

Interfaith Creation Care of the Triangle (ICCT) Webinar - 1.13.26
NC Council of Churches “Advocating with Compassion”
Presented by Rev. Susannah Tuttle
PRESENTATION NOTES

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Cover slide

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So, a bit about what we’re going to cover.

As a citizen you have a unique opportunity to help make a difference by becoming more involved in communicating with your elected officials.

Today we will answer these questions:

- How does the NC General Assembly work?
- Who holds the power?
- What does it mean to advocate with compassion?
- How can you put your faith and values into action?

So let’s dive right into the presentation!

We will answer questions after the presentation during the Q & A period. We are also recording this presentation so it will be available to you to watch again and also for you to share with your communities.

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How many of you know who holds the power to represent you on the federal level? What about in the State? Locally? *Feel free to use the chat box if you’d like to share your representative’s names.*

Many people do not know who represents them on each of these levels and often times find it very confusing to figure out who these people are.

As a citizen of your city, county, state, and country there are a lot of elected officials who represent you in different types of elected office.

To find out who your members of the NC General Assembly or Congress are you can go to the General Assembly's website: <https://www.ncleg.gov/FindYourLegislators> to find out.

To find who represents you locally just google for the City Council or County Commissioners website in your area.

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On the federal level the legislative branch of government is the Congress which is a Bicameral Government.

This means members of Congress are divided into two chambers; the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Each state in the United States elects two senators for staggered 6-year terms. The Senators represent the entire state.

For the House of Representative nationwide the US is divided into 435 congressional districts – each with a population of about 710,000 individuals.

Does anyone know how many districts we have in the state of North Carolina? I'll give it a moment for folks to drop their answers into the chat Answer = 14 House Districts.

Each district elects a representative to the House of Representatives for a two-year term.

This means on the federal level you have 3 elected officials representing you in Congress: 2 Senators and 1 Representative.

And let's not forget the President! Which brings the grand total of 4 people in Washington D.C. that should be keeping each one of us in mind when they are making decisions.

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Each state in the nation has a different government structure and cycle.

But they all have the same 3 branches of government which mirror the federal government: Executive, Judicial, and Legislative branches.

Today our focus will be on the North Carolina Legislative Branch of government.

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North Carolina's government has been divided for a number of years now. The Republican party holds power in the North Carolina General Assembly, which is commonly referred to as the Legislature, with majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The Speaker of the House is Destin Hall, and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate is Phil Berger, both Republicans.

However, the Democratic party currently holds the highest office in the executive branch, Governor Josh Stein is a Democrat. The lieutenant governor is Rachel Hunt, also a Democrat.

The purpose of the Legislature is to create and change the laws of North Carolina, as well as to provide a budget for state government operations.

In North Carolina we have what is called a bicameral legislature, just like Congress on the federal level. This means legislators are divided into two chambers; the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Legislative sessions are two years long, and include a long and short session which we will talk about later in the presentation.

Legislators are elected for two-year terms and elections are held every two years.

In 2024 all of the seats in the NCGA were up for election and the Republican Party maintained enough seats in the Legislature to have a majority, but lost what is called a veto-proof supermajority.

A supermajority means that a single party has 3/5 of the voting members of the Legislature and therefore have the voting power to overturn any veto that might be issued by the Governor.

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Now we are going to take a deeper dive into each chamber of the NC Legislature. First lets talk about the Senate.

The President of the Senate is the Lieutenant Governor of North Carolina, but the Lt. Governor has very limited powers in the Senate and can only vote to break a tie.

The President Pro –Tem. Sen. Phil Berger, holds the most power in the Senate with control over appointments of members to standing committees and wields a heavy influence over bills.

The Senate is generally considered the more powerful of the two chambers even though it has fewer members.

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The House is led by a Speaker, who holds powers similar to those of the Senate President pro-tem.

Each Chamber, the Senate and the House, has its own set of committees and caucuses.

