n Washington, the new year brings a new Congress, a new administration, a new balance of power, and carries with it new opportunities to pursue legislation that will serve Southern Baptists and the common good. The following lays out our priority legislative and policy initiatives we will engage this year. We have worked on some of these issues before in previous legislative sessions; some of these issues are new. Though not exhaustive, this agenda provides insight into the range of issues the ERLC will focus on this year.

**Sanctity of Human Life**

Scripture teaches us that every person is an image-bearer of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Moreover, Scripture is clear that the womb is God’s domain, and that his knowledge of the unborn even precedes the creative act of conception (Jer. 1:5; Ps. 139:13). It is estimated that over 3,000 abortions take place in the United States every day. These are precious human lives denied both personhood and protection by an on-demand abortion culture. This year, we will continue our fight on
behalf of the most vulnerable among us, beginning with our second annual Evangelicals For Life conference in Washington, D.C. Additionally, with the current congressional makeup, we are hopeful regarding our intended advocacy for a number of key pro-life legislative initiatives:

- **Defund Planned Parenthood**: The ERLC is committed to seeing the nation’s largest abortion provider (Planned Parenthood Federation of America) deprived of federal funds. A defund effort was pursued in the last congress only to see the president veto the bill once it reached his desk.

- **Pro-Life Supreme Court Nominee**: The untimely passing of Justice Antonin Scalia in early 2016 left the Supreme Court with an uncertain future. Given the current makeup of the Court, the proposed nominee—and the convictions that he or she holds—will play a critical role in future Court decisions that will, in turn, shape American life. The ERLC will press for a Supreme Court nominee who, among other things, rightly objects to the so-called constitutional right to abortion and who carry the mantle of Justice Scalia’s legacy.

- **No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act**: In the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*, the Hyde Amendment was introduced to prevent taxpayer dollars from being spent on abortion. Since its enactment in 1976, congress has passed the amendment as a temporary rider which expires each year. The No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act would codify the Hyde Amendment by prohibiting federal funds from being expended for abortion or health coverage that includes coverage for elective abortion.

- **Pain Capable Unborn Child Protection Act**: Currently, the U.S. is one of only seven nations in the world that allows elective abortions after 20 weeks post-fertilization. The Pain Capable Unborn Child Protection Act would prohibit the performing (or attempted performance) of abortions on babies at 20 weeks or greater gestation, except in cases of rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother. In the previous congress, the bill passed the House. The Senate, however, failed to reach the 60 vote threshold needed to pass the bill, and the measure was withdrawn. We will push for both chambers to reconsider the bill this year.

- **The Born Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act**: Federal law does not adequately protect a born child who survives a failed abortion. In that moment, such children deserve all of the medical care possible. The Born Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act would amend the federal criminal code to require any health care practitioner who is present when a child is born alive following an abortion or attempted abortion to 1) exercise the same degree of care as reasonably provided to any other child born alive at the same gestational age, and 2) ensure that such a child is immediately admitted to a hospital.

- **Mexico City Policy**: Funding of abortions overseas with foreign aid monies has been banned since 1973 under the Helms Amendment. In 1984, then President Ronald Reagan enacted
the Mexico City Policy to require that NGOs receiving federal funds for work overseas neither perform or actively promote abortion as a method of family planning in other nations. The policy has been reversed with each subsequent change in administration, having been rescinded in 2009 by President Obama. The ERLC will advocate for its reinstatement.

The ERLC will also monitor and be increasingly vocal against the rise of physician-assisted suicide, as such is incompatible with the biblical witness and overall pro-life position. Proposals to legalize this practice are active at the state level across the country.

**Religious Liberty**

We learn from Romans 13:1–7 that governments and rulers have authority because that authority has been given by God. God alone is the Creator of the universe and Lord of the conscience, and recognizing God’s authority also means recognizing that man’s authority is never all-encompassing but is limited and to be exercised within parameters that God sets. The Founders understood this basic reality in crafting the First Amendment, which limits the power of government to provide religious freedom for American citizens. Baptists have always been at the forefront both among Christians insisting on religious freedom as a biblical teaching and in the public square contending for religious freedom for all. The ERLC will continue our work to defend the free exercise of faith for all believers. These are a few issues we expect to work on in the coming year:

- **Repeal the HHS Mandate:** Issued by the Department of Health & Human Services under the authority of the Affordable Care Act, this rule forces certain employers to provide FDA-approved contraceptives and abortion-causing drugs within their health care benefits. Employers with religious and ethical objections face staggering fines if they refuse. The ERLC fought the Obama administration’s HHS Mandate since its proposal, including before the U.S. Supreme Court. Because the HHS Mandate was not created by legislation, rescinding the mandate provides a religious liberty and pro-life win for the Trump administration that doesn’t require an act of Congress.

