

2016 Voter education guide

11 *things your congregation can do before the 2016 elections*

1. HOLD AN ADULT EDUCATION FORUM ON THE ISSUES

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

2. ORGANIZE A CANDIDATES FORUM

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

3. 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 issue prior to the election. Check with your denominational office for good resources.

4. ORGANIZE VOTER REGISTRATION

Since many people do not know how or where to register, your congregation can make it easier by organizing a voter registration drive. See the last page of this resource, “Conducting a Voter Registration Drive” for more information.

5. SET A “100% REGISTERED” GOAL

Become a “100% congregation” by making sure every church member is registered to vote. It’s also important for everyone to verify that they are registered – even if they think they are. Go to the official Wisconsin Voter Information website at <https://myvote.wi.gov/> to check on voter status, polling place location, and sample ballot, or call your county or municipal clerk.

6. MAKE SURE EVERYONE KNOWS ABOUT THE NEW PHOTO ID REQUIREMENT

Wisconsin now requires voters to show a photo ID at the polls. Find detailed information at <http://www.bringit.wi.gov> about what is an acceptable photo ID, how persons without a photo ID can obtain

one, exceptions and rules for those unable to make it to a polling place, etc., and share this information with all your members.

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. See <http://www.gab.wi.gov/elections-voting/voters/absentee> and <http://www.bringit.wi.gov>.

8. OFFER YOUR CONGREGATION AS A POLLING SITE

Often polling sites need to change. 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 congregation 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.

11. GET VOTER INFORMATION TO ALL YOUR MEMBERS

Include a 2016 Election insert from <http://www.wichurches.org/resources/voter-resource/> in your Sunday worship bulletins leading up to the elections. Put up posters with voter information in your church, and put links on your church’s website to voter information from the Government Accountability Board <http://gab.wi.gov/elections-voting> the Wisconsin Voter Information website <https://myvote.wi.gov/>, and <http://www.bringit.wi.gov>.

Christian Principles in an Election Year

The following 10 principles were developed by the National Council of Churches USA's Justice and Advocacy Commission and approved by the NCC's Executive Committee.

Your church, your communion, and the National Council of Churches USA do not endorse any political party or any candidate.

Be that as it may, our Christian faith compels us to address the world through the lens of our relationship to God and to one another. Public discourse is enhanced as we engage civic leaders on the values and ethics affirmed by our faith. At the same time, religious liberty and the integrity of our democracy will be protected as candidates refrain from using faith-based organizations and institutions for partisan gain. We offer these 10 principles to those seeking to accept the responsibility that comes with holding public office.

- 1. War is contrary to the will of God.** While the use of violent force may, at times, be a necessity of last resort, Christ pronounces his blessing on the peacemakers. We look for political leaders who will make peace with justice a top priority and who will actively seek nonviolent solutions to conflict.
- 2. God calls us to live in communities shaped by peace and cooperation.** We reject policies that abandon large segments of our inner city and rural populations to hopelessness. We look for political leaders who will re-build our communities and bring an end to the cycles of violence and killing.
- 3. God created us for each other, and thus our security depends on the well being of our global neighbors.** We look for political leaders for whom a foreign policy based on cooperation and global justice is an urgent concern.
- 4. God calls us to be advocates for those who are most vulnerable in our society.** We look for political leaders who yearn for economic justice and who will seek to reduce the growing disparity between rich and poor.
- 5. Each human being is created in the image of God and is of infinite worth.** We look for political leaders who actively promote racial justice and equal opportunity for everyone.
- 6. The earth belongs to God and is intrinsically good.** We look for political leaders who recognize the earth's goodness, champion environmental justice, and uphold our responsibility to be stewards of God's creation.
- 7. Christians have a biblical mandate to welcome strangers.** We look for political leaders who will pursue fair immigration policies and speak out against xenophobia.
- 8. Those who follow Christ are called to heal the sick.** We look for political leaders who will support adequate, affordable and accessible health care for all.
- 9. Because of the transforming power of God's grace, all humans are called to be in right relationship with each other.** We look for political leaders who seek a restorative, not retributive, approach to the criminal justice system and the individuals within it.
- 10. Providing enriched learning environments for all of God's children is a moral imperative.** We look for political leaders who advocate for equal educational opportunity and abundant funding for children's services.

Finally, our religious tradition admonishes us not to bear false witness against our neighbor and to love our enemies. We ask that the campaigns of political candidates and the coverage of the media in this election season be conducted according to principles of fairness, honesty and integrity.

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?

