

How to Host A Community Forum



A community forum brings the community and the people that wish to serve that community as their elected members together. In the lead up to an election, it gives political parties and their local representatives a chance to explain their position on issues of global justice, and the community a chance to probe deeper and seek answers.

Why Host a Community Forum?

Community forums can be a very effective way to raise awareness in your community and get parliamentarians (and would-be parliamentarians) focused on humanitarian and justice issues. They offer a chance for the people that are seeking to represent you and your community to let you know what they and their party are seeking to achieve on the issues that matter to you.

You are not alone. Your community forum will be one of many held around the country in the lead up to the election. This will let all parties know that aid, and issues of international justice are key priority issues for Christians and people in their community.

Beyond this, community forums can generate local media attention and provide community members an opportunity to get answers to the questions that they want to ask, and push for more action.

What is Involved?

The good news is that a community forum can be as big or as small as you want.

While big has its advantages, a community forum in the lead up to an election certainly doesn't have to be big and fancy to have an impact.

At the small end for example, it can be a discussion held between political representatives and your church community, perhaps on a Sunday afternoon after Church, to talk about issues of international justice. A larger forum might see you engaging many in your community by advertising across the airwaves and in multiple networks, securing a significant local venue (like the town hall), having a recognised community leader MC, having media engaged and a large public advocacy action in tow.

Scale your forum – or community discussion – to what you believe you have the resources and energy to achieve within your networks.

Micah is suggesting that your community forum should go for about an hour. Long enough to give political parties and attendees a chance to engage with the issue, but not so long that it loses people attention. But the length of time can vary based on the vision you have for your forum (for example, you may wish to create time for local artists, performance or engage participants in an advocacy action).

Some of the basic building blocks will include:

1. Representatives from the major parties (or major parties plus significant independents or minor parties).
2. An opportunity for constituents to ask questions or engage in discussion.
3. Someone to frame the issue, keep the discussion on track, close and summarise the event.

Start the Planning: Who, Why and What?

FORM A TEAM

Your first step is identifying your team. Who's going to be involved in helping you coordinate and run this community forum. These can be people from within your church, your home group, or friends and peers committed to this issue. Community forums can be a lot of work, so it is certainly helpful to have people on deck to help out before your start. It's not impossible to do it by yourself, but we recommend getting help.

Other people you could consider recruiting:

- People from schools, community groups, or other churches within your electorate.
- Micah Supporters in your electorate.

BE CLEAR ON PURPOSE

Micah Australia are calling for community forums to be held across Australia. These forums should influence political parties to see Australia, as one of the most prosperous and least indebted nations in the world to stop trailing the field when it comes to aid generosity (we rank 19th out of the 29 official aid giving nations). Instead, we want political parties to commit to Australia becoming a leader in generosity.

- Your forum should raise awareness about Australian Aid.
- It should increase understanding of what the various political parties are committed to doing, and what your local member and would-be local members are willing to do to champion your issue.
- Your forum should also allow members of your electorate a chance to ask questions about the policy positions of the different parties, and press for action.
- If you wish, you can use this forum as a platform for constituents to talk about other pressing international justice issues, such as climate change, slavery, the global humanitarian crisis or refugees. These issues are of course all linked to the people that Micah Australia is trying to serve.

CREATE A VISION FOR YOUR FORUM

With your team, discuss and create a vision for the forum you wish to host.

Some of the questions you may want to ponder are:

1. How big do you want it to be?
2. How do you want to promote your forum?
3. What kind of venue do you want?
4. Who do you want to have involved?
5. Should there be entertainment?
6. Can you include food (people love food)?
7. What about engaging local media?
8. Who are the partners that can help you?

The rest of this guide can spark other ideas for what can be involved with your forum and how you want to craft it. You need to calibrate your vision with the resources (particularly budget) and time you and your team have available.

CREATE THE AGENDA

Once you have a vision, you will need to start mapping out exactly how the forum will run.

A suggested agenda may include:

- Welcome and Introductions (10 minutes)
 - Welcome people, explain why we are here and introduce the speakers...
- Opening Remarks (10 minutes)
 - A chance for someone to frame the discussion and set the tone ~ can be a panellist with expert knowledge, or someone that is high profile in the church or local community.
- Statements from Panellists/Political Parties (3-5 minutes each)
- Questions and Answers (20-30 minutes)
 - Make sure that at least some people in the room have come prepared to ask questions.
- Advocacy Action (optional)
 - We recommend having a real-time social media action that you ask the audience to participate in.

- This can be as simple as asking them to take a photo of the panel during the event, and post it on their social media channels, highlighting why they are involved and their support for Australian Aid, tagging #AustralianAid @MicahAustralia
- Summarise and Conclude
 - Wrap up the discussion and summarise what has been covered
 - Aim to leave people inspired and hopeful.
 - Tell people they can 'Follow Micah' on social media for breaking news on social justice and alerts on upcoming events and actions.
 - It's also a good idea to contact the Micah team before hand to see how we can assist with follow up (we can implement a 'text to join' action for you which will collect people's details if they are interested in future events and actions).

