

How does Faith shape our Political Vision?

In evangelical Anglican families, like the one I grew up in, conservative meant good and liberal meant evil. As a child I was taught that conservatives were on “God’s side,” and “they” the social liberals were of the devil. That’s what many of us were taught and that’s what we believed. Sadly, many still believe it.

This isn’t unique to Anglicans or Canada. I have had many protestant clergy friends who have experienced this belief. One, spent over 20 years as an evangelical pastor in the USA, and he reported to me that as he engaged with the life and teaching of Jesus at the heart of his faith, the less enamoured he became with the political project to which evangelicalism was giving its soul. He felt increasingly out of sync with an evangelical community more concerned with conservative politics than the compassion of Christ. He shared his thoughts with me and invited me to share them as it might help answer questions as we look south to the US election in about 6 weeks.

He feels the conservative church has become so out of sync with Jesus in its core belief. He asks “How else do we explain why nearly 80 percent of white evangelicals currently embrace the candidacy of Donald Trump, whose way of life and values could not be more opposite to their own? How else can we explain their visceral disgust with Hillary Clinton who, whatever her flaws, is a committed Methodist Christian who grew up in Sunday school, started out as a young Republican, and was drawn into social justice concerns through the influence of a youth pastor?”

In a recent conversation, he gave me about 10 reasons why he had to part company with the Conservative Evangelical Project:

“1. I want to associate with people who are respectful and treat others, even their opponents, with basic human decency and civility.

Too many conservative leaders have become increasingly disrespectful to the point of being rude, crude and mean-spirited. It’s become impossible to ignore — from Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., shouting “You lie!” during president Obama’s State of the Union address to Donald Trump reaching historic lows with name-calling, crude insults, genital braggadocio, and violent rhetoric.

2. I can’t support regressive thinking that longs for a time when life was worse for nearly everybody except white people like me.

Whether you like President Barack Obama or not, former religious right activist Frank Schaeffer told the ugly truth about contemporary conservatism: It has carried out a vicious “slow motion lynching” of our first African-American president. Today’s conservatives have been undermining voting rights for minorities, vilifying immigrants, scapegoating LGBTQ people, and resurrecting white privilege and white supremacy to maintain systemic injustice. One simple word in Trump’s campaign slogan — “again” — harkens back to a time of deep discrimination against everyone who doesn’t look like or prays like me.

3. I won’t be pandered to or manipulated based on religious self-interest or bigotry.

Today’s conservatives support a frightening array of proposals that go against our Constitution’s call for “equal protection”: banning people from entering the country based on religion, mass surveillance of communities based on religion and creating registries of people based on religion.

4. I am drawn to policies that support conquering poverty, not perpetuating it.

When I began to understand the complex causes and conditions that trap people in poverty, I better understood the need for quality education, nutrition, health care, childcare, occupational safety, fair pay, racial equity, and public transportation. I became increasingly drawn to leaders who work to reduce poverty

by reducing teen pregnancy, addiction, family breakdown, domestic violence, gangs, mass incarceration, and untreated mental illnesses. In short, the more I became committed to poverty reduction, the more I saw how conservatism keeps people trapped in poverty.

5. I cannot support the massive transfer of wealth from the poor and middle classes to the rich.

Conservatives often complain that liberals want to transfer wealth, but the fact is, for decades conservatives have supported a massive transfer of wealth to those who need it least. They have long promised that if we just help the rich through tax cuts, deregulation, and undermining worker rights, the benefits would “trickle down” to the rest of us. When I was younger, I was naive enough to believe this kind of voodoo economics, but with age I’ve come to see that all that actually trickles down is toxic slurry of pollution, unemployment, crumbling infrastructure and economic inequality that is pummeling Americans, regardless of race or religion.

6. I have grown so tired of being misinformed and manipulated about abortion.

Here are the facts: Abortion rates went up under former Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, then down under Bill Clinton, remained level during George W. Bush and have fallen about 13 percent during the Obama administration. There were 29 abortions per 1000 women aged 15-44 in the Reagan years, and the number has dropped to 16 today. As evangelical-born writer Rachel Held Evans has said, criminalizing abortion only reduces its safety, not its incidence.

The conservative culture war on abortion has failed. Its “baby-killer/women-hater” rhetoric has polarized and paralyzed us for decades. If we want to reduce abortion, we must focus on policies that have been proven to do so: better education, health care, and wages — which, it turns out, are policies that also improve women’s lives and strengthen families.

7. I care about the health of the earth.

My faith leads me to support environmental policies that build a cleaner, more sustainable and ultimately more profitable future. When I hear conservative candidates talk about shutting down the Environmental Protection Agency and getting rid of government regulations that protect the environment, I wonder how many more Flint-style water crises there will be, how many more Gulf oil spill disasters there will be, how many more inches (or feet!) the sea will rise, and how much national and global instability will result. I’m no fan of big government, but conservatives argue for shrinking government to a size that it can no longer hold big business accountable as it plunders our one and only beautiful planet earth for short-term profit and long-term disaster.

8. I won’t feed terrorism.

Too few conservatives seem to understand the simple strategy of terrorism: use inexpensive, unpredictable, and highly visible attacks to instil fear among rich and powerful nations to entice them to bankrupt themselves financially and morally through endless and unwinnable wars. When conservatives advocate for “bomb the hell out of them,” “waterboarding” and “carpet-bombing” strategies to beat terrorism, they are foolishly marching us right into the trap the terrorists have set.

9. I am sincerely concerned about Trump’s base.

A good friend of mine, a Trump supporter, said this to me the other day: “Whatever you think of Trump, white men like me feel like we’ve lost a lot. We’re everybody’s whipping boy. We’re tired of being disrespected. Trump gets that.” I think there are millions of Americans, many of them white and working class, who feel like my friend. Their jobs were shipped overseas. They’ve been hurt by an economy that aggregates wealth at the very top. They’ve fallen between the cracks of a dysfunctional Congress so

divided that it gets next to nothing done. Sadly, beyond stirring them up with angry speeches, once Trump gets what he wants from them — their vote — he'll leave them even worse off and therefore angrier. We need actual policies that will help them build a better future, not vain promises about returning to the past.

10. I believe in the power of love, not the love of power.

I understand that millions of Americans are pumped up by Trump's talk about being tough, his "punch him in the face" bluster, and his disgust with a free press, and his glib praise of dictators and torture. But my faith leads me to see true greatness in service and true power in love, self-control, and neighbourliness — not domination, reactivity, and revenge. Trump's love of power may have served him well in business and entertainment, but in political leadership, it will be his Achilles' heel, and his reactivity and lack of humility will make him chaotic and dangerous."

He went on in conversation. "I don't always agree with everything that goes under the label of progressive, and progressives need to be way more effective at communicating and implementing their best ideas. But I cannot support any party or candidate — local, state, federal or presidential — characterized by mean-spiritedness, bigotry, unfairness, carelessness toward the poor, funnelling wealth to the richest, undermining abortion reduction, destroying our fragile planet, playing into the hands of terrorists, exploiting the anger of suffering people, and being driven more by the love of power than the power of love."

As vicar of a parish on the border, I hope that sharing these thoughts from my US pastor friend, Brian D. McLaren, might assist Canadian Christians in helping us talk with our US neighbours and help us in our clarity as to why we feel called to be Progressive Christians.