

# **Faith, Values and the 2016 Election: Toward A Politics of the Golden Rule: Reflection Guide and Resources**

## ***Introduction***

As religious organizations, clergy and people of faith across the country, we believe the 2016 election presents an important opportunity to reflect on our deepest values and commitment to the common good. Elections should be about more than partisan divisions, the latest poll numbers, Super PACs and billionaire donors. Politics as usual is insufficient for the urgent task of addressing the defining moral issues of our time: growing economic inequality; climate change; a broken immigration system that tears apart families; mass incarceration that devastates communities of color; gun violence; and confronting terrorism without abandoning our values. All of these challenges require policy responses, but at root they raise moral questions about the kind of nation we want today and for our children and grandchildren.

Religious leaders and ordinary people of faith have always been at the forefront of struggles for justice. The soul of American democracy is found in those clergy and faith-based activists who have marched, bled and even died for voting rights, equality and human dignity. Inspired by this prophetic witness and united as people of faith, we turn our attention to this presidential election not as partisans, but as faithful citizens committed to justice and compassion, responsibility and community.

The Golden Rule – as Pope Francis reminded us during a historic address to Congress in September of 2015 – has political implications and requires action. As the Pope said:

*This Rule points us in a clear direction. Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities, which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities.*

At a time when some demonize immigrants and Muslims, exploit economic insecurity and sow division to score political points, most Americans are looking for responsible leaders who unite citizens around a better vision.

***The 2016 election should be a national examination of conscience.***

This reflection guide, endorsed by diverse religious organizations and faith leaders, provides a framework to think about key moral issues heading into the election.

## **An Economy of Inclusion**

All religious traditions recognize that charity is essential to care for the most vulnerable, but helping those in poverty also compels us to address the root causes of why there are so many struggling on the peripheries. “Charity is no substitute for justice withheld,” St. Augustine observed centuries ago. Today, an economy of exclusion and inequality rewards the wealthiest few at the expense of many.

Economic inequality has reached its highest levels in nearly a century. CEOs of the largest companies in the United States now make over 300 times their average worker. Many working Americans are not paid a living wage, trapping them in poverty even as they toil long hours. The U.S. is the only developed country without guaranteed paid family leave for workers who need to care for a newborn, a sick spouse or a dying parent. At least 43 million Americans don’t even have a single paid sick day. These are political and moral failures.

In order to build a pro-family economy we need political leaders who will:

- Promote policies that honor the dignity of work through fair wages and paid family leave.
- Protect social safety nets that help the most vulnerable
- Create a just tax system that serves the common good, not a privileged few

## **Global Warming: A Threat to Creation and Our Children’s Future**

As people of faith, we believe that responding to the urgent threat of climate change is essential to caring for God’s creation and loving our neighbors. Human activity, primarily the burning of fossil fuels for energy, has thrown nature out of balance, polluted the air, raised sea levels, made thousands of God’s creatures extinct, and threatens the lives and livelihoods of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. In short, we have become destroyers, not sustainers of, life. Pope Francis’s recent encyclical -- *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* -- is a wake up call that challenges all of us, especially political leaders in positions of power, to take action. Pope Francis writes:

*Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day.*

Some political leaders ignore or deny the overwhelming scientific evidence that human behavior is exacerbating global warming. We can’t afford denial, delay or indifference. The climate change crisis most impacts those who contribute the least to the problem: the poor and vulnerable. That’s why over 18,000 faith communities are working with Interfaith Power & Light to green their facilities, teach and preach about global warming as a moral

issue, and mobilize for policy change. The United States, a wealthy nation with vast resources, has a unique responsibility to show moral and political leadership by:

- Transitioning from dependency on fossil fuels toward a clean energy economy.
- Honoring the emissions-reduction commitments our nation made at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris in 2015, and taking additional actions needed to avert catastrophic global warming.
- Assisting developing nations – who are least responsible for climate change but most impacted by it – in coping with threats such as increased droughts, floods and sea-level rise by sharing clean energy technology and other supports.

