This year brings the beginning of the 114th Congress, and with it new opportunities to advance legislative issues important to Southern Baptists. The following is a partial listing of the various legislative and policy initiatives we will engage this year as part of our stewardship of God’s design for government. Some of these initiatives are carryovers from the previous Congress, others are new developments. While not exhaustive, this agenda provides insight into the range of issues the ERLC will attempt to address in the coming year.

SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

Of all the areas of interest to the ERLC, the sanctity of human life remains a chief concern. Psalm 139 reminds us that God is intimately involved in the development of every person. He is also concerned about how people treat each other. Jesus said that we are to act in love toward each other (Luke 10:25-37). The first act of love we can show toward fellow humans is to seek to protect them in their most vulnerable stage—in the womb. While we are not yet at the place politically or culturally to reverse the horrific 1973 Supreme Court decisions legalizing abortion on demand, we believe some steps to rein in the worst abuses are possible. Several bills offer us the opportunity to do just that.

The Abortion Non-Discrimination Act (S. 50) amends the Public Health Service Act to codify the Hyde-Weldon Amendment. Hyde-Weldon prohibits the federal government and any state or local government that receives federal financial assistance from subjecting any health professional, hospital, provider sponsored organization, health maintenance organization, accountable care organization, health insurance plan, or any other kind of health care facility, organization, or plan from discriminating against entities that refuse to participate in abortion-related activities. The bill also includes a private right of action for health care providers to file suit against a discriminating governmental entity. Language was included in last year’s package of bills to keep the government running (A.K.A. the Cromnibus) instructing the Administration to investigate violations of the Hyde-Weldon Amendment in California law. But until we have a law codifying Hyde-Weldon, we will continue to see efforts to marginalize those with pro-life convictions. Neither chamber has voted on the bill.

Parents should be informed before their minor daughter is subjected to an abortion. The
Child Interstate Abortion Notification Act (S. 404) would significantly address this concern. It prohibits the transportation of a minor girl across state lines for an abortion to circumvent parental notification or parental consent laws in the girl’s home state. The bill also requires an abortion provider in a state without a parental notification requirement to notify a parent before performing an abortion on a minor girl from another state. Neither chamber has voted on the bill.

Based on strong evidence that unborn babies experience pain by 20 weeks gestation, if not earlier, the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act (H.R. 36) prohibits performing or attempting to perform abortions on babies at 20 weeks or greater gestation, except in cases of rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother. The House was poised to vote on this bill on January 22, 2015, during the March for Life. Leadership pulled the bill at the last minute due to concerns raised by a few members of Congress about requirements that victims of rape or incest must report the crime to law enforcement. Revised reporting language is being worked on now. The Senate also has yet to act on it.

When they pulled the Pain Capable bill, House leadership brought the No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion and Abortion Insurance Full Disclosure Act of 2015 (H.R. 7) up for a vote. This bill combines two originally separate bills. It does two things. First, it establishes a government-wide statutory prohibition on funding elective abortion by codifying a patchwork of funding-restrictive policies. Currently, many of these must be reauthorized as riders to annual appropriations bills. Second, it requires that consumers be made aware of the extent to which abortion is covered in health insurance plans and the cost of this coverage in the plans they are considering. The government funding bill passed by Congress late last year (A.K.A. the Cognibus) included language instructing the Administration “to provide additional clarification” on abortion provisions in health plans. H.R. 7 will help assure this is done. The bill passed in the House, and is awaiting action in the Senate. We also support the Title X Abortion Provider Prohibition Act (S. 51/H.R. 217). This bill prohibits the government from directing Title X family planning funds to family planning agencies that provide abortions or provide funds to any other entity that performs abortions. Neither chamber has voted on this bill.

Our country’s commitment to eliminating discrimination based on sex should extend to every stage of human life. The Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act (PRENDA) (S. 48) seeks to uphold that conviction. The bill prohibits sex selection abortion and the coercion of a woman to obtain an abortion based on the sex of the unborn child. The legislation also enables civil penalties to be levied against those who aid or support such abortions. Regrettably, S. 48 does not address race selection abortion. In the 113th Congress, the House version of this bill included a prohi-
bition on racial discrimination in abortion. We are seeking this inclusion in the House version this Congress as well. Neither chamber has voted on the bill.

**REligious freedom**

Religious freedom is a first right. God gave humans the freedom to decide whether or not to worship Him. He made the human conscience and He intended it to be inviolable (Matthew 23:37). If God will not violate the religious freedom He granted to humanity, government should not either. The ERLC will continue to work to protect faith from governmental interference, as we believe God would have us do. The following are some of the issues we will engage.