Schedule an adult education forum several weeks before the election. It could be held in a congregation, a school, a community center. Invite other congregations/community groups to co-sponsor the event. The forum can be offered on a weekly basis, or be 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.

KEEP IT NONPARTISAN

Consult “Preaching Politics from the Pulpit: 2012” from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life at <http://www.pewforum.org/Church-State-Law/preaching-politics-from-the-pulpit-2012.aspx>

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. 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 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.

WCC POLICY PRIORITIES

For more information, see “Programs and Ministries” and “Advocacy” sections of the Wisconsin Council of Churches website, www.wichurches.org

Racial Justice

As a council of Christian churches, we hold ourselves accountable for our own critical self-reflection on the ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate institutional racism. We call ourselves to greater awareness of issues of power and privilege. We will strengthen our advocacy efforts as we challenge policies and laws of the state that perpetuate structural injustice.

Poverty

In the tradition of the prophets, we have the duty to challenge systems that create, sustain or ignore human suffering. We are called to speak out against policies and practices that create poverty, or that do less than possible to alleviate it. While faith communities are not called to partisan politics, we must bring our values to the public debate about decisions that affect the poor. Those with the power to act must be called to account.

Hunger and Food Security

Food is one of the most basic human needs. Without dependable access to food for a safe and nutritious diet, no one can lead a happy and productive life. Yet there are many people in our communities who do not have enough to eat, or who worry about where their next meal is coming from. It is not God’s will that people suffer hunger. God “has filled the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:53) and Jesus had compassion on the hungry crowd (Matthew 15:32). We are to pray for our daily bread (Matthew 6:11). Caring for the poor and feeding the hungry is a basic responsibility of God’s people (see, for example, Proverbs 22:9).

Environmental Stewardship

As citizens of Wisconsin, we have enjoyed the beauty and the bounty of our state and wish to preserve it for all who live here and for those who come after us. Because of the extended reach of technology, trade and communications, our actions have global consequences, and events far away affect our own communities. Our responsibilities are national and global as well as local. As members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, we call ourselves and our fellow citizens to repentance and to a renewed commitment to responsible living in our part of Creation. As Christian communities, we have a responsibility to lift up the ethical and spiritual values that must guide our behavior as members of earth’s household

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Hold 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. For more about fostering civil conversations, visit the WCC's "Season of Civility" webpage at <http://www.wichurches.org/programs-and-ministries/season-of-civility/>

HELP SET THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Those who attend and candidates who participate will long remember the moving tales of people struggling to make ends meet. In 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 status for 501(c)(3) organizations. Candidate forums are an important vehicle for informing your community, but 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. A thorough and user friendly guide to IRS restrictions on the political activity of religious organizations, "Preaching Politics from the Pulpit: 2012" is online at <http://www.pewforum.org/Church-State-Law/preaching-politics-from-the-pulpit-2012.aspx>

CHOOSE A FORMAT

A variety of formats is possible. Many candidates have a stump speech and have been trained to respond to any question with a tested answer 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: 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 2: A variation of the panel format has proven very effective. Set up a panel of experts to begin the discussion. Expert panelists may represent issues important to low-income people, the homeless, the hungry, those seeking work or on welfare. Or they may speak on racial justice, immigration, environmental justice and stewardship, or the role of religion in the schools and the future of public education.

OPTION 3: 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.

WCC POLICY PRIORITIES (*Continued*)

Immigration

The United States is a nation of immigrants, continually reshaped by new groups of people bringing diverse cultures, perspectives, and resources. Immigration is a core issue for faith communities. The Bible continually shows God's concern for the migrant and the outcast. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are called to care for the outcast and the stranger. Christians have been in the forefront of those calling for hospitality, solidarity, and justice for the more recently-arrived members of their communities. They have worked to replace prejudice and hostility with understanding and reconciliation.

Opposition to Torture

With the advent of the "War on Terror," the Wisconsin Council of Churches has joined the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (www.NRCAT.org) in expressing grave concerns about the use of torture by military forces and clandestine operatives, and advocating for its elimination. The WCC has supported all efforts to bring the United States back to being a nation that governs its policies of military detention under the provisions of the Geneva Convention and other international laws which cover the use of torture.

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 US 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. See the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's "Preaching Politics from the Pulpit: 2012," available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/Church-State-Law/preaching-politics-from-the-pulpit-2012.aspx>

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

Find voter registration information guides at <http://www.gab.wi.gov/voters>. Contact your city or county Registrar of Voters to learn about how and where registration is carried out in 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.



**We pray and work together for the unity and renewal of the Church
and the healing and reconciliation of the world.**

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