



# Christians *in* Politics

**Getting involved as a local  
church and as a church  
leader**



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The Christian church is the largest 'civil society' group in the UK. Churches are the biggest provider of youth and children's services in Britain. Across the denominations, church members give more hours of voluntary, charitable and community service than any other organisation. It has been said (with good evidence to support the claim) that if the church ceased to exist tomorrow, civil society would effectively collapse.

Because Christians tend to see their works of service as 'ministry' rather than 'community activism', we often fail to recognise what a vitally important constituency the church represents. This means that we sometimes do not use the 'voice' that this gives us wisely or effectively. There are many different ways in which churches and their leaders can become positively and appropriately involved in the public and political life of their local community. We asked two church leaders who are travelling this path to share their experiences of being 'salt and light' in this way. They are:

- Rev. John Guest, an Anglican Rector in Stanford-le-Hope on the Thames estuary in Essex;
- Rev. Ian Savory, Pastor of an independent church on the Catton estate in Norwich, Norfolk.

Neither would claim to be an 'expert' on political or community engagement! But both they and their churches have seen significant fruit as they have pursued this call to become salt and light in their local communities.

### INTRODUCTION

**[John]** Some years back I ran up a provocative banner in the town centre proclaiming DON'T GO TO CHURCH! A number of local Christians were scandalised yet the wider community seemed to grasp the idea at once. One local head teacher invited us to "do church" in his school, and a radio news programme host asked me if we could hold "church" at the nearby Sunday boot sale!

*My role is to be a 'bridge builder'; reaching out to all kinds of people in the community through relationships.*

The truth of course is that the church is neither a building nor a meeting. You cannot 'go' to church any more than you can 'go' to family. Church is people - as little as two or as many as two billion – and in the present age it is the foremost expression of the Kingdom of God. Once we understand this vital dynamic and begin to promote it, we can take a whole new approach to what we traditionally call 'ministry' and more clearly demonstrate the salt and light role of the church in the community.

Our vision is to be: a growing church in which we can deepen our relationships with God and with one another. I initially thought that growth (the 'aim') would be the key focus, but have increasingly come to recognise that relationship (the 'process') is where I am called to invest my time and efforts. A major part of my role is to be a 'bridge builder', reaching out to all kinds of people in the community through relationship.

**[Ian]** As Christians, the message of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension and his desire for a new community is central to who we are. Out of that revelation flows our heart for a living fellowship (koinonia) 'on the earth as in heaven', that makes a difference now in our families, our communities and our world.

The Bible declares that God’s purpose for mankind is relationship with himself. We reflect this when we engage with those who serve our communities, from statutory bodies and the voluntary sector to those in political roles such as MPs and local councillors. We seek to affirm their hard work and endeavours. We show them kindness and a generous spirit, because that is what we have encountered in Christ. We build an atmosphere where thankfulness is the norm, expressed freely to those from all backgrounds and political perspectives. We live as people who know Christ is ‘for’ us, and we are ‘for’ the people. We seek to call up in others a spirit that desires to contribute to the good of our society.

## A VISION FOR ENGAGEMENT

**[John]** Most of us need to ask two fundamental questions: Where am I going? and How do I get there? This is true for individuals and for communities; the first is a question of Vision and the second is one of Goal or Aim. To miss one of the two questions means either knowing where you are going, but not how to get there; or knowing the right approach, but not the desired destination.

For the church to effectively engage the community it must first know what it is aiming to do and secondly what steps it needs to take to achieve this. The realisation that building the church is Jesus' responsibility and that seeking the Kingdom is ours, gives a helpful realignment of approach to ministry and service. This focuses our vision and enables us to authentically ‘be’ the church and ‘do’ the Kingdom, rather than ‘going’ to church and overlooking the Kingdom altogether.

*Being involved and engaged in this way enables us to...affect the process for the good of the kingdom and the world.*

**[Ian]** We must look to God to grant us the vision for our church, and also for our city, our region, and our nation. We need to be strategic: identifying our objectives clearly and prioritising accordingly. We must position ourselves within the realms of local governance, education, health and social issues, because being involved and engaged in this way enables us to comment on, shape and affect the process for the good of the Kingdom and the world.

## TAKING A ‘360 DEGREE VIEW’

Opportunities for local churches to get involved in public and political life are all around us. Many public bodies are actively looking to build closer relationships, because alongside the fact that they need them to deliver services, they also see ‘engaging with faith groups’ as one of their objectives. Even if they are willing to connect simply because they recognise that Church is an important part of the local community, it’s up to the us to grasp this chance to serve and lead.

