

COME LET US REASON TOGETHER

A GOVERNING AGENDA TO END THE CULTURE WARS



Come Let Us Reason Together Governing Agenda Press Teleconference Opening Remarks

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Katie Paris, Director of Communications Strategy, Faith in Public Life

Welcome everyone. Thank you so much for joining us. My name is Katie Paris, with Faith in Public Life and we could not be more pleased to partner with Third Way to unveil the "Come Let Us Reason Together Governing Agenda." As an organization dedicated to advancing faith in the public square as a positive and unifying force for justice, compassion, and the common good, we embraced the opportunity immediately, two years ago, to help Third Way build and launch this incredible coalition.

This is a landmark moment of Evangelical and progressive engagement in American politics.

For years, static and bitter divisions between political Progressives and Evangelicals have bolstered partisanship and ideological purity, over progress. The result: polarization and gridlock.

Speakers on the call today, and other groups and leaders in this coalition, are pro-life and pro-choice; pro- and anti-gay marriage, for and against Proposition 8. Yet they have agreed on a common ground agenda.

Such common ground takes years of building relationships and trust. It takes vision and courage.

The leaders we'll hear from today are some of those who summoned the courage, put in the work, and followed their values to a bold new Agenda. Documents detailing the agenda are now available online at ComeLetUsReasonTogether.org, including a letter to Congress and the President and statements of support from Evangelical and Progressive leaders.

I'm proud to welcome and introduce the principal architect of the Governing Agenda, Rachel Laser...

Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Program, Third Way

Two years ago, Third Way had a crazy idea. Could historic antagonists, could progressives and Evangelical Christians, together change the culture wars into culture discussions? Could we identify common values and common ground on the most divisive social issues of our times, like abortion and gay and lesbian rights?

We decided to give this a try even though inside Third Way even many here thought the effort was likely to fail. We hired Dr. Robert P. Jones as our senior religion advisor and we quietly began to reach out- to progressives on our side of the culture battles and, with help from Faith in Public Life, to Evangelical leaders whom most of us had never met, and to be honest, often only stereotyped.

Two years later, here we are, joined in hand and heart around the Come Let Us Reason Together Governing Agenda, an agenda of shared concrete policy solutions on the issues that have divided this nation the most.

Today, in a letter and memo, we offer the President-Elect and leaders of Congress on both sides of the aisle a roadmap for how to put an end to the culture wars- to move the country beyond the ugliness and stagnation of distrust and divide and firmly onto a path of progress and community.

You can find these documents and also sign up to join our initiative at www.comeletusreasontogether.org. You can also become our fan if you search for us on Come Let Us Reason Together on Facebook.

Let me tell you briefly about the four components of our Come Let Us Reason Together agenda:

- (1) Reducing abortions through addressing the root causes of abortion. The policies in our shared agenda prevent unintended pregnancies and support pregnant women and new families; they do not ban or even restrict legal access to abortion in any way. They include but are not limited to comprehensive sex education, increased access to contraception for low-income women, expanded health care coverage for pregnant women and children, and support for pregnant and parenting students, and for adoption.
- (2) Protecting the rights of gay and lesbian people to earn a living and also affirming a religious exemption for faith-based employers. Our shared position is that it should be illegal to fire, refuse to hire, or refuse to promote employees simply based on their sexual orientation. We simultaneously affirm that this type of legislation should not threaten the religious liberty of churches and other religious organizations. Specifically, we support the religious exemption passed last year in the House of Representatives. This religious exemption had support from Congressman Barney Frank on the one hand and the Orthodox Union of Jews, Seventh Day Adventists and Catholic Bishops on the other.
- (3) Renouncing torture. Together, we agree that the use of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment against prisoners is immoral, unwise and un-American. Here, our recommended policy is modeled on the bipartisan Campaign to Ban Torture's "Declaration of Principles for a Presidential Executive Order on Prisoner Treatment, Torture and Cruelty."

