

Faith and Society Files: The Art of the Possible

Does politics have a role in the Church or is it a distraction from our mission? What does politics mean for our faith - and what should our faith mean for our politics? This six-session resource from the Joint Public Issues Team aims to help people to explore the importance of Christian engagement with public issues.



Session 1

WHAT DOES GOD LOOK LIKE?

The way we see God is crucial in shaping our beliefs, our actions, and how we live out our faith in the world. So we begin our series of studies, with a session that explores different images of God, looking particularly at what we learn of God from the life of Jesus.

Key Messages

- a) How we picture God will shape and guide our relating to the world
- b) Different images of God reflect the different ways in which the church has engaged with society over the centuries
- c) Jesus points us towards a life of faith that is very clearly politically engaged

Preparation

You will need

- Flipchart and pens
- Bibles or copies of Mark 1:16 – 3:6
- Pictures of God - You might find copies of pictures in books or by searching on the Internet (try searching google images or the websites of art galleries such as www.nationalgallery.org.uk),
- Pictures of Jesus - Again you will find pictures in books and on the internet. 'The Christ we Share' is a pack available from www.mph.org.uk and contains a large range of pictures.
- Copies of the Session 1 handout: biographies of people and movements
- Copies of the Session 1 handout: Jesus in Scripture (optional)
- Copies of hymn books

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

As this is the first session, you may need to make sure, both that everyone knows each other, and that everyone understands something of the overall purpose and content of the six sessions as explained in the Introduction

Our God of many faces and names, we praise you for the different ways in which you come to us. Your presence is never far from us. We find you in scripture, glimpse you in the world around us, and encounter you through the community of your people. Most of all, we see you in Jesus, who reveals the mysterious depths of your love that embraces all people everywhere. May we never be content with narrow definitions and limited understandings, but seek always open hearts and minds that allow you to come to us in new and surprising ways. Amen.

INTRODUCTION (10 mins)

ACTIVITY

What different words and images does the Bible use to paint a picture of God? As a group, make a list on a flipchart of as many as you can think of.

Obvious examples might include: King, Lord, Shepherd, Father, Mother, Creator, Liberator, Provider, Light, Ruler, Judge.

Less obvious examples might include: Dark cloud (Exodus 20), Faithful lover (Hosea 2-3), Vineyard owner (Mark 12), Party host (Luke 14).

Question: Which images do you find most helpful? Which are least helpful? Why?

We have to remember, of course, that God is always beyond human concepts and descriptions. God defies our definitions. Yet despite the inevitable limits of our visual and

verbal language, it is all we have to work with! So it is not surprising that the Bible seeks to use many different images to try to help us grasp just a little of who God is and what God is like, even though they will always remain inadequate.

But it is worth reflecting on what kind of images of God tend to dominate, whether in the Bible or in our prayers or in our hymns and songs. What pictures of God are most often used? Do they provide us with a holistic vision of God? Does it matter how we picture God?

PICTURES OF GOD (20 mins)

Art has been treated with much suspicion in the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith traditions. There has been the fear of idolatry as well as a general suspicion of any attempt to picture God. Within the history of the Church, this has led to the growth of movements that actively resisted the use of art in places of worship, and destroying whatever they could find. Yet at the same time the Church has done much to encourage the arts, seeing pictures as a way of teaching the faith as well as enhancing the beauty of its buildings. Perhaps we need to reckon with the fact that art is dangerous! The way we see shapes our way of thinking. The way we picture God shapes what we believe about God.

ACTIVITY

Show a small selection of pictures of God.

Ask the group to reflect on what they see. What do they like or dislike about the pictures? How might they go about depicting God? Most importantly, what do the pictures tell us about the artist's understanding of God?

Much art in the western tradition pictures God as an authority figure. God is often very evidently male! He might well be sitting on a throne. He is over and above everything, controlling and dominating, exercising power, and perhaps also somewhat remote from the world. It would be surprising if this understanding of God does not appear in at least some of the pictures that the group looks at.

ACTIVITY

Show a selection of pictures of Jesus.

Again, ask the group to reflect on what they see. What do they like or dislike about the pictures? Do any of them tell us something rather different about the God we see in Christ?

Jesus can be pictured in many different ways. Sometimes he is seen by artists as the great and glorious king, reigning in glory, flanked by angels and archangels. But we are also given very different insights. We see pictures of Jesus crucified, suffering pain and anguish. We see him placed within different cultural contexts, perhaps looking Anglo-Saxon, or Indian, or Palestinian. Above all, we are helped to see Jesus as human, one with us, and deeply involved with this world.

The way we see God is fundamental to the ways we then choose to live out our faith. If we see God as no more than an authority figure, distant and unengaged with the affairs of the world, then it is surely likely that our churches will be places of deep reverence and worship, but maybe far less inclined to take seriously the business of social and political engagement. On the other hand, if we allow some of the pictures of Jesus, immersed in the injustices and sufferings of the world and telling us the story of the incarnation, to help shape our understanding of God, then perhaps that will help us develop an understanding of our faith that takes seriously our need to be radically involved with the way our world and our society is ordered and governed.

GOD, THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD (15 mins)

ACTIVITY

Read the sheet of brief biographies. What picture of God do you think these various Christian figures and movements might have had? Discuss the

different views each had of the relationship between faith and politics. Where do your sympathies lie?

Politics is often said to be about 'the art of the possible'. It is not just about theory but about making a difference to the way things are, recognising that this will involve compromise. But Christians have always wrestled with questions about how far to get involved with politics and the state, what the limits to compromise should be, and how the church should act in the world. The biographies offer very different answers to these questions.

SEEING JESUS IN SCRIPTURE (25 mins)

The bible can be read in many different ways. The passages we have read can be interpreted in different ways. But perhaps too often we fail to see the political implications behind Jesus' actions, and the ways in which he continually challenged the status quo.

ACTIVITY

Divide the group into pairs. Then give each of the pairs some verses of Mark 1:16 - 3:6 as follows:

- ***Chapter 1: 16-20; 21-28; 29-39; and 40-45***
- ***Chapter 2: 1-12; 13-22; and 23-28***
- ***Chapter 3: 1-6***

(It doesn't matter if you don't cover every passage – the point is to recognise the whole of Jesus's ministry and teaching had political implications)

Ask the group to try to identify the political dimensions and implications of what is going on in the passage they have read.

The second handout with this session suggests how the political implications of these different passages might be understood. You could use this handout as supplementary leader's notes to guide the feedback on each section, or you could copy it for all group members to take away after the discussion.

Do you see Jesus as a political figure? Do you think we should we see Jesus in this way?

FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)

It is sometimes said that we learn our theology through the hymns and songs that we sing. Look through whatever music books you have available.

What kind of pictures of God do you find? Are there hymns and songs that speak of a politically engaged faith?

What will you take away from this session?

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

Our God, who loved the world so much you came to us in Jesus, teach us to love this world as well. Help us to search for your wisdom within the complexity of international relations, seek your presence amidst the challenges faced by our own society, and see your image in the people we live alongside. So may your kingdom come and your will be done, on this earth as in heaven. Amen.

HOMEWORK

As you read the bible this week, or hear it read in the services you attend, try to identify the social and political dimensions present in each passage.

GOD, THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD – biographies of people and movements

<p>Constantine (280-337) Constantine is best known as the first Christian Roman emperor. He brought together the Christian faith and the Secular state, so that allegiance to one also meant allegiance to the other. Under his direction, Christianity became the official religion, supported by the full power and authority of those who governed the Empire. As a result, Constantine got involved in church discussions about Christian doctrine, and gave state money for the building of churches.</p>	<p>John Wesley (1703-91) Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was a staunch High Church Tory who said that the Church should defend and honour the King. Recent memories of the English Civil War, when new forms of religion were seen as doctrinally suspect and politically subversive, meant that Wesley wanted to prevent the new Methodists being associated with dissent. However Wesley spoke out against social injustices such as slavery, practiced prison visiting and promoted the education of the poor.</p>
<p>Augustine (354-430) Augustine was a very significant leader in the early church and wrote a book called the <i>City of God</i>. He argued that Christians belong to the heavenly city to come, but that meanwhile here on earth the church and the secular state have different functions and purposes. The two should not be confused. God can use secular, political powers to control evil, seek peace, and even make sure people do not stray into heresy. But they cannot achieve our salvation.</p>	<p>Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) King was a Baptist pastor in the USA who became a leader of the civil rights movement, seeking an end to racial segregation. On more than one occasion, he was arrested and imprisoned, and was also the subject of frequent death threats. Though a leader of acts of civil disobedience, such as a bus boycott, he was committed to nonviolence throughout his life. He was assassinated shortly after a famous speech, 'I have a dream'.</p>
<p>Amish Communities The Amish people live in communities in the USA and Canada and have roots in the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions. Many of them live very simply, trying to be obedient to Bible teaching. They place high value on community and family, refuse many of the benefits of modern technology, and resist contact with the rest of the world. They would not accept help from the state and nor would they ever serve in the military. Their commitment is to model an alternative way of discipleship living that keeps them apart from the rest of society.</p>	<p>The Diggers (1600s) This was a revolutionary movement to emerge in England in the 1640s and 50s, involving such figures as Gerrard Winstanley. Its vision was both to improve the lot of the hungry and landless by cultivating common land, and also to create a propertyless and moneyless society. They said the earth is for all to share so should not be bought and sold. They took direct action to support their political aims, argued their case from scripture, were very impatient with the failure of the church to support them, but they were quickly suppressed.</p>
<p>Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) Bonhoeffer grew up in Germany. As a pastor and theologian, he grappled with how, as a Christian, he should respond to the rise of Nazism. He reluctantly concluded that he could not ignore or support the actions of the ruling party. Following Christ meant being in active opposition to the Nazi ideology. After much heart searching, he participated in a plot to kill Hitler, and was eventually imprisoned and executed.</p>	<p>Gustavo Gutierrez (1928-) Gutierrez is from Peru and is described as a liberation theologian. He has lived and worked amongst the slum people of Lima. His deep involvement in the life of the poor has led him to argue that our Christian faith calls us to work to revolutionise the social and political structures in our world. He draws on people like Marx, as well as the Gospels, to support his call for liberation for the poor.</p>