A committee is a part of the legislative process. Each chamber has standing committees. Their membership and leadership can change year to year but their roles remain the same for the most part. Committee meetings are publicized, open to the public, and concerned citizens and interest groups are allowed to give testimony in committees. We will talk more about committees and their role later in the presentation.

A caucus is a group of people with similar beliefs. For example, each political party has a caucus and there are also ones based on shared interests like the sportsman or agricultural caucus. Caucuses are used to hash out differences behind closed doors and to get the group to come to an agreement on bills. These meeting are not open to the public.

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This is an overview of the Legislatures cycle and as we discussed before it lasts for a biennium, which is two years.

The first part or the "Regular Session" is more commonly referred to as the "Long Session" and occurs in years ending in an odd number. For example: next year in 2027 the cycle begins with long session in January.

During the legislative session meetings are held Monday evenings and during the day on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

Most legislators return to their districts on the weekend to work, meet with constituents, and spend time with family.

There is no limit on the length of any session; the "long session" typically lasts for 6 months and the "short session" typically lasts for 6 weeks. Lets take a closer look at the Long Session.

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The first part of the Long Session is the **ONLY** time in the entire two year cycle when legislators can make a new law, repeal an existing law, or make changes to a current law.

There are, of course, some ways around this. To get a bill introduced throughout the cycle it must:

Have a fiscal or budget impact.

Be a recommendation by a Legislative committee or commission.

Or is a PCS, a Preferred Committee substitute. This is when a committee votes to strip language out of an existing bill and replace it with completely new language.

If you were following the Coal Ash Bill a number of years ago... this is what happened to create the bill since they were in the middle of the two year cycle when the Dan River coal ash spill took place.

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Let's follow the progress of a hypothetical bill through the legislative process.

A bill can begin its journey in either chamber; the House or the Senate. Once a bill has been filed it is then formally introduced to a Chamber...

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For our purposes let's say it is introduced in the Senate.

It is then read into that Chamber for the first reading and then it will be referred to a committee.

This is a formality and typically happens very quickly at the beginning of the day's session.

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Bills commonly move through more than one committee for approval.

Sometimes this process takes months and sometimes it can take only a few hours.

Committees have great power over the legislative process. They can choose to not "take up" or consider bills referred to them.

If a bill is not considered or does not pass a vote of the committee it was assigned to, the bill is considered dead.

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If a bill does receive committee approval it will return to the Senate floor for its second reading. If it passes it will then have its final reading.

After passing the third reading the bill will be sent to the next chamber.

for our purposes we started in the Senate so it would be sent to the House.

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Once the bill passes out of its first chamber, either the House or the Senate, it has met a requirement called the Crossover Deadline. This is the date by which all bills, that do not affect the budget, must pass at least one of the two chambers in order to remain in consideration for the rest of the two year cycle.

The Crossover Deadline only occurs during the long session.

If a bill fails to meet this deadline it is considered dead for the rest of the two year cycle.

This is why the timing of advocacy and education efforts are so important.

For our purposes our bill has just passed the Senate and is being introduced in the House.

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The bill now has to go through the same process it went through in the previous chamber. Committees, votes, and readings.

If a bill undergoes major changes and looks very different to what was approved by the first chamber it has to be sent to a conference committee to be hashed out. The Conference Committee is made of a handful of members from both chambers and is charged with resolving the differences.

Once a bill passes both houses and is signed by the Governor it is considered ratified. If the bill is a local law, it becomes law at that point. Otherwise it becomes effective on a date outlined in the bill itself.

After adjournment of the General Assembly, the Governor has 30 days to act on a bill. If the Governor vetoes a bill, the bill is returned to the General Assembly where a vote of 3/5 of present and voting members can vote to override the veto.

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As you can see, the numerous deadlines from February - May of the Long Session are why you see such a frenzy of work and media reports at certain times of the year when other times there is very little going on with the NCGA.

