

Democracy Values & the 2020 Election

A Reflection Guide for Faith Communities

FAITH
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Interfaith Power & Light
A Religious Response to Global Warming

A Reflection Guide for Faith Communities

As people of faith across the country, we believe the 2020 election is a referendum on the values that will shape our future. How can we renew our fragile democracy? How do we honor the human dignity of every person? Will we protect God's creation for future generations? What policies will prioritize the common good and confront global pandemics that remind us of our interdependence? These questions require a societal examination of conscience.

Many of the defining moral issues of our time are on the ballot: faltering democratic institutions, extreme inequality of wealth and power, the existential threat of climate change, cruel immigration policies that tear apart families, mass incarceration that devastates communities of color, senseless gun violence, and threats to global public health and security. These challenges are daunting. We must move forward in a spirit of hope, and resist despair and cynicism. For generations, people of faith have been at the forefront of struggles for justice, leading seemingly unwinnable movements. From the abolition of slavery to women's suffrage and the civil rights movement, religious activists have proven that faith and action are powerful catalysts for social change.

The challenges we confront today require us to envision who we wish to be as a nation. Appeals to nationalism put a new face on the sin of white supremacy. People of color and members of Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindi and other faith traditions are too often targeted by dehumanizing rhetoric and racist policies. When we resist this culture of exclusion, we affirm that all of us are created in the sacred image of God.

This reflection guide is intended to spur discussion and discernment. Whether you use it at a kitchen table, in a house of worship, a community forum, or at an event with political candidates, we hope it helps you navigate the urgent moral questions raised by this election. The issues we address here are not exhaustive, but we believe they provide a framework for evaluating issues and candidates in a way that prioritizes justice, dignity and the common good. Each section includes suggested questions to guide your conversations and spark ideas for questions to ask political candidates.

Guide Contents

Democracy and Voting Rights	1
Protecting God's Creation: Climate Justice for our Children and World	2
Loving Our Immigrant Neighbors	4
The Last Shall Be First: An Economy of Inclusion	5
Moral Health Policies in a Time of a Pandemic	7
Restorative and Racial Justice	9
Made in the Image of God: Respecting the Dignity of LGBTQ People	11
The Global Common Good: We're All in This Together	12



Democracy and Voting Rights

This election is more than a choice between parties and ideologies. An even more fundamental question is at stake: Can we preserve democracy in the face of serious threats to fair elections and fundamental rights?

Voting is the very foundation of representative democracy. By ensuring people a voice in their government, the right to vote promotes human flourishing and provides an essential safeguard against tyranny. But this most basic right has been undermined by courts and politicians who make it harder for citizens to participate in the political process. Those who erect obstacles to voting are violating one of our most sacred values, and damaging our democracy.

In a highly controversial decision, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned key elements of the Voting Rights Act in 2013. Since then, numerous state legislatures have put up roadblocks to voting, including purging registered voters from the voter rolls without notifying them, closing hundreds of polling places in communities of color, restricting voter registration windows, and requiring voters to show forms of ID that many people don't have. This year, the Supreme Court even denied extending voting by mail in Wisconsin during the coronavirus pandemic, forcing voters to risk infection with the deadly virus by standing in lines at crowded polling places on the primary election day. Across states, these restrictions have targeted people of color, with the goal of suppressing the vote.

Congress must do everything in its power to ensure that every citizen has safe, equal, unobstructed access to voting. Enacting automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, no-excuse absentee voting, early voting and restoring the voting rights of formerly incarcerated people all advance essential protections for democracy in the face of dangerous voter suppression.

Questions for Reflection and Candidates

- 1 How do you see democratic values at risk today?
- 2 How do systemic barriers to voting undermine our most sacred democratic values?
- 3 How can your faith community better advocate for stronger voter protections at the state and local level?
- 4 As a candidate, what are your specific plans for protecting and strengthening voting rights?



Protecting God's Creation

Climate Justice for our Children and World

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, driven thousands of species

of God's creatures to extinction, intensified catastrophic events such as wildfires and hurricanes, and threatened the lives and livelihoods of our most vulnerable brothers, sisters and neighbors around the world. Scientists tell us we have less than a decade to avoid even more catastrophic consequences.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown how interconnected our world is – how the health of one affects the health of all. We also see that air pollution makes us more vulnerable to the disease. People who live in more polluted areas are more likely to become infected and die. Political leaders must take proactive steps to reduce the threat of future disease outbreaks, which are exacerbated by global warming.

