



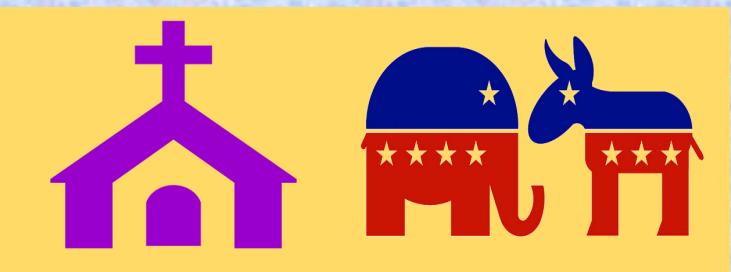
# the church's role in a divided society

**What should the church do to help congregants navigate the current state of political discourse in America?**

Churches are wrestling with how to live out their faith in an increasingly divided American culture. Research indicates that partisan politics is affecting congregations in how we interact, worship, and fellowship with each other; how clergy preach their sermons; and how (or if) we engage in the public square. In American society where the institutions of church and state remain separate, the reality that political discourse impacts religious communities cannot be denied. People bring their whole lives – good, bad, and troubled – to their church.

Some believe that it is prudent for leaders to refrain from engaging in political issues. Another approach is offering the church as a public space for navigating political issues without taking an institutional stand. And in both conservative- and progressive-leaning churches, some leaders claim it as a moral and ethical imperative to honor God and God's people by articulating their understanding of God at work in the world.

Embracing the essential Christian tenet of a loving God and a loving Christian community, how might people listen carefully to one another, not for the purpose of changing one another's minds but of respecting what people value? Through deliberation, is it possible to experience a more respectful way of being both citizens and members of a faith community?



- Some people are leaving their churches because of disagreements on political issues.
- A recent news story highlighted that "faith leaders describe the 'inner conflict and turmoil' they've experienced since the 2016 presidential election." Many clergy agree that it's become harder to unite politically diverse congregations.
- The church itself can become the subject of political discourse, rather than just a moral commentator from the outside. Child abuse scandals in churches and denominations; the fracturing of mainline churches around questions of human sexuality; churches as targets of racial tensions and public violence; and politicians themselves choosing religion to frame or bolster their policy decisions are just a few examples of how the lines between the secular world and religion have become blurred.

*What would it take to invite into dialogue our fellow church members who hold not just a variety of political perspectives, but different ideas on how to engage with these perspectives?*

*How do we bring our faith and morality to bear without further widening the gap between people who hold different political views?*

# option 1: the church as refuge

*This approach asserts that the primary focus of the church should be on our religion and not on the political fray, tensions, and bitter partisanship that divides us. The church should work to avoid the culture wars and create a sanctuary where people come together to worship Christ regardless of political lines, across race, gender, and socio-economic statuses.*

*This position holds that the fundamental ministries of the church primarily include worship, faith formation, congregational care, and being Christ's presence in the world through service. As such, the church should refrain from taking political stances on issues that may cause unnecessary division among the congregation and distract from these core missions. To the greatest extent possible, the church should leave room for diverse perspectives.*

“Churches should focus more on spirituality and faith instead of social issues.”

## Possible actions

- While members of the church may engage in their own political activity outside of the church, church funds and resources should not be used to host political discussions, candidate forums, or other political activity.
- Churches should develop social media policies to limit political commentary, opinions, and statements from clergy, staff, and lay leaders.
- Any direct political statement by the church should be vetted by denominational authority or church leadership and taken with respect to disagreement of sincere Christians on the issue.
- Pastors should refrain from directly taking political stands in sermons and aligning with either political party or politicians.
- What are other ideas?

“Bringing politics into the church could hinder fellowship and cause divisions.”

## Drawbacks

- Defining what is political activity may be confusing, hard to regulate, and may unnecessarily limit the programming and ministries of the church including worship, education, and care.
- Social media is a primary way to engage people inside and outside of the church. Limiting expression through social media may limit the ability to communicate a congregation's or denomination's interpretation of the Gospel.
- Pastors may feel restricted or limited in addressing scripture passages or applying faith to practice, and may worry that this could result in a watering down of the gospel.
- In the absence of a political statement by the church, members may disagree among themselves, causing more division and limit the opportunity for the church to walk alongside members in that journey of dialogue.
- What are other possible drawbacks?

