

## Elections 2009

On 4 June 2009 every citizen in the United Kingdom will have the opportunity to vote in the European Parliament Elections. There will also be some local council elections in England.

As Christians, we are called to live and work for a better society. One way of achieving this is by engaging with the election process. First finding out about candidates and policies, then voting on the day.

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### Who are we electing?

#### Members of the European Parliament

The UK will elect 72 MEPs, representing 12 regional constituencies. The MEPs will serve for five years. The 26 other European Union member countries will also be voting for their MEPs between the 4 and 7 June.

#### Local Councillors

Across England, some County Council and Unitary Authority seats are up for election. If you are not sure whether your council is being elected this year, you can check with your local authority.

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### What am I voting for?

#### The European Parliament

The policies of the **European Union** have a direct influence over our lives. From the quality of **air**, to the price of **food** on our shelves, to the number of **fish** we can land – all are controlled by the European Union. The European Parliament is the only part of the European Union that is **democratically elected** by the EU's citizens.

The powers and role of the European Parliament are not straightforward!

The European Parliament is a **legislative** body – its approval must be found for new EU laws. It cannot, however, initiate new laws itself – these must come from the European Commission. The European Parliament also has to give approval for the EU **budget** (excluding the Common Agricultural Policy) and can **veto** the appointment of new European Commissioners.

New European legislation must be agreed a majority in the Parliament and by the European Council – a body made up of the 27 EU Heads of Government.

The Parliament's committees **monitor and investigate** a whole range of issues, such as **Foreign Affairs, Development, Culture and Education, Environment, Public Health and Food Safety**. Reports from these Committees, help shape discussion and development of policy in that area.

The Conference of European Churches has prepared an online guide to the 2009 European Parliament Elections - [www.ecumenicalvoices2009.eu/](http://www.ecumenicalvoices2009.eu/)

## County Councils and Unitary Authorities

These have responsibility for the **strategy and content** of the delivery of local services, including **education, consumer protection, rubbish disposal, libraries, social services, transport, strategic planning and fire services.**

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### How do I vote?

You need to be registered with your local authority in order to vote in an election.

If you are not registered, you can register through your local authority or online at [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk)

If you don't know whether or not you are registered, you can contact your local authority and find out.

Your local authority should then send you a polling card and instructions on where and how to cast your vote.

If you cannot attend the polling station on election day, you can apply to the council for a postal vote (where you send in your completed vote by post) or a proxy vote (where you nominate someone on your behalf to vote for you).

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### Political Extremism

The Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church have made clear their conviction that the policies of extremist and racist political parties are incompatible with an understanding of God's love for all people.

We call on Christians to work actively to counter those who stir up hatred, and reject racist and intolerant political parties.

Using your vote is one way that you can stop the racist political parties from being elected.

#### What is the threat?

Local and European elections historically have had a low turnout. This makes it easier for extremist parties to do well, or even be elected.

The European Parliament elections use a system of proportional representation, which makes it possible for a party with a relatively small number of votes to win a seat. It is therefore crucial that voter turnout is as high as possible. This will limit the chances of racist political parties, and their relatively small supporter base.

Political arguments based on fear and prejudice may be better received during a time of economic downturn. Christians should respond to this with counter-arguments of hope and love.

#### How can it be countered?

Community mobilization is the key to stopping racist parties from winning or increasing their presence.

In Burnley a few years ago eight BNP councillors were elected. Thanks to community mobilisation that was reduced to four at a subsequent election.

One effective option is for local church leaders to issue a statement condemning policies and principles which are contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. More information is available on the Countering Political Extremism website - [www.methodist.org.uk/extremism](http://www.methodist.org.uk/extremism) This is a resource for all the churches. Please feel free to use the material and adapt it for your own use.

## What can I do?

- ✘ Please ensure you use your vote. Try and engage friends and colleagues in discussions about the election and ensure they turn out as well.
- ✘ Discuss with your minister if your local church can take any action to tackle local racist political parties. One major way is to issue an ecumenical statement explaining that the policies and politics of such parties run counter to the teaching of Jesus Christ.
- ✘ Think carefully about which candidate or party most closely represents your views. Listen to your candidates, read their election material, watch party election broadcasts and visit the party websites so you can make an informed and thoughtful decision.
- ✘ If you are concerned that a far-right political party is active in your area, visit the Countering Political Extremism website for information and ideas about what action you can take.

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## Further Information

### Countering Political Extremism

[www.methodist.org.uk/extremism](http://www.methodist.org.uk/extremism)

### Baptist Union of GB – Faith and Unity – Political Extremism

[www.baptist.org.uk/resources/social\\_political\\_resources.asp?section=95](http://www.baptist.org.uk/resources/social_political_resources.asp?section=95)

### United Reformed Church – Church and Society

[www.urc.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/church\\_and\\_society/home\\_page](http://www.urc.org.uk/what_we_do/church_and_society/home_page)

### Conference of European Churches – European Parliament Elections Guide

[www.ecumenicalvoices2009.eu/](http://www.ecumenicalvoices2009.eu/)

### Hope not Hate

[www.hopenothate.org.uk](http://www.hopenothate.org.uk)

### The Art of the Possible – Exploring the meaning of faith in the world of politics.

Free house group study session materials on faith, democracy and justice

[www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/artofthepossible](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/artofthepossible)