

## KEEPING FAITH IN POLITICS

### Preparing Churches and Christians for the General Election 2011

Every three years we get a chance to vote in a new Parliament – new lawmakers, new ministers, a new government. Regardless of our wealth, status or ethnicity, all of us can help to choose those who will take decisions which will affect our daily lives and those of our communities. It's a right we should both value and exercise.

Of course, it's easy to be cynical about politics, to think that politicians are just out to promote themselves or feather their own nests. Scandals, broken promises, expenses fiddling, an excessive focus on 'personalities' – all this can make us want to lose faith in democracy and wonder what the point is to voting. But politics is much more than this – it's about us expressing our values and hopes, saying what we, as New Zealand citizens and residents, want our country to be. So we should all get out and vote on Saturday, 26 November – but not without thinking about who – and what – we're voting for. Christians in particular should take voting seriously: the Bible tells us to respect – and pray for – those in authority over us, and we should not seek to vote them into office lightly.

Elections also provide an opportunity for issues to be debated more vigorously than usual. Politicians want to know our views and concerns, and we should not be afraid to tell them. Decisions that politicians take in areas like education, employment, transport, crime, the economy, the environment and many others affect us daily, and general elections give us a valuable opportunity to seek to influence them.

All of us take into account a range of issues when we vote, and this resource is aimed at helping Christians and churches think through some of those at the top of our national agenda today (and not *only* Christians: while each section does contain its fair share of 'theology', readers who don't hold any religious

convictions are still welcome to take what may be of value to them.) The purpose of each section is not to try to persuade anybody to vote in a particular way, or suggest that one party's policies might be more 'Christian' than any other's: rather it is to get us all thinking afresh about some of the issues we face as a country as we each make up our minds how we'll vote.

Hence each section is written in a *questioning* rather than *didactic* tone. Each gives some basic information and raises some key questions, but it stops short of offering any 'answers'. There are hardly any issues where Christians agree on what needs to be done, so trying to put forward some supposed 'Christian' view would in any case be naive in the extreme! So we've tried to draw out biblical and theological points that relate to each of the issues discussed, but left it to readers to make the link between their faith and those issues themselves. Some of the material here may be familiar to some, others may find some of it very new. Either way, we hope you'll take the trouble to study it and think through some of the questions it raises.

Perhaps you might want to study this resource together as a church or fellowship. Why not set aside a few evenings between now and the election to come together and discuss the issues it raises and share your thoughts and opinions. A group could read one section in advance of the meeting and then one member could open a discussion using some of the questions we've raised or some of your own (each section has its own one-page summary which could act as an *aide-memoire*, and set of possible questions to discuss). Perhaps your church will be organising a hustings event for the candidates in your electorate – in which case, why not raise some of the questions here at that event?

People, particularly in a secular country like New Zealand, often say that 'politics' and 'religion' are best kept apart. Some Christians also doubt whether their faith ought to have any bearing on what they do in their everyday life, including how they vote. We beg to differ. The idea that faith is only a 'private' matter is quite foreign to the Bible, which presents a God who, in the beginning,

creates the world, in the end renews it, and in between challenges people to steward and tend it and practise justice in their dealings with each other.

Putting the 'kingdom' at the heart of his message, Jesus also engaged in a ministry that was fully in the public eye, challenging people about the way they lived, who they saw as their 'neighbour', and whether their goal in life was to serve God or themselves. Seeking first that kingdom, and being 'salt' and 'light' in the world, were challenges Jesus left his followers. One way we can respond to them is by taking seriously the business of exercising our vote.