

Making Witness & Lobbying a Family Affair with FCNL

by Beth Collea

There's a new "must see" stop for Quaker families in Washington DC—the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) Welcome Center! This is the perfect time for Middle School and even Elementary-aged Friends to explore the Quaker vision of the world as it could be and to practice using their Quaker voice to press for change. FCNL Lobbying Training, offered every Wednesday morning and by appointment, guides families step-by-step in rendering our Quaker Witness as legislative advocacy. The learning is solidified by immediately heading across the street to the Senate office buildings to speak your Truth through lobbying.

This is a spiritually-rooted process! Christine Ashley, FCNL Field Secretary, shows us how to weave head, heart and voice together to carry our Truth into the world with integrity and impact. The training, which lasts about 90 minutes, begins where Quakerism begins--with our inner experience. To develop an authentic public Quaker voice, we take an inner inventory of the leadings and concerns we feel rising. She then helps us sift and sort the many threads for the clearest and most powerful themes. Christine guides us to recall times when we were moved to action around a particular issue. Perhaps a service project on Earth-care left a profound impression. Perhaps hearts have been stirred by gun violence or economic inequality or the fear engendered in classmates whose families are new Americans. Personal experience often forges the courage of our convictions and yields the most compelling messages!

Once we discern a theme for our lobbying, Christine deftly matches our concern with legislation in process. We will only have a few moments with our Senator or more likely staffers, so we work to hone a request that is focused, actionable, and respectful. Our deepest hope is for a meeting of hearts and minds especially across differences in understandings and priorities. FCNL shares great success stories around encouraging bipartisanship through finding common ground. Their careful work kindled the bipartisan House Climate Solutions Caucus, now numbering 74. It is a bright spot amid the discord that characterizes so much of politics in Washington.

A five-minute walk across the street and we are in the Senate Office building. There's a palpable empowerment in giving voice to injustice and what we know isn't right and true in our society and government. We advocate for better ways forward in practical terms. If you plan ahead and are clear about your issue, make an appointment with your senator.

Don't miss the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Museum a short walk from the FCNL offices. It's a perfect celebration of Witness as Advocacy! The story of the suffrage movement gives us another chance to encounter the themes undergirding our lobbying: that one person can make a difference, that persistence is necessary to make systemic change, that different skills and gifts come together to make a movement work, that there's power in the imagination and vision of a world that could exist but doesn't yet.

Side Bar: Quaker Destinations can Help Form Our Faith

A visit to the FCNL Welcome Center and the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality Museum can be logical extensions of religious education that happens in your local meeting. Most Quaker religious education happens in the family. It can happen in the home or in the mini-tan! Intentional preparation will make the visit even more meaningful.

As family life becomes busier and busier, vacations are rare occasions when families have complete discretion to determine their agendas. Look for ways to weave in these Washington DC gems and other "Quaker Destinations" that give rise to conversations that can build Quaker faith. All Ages Quaker religious education can happen on the road!

Don't miss the opportunity to debrief in the car afterwards. Embrace this opportunity to reflect on taking the Quaker vision and values into the world, listening inwardly for issues that have stirred hearts, naming parts of the Quaker journey (leadings, clearness, witness, discernment, etc.), or resolving ethical dilemmas around civil disobedience.

Queries:

- How did it feel to speak your Truth?
- What part of your time with FCNL did you like the best?
- What seemed most important about your FCNL Lobbying adventure?
- Why do you think so many of the women's rights activists were Quakers? Alice Paul was a Friend as were a generation of early suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony.
- Do you think winning the vote for women might have been a leading for Alice Paul?

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