

# **GUIDE TO MEETING WITH EDITORIAL BOARDS**

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**Torture**

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## **WHY THIS MANUAL?**

This manual evolved from the experiences of small delegations of people of faith who visited editorial boards in seven cities in late 2008 to ask these boards to prepare editorials opposing U.S.-sponsored torture. The visits were organized on behalf of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) by the Rev. Sandra Strauss of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches and paid for by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

Specifically, the delegations asked for support for a Presidential Executive Order ending torture and a Select Committee of Congress to investigate U.S. torture policies and practices since September 11, 2001. President Obama issued an Executive Order halting torture on January 22, 2009.

The manual is designed to be helpful to other people of faith and faith-related organizations that wish to organize or sponsor editorial board visits on torture or other issues. While it is directed primarily at persons who are organizing delegations to make visits, it can also be used by delegations to prepare for meetings.

***★ Note to Editorial Board Delegation Organizer: You may just be organizing the delegation or you may also be part of the delegation or you may be the leader of the delegation. Each Editorial Board visit may be handled in various ways. This manual is meant to help you organize the delegation and help the delegation leader (if other than you) prepare the team for the meeting.***

If you have questions about this manual, please call 202-547-1920 or write [campaign@nrcat.org](mailto:campaign@nrcat.org).

## **WHAT ARE EDITORIAL BOARDS?**

### ***Board makeup***

Many newspapers make their decisions about what position the newspaper will take on specific issues by using an editorial board. The editorial board usually consists of the editorial page editor and editorial writers. Some newspapers include other personnel as well. One chain of newspapers is embarking on a campaign to have a citizen sit on the editorial board.

Some newspapers, particularly small ones, do not have an editorial board, choosing instead to rely on the judgment of a single editorial page editor.

### ***Functions***

Editorial boards meet on a regular basis to discuss the latest news and opinion trends and discuss what the newspaper should say on a range of issues. They will then decide who will write the editorials and when they will be printed. When such an

editorial appears in a newspaper, it is considered the institutional opinion of that newspaper.

At some newspapers, the editorial board will also review wire service and syndicated columns for inclusion on the editorial page or op-ed page.

The editorial board also controls the endorsement process for the newspaper during campaigns. Candidates will come before the editorial board for a group interview that can last for several hours, depending on the office. During the meeting, the board asks the candidate a range of questions on various issues and uses the meeting as a way to judge which candidate to endorse.

Editorial boards may also meet with political, business, religious, and community leaders to learn more about an issue.

### ***The op-ed page***

Many newspapers also run an "op-ed" page, which means, literally, "opposite (of) editorial." This refers to the fact that this page is positioned opposite from the editorial page, but does not mean the opinions on it are necessarily the opposite of the newspaper's editorial opinions.

This page includes columns from other newspapers, wire services, and syndicated columnists. It may also include statements of opinions from local government and civic leaders or other freelance contributors.

Columns on this page may also be penned by the newspaper's own staff, but if bylined they do not necessarily represent the views of the newspaper's editorial board.

At many newspapers, both the editorial and op-ed pages may also include a mix of letters from readers.

### ***Letters to the Editor***

Letters to the editor appear on the editorial page in response to an article or editorial published by the newspaper. Generally word counts are limited to 200 words per letter and are edited for grammar and spelling—not content.

Some local publications have a policy of printing every letter to the editor (unless slanderous or libelous). Others choose the letters to print. The newspaper website usually specifies the form and requirements necessary for submitting a letter to the editor.

### ***ORGANIZING DELEGATIONS:***

**IMPORTANT: Organizing something of this scope may take longer than anticipated!** Organizers should be prepared to have lots of lead-time in order to make

sure that meetings can be scheduled in a timely manner to coincide with the legislative or policy agenda that the organization is trying to meet.

### **Initial Recruitment of Delegation Members**

Before making the first call or contact, it helps to paint a very clear picture of the project and the organization's request—the “ask.” Try to build on contacts and relationships of people who are already familiar with the issue and the organization with which you are working and supportive of its work.

The initial task is to identify delegations. Local clergy or other religious leaders (including staff of ecumenical or interfaith organizations) may be the initial contacts in helping identify potential delegation members. Organizers should be prepared to make lots of calls and send lots of e-mails. Many times, the names received will be a starting point, since many will be too busy, unwilling to make the time to participate, or uncomfortable with the prospect of such a meeting. For those who cannot participate, it never hurts to ask for additional leads.