Religious minorities continue to face mounting persecution in many places around the world. Minority Christian groups are being brutally attacked in some areas. Anti-semitism is on the rise in some places as well. We were very pleased that the Administration nominated Rabbi David Saperstein for the position of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom at the State Department. While we have expressed concerns about some of Rabbi Saperstein’s social views, we are deeply impressed by his decades-long record in advocating for the kinds of religious freedom protections needed right now in the international context. Rabbi Saperstein’s position provides counsel to the president and other administration decision-makers regarding religious freedom violators around the world. He will also advocate for religious freedom around the world. We will work closely with Rabbi Saperstein to help protect religious freedom for all people of faith.

Last year, Congress also passed the *Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act of 2014* (S. 653/H.R. 301). We strongly supported passage of this bill. This law directs the president to appoint a special envoy in the State Department to promote religious freedom of religious minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. The president has not appointed this person yet. We will continue to emphasize the importance of this role, especially in light of what is happening to religious minorities of all faiths in this region.

This year, we will also find ourselves working tirelessly to ensure reauthorization of the *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* (USCIRF). This Commission conducts research on religious freedom violations around the world and offers to the State Department and Congress counsel and recommendations for action on violators. The Commission has gone through a number of changes the last few years. Its existence was extended into 2015, but it needs a longer term authorization. We believe the Commission is functioning
extremely well and fills a needed role in monitoring religious freedom around the world. We will work to ensure its long-term viability.

Threats to religious freedom come in many forms. The Affordable Care Act has introduced a number of concerns. The Health Care Conscience Rights Act would protect religious freedom under health care in three ways: (1) issues a full exemption from the Obama administration’s abortion/contraceptive mandate for those objecting due to deeply held religious convictions; (2) provides conscience protections for individuals and health care entities that refuse to provide, pay for, or refer patients to abortion providers; and (3) applies a private right of action to ensure that victims of discrimination can seek redress in court. As of the release of this agenda, the bill has not been introduced in either chamber.

As our government embraces an unbiblical view of marriage, it is likely that those with religious convictions that marriage is only the union of one man and one woman will come under scrutiny. The Marriage and Religious Freedom Act, which was introduced in the 113th Congress, prohibits the federal government from taking an adverse action against a person if the person acts in accordance with a religious belief that: (1) marriage is or should be recognized as the union of one man and one woman, or (2) sexual relations are properly reserved to such a marriage.

Additionally, we are continuing to work with lawmakers and other interested groups to introduce a bill that would protect the religious freedom of adoption agencies to place children in homes according to their convictions, especially as they relate to marriage.

We are also still closely monitoring the situation for men and women of faith in our nation’s armed services. We are pleased to have been able to join with other concerned groups to have important religious liberty protection language for chaplains and military personnel added to the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The language protects the right of service members to hold and freely practice their religious beliefs. In addition, language protecting the rights of chaplains to conduct their ministries in accordance with the dictates of their conscience without fear of reprisal was approved earlier in 2013. We will continue to work this year with other concerned groups to seek ways to continue to protect the right of our men and women serving in harm’s way to live out the dictates of their faith as they put their lives on the line for their country.

At times, the ERLC finds itself in the position of opposing legislation as well. One of the pieces of legislation we will continue to oppose this Congress is the Employment Non-Discrimi-
nation Act (ENDA). This bill prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity by employers, employment agencies, labor organizations, or joint labor-management committees. While it exempts some overtly religious organizations, it does not take into consideration all faith-based organizations or the faith-informed convictions of for-profit business owners. It also threatens the ability of people of faith to share their faith-informed convictions about sexuality without fear of retaliation.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

God ordained the family and rooted it in the union of one man and one woman. The book of Genesis tells us that God determined it was not good for man to be alone. He instituted marriage as exclusively the union of one man and one woman, and He intended children to be conceived and raised in that environment (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25). Our culture may be moving away from that ideal, but that does not change God’s design. Family breakdown is also not in the best interest of men, women, children, and society. The ERLC will do all it can to protect God’s design for marriage and speak to the needs of families in 2015. Here are a few ways we will do that legislatively.

As courts continue to strike down the rights of citizens to define marriage in their states, a federal legislative solution becomes ever more needed. The State Marriage Defense Act would instruct the federal government to look to a person’s state of legal residence when determining marital status and application of federal marriage law. The bill also lets each state decide for itself who qualifies within their state for marriage benefits. With the Supreme Court set to rule this year on the constitutionality of state efforts to define marriage as only the union of one man and one woman, we are watching closely to determine if this bill or something additional is needed in response.

