



## Scotland's Churches and the Scottish Parliamentary Election - 3 May 2007



### Planning an Election Meeting

Thank you for your interest in organising an all-party meeting for the Scottish Parliamentary Election candidates in your constituency. For the past 30 years churches across the country have joined together to host meetings to which election candidates are invited. Meetings sponsored by the churches provide all-party opportunities for genuine political debate on neutral territory. At these "Question Time" meetings the electorate can meet with and question the candidates to represent them in Parliament.

This leaflet offers some simple information and guidance on planning such a meeting locally. The suggestions are drawn from the experiences of people who have organised meetings in the past.

*Enclosed with this leaflet is a set of questions prepared for ACTS (through its Church & Society Network), which you may find useful as starting points.*

*These cover mainly "devolved issues" within the remit of the Scottish Parliament, and they are intended to highlight issues which may be higher on the churches' agenda than on the media's (or the political parties'); each question is accompanied by some notes which give brief background information for the questioner.*

*Please feel free to copy them for those who come to your meeting.*

### **When will the election happen?**

Thursday 3 May; it is vital to start planning as soon as possible.

## **First things first...**

These meetings work best when at their most ecumenical. So the first thing to do is to form a local ecumenical planning group, either under the auspices of your local Churches Together group or Council of Churches, or (if this is not possible) a special election group made up of different churches. Remember also that there may be other faith groups present in your area who would like to be included. This inclusive approach is likely to get a better response than acting as a single church. You may also want to consider including other local organisations. Call a meeting of this group as soon as possible.

## **What area should we cover?**

Ideally there should be one churches' election meeting in each constituency, but life is rarely that simple. Some ecumenical groups may only cover part of a constituency, whilst others may straddle several. If **Churches Together in Inverburgh** is part of the **Inverburgh and Westfield constituency**, try joining up with **Westfield** churches to organise a meeting to cover the whole constituency; however, if you live in a very large constituency it might be more practical to organise two meetings at different ends of the constituency. Alternatively if the town is divided into two constituencies, set up two separate planning groups to organise two separate meetings, one for each constituency, so that you are only dealing with one set of candidates at a time. The SCPO website [www.actsparl.org](http://www.actsparl.org) will have a list of meetings we are aware of.

## **When should the meeting be held?**

In the past candidates have responded well to meetings held on a Sunday evening a week or two before the election, but there may be a local reason for a particular night. You should choose (as soon as possible) what looks a suitable date, with at least one alternative, and check with the political parties or candidates locally to confirm that there is no clash with another event in. It might be possible to hold the meeting after an ecumenical evening service, but it should be clear that the meeting is open to all, church members or otherwise.

## **Who should run the meeting?**

Try to identify a respected and impartial person from your community to chair this meeting. This could be a church figure, or a community leader. It is vital that the person chairing should not be identified or connected with any one political party; a strong character is best, able to control aggressive, evasive and irrelevant speakers - whether candidates or members of the public! You should identify and invite such a person early, in order to get their provisional agreement, and then confirm dates with them once the date of the meeting is confirmed. If they have not done this before, they will need to be well-briefed on how the meeting is to be conducted (particularly on the timing of the contributions, see below). It might also be useful to give them a copy of this leaflet and other relevant material.

## **How do we find the candidates?**

Most constituency parties have already identified their candidates for the election. You can contact the party headquarters (by phone or through their website - see below), either to find the name and address of the candidate, or the details of your local party. Contact the candidates with an initial invitation, explaining the aims of the meeting and the time and date.

The contact details for the political parties currently represented in the Parliament are:

- Scottish Conservatives – 0131 247 6890; [www.scottishconservatives.com](http://www.scottishconservatives.com)
- Scottish Green Party – 0870 0772207; [www.scottishgreens.org.uk](http://www.scottishgreens.org.uk)
- Scottish Labour Party – 0141 572 6900; [www.scottishlabour.org.uk](http://www.scottishlabour.org.uk)
- Scottish Liberal Democrats – 0131 337 2314; [www.scotlibdems.org.uk](http://www.scotlibdems.org.uk)
- Scottish National Party - 0131 525 8900; [www.snp.org.uk](http://www.snp.org.uk)
- Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party - 01698 338012; [www.sscup.org](http://www.sscup.org)
- Scottish Socialist Party – 0141 429 8200 (Glasgow office); [www.scottishsocialistparty.org](http://www.scottishsocialistparty.org)
- Solidarity – no phone number given; [www.solidarityscotland.org](http://www.solidarityscotland.org)

These parties should be represented in all or most areas (though some may stand in regional lists only). Closer to the election you can find out details of any other candidates via your local Returning Officer, usually in the Chief Executive's department of your local Council. Ring all the candidates as soon as possible as they become very busy as the election gets near.

**Do we have to invite all the candidates? What if a candidate refuses to attend?**

The important thing is to ensure that your meeting is impartially chaired and cannot be seen as promoting any one candidate or party. We suggest inviting all candidates (including reps of parties standing in regional lists only) unless you consider that it might cause a breach of the peace to do so.

It is expected that the "Scottish Christian Party" ([www.operationchristianvote.org.uk](http://www.operationchristianvote.org.uk)) and the "Scottish Christian People's Alliance" ([www.cpalliance.net](http://www.cpalliance.net)) will have candidates, at least in regional lists; although neither of these parties has formal links with any of the main churches, you should be particularly careful to ensure that any participation by them is on the same basis as others, to avoid any danger of your meeting being seen as promoting any one party.