The following diagram outlines some of the opportunities that are potentially available:



## 1. PRAYING FOR POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

The Bible commands us to pray 'for rulers and all those in authority' (1 Tim 2:1-2). Prayer has to be the starting point and the distinguishing mark of all authentic Christian engagement in public and political life. Without the humility, wisdom, and understanding of God's heart that comes through prayer, we run the risk of compromising our witness and becoming seen as 'just another interest group'.

Prayer is something that we can offer unconditionally. We are called to pray for our Christian brothers and sisters and pray for our 'enemies' in equal measure. Even people who do not share our faith are almost always pleased to accept prayer as a genuine act of support and good will.

We can engage in prayer for politics and political leaders in many ways. This may involve praying as individuals, in prayer groups, and as a whole church. For loads of creative, practical ideas on how to pray effectively into these areas, download prayer resources from [www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk).

**[John]** One of the foundations of my ministry is a conviction that I am called to pray for an hour each day for the church and community that I serve. This has become a morning prayer time that others also participate in. We pray for many things; some very personal and specific, others as an ongoing act of persistently bringing our community and nation before God. We pray for the residents of every street in the Parish, and all the arms of local and national government.

Without this commitment to prayer, I suspect that much of the other 'activity' we are involved with would not be nearly so fruitful! Prayer is the foremost method by which we effect change in the world. So many of the problems that we see in society have spiritual roots, and therefore need spiritual solutions. Because of this, prayer remains a top priority and it's important never to let other commitments (even really good and exciting ones) come in the way of that.

## 2. INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

Schools are important centres in most localities. They provide a connection point with children and families. The ideas and values that they teach will shape our society in the next generation, for better or for worse. Churches were the original provider of mass education in Britain, and many have carried this tradition on with a strong commitment to schools work.

Education will remain at the centre of political debate for the foreseeable future. Important decisions about its direction are made at local level, with real opportunities for churches and individual Christians to get involved. School governing boards normally include representatives from both the parents and the wider community, and there are also opportunities to become involved in the wider services that schools increasingly provide.

**[Ian]** As a church we started our vision for community work around 9 years ago. Part of our strategy was a conscious effort to 'go for kids' and to 'grow with a generation'. Children mostly attend school, so getting involved with the schools was an obvious first step. This led to members of the

*Among the many purposes of schooling, four stand out: to love and to care, to serve, to empower, and to learn.*

Tom Bentley, formerly of  
DEMOS

church being on the governing body of both the local First and Middle schools, and also chairing these bodies through the amalgamation process into a Primary school.

Our relationship with the schools has truly blossomed, from initially standing in the gap between two schools which were almost at war, to a true friendship and strong working relationships. Our staff are in the schools around 2-3 days per week, delivering lessons, assemblies, and clubs etc. As part of the amalgamation to a Primary school we were invited by the Head to partner with them and invest in the new building. We now meet in a school sports hall on a Sunday which we helped to finance and build, complete with stage area and a baptistery pool. Working together in this way has enhanced the facilities available to the church, the school, and the local community too.

### **3. COMMUNITY PROJECTS (VOLUNTARY AND FUNDED)**

Churches make a huge contribution to society through the projects that they run and services that they provide. We do not always recognise that our work with young people, the elderly, homeless people, families, or addicts has anything to do with politics. But in fact, the work that we do as local churches makes a powerful political statement about how these social issues should be tackled and what kind of society we want to see.

We need to recognise the wider political context of our community work for two reasons:

- Much of this work is funded by the state, and good working relationships with government agencies are essential to access funding.
- Excellent local projects can and do influence the wider debate. Today's local project can easily become tomorrow's 'beacon initiative' and next year's national policy.

**[Ian]** We wanted to move beyond traditional schools work to supporting young people in the community. We were able to secure funding through the 'Children's Fund', a government initiative focused on preventative support for 5-12 year olds, which has enabled us to employ two community workers over the past 6-7 years. As well as the practical work with children which this enables us to do, we have been able to have representation on the board at County level. This gives us advance warning of any planned changes, and allows us to have an influence on the decision making process that goes on.

We were fortunate enough to receive three year funding for a youth worker from Children in Need in Sept 2007. We have been able to 'hit the ground running' in the local high school, by appointing someone who had previous experience of the school. His work is vital as he bridges the gap between Primary and High school, providing support to pupils making the transition and also pastoral care in one-to-ones and small groups. Out of this relationship we are about to pilot an inclusion project, providing an alternative education programme to pupils who have been expelled from school one day per week in the forthcoming term.