Seeing Jesus in Scripture

These passages from the Gospel of Mark illustrate the political implications behind Jesus' actions, and the ways in which he continually challenged the status quo

1:16-20

- Jesus has just announced the coming of God's kingdom (verse 15), but then calls common labourers to help him in the task. It is not what we might expect, and a sign that Jesus intends to subvert our expectations!
- Jesus chooses his disciples, a reversal of the normal practice, and the fact that they are ordinary, working people suggests that this new kingdom will be about overturning the structures of power and privilege.
- Jesus demands they leave their workplace. This means both leaving behind economic security and breaking up the social fabric of the extended family. A new society is being formed! Life will not go on as before!

1:21-28

- This exorcism takes place on the Sabbath in the synagogue – the time and place around which society was carefully ordered and regulated. So this is a way of Jesus challenging the existing order of things.
- The exorcism is 'framed' by reference to the crowd (verses 22 and 27) which emphasises that this is a very public contest about authority between Jesus and the establishment.
- What is the demon in the story? The demon is both defiant and fearful. It holds people captive. Jesus is invading the territory of the scribes, where the scribes rule and exercise their authority to teach the law and control the way people live, and it is this 'spirit' Jesus is challenging. Jesus wants to free people held captive to the old authority structures that so often oppressed and marginalised people.

1:29-39

- The healing of Simon's mother-in-law takes place in private, after sunset when the Sabbath is over, suggesting that it could easily be a controversial act (see 3:1-6)!
- This is the first time a woman appears in Mark's gospel. She 'serves' Jesus (verse 31) – a word that is not about making dinner, but about being a follower and a disciple. Thus, we discover that in God's kingdom women will not be devalued but will be identified as true disciples.
- Economic and political circumstances in Palestine had left many in the population poor and dispossessed. Illness and disability were part of this cycle of poverty. So Jesus care for many in such need challenges the acceptance of these circumstances.

1:40-45

- The leper was the archetypal outcast who was regarded as impure. Only the priest could preside over cleansing. Jesus breaks the purity code by touching the leper, showing that he will not cooperate with laws that marginalise people.
- The leper is sent to the priest, not out of obedience but to protest! The priest would not accept Jesus' authority, but he is given no choice!

2:1-12

- Jesus' teaching is in opposition to that of the scribes who see themselves in control of how people must live and behave. They decide how sin is defined and who is guilty, but Jesus will not go along with their exercise of power.
- The physically disabled were held to be inferior. Jesus not only restores the paralysed man to health, but in doing so challenges the system that declares him sinful.
- Jesus unilaterally bypasses public authority in order to bring justice and liberation to human life.

2:13-22

- Tax collectors were despised by upright Jews, not least because they collaborated with Gentiles. Jesus transcends such social barriers.
- A meal takes place involving Jesus, sinners and tax collectors. This is an extraordinary coming together of different groups of people! Again, all kinds of social barriers are being overcome and people brought together across divides.

- The shared meal was at the heart of society. So the religious authorities were very anxious to control what went on – who could eat together, what the diet should be, etc. Here Jesus subverts such rules and regulations.
- Jesus has no time for the fasting of the Pharisees, seeing this as the kind of piety that hides real issues. The fact is that they could afford to fast because they had plenty to eat the rest of the time; by contrast many Jesus mixed with constantly went hungry.

2:23-28

- The controversies over food continue, and here the question is when and where to eat. The Pharisees set the rules over the sowing, harvesting and marketing of produce, and this included Sabbath rules. But for many poor farmers, these rules were an impossible burden. They could not afford to pay tithes or leave fields fallow. Jesus takes their side by deliberately flouting the rules, engaging in an act of civil disobedience.
- Jesus endorses the Jubilee principle that hungry people have a right to food despite laws that restrict such access. He sees food as a political issue and a faith issue. God is Lord over the Sabbath!

3:1-6

- Familiar religious and political arguments are at the centre of this healing miracle – Jesus is deliberately defying and breaking the Sabbath laws.
- The synagogue confrontation reads like a trial scene, with the authorities standing poised to condemn Jesus. But he breaks the law to raise deeper moral issues about the health of a society that allows people to stay sick.

Session 2

WHERE'S THE JUSTICE?

'Justice' is a word frequently found both in the Bible and used in our society. This session looks at how different understandings and dimensions of this key concept can help Christians to explore God's agenda for the world.

Key messages of the session

- 'Justice' is a complex idea that has several different and even conflicting meanings
- What it means to act justly is a key theme in the Bible
- Our political commitment to justice will be guided by our faith's understanding of justice

Preparation

You will need

- A pack of smarties or similar sweets
- Copies of three newspaper articles which illustrate a contemporary issue where there are competing views of justice (e.g. Israel/Palestine; Iraq; funding of anti-cancer drugs; taxation)
- Copies of the three symbols for the dimensions of justice
- Bibles
- Flipchart paper and pens

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

God of justice, we see clearly the unfairness present within the world and our own society. A few enjoy vast wealth while many experience unrelenting poverty. Some have almost limitless opportunities while others struggle simply to survive. There are those of us who have secure jobs, a steady income and homes to live in, while at the same time many of us are unemployed, burdened by debts and homelessness. Forgive the ease with which we live with such unfairness, and guide us to a renewed vision of what it means to proclaim your justice. Amen.

INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to brainstorm what phrases and ideas come to mind around the word 'Justice'?

Examples might include: Law, Courts, Fairness, Inequality, Punishment, Oppression, 'Peace with justice', 'Justice must be seen to be done', 'Racial justice', 'Justice for the world's poor', 'It's not fair!', 'Let the punishment fit the crime', 'Rough justice'

Talk about justice quickly reveals that we encounter issues of justice everywhere we look. We are regularly confronted with questions about what is just or unjust. Our politicians are trying to determine what it means to act justly, and public life is often about seeking to do to what is just.

And not only are issues of justice fundamental to life, they are also fundamental to faith. If you take the Bible seriously, you will be concerned about what is just and unjust. If you take Jesus seriously, you will be involved in justice issues. Doing justice belongs at the centre of our faith.

But justice is not a straightforward concept...

COMPETING UNDERSTANDINGS OF JUSTICE

ACTIVITY (10 mins)

Give a member of the group a pack of Smarties and ask them to discuss how to distribute it in a just way.

The kinds of questions they might ask could include: Who do they belong to? If they are mine, is it just that I should have the right to eat them all? Does justice require some kind of sharing? Who with? If we divide them should the hungriest person (or the one who loves chocolate most) have more? Should sharing be with those in the room? What about those absent? Or those living

next door? What if some members of the group boycott Nestle products? How does the group decide what is a just thing to do?

Then steal a smartie from the group! What is a just response now? Does justice demand recompense or punishment?

When we begin to talk about justice it is soon clear that it is not a straightforward concept. We ask the basic questions, such as what does it mean to do justice? How is justice to be practiced? What does justice look like? And quickly we realise that it is possible to give very different answers to those questions. Justice looks very different to different people. Justice is practiced very differently in different places. Justice can be described in very different ways.

ACTIVITY (10 mins)

Choose a few newspaper articles, perhaps a couple for every two or three members of the group, which illustrate competing ideas of justice: What is just in each situation, and why? What counter-arguments might be offered?