On top of ensuring political parties are represented, you may wish to include one or more additional speakers that can provide insight on the issue, and whom can engage the audience.

BRIEF YOUR SPEAKERS WELL

- Ensure they know that you want a respectful discussion between speakers, and allow them to know who else will be joining them on the panel (consider sharing the bios of the speakers with one another).
- Speakers should know the time limits for their opening statements, as well as the format of the night.
- Ensure speakers know the angle that your team are approaching this issue on (the desire to see Australia has leaders when it comes to generosity).
- Share with them beforehand the [Policy briefing materials](#) provided by Micah which are:
 1. Policy Brief (2 page) This is a summary of Micah's key policy asks for 2019 and briefly outlines the reasons for these.
 2. Policy Booklet. This booklet is much more detailed and provides context and information on the policy asks.
- This not only gives them something to bounce off in preparing their remarks, it, in itself is a powerful form of advocacy as it creates the opportunity for speakers to engage deeper with your arguments for increasing aid generosity.

On the day the event runs, make sure you have a team with clear tasks allocated to help with set up, greeting speakers, running advocacy actions or any other components that need to be completed (see checklist on last page).

PARTNERSHIPS

Once you have a vision for your forum it may be worth identifying local partners that you and your team can engage to realise that vision. Partners could include churches in your electorate, educational institutions (schools, TAFE, university groups), other civil society groups (e.g. a local TEAR group, Lions Club or Baptist World Aid Catalyst group).

These partners can assist in promoting the event, distributing materials, engaging political and media contacts, accessing their networks and even providing sponsorship or funding.

Implement the Plan. When, Where and How?

Once you have a vision, its time to start thinking about logistics. How do we make this vision a reality?

PICKING A TIME

Working out when to host the forum can be tricky. Prioritise a date that ensures as many of your key participants can make it to the forum as possible (it's O.K if you can't find a date that works for both/all major candidates in your electorate – see below on reaching out to candidates).

We recommend reaching out to the political candidates you wish to be engaged as soon as possible with a few suggested dates and seeing if they are available.

Other considerations around timing include:

1. Making sure your chosen venue is available.
2. Whether to host your forum before or during the official election campaign.

3. If you host your forum before, ensure that it is not in a parliamentary sitting week. There is also a small chance that the political party you wish to invite will have not yet finalised their preselected member for the seat at the time you are wishing to invite them. If this is the case, consider inviting a member of that party from an adjacent electorate.
4. Consider the impact of other events on the turnout of your forum (e.g. sporting matches or concerts).
5. Whether you want the event to be held straight after church in order to engage as much of your church community as possible.

ENGAGING POLITICAL CANDIDATES

Start with an Email

Often the engagement process will start with an email. Outline the vision of the forum, who else will be invited and potential dates. In most cases, this won't be enough to get the attention of your local political candidate.

Follow up with a phone call or a visit

We recommend you follow up soon after with a phone call. If you have a relationship with your local MP, it can sometimes be helpful to meet up with them or their staff to lock down details and confirm date, time and venue.

In the lead up to an election, most candidates will be highly motivated to spruik themselves and their policies to as many people as possible. An election forum gives them a chance to do this.

Make sure you communicate what the forum is about, the expectations for the candidate (opening remarks, taking questions from the audience) the size of the audience, who else will be there, the format of the event etc.

IT'S ALL ABOUT FRAMING

It's possible if a party is planning to cut aid, or retreat on support for one of the issues to be discussed at the forum, they may suggest that all their members don't attend.

Framing can be helpful to address this. For example, in past elections some Coalition members have avoided attending events about aid (due to plans to reduce the aid program) or climate change (to avoid further criticism on their policy). Reminding Coalition members that the Church is a generally constituted of conservative voters that are often sympathetic to their party, and are interested in hearing more on this issue can assist with engagement.

Micah is hopeful as well, that after a 5 years of sustained cuts to the aid program, the Coalition may be interested in increasing the aid budget in the context of the budget's return to surplus and as part of their narrative that they have 'got the budget under control'.

CONFIRM A FEW DAYS OUT

After you have confirmed details with the candidate, it's worth contacting them a few days before the event as a reminder and also to reconfirm their availability.

Contact details for the office of sitting members of parliament can be found [here](#).

You can contact parties directly to ask for the contact details of pre-selected candidates in your electorate.

If you are unable to find the contact details of candidates in your electorate – feel free to reach out the Micah team at gov.relations@micahaustralia.org

PICKING A VENUE

There are a range of factors to consider when you are thinking about where you host this event. It is of course fine, and expected, that there will be trade-offs in some of the considerations below.

- What sort of budget do you have for venue hire?
- Will the venue be willing to donate use of their space?
- Is the seating capacity and space aligned with the number of people you are hoping to have attend the event? (A small room vs large auditorium)
- Will this venue be appropriate for the people you are trying to attract to the event?
- Does it create the kind of atmosphere you are hoping to achieve?
- Is it disability accessible?
- How will people get to and from the venue? (parking, public transport etcetera)
- Are there specific features you wish for in the venue in order to do an advocacy stunt? (e.g. an area that lends itself to good photography, sufficient lighting or space etcetera).