- (4) Immigration Reform. We support comprehensive immigration reform that (1) secures the borders through rigorous enforcement, (2) provides a practical, earned path to citizenship, (3) establishes a fair guest worker program, and (4) keeps families together.

This is the first time that Evangelical religious leaders and progressives have come together on these issues. It is the first time, but it won't be the last. Yes- we still disagree on many fundamental principles. I am pro-choice for example and many of the speakers this morning are pro-life. But over these two years, we discovered many deep values that we share- the values of (1) respect for human dignity, (2) the Golden Rule (2) optimism and (3) pragmatism.

On behalf of myself and my team at Third Way working on this initiative- including my die-hard policy advisor Nikki Yamashiro, we are honored to be at the table with this group of courageous leaders who represent the best of the future.

And that includes our moderator, Katie of Faith in Public Life, who will now introduce our speakers.

Robert P. Jones, Ph.D., Visiting Fellow, Third Way; President, Public Religion Research

It's a great privilege to have been part of this process of "reasoning together" over the last two years. As one who has spent considerable time in both communities represented here—professionally working among progressives and personally growing up as a Southern Baptist in Mississippi—I've known how contentious debates over these issues can be, and it has been deeply meaningful to see this shared governing agenda emerge, which illuminates a genuinely new path for the country.

I want to make two points about the significance of this governing agenda for the increasingly complex evangelical community, which constitutes a quarter of the U.S. population. First, the Come Let Us Reason Together Governing Agenda marks a maturing of the evangelical center. It is evidence that the evangelical center is marking its identity not only by broadening the agenda to engage issues like the environment, but by carefully rethinking old approaches to cultural issues like abortion.

Second, this governing agenda highlights the priorities of a new evangelical majority that is finding its voice and its feet. In the recent Faith and American Politics Survey, conducted by my firm Public Religion Research and sponsored by Faith in Public Life, we found that 40% of evangelicals are centrists, while 46% are traditionalists (or more conservative) and 14% are modernists (or more progressive). Among younger evangelicals (18-34), the evangelical center is even larger (45%). This means that the coalition of centrist/modernist evangelicals account for a majority of evangelicals. Our research also demonstrates that a majority of centrists/modernist evangelicals support even the most divisive areas of our governing agenda, abortion reduction and employment nondiscrimination for gay and lesbian people.

This shared governing agenda, built by big-tent progressives and the emerging evangelical center, is a cause for great hope that we may move toward the beginning of the end of the culture wars at such a critical time in our nation's public life.

David P. Gushee Ph.D., Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics, Mercer University; President, Evangelicals for Human Rights

The Christian faith tells the story of God's majestic love for the world in creation and in redemption. The Bible teaches that every human being is a person of immeasurable worth and dignity, as demonstrated in God's gracious choice to make each one, to sustain each one, and to rescue each one through Jesus Christ.

The four issues addressed in this Governing Agenda may seem to represent quite different or even unrelated concerns. They would be covered by different offices in the executive branch or different committees in the Congress. But what they all have in common, at their core, is concern for human dignity. And human dignity is just another way of saying that each human being is to be treated with the respect that they deserve as objects of God's infinite and merciful love.

Public policy has its limits. It cannot do everything that a religious vision might imagine to be appropriate or even possible in the full recognition of a human being's sacred worth. But it can do some things. And it must prevent things certain things from being done.

We call for abortion reduction. I support this because I believe that one of the things that must not be done to human beings is to abort them; and yet those facing crisis pregnancies need help to create the conditions in which they can sustain and protect the lives for which they are now responsible. This too is the work of human dignity.

We call for an end to torture and cruelty toward those we detain in the fight against terrorism. I support this because such physical and psychological assaults on human beings are a clear violation of human dignity that can never be justified on national security or any other grounds.

We call for employment rights for gays and lesbians. This one might be more controversial among some in our community. But I support it because denying someone a job in a secular workplace due to their sexual orientation violates human dignity and serves no public purpose.