We live in a world of clashing justices, often rooted in clashing ideas. The search to know what justice looks like is complex because we have so many different understandings of it. But 'justice' is central to the way we think and behave, and the way society orders its affairs. So we need to gain a better understanding of the complex picture surrounding this word 'justice', to look at possible answers to the question of what we mean by justice, and to begin to see what contribution Christian faith can make to the debate.

DIMENSIONS OF JUSTICE (20 mins)

ACTIVITY

Hand out or display copies of the symbols of the Old Bailey, the United Nations flag, and a circle around a hand with a heart on the palm. Perhaps draw the three circles below on a flipchart. Name the three dimensions of justice and ask the group to brainstorm what each means.

This activity looks at the differences between criminal justice, social justice and restorative justice. These dimensions of justice are not to be seen as alternatives. They interact with one another, and each finds its place within the Christian tradition, as we struggle to know what it means to create a just society.

Criminal Justice

- Most famous image – the statue of a blindfolded Lady Justice on the Old Bailey
- Blindfold signifies impartiality – that justice pays no attention to wealth or status
- Sword illustrates society's determination to protect itself and punish wrongdoing
- Scales signify a commitment to weigh the evidence and decide without favour
- Greek word for justice – *dike* – also means punishment or vengeance: criminal justice is about justice through punishment
- Society establishes laws to enable people to live together and holds individuals responsible for keeping or breaking these laws
- Punishment aims to ensure that a penalty is paid, that others are deterred and an offender reforms their behaviour



Social Justice

- Symbol of the UN – one world, in which the injustices of fundamental inequalities are tackled
- Social justice is about the fair distribution of benefits and burdens, including housing, food and education
- The term "social justice" is recent, coming into use in 1850s
- Yet social justice has been a central concern in Hebrew and Christian traditions
- The social justice agenda has key themes including: the gap between rich and poor, the use of violence to oppress, discrimination based on gender, race or religion
- Social justice challenges understandings of criminal justice – e.g. how far is crime a result of social injustice?

Restorative Justice

- Symbol sometimes used is of the circle of life, around an open hand representing the healing of human relationships, with a heart shape on the palm representing the depth of healing needed.
- Victim, offender and community are brought together in the search for reconciliation
- Our society has particularly used Restorative Justice as a way of trying to address and prevent youth offending
- Aim is to help offenders to understand the impact of their crime, to face up to the effect it has had on the victim, and so to take proper responsibility for it
- Normally, ways of making reparation are agreed by all three parties – e.g. writing a letter of apology, putting right damage caused, carrying out community service
- Helps the community to have confidence that offenders are making amends
- Enables the victim to be heard and – hopefully – to be able to begin to move on in their own life
- Other examples of restorative justice in action might include the Corrymeela community or the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

FAITH AND JUSTICE (25 mins)

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to identify stories or verses from the Bible which introduce the concept of justice. Write these up on the flipchart.

Examples might include:

- *God-given laws in Exodus, Deuteronomy etc (Deuteronomy 27:19)*
- *Job crying out for justice (Job 19:7)*
- *The Psalmists sing to a God of justice (Psalm 33:5)*
- *Isaiah says that God will not judge with his eyes or ears but give justice to the poor (Isaiah 11:4)*
- *The Pharisees are condemned for not focusing on the true matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23)*
- *The widow and the unjust Judge (Luke 18:3)*
- *The workers in the vineyard who are paid the same wage (Matthew 20:8)*
- *The woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus (John 8)*

Themes of justice run throughout the bible. The gospel is more than salvation for the soul and it is more than good works of caring and healing. It is about dealing with root injustices in ways that challenge and transform the whole of human society. In reading this biblical witness, a distinctive understanding of justice begins to emerge.

1. Shalom

The word that encapsulates God's vision for humankind is shalom. Shalom is how God intends things to be. It is a condition of rightness, when a person's entire being is as it ought to be. This includes physical well-being, relationships with God and with others, and personal character. Where there is any kind of injustice there cannot be shalom, for not everything is right. This provides a holistic vision of justice rooted in what people need in order to experience this state of rightness. Whereas we think of justice (particularly retributive justice) as having to do with what people earn or deserve, biblical justice rooted in the idea of shalom is concerned that people have what they need, even if it is far beyond what they deserve.

Question: What examples are there in your list of Bible stories of shalom justice?

2. Covenant

Closely linked with shalom is the idea of covenant. A covenant is an agreement between two parties, and in the bible it is between God and the people. This covenant was the framework for the development of law and justice in Hebrew society and so, unlike other societies where law was imposed by the dictates of a ruler, it grew out of relationship - a relationship with God who was personal, faithful and concerned for the shalom of everyone. Thus, when the prophets attacked the people for their failure to keep the covenant, they were attacking a failure to maintain relationships. Justice is best exemplified by a community of restored relationships and healed memories.

Question: What examples are there in your list of Bible stories of covenant justice?

3. Restoration

Certainly the biblical vision for justice includes the threat of punishment when there is wrongdoing, but there is the constant reminder that the focus is on restoration. God does not give up; God is merciful and compassionate; God is faithful even when we are unfaithful. Restoration rather than retribution is the key, and this means that love and justice are linked together, working towards achieving shalom. Many understandings of justice place it in opposition to love, or at the very least in tension with love. But as Christians we believe we learn what justice truly is from God, and God's very nature is always love. Justice and love are not opposites, with justice somehow controlled and tempered by love. Rather, justice cannot live without love, and this must affect policy and practice.

This emphasis on restoration means that Christian justice also has a future dimension. For many, the fight for justice in a world where there is so much injustice, can seem like a hopeless cause. We are aware that it will never be achieved by humankind on this earth. But the Christian vision looks beyond the coming of the kingdom of God, and it is this future hope that gives meaning and direction to the present struggle. The present reality is not all there is. We do not have to rest content with the status quo. The gospel announces the coming of God's justice.

Question: What examples are there in your list of Bible stories of restoration or future justice?

FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)

What relevance do our Christian perspectives on what makes for justice have for public life?

What have you learned from this session?

Are there issues on which you have gained new insights or perspectives?

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

God of justice, you give us a vision for life together. You call us to work for a world and a society where what is broken is restored, where relationships are marked by faithfulness and fairness, and where everyone is able to enjoy 'shalom'. Show us ways in which we can work for this vision until your kingdom come in all its fullness. Amen.

HOMEWORK

During the week look out for situations where understandings of shalom, covenant and restoration gives new perspectives on justice for our world or country.

Symbols of Justice



CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Statue of Lady Justice on the Old Bailey



SOCIAL JUSTICE

Symbol of the United Nations



RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Symbol of the restorative justice movement

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.

POLITICAL BINGO!

Find someone who can sign a square. The winner is the first person to get a row of signed squares!*

Find someone who...

...can name their MP -----	...is a school governor -----	...has had a chat with a homeless person this month -----	...has signed a petition -----	... has written to a prisoner of conscience -----
...has bought fairtrade tea this month -----	...belongs to a local residents' association -----	...has been on a march/demonstration -----	...has written to their MP -----	...has listened to or watched the news today -----
...has written to complain about (or praise) an advert or a TV programme -----	...can name their local councillor -----	...has argued about politics in a church -----	..belongs to a campaigning organisation (eg Amnesty, Oxfam) -----	has raised money for a local concern -----
who voted for the first time at the last General Election -----	...has used public transport this week -----	...has registered for a postal vote -----	...knows their local policeman ----- has argued about politics in a pub -----
...has voted in a European election -----	...can tell you the size of their carbon footprint -----	...has met their local councillor -----	...reads a newspaper every day -----	...belongs to a political party -----

*Rules:

You only need to complete one line of five squares (horizontally, vertically or diagonally) to win

You can't have the same signature more than once

Session 4

CHURCH AND STATE

Christians have taken different approaches to the state. This session explores what these look like, and how the way we see God affects the choices we make in relating to those who exercise political power.

NOTE: The term 'the state' does not equate directly with a country or parliament. Instead it is taken here to mean the political power which forms the basis of civil government over a geographical area - this can also include the means of enforcing that power such as the courts, the civil service and the military.

Key Messages

- a) There are different 'models' or ways in which the church has related to the state throughout history
- b) We need to name and learn to live with the tensions that exist between church and state
- c) The pictures we have of God will shape our own attitude to the state

Preparation

You will need

- Copies of the two hymns printed on the accompanying Session 4 handout
- Copies of the handout of biographies used in Session 1
- Copies of the roleplay instructions found in the second Session 4 handout
- Bibles
- Flipchart paper and pens

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

God of all, we pray for our country. We remember before you those who have been elected to positions of authority within local and national government, those who are part of the judicial system, those who serve in the armed forces, and those who are part of the civil service or work in local government. May they act with integrity, seeking ways that make for peace with justice for all people. And give to us a deeper understanding of some of the challenges they face in the work they do. Amen.