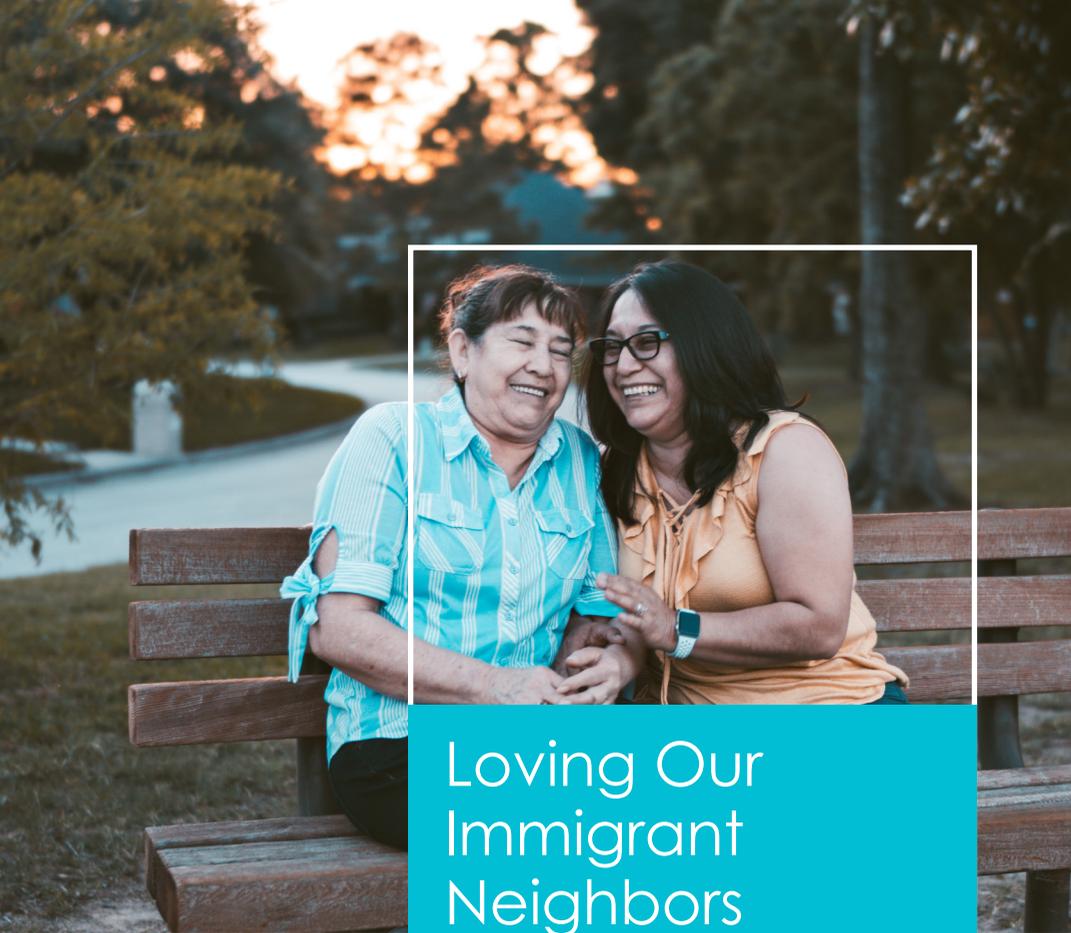
Some political leaders ignore, downplay or deny the overwhelming scientific evidence that human behavior is exacerbating global warming and threatening life. We can't afford denial, delay or indifference. From droughts to superstorms to disease, every community faces the threat of destruction – with the poorest and most vulnerable people harmed “first and worst.” This is a moral issue. That's why faith communities across the United States are conserving energy, greening their facilities, and preaching about care for our common home.

The United States has a unique responsibility to show moral and political leadership:

-  Transitioning our economy away from polluting fossil fuels toward 100% clean energy.
-  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, disease, and sea-level rise by sharing technology and financial support.

Questions for Reflection and Candidates

-  What does your faith teach about our responsibilities for the Earth and to others? How are they interdependent?
-  Has your faith community made an effort to cut emissions, save energy, or practice environmental stewardship?
-  As a candidate, what specific policies do you support to protect God's Creation and secure a safe climate for our children and future generations?



Loving Our Immigrant Neighbors

Scripture repeatedly makes clear that immigrants must be treated with dignity. Policies that rip children from their parents' arms, lock people away in inhumane conditions, and ban desperate families from entering the country should keep us awake at night. As people of faith, we believe that the way we treat our immigrant neighbors is a sign of how we treat God.

In 2013, the U.S. Senate passed bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform, which then failed to pass the House. Since then, legislation to fix our broken immigration system has been supplanted by nativist policies and the politics of white nationalism. Programs to

protect young immigrants, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are still at risk. We must reject the fearmongering and punitive measures that traumatize our immigrant communities and separate families. Migration is also a complex global reality with root causes that include religious persecution, political oppression, poverty and violence. Criminalizing people for seeking physical safety undermines human rights law, and our moral imperative to provide asylum and refugee resettlement.

