

# Politics Support Groups: A how-to guide

This is not about a project or a programme.

As two organisations – Bible Society and Christians in Politics – we simply want to seed an idea.

It's not a clever idea. There is no rocket science involved. It is just an attempt to join some dots that we think need joining. In fact in many places all over the UK people are already joining these dots to good effect.

For many years Christians in Politics, Bible Society and many other organisations have been encouraging Christians into various forms of public service, and laying out the biblical case for doing so.

As a result of initiatives like the SHOW UP campaign of 2015, many Christians have been getting politically involved for the first time. But as with any new endeavour, those who are embarking on this mission need support, encouragement and challenge.

There are plenty of good theological and relational resources from national Christian agencies to help with this. But much of it requires a connection to the national picture that many folks engaged in local service simply will not have the capacity for. How can people be supported and encouraged in their locality? The answer is surely through the local church.

But how can a local church leader accurately disciple someone whose mission field is politics? Each sphere, whether it's high finance, education, art or the media, has its own glories and darkneses. There are specific principalities and powers at play. Leadership, prayer and wisdom are required.

If a church leader has a computer programmer or investment banker in their congregation, they may know that they look after their families well and that they contribute plenty to the weekly collection, but not have a clue whether what they do from Monday to Friday is advancing the kingdom. And how could they, unless their church institutes a 'Bring your pastor to work' day? Multiply that effort by the 50 other career paths or life situations represented in a congregation and there is no way that one person or even a team can meaningfully ask the right questions in challenge and support.

So the obvious answer is that this sphere-specific discipleship requires interaction with other believers involved in that sphere. They are the people who know the specific stumbling blocks and opportunities that every sector brings.

But in any given congregation there may be just four or five involved in education, three or four in business and maybe just two or three in politics. There isn't the critical mass to form a meaningful group for training, support and accountability.

This may have been an insoluble problem 20 years ago. But in the last two decades we have seen the explosion of vibrant Churches Together groups all over the UK. Formal links have developed into meaningful, missional relationships. So there may not be critical mass in one congregation, but across all the churches in any given town there probably is. These groups of Christians who have a passion for politics are organically springing up all over the country. Unity is being found through shared purpose. Local churches are being impacted by these groups, and groups are benefitting from having accountability to the local church.

Getting people who are passionate about both church and politics to meet together is incredibly challenging as that group of people are often at more meetings per week than any other group of people in the UK already. But our experience shows that with committed leadership, it is possible.

At the outset, this may simply look like four or five people meeting to pray three times a year in a pub or front room. The core relationships will be key. Don't rush things in the desire for early impact or big numbers. Only through key cross-party, trusting relationships can others be welcomed into a circle of trust. That trust is very necessary bearing in mind some of the challenges and opportunities that will be shared.

From our experience, these groups operate most effectively when it's clear what they're for.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of local groups is to provide mutual support for those who are actively involved in politics, rather than being a safe replacement for meaningful involvement. People can be politically involved in many ways: as candidates, as intercessors, as administrators, as pastors, as design experts, as practical helpers – the list goes on! Groups are not an opportunity to do a Christian version of Question Time, pontificating about our most recent passions and frustrations.

Local groups have sprung up all over the country.

**Luton** – Christians coming together from across the parties to pray together

**Bristol** – As part of the broader work of Bristol:network, a politics grouping was formed to pray into and shape a strategic plan for the city. It has led to many believers getting involved.

**Doncaster** – Christians coming together to impact the town and build strategic relationships with councils and members of parliament.

**Leeds** – A local support group from across the parties and across the Brexit divide, praying and seeking together.

**Kingston** – Challenging local Christians to be politically aware and involved.

We have Transform Southwark (Politics), Mission:all Luton (Politics), Christians in Politics (Leeds) etc. The name matters less than the values.

These are some of the values that we think should inform any interaction.

## **Values**

### **Participate, don't just commentate**

We encourage Christians to be actively involved in the political sphere by joining parties and campaigns and by standing for office, both locally and nationally, rather than just discussing those who do.

### **Kingdom before tribe**

As we know, politics can be dangerously tribal. We believe in the importance of being involved in political tribes, but we also believe in the importance of not losing our identity to the tribe. Our identity is found firmly in Christ and our primary allegiance is to him. This value enables us to come together from across the political spectrum, modelling good agreement and disagreement.

### **Servant leadership**

Politics can be a world of self-promotion, and we unashamedly follow the example of Jesus, who in the words of John 13 'knew that the Father had put all things under his power', but at that very moment chose to wash his disciples' feet. He shows us that we should not be scared of power but also shows the correct way of using it. We will be as invested and passionate about the success of brothers and sisters as we are about our own.

### **Honouring the body**

Our strategy is to work in partnership with the Church both locally and nationally. We are hugely encouraged by the life springing up through various forms of Churches Together entities across the UK. At their best these groups will serve the vision of local churches trying to impact the sphere of governance and politics.

## **Relationships**

The emphasis of these groups should be placed on building strong relationships before drawing up grand plans. It is only the strength of these relationships that creates the space for good disagreement. And disagreement will come. This is politics.

## **Groups will:**

- Pray for, listen to, and practically support sisters and brothers
- With the help of national resources, be active in grappling theologically with the challenges and opportunities of being involved in the sphere of politics
- Attempt to hold one another accountable in their political involvement
- Seek to encourage others into political engagement, making the biblical case for involvement to local churches
- Attempt to discern where God is directing their specific group

We're looking for local champions who will:

- Find a leader or leaders
- Look after them
- Encourage them into intentional relationship-building
- Connect them with national resources
- Integrate the group into your wider Churches Together work, connecting with other spheres

## **For more information or to discuss in more detail contact Benita Hussain:**

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