INTRODUCTION (10 mins)

ACTIVITY

Distribute copies of the hymns on the handout - *I vow to thee my country* and *Sing we a song of high revolt*

The first expresses a very clear loyalty to one's country as well as to God's heavenly kingdom, and raises questions as to whether such commitment is always justifiable. The second hymn could be written by those intent on revolution, and raises questions of how far it is permissible to challenge the state.

Discuss the words and meanings of the two hymns.

What do they say about Christian attitudes to the state? Would you feel comfortable singing either or both of them in church? Why?

CHURCH AND STATE IN HISTORY (15 mins)

ACTIVITY

Distribute copies of the biographies used in the Session 1 handout.

Throughout history Christians have taken different approaches to the state. The biographies used in Session 1 give examples of some of the most famous ones. What issues and problems do these raise? Are they all relevant today? Which do you feel is closest to your own position? Why?

THE WITNESS OF THE BIBLE (20 mins)

What does the bible have to say about our relationship as Christians to the State? Romans 13:1-7 is one of the most significant passages in the story of how the church and state have related. The different ways in which it has been interpreted have been key – and a whole range of views have been offered on the basis of this one passage! You may choose to compare and contrast it with other bible passages as well, such as Luke 4:16-19 (Jesus proclaims his allegiance to a very different kingdom to that being upheld by the state), Luke 23 (Jesus is sentenced to death by the political authorities), 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 (Paul declares the rulers of this world are doomed to destruction).

ACTIVITY

Read Romans 13:1-7

What does this passage say to you about the relationship between Christians and the state? In what ways do you agree with Paul, and in what ways do you disagree?

In discussion you might like to ensure that the following points are covered:

- **The passage is written in the context of a small and vulnerable community.** Paul is writing to a small Christian community that is very aware of the might of imperial power, and his readers would have been particularly conscious of the way in which, just a few years earlier, Jews had been expelled from Rome. The demand for loyal conduct is about avoiding any new edict that would result in another wave of expulsions, and so Paul gives the initial advice to live peaceably with all (12:28) and now in this passage takes up the question of how relations with the political authorities are to be conducted.
- **God-given power can be rightly or wrongly used.** Paul draws on Jewish tradition in declaring that the authorities receive their power from God. But although Paul doesn't discuss it, it is clear that this God-given power can be rightly or wrongly used. (Reflect on other biblical examples of power being rightly or wrongly used – such as Daniel 5 where Belshazzar is weighed on the scales and found wanting. Or read Proverbs 8:15-16 that implies governing can be done justly or unjustly.)
- **Ultimately our highest allegiance is to God.** Further, although Romans 13 might appear to advocate a quiet acceptance of anything decreed by those in authority, the preceding chapter suggests otherwise. There we read of the renewing of the mind in accordance with the will of God, and of the need to face up honestly to the threat of persecution. Thus, Paul juxtaposed persecution and civil loyalty, ultimate obedience to God and due honour to the authorities. He proposes this to be a particularly powerful witness. It gives a positive role to those who have civic responsibilities whenever they exercise their rule in legitimate ways. But in urging recognition of this, Paul is under no illusion that power can be wrongly used and in the end our highest allegiance is to God.

LIVING AS CHRISTIAN CITIZENS (25 mins)

For most of us living in democratic states, the nature of our engagement with the state is fairly uncontroversial. We may disagree with what a government does, but in a democracy we have the option of campaigning to influence public opinion and of voting for another party. However, there are times when people feel that the state uses its power illegitimately.

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to identify times when they felt in conflict with what the state was doing, or to talk about possible scenarios when this might occur.

Churches and Christians have, of course, disagreed about how they should respond in such situations. It will depend on our politics and our theology!

Get the group to consider the range of possible responses below. You could do this by dividing the group into twos or threes and giving each group one of the models described on the handout for Session 4. Ask each group to take on the opinion expressed on their piece of paper – give them a few minutes to discuss as groups, and then ask a representative of each group to roleplay their case, and criticise each others' arguments.

Alternatively you could use the handout to guide a general discussion which covers these approaches.

Identifying people or situations which illustrate each position.

What picture of God underlies the various responses to the state?

The following are all options for the church as it seeks to respond to the actions of the state:

- Accept the benefits and the comforts of co-operating with the state with gratitude:
- Use our position to help others, but being cautious about getting ourselves into trouble:
- Seek radical change or revolution:
- Take non-violent direct action:
- Walk away and create an alternative model of how life should be lived:
- Stay in co-operation with the state, conscious of the compromises needed, and try to voice effective opposition:

As the churches in this country try to relate to the state, we tend to take this last option. Are we right to do so? Under what circumstances might we choose an alternative way of relating to the state?

FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)

***How does your picture of God shape the way you choose to relate to the state?
Should the Church and an individual Christian relate to the state in different ways?
What do you think you have learned from this session?
What questions has it left you with?***

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

God of all life, give to our churches wisdom, grace and understanding. Where the state acts with truth and justice, may we be quick to offer our support and encouragement. Where there is a willingness to ignore the needs of the most vulnerable and the rights of the oppressed, may we be prepared to take a stand and be the voice of opposition. Amen.

HOMEWORK

Find out about how your denomination relates to the State. Most Churches have a public issues office which relates to Government (eg The Joint Public Issues Team where Baptists, Methodists and members of the United Reformed Church work together - see www.jointpublicissues.org.uk). Has there been a history of non-violent resistance in your denomination? Or has your Church worked alongside the state for positive change?

I vow to thee, my country

I vow to thee, my country,
 all earthly things above,
Entire and whole and perfect,
 the service of my love;
The love that asks no question,
 the love that stands the test
That lays upon the altar
 the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters,
 the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted
 the final sacrifice.

And there's another country,
 I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her,
 most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies,
 we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart,
 her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently
 her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness,
 and all her paths are peace.

Cecil Spring Rice (1859-1918)

Magnificat Now!

Sing we a song of high revolt;
make great the Lord, his name exalt!
Sing we the song that Mary sang
of God at war with human wrong.

Sing we of him who deeply cares
and still with us our burden bears.
He who with strength the proud disowns,
brings down the mighty from their thrones.

By him the poor are lifted up;
he satisfies with bread and cup
the hungry ones of many lands;
the rich must go with empty hands.

He calls us to revolt and fight
with him for what is just and right,
to sing and live Magnificat
in crowded street and council flat.

Fred Kaan (born 1929)

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Church and State



This is one way the Church and Christians might respond to the State. Pretend you hold this position and think how you would argue with others who disagree with you.

Accept the benefits and the comforts of co-operating with the state with gratitude:

Rather than worry too much about the world's injustices, we can simply be thankful that, whether by birth or hard work, we can enjoy a comfortable existence. We are part of the system, and it is not in our interests to battle against it. That must be the way God intended it to be! The problem is we are on the side of the status quo however unjust it is. (A classic Christendom position)



This is one way the Church and Christians might respond to the State. Pretend you hold this position and think how you would argue with others who disagree with you.

Use our position to help others, but being cautious about getting ourselves into trouble:

Our power is limited, but it is important to show some concern for the well-being of others. We will give to charities and volunteer our time at the soup kitchen, but not take part in any campaigning. The problem is we are not really changing anything, merely offering a little first aid. (The attitude of some charitable giving.)



This is one way the Church and Christians might respond to the State. Pretend you hold this position and think how you would argue with others who disagree with you.

Seek radical change or revolution:

The basic inequalities are so much part of the fabric of society that the whole system needs to be exposed and rebuilt, and we must not be afraid to be part of direct confrontation. The problem is that revolution might fail, and the last state will end up being worse than the first. On the other hand, is it right to allow evil to go unchallenged? (The Diggers took this view in occupying land)



This is one way the Church and Christians might respond to the State. Pretend you hold this position and think how you would argue with others who disagree with you.

Take non-violent direct action:

When some Christians have felt there are no democratic methods left, they have turned to non-violent direct action as a way of standing up against the power of the state. This can be a high profile witness and full of integrity, but can be lonely and personally costly, and ultimately fail to change structures. This is a response usually taken by individual Christians rather than Churches. (Trident Ploughshares took this position)

This is one way the Church and Christians might respond to the State. Pretend you hold this position and think how you would argue with others who disagree with you.

Walk away and create an alternative model of how life should be lived:

In Christian history, there have been those who have opted out, creating communities that are radically different, and having as little as possible to do with the rest of the world. The problem is that all possible influence on society is lost and the abuse of power goes unchallenged. (The Amish communities have taken this approach)

✂-----

This is one way the Church and Christians might respond to the State. Pretend you hold this position and think how you would argue with others who disagree with you.