We call for comprehensive immigration reform. I support this because I believe that our current mix of policies creates numerous circumstances in which human beings sacred in God's sight are mistreated and their families damaged or destroyed.

I support this effort not just because its policy proposals reflect a proper respect for human dignity, but also because the very process of working together toward a shared vision between progressives and evangelicals also advances dignity and mutual respect.

We live in a culture in which people feel free to dehumanize those with whom they disagree. Christians often participate in this contemptuous behavior. This common ground process marks a better path, and one much more in keeping with the values of the Christian faith.

Rev. Dr. Joel Hunter, Senior Pastor, Northland, A Church Distributed

I am actively supporting the work of Third Way and the spirit of “Come Let Us Reason Together” because I believe we are at a watershed moment in our country’s history. I believe that we are turning from a 20th century mentality that emphasized enemies vs. allies to a 21st century pattern that prioritizes ad hoc coalitions to solve mutual problems. I believe we are passing from an era of “zero-sum” thinking in which the winner (temporarily) takes all, to an era where each “side” can advance a piece of its agenda together. What has been termed the Culture Wars has been characterized by vilifying those who differ from “us” on provocative issues and treating “them” as traitors and threats. I believe we can end those Wars by thinking of our differences as ways we can learn from each other, and periodic cooperation between opposing affinity groups as a way for both “sides” to advance without compromising our basic core values. Frankly, I want to be a part of promoting this new form of maturity.

Two issues are difficult for me to even address, but that is the point isn’t it?

In the first issue, abortion, I am so committed to the stance that life in the womb is sacred to God (Psalm 139:13) that I cannot wait for abortion’s entire elimination before working on its steady reduction, person by person. Our working points starting with comprehensive (including an emphasis on abstinence) sex education and access to contraception to reduce unintended pregnancies, and extending to support for low income pregnant women, to adoption options, are all positive ways to reduce abortion. Also, government resources can reach women not now being helped and add to the support that some committed organizations are already providing for women from pregnancy through to birth.

Second, though I focus on the ideal for marriage as between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-6), I also believe that each American citizen has the right to earn a living without discrimination and construct legal contracts between each other without interference. At the same time, I believe that in the free exercise/expression of religion, a religious organization should not be forced to hire someone living against the values it is trying to advance. Beyond that exemption, I believe the church should attend to the training of its own congregations (I Corinthians 5:12) and not be prone to interfering in the citizens’ rights of those outside its congregations.

I will promote these ideals and conversations in my own constituency groups. In that activism, I hope to be a part of Third Way’s changing the cultures of church and country

from being polarized to being respectful and cooperative in working together to solve our common problems.

Jonathan Merritt, Founder, Southern Baptist Environment and Climate Initiative

I support the “Come Let Us Reason Together” governing agenda put forth by Third Way because of my desire to see people of faith work across divisions of disagreement in the pursuit of common goals.

As a committed Southern Baptist, I know all too well the “culture war” mentality. It is a mentality that often speaks without listening, divides rather than unites and promotes destructive partisanship. At the same time, I am proud of the unwavering moral stances that conservative Christians, including Southern Baptists, have taken. We remain committed to important issues like the traditional marriage and protecting life conception. Yet, conservative Christians must also live out the other tenets of our faith including compassion, charity, human dignity and the pursuit of peace. Therefore, I support this agenda *because* I am a Southern Baptist, not in spite of that fact.

We should maintain our convictions on those matters where conscience demands that we part ways. However, we must accept the promise that people of mutual goodwill can find shared values and goals. For far too long, we have allowed the common good to be sacrificed on the altar of our disagreements.

Two policies in the agenda have been at the center of some of the fiercest disagreements, but even here there is room to work together. First, while I support making abortion illegal, we must vigorously seek to reduce the number of abortions. This includes supporting efforts to prevent unintended pregnancies, assisting pregnant women and new families, and supporting adoption. It is easy to call oneself “pro-life.” The difficult thing is to put feet to our faith and begin working with real people in real communities—to see that faith made tangible, and lives saved.