### **Dignity, Welcome and Citizenship for Immigrants**

All of our sacred traditions compel us to protect the stranger, the migrant and the refugee. We support comprehensive immigration reform to fix a broken system that breaks up families and leaves an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the National Association of Evangelicals, Church World Service and the Interfaith Immigration Coalition are leaders advocating for and serving immigrants. As the Evangelical Immigration Table, a coalition of prominent Christian organizations, states:

*Our national immigration laws have created a moral, economic and political crisis in America. Initiatives to remedy this crisis have led to polarization and name calling in which opponents have misrepresented each other's positions as open borders and amnesty versus deportations of millions. This false choice has led to an unacceptable political stalemate at the federal level at a tragic human cost.*

While polls show most Americans support comprehensive reform that includes an earned path to citizenship -- and bi-partisan legislation passed the Senate in 2013 --- the politics of immigration have turned ugly. The demonization of immigrants and enforcement-only solutions too often obscure the urgent need for practical and humane reforms. No human being is illegal. Breaking up families and sending migrants back to poverty, violence and in many cases likely death is morally unacceptable. In the past and today, immigrants strengthen our communities, contribute to the economy, and want the best for their children. Elected officials and candidates for office can stand up for human dignity and families by:

- Supporting comprehensive immigration reform that includes an earned path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants
- Addressing the root causes that drive migration to the United States: economic insecurity, violence and unjust trade policies.
- Increase the number of family visas and reduce family reunification waiting times.

### **Gun Violence**

Across denominations and faith traditions, we hold in common the belief that all people are created in the image of God, and that killing is an unequivocal sin. Protecting life and preventing violence are both individual and societal responsibilities. Yet we live in a nation with more guns than people, where more than thirty people are killed by guns each day and even modest measures to keep firearms out of the wrong hands are portrayed as a threat to our founding ideals. In order to demonstrate true regard for human life over political posturing, elected officials and candidates for office should:

- Support laws that require a background check for every gun purchase, whether at a store, a gun show, over the Internet or between private citizens.
- End the ban on federal research of the gun violence epidemic, which prevents the development of solutions that will save lives.
- Enact policies that improve the efficacy of background checks to prevent violent criminals and the severely mentally ill from obtaining guns.

## **Restorative and Racial Justice**

Redemption is at the very heart of faith. Restorative justice begins with deep listening to those who have been left out of the national conversation. Healing broken relationships, families, communities and rebuilding trust in public officials requires moving from state-sanctioned violence against people of color, mass incarceration and capital punishment to authentic restorative justice. We are encouraged by the ideologically diverse, bi-partisan effort in Congress to end sentencing policies that disproportionately impact people of color. While the U.S. is home to less than 5% of the world's population, we hold 22% of prisoners worldwide. Almost half of federal prisoners are jailed for nonviolent drug offenses. Racial disparities are stark -- 1 in 15 African-American men are incarcerated, compared to 1 in 106 white American men. People returning from prison face steep barriers to finding housing, employment and opportunity. The United States is also one of the few advanced nations in the world to execute prisoners. The death penalty only contributes to a culture of violence and retribution. Tragically, it has also been proven to result in state-sanctioned killing of innocent people through wrongful convictions. Those executed have disproportionately been people of color, and in many cases they never received adequate legal representation. In addition, as Black Lives Matter activists have brought to our collective consciousness, the reality of systemic racism includes the killing of African-Americans through unwarranted police violence. In order to reform a criminal justice system that fails to provide equal justice to all, elected officials and candidates for office should:

- Support sentencing reform policies that reduce sentence length for nonviolent crimes and offer alternatives to incarceration.
- Remove barriers to employment and take steps to reintegrate people returning from prison, such as "ban the box" legislation that removes stigma and opens job opportunities for ex-offenders.

- End the death penalty.
- Equip police forces to deescalate situations without resorting to violence.
- Address racial profiling at all levels of the criminal justice system.
- Invest more in locally based, effective peace building programs.

## **Protecting Our Nation, Affirming Our Values**

We live in an age of anxiety and insecurity. Americans have legitimate fears about terrorism and violence at home and around the world. Especially in difficult times, people of faith are called to be peace-builders, seek dialogue and support diplomacy. We reject the use of divisive tactics to exploit fear for political gain.

The U.S. military budget equals nearly half the world's total military spending. In contrast, less than 1 percent of the \$4 trillion federal budget goes to foreign aid, which includes initiatives to fight the spread of diseases and support social infrastructure in developing countries. This assistance is not only an act of charity. It helps strengthen countries where violent extremists flourish in unstable environments, where lack of health care, education and other basic human rights are denied. If we want peace, we must also work for justice here and around the world. Despite the fact that there are effective peacemaking practices, little investment has been directed into these initiatives.

After years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Middle East remains a cauldron of warring factions and extremist insurgents. It's a false choice when we're asked to choose between our values and our security. The next president will face urgent and complex challenges that require a commitment to:

- Decreasing the United States' role in the global arms trade, which fuels violence and destabilizes governments.
- Increasing peace building and development aid in vulnerable countries and regions in ways that respond to the root causes of conflict, violence, and war.
- Pursue diplomacy and dialogue as key tools in efforts to build global peace and security.

Create a world free of nuclear weapons