Organizers should strive to put together delegations that are representative of the faith community (with a range of faith traditions), as well as gender balanced and if possible racial-ethnic balanced. Also, organizers should be aware that editorial boards may not be as responsive to a “hired gun” (though it should be noted that local folks might benefit by having an “expert” in a meeting, depending on the issue).

A clear project description and outline of tasks is important, and it helps to use that information to formulate a “job description” for potential delegation members and leaders. Once a potential delegation member is contacted and expresses interest, questions concerning specific duties and time commitments may be answered quickly by sending the “job description.” It may also serve as a reminder of what they are being asked to do.

### ***Education/Training***

Organizers should be prepared to have potential delegation members express fears that they are not prepared or knowledgeable enough to take on the responsibility requested. To alleviate fears it is important to have available background information, a planning guide for op-ed visits, and if at all possible, delegation leaders should be encouraged to schedule a meeting or meetings to plan the editorial board visit. If delegation members do not live near each other, consider arranging a conference call.

Part of the background information should be a clear statement of the “asks” and the theological underpinnings. It also helps to put together a set of additional resources on the issue that could be used for knowledge building related to the “asks.”

It is very helpful for organizers to prepare a planning guide for delegation leaders to assist them in preparing for their meeting. The guide may be based on information in this manual, but should be specific to the project. It should provide a step-by-step guide

for what needs to happen to carry out the meeting, with spaces for including names of delegation members next to their responsibilities. Delegation leaders appreciate having something that saves them time and summarizes all that needs to be done on one sheet (front and back)

Organizers should be prepared to do a lot of “hand holding.” Sometimes just being a friendly supportive voice at the other end of a phone is all that is needed, but it also helps to be able to hear out the person who needs help and to be prepared to dispense practical advice and encouragement. It does help to be able to speak from some level of experience, so being someone or having someone available who has actually participated in editorial board meetings is helpful.

### ***Recognition and Thanks to Delegation Members***

Once the meetings are completed, organizers should thank all who participated for their participation. Those who participated will have spent, at a minimum, a few hours in preparing for and participating in the meetings—and they are likely to be persons who already have many demands on their time. Those who participated will remember the notes of gratitude and recognition of the value of their time and will be more likely to participate again in the future if they feel their efforts were appreciated.

### ***Feedback from Members of the Delegation***

Feedback from those involved in the meeting may be helpful to organizers in the future for planning other editorial board visits. It may also be helpful in recruiting people for future delegations. Sharing a member’s positive experience may encourage others to participate in a visit in the future.

### ***MAKING THE CONNECTION WITH EDITORIAL BOARDS:***

Go to the newspaper's web site to determine if the paper has a formal policy on requesting editorial board meetings. If it does, the person doing the research should secure a copy in writing and follow it closely. For example, if the paper asks for no more than three representatives from an organization, the delegation should not show up with four; if they specify a clear timeframe for the meeting, the delegation must respect the time that is allotted.

### ***Researching Editorial Board Members***

It is always helpful for the delegation to know as much as possible about the members of the editorial board. You can research the editorial board members in a number of ways.

- Names of editorial board members are often listed on the paper’s website, and sometimes the paper will have biographies of the editors.
- If biographies are not available, you should go into the newspaper's archives and read pieces the editor has written in the past.

- You can ask representatives of other organizations, that have had meetings with the editorial board what they can tell you about the board's positions individually and as a group.
- Linked In, My Space or any of the networking programs, or Google may also be good resources for information about the editorial board members.

Each team member should be assigned to an editorial board member or two and report back to the group on their findings.

### ***Setting Up the Meeting***

The delegation leader or organizer will need to call or e-mail the editorial page editor and request a meeting. In this call you or the delegation leader will need to:

- Introduce himself/herself and the organization represented. Localizing the description can be helpful—that is, though the delegation may be representing a national organization like NRCAT, delegation members are also members of local congregations or organizations, or are longtime residents of the area. If any delegation members are able to indicate that they are representing an organization like a state ecumenical agency, they should do so.
- Briefly explain the reason for the meeting, ask the editorial board to take a position calling for an end to U.S.-sponsored torture forever.
- Note that he/she will be joined by a small group of people of faith who want to be part of this meeting.
- Note that he/she can send the editorial board written materials in advance so they can read about the request before the meeting and be prepared to ask questions.
- Be polite, but be strong. Delegation leaders/organizers should not be shy about expressing how important this issue is for the organization he/she represents and the constituencies of delegation members who will participate in the meeting.