Stay in co-operation with the state, conscious of the compromises needed, and try to voice effective opposition:

The aim is to try to make the existing structures more just, and this includes a willingness to speak out against the prevailing powers when necessary. The problem is that a spirit of compromise may too easily prevail. When should you walk away? Is it possible to retain a first loyalty to God that will result in a willingness to finally break with the state when this is demanded? (Jubilee 2000 is an example of such engagement)

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Session 5

PARLIAMENT

This session will focus particularly on politics in Parliament, looking at how things work, Christians and Parliament, and how you can take part in trying to influence political decisions.

Key messages:

- a. there is no perfect political system
- b. in order to influence it we need to understand how our own system works
- c. there are tensions and dilemmas for everyone involved

Preparation

You will need:

- background information about your MP for the introductory exercise (the websites <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/commons/> or www.theyworkforyou.com are useful, or the House of Commons Enquiry Service on 020-7219-4272
- Paper and pens to write answers to the Parliamentary Quiz (and a small prize for the winner)
- Bibles or a sheet with the following readings on it: Judges 8:23, Psalm 72, and 1 Samuel 8
- Copies of the Session 5 handout on devolution

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

Loving Father and Mother, we pray for all those who play a role in governing us. For Members of Parliament, of the Scottish Parliament, of the Welsh Assembly, the Greater London Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the European Parliament. We pray for officials and civil servants, for researchers and administrative staff. We pray for those seeking election to office, and for those who have faced the pain of being defeated. We pray that we will seek to be aware of their role and the challenges they face, and to remember them before you as often as we criticise what they do. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

Most people's contact with Parliament is through their local MP. Before the meetings ask someone to find out who your MP is and something about them. What party are they a member of? What is their majority? What are their political interests? How far does the constituency spread? At the meeting share this information with the group and find out whether anyone has written to their MP? What was the letter about? Did they get a reply? What did they feel about it? [If your group is spread over more than one constituency, you could perhaps look at a map of the different constituencies, and the different MPs who represent them]

If you live in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or London some of the powers of the Westminster Parliament are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly or Greater London Authority. People in your group may have had contact with their MSP, AM, Northern Ireland Assembly member or London Assembly member. There is a handout on different powers given to the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, Greater London Authority and Westminster Parliament for information which could be used to answer questions or shared with the group at the end of the session.

ACTIVITY (15 mins)

Challenge the group to the *How well do you know Parliament Quiz?*

The aim of this quiz is to help people to talk about what they do – and don't – know about the operation of Parliament. Although scores aren't important, you could have a small prize (eg fairtrade chocolate) for the winner.

At the end of the quiz ask the group to think what questions they are still left with? Does anyone else in the group know the answers or can you think of ways you might find out?

THE BIBLE AND KINGSHIP (20 mins)

There is no perfect political system. In the Old Testament we can see the way in which the people of God struggled over the question of what form government should take. In those days the option before them was whether or not to have a king, and there was clearly plenty of disagreement!

ACTIVITY

Hand out sheets with the Bible readings on them or ask people to look them up. Compare the condemnation of kingship in Judges 8:23 and the hopes for kingship expressed in Psalm 72.

Read 1 Samuel 8.

Discuss what arguments you think might have been used both against and in favour of kingship? Did kingship prove to be a good option for Israel? What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages? Was it perhaps simply inevitable that the nation would choose the path of having a king?

There is a very deep conviction in the Old Testament that God alone is king and that this kingship embraces all aspects of life, including the social, economic and cultural life of the people. Only God can claim such authority, and the kind of rule God offers is just and compassionate. So there were those who saw the desire for a human king as undermining the rule of God and they were highly critical of the monarchy. Yet the pressures on the people – the different tribes of Israel – to organise themselves in the face of outside threats meant that those who wanted a king won the day. However there were repeated efforts to ensure that the king was also subject to God's rule, and the prophets made it clear that only the king's obedience to God could bring the people peace and prosperity. Kingship came to be seen as necessary but also open to abuse and failure.

Ask the group to reflect on our own parliamentary system. Is this the ideal? What is good and bad about our way of organising government? Is democracy the best there is? What perspectives does our faith bring to such questions?

RELATING TO YOUR MP (15 mins)

Do you know your MP? Does your MP know you and your church? You are far more likely to be able to influence an MP over a particular issue if you already have a relationship with your MP.

ACTIVITY

Get the group to identify what makes an effective relationship with an MP, perhaps drawing on things they have done/experienced in the past. Ideas might include:

- **Get to know your MP** – visit your MP in Parliament or at their constituency office (details in the local phone book or on their website). Even better invite them along to an event at your church, perhaps a special service or community event, or to visit a social project like a playgroup or a nightshelter that you organise. And if they can't come, invite them again.
- **Affirm the work done by your MP** – even if you are writing to oppose something they are doing, try to find some area of common ground upon which you can build. For example they might have voted against an increase in the development budget, but you know they are very committed to work with children in need in the constituency. Point out the disproportionate impact of poverty on children in developing countries.
- **Pray for your MP** - let your MP know that church members will be praying for them regularly. This is not just praying that they will change their mind on particular issues, but that they will be given the wisdom necessary to make difficult judgements and for strength in coping with a life that can place strains on their family relationships.
- **Write effective letters** - address them to the right place and person; don't write in green ink, put words or phrases in capitals or rely on bible quotes – you will be taken less seriously; write in your own words, MPs get dismissive of organised letter-writing campaigns.
- **Talk local** - even if you are contacting your MP about a "national" subject try to get a "constituency angle" in your letter – eg the number of homeless people in your local authority area; the impact of alcohol misuse on your town centre; or your church's commitment to combating climate change
- **Show that yours is not an isolated voice** - get lots of people to write personal letters. MPs judge the importance of an issue by the amount of correspondence they receive. So instead of passing a motion at church council, persuade each member to write a short letter. Twenty letters is more effective than a single motion.

- **Ask your MP to take action as a result of their contact with you** - this may be to raise the subject with the relevant Minister; the Minister concerned will have to respond to the MP, so raising their awareness of the issue. And your MP will probably write back to you too. Or it might be to sign a Parliamentary Early Day Motion (like a parliamentary petition), vote a particular way, or table a parliamentary question.

NB Depending on what subjects get your group fired up it might be more appropriate to get your group to talk about ways in which they might relate to their MSP if in Scotland, their AM in Wales, their Assembly Member in Northern Ireland or their GLA member in London – the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, and Greater London Authority have different responsibilities and the issues of concern locally might be the responsibility of the devolved government.

COMPROMISE AND CONSCIENCE

One way to lose support for your cause is to question the integrity or conscience of your MP. Few of us get through a day without facing dilemmas or compromises. From the everyday – supporting fair trade or buying British – to life-changing ones – working in the arms industry or taking a personal decision about abortion. Life's choices are rarely clearly between right and wrong, and part of the human condition is wrestling with complex moral choices. Sometimes this leads us to compromise, negotiate or settle for the best option at the time. This doesn't always sit easily with the language of our faith – we worship an unchanging God, a God of truth not compromises. How do we live with these challenges in our lives?

These dilemmas are also apparent in politics. In voting for one particular party, we do not expect to agree with every promise made in a manifesto, rather that a party shows the nearest "fit" to our own political beliefs. Politicians' experience of this dilemma is heightened by the fact that they owe some loyalty to the party which helped get them elected. How should individual politicians act within a parliamentary democracy whilst staying true to their consciences?

ACTIVITY (20 mins)

Choose a current highly controversial issue. This will depend on what is in the news and the make up of the group, but should be an issue which many Christians would see as an ethical one, eg armed conflict, gambling, nuclear weapons or abortion. In groups ask people to imagine that they are Christian government ministers who totally disagree with government policy on the subject.

- How would they respond?
- Would they resign as a minister?
- Would they stay in post and try to influence the party?
- What loyalty should they have to the party?
- If they didn't resign over this issue where would the line be?
- How would they reply to letters from Christians questioning whether they were being truly Christian?
- Can members of the group identify times when they have experienced such tensions in their own lives?
- Reflect again on the title of this course – "The Art of the Possible"

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

Loving God, we want to pray for our MP, [name]. We pray that at times when we agree with them as much as at times when we profoundly disagree you will remind us that they too are seeking the best for all people. We pray that they will be given wisdom and judgement in making decisions, and the courage to work for their convictions, resisting the temptations and pressures they may face. We pray for the friends and family of [name] that they may also feel your love and closeness, especially at times when [name] feels far away or distracted. May marriages, friendships and family relationships be given time to deepen and grow away from the pressures of Westminster. We ask these prayers in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

HOMEWORK

Find out about the three Christian party groupings at Westminster – the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum, the Christian Socialist Movement and the Conservative Christian Fellowship, as

well as the all-party Christians in Politics (www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk) – and if you are inspired by any of them, join one! Find an opportunity to pray for your MP.

How well do you know Parliament?

