

## Participating in Public Forums

Many Members of Congress sponsor public forums or town meetings in their districts. Sometimes these meetings are on a range of subjects. Others are on specific topics. Members of Congress often hold town meetings on very specific issues such as health care. Consequently, you can use these forums to advocate your position to the Member and to get your view aired in the media. Most public forums are covered by the media.

The challenge of public forums is how to get heard amidst the chaos. Sometimes they are so structured it is difficult to participate. Sometimes forums are advertised in the local newspapers. If you haven't seen an ad, call the district office and inquire about upcoming town meetings. Below are a few suggestions for getting your point across:

- **Hand out flyers to everyone who enters the forum.** Have a couple nicely-dressed people stationed at each entrance. Hand out flyers as people enter. The flyers should be tailored to the particular Congressperson's focus. For example, if the Member of Congress supports one of the inadequate health care reform bills, distribute a flyer comparing current efforts.
- **Prepare very focused questions.** At some recent town meetings sponsored by Members of Congress who did not want substantial health care reform, advocates asked, "Will you support a universal health care plan for us that is as good as the one taxpayers provide for you?" (Members of congress have excellent coverage. We want the same). "Does the fact that you've received \$100,000 in contributions from insurance companies influence your position on health care." (These figures are available for each member of Congress.) Spend some time planning some good questions.
- **Recruit religious leaders to ask questions.** Clergy should introduce themselves and their congregations. Their positions add extra credibility to the questions.
- **Line your people up at the mikes.** Frequently, town meetings have one or two open mikes that are set up in the aisles. The questioners are called on as they line up. As soon as the moderator indicates they are willing to accept questions, get all your people, perhaps five or more, to line up behind each mike. This helps your questions to dominate the discussion. Clap when your people say something really good.
- **Carry signs or wear buttons.** If your group has signs or buttons that symbolize your concerns, bring them. Bring extras to share with others. These show up well in media pictures.
- **Be bold.** Sometimes it is scary to participate visibly and vocally in these meetings, but we need to if we are to advocate as effectively as possible. Being bold does not mean being obnoxious, but it requires taking a stronger, more prophetic role than many feel comfortable. God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.