



SAFE & HEALTHY ST. JOE COUNTY
Congregational Forums
TOOLKIT

2024



CONTENTS

2.
Introduction
3.
Build a Team: Who, Why & How
3.
Plan Your Congregational Forum: Logistics, Date & Location
4.
Set an Agenda
5.
Sample Forum Agenda Template
9.
Turnout

INTRODUCTION

Dear Faith and Community Partners,

This past year, our county chapter of Faith in Indiana celebrated the groundbreaking for a 24-hour Crisis Response Center. Faith in Indiana organizers worked alongside city and county officials to secure more than \$3 million for this project. Despite resistance from new county leadership, we were able to keep this project moving forward. Now, a person experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis has a place to go for help. And law enforcement officials can take people in crisis to a place other than jail or the ER. This all happened because ordinary people of faith listened to the needs of their community, built people power, and partnered with public officials to advocate for common sense solutions.

There are lots of ways to work for change: Personal transformation, service, education, lobbying, protest. All have their place. Faith in Indiana's unique contribution is to focus on building people power to help public officials do the right thing. Power with — not power over. Power for the common good. Power that comes through relationships and lots of people working together in the public arena for a common purpose.

Our theory of change is that it takes organized people, organized money, and organized votes to make change happen. We are embarking on a journey during the next six months to build people power so that St. Joe County can become a safer and healthier community. Mayor Pete told our leaders during our first meeting: *Everybody knows who the Mayor is and who the President is. But very few people know who runs their county or their state. And they have a huge impact on our everyday lives.* We've learned just what role county government can have in shaping our lives — helping or hindering us from having a safe and healthy community.

This toolkit is designed to help your congregation or organization develop a stronger voice and influence in our county. We envision **in-house congregational forums in late February or early March** that will prepare our congregations to team up and have **meetings with elected county officials in April or May.**

We are excited to be on this journey together. There's a lot at stake, but if we stand and work together, we can make St. Joe County a safe and healthy community where everyone has the chance to flourish — no matter their race, how they pray, or what zip code they live in.

In hope,

Andre Gingerich Stoner

Lead Organizer, St. Joe County

I. BUILD A TEAM: WHO, WHY & HOW



Do you want to move from being a victim, spectator or pundit to being an architect for our community and an agent of change? Are you ready to step into public life and lead with others? Do you want your congregation to have a voice in public life?

The first step is building or joining a team in your congregation or organization. As we say at Faith in Indiana, “Power is in relationship.” Who in your congregation is ready to roll up their sleeves? Who wants to do the nitty gritty work of building relationships, finding out what people care about, and inviting them into this movement? Start inviting those people to work with you.

II. PLAN YOUR CONGREGATIONAL FORUM: LOGISTICS, DATE & LOCATION

When planning your congregational forum, choose a date during the last half of February or the first few days of March. This will give your team time the time needed to effectively plan, engage congregants, and ensure a good turnout. Plan for at least 90 minutes of programming. Consult with your pastor or other leaders to make sure you’re choosing a time that works well for your setting.

Consider hosting the forum after a Sunday potluck gathering in the church fellowship hall; as an all-church second-hour gathering followed by a meal; during adult education classes (you may need to plan for multiple Sundays to give yourself enough time); or soup and conversation mid-week. Don’t forget details like registration, sound, and seating when planning your congregational forum.



III. SET AN AGENDA

Planning and preparing an agenda for your February Congregational Forum is an important step for a successful meeting. Consider the following as a foundation.

What is the Purpose?

To invite large numbers of people of faith to become architects of our county:

- to develop a vision for a safe and healthy county
- to get informed
- to take action together and with others.

What is the Hoped for Outcome?

People commit to attend (and help organize) County Council Forums in April with their elected officials.



SAMPLE FORUM MEETING AGENDA TEMPLATE

Date:

Time:

Location:

TIME	LENGTH	DESCRIPTION	LEADER
	5 minutes	Welcome & Faith Grounding	
	25 minutes	Learning Together: Who Runs Our County and What's at Stake? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal testimonies - 5 min• Tell the story - 6 min• Discussion - 9 min• Who is your commissioner? - 5 min	
	30 minutes	Prophetic Imagination: What Kind of County Do You Want?	
	20 minutes	Taking Action: From Spectator to Architect	
	10 minutes	Evaluation & Closing	

