

Session 3

CHANGE-MAKERS

This session looks at what politics might mean for Christians. Participants are invited to take a “wider” view of politics, and look at how they can be change-makers.

Key messages of the session:

- a. politics is everywhere, part of our daily activities, and not just restricted to politicians
- b. our churches make political decisions
- c. we are challenged to see politics as being about change

Preparation

You will need:

- flipchart paper and pens
- copies of the Session 3 handout on political bingo for the group members, pens and possibly a small prize
- Bibles or copies of the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37)

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

God of creation, we gather here from many places. Some of us are tired and seeking rest and refreshment. Some of us are distracted by the large and small concerns which dominate our lives. Some of us are seeking answers or inspiration. Help us to listen, speak, question and discern your will for us and for your world. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

INTRODUCTION/ACTIVITY (5 mins)

Ask the group to think of the kinds of things that people say about politics and politicians. Note these on the flipchart. Examples might include:

- **politicians are only in it for themselves**
- **they can't be trusted**
- **politics is boring**
- **party loyalty means there is no room for conscience**
- **it's all about political correctness gone mad**

Did you get any positive comments or are they all negative? These responses are not just a British phenomena; worldwide, politicians represent the least trusted occupation, scoring only 13%. Religious leaders are the most trusted (33%), followed by military/police leaders (26%), journalists (26%) and business leaders (19%). (Gallup International Associates/BBC World Service poll)

But politics is about more than politicians...

ACTIVITY – POLITICAL BINGO (10 mins)

Hand out a “political bingo” sheet and pen to each member of the group. Each person has to find someone else in the room who can sign a square on the bingo card – you can only sign another person's card once, and can't sign your own (if the group is too small to limit the number of signatures to one per person, set an appropriate limit). The winner is the first person to complete a line – horizontally, vertically or diagonally.

Ask people to discuss the game. What surprised people about Political Bingo? Did they think that everything on the sheet was political? Briefly try to get people to identify what they would see as political and what is not and explain why.

RE-IMAGINING POLITICS (20 mins)

Many people will associate politics with parliament, with elections, or with legislation. The danger with this is that we see politics as something that only happens once every five years when we are asked to vote for a party.

Can we imagine politics in a different way? The origin of the word “politics” comes from the Greek word for the word for city (*polis*) and is related to the word for citizen (*polites*). If we start from this point, does it change the way we see politics? Politics is not about what politicians do to us; instead could it be about how we as citizens decide we want to organise our society, how we choose we want to live together, and the kind of world we want to see tomorrow?

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to reflect on the implications of this challenge. What kinds of issues/actions would then be considered political? Examples could include:

- voting for political parties in a democratic system
- taking a role in public life such as a school governor or magistrate
- choosing to buy fair-trade bananas
- impact of where we go on holiday
- responding to a joke or remark which demeans someone else
- any actions which say “I want the world to look like this”

This understanding of politics shares responsibility with the politicians, rather than blaming them for public apathy or alienation. It’s about not opting out but recognising that every decision we take, or fail to take, says something about how we want our world to be shaped. Not just about individual acts of mercy, but about changing the way our world works for the better.

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to get into pairs and discuss what activities they have done that day which could be seen as political. For example if they have bought something, who was involved and who was affected? What statement were they making about how they want the world to look through their purchase?

POLITICS IN THE BIBLE (20 mins)

"When people say the Bible and politics don't mix," Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously said, "I don't know which Bible they are referring to. It's not the one I've been reading." As we saw in the last session on justice, the Bible has a lot to teach us about many key political topics: injustice, humanity, suffering. But can the Bible also inspire us in the way that we “do” politics? If we accept the broader understanding of politics explored earlier in this session, what does it mean for Christians to act politically?

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37)

How can the actions of the Samaritan throw light on what politics can mean for us, and what our understanding of God says about this?

Ask the group to reflect on what we might learn about doing politics from reading this passage. Examples might include:

- The Samaritan didn’t opt out. He saw that the suffering of another was an injustice which had consequences for him.
- The Samaritan got involved. It was messy, it cost time and money. Our God of the incarnation gets involved in our messy, costly world
- The Samaritan committed to coming back (to pay the innkeeper). Politics isn’t “hit and run”, going for the easy win and then moving on. God wants ongoing relationships that are costly – not necessarily financially, but in terms of the commitment required of us.
- The Samaritan did more than apply sticking plaster. The Samaritan wanted to achieve change. Christianity is a transformational faith; it transforms individuals’ relationships with God, as well as relationships between people, families, communities and nations. The Samaritan’s actions

challenged the prejudices of the man and the innkeeper and perhaps began incrementally to change the deep-rooted attitudes which led to the discrimination against Samaritans.

FOR DISCUSSION (25 mins)

The title of this course is taken from the saying by nineteenth century Prussian politician, Otto von Bismarck, that "*politics is the art of the possible*". Many Christians, indeed many voters, are put off by this sentiment which says that politics is about compromises, about short-term pragmatism, and not about ideals.

- How does this phrase fit with the discussion above about what we can learn from the Bible about doing politics. Why might this title have been chosen to explore the links between Christianity and politics?

What political decisions has your church had to make? It would be surprising if the answer is "none", but you could use an illustration to stimulate discussion. One example might be a debate over whether the church should continue to fund a loss-making lunch club for older people. What are the different considerations for the church (Support for (dwindling) group of vulnerable people? Use of money which could be spent elsewhere? Subsidising work which should be funded by a statutory agency?) How do different church members approach the debate? (Different interest groups? Hidden agendas? Open or closed discussions? Impact of different personalities or theological positions?). Other examples might be more directly "party" political (eg the use of church premises by particular groups, or the hosting of a hustings meeting before an election).

- If the church is a place where political decisions are made, how should we as members of the body of Christ approach our politics and our political dealings with one another? What implications does this have for our participation in politics in the wider world?

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

God of change and challenge, help us to be open to your prompting, ready to see Godly possibilities in our everyday activities. Help us to be honest in our discussions and debates within the church and outside. And help us to seek to heal and not just relieve the deep fractures in our society. This week help us to be open to how we can think, speak and act a little differently. In the name of the great healer, Jesus Christ, Amen.

HOMEWORK - The three-legged political stool

Think of one situation in today's world, nationally, locally or in your church.

How could you respond:

- **Personally – how will my involvement change me as a person or what I do?**
 - **Practically – what can I or we do to make a difference?**
- **Politically – what can I or we do that helps to change the world around me?**

The next three sessions look at how Christians can be agents of change in God's world.