

October 2007

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Project and Robert P. Jones, Consultant  
**RE:** Overview of "Come Let Us Reason Together: A Fresh Look at Shared Cultural Values Between Evangelicals and Progressives"

## Overview

This paper presents a framework for bridging the cultural divide between many progressives and Evangelicals.

Over the last few years, progressives and Evangelicals have engaged in new discussions to find common ground on issues like poverty and the environment. These groundbreaking dialogues, however, have succeeded largely by agreeing to sidestep so-called "cultural issues," such as the role of religion in public life, abortion, and gay and lesbian issues. In order to move beyond this impasse, we conducted careful research and engaged in numerous conversations with Evangelical and progressive leaders in order to listen and reflect on our shared values. The title of our paper, "Come Let Us Reason Together," is both a biblical quote and a philosophy that has guided our approach of talking with each other instead of at each other. The fruit of this effort is a document that reveals new insights that offer hope for progress and identifies recommendations for concrete areas of agreement on the most divisive cultural issues of our times.

## Insights

### **Five Reasons We Can Find Common Ground on Cultural Issues**

#### **Reason #1: Contrary to popular stereotypes, Evangelicals are not a monolithic group.**

We identify an important persistent pattern that we call the "one-fifth, one-third, one-half formula:" one-fifth of Evangelicals are progressive; one-third are moderates who share some progressive values; and one-half are conservatives who may be partners on particular issues.

#### **Reason #2: Evangelical views on cultural issues are far more nuanced than most believe.**

For example, on abortion, Evangelicals are mostly pro-life, but they are looking for middle ground. Evangelical support for embryonic stem cell research has risen steadily over the past 5 years; although support still falls short of a majority, 2006 marked the first time that a plurality (44%) of Evangelicals support it.

**Reason #3: The predominant ways Evangelicals and progressives see government’s role in affecting social change—one changing individual hearts, the other changing society—need not be in conflict.**

The idea of “The Golden Rule” as a guide to good government comports with both of these conceptions of government and resonates widely in American society.

**Reason #4: Evangelical distrust of progressives is often rooted in the belief that progressives harbor hostility toward religion and religious people, and progressives are beginning to address this stereotype.**

One of the most powerful themes that emerged in our interviews with Evangelical leaders is the perception that religion is not welcomed in public life, particularly by progressives. While progressives have consistently affirmed the First Amendment principles of religious liberty, progressives are now also re-engaging to affirm an appropriate place for religion in the public square.

**Reason #5: Evangelicals are going through a time of social and generational change, which presents new opportunities for cooperation.**

There is an emerging new center represented by Evangelical leaders with broader public priorities, and there is a new generation coming of age with different priorities.

**Recommendations**

**A Framework for Bridging the Divide on the Toughest Issues**

The goal of this paper is not just to point out the opportunities for collaboration between progressives and Evangelicals, but also to identify specific places of agreement. We have found common ground ideas in six key areas:

- **Affirming the role of religion in the public square.** In order to move beyond misunderstandings and stereotypes of both Evangelicals and progressives with regard to the role of religion in the public square, we propose a three-part statement that affirms an appropriate public role for religion in American society, while preserving both First Amendment principles of religious liberty: non-establishment and free exercise.
- **Affirming the human dignity of gay and lesbian people.** One of the most difficult cleavages between Evangelicals and progressives is attitudes about public policies that relate to gay and lesbian people. We propose a three-part statement unequivocally affirming the human dignity of gay and lesbian people, which is designed to create a foundation for discussions of these issues. Importantly, we also affirm that no legislation to protect the human dignity of gay and lesbian people should or need abridge the religious liberty of religious communities.

- **Reducing the need for abortion.** Evangelicals and progressives can find common ground on the goal of reducing the need for abortion in America. We propose a concrete set of policies, “The Reducing the Need for Abortion and Supporting Parents Act,” which seeks both to prevent unintended pregnancies and to support pregnant women who wish to carry their pregnancies to term.
- **Placing responsible moral limits on the treatment of human embryos.** While Evangelicals and progressives may disagree on the moral permissibility of embryonic stem cell research, this stalemate has blocked progress on a set of common ground policies that provide reasonable moral limits on the treatment of human embryos. For example, both groups can support a ban on the patenting or selling of a human embryo as a commercial product, and both can agree that the United States should join virtually all other industrialized countries in banning reproductive cloning.
- **Other common ground ideas.** In addition to these proposals, we offer concrete ideas in two other areas: 1) creating safe spaces for children online, with new protections for minors on internet pornography sites and on social networking sites; and 2) encouraging responsible fatherhood through expanded opportunities for low-income fathers, increased enforcement of child support, and support programs for incarcerated fathers that encourage a continuous relationship between a father and his children during his imprisonment and in the reentry process.

We do not conclude that these conversations will be easy or that these proposals in themselves will resolve all the real disagreements and tensions on cultural issues. But we believe that the gap need not be as wide and the mistrust need not run as deep. We are hopeful that this work of reasoning together will begin to heal the wounds of divisiveness and lead to a path of progress for the country.