We will work to remove barriers to adoption. Tens of thousands of children around the world are living in orphanages. Yet there are many good families in this country eager to adopt them. Our country can do more to help connect these children with loving families. Both will benefit as a result. The Children in Families First Act simplifies the process for families seeking to adopt children internationally and helps foreign governments develop stronger child welfare systems that can find a caring family for every child in need. Among other things, the bill would create a focal point within the U.S. State Department for vulnerable children and family security; streamline responsibility for nearly all processing of intercountry adoption cases in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS); and establish a Center of Excellence within USAID, dedicated to implementation of the 2012 National Action Plan on Children in
Adversity. The bill has not been introduced in either chamber yet. An additional area of concern to us is the growth of the payday lending industry. This industry provides small, short-term loans to people. In theory, the practice sounds helpful, but in application it is extremely predatory. In some states, the annual interest rates on these loans approach 400 percent. Because they are short-term loans, often two weeks, hence the term “payday” loans, the borrowers are often unable to repay them. Lenders then renew their loans. This practice often traps borrowers in an endless debt trap. We believe our country needs a uniform lending cap to protect vulnerable people from such predatory practices. Congress has already enacted a 36 percent annual interest rate cap on loans to members of the military. We believe that the rest of the population deserves similar protections. We will work this year to have legislation introduced that will rein in the worst of these predatory lending abuses.

We have also become increasingly concerned about our nation’s criminal justice system. The system has become very effective at removing criminals from the population, and we appreciate these efforts. Those who engage in criminal behavior should be punished. However, we believe the system is much more effective at punishment than at rehabilitation. We must not only punish offenders. We must also do all we can to help them break the cycle of criminality in their lives so they can reclaim the rest of their lives once they have paid their debt to society. Currently, too many men and women are repeat offenders. We support efforts to give these men and women a second chance at life after incarceration. The Second Chance Reauthorization Act helps to provide just this kind of support. The bill reauthorizes the original 2008 law, which expired in 2013, and makes some important changes in it. It opens more of the grant process to faith-based groups and it streamlines some of the programs that can be funded. Fortunately, Congress has continued to appropriate money for the existing law, but these changes will make the law more effective.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Both the Old and New Testaments tell us that humans are supposed to look out for each other. In God’s design, we are our brother’s keeper (Genesis 4:1-10), and we are supposed to act with neighbor love toward others (Luke 10:25-37). This attitude is in great need today. The ERLC has many concerns about the treatment of people around the globe. We engage at many levels to help alleviate human suffering and governmental overreach into people’s lives.

We highlight here two efforts we will continue to engage this year, one concerning inhumane prison conditions around the world and a second focused on Internet firewall circumvention. First, the Foreign Prison Conditions Improvement Act brings U.S. pressure to bear on foreign
governments to institute some basic humanitarian measures to address deplorable prison conditions. It seeks to ensure access to clean drinking water, basic medical care, protection from the elements, and adequate sleeping space, among other things. It also presses for inmates to be given access to family members and legal representation. Neither chamber has voted on the bill.

Second, we will work to gain adequate funding commitments by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) for Internet firewall circumvention technology that will enable people in closed countries, like China and Vietnam, to access information and communicate with others over the Internet without fear of governmental censorship or reprisal. The BBG has already stated this technology is one of its priorities. They just need some guidance from lawmakers on the allocation of their current funding.

**IMMIGRATION REFORM**

The Old Testament is filled with God’s call to His people to “love the stranger” in their midst (Leviticus 19:34). Jesus told His disciples that their care for the stranger was a direct reflection of their own spiritual vitality (Matthew 25:31-46). The biblical call to care for the stranger has a direct bearing on our treatment of undocumented immigrants in this nation. While the ERLC has not endorsed any particular immigration reform legislation, we continue to call on lawmakers to support just and compassionate immigration reform that includes undocumented immigrants.

Congress is currently working on several bills to address various aspects of immigration reform. We do not see any likelihood for the introduction of a comprehensive bill by either chamber. The introduction of a number of separate targeted bills is acceptable to us, provided that the end result implements the goals expressed by the Southern Baptist Convention in its resolutions on immigration reform and follows the six principles set forth by the Evangelical Immigration Table:

- Respects the God-given dignity of every person
- Protects the unity of the immediate family
- Respects the rule of law
- Guarantees secure national borders
- Ensures fairness to taxpayers
- Establishes a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and who
wish to become permanent residents.
With more than 11 million undocumented immigrants in our nation, and more joining them every year, our country cannot allow the status quo to continue. It isn’t good for them or our nation. We look forward to finally achieving this historic goal in 2015.

CONCLUSION

As noted earlier, these are just some of the legislative issues we will engage in 2015. Some bills we will support are still in development. New ones will arise during the year as well. Furthermore, this agenda does not address our efforts to engage myriad other areas of concern at the legislative and policy level, like sex trafficking, pornography, poverty, hunger, homosexuality, and gambling, for example. While the environment remains very toxic politically, we know God has an agenda of His own. We will seek to understand His will as we bring Southern Baptist biblical convictions to bear on the great public policy questions of our day. We ask that every concerned Christian join us in prayer and action in this Kingdom effort to be instruments of God’s will on earth.