Capitol Hill is relatively quiet during these August days in Washington, with members of Congress spending time in their home districts, attending town hall meetings and community events, meeting with constituents, and making the pitch for reelection in this midterm congressional election year. The standard joke I’ve been hearing making the rounds both inside and outside the Beltway, is that there isn’t much difference between the lack of activity in August and what has been happening – or not happening – in the halls of Congress for most of the year. Often it is expressed in far more colorful terms, but however it is expressed, yes, I get the joke.

I am certainly not unsympathetic to such sentiments. It has indeed been a frustrating year for those hoping for movement on key legislative issues facing our country and the world, regardless of where one stands on the political spectrum. The historically low public approval ratings for Congress reflect this frustration, and it remains to be seen how this it will play out at the polls in November. What I fear is that apathy and cynicism will garner the most votes in November. As much as I can understand such a response, having worked in the area of faith-based justice policy advocacy in Washington for almost 25 years, one thing I do know is that apathy and cynicism are not the solution for what ails the process.

Whenever I feel myself coming close to succumbing to apathy and cynicism, and inclined to give up, I remember an encounter I had several years ago when I traveled to Colombia as part of a Witness for Peace delegation. While there, we spent several days in a crowded makeshift village of small farmers and families who had been displaced by the civil war and constant threats of violence that have ravaged Colombia for decades. I stayed with a family for several days, listening to their stories, their fears, and their hopes for the future. As we prepared to leave, one man said to me, “You are so lucky – you can vote in United States.” I knew exactly what he meant – I, as an
American citizen, with the right to cast my vote in a country with vast global influence, in so many ways had more say about his future and the future of his country than he did.

It was a moment of reckoning, one I recall again and again when I find myself weary about the possibility of real change and transformation in our world. For me it is a call to recommit myself to the power that I do have, however small it may seem to me, which is no small thing to so many people around the world who struggle just to make it to tomorrow.

The truth is, everyday people are making a difference. Advocates for campaign finance reform are working to advance legislation that would restore the power of everyday voters to have their vote counted amid the sea of big money influencing election campaigns. Youth advocates for immigration reform are courageously telling their stories, faithfully attending town hall meetings and engaging members of Congress despite disappointments and setbacks in the immigration reform debate.

I often hear the quote “Be the change you want to see in the world.” In this midterm election year, when apathy and cynicism threaten to carry the day, here is a variation to try: “Give voice to the change you want to see in the world.” Think of those who have no vote to cast, especially the children, and exercise your right to vote.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Sorensen is Director of the UCC Justice and Witness Ministries’ Washington, D.C., Office.

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