### **4. PARTICIPATE IN LOCAL FORUMS AND CONSULTATIONS**

If you read the media you may well come away with the cynical view that 'the government' is remote and unwilling to listen to people. Politicians are as concerned about this as anyone else, and

there are now many initiatives in place that seek to re-build relationships and trust by including local people in discussions and decisions:

- Local government has a 'duty to consult', which they act on by setting up local forums, consultations, and partnerships to hear the views of local people and community groups.
- Both local and national bodies are interested in consulting with 'faith groups'. In the past this has been seen to go hand-in-hand with initiatives to connect with ethnic minorities, and there are clear opportunities for groups such as black-majority churches to engage via this route. However, the door is open for all churches to get involved (and if we don't, you can be sure that others will!)

Consultations provide a great opportunity to influence decision makers and to communicate a vision of hope for your local community. To engage effectively does require an understanding of the structures that are in place, the jargon that is used, and what can (and cannot) be achieved.

**[John]** My role as a Parish Priest gives me a huge bundle of potential opportunities. I currently chair the 'Hope Committee', which was the first of the forums to be set up by our local council and has been running for 10 years. My vision is that it should be 'independent, representative, and active'; focused on understanding and advocating the needs of local people. My style is to ensure that we keep the 'boring' work to a minimum (holding committee meetings and sending out agendas and minutes), and concentrate on actually doing and achieving stuff! Most of the people who participate are volunteers, and we want to use their gift of time effectively.

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I also chair the 'North East Cluster Extended Services C.O.G' (you really do have to get used to jargon in the public sector!). What this actually means is that I help a group of head teachers, local politicians, community workers, and others to use their facilities and contacts with families to provide services that go beyond the 'in school hours' curriculum. This can mean anything from breakfast clubs and healthy eating initiatives to counselling services and family support. The relationships of trust which get built by working together have also enabled us to provide Christian schools workers, introduce prayer spaces into schools, and find Sunday meeting venues for new churches desiring to plant into the area, all with the enthusiastic support of the schools involved.

As opportunities have expanded I have had to prioritise my time, and focus on where I can achieve the greatest positive impact. If someone else can do it, I will let them; this has provided several opportunities for other members of the church to get involved. You do need to be aware of the risk of tokenism; sometimes people will ask you to be involved just so that they can claim your support or 'tick a box'. I'm always looking to build new relationships, but that doesn't mean that I say 'yes' to every committee I am asked to serve on!

## **5. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LOCAL COUNCILLORS AND MP**

To pray effectively for our local politicians, we need to build relationships with those we are praying for. Most local elected representatives also have a genuine desire to connect with community

groups, and can be strong advocates for the good work that churches do – provided that they know about it!

The Christians in Politics information pack on **making contact with your elected representatives** ([www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk)) can help you to find out who your local representatives are, what they are responsible for, and how to get in touch with them. You may want to speak with them about specific issues that concern you, but you are much more likely to get a sympathetic hearing if you are coming from a place of ongoing, positive relationship. This should be a priority for any local church.

*The most uplifting letters we have from Christian correspondents are when they seek to encourage the MP in his work and his calling, to praise him for something he has done well, or to let him know that they are praying for him.*

MP's office staff

**[Ian]** Our local MP regularly holds surgeries at our premises. This is a really practical way of serving him and also ensuring that we have open lines of communication. He has gone on record as saying that many of the things that his party stands for, our church is already doing!

We try to develop and sustain strong relationships with local Councillors by making sure we meet with them at various events and catch up with each other. We also publicly affirm them for their hard work and send occasional small gifts of appreciation when they are going through hard times. These Councillors are on the whole good public servants, and it should be part of the church's role to affirm what they do and to hold them to account in the context of a positive relationship. Out of this desire to 'big up' local people we also award the 'Catton Community Champions Shield' once a year, to affirm those mainly outside of the church who make a massive contribution to our community.

## **6. INVOLVEMENT WITH POLICE AND CRIME PREVENTION**

Justice, mercy, and peace are important themes of the gospel message. People in the front line of administering these values on behalf of society working in the Police service and the criminal justice system can sometimes feel alienated from the communities they serve. Churches can help to change that in many ways: Police chaplaincy, prayer for community transformation, encouraging Christians to serve on police boards or as magistrates, and 'on the ground' initiatives to help lift people out of situations that lead them to commit crimes.