If a delegation member other than the leader knows a particular editor who sits on an editorial board, that person might be the best person to approach the board about securing an editorial board meeting for the group. The delegation should be prepared in the event the board member declines the request and asks that the group go through the formal process, but if he or she agrees to act on the delegation member's behalf, it is imperative that he/she be pinned down on the timelines. Obviously a personal meeting or phone call goes a long way toward getting such a meeting versus an e-mail or voice mail (though some do specify a preference for e-mail requests).

**If the editorial board AGREES to meet with the delegation:**

The organizer should work with the editorial board to set the time, date and place (probably the newspaper office) and begin preparations for the meeting.

**If the Editorial Board says NO to meeting:**

No matter how hard you may try, some papers are simply not interested in scheduling a meeting, or may be busy addressing issues that they consider to be higher in priority. However, through the research process you may learn that the paper already has a stated position on the issue and this information could be used to build support in the faith community to encourage support (or possibly disagreement) through letters and other contacts. Just by contacting the board, the board knows that there is interest and learns the faith community's position, and that knowledge might spur support in the future. It introduces the board to persons who might serve as future contacts or resources on the issue from the faith community. It also gives the board the opportunity to ask for support by printing an op-ed on the issue submitted by a member of the faith community.

If you are unable to schedule a meeting with the editorial board or the board refuses a meeting, you should ask if the paper will run an op-ed by one of the delegation members or by a leader of the organization represented explaining the issue. This is a fallback, however, as the goal of this effort is to get the newspaper itself to endorse the issue.

It helps to have a sample letter and op-ed that can be used as a starting point to ensure that the position of the organization is represented accurately. The final products may look much different, but the point is that writers are not starting from scratch, and having a sample may prove to be a time saver.

***Scheduling a Planning Meeting***

You will need to set a time for the delegation to meet beforehand (or arrange a conference call) to plan how the group will conduct the editorial board meeting, including.

- Identification of the key points the group wants to make.
- Decisions about which members of the group will speak to what points.
- Decisions about who will be the leader of the delegation, the person from the group who will lead the presentation.

Delegations should practice with peers prior to the meeting to make sure the points to be made are coming across coherently and concisely. It is important to keep the subject as simple as possible. If the editorial board doesn't get it, their readers won't either.

***The Editorial Board Meeting: Making the Meeting Effective***

At the editorial board meeting, one person should be the moderator and called upon to lay out the issue generally. Ideally, this leader will have had some training in public speaking/presentation skills and should be able to think on his/her feet. He/she

should be sure to introduce the members of the group or give each member an opportunity to introduce themselves.

Members may be called upon after the opening statement to present additional facts or support the facts. The editorial board members will then ask questions and will often counter the delegation's arguments. Delegations should be encouraged to anticipate a series of questions and have prepared answers in advance of the session—and organizers can help by providing delegations with anticipated questions to help in their preparation. It is impossible, however, to anticipate every question that may arise during a meeting. If a delegation receives a question for which it doesn't have an answer, the group should be instructed to offer to get back with a response within a specific time period: "I don't have the answer to that question, but I would be happy to get back to you within 24 hours with the answer. Is that okay?" If the issues aren't fully explored in the allotted time period, delegations should be encouraged to ask for an additional meeting.

Delegations should be prepared for tough questions, and for their answers to be challenged, though it is rare for an editorial board to become overly confrontational or combative. No matter what happens during the meeting, delegation members must remain civil and polite or they will risk having their message lost or dismissed.

As the meeting is drawing to a close, the delegation leader should thank everyone at the meeting for their time and consideration. The group should also be encouraged to ask for a timeframe on a decision as to whether an editorial will run, and should not hesitate to suggest the optimal timeframe for an editorial. The board may not be willing to give a commitment, but it doesn't hurt to ask.

Delegation members should also ask to be put in the publication's database as an expert on this subject.

### ***The Critical Follow-Up – Thank you messages***

Within 24 hours, the leader of the delegation should send a thank you note or e-mail to the main contact at the newspaper thanking the editorial board members for their time and consideration of the issue. This communication should contain any follow-up actions the group plans to take. If the editorial board cannot come to a consensus, the delegation should be prepared to submit a guest column or op-ed piece—based on the information and "asks" provided by the sponsoring organization. Following publication of that piece, members of the delegation should also be urged to write letters to the editor, agreeing with the op-ed piece and urging the leadership of the publication to take a stand on the issue.