

10 Things Your Congregation Can Do Before the Election

1. HOLD AN ADULT EDUCATION FORUM ON THE ISSUES

Organize an adult education forum several weeks in advance of the election to examine the issues being discussed in the fall election at the state and federal level from a faith perspective.

2. HOLD A PRESENTATION OF EACH CANDIDATE'S VIEWS

Ask members of your congregation to read about one issue for each candidate, and then hold a "Voters Night." Each person presents a summary of the candidates' view on the issue they studied. This saves everyone from researching all the issues themselves.

3. ORGANIZE A CANDIDATES FORUM

Hold a candidate forum. Invite all candidates for a particular office to attend. See our companion resource on organizing a candidate forum for more information.

4. CONDUCT A BIBLE STUDY ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHRISTIAN FAITH AND FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP

The connections are not obvious to many Christians. Arrange for your congregation to offer a Bible study on the issues prior to the election. Check with your denominational office for good resources.

5. ORGANIZE A VOTER REGISTRATION DRIVE

Since many people do not know how or where to register, your congregation can make it easier by organizing a voter registration drive. See our companion resource, *Conducting a Voter Registration Drive*, for more information.

6. SET A "100% REGISTERED" GOAL

Become a "100% congregation" by making sure every church member is registered to vote.

7. PROMOTE "VOTE BY MAIL"

For voters who cannot make it to the polls, promote the "vote by mail" (also known as an "absentee ballot") option.

8. OFFER YOUR CONGREGATION AS A POLLING SITE

Often polling sites need to be changed. By offering your congregation as a site, you can help your community to vote. Contact your local Registrar of Voters.

9. PROVIDE CHILD CARE AND/OR TRANSPORTATION TO POLLING SITES

Find out who in your congregation and community needs transportation, and then arrange for someone to take them to the polling site. You can also provide child care either at your church or right at the polling site (check with your local Registrar of Voters).

10. HAVE A PRAYER SERVICE BEFORE THE ELECTION

Prayer for our elected leaders is important. A special service before the election also can help your congregation remain focused on what is most important in this electoral season.

This resource is provided by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, 750 Windsor Street, Ste 301, Sun Prairie, WI 53590 (916) 837-3108.

For more information, check out our website at www.wichurches.org

Organize an Adult Education Forum on the Election Issues

VOTER EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT!

An adult education forum can be an important opportunity to help people see through the 30 second sound bites on political commercials and thoughtfully examine the pros and cons of each ballot measure. Voters in your congregation can then be empowered to make informed decisions at the polls.

WHERE DO I START?

See about scheduling an adult education forum several weeks before the election. It could be held in a church, a school, or a community center. Invite other congregations/community groups to join you in co-sponsoring the event. The forum can be offered on a weekly basis, or presented in one or two evening programs. Be sure to promote the event in the media.

RECRUIT A GOOD FACILITATOR

Good leadership for this forum is critical. The person(s) you recruit should be skilled, knowledgeable and experienced individuals who can lead discussion groups where there is disagreement without injecting their own biases.

DECIDE ON A CLASS FORMAT

Invite participants to choose the issues to be discussed. Then ask participants to research the pro and con positions for each issue being discussed. Ask one or two individuals to be prepared to briefly present either the pro or con position to the class. Ask the facilitator to present a brief overview of the pro and con presentations from class participants. Then invite the class to ask questions and to enter into discussion.

ASK GOOD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this proposal? Where did it come from? Why is it of concern this year? How does our religious tradition inform our understanding of and perspective on this proposal?

What are the values that underlie this proposal? How do those values fit with my own? Within our forum, where can we find agreement in this proposal? Where do we disagree? What more do I need to know before making an informed decision on this proposal?

SUMMARIZE THE DISCUSSION

A good discussion leader will always summarize the important discussion points that were made and where the group found consensus.

This resource is provided by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, 750 Windsor Street, Ste 301, Sun Prairie, WI 53590 (916) 837-3108.

For more information, check out our website at www.wichurches.org

Holding a Candidate Forum

HELP CHANGE THE SPIRIT OF THE CAMPAIGN

A candidate forum can help redefine and redirect a public dialogue that has grown increasingly brutal, mean-spirited and divisive. Faith communities can set the tone and control the forum, and therefore can demand a higher standard of dialogue, sending a powerful message to those in power and those aspiring to power.

HELP SET THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Those who attend the forum and those candidates who participate will long remember the moving tales of people struggling to make ends meet and the success stories of community groups beating the odds. Politicians will encounter the moral analysis and compassionate work of the religious community.

RECLAIM THE POLITICAL PROCESS

A lot of people think the political system is too complex for them to understand. Many people do not vote. They just watch from the sidelines. By demystifying the process, helping people to understand what government does and what policy options really mean, a candidate forum encourages people to become involved.