This also means that every two years there is a very small window of opportunity to influence legislators and the outcome of legislation. This is why meeting with elected officials when they are home in their districts before the session is so important.

One last note on the bills which make the crossover deadline I mentioned earlier; if they do not pass before the NCGA adjourns the Long Session, the bill is still considered "alive" and can be brought up during the Short Session.

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In between sessions your legislator is home in the district working at their regular job...being a legislator is only a part-time job and pays very little.

This is a great time to get to know them and educate them on the issues you care most about. We will talk more about this later.

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Finally the last part of the NCGA Cycle is the Short Session.

The short session is held in even numbered years and typically last 6 weeks.

This is what will be taking place this year, in 2026.

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During the short session legislators:

Tweak the budget making any changes prior to the fiscal year starting on July 1st.

Consider committee recommendations of bills.

Take up any bills that are "alive" because they met the crossover deadline but are not budget related.

Again, there is an even shorter amount of time during even numbered years to influence legislators and impact legislation.

This is why the work you do to advocate and educate your community, congregation, and elected officials...outside the halls of the NCGA and in between sessions...is so critically important.

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So now that we have gone through a refresher of how the NC Legislature operates... let us shift to the title of today's presentation: **ADVOCATING WITH COMPASSION**

It has become increasingly clear that values-based messages and messengers provide new angles on issues. They are able to lead with a non-partisan, and moral voice of hope.

Because of our desire to connect our values to our policy work, the NC Council of Churches has developed a long-term faith-based 'Advocating with Compassion' campaign that uses values-based messaging.

We are teaching and engaging people of faith & conscience on how to find their unique faith voice and use it to advocate with compassion with decision makers. By connecting the issues by highlighting our values, we are able to advocate more clearly and with relevance.

We encourage citizens to build long-term relationships with their elected officials by starting an open dialogue and practicing active listening. Which often means asking questions and listening intently first before speaking to your own advocacy goals.

Elected officials are asked to share their vision and ideas, and to explore ways they can work to protect and support policies which: increase energy efficiency, develop clean & renewable energy sources, encourage large-scale composting, and decrease carbon pollution.

Citizens then share stories of success from their communities and congregations and why they believe their faith tradition calls them to care for this world, to Care for Creation, through the policies they are advocating for.

The pedagogy of "Advocating with Compassion" is at the root of what originally brought the NC Council of Churches together over 90+ years ago and continues to be a centerpiece in the core values of every person and program that has been a part of the Council's work & leadership.

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One way the NC Council of Churches works to be strategic in our engagements with North Carolina General Assembly's members has been to determine strategic target areas. In the advocacy world it is often called "power-mapping" - the ways to identify who and what influences decision makers. As a faith-based initiative we have the opportunity to review our legislator's faith tradition - what congregation they belong to - and if they have ever spoken publicly with a moral or religious voice. We are also continuing to map our own congregational network to help determine which legislative districts we have a strong presence in - as well as whether or not legislative members affiliated congregations tend to be on the progressive, moderate, or conservative scales.

This "power-mapping" strategy helps us better understand decision makers as people in communities themselves. Think about some examples of how to best build a relationship with someone: knowing where they grew up, if they have children, a love for pets, hiking, gardening, sports, etc. is a great way to connect on the personal level which ultimately will build trust and interest for what each of you have to say and think - even if we find ourselves on opposite sides of an issues - we still need to treat each other with dignity and respect.

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So... what does it actually mean to "Advocate with Compassion"? It's basically just what it sounds like.

It means approaching conversations with our elected officials with a sense of deep and authentic kindness, empathy, fairness, and an acknowledgement of shared humanity.

When I think of compassion, particularly from the context of advocating from a place of faith or spirituality, I think about bringing my values into the room with me when I'm speaking with an elected official.

Now, these are all values related to compassion: values of fairness, justice, love for neighbor, humility, and kindness—which really, for me, differs from niceness. It's not just about being polite, it's about creating the space in the room for someone to be honest about who they are, where they are, what they need, and what their challenges are.