Sample Congregational Forum Agenda

- **Welcome & Faith Grounding (5 min)** Invite clergy or faith leader to offer a brief opening reflection/ prayer/ reading on the importance of caring for our community/county.
- **Learning Together (25 min)** Who runs our county? Who is your commissioner/ council member? How have they been voting? The answers to these questions are instrumental in guiding the work towards a safer and healthier community. Devote time in the agenda to the following:
 - a. Personal testimonies: Have two to three people share how their lives have been impacted by county decisions (2 minutes each for a total of 4-6 minutes; make sure each presenter is prepared to be concise.)
 - Tell the story (slide deck will be available) (6 minutes)
 - i. Role of Commissioners and Council
 - ii. November 2022 election leadership shift
 - iii. The impact on our county (mental health funding, Motels4Now, Portage Manor, gutted the Health Department, library board)
 - Discussion
 - Did you know this?
 - How do you feel?
 - Does this reflect the vision and values of our faith community?
 - Do you know who represents you?
 - What's at stake if people of faith do not engage in what's unfolding in our county?
 - Who is your commissioner? Who are your council members? (Use maps, QR codes, websites) (5 minutes)



Prophetic Imagination (30 min): Engage in an exercise around the question “What kind of county do we want?”

Introduce FISJC County Vision developed by our faith leaders two years ago. Hand out printed copies. As a group, take turns reading the heading and first sentence for each point listed in the Vision. Then, take the following steps:

Ask the group: “Is this the kind of county you want?” Take several comments.

Encourage group feedback: Show **5** fingers if “I’m all in, **3** if “Yes, but ...” or **1** for “No way.”

Engage in a group exercise: Take the time to post sheets of butcher paper around the room, highlighting each of the seven areas listed in the FISJC County Vision. Under each of the seven areas, include two columns with the headers, “Pain” and “Solution.” Ask attendees to go to the area they feel most passionate about, talk with those assembled, and write comments on the butcher paper. Then give a grade to current county leaders on how they are doing: Green dot is awesome, Yellow is OK, Red is failing.

Debrief the takeaways in a big group.



- **Taking Action: From Spectator to Architect (10 minutes)**

- a. Have a leader share their journey moving from victim/spectator/pundit to community architect and change agent. Make sure they include risks they are taking and the trolls they have to fight that try to pull them off the bridge.
- b. Table conversation: Are you a spectator or an architect? Do you want to move across the bridge? What challenges will you face? What's at stake if you don't cross the bridge? Do we want our congregation to have more of a voice in public?
- c. Report out, sharing: Extend an invitation for us all to take steps across the bridge.



- **Taking Action: Attending the Forum with Your County Council Member (10 min)**

Set the stage for a successful “Safe and Caring Communities Forum” with Council member X.

- a. Establish a date and time, if possible
 - b. Determine that our congregation will join with X congregation(s)
 - c. Discuss the difference it would make if 75, 100, or 150 people with a vision for a safe and healthy community met with Council member X?
 - d. Who plans to attend? (Sign up)
 - e. Who will commit to inviting two others?
 - f. Who is interested in helping plan (get volunteers)
- **Evaluation (7 min)** Have everyone share one feeling word to describe where they are. Be sure to draw out a couple feeling words from attendees, as well as name any tensions. Conclude with a political/faith lesson (For example “Change happens through organized people”; “Power is in relationships”; “We can have a voice when we risk stepping into the arena.”)
 - **Closing (2-3 min).** End the session with a prayer for the peace of the city/county, emphasizing what's really at stake for the community.



IV. TURNOUT

Ensure that everyone on your team understands that they are responsible for turnout. This is not just about pulling off a good event. This is about starting to build the relational network that can work powerfully together to shape the kind of county we need and want.

Make a turnout goal as a team. Do you want 30 people from your congregation to attend? 50? 100? Remember that not only members and attenders of your congregation, but also friends and neighbors, can be invited. The turnout goal is a chance for you and your team to see what kind of base you can build — not just for this event, but for action in the future to win on issues and hold leadership accountable.

The most effective way to invite people is a personal conversation where there is a relationship, connecting to what people care about. Email, bulletin announcements, Facebook ... all that is extra!

Each member of your team makes a list of people they will invite. You need to invite at least twice as many people as you hope to attend.

You can immediately reach out to them by email or text, but then commit to a date by when you will reach out to them personally.

One person on your team is responsible for checking in with each team member about how they are doing. As you get closer to the forum date, you can schedule 15 team check-in calls, to see where people are at.

We will have a turnout training at our base meeting with all congregational teams at 6:30 p.m. on Jan. 22, 2024. We will provide sample bulletin blurbs, email announcements, Facebook posts that you can adapt to your context.

Use this [turnout worksheet](#) to ensure your team has strong participation.





We will provide support, training and coaching for you. During the winter and spring of 2024, team leaders from multiple congregations are meeting the 2nd Monday of each month in the evening. They are then bringing their teams together for a Base Meeting in the evening of the 4th Monday of each month (the third Monday in April and May because of Passover and Memorial Day).

If you want more information or ideas for how to start, contact our Faith in St. Joseph County organizer, Andre Gingerich Stoner, at 574-220-6629 or andre@faithindiana.org.