STAY NONPARTISAN AND WITHIN THE LAW

Endorsing or working for or against candidates for public office is absolutely forbidden to nonprofit corporations, and may result in loss of tax-exempt legitimate activity for 501 (c) (3) organizations, and they are an important vehicle for informing your community. Should you decide to organize one, you must pay close attention to the law. The most important principle for faith communities to observe is nonpartisanship.

CHOOSING A FORMAT

A variety of formats is possible. Many candidates have a stump speech and have been trained to give tested answers to any question, designed to shift the debate back to issues that work in the candidate's favor. They may or may not answer the important questions for faith communities.

OPTION 1: Turn the candidates loose, let them give their stump speech and encourage them to say things that they think will appeal to your church and community. After an opening speech, with a set time limit, candidates might respond to each other, be interviewed by a panel, or take questions from the floor. The candidates may prefer this format, but it may not shift the terms or tone of the public debate.

This resource is provided by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, 750 Windsor Street, Ste 301, Sun Prairie, WI 53590 (916) 837-3108.

For more information, check out our website at www.wichurches.org

OPTION 2: Have a panel. If a panel is set up to interview the candidates, the moderator and the panel must be prepared to allow follow-up questions. This is especially true if a candidate does not come close to addressing the concerns that have been raised, but simply uses any question to give packaged answers outlining his/her favorite issues.

OPTION 3: A variation of the panel format has proven very effective. Set up a panel of experts to begin the discussion. Expert panelists can represent issues important in this election. Another tactic is to find panelists who themselves are disenfranchised: the homeless, the hungry, those seeking work or on welfare, or those impacted by immigration policies, environmental justice and stewardship, or the future of public education.

OPTION 4: Another format option would have an interview team picked by the congregation quiz the candidates on ten to twelve specific issues. Time could be allotted to the interview team to express concerns of the congregation. If the candidates avoid the issue, follow-up questions could attempt to get a clear answer.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

To host a successful forum:

- assemble a representative panel that can talk about local factors and concerns;
- take the time to prepare the panelists and the moderator;
- get candidates of all political parties to attend and participate;
- appoint a media committee to promote the event and approach your local cable access station;
- get other groups to co-sponsor the event;
- hold the forum at a well-known location away from the faith community if you wish the community-at-large to participate.

This resource is provided by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, 750 Windsor Street, Ste 301, Sun Prairie, WI 53590 (916) 837-3108.

For more information, check out our website at www.wichurches.org

Conducting a Voter Registration Drive

DOES VOTING REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE? Politicians listen to people who vote—or they'll be out of a job. In the last three election cycles, an average shift of 10,400 votes in each contest would have changed the outcome of 20 U.S. Senate races. Elections mean a lot to your life and the lives of people close to you. Changing a couple of votes in the Senate or House—or in the State Legislature—can change what happens to billions of dollars. Helping people register to vote, and reminding others how important it is to vote, gives people a voice and makes a democratic process stronger.

WHAT IS LEGALLY PERMISSIBLE?

Tax-exempt organizations like religious groups may organize and/or participate in voter registration, education, and get out the vote activities without jeopardizing their tax exempt status, provided the effort is nonpartisan. Nonpartisan means that the activity or program is not influenced by, affiliated with, or supportive of the interest or policies of any one political party, candidate or referendum. Efforts must focus solely on educating members about the importance of voting without bias for or against any candidate or party.

WHAT SHOULD WE AVOID?

- Do not distribute material on particular candidates, political parties or issues as part of your voter registration drive.
- Do not offer suggestions or opinions on which party people should register for or for whom they should vote.

WHERE DO I START?

1. ENLIST HELP

Begin by identifying others in your congregation who would be interesting in helping with a voter registration drive. Share your interest and invite feedback/ideas for how best to proceed. Collaborate with other non-partisan organizations (such as the League of Women Voters).

2. COLLECT INFORMATION

Learn about voter registration laws in your area. Contact your city or county Registrar of Voters to learn about how and where registration is carried out. *This resource is provided by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, 750 Windsor Street, Ste 301, Sun Prairie, WI 53590 (916) 837-3108.*

For more information, check out our website at www.wichurches.org

your community and to order voter registration cards and materials. These officials may provide training sessions for groups who are interested in conducting voter registration drives. You may hold a registration drive in your own faith community, or for the community at large.

3. DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Remember: voter registration is a year-round process. While upcoming elections establish important registration deadlines, every faith community should consider a year round campaign. Remind volunteers that the effort is nonpartisan.

Volunteers may not advocate particular candidates or suggest how a person should vote. It is a good idea to have volunteers from more than one political party. You may want to set up a table at coffee hour, providing forms and reminding people of the important responsibility to vote.

Be creative in your outreach efforts. Think about how you might reach those who often do not register and/or do not vote—including youth and low income people.

4. SPREAD THE WORD

Publicize voter registration efforts in the worship bulletin, congregational newsletter, and from the pulpit. Encourage pastor to address the issues of political responsibility and faithful citizenship.

This resource is provided by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, 750 Windsor Street, Ste 301, Sun Prairie, WI 53590 (916) 837-3108.

For more information, check out our website at www.wichurches.org