

Countering political extremism at the ballot box

A toolkit for church leaders

Introduction

The threat of far-right politics in Britain has not diminished. It is important not to become complacent. The appropriation of Christian images, language and symbols by the BNP means that it is even more important that churches do all they can to counter political extremism.

This toolkit is focused on practicalities. For information about the policies and state of the BNP, theological reflection, prayer resources and the views of the UK churches, visit the ecumenical resource site Countering Political Extremism www.methodist.org.uk/extremism

All churches are welcome to adapt and make use of the material on this website.

Christians, by following in the footsteps of Jesus, have a responsibility to act and speak against injustice and discrimination. It is especially important that Christians challenge those who use Jesus or Christian symbols to justify racist politics.

This toolkit contains key steps you might take to challenge extreme and racist political movements such as the BNP, England First and the National Front.

Working together to show that the church is a place of hope and life, we can overcome the fear and prejudice of political extremism.

Our Advice

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing.

Silence or inaction is not an option.

Extreme views are often given publicity because they are unusual. It is important that these views are challenged or criticised when they are discussed in public.

Refusing to criticise groups such as the BNP because we think we might give them extra publicity is a strategy that can backfire: they will still get exposure and their views won't be challenged. An opportunity to talk about the Christian faith in a positive way will have been missed.

When the BNP or other extreme groups are active, churches have an extraordinary opportunity to share the Gospel message of God's love for all people, to encourage democratic citizenship and social action, and to demonstrate the positive and affirming message of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Tool 1: Knowledge is power

Be aware of what is happening in your local area.

Is the BNP (or another group) active? Do they put up candidates for election. How many votes are far-right groups getting?

Your local authority will be able to provide information about recent local elections.

In European Parliament, Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and London Assembly elections, a regional constituency system of proportional representation means that all voters will have an opportunity to vote for the BNP.

It might help to find out how BNP candidates have polled in recent elections, as this can reveal the likelihood of them winning a future seat. If they are the incumbent party, then it should be useful to know how much support is required to defeat them.

Try to keep informed about what is happening. If you can, get hold of copies of their election publicity, or keep records of letters that their candidate might have written to the local paper. These might be useful to refer to if you decide to do any future work.

Find out what action has already taken place in terms of efforts to counter political extremism. Have the other political parties, trade unions, community organisations or groups affiliated to Unite Against Fascism or the 'HOPE not Hate' campaign been active? What efforts have been made to boost voter registration or increase turnout?

Tool 2: See, Judge, Act

You will know your congregation and your community well – probably better than anyone else. Listen to the concerns of your people. Learn about the realities and challenges they are facing. Think about how the BNP might be exploiting fears, perhaps to do with employment, asylum seekers, benefit provision or community relations, and about how to deal with genuine issues without resorting to the politics of fear and hatred.

People will consider voting for a far-right party for a number of reasons – and not always because they are racist or neo-Nazis. Be aware not to patronise or lecture people about how they might vote when they have real issues or concerns that need to be addressed. It has sometimes been the case that the BNP have done well when the other parties have failed to mount even a minimal campaign, or where there may only be one or two mainstream candidates. It is important that everyone pulls together when there is a danger that the BNP might succeed.

Tool 3: Speak out

When churches come together to issue a joint statement distancing themselves from racist political organisations it can have a big impact. Is this something that you could organise with other church leaders in your community? Or could you work with inter faith or other community organisations?

For examples of local and national church statements on political extremism see www.methodist.org.uk/extremism

In recent years the BNP have used Christian symbols or ideas to gain support. This insidious behaviour is outrageous and needs to be challenged. Two examples are the establishment of the 'Christian Council of Britain', a BNP front organisation, and the featuring of Jesus in a BNP election campaign poster. There may be other examples of the BNP using Christianity to further its own ends in local leaflets and publicity. Keep aware and be ready to respond appropriately if they do.

You may wish to make use of the statements that have been agreed nationally by our churches. These can be found by going to:

Baptist www.baptist.org.uk/resources/social_political_resources.asp?section=95
Methodist www.methodist.org.uk/extremism
United Reformed Church www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/pi_cpeurc.doc

If you make a statement please e-mail politicalaffairs@methodistchurch.org.uk

Tool 4: Challenge indifference as well as intolerance

All the mainstream churches encourage their members to participate in elections – though they don't say which party to vote for. Many churches have condemned racist or far-right political parties and have urged their members not to vote for them.

As a church leader, think about an appropriate way to share this message with your congregation. Ask yourself if there is anything that you can do to promote voter registration and participation in elections.

The Art of the Possible is a free six-part series of house group materials aimed at exploring the meaning of faith in the world of politics. Download materials from www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/artofthepossible

Tool 5: Actions speak louder than words

The BNP supports segregation and a withdrawal of all support for people seeking sanctuary in this country.

Do the opposite by promoting diversity and community cohesion. Think about whether you can host a community fun day in your church, or work with other faith groups in your area to set up an Inter Faith forum. Think about what local, regional or national projects your church could get involved in to support people seeking sanctuary.

If an extremist party wishes to use your church premises you should refuse. If the BNP met in church buildings it would give them legitimacy and undermine the churches' credibility.

Many churches organise hustings for election candidates. Do not invite BNP candidates or parties with racist policies. The Charity Commission guidelines on this matter are quite clear:

www.charity-commission.gov.uk/supportingcharities/elect.asp

- It is open to a charity to refuse to hire facilities to a candidate, party or other group if the charity trustees feel that to do so would either increase the risk of alienating the charity's beneficiaries, users or supporters, or increase the risk of public disorder.
- It is open to charities to decline to invite to a public meeting a representative from a political party which advocates policies which are in contravention of the charity's objects, or whose presence or views are likely to increase the chance of public disorder or of alienating the charity's supporters.

The Methodist Church and Baptist Union of Great Britain have prepared guidance for churches where there is a BNP councillor. These resources can be adapted to other denominations. These guidelines for Churches dealing with extremist political parties can be found at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/jpitpolitics.htm

Tool 6: Stay Safe

Standing up to extremist parties can be very challenging for those involved and for their families.

People who have done this have had visits from members of extremist parties which they have found intimidating, whilst others have had abusive phone calls and letters.

Be aware of your personal safety and that of your family. Keep doors locked, and use a chain when you answer the door.

If you receive abusive calls, do not engage in conversation but put the phone down. Call British Telecom's advice team on 0800-661-441 or your own network operator. Consider using an answerphone to screen your calls.

Let your colleagues know what you are doing - you will need the support they are able to offer.

Find out more

Countering Political Extremism – Ecumenical Resource Site

www.methodist.org.uk/extremism

HOPE not Hate

www.hopenothate.org.uk

Racial Justice and the Ballot Box – CTBI

www.ctbi.org.uk/CBA/265

If you want to speak to somebody or if you have any queries, comments, suggestions please write to:

faithandunity@baptist.org.uk

politicalaffairs@methodistchurch.org.uk

church.society@urc.org.uk

This toolkit has been prepared by the Joint Public Issues Team

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