



Issue Forums

In the early years of our democracy houses of worship were primary gathering places where local communities met to discuss issues affecting the community and the nation. Today more than ever, people of faith can and should participate in the public discourse on current issues. An issue forum is an opportunity to convene in your house of worship to deliberate issues, problems, and potential solutions within your faith community. Public policy issues are often highly complex. They involve detailed factual information and thorough understanding of varied perspectives. An issue forum provides a way to learn about difficult issues in a safe environment. Engaged and educated citizens can advocate and impact policy more effectively within the community. Issue forums provide a solid foundation for political action and understanding.

An Issue Forum Is...

A safe space to learn about difficult and intractable social issues.

A way to relate policy issues to religious social teachings in a way

Project At-A-Glance

Choose a public policy issue you think your congregation or community needs to learn more about and discuss.

Form an event committee

Choose a venue and date

Invite co-sponsors to participate

Invite speakers and make other event arrangements

Promote your event

Host and manage the forum

Plan for and execute follow-up with attendees and participants.

The Difference Between An Issue Forum And A Candidate Forum

Issue forums are opportunities for members of your congregation and community to come together and learn about ideas. Candidate forums are opportunities to learn about people—specifically, candidates for office.

Congregations are allowed to hold candidate forums. The IRS rules for congregations regarding nonpartisan candidate forums are more extensive than the rules regarding issue forums. For excellent information about how to hold a candidate forum in your congregation, see “Politics and Pulpit” by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. www.pew.org a forum on the particular impact of a proposed highway on an economically disadvantaged area in your community.

Handling Controversy

If everyone in your community agrees about the issue you choose as your forum topic, there won't be much to discuss at your forum. If you believe that it's important to hold an event about the issue even though it isn't controversial, consider holding an “informational meeting” instead of a forum.

Variety of Policy Alternatives

If there is only one possible way to address the policy issue you've chosen as your forum topic, the audience will be frustrated and the forum won't yield much productive discussion. However,

**United Methodist
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This series provides congregations and individuals the skills to build and deploy justice ministries and advocacy methods. Other methods in this series include:

**Building a relationship with your elected representative*

**Writing a letter or email to your elected representative*

**Writing a letter to the press, blog or website*

**Organizing a rally or protest meeting*

**Building a congregational justice ministry*

**Proposing legislation*

**Parish based Community Organizing*

**Creating a Conference Resolution*

**Asset Based Community Development*

**Challenging legislators*

**Community Listening*

The Board of Church and Society provides advocacy and justice programs for congregations.

<https://nccumc.org/christianformation/church-and-society/>

it is almost never the case that an issue only has one possible solution.

Often, policymakers prefer to present issues to the public as though there were only one solution because it makes their jobs easier or it helps them enact the solution they prefer. If, in your planning process, it begins to appear that your issue has only one possible solution (eg: raise taxes), consider changing the way you and others are “framing” the issue.

Finding Co-Sponsors for Your Forum

There are four kinds of organizations that your congregation should consider asking to co-sponsor your issue forum (or other events, for that matter.)

Peers—Other local congregations in your area. Consider setting a goal of having some degree of religious diversity in your co-sponsors.

Vertical Teams—groups that your congregation relates to on a regional, state, or national level such as your district, cluster or judicatory.

Colleagues—Groups you work with locally that are not congregations, such as your local ministerial alliance or a charity you partner with in the community.

Friends—Groups your congregation belongs to or makes common cause with at the state or local level such as, Bread for the World,

Getting Started

Start discussing ideas for potential issue forum topics with members of your congregation. Members of social action committees and Sunday School classes are a great place to find interested people. Start identifying individuals who can take part in the planning team for your forum. Organize a core team to start brainstorming some issues you would like to cover. Once you have some ideas as well as support, talk to your pastor about your intentions and share your ideas with him or her. With his or her input, set a date. Your pastor can be a great resource as you plan your event, so keep communication open. Once you have a date and a topic, your pastor can publicize the forum from the pulpit several weeks in advance of the event.

What Issues Make Good Forums

An ideal congregation-based issue forum addresses a **current public policy issue** of **broad religious social concern** on which there is some level of **controversy or difference of opinion** that could have a **variety of possible policy solutions**

Current Issues

Current issues include topics that are in the news and/or that the Legislature is considering. It's important to make your forum topic broad enough, but not too broad, to allow for rich discussion. For example, “Healthcare in North Carolina” would be too broad a topic—“The Crisis in Access to Healthcare for Children” or “The Growing Need for Home Healthcare for Seniors” would be two of many possible ways to refine the topic.

This document was created by Brian Heymans while he served on the Board of Church and Society.