1. Parliament is divided into an upper and lower House – how are these more commonly known?
2. How many MPs sit in Parliament (within 10)?
3. How many of these are women (within 10)?
4. How many from black and minority ethnic groups (within 5)?
5. Name four categories of Lords who sit in Parliament
6. When the Government introduces legislation which House does it start off in?
7. What is the difference between a select committee and a bill committee?
8. How much time do MPs have to vote when a division is called?
9. How many General Elections have there been since the second world war?
10. Who cannot vote in a UK parliamentary election? There are five categories – one point for each one you get right.
11. What do the words guttersnipe, stoolpigeon and traitor have in common?

And if there is a tie – a bonus question:

12. When delivering the Budget what did Gladstone choose to drink?

How well do you know Parliament? – the Answers

1. Parliament is divided into an upper and lower house – how are these more commonly known?

House of Commons and House of Lords.

1 point for each correct answer.

2. How many MPs sit in Parliament (within 20)?

650 MPs were elected at the 2010 Election. For an up to date number visit www.parliament.uk

1 point if you said within 20. 2 points if you got it exactly right.

3. What percentage of these are women (within 5%)?

144 at the time of writing (April 2010), just over 22% of the total. An up to date number can be found on the Parliament website – www.parliament.uk

1 point if you said within 5%. 2 points if you got it exactly right.

4. What percentage are from black and minority ethnic groups (within 5%)?

27 at the 2010 General Election, or just over 4%.

1 point if you said within 5%. 2 points if you got it exactly right.

5. Name four categories of people who sit in the House of Lords (1 point for each category)

There are 810 at the time of writing (January 2011). This includes

- 638 Life Peers (appointed by political parties for life)
- 90 Hereditary Peers (Under a compromise agreed in 1999 the 700+ peers with hereditary titles may elect 91 from amongst their member to sit in the Lords)
- 23 Law Lords and
- 25 Bishops and Archbishops of the Church of England, known as the 'Lords Spiritual'.

For up to date figures for the House of Lords see: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/lords/lords-by-type-and-party>

6. When the Government introduces legislation which House does it start off in?

Legislation can start in either house, and is considered in various stages – eg first reading, second reading, committee, report and third reading – before going through the same process in the other house. All legislation passes through both Houses, and can bounce backwards and forwards until agreement is reached or the House of Commons asserts its primacy, after introducing the Bill in two sessions of Parliament, through the Parliament Act.

The exception to this rule is legislation which affects the spending of money, such as the annual Finance Bill (which implements the Budget), or the Consolidated Fund Bill. These must start in the Commons, and cannot be amended by the Lords.

1 point if you said either House, or an extra 1 point if you mentioned the exception.

7. What is the difference between a select committee and a bill committee?

A Select Committee is permanent, and reviews the activities and issues relating to a particular government department (such as the Defence Select Committee or the Health Select Committee). A Bill Committee is temporary, and is convened to scrutinise and discuss one particular Bill. Once its job has been done it is dissolved.

1 point if you said Select Committees are permanent and Bill Committees are temporary. 1 point if you said Select Committees review government departments and Bill Committees scrutinise proposed legislation.

8. How much time do MPs have to vote when a division is called?

From the moment of a division – a vote to say yes or no to a particular motion – MPs have eight minutes to make their way to voting lobbies on either side of the Commons chamber. After eight minutes the doors are locked. If MPs are not in the chamber at the time of the division, they are alerted by ringing bells and notices on TV monitors situated around the Houses of Parliament, in Ministers’ offices in their Departments (all within 5 minutes of the Palace of Westminster) and – believe it or not – in the Red Lion pub in Whitehall. MPs all carry electronic pagers and are alerted on those as well.

1 point if you said eight minutes.

9. How many General Elections have there been since the Second World War?

18.

Year	Prime Minister	Party	Year	Prime Minister	Party
1945	Clement Attlee	Labour	Oct 1974	Harold Wilson	Labour
1950	Clement Attlee	Labour	1979	Margaret Thatcher	Conservative
1951	Winston Churchill	Conservative	1983	Margaret Thatcher	Conservative
1955	Anthony Eden	Conservative	1987	Margaret Thatcher	Conservative
1959	Harold Macmillan	Conservative	1992	John Major	Conservative
1964	Harold Wilson	Labour	1997	Tony Blair	Labour
1966	Harold Wilson	Labour	2001	Tony Blair	Labour
1970	Edward Heath	Conservative	2005	Tony Blair	Labour
Feb 1974	Harold Wilson	Labour	2010	David Cameron / Nick Clegg	Coalition

2 points if you said 18, 1 point if you said 16 - 20

10. Who cannot vote in a UK parliamentary election?

- People under 18 years old
- Foreign nationals (apart from citizens of the Irish Republic and Commonwealth countries resident in Britain)
- Members of the House of Lords (The Queen can vote but it is considered unconstitutional to do so)
- Sentenced prisoners
- People convicted within the previous five years of illegal election practices

1 point for each category of people disqualified from voting (total of five points)

11. What do the words guttersnipe, stoolpigeon and traitor have in common?

Speakers have at one time judged them all to be “unparliamentarily language” and therefore they cannot be used in parliamentary exchanges.

1 point if you got this right.

And the tie-breaker:

12. When delivering the Budget what did Gladstone choose to drink?

Sherry and a beaten egg.

Alcohol is not normally allowed in the chamber of the House of Commons, though by tradition the Chancellor of the Exchequer has the right to drink whatever he likes when delivering his speech (up until now it has always been a man).

Gladstone’s rival Benjamin Disraeli was said to have taken brandy with water when he made his budget speeches. Geoffrey Howe took Gin and Tonic, Kenneth Clarke supped Glenfaclas scotch. Gordon Brown delighted Highland Spring Mineral Water Company by choosing a well-known Scottish brand. The current Chancellor, Alistair Darling, is reported to have stuck with simple London tap water.



The House of Commons and House of Lords

at the Palace of Westminster make up the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

Westminster is sovereign over all parts of the UK; devolution was by Acts of the UK Parliament, which can be repealed if Parliament wishes. The Acts for Scotland and Northern Ireland list those areas retained by Westminster (Reserved Powers); everything else is devolved. The Acts for Wales and London list what is devolved (Devolved Powers); everything else is reserved. A list of powers reserved under all four Acts is opposite.

Westminster legislates for England; it has the power to legislate for the whole of the UK even in relation to devolved powers, but has agreed not to do so unless requested. The Scottish Parliament sometimes does make that request if they want laws identical to those in England.

Westminster also governs British Overseas Territories such as Bermuda, the Falklands and Gibraltar. The Channel Islands and the Isle of Man are Crown Dependencies, and each has their own assembly and government.

Reserved Westminster powers include:

- Abortion, Human Fertilisation and Embryology
- Broadcasting
- Constitutional Matters and Elections
- Counter-Terrorism
- Data Protection
- Defence and the Armed Forces
- Economic and Fiscal Policy and Currency
- Employment and Health and Safety
- Energy
- Equal Opportunities
- Gambling and the National Lottery
- Genetics and Medicines
- Immigration, Asylum and Nationality
- International Relations
- Judicial Appointments
- Political Party Funding and Registration
- The Royal Succession
- Social Security and UK Taxation
- Transport (relating to aviation, navigation, railways, safety and regulation)

The Greater London Authority is the Mayor of London plus the London Assembly. The Mayor holds executive power in Greater London, and is accountable to the London Assembly. The GLA is responsible for London's cultural strategy, economic development, fire and emergency services, transport and policing.



The Northern Ireland Assembly is based in Stormont. The Northern Ireland Executive is accountable to the Assembly.

Stormont's devolved powers include:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Agriculture | Environment |
| Culture, Arts and Leisure | Health |
| Education | Regional Development |
| Employment | Social Development |
| Enterprise, Trade and Investment | Transport |

The Scottish Parliament is located in Holyrood, Edinburgh. The Parliament can alter the income tax rate by up to 3 pence in the pound from the rest of the UK. The Parliament can create its own laws. The Parliament holds the Scottish Government to account.



Holyrood's devolved powers include:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry | Police and Fire Services |
| Economic Development | Research and Statistics |
| Education | Scots Law and Courts |
| Environment | Social Work |
| Food Standards | Sports and the Arts |
| Health | Tourism |
| Home Affairs | Training |
| Local Government | Transport |

The National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff Bay can pass laws (Assembly Measures) which have the same effect as Acts of Parliament, but only after the agreement of the UK Parliament on each occasion. It has no formal tax-raising powers, but it does control the level of grant to local councils, which can indirectly affect Council Tax rates.

The National Assembly for Wales holds the Welsh Assembly Government to account.