- **Healthcare conscience protection:** The ERLC will continue to support the Conscience Protection Act and other legislative tools that seek to protect pro-life citizens who work in the healthcare industry. While we work to end the practice of abortion-on-demand, it is also an unconscionable breach of conscience when pro-life healthcare workers are forced to participate in abortions and other medical procedures which conflict with their religiously informed conscience.
• **Oppose the Department of Education’s interpretation of Title IX:** Title IX is a complex federal law that ensures that men and women are treated equally in educational settings. A new rule by the Obama Administration’s Department of Education redefined “sex” under the statute to mean not biological sex but gender identity. This interpretation will have far-reaching consequences for our nation’s education system at all levels, particularly concerning student privacy and parental rights. We will fight against this new regulation in the courts and at the agency level, and we will support new legislation to overrule this regulation.

• **Implications of the sexual revolution dogma in the military:** Our nation goes to great, if imperfect, lengths to facilitate the free exercise of religion by active duty service members at home and abroad. Those lengths include the provision of chaplains and assorted accommodations. As sexual revolution dogma propagates throughout the federal government, conflicts continue to develop for those who hold to God’s design for human sexuality. The normalization of ideas like same-sex marriage and transgenderism creates conflicts of conscience and religious freedom and the effects of such ideology on combat readiness are yet to be seen.

• **Restoration of Russell Amendment protections:** Due to an executive order by President Obama, all federal contractors and subcontractors are required to positively affirm “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” (“SOGI”), or else forfeit eligibility for federal contracts. Rep. Steve Russell (OK-5) sought to protect the religious freedom of both contractors, chaplains, and service members. Sadly, the Russell Amendment was abandoned for the Fiscal Year 2017 by lawmakers in both parties. Until religious exemptions are restored—either by an act of Congress or the rescinding of the Executive Order 13672—the religious freedom of military personnel and federal contractors is being violated.

The ERLC will also work to secure the passage of the First Amendment Defense Act, discussed below in the Family & Marriage section. During the Obama administration our nation witnessed some of the most pernicious and voluminous breaches of domestic religious freedom by the federal government in recent history. The ERLC will continue to advocate for religious freedom for all people of all faiths, a conviction which remains a distinctive in the baptist tradition.

**Family and Marriage**

Marriage is a gift from God. It provides stability for raising children (Prov. 1:8), serves as the basic human social structure (Gen. 2:18-25), and illustrates the relationship between Christ and his Church (Eph. 5:22-33). Marriage is an essential, foundational institution for human life and flourishing. We will work in the coming year to defend God’s design for marriage amidst related policy items. Here are a few of particular interest:
• **First Amendment Defense Act (FADA):** FADA prevents the federal government from punishing an individual or faith-based business because they believe that marriage is an institution between a man and a woman. If FADA-like protections are not enacted in the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the ramifications for those who hold to a biblical view of marriage are likely to be dramatic. Likely casualties include a host of businesses, adoption/foster care agencies, government contractors and grant recipients, and religious institutions—including higher educational institutions along with students seeking federal aid to attend them.

• **Civil Rights Uniformity Act:** One legislative response to unfounded interpretations of the words “sex” and “gender” by federal agencies is the Civil Rights Uniformity Act. This act would require the approval of Congress before “gender identity” is treated as a protected class in Federal Law or Policy, thus preventing such policies from being fabricated by Executive Branch bureaucracies.

• **Women in combat and the draft:** The increasing number of female service members put at risk in combat situations is disconcerting. Further, rhetoric during the 2016 election cycle included skirmishes wherein otherwise social conservative policy makers inexplicably affirmed forcing our teenage daughters to be registered in the Selective Service. Such policies are both a logical outworking of the sexual revolution and in direct conflict with biblical manhood and womanhood. The ERLC will continue to discourage such policies.

• **Revive obscenity prosecution:** The Obama administration’s Department of Justice terminated the Obscenity Prosecution Task Force (OPTF). Though the Department continued to prosecute cases involving children (which is essential), they ignored virtually all other violations of existing federal law which makes production and distribution of hardcore pornography illegal. The ERLC will monitor Department of Justice activity on this issue to see if there is measurable difference in the Trump administration.

In addition to these issues we’ll monitor adoption-related policies. Especially as proposals for tax reform begin to develop we’ll keep an eye out for policies that would make adoption more costly. Moreover, we will continue to advocate for the human dignity of immigrant and refugee families in the United States.

