

Our church and our world – building bridges with political leaders

As Abraham Kuyper famously said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

God’s love for the world and his rule over all creation means that the Church can never ignore the communities to which we belong. Just as Christ is sovereign over the natural world, Christ is also sovereign over the political sphere and prompts us to interact truthfully and lovingly with the institutions that structure public life—parliaments, councils, courts etc.

How we are governed

In Australia, our “rulers” are elected representatives who are tasked with representing their communities at either a local, state or federal government level.

It is worth remembering that each level of government plays a different role in governing and has unique responsibilities. It is important to be familiar with which responsibilities fall with each different jurisdiction.

“So often we have people angry with us, because we can’t solve a problem we have no legal authority to be involved in. The federal government cannot make your neighbour cut down a tree that is damaging your home. That’s an issue for a council.”
- Parliamentary staffer

Local (council): Responsible for things closest to everyday life like roads, waste, community facilities and developments. They are responsible for decisions relating to church property and community services or infrastructure.

State: Responsible for many of the major services and systems that shape our day-to-day life like schools, hospitals, police, transport and community services. State Governments have an enormous influence on what is funded and what is permitted in our communal life.

Federal: Responsible for matters that affect Australia as a whole such as tax, defence, foreign affairs and immigration. They provide significant funding to the states and also sets national standards around particular issues such as discrimination laws.

Attitudes towards the church may vary, but for most MPs, even if the Christian faith is not well understood, there is an understanding that the people who attend churches are part of the community that the MP or councillor is seeking to serve. Churches are an important access point for an MP to a section of the community they are tasked with representing.

“A great church is a refuge and a sanctuary.... A great church offers you faith, hope and renewal. ... In a sense it becomes a community hub—sometimes a spiritual community hub.”
-Jason Wood MP

How to build bridges

Step 1: Know who your elected representatives are.

Find out their names and contact details, but also learn about them. Read their maiden speech to Parliament. Pay attention to the issues they speak about and sign up for any newsletters they may produce.

It is worth knowing who the Senators and MLAs are in your state too. Senators sit in the upper house of the Federal Parliament and MLAs are in the NSW upper house. They don't represent a single electorate but they review legislation. Most parties will have a Senator who has some responsibility for the local area to which you belong. You can reach out to the state divisions of political parties to ask who they might be.

Tools for finding your MPs and representatives

The Australian Electoral Commission (aec.gov.au) and the state electoral commissions have search functions to allow you to find your representatives.

The Australian Parliament website (www.aph.gov.au) lists contact details and each MP has a page that shows speeches they have given and some of their history. Most state parliament websites have this too.

Step 2: Begin the habit of praying for them.

You may even want to let them know that you are doing this and ask if there are particular things they would like prayer for. Many MPs who have no interest in belonging to a church are respectful and grateful for the care this demonstrates.

Step 3: Identify opportunities to be hospitable

Think about times that they may be able to, comfortably, be part of the church community. This doesn't have to mean coming to church, but it might mean inviting them to an anniversary event or the opening of a building. It might mean having a coffee with the eldership some time.

One of our local ministers always makes a habit of checking in and asking how I am going in my role. He has spoken honestly about the challenges of leadership in the church context too and I have been grateful for his friendship, even though we don't have the same beliefs.

-Federal Parliament MP

If an MP is coming to your church, arrange for someone in the congregation to greet them, introduce them to people, and make sure they are looked after. That person should not interrogate them or argue with them, but simply help them to feel welcome.

Step 4: Make a habit of reaching out occasionally.

Put it in the calendar to check in on occasion. MPs and councillors are very time poor, but a brief check in every few months keeps the relationship warm.

Attend events they are holding too, to demonstrate your interest in the community to which you belong. You can attend council meetings and you can go to community events they are likely to participate in.

It is also worth building this sort of relationship with local media and demonstrating to the broader community that you are interested in what happens beyond the church walls.

Step 5: Engage on issues

Reach out when there are issues of interest or concern for the church. Make your position clear and compelling and make arguments on the basis of the common good.

Remember that even when we disagree profoundly, those with whom we fundamentally disagree bear the image of the Almighty God.

Conclusion

Precisely because Jesus rules the whole world, we who follow him should also love the whole world. Engaging with the three levels of government is a way of loving our neighbours. Engaging with our community leaders is a way of working towards the common good. And we should expect opportunities to talk about how Jesus loved the world in a way only God incarnate could: he gave himself to death and resurrection to save

people, not just from hardships in this world, but from the consequences of rejecting God
- from being judged for our sin.