The National Assembly for Wales has responsibility for:

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry | Housing |
| Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings | Local Government |
| Culture | Public Administration |
| Economic Development | Social Welfare |
| Education and Training | Sport and Recreation |
| Environment | Tourism |
| Fire and Rescue Services | Town and Country Planning |
| Food | Water and Flood Defences |
| Health and Health Services | The Welsh Language |
| Highways and Transport | |



SESSION 6

Politics of the Here and Now – Change-makers in the Local Church

If we are to take justice seriously then this realisation affects, or broadens, what it might mean to 'be church' in the place where we are situated. This session encourages us to reflect on how God wants us to relate to and care for our local community.

Key messages

- a. Every local church represents the Body of Christ in that place and is a political presence
- b. Our formal and informal networks help us to establish that presence but also give us a way to see the underlying needs of our community
- c. We have tools through which we can seek to discern how God wants us to relate to our local community and to act for change.

Preparation

You will need:

- Pens and paper for all members of the group
 - Flipchart paper and pens
 - Some background information about your local area for the first exercise
 - Bibles or copies of the reading (John 8: 2-11)
 - Copies of the Session 6 handout on the Pastoral Cycle
-
- As this is the last session of the series, you will also need copies of the evaluation form for members of the group to complete

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

Living God, we thank you for Jesus' involvement with the people he lived alongside, and for his encounters with strangers along the roadside. We thank you for his practical caring, which has affected the lives of so many people. We thank you especially for his teaching and preaching which offer to us a way of seeing the world through the lens of God's loving justice. Be with us as we explore Jesus' ideas which turn the values of the world upside down. Be with us as we endeavour to see our neighbourhood afresh: through the eyes of the Risen Christ. Amen

INTRODUCTION

ACTIVITY (5 mins)

Ask people to draw a quick sketch map of what they think is their church's local community (boundaries, landmarks).

Don't worry about accuracy – the aim is to help people to think about their local environment and to get the group to agree, for the purposes of this meeting, what is the "community" you are talking about. Attempt to get some broad agreement amongst the group. For some towns or villages this will be simple; in larger areas or if you are a church with members gathering from a wide area this may prove more complicated. There are no right answers, rather it will help discussions later in this session if assumptions are voiced even if they are not entirely shared amongst the group.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Do we as a church and as individuals have our ears to the ground? This exercise aims to help people to find out more about where they live.

ACTIVITY (20 mins)

Divide into groups of four or five people. The members of any church are living links with many aspects of the local community. Do a quick survey:

- Draw group of stick figures in the middle of a sheet of flip chart paper. These people symbolise your Church, a significant political presence in the area.
- On the left of your diagram add a list of all the groups, organisations, influential people etc which in some way link with the lives of this part of the Body of Christ. So you might

- include local schools, health centres, businesses, local councillors with whom people in your congregation have connections.
- On the right hand side, list any informal networks which are less structured: places where people might stop to converse with each other and influence each other's opinions. For example you might include parent and toddler groups, book clubs, pubs, friends of libraries etc.
- Then compare these groups, organisations and networks with the information about your local area available from official sources of information. In smaller groups write a list of what you may have discovered: Was there a close match between your informal diagram and the official sources of information from your research? What surprises you? What concerns you?

NB Arrange in advance for your study group to have access to some of this information for your local area. (It is possible that someone in your church has already researched demographic material; for example, in order to produce a church profile in preparation for the Calling of a new minister. Otherwise, your local library could assist you.) Visit websites such as the following to find out more.

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census/default.asp>

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/D11/Directories/Localcouncils/index.htm>

BIBLE STUDY (15 mins)

Read John 8: 2-11

- Firstly, discuss what you see in this account. Who holds power in this story? How does Jesus set about altering the balance of power?
- You can find the crowd's justification for this judgemental act clearly written in Leviticus 20:10 and in Deuteronomy 22:22-24. (Does it seem strange that our New Testament story only mentions the potential fate of the woman, when the original Hebrew Scriptures clearly apply equally to both the man and the woman, once found guilty?)
- Discuss together how Jesus responds to this sudden crisis. Jesus appears to ride rough-shod over the accepted rules of the contemporary Jewish religious authority. Does this strike your group as a courageous thing to do? Why do you think that Jesus appears to hold love and justice in higher regard than the 'letter of the Law' which is enshrined in the early books of the Bible?

Divide into groups again, and return to the list(s) of 'formal' and 'informal' contacts with the local community. Take a few moments to explore whether there are any situations in your own community where it might be necessary to dig below the surface in order to discover, not only symptoms, but also causes of some aspect of poverty or injustice? Examples might include: the head teacher in a prosperous London suburb once said to some prospective parents, "You'd be surprised to discover what goes on behind the net curtains around here!" Do you think that there might be hidden problems in your area? Sometimes small local businesses close, leaving empty shops along a main street. Could there be a reason behind the closures which might be explored?

You are invited to attempt to lay the Gospel story alongside your thoughts about your local community.

TOOLS FOR LOCAL CHURCHES (30 mins)

Following are two theological tools, or resources, to help you explore how we, as Christians, should begin to engage with our local community. The **Pastoral Cycle** offers a process by which churches can begin to discern the will of God for their action in the community. **Liberation Theology** offers lessons developed largely in Latin America for churches seeking to understand what it means to work alongside those who are most disadvantaged.

Depending on the nature of your group you may choose to focus on just one tool, or to look at both and prompt a discussion.

1. The Pastoral Cycle:

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to identify people or situations where you could work together with other partners to try to achieve change. This activity may give you the first glimmer of a possible new vision of service but, if your group is not yet ready to talk of local examples, here is a list of some issues from other communities.

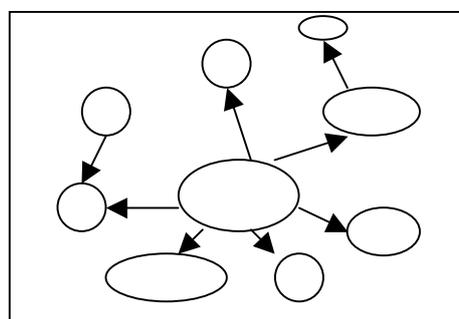
There's an empty shop on the high street which might provide a meeting place for local people.

You are babysitting for a young couple a few doors away, and realise that there is no food in the fridge. The children tell you that they have shared a portion of chips for their tea. When their mother comes home, you make a comment about how expensive life is, and she bursts into tears.

An immigrant worker longs to read English books, and have access to a computer, but his working hours do not match with the opening times of the local library.

The last areas of open land on a housing estate are rapidly being in-filled with new homes, and the local children are losing their only open spaces for play.

- Ask group members to draw a "spidergram" (see right for an example) about the situation – showing everything they know, and all the questions it provokes, and the links with other situations, people and partners. This is the basis for beginning the first part of the Pastoral Cycle – seeing or understanding.
- Give each member of the group a copy of the Handout, and ask them to work through the cycle for the situation they have identified, looking at the questions posed.



The Pastoral Cycle is an ongoing process which helps us to work for change through a cycle of:

- **Seeing** or Experiencing – knowing your community, finding out more about the people and the situation
- **Reflecting** or Exploring– what might God be saying in this situation?
- **Acting** – how can you respond?
- Then the cycle begins again with finding out more about the consequences of acting or the reality of the changed situation

Remember, the Pastoral Cycle cannot be "completed" within one evening. The purpose of this activity is to give members of the group the tools to look at their own involvement in the community. After some discussion along the lines of the handout, invite them to go out from this place and to live the ongoing stages of the cycle. If they have been genuinely challenged, through this process of considering their own community and locality in the light of this story, then is there a particular problem or social need which might be approached in this way? Is the time right for local Christians to become involved in a situation in which they might previously have assumed that someone else would act?

Sometimes you might find that you are the very person who needs to act in a serious situation, just as Jesus was when the woman's life was in immediate danger. More often, however, our task will be to support other people with companionship and skills. This might be enabling access to computers, or information about Local Councillors, for example. Hopefully the church can achieve change together with other people, and with other partner organisations.

The Pastoral Cycle is continuous, until a goal is achieved. If a process is ongoing, we need to remember to keep returning to the Scriptures which give us the model of how Jesus thought and acted, in order to change the world. We are called to continue praying, experiencing and exploring, whilst we are involved with people's difficulties.

2. LIBERATION THEOLOGY

ACTIVITY

Ask the group to think again about the woman whom Jesus had saved from death by stoning. For liberation theologians, the authentic proof of God's grace is love in action – setting someone else free.

Ask the group to think about what the challenges of liberation theology might mean for churches and Christians today – list the four headings/challenges below on a flipchart as a conversation starter.