In other words, authentic compassion creates the opportunity for authentic relationships and authentic conversation.

I also think of compassion as being a value of integrity. When we advocate with compassion, which is a shared value across religious traditions, we are being honest about who we are and why we are advocating for the work that we are doing—work of sustainability, work of climate or environmental justice—we are showing up to advocate for that work because of the love that we have for people, the love that we have for our home communities, for our ecosystem, for North Carolina, and for the world.

So, summed up another way, advocating with compassion is advocating with love.

It's treating your conversation partners with love and letting your discussion be led by love. You might begin your conversation by talking about your deep love for the coastal community that you grew up in or live in today, and how that influences the work that you are now advocating for. Your deep love for farmers. Your love for the mountains where you live or vacation. Your love for the people in your family and your neighborhood.

We can relate to each other when we speak from a place of love. And when we do this, we really do invite each other into realer, and I think, more transformative conversations.

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Your Voice Matters! As a concerned citizen your role really is to give voice and real life stories to policy issues. You don't need to be an expert on numbers and facts because that's what professional lobbyists and state level advocacy groups are for.

Their role is too:

- Provide detailed information and advise legislators
- Help new Legislators learn the ropes
- Play the 'inside political game'
- Find sponsors for bills

Your role is to give voice and breathe real life stories into these policy issues. To speak for your lived experience, to breathe love into the work, and to bring the policy to life.

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It is just as critical to reach out to elected officials when they are home working and campaigning in their districts.

Here are four examples of solar arrays on congregational facilities in NC: *Eno River UU Fellowship (Durham)*, *Hillside Baptist (Chapel Hill)*, *Henderson First UMC (Henderson)*, *Peace United Church (Greensboro)*. The celebration of each of these installations is an example of a wonderful opportunity to engage policy & decision makers.

Invite them to tour the facility, see the changes, and hear how much money the community has been able to save.

This is a great way to begin to develop a relationship with decision makers and get to know them while they get to know you.

The goal is for individuals to invite their elected officials to see the good work they are doing in their communities and hear the stories of what our congregations are doing.

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Lastly, we hope that you might consider praying with your legislators if and when you have these meetings with them. Now, only do this if it is authentic to who you are and your tradition or practice. If it is not an authentic part of your identity, you may consider saying something like we're thinking of you, or simply offering thanks. But if prayer is something that you do and are comfortable with, it can really impact a meeting.

Lawmakers are used to talking about bills and legislation rightly so, but acknowledging the difficulties of the work, and praying for them and other decision makers is a kind and I think really beautiful way to end a meeting.

The image on this slide is one of the most powerful experiences I have witnessed inside the building of the NC Legislature. People walking through the halls stopped and shared the moment in silence, recognizing the power of mindfulness and beloved community.

And again, just one more reminder to please start conversations with elected officials by talking about what they love and what you love. The response, from faith leaders and legislators, is almost always that "they love this place—North Carolina—from the mountains to the sea." They love vacations with their grandchildren, they love being with

their community. AND beginning in this way reminds them of all the reasons to care for this world through appropriate legislation.

The response, from faith leaders and legislators, is almost always that "they love this place—North Carolina—from the mountains to the sea. They love vacations with their grandchildren, from the mountains to the sea."

Beginning that conversation based in love moves you to issues not of business but of humanity. And asks larger questions about morality and why we're all here. Ultimately, it is through the lens of morality, that hope overcomes despair.

By returning to the core values of our hearts we can find the creativity, strength and vision to move beyond this powerful status quo and to create a true culture shift towards a more sustainable, just, and compassionate world.

May it be so!

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Now it is time for me to turn it back over to the the wonderful leaders of Interfaith Creation Care of the Triangle to share some exciting opportunities that include what I like to call an example of a "What I love campaign" which essentially is a way to communicate "What is it that I love, and what am I willing to do to protect it!"

I look forward to answering any questions towards the end of the program.