**Justice**

Scripture unequivocally teaches that God is just (Deut. 32:4). And as Christians we rightly bear the call to reflect the justice of God as we seek to be faithful followers of the Lord, Jesus Christ. That mandate can be seen most clearly in the words of the prophet Micah: “He has told you,
O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” In our advocacy for fair and impartial judgment, and equitable treatment of the unjustly oppressed and marginalized, we bear witness to a God who is ultimately the just Judge, and a gospel that saves indiscriminately and without partiality. Here are some of the issues that the ERLC will seek justice on in this Congress:

- **Criminal Justice Reform:** In a show of true bipartisanship, this past Congress both Democrats and Republicans came together to work on a package to reform the American criminal justice system. The ERLC will once again push for the consideration of the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act. The bill takes a targeted, nuanced approach at reducing certain mandatory minimums while also directing the Department of Justice to expand recidivism reduction programming in partnership with nonprofit and faith-based organizations.

- **Poverty:** It is true that poverty has many causes. Personal choices account for only some of the problem. In other instances, local and federal policies impede access to upward mobility and reasonable opportunity. The ERLC will continue to engage with Speaker Ryan’s poverty task force which has outlined a number of goals and policy reforms.

- **Payday Lending:** The continued growth of the payday lending industry has meant a devastatingly endless cycle of debt and despair for millions of Americans across the country—many of whom sit among us in our pews on any given Sunday. In theory, there is nothing wrong with small, short-term loans. However, when the annual interest rate on such loans approach 400 percent (as it has in some states), the result is an industry that can only be described as predatory. Congress has already enacted a 36 percent annual interest rate cap on loans to members of the military. We believe that all Americans deserve such protection. In cooperation with the Faith for Just Lending Coalition, the ERLC will continue to advocate for federal legislation that will impose a lending and interest rate cap on these organizations.

Additionally, the ERLC will continue to be active in the ongoing fight against systemic, societal ills like human trafficking and structural racism.

**International Engagement**

Just as the ERLC is focused on advocating for human dignity, religious liberty, the family, and justice issues in the United States, we advance the same agenda internationally. In so doing, we respond to the call of the Scriptures to “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all
who are destitute” (Prov. 31:8). The ERLC’s international work is focused on the most vulnerable, such as religious minorities and victims of human trafficking.

- **Speedy appointment of an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.** The Office of International Religious Freedom within the U.S. Department of State is one of the most important institutions for promoting religious freedom and protecting religious minorities, including Christian minority communities, around the world. The office’s tools were recently strengthened through the successful passage of the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, due in part to the ERLC’s advocacy efforts. The Ambassadorship was vacant for nearly two-and-a-half years during the Obama administration, and we call upon the Trump administration to prioritize this appointment. Religious minorities around the world are depending on a strong Ambassador for International Religious Freedom.

- **Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act:** After years of silence and in response to advocacy from the ERLC and other organizations, the Obama Administration in 2016 formally declared that the so-called Islamic State had committed genocide against Christians, Yezidis, Shia Muslims, and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria. This important piece of legislation would support efforts to bring those who have perpetrated genocide to justice and would provide aid to genocide survivors and the families of genocide victims.

- **Reauthorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA):** The cornerstone of U.S. efforts to combat international human trafficking, the TVPA will expire this year unless reauthorized by Congress. The bill creates several federal crimes for human trafficking and establishes the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons within the State Department. We will work to ensure the TVPA is reauthorized in 2017.

- **Fighting global antisemitism:** There has been an alarming rise of antisemitic incidents in Europe and antisemitic speech around the world, particularly in the Middle East. Additionally, the United Nations has a long history of singling out and seeking to isolate the state of Israel. Most recently, this has occurred through passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2334, but there are countless other examples, including the recent UNESCO resolution denying Jewish connection to the Temple Mount. Through collaborative action with like minded organizations, we will work against such action at the United Nations, and the ERLC will continue its work defending victims of antisemitic incidents in Europe and antisemitic speech around the world, particularly in the Middle East.

- **Humanitarian crisis in Syria:** The Syrian Civil War, which will soon be in its sixth year, has already displaced more than half of the population of Syria. Jesus calls us to serve the
“least of these,” and we will work with the new administration to find ways to provide relief to refugees and Syrian internally displaced persons who have lost their homes and their way of life due to the civil war.

The ERLC will remain engaged internationally in other ways as well, such as direct advocacy for victims of religious persecution, working with the State Department to apply pressure on foreign governments, and raising awareness about injustice and persecution around the world.

**Conclusion**

Washington D.C., remains a deeply divided city along partisan lines, and the political environment can be toxic. But we know that God has his own agenda, and our objective is to align ourselves with the ways God is moving in Washington to the benefit of the United States and the world as a whole. We will commit ourselves to understanding and discerning his will as we bring Southern Baptist biblical convictions to bear on the great public policy questions of our day. We ask that our brothers and sisters join us in prayer and action as we seek together to be used by God for his purposes on earth.