When you contact the candidates, state who else has been invited to the meeting. If candidates cannot or do not wish to attend, you should read out apologies at the start of the meeting; candidates may suggest a substitute from the same party - possibly one of their "list" candidates in your area. If you have any doubts, you should discuss these with your local ecumenical group and contact your Constituency Returning Officer, via your local Council, for advice.

## **How should we publicise the meeting?**

Once you have finalised time and venue and invited candidates, try to get publicity for the meeting out to as many people and in as many ways as possible. Write to all the churches in the local area, asking them to put up posters and to put details of the meeting in their weekly notice sheet. Better still, get members of each denomination or church to take responsibility for publicising it within their own church.

Make a list of public places where details of the meeting could be advertised - public libraries, doctors' surgeries, post offices, community centres, shop windows, church members' windows.

You can also ask the local media to advertise the event. Notify the candidates that you will be doing this, and send out a press release in advance. The more publicity you promise, the more eager the candidates will be to attend.

The press release can be very simple (stating What, When, Where, Who and Why) and should be sent to local newspapers and radio stations. Remember to include contact telephone numbers so they can find out further details. It is important to stress that these meetings are not campaigning events, although churches and Christian bodies may be actively campaigning on particular issues on other occasions.

## **What about the venue?**

You might decide to hold the meeting in one of the local churches, or in another building that is more convenient - for example, a school or community centre. Wherever the meeting is held, it should be easy to find and accessible to people with mobility difficulties. Convenient car parking should also be considered.

**Sound** - It is important to have an efficient and effective public address system - check this in advance, and then make someone who understands its operation responsible for it on the night. A mobile "floor" microphone (and someone to run around with it) will make it much easier to take questions or comments from the audience, which are a vital part of the process.

**Stewarding** - Decide how many people you will need to welcome people, etc - for example, will you be serving tea and coffee? Try to get volunteers from a range of churches.

### **Running the meeting...**

It is up to the planning group to decide the timetable for the meeting. You might want to consider the following structure:

- Brief introduction of the candidates by name and party
- Short statement by each candidate (a couple of minutes at most)
- Questions from the floor on political issues, allowing each candidate to respond
- Final few sentences from each candidate

Bearing in mind that you may have six or more candidates, you will need to ensure that statements and answers are kept strictly to time. If your Chairperson does not want to control the meeting *and* keep an eye on his/her stopwatch, you could have someone at the back of the room holding up a card when the speaker is one minute from the end, and again when their time is up.

It is always a good idea to have someone lined up to ask the first question - people may be slow in starting, but they will soon heat up! These meetings are run by - but not for - the churches; people from all sections of the community should be encouraged to attend and to participate.

Decide how you want to handle questions - do you want people from the audience to submit them in writing to the Chairperson at the start of the meeting or as it progresses? (This method allows the

Chairperson to ensure that a range of topics is covered.) Or are you happy simply to take questions from the floor? Whatever you decide, this should be made very clear to the audience at the start of the meeting (and paper provided if you want questions in writing). You *may* also want to remind people that this is a Scottish Parliament election, and encourage them to focus on issues within the Parliament's powers. Also decide whether you will allow supplementary questions to be asked - remember that even if each of six candidates is given just two minutes to answer, each question will take twelve minutes. Questioners may also need to be kept in check by the Chairperson - people have come to hear the candidate, not them!

### **And afterwards...**

Once the meeting is over, please let ACTS know how it went. Did this briefing paper cover everything you needed to know? Was it easy to use? Did you come across unexpected problems? Were the suggested questions helpful? Was there enough background information? The information which you supply will help ACTS improve its material for the *next* election! Send your comments to Tom Moyes, Network Officer, ACTS Network Officer, 7 Forrester Lodge, Inglewood, Alloa, FK10 2HU; 01259 216980; [tommoyes@acts-scotland.org](mailto:tommoyes@acts-scotland.org).

***Thank you for offering to organise an election meeting.  
We hope that it will be successful, and will provide a valuable  
opportunity for the political debate and reflection necessary for  
real democratic participation.***

## Checklist

1. Contact the Churches Together Group/other churches/ faith communities in your constituency and form a planning group; have at least one initial meeting to draw up list of tasks.
2. Pencil in a likely date (or dates) for the meeting.
3. Identify a venue and check availability.
4. Identify the candidates for the main parties and contact them, inviting them in principle to the election meeting and checking your projected date, venue, etc.
5. Identify someone to chair and liaise with them.
6. Confirm venue booking. Check out sound system, and identify someone to run it on the night. Where will the candidates sit, and do they need name/party labels in front of them?
7. Recruit stewards/helpers for the night.
8. Once nominations have closed (around three weeks before the election), get hold of the final list of candidates. Contact them by phone *as soon as possible* to confirm or invite. Brief them on the timetable (including strict time limits).
9. Produce posters/ information for display; contact other churches in the area and identify other places for posters.
10. Send press release to local media.
11. Brief the chairperson fully on timetable. Appoint timekeeper with stopwatch and card if required.
12. Brief stewards on welcoming/serving refreshments. Photocopy briefing on issues for audience if required.

*Further information is available from the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1SR; 0131 558 8137; [graham@actsparl.org](mailto:graham@actsparl.org); or from Tom Moyes, ACTS Network Officer, 7 Forrester Lodge, Inglewood, Alloa, FK10 2HU; 01259 216980; [tommoyes@acts-scotland.org](mailto:tommoyes@acts-scotland.org)*

*Please email [rosemary@actsparl.org](mailto:rosemary@actsparl.org) to tell us where and when you have organised a meeting, and we will put the info on our website.*