“We should protect the church from being misguided or hijacked by outside interests.”

## option 2: the church as mediator

“The church should engage differences with hospitality.”

*This approach asserts that the primary focus of the church should be on helping people of faith navigate the controversial issues that divide us. The church should build bridges of cooperation and actively promote healing, understanding, and transformation across divisions.*

*People who hold this position believe that the fundamental ministries of the church should primarily include pastoring, teaching, faith formation, and congregational care. As such, the church should actively teach congregants skills to engage with different perspectives, listen to marginalized or unheard voices, and be agents of reconciliation for individuals, communities, and society.*

“The church should model listening and facilitate conversation across differences.”

### Possible actions

- Churches should foster exploration of diverse perspectives on political issues and allow open discussion around political commentary, opinions, and statements from clergy, staff, and lay leaders.
- Clergy, staff, and lay leaders should be trained in dialogue and deliberation practices to enhance their ability to facilitate divisive conversations and mediate conflict within their congregations.
- Create listening and collective discernment sessions to explore issues and experiences of individuals or communities within the church.
- Encourage one another in sharing and valuing our respective “spiritual biographies,” experiences when we felt God’s presence or absence.
- What are other ideas?

“The church should be a ministry of reconciliation.”

### Drawbacks

- Exploring diverse perspectives may increase divisiveness in the church.
- Listening to other voices, particularly those outside the church, could compromise our unity or sense of identity as a community of Christ.
- Not all points of view are reconcilable to Christian faith. When and how does the church decide when reconciliation is appropriate or not?
- A posture of reconciliation may mitigate our ability to confront evil, to withstand cultural pressures, and to speak truth to power.
- What are other possible drawbacks?

“The church has a responsibility to listen & care, to build bridges of new understanding, trust, and relationship with individuals and communities.”

# option 3: the church as prophetic voice

*This approach asserts that a primary focus of the church should be to engage in the public square in order to live fully into its mission. The church should be a prophetic voice in the midst of the political fray, tensions, and bitter partisanship that divides us.*

**“We should express our faith through ACTION.”**

*People who hold this position believe that the fundamental responsibilities of the church should include speaking to the cultural and political issues of the day, pursuing justice, and advocating for righteousness. As such, the church should actively speak, engage, and lead in addressing topics of public concern.*

**“The church should be an agent of change for the betterment of society.”**

## Possible actions

- Churches should address issues of public concern in sermons, teaching, and ministries of the congregation.
- Clergy, staff, and lay leaders should be trained in advocacy and activism to enhance their ability to lead congregants in public witness and action.
- Hold forums on church or denominational social statements about public issues and encourage action in their local community.
- Create partnerships with other congregations or secular organizations in order to improve the community. Lead in local community efforts to address systemic injustices and promote the work of justice.
- What are other ideas?

**“The church should speak out on issues about which scripture conveys timeless truths.”**

## Drawbacks

- Churches may alienate those who disagree with their public stances. Members or potential members may get angry or withdraw from the church.
- Churches may be seen more as political actors than faith actors, compromising their witness in the public square. This could damage its witness and credibility in the world.
- Churches may draw criticism, protests, and even retaliatory measures for publicly enacting their values.
- Churches may be asked to partner with agencies that do not align with the Christian faith or to work within community constraints that limit the church's prophetic witness.
- What are other possible drawbacks?

This discussion material was written by a group of clergy and scholars from a wide range of Christian denominations who have participated in research exchanges with the **Kettering Foundation**. The guide is available from **Baylor University's Public Deliberation Initiative (PDI)** and is intended to encourage public deliberation in congregations.

Founded in 1927, the **Kettering Foundation** of Dayton Ohio (with an office in Washington, DC), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It provides issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please, visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org) or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

**Baylor University's Public Deliberation Initiative (PDI)** collaborates with the Kettering Foundation by participating in regular research exchanges focused on developing faith-based materials for public deliberation. PDI also contributes to this work by hosting the Faith & Deliberation Initiative on its website. PDI participated in the creation and development of this issue guide for use within congregations and other faith communities. For more information about Baylor University's PDI visit <https://sites.baylor.edu/baylorpdi/>.