Our nation is stronger because of immigrants and refugees. How will we honor our immigrant neighbors and family in 2020?

Questions for Reflection and Candidates

- 1 How can we replace immoral immigration policies that tear families apart and cause trauma with an immigration system that values families and affirms the dignity of all people?
- 2 What can we do to heal the wounds inflicted on immigrant communities by political rhetoric that portrays them as a dangerous "other?"
- 3 If there are immigrants in our community who are feeling isolated and under threat, how can we show support and build connections?
- 4 As a candidate, what will you do to defend the dignity of all immigrants, and how will you further policies that keep families together?



The Last Shall Be First

An Economy of Inclusion

Our economic systems should work for all Americans, not only the wealthiest few. This is a matter of justice and human dignity. All religious traditions recognize that charity is essential to care for the most vulnerable, but

helping our neighbors in poverty also compels us to address its root causes. “Charity is no substitute for justice withheld,” St. Augustine observed centuries ago.

In order to build a pro-family economy that enables all people to flourish, political leaders must promote policies that honor the dignity of work through living wages and paid family leave; protect social safety nets that help the most vulnerable; and create a just tax system that serves the common good, not simply a privileged few. The teachings of diverse faith traditions make clear that unjust treatment of workers and extreme inequality are signs of a sinful society. The Hebrew prophets denounced greed and the hoarding of wealth. Pope Francis reminds us that an “economy of exclusion” literally kills people.

Our nation’s policies too often fail to honor these values. The wealthiest and most powerful get tax breaks while food assistance programs are slashed. Millions of Americans have lost jobs, and many work hard but struggle to stay above the poverty line because they are not paid living wages. CEOs of the largest companies in the United States now make over 300 times their average worker’s pay. 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 working Americans don’t even have a single paid sick day.

All of these injustices are made worse by the coronavirus pandemic, which has exacerbated deep inequalities and fallen hardest on low-wage employees. We must ensure that essential workers such as health care providers and grocery store cashiers receive more robust social and economic support. Relief packages that respond to the pandemic must not only help shareholders and corporations. This crisis is an opportunity to fundamentally reimagine how we create a just economy.

Questions for Reflection and Candidates

- 1** What can we do to ensure that all Americans are able to provide for their families and live with security and dignity?
- 2** How do we create a just tax system that is fair to all Americans, including working families who are trapped in poverty?
- 3** Why does the United States lag behind most developed countries when it comes to providing paid sick leave and paid family leave?
- 4** As a candidate, what are your specific plans to ensure workers have living wages and economic security while the coronavirus pandemic continues, as well as for the long term?



More Health Policies

in a Time of a Pandemic

Despite our nation's stated values of life and equality, the United States is the only industrialized country in the world that does not guarantee its residents universal access to health care. This is a failure of political and moral imagination – especially in a time of pandemic.

In stark ways, the COVID-19 crisis reveals the tragic consequences of failing to prioritize public health and human life on the national level. State and local leaders have been forced to scramble to obtain critical medical supplies while the federal government failed to act with urgency. Some governors have shirked their responsibility to issue social-distancing orders and ended them despite the risk of more deaths.

“Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane,” Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., said. Data shows people of color are more likely to become ill with the coronavirus and to die from it -- especially African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans. Incarcerated people, people of color and immigrants are trapped in life-threatening conditions because of political indifference. These realities are severe expressions of systemic injustice.

Faith communities have long been at the forefront of providing direct medical services, and have advocated for universal access to quality health care. We must continue to insist that all of God’s children deserve coverage and access to care that protects their health and heals them when they are sick.

Federal and state efforts to slash Medicaid and take health care away from millions of low-income Americans, people with disabilities, children and seniors are sins. Powerful special interests should not decide who lives and who dies. Pharmaceutical corporations put greed before human life by pricing lifesaving medicines like insulin out of reach for millions of Americans. As people of faith, we know this is unacceptable and immoral.

Lawmakers and candidates must demonstrate a commitment to policies that ensure everyone has access to quality, affordable healthcare, release specific plans to reduce pervasive racial inequities in the healthcare system, and end pharmaceutical corporations’ ability to price gouge the medicines we need.

Questions for Reflection and Candidates

- 1 How can people of faith be most effective in using our stories, congregations and power to advocate for health care reform?
- 2 What do you struggle with the most when it comes to our healthcare system?
- 3 How has the COVID-19 crisis impacted your community? What policy solutions can keep us all safe and remedy racial and economic inequalities in your community?
- 4 As a candidate, what are your specific plans for making sure that quality, affordable health care is available for all?