- **We are called to 'be there' for people, as Jesus was.** Remember that Jesus firstly listened to the evidence from the crowd, and assessed the needs of the woman. There is never a case for assuming that we know what other people need or, especially, how they are feeling. Before we can assist anyone, we need to have clearly heard their dilemma and/ or pain.
- **Getting involved can be scary.** If we are timid, we need to ask God for the courage to speak and act, and to keep on returning to the cycle of prayer and reflection, our access to the Wisdom of God. Remember that you are never on your own, and the whole church is called to action, not just yourself.
- **Taking over can be tempting.** Some others of us are blessed with worldly competence, gained from education and life experience. It would be all too easy for a capable, articulate, skilled person to wade in and sort out another person's life, or to take over and run a community project. We are called to walk alongside people and to offer help when it is useful, and to empower others to act for themselves, wherever possible. Church Action on Poverty talks, for example, of "giving a voice to people experiencing poverty", not speaking on their behalf.
- **Liberation isn't about doing things for or to people.** Only by humbling ourselves before the presence of Jesus Christ in the faces of the poor and powerless, will we avoid being overbearing. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Christian educator said that, "Even benign paternalism is anti-dialogical". He was saying that it is very easy to destroy authentic conversation, which is essential to liberation. The church community is blessed with significant resources to befriend vulnerable people in a community, and to speak out for disempowered groups. We are called to respect the humanity of the weakest, least attractive person in society, remembering that we are all equal in God's sight, and that any talents and gifts with which we may be blessed with, are at the disposal of God's Kingdom.

A group of (South American) peasants from a (local) community were going to the municipal authorities, accompanied by their priest, in pursuit of basic rights which were being denied them. When they had finished putting their case, the mayor turned to the priest. "And what does the church think?" he asked. "You have just heard what the church thinks".

(Margaret Hebblethwaite, Base Communities: an Introduction (1993) p. 28)

- **Ask the group to reflect on this quote.**
- **What questions or challenges does it raise for your local church as it currently is?**
- **What do members of the group understand by the word "liberation"? How might it apply in your community?**

FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)

- **What might God be saying to you about the needs of the people who live and work around you?**
- **How can your church be involved in bringing about change?**
- **Who could your church work with, in order to set another person free?**
- **What have you learned from this session?**
- **Are there issues on which you have gained new insights or perspectives?**

Please ask the group to spend 2 minutes filling in the feedback questionnaire on these sessions, and collect them back in to send to the authors of the material.

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

You might like to write the people and groups listed below (or other locally relevant ones) on pieces of card and distribute them to members of the group, together with a night-light. These can be placed around a cross on a safe surface during the prayer.

Living, Caring God, we know that Jesus was never afraid to help people, and we ask that you will show us how we should engage in the needs and growth of our local community, both as individuals, and as a church congregation. Help us to listen intently to the various voices around us, and help us to recognise opportunities for action and for care. Keep us alert for creative possibilities for partnerships, which might bring about change for the good.

As we pray, we ask your blessing on those who are engaged in the well-being of our locality: We remember our Local Councillors, our educational services: nurseries, schools and colleges; primary health care trusts and hospitals; residential care facilities; the emergency services; and the many businesses which provide employment and services.

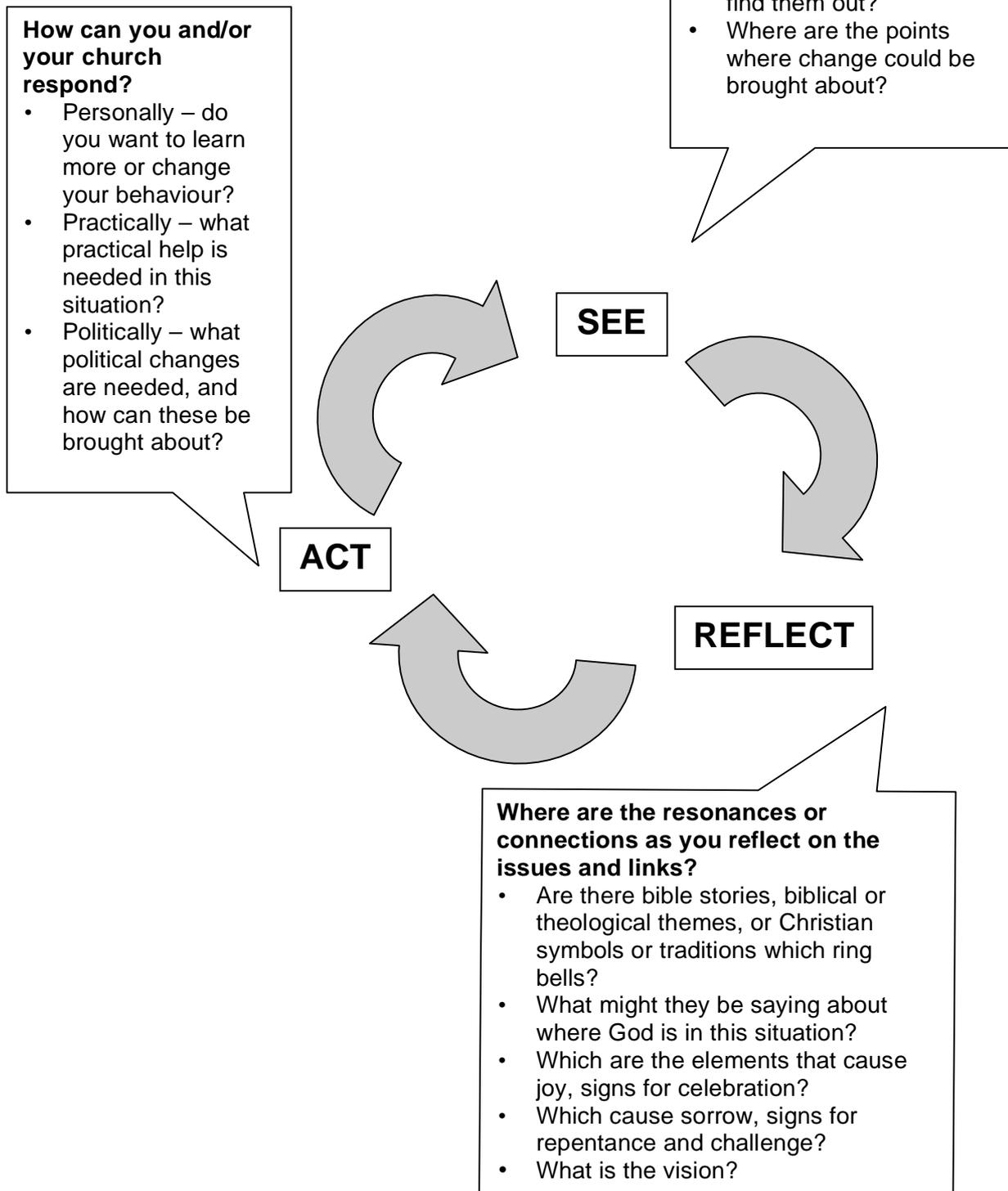
Give us eyes to recognise injustice, hearts to care, and courage to speak about these matters of political action within our local congregations, and with people in positions of power and influence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

HOMEWORK

If the group has been inspired and enthused by the discussion in these sessions, encourage them to consider how they could take action for change.

POLITICS OF THE HERE AND NOW

Using the Pastoral Cycle



The Art of the Possible: exploring the meaning of faith in the world of politics

EVALUATION FORM FOR GROUP MEMBERS

Thank you for taking part in sessions looking at the meaning of faith in the world of politics.

We are keen to learn from the feedback of people who have used our study material. Therefore we would be grateful if you could take 2 minutes to complete this form and return it to your group facilitator before you leave.

1. How many of the sessions in this course did you attend? Please tick:

- Session 1 What does God look like?
- Session 2 Justice
- Session 3 Change Makers
- Session 4 Church and State
- Session 5 Parliament
- Session 6 Politics in the here and now

2. Which of these sessions did you find most useful?

Why?

3. Which did you find least useful?

Why?

4. What do you feel you learned from this series?

5. What do you feel you may do differently as a result (in your personal life, at church etc)

6. Do you have any other comments?

The Art of the Possible: exploring the meaning of faith in the world of politics

EVALUATION FORM FOR GROUP LEADERS

Thank you for leading sessions looking at the meaning of faith in the world of politics.

We are keen to learn from the feedback of people who have used our study material. Therefore we would be grateful if you could take 2 minutes to complete this form and return it to the address below together with any comments from group members.

1. How many of the sessions in this course did you run? Roughly how many people attended each?

	<i>Ran the session (please tick)</i>	<i>Rough numbers attending</i>
Session 1 What does God look like?	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Session 2 Justice	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Session 3 Change Makers	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Session 4 Church and State	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Session 5 Parliament	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Session 6 Politics in the here and now	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

2. Which of these sessions did you find most useful?

Why?

3. Which did you find least useful?

Why?

4. What do you feel the group learned from this series?

5. What do you feel group members may do differently as a result (in your personal life, at church etc)

6. Do you have any other comments? If you have time to give us detailed feedback on the contents of individual sessions – what worked and what didn't – as well as suggestions for improvements, we would be very grateful. Please use the space overleaf, or email politicalaffairs@methodistchurch.org.uk

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