Second, I affirm freedom of religious expression and the rights of religious institutions to have their values reflected in their hiring practices. But I can also support a policy that ensures that gays and lesbians receive equal treatment in the workplace. To me, scripture is clear that God’s ideal is heterosexuality, but this policy gives conservative Christians an opportunity to affirm, rather than undermine, our claims to love our gay and lesbian neighbors.

I count myself a member of a group becoming known as “the younger evangelicals.” We are a group who has turned away from self-serving partisanship. We are a generation calling for a rapid infusion of civility and grace into a political culture where faith has often produced divisiveness. Today, as Christ-followers spanning many generations hold hands in pursuit of the common good, may God bless our spirit of cooperation.

Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, President, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

I am proud today to be standing shoulder to shoulder with some unlikely allies. We do not agree on everything, and we have walked some difficult ground together. But we have found that our differences have not prevented us from finding shared values. And with the Come Let Us Reason Together governing agenda, we have also found common policies.

American Evangelicalism is currently experiencing its greatest transformation in the past 100 years. The Browning of the Evangelical community, in addition to a generational transference of corresponding leadership mantle, converge around the nexus of an Evangelical agenda that stands committed to building bridges rather than building walls.

The 2008 Presidential Elections demonstrate how Hispanic Christians, as the fastest growing religious demographic in our nation, stand poised to facilitate an unprecedented platform for Faith in Public Policy that does not establish camp in the extremes but rather on common ground.

Let us be clear. As Hispanic Christians, we stand committed to the message of the Cross. However, that cross is both vertical and horizontal. It is salvation and transformation, ethos and pathos, Kingdom and society, faith and public policy, Covenant and community, righteousness and justice. Each dependent on the other, not either or, but both and. We seek to reconcile a platform of righteousness and justice where John 3:16 converges with Matthew 25 while Billy Graham meets Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Masters table.

For example, let us look at Immigration reform, via the prism of the vertical and horizontal cross. We agree that we need comprehensive immigration reform that creates an earned path to citizenship and protects families, while securing our borders and treating American taxpayers fairly. The common ground solutions we present here enables us simultaneously to protect our borders, protect families, and protect our values.

We agree that we should adopt comprehensive immigration reform with the following provisions: securing our borders through rigorous enforcement, providing an earned pathway to citizenship that is fair to the American taxpayer and respects the rule of law by requiring the undocumented to pay back taxes, pay reasonable fines, and demonstrate proficiency in both American Civics and the English language. In addition, a common ground, third way, center of the cross solution to immigration, requires the establishment of a viable guest worker program in addition to policies that keep families together.

Moreover, even as it pertains to sexual orientation, when we reconcile both the vertical and horizontal elements of the Cross, Evangelical Christians can agree that even amidst our different beliefs about the issue of sexual orientation, we agree on a Policy that protects the basic rights of gay and lesbian people in the workplace by making it illegal to fire, refuse to hire, or refuse to promote employees simply based on their sexual

orientation and simultaneously affirming that no legislation to protect the human dignity and rights of gay and lesbian people should threaten the religious liberty of churches and other religious organization.

The fastest growing ethnic and faith demographic, Hispanic Born Again Christians and the New Evangelicals, urge the incoming Administration and the incoming Congress to find common ground on these very issues that have been exploited as tools of political expediency while creating greater division in our communities and nation.

Let this hour demonstrate that no longer will these issues exist as tools of political demagoguery and campaign sound bites that wedge us apart, but rather, let the church, and people of faith, brown, black and white stand as the vociferous oracles of Kingdom of God agenda that calls Republicans and Democrats, Progressives, Moderates and Conservatives, Red and Blue States to meet, not on the fringes and extremes, but rather at the strongest point, the middle of the Cross.

Rev. Samuel Rodriguez is the President of America's largest Hispanic Christian Organization, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, the Hispanic N.A.E, serving 16 million Hispanic Born Again Christians via 19,000 churches.