PROMOTION

Getting people to your event is critical. As previously mentioned, your event does not have to be huge to have an impact, but larger numbers can certainly help with drawing key speakers and demonstrating a concerned constituency to political candidates.

Arguably the most effective way to get people to attend your event is by personally inviting people that you, your team, and your partners know – and then asking them to do the same.

Do this by speaking to people in your local networks (friends, pastors, people from church, community leaders) and asking them to promote the event.

Create a Flyer

Having a short, catchy promotional flyer for your event is a great way to quickly distribute information about your event.

- Flyers can be letter box dropped
- Given to churches to distribute
- Included in newsletters.

Engaging Church Networks

Engaging pastors, or churches in your local electorate is a great way to get people to attend your event. You can ask the church to distribute flyers, or better yet make an announcement (or have one of your team members) make an announcement about the event, and why you believe it's important to have Christians attend and engage.

Engaging Radio

Getting information on the radio through community noticeboards or paid advertising, particularly with Christian media, is a great way to increase awareness about your event, and can often be done at a low cost, particularly if the local radio station is willing to partner with you in promoting the forum.

Email

Ask Micah to send out an email to supporters in your electorate, with the details of your event. You can also ask other partners with email lists and even suggest that your political candidates promote the forum to their supporters.

Online

Having the event promoted online through Facebook and other social media channels is a great way to engage people. You can also ask Micah, political candidates attending the event and any other partners to promote the event on their social media channels.

Here are some additional tips on getting people to attend your event from our friends at the [Campaign for Australian Aid](#):

- People are more likely to attend if they are given a role to play at the event. For example, at a forum in Reid the organisers invited a local choir to perform which resulted in 20 additional attendees. At the same forum 5 community leaders were asked to speak for 1.5 minutes each sharing why their community cares about aid, and attracted people who look up to those leaders.
- Find ways to get other people to turn out for you. For example, at a forum in Perth, the organisers offered 10 seats to a local school framed as an educational opportunity. The contact at the school then selected the students and brought them along. At a forum in Sydney, 10 aid supporters each committed to bring 3 friends each to the event, and held a texting/calling party where they made this happen. Personal relationships amongst the organisers are a key promotion opportunity.
- Feature people at the forum that will bring a crowd. For example, some forums have featured Tim Costello. Other forums in the past have featured artists and community leaders.
- Hold your forum where a crowd already exists. Forums held over the last few years held after regular services that have partnered with churches have instantly resulted in 100+ people attending.

Amplifying your Message by Engaging Media (Optional)

A great way to amplify the impact of your forum is to engage the media. Sharpening your messaging, or having a creative advocacy stunt or an interesting photo opportunity are all great ways to tweak media interest.

Here are some things to consider, that may help you engage the media.

- If you have budget, you can engage a PR agency, or ask them to partner and do some work for you pro-bono.
- Create a media release you can use to help you pitch your event
- Get in touch with media early, to begin pitching in and make sure to follow up.
- Consider preparing a 'press pack' for media members at the meeting. This should include some briefing material, your media release and some information on the panel participants.
- Have a person available to engage and meet the media at the event.
- Engage local media, even if they don't come to the event. Use your media release to pitch a story to them.

Running the Event

Below is a checklist for the day of the event, it will be a busy day so make sure you go through this to ensure you've got all your bases covered!

Checklist for the Day:

- Get the Room Set Up
- Chair and Table Configuration
- Does the Microphone work?
- Does the Powerpoint work?
- Ensure you have any relevant Multimedia Presentation incl videos and photo slideshows ready to go
- Speaker Liaison - do they know how long to talk for? Do they have slides? Who is greeting them when they arrive?
- Copy of Runsheet distributed to every key team member (it's also a good idea to gather your key team for a brief meeting to go through the run sheet together before the event)
- Signage set up
- Props / Travelling photo/art exhibition if relevant
- Registration desk (sign up pads to collect people's details)
- Take away collateral / fact sheet available for people?
- Is Catering or tea/coffee stations ready to go?
- Someone booked in (can be a volunteer) to take photos?
- Someone booked in to take video footage
- Have you done one last follow up with local media and who will be greeting them/liasing with media when they arrive?
- Pray! Pray together as a team and commit the event to God.

Follow Up

- Ensure that photos or video footage is made available to attendees and politicians after the event. MP's love to share photos or clips of themselves talking so be sure to share with their office afterwards.
- If no local media come to the event, still engage them by following up with them afterwards, sharing a few of the best photos and quotes and your media release.

OTHER QUESTIONS?

The Micah team would love to help you and answer any questions you have, and where possible, we'd love to support your forum as much as possible so be sure to keep us in the loop! Contact us at gov.relations@micahaustralia.org



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