Although the opportunities will vary depending on the needs of the community that you are part of, few organisations will be closer to those needs than an active local church.

**[John]** To work effectively alongside the police, you need to get to know them locally. This highlights one of the issues with building relationships: police officers and other public servants do tend to 'move on' as their careers progress or personal circumstances change. The church is part of the community for the long haul; this gives us a perspective which can be valuable, but it does mean that we cannot take today's good relationships for granted, and have to be constantly reaching out to new potential partners.

We launched the 'Bar'n'Bus' initiative in our town in partnership with the local police and a group of churches. The aim was to deal with problems caused by youths hanging around on the streets at night. The police paid to have a double-decker bus converted out of their crime prevention budget,

with a hot drinks bar, seating areas, playstation games, and a small prayer room. It is manned by volunteers from four local churches, which also cover the running costs. In the first year of operation, the police reported a 34% reduction in minor crime on bus night! Team members have many amazing stories to tell of conversations with young people who in many cases have engaged with prayer and encountered a positive expression of Christianity for the first time.

*In many cases [where the churches have become involved] there has been a significant, measurable reduction in crime statistics and a tangible improvement in social harmony. Public confidence in local crime reduction agencies has risen and reoffending statistics have fallen.*

Debra Green, City Links

## 7. GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS IN THE LOCAL MEDIA

As Christians, communicating the gospel message of good news is a fundamental aspect of our calling. We all know that in our modern world, the media is essential to any effective communication. But how many churches and church leaders know how to work effectively with their local media (newspapers, radio, TV, and increasingly the internet?)

Stories are what shape our understanding of the world we live in. Local media can't survive without stories. Many churches have fantastic stories to tell; of sacrificial service, joyful community, and changed lives. With a basic understanding of how the media operates and a willingness to build long term relationships, the opportunities are there for ours to become the stories that are heard.

**[John]** My involvement with the local paper began because the editor approached the church hierarchy and asked if anyone was willing to contribute. He didn't get much of a response, but (again through having developed an existing relationship) I was able to seize the opportunity. I now write a fortnightly column in the 'Thurrock Gazette'. My first article was entitled "Freddie Starr didn't eat my hamster"! This reflects the tone I have tried to adopt: short, punchy, humorous, and leading people to an insight from the Bible or Christian spirituality.

Taking on even a fortnightly column is a serious commitment. You can't not do it just because you are busy that week, and 'writer's block' does not go down well as an excuse when they have held space for you! The reasons that I continue to prioritise it include:

- I want to show people that there is 'good news' out there in our community and the world;
- I am able to portray the church as fun, quirky, and not boring (thus breaking down some of the unhelpful stereotypes that people hold);
- I do get feedback, which is a great way of engaging with people who we might otherwise never come into contact with;
- The local paper reaches 150,000 people each week (that's about a thousand times as many as listen to my sermons!)

Having regular contact with journalists means that we are more likely to get our 'good news' stories communicated to a wider audience. And if there were ever to be 'bad news' out there concerning

the church, I am confident that they would at least talk to us before printing it and present the facts in a balanced way.

#### **POSTSCRIPT: IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT**

**[Ian]** I know that some church leaders worry that they will have to compromise what they believe if they get involved in public and political life. Not once have we compromised on our faith. In fact this has become our strength, as we are accepted as being a community of believers who are committed to a certain set of values. Over time, people get to know that what we say we will do, and that we will strive to do it well!

The church is a collection of people, not a building. We live out our lives in the midst of the community, and experience its problems and opportunities daily. We should be pro-active in having a wide Christian representation in positions of influence within our locality and beyond. God loves us, loves the lost, and loves His world. We want to be instrumental in bringing about His purposes, for His glory and for our healing. Having Christian representation at all levels in society is one way in which we can do this.



#### **ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS**

**Rev. John Guest** is Rector of St Margaret's, Stanford-le-Hope, in South Essex. He has responsibilities for the Parish church and a 'fresh expressions' congregation which meets in a local secondary school. John is Chair of the Hope Committee (a local community forum), serves on several other groups relating to community and education issues, and is a regular columnist in the Thurrock Gazette, a local newspaper.



**Rev. Ian Savory** is Senior Pastor of Oak Grove Chapel in Catton, Norwich. He is responsible for numerous community projects including work with schools, children, young people and the elderly. Oak Grove also run a community café and credit union, a charity shop and regular programme of social events. Ian is consulted regularly by the local council on issues relating to the Catton estate.