Restorative Racial Justice

Justice and redemption are at the very heart of faith. Restorative justice begins with listening to and empowering communities that have been exploited, excluded and denied equal representation and freedom. The evil ideology of white supremacy shaped our nation from its founding and continues to impact policies and communities today, especially in the criminal justice system. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and so many other Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color, has provoked a growing, multi-racial moral movement for accountability and systemic reforms for racial justice.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Racial disparities are stark and pervasive. People returning from prison face steep barriers to voting, housing, employment and opportunity. For all too many, true freedom never comes. The United States is also one of the few industrialized 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. Those executed have disproportionately been people of color, and in many cases they were denied adequate legal representation. In addition, the reality of systemic racism includes the killing of African Americans through police violence.

In order to reform the criminal justice system, elected officials and candidates should commit to sentencing policies that reduce sentence lengths for nonviolent crimes and promote sensible alternatives to incarceration. It's also essential to reintegrate people leaving prison into society by removing barriers to employment and voting. Our country needs to create new law enforcement systems and visions of community safety. Recent reforms have not done enough to stop the murder of our Black neighbors by the police. In order for our Black neighbors to thrive, we must examine our country's prioritization of punitive law enforcement and policies by cutting outsized law enforcement budgets and reinvesting in health and human services, schools, affordable housing and living-wage jobs. The issues of racial justice and criminal justice are intertwined with the many issues we will vote on this fall. The changes to policing must be accompanied with direct investment in community needs and redefining public safety.

As people of faith and conscience, we must hold federal, state and local officials accountable for the persistent racial bias and unconscionable killing of unarmed civilians perceived as a threat, almost always people of color.

Questions for Reflection and Candidates

- 1 How can we dismantle the evil ideology of white supremacy in our culture and political systems?
- 2 What can be done to end racial profiling and police violence against people of color?
- 3 What steps can be taken to ensure formerly incarcerated people have voting rights and fair access to employment?
- 4 As a candidate, what will you do to ensure racial justice is prioritized in the criminal justice system?
- 5 How do we build safe communities for everyone, particularly people of color?

All people have inherent dignity because everyone is created in the image of God. Our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender family members, neighbors and co-workers deserve equal rights, and to live without fear or discrimination.

This is too often not the case. In many states, LGBTQ people can still legally be denied housing and job opportunities simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ youth are disproportionately at risk for self-harm and targeted for violence. Some leaders have distorted the value of religious liberty to sanction discrimination. As people of faith, we reject any form of “othering” and seek to build an inclusive society. A foundational principle at the heart of all faith traditions is love of neighbor, and the imperative to be in solidarity with those who are excluded.

Elected officials who have the power to shape policies should ensure LGBTQ people are protected from all forms of discrimination. Politicians also should consistently speak out against those who use hateful rhetoric to demean the dignity of LGBTQ people.



**Made in the
Image of God**

**Respecting
the Dignity of
LGBTQ People**

Questions for Reflection and Candidates

- 1** How can your faith community more fully support the equal dignity of LGBTQ people in your state and local area?
- 2** What are the greatest threats to LGBTQ people in your community and the nation?
- 3** As a candidate, what are your specific plans to ensure that LGBTQ people have equal rights and are treated with dignity?

What does it mean to love our neighbors as ourselves in a globalized world? The health and future of our country and communities are interconnected to the health and security of other nations. Our fates are bound up in what Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., called “an inescapable network of mutuality.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is a wakeup call that underscores this reality. Global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, terrorism, the arms trade, and the refugee crisis are not solved by nationalist rhetoric or walls. The next president must address these challenges by putting public health, peace and diplomacy first.

Americans have understandable fears about violence at home and around the world. But many leaders have stoked fear in ways that lead to misplaced priorities and disproportionate funding for the U.S. military budget, which now

accounts for nearly half of the world's total military spending. In contrast, less than 1 percent of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, which includes initiatives to fight the spread of diseases and poverty in developing countries. If we want peace, we must also work for justice here and around the world. When we have billions for F-35 fighter jets but not enough N95 masks for our frontline health care workers and first responders, our moral priorities as a nation are distorted.

America's next president should take concrete steps to end disproportionate funding for weapons of war and re-invest in the global challenges of public health epidemics, climate change and migration. In addition, we must increase peace-building and development aid in vulnerable countries in ways that respond to the root causes of conflict. By pursuing diplomacy and dialogue as key tools in efforts to build global peace and security, the United States can lead with moral legitimacy.



Questions for Reflection and Candidates

- 1 What policies do you think are most important for creating security for your family and community?
- 2 What role should the United States play in the world to help build global peace and security?
- 3 How can your faith community advocate for policies to create a more peaceful world?
- 4 As a candidate, what programs and policies would you prioritize to help build secure communities and a peaceful world?

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Interfaith Power & Light is mobilizing a religious response to global warming. Their mission is to inspire and mobilize people of faith and conscience to take bold and just action on climate change.

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