



**Getting involved as a
Member of Parliament**



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Many Christians I meet are very interested in politics – in the life of their community and their country – but avoid political activism because they believe it involves constant moral dilemmas. Should I obey God or go along with the party?

They believe that the position of a government minister must be completely impossible, unless he or she sells out altogether and just maintains a purely nominal faith commitment. I try and persuade them that the reality is very different... It's vital that Christians don't just vacate the public arena, leaving other people to make all the choices, and then complaining when they don't agree with the outcome.

Stephen Timms MP

WHAT IS AN MP?

MP means Member of Parliament. The UK public elects MPs to represent their interests and concerns in the House of Commons. MPs are involved in considering and proposing new laws, and can use their position to ask government ministers questions about current issues. There are presently 650 MPs (2014).

WHAT DO MPS DO?

MPs split their time between working in Parliament itself, working in the constituency that elected them, and working for their political party. Some MPs from the ruling party become government ministers with specific responsibilities in certain areas, such as Health or Defence etc. and they are 'shadowed' or held to account in these areas by equivalent roles in the opposition parties. Those with ministerial and shadowing duties are called 'front-benchers', and MPs that do not have ministerial responsibilities called 'back-benchers'.

Working in Parliament

When Parliament is sitting (meeting), MPs generally spend their time working in the House of Commons. This can include raising issues affecting their constituents, attending debates, and voting on new laws. Most MPs are also members of committees, which look at issues in detail, from government policy and new laws, to wider topics like human rights. MPs who are part of the majority party which forms the government may also hold senior or junior ministerial roles

Working in their constituency

In their constituency, MPs often hold a 'surgery' in their office, where local people can come along to discuss any matters that concern them. MPs also attend functions, visit

My role as an MP means that I work closely with people from all walks of life. Whether it is Chief Executives or local kids in the constituency, I meet thousands of people. Encouraging and enabling them to make the most of their talents and aim high is an important part of my job. Indeed, in a constituency like mine, it's vital. I find strength in knowing that by doing this job I'm not only acting upon my faith, but hopefully helping to build a more just and equitable society too.

Sarah Hodgson MP

schools and businesses and generally try to meet as many people as possible. This gives MPs further insight and context into issues they may discuss when they return to Westminster.

Working for their political party

Although there are a small number of MPs that are independent of parties, with the present electoral system there is strength in unity. As such, in order to get elected as a Member of Parliament, it is normal to join a political party that fits closely with your own interest and concerns. Members are elected individually, and parties form governments. As members of political parties MPs, seek to represent the traditions and thinking of their party in Parliament. Parties are elected on promises made in their respective manifestoes, and they also provide the practical and organisational support needed to run an election campaign.

For more about the role of an MP look here: www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/mps/

You can find out who your own local MP is here: www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/resources/find-your-mp/

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR CHRISTIANS TO BE ENGAGED AT THIS LEVEL?

It is vital that Christians continue to get involved in politics by becoming Members of Parliament for two reasons:

1. In a democracy, numbers count (literally). This places a responsibility upon Christians to reflect God's will in Parliament. As Archbishop Tutu affirms: "If God's will is not being done in politics, whose will is being done?"
2. The Bible shows God's heart for good government, and contains many examples of the importance of serving and leading at a national level.

With the idea of a leader representing the concerns of a community in the corridors of power being seen in the Old Testament through people like Joseph, Daniel, Esther, Mordecai, Nehemiah etc, Christians have historically embraced the task to lead and serve in a representative role by becoming Members of Parliament. Indeed, the freedoms that underpin the opportunities to serve at this level where hugely influenced by Christianity. For example, led by Oliver Cromwell it was puritan Christians who created the role of the MP. These believers challenged the rule of the monarchy and began a process of broader representation of the common people in government by establishing the House of Commons. As such, there have always been Christian MPs in the UK - including notable historical figures such as:

When the honorable member for Yorkshire, **William Wilberforce**, gave his life to the Lord Jesus Christ, he briefly considered leaving politics to become a clergyman. After taking advice from John Newton, Wilberforce was inspired by God to remain in politics in order to abolish the slave trade and to change public morality in the UK. During his life he also established numerous missionary and humanitarian societies.

Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 7th **Earl of Shaftesbury** made a profound contribution to social reform. He spearheaded countless campaigns to care for the mentally

I saw a re-run of the 'Cathy Come Home' documentary when I was 14 and it moved me to tears and prompted me to join 'Shelter' the campaign for the homeless. Two years later I joined the Liberals largely out of a further developed sense of anger at the injustice that I saw around me in the north of England and (at the time of Live Aid) overseas. I was 18 when I became a Christian and I wondered for a while whether politics wasn't a rather grubby Godless world for a new Christian - but I look back and see that God led me to stay put and to stand up for what is right and to be a witness for Him in my life as an activist. I don't know whether I ever really thought I would become an MP, but I know God put me here for a reason, to serve Him and to make use of my Z-list celebrity status to promote the gospel in my own constituency and further afield.

Tim Farron MP

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have identified their faith as the moral basis for political engagement. Today, in Parliament there are a strong, growing number of believers seeing the role of MP as a calling. As Jeremy Paxman noted in his book *The Political Animal*:

"Although the business of politics is an intensely earthly trade, it is noticeable that religious belief seems to be much higher among members of the House of Commons than in the country at large."

This is not unexpected, because at heart politics is about conviction.

Within Parliament, Christian MPs enjoy fellowship across the party divides through Christians in Politics sister organisation, the official All-Party Parliamentary Group called **Christians in Parliament** (CiP). They run weekly prayer meetings, weekly bible studies, monthly worship services, the annual National Prayer Breakfast, the annual Week of Prayer for Parliament & Government, evening receptions, debates, and other activities and events. As a forum for developing relationships in Christ, CiP is bicameral (involving Peers from the House of Lords) and inter-confessional (not restricted to any one denomination). With administrative support from Bible Society, CiP provides an important communication hub for the broader Christian community at Westminster which includes party organisations, think-tanks, charities, campaign groups, special interest groups, academic institutions and denominations etc.

ill, to reduce working hours in factories and to stop children being sent down mines.

The politics of Liberal Prime Minister **William Gladstone** were driven by his evangelical faith. During his six decades of political activity in which he instituted far-reaching parliamentary reforms, he never gave up on what he saw as his God-given task to serve through being a Christian member of the House of Commons.

Kier Hardie became a Christian in 1897 and later wrote that "the impetus which drove me first of all into the Labour movement, and the inspiration which has carried me on has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth than all other sources combined." He went on to help found and lead the Labour Party, fighting his entire life for better pay and conditions for working people and their families.

More recently, Margaret Thatcher,

When I first got involved in politics as a student I never expected that Christians would agree about any particular political programme any more than other people might, but I do think that it is very important that we do make our presence felt across the political spectrum with a witness that unites and rises above mere political differences.'

Desmond Swayne MP

Christians in politics, the presence of genuine Christian MPs across all the parties is a living reality that confirms the possibility of serving and leading in high office without compromise. Knowing who they are in Christ and who Christ is in them, they confirm what Joseph and Daniel experienced – that although there is a time to comply and a time to defy in political leadership, the Lordship of Christ is eternal, comprehensive and non-negotiable.

My work gives me the opportunity to be involved in God's world in a hard place, where decisions have consequences, and where we must interpret the needs of a fallen world with truth and grace.

Alistair Burt MP

HOW CAN I BECOME AN MP?

First of all find out if you are allowed to stand for Parliament. You must be at least 18 years old and a British citizen, or a citizen of a Commonwealth country with indefinite leave to stay in the UK. You can't be an MP if you're a civil servant, an un-discharged bankrupt, a member of the clergy, police or armed forces, a prisoner serving more than a year in jail, or if you've been found guilty of certain electoral offences.

Although developing a good knowledge of politics by studying the subject at Higher Education level is a valuable and recommended step, people become MP's from many different spheres of life. On their journey of growing interest and involvement in national politics, MPs have started off as church-leaders, local councillors, community leaders, teachers, trade unionists, journalists, lawyers, campaigners, academics, Civil Servants, business professionals, and even actresses! Reflecting the very different parts of the country, they are a diverse group of people, all of whom

Before I came into Parliament, I had been deeply saddened by the emotional costs and poverty caused by family breakdown and the strains this escalating problem imposed on so many of our public services. Once elected, I saw that over a third of my constituency surgery cases had a marriage, relationship or parenting breakdown as the original cause of the benefits, housing, social services or child support issue that my constituents were coming to see me about. This issue remains one of the driving forces for my political life.

