



## Organize an All-Candidates Meeting

One effective way for a congregation to get involved in democracy is to organize an all-candidates meeting. By doing so you send the community the message that

- public debate matters
- the church has an interest in the issues discussed
- people who are affected by political policies have a right to participate in all the conversations—this is community!

Your faith community can host a non-partisan all-candidates meeting leading up to an election.

- Invite all candidates in your riding to share their views and answer audience questions.
- Provide a platform for local candidates to engage with church members and the local community about where they stand on the issues.

### Accessibility: It's not just about ramps

- Is your space physically accessible?
- Are there people who may not usually enter a Christian sanctuary? Can you provide information that increases their comfort level, or can you use the church hall?
- Does your chosen space have a sound system or hearing assist system? Consider a sign language interpreter too.
- Is your location accessible by public transit? Is parking easy?

Check out Elections Canada's resources on increasing the accessibility of voting: [www.inspirerlademocratie-inspiredemocracy.ca](http://www.inspirerlademocratie-inspiredemocracy.ca).

## Simple Plan

The detailed plan opposite outlines a traditional format for an all-candidates meeting. This might not work for your faith community or the people you want to engage.

To be non-partisan, all—or at least the agreed-upon main parties'—candidates running in a riding need to be invited. One community decided they could not host a traditional meeting because the number of candidates in their municipal election was too large. They invited all the candidates and gave them each an opportunity for short opening remarks. Following the opening remarks, refreshments were available and attendees were invited to circulate and talk to individual candidates and browse their literature tables. There was no debate or way to see how one candidate's approach compared to another's, but the event introduced candidates and voters to each other.

## Detailed Plan

- 1.** Think about who in your community is directly affected by government policy. How can you ensure they have a voice in planning and hosting the meeting?
- 2.** Partner with community organizations, other churches, or other faith groups to include more opinions and voices, build partnerships, access a broader group of voters, and share costs. If you are already working on an issue together, focus your meeting on that issue.
- 3.** Form a planning team, and start early to ensure you can build partnerships and you have the candidates committed to your event.
- 4.** Choose a place, possible dates, and a time for the meeting. Give the candidates a range of dates so you can schedule a day that works for everyone.

**5.** Consider the accessibility of your space (see page 1).

**6.** Plan the format of your meeting. Here's a common one:

- Allow five minutes for each candidate's opening remarks, and choose the order of speaking—maybe in alphabetical order by last name or by drawing numbers ahead of time.
- Allow an hour for the question-and-answer period. Decide whether audience members or a moderator will ask the questions. Allow 30 seconds for each question and one minute for the answer.
- Give candidates three minutes each for closing remarks. Choose the order of speaking, maybe in reverse order from the opening remarks.

**7.** Choose an engaging debate moderator.

- The moderator introduces the candidates and moderates questions from the audience.
- They explain the guidelines and schedule for the meeting, and make sure the rules are followed. Your planning team sets rules that are appropriate for your setting—for example, no personal attacks.
- The moderator must remain neutral and not get involved in the questions or answers.
- You might ask the audience to submit questions to the moderator in advance.

**8.** Choose a timekeeper to monitor and notify the candidates and questioners of the time limits. This person has a stopwatch and gavel or bell. They let candidates know one minute before the end of their time limit for opening and closing remarks.

**9.** Send an invitation to the candidates asking them to participate. Include the guidelines and format for the evening. Ask them to provide a short biography to help the moderator introduce them. Let them know tables will be available for their literature. If a candidate says no or does not return calls, consider having an empty chair or name card on display, and ask the moderator to note the candidate's absence.

**10.** Advertise your meeting. Use local print media, social media, e-mail lists, websites, networks, and partners. Send out your information more than once. Remind the media directly. Give the date, time, and location of the meeting, and the names and party affiliations of the candidates. Inform your congregation of the meeting through a bulletin insert, e-mail, or announcement. Be sure to use the informal networks of all your planning partners.

**11.** Set up for your meeting:

- Arrange tables, chairs, and microphones at the front of the room for the candidates—with clear signs indicating their names and parties—and the moderator. Provide water for them.
- Have at least one floor microphone for the audience. Make sure it's accessible to those using mobility devices.
- Provide tables in the hall or foyer for each candidate's literature.
- Consider other kinds of hospitality, like refreshments.
- What other events will you post information about? This is an opportunity to share who you are as a faith community.
- Make sure you have directional signs on outside doors. If there is an accessible entrance make sure it's clearly marked and referred to at other entrances. If you are offering sign language interpretation or other services, make sure there are clear signs indicating those too. Use signs to let people know all are welcome in this space!

**12.** After the meeting:

- Debrief: Review and assess the successes and challenges and what could be improved next time.
- Write a follow-up media release. Include quotations and a media contact.
- Send thank-you letters to candidates, organizers, partners, and any other contributors.