Andrew Selous MP

For more information about Christians in Parliament, visit their website:

www.christiansinparliament.org.uk

For Christians, becoming an MP can be a challenging calling. The tribal nature of party politics will sometimes place demands upon your identity and test your loyalties.

Although, as elsewhere in public life there will always be nominal

(apart from 'independents') have followed the same course.

First you have to join a political party. Although party membership is constituted at a national level, every constituency in the country has local branches that act as forums for political action.

Second, you need to become an active member of the party by getting involved in local and national campaigning and debates.

Becoming an MP in either the Labour, Conservative or Liberal-Democrat parties, or one of the smaller parties such as UKIP, the Green Party, Plaid Cymru or the Scottish Nationalist Party involves plotting a course through the selection process of each party. These processes to become a Prospective Parliamentary Candidate (PPC) are different in each party. For example, some parties identify constituencies that are only available for women to apply for. Others take a strong steer from the national party as to who should be selected. Generally they take the form of:

- Party members needing to have their names registered on an approved list that is compiled at a national level. This usually occurs by an interview (informal or highly structured) or straightforward registration.

- When a constituency vacancy becomes available a formal selection process is initiated, and those who have registered an interest in becoming an MP are invited to apply for the post at a local constituency level.

- The constituency party then runs a series of interviews for those who have applied. Varying across the parties, these usually take the form of a process of elimination. Applicants need to perform well at successive interviews to get the necessary votes cast by the members of the constituency party to go through to the next round. Different local parties look for different qualities in those that are applying. Things like a strong grasp of politics, good knowledge of party policy, experience of campaigning, and an affinity with the local area are all important. Eventually, a PPC is selected to stand in the next election.

In 1985 I was a partner in a large provincial law firm and active member of a house church in Plymouth. I had a sense of calling into a 'wider work' and was actively seeking God's direction for the way forward. On 3rd December 1985, I had a day off work for prayer and fasting in a friend's flat to try and clarify the call. (Not being a great one for fasting I popped out at eleven o'clock and bought some donuts. It seemed to help!) When I got home that evening my wife Janet asked, 'Did you hear anything?' 'Yes,' I said, 'I believe God is calling us into politics!' 'Oh no!' she replied. At the age of 30 I knew nothing about it. I could just about name the Prime Minister and I did not really know what was going on in the world. I told the partners at my law firm that I was going into politics but did not know what party to join. They laughed.

Gary Streeter MP

In Luke 14: 25-34, Jesus tells us how we need to 'count the cost'. The selection processes can be gruelling, and it is quite normal for applicants to experience a number of them

before they are eventually selected for a ‘winnable’ seat. Despite this, the reward of fighting an election in order to serve God by serving a constituency of people in parliament makes it a very worthwhile endeavour. Ahead of, and alongside all these steps, for the Christian sensing God’s calling to this vocation, it is essential to prayerfully engaged with Word of God. It is also important to be in fellowship and receive pastoral guidance within the authority and accountability of a local church.

USEFUL LINKS

The Labour Party

www.labour.org.uk

Christians on the Left

www.christiansontheleft.org.uk

The Conservative Party

www.conservatives.com

The Conservative Christian Fellowship

www.christian-conservatives.org.uk

The Liberal Democrat Party

www.libdems.org.uk

The Liberal Democrat Christian Forum

www.ldcf.net

Scottish Nationalist Party

www.snp.org

Plaid Cymru

www.plaidcymru.org

UKIP

www.ukip.org

The Green Party

www.greenparty.org.uk

I believe that God is longing for some Daniels to step into his will and influence the direction of the UK today ... You never know, God might just call you!

Jeffery Donaldson MP



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

DAVE LANDRUM Dr Dave Landrum is Director of Advocacy at the Evangelical Alliance before which he was parliamentary officer for the Bible Society. He has a first-class degree in contemporary politics and urban policy studies and a doctorate in politics and policy process in education. Well-respected in parliament, Dave's passion is to see Christianity making an impact on society by being at the centre of political, cultural and economic life.