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How would Jesus vote? Religious groups' voter guides focus on both ends of the political spectrum and differing concepts of 'values'

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Jonathan Miller, the state treasurer of Kentucky, visited some of the poorest parts of his state in 2004 while campaigning on behalf of state legislative candidates. He knocked on doors of mobile homes without running water or indoor plumbing, and expected to talk about education opportunities and affordable health care. Yet the most frequent question he was asked was, "What is your position on gay marriage?" As candidates reach out to the constituency known as "values voters," voter guides are available to help people of faith make informed decisions. But Miller's story illustrates the divide in opinions on what values should most motivate them.

Some guides advise voters to choose candidates based on their views on certain issues, like abortion. Some newer guides argue against using such "litmus tests" and urge voters to more broadly apply Christian moral values in the voting booth, partly by focusing on the common good.

"The Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics," developed by San Diego-based Catholic Answers, lists five "non-negotiable" issues Catholics should consider when voting, calling them "actions that are intrinsically evil and must never be promoted by law." They are abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning and homosexual "marriage." They offer a similar "Voter's Guide for Serious Christians," substituting Scripture references in place of Catholic catechism citations. Both versions are available in Spanish. The group distributed 10 million copies in 2004, said Jimmy Akin, director of communications for Catholic Answers Action, a separate organization that promotes and sells the guides for 40 cents or less for bulk orders and has a mission "to bring moral principles to the public sphere." "Nobody is expected to check their values at the door. That's the nature of democracy," Akin said.

Another Catholic voter guide, being passed out in Catholic churches in the U.S. starting this week, argues against basing votes on a few issues. It encourages Catholic voters to inform their consciences, apply prudence and vote for the common good "by focusing on what's best for everyone, especially the poor and vulnerable." The 12-page guide, "Voting for the Common Good: A Practical Guide for Conscientious Catholics," was developed by a new organization, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. They printed 1 million copies, and hope at least that many more are circulated through their online version (available in English and Spanish).

The Rev. David Hollenbach, director of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice and a professor at Boston College, is on the speaker's board for the alliance. He said the guide is a response to a trend of reducing Catholic teaching to a few issues at election times, he said. That trend is inconsistent with the breadth of Catholic teaching, he said, because it "undermines the Christian responsibility for the common good ... [and] tends to cut off debate about a number of urgent moral and social issues at a time when we really need to be finding effective ways to deal with them." The guide lists 18 issues important to Catholics, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, but does not state what a Catholic must believe on those issues. "It rejects voting based on litmus tests," said Alexia Kelley, executive director of the Alliance.

Both groups declined to name any contacts in Arkansas who might distribute the guides.

The Rev. Erik Pohlmeier, the pastor of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Hot Springs, said the diocese probably wouldn't forbid either guide. But if he were to use any, he would choose the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2003 paper, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility." That document echoes the developers of both voter guides in saying people of faith have a responsibility to apply values in the voting booth and an opportunity to affect the

direction of their state or nation with their votes.

AN INDIVIDUAL MATTER The Rev. Stephen Copley, senior pastor at First United Methodist Church in North Little Rock, agrees that individuals can act out their faith in ways that make a difference. He did that as part of a coalition of pastors and other groups that supported a successful effort to raise the minimum wage in Arkansas in April. But that is a personal responsibility, and it's not the job of a pastor or church to influence the way someone votes, he said.

"It's very important that people of faith go and vote their conscience. I think that's critical," he said. But he never distributes voter guides in church or allows them to be available in the lobby, "just out of the understanding that within the church we all have a variety of understandings. ... I hope that as people come to worship and study Scripture and how that impacts their lives, that's what they take into the voting booth." That kind of sentiment is partly what led Miller, the Kentucky treasurer and a Jew, to write his new book *The Compassionate Community: Ten Values to Unite America*. The values are based on the simple idea, and biblical command, to "Love your neighbor as yourself," Miller said.

Both ends of the political spectrum have made mistakes in dealing with "values voters," he said. "The right likes to tell voters, 'This is how you need to think,' while the left tends to say, 'Let's stop talking about it, let's ignore religion.' The great majority of Americans are in this middle where we're struggling with our faith every day. What I argue is let's get to this great debate" over what values should motivate people of faith. "We're going to find out we have a lot more in common." The 10 values - among them responsibility, work, family, freedom, justice, peace and life - are consistent with the concept of the common good, he said. "Our religious traditions tell us selfishness is not a moral value." Several of those values appear in one of the thickest voter guides, from Sojourners/Call to Renewal, an organization that publishes *Sojourners* magazine and is led by Jim Wallis, author of *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*.

The 20-page "action guide" is boldly named "Voting God's Politics." It discusses religion's role in a democratic society, lists 10 ways to get involved, offers weekly sermon topics and advises how to stay on the good side of IRS rules for religious organizations in election seasons. An "Issues Guide" identifies basic Christian values (among them peace, racial justice, the sacredness of life, ending poverty, human rights, strong families and caring for God's creation). A 21-page "Toolkit for Organizers" offers original prayers related to each of those issues, suggests how to distribute the guide and gives sermon talking points. And a 40-page discussion guide, "Democracy in the Balance," has four units designed for study groups, with essays by Wallis, Bill Moyers, Barack Obama and others.

CHURCHES AND THE LAW Kim Szeto of Call to Renewal said at least 18 churches from nine Arkansas cities had ordered the guides, but was unable to say which churches.

As nonprofit organizations with tax-exempt status, churches can run afoul of the Internal Revenue Service if they cross the line in promoting candidates during worship. The Interfaith Alliance, based in Washington, has produced two booklets to help people avoid that as part of its "One Nation, Many Faiths, Vote 2006" campaign.

One, "A Campaign Season Guide for Houses of Worship," uses a green-light, red-light motif to inform churches what they can and can't do in relation to elections. Participating in voter registration drives, inviting candidates to debates, distributing candidate questionnaires and encouraging a yes or no vote on ballot measures get green lights. Red lights go to endorsing candidates or parties, making financial donations, posting signs favoring a candidate or party, or allowing distribution of partisan voter guides.

The other, "Running for Office in a Multi-Faith Nation," guides candidates in negotiating issues of religion and values.

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance and a Baptist preacher, said the guides were developed because of what he sees as increasing entanglement of government and religion, such as federal Faith-Based Initiatives, which he calls "government-subsidized religion" and has advocated an end to.

Both guides stress that an elected officials' highest authority for serving constituents is the U.S. Constitution, not his faith.

"This nation was founded by people who saw not only the errors, but the evils of using the government to advance one particular form of religion," he said. "Historically, that has always caused problems." Gaddy believes voter guides are useful, but that church is not the place to hand them out. "There is an implicit religious endorsement of whatever that voter guide says," he said.

Gaddy, like the developers of all the voter guides, believes it's a citizen's responsibility to be educated on the issues and candidates - and he knows that not all voters accomplish that. "I am always fearful that people enter a voting booth as if

they're casting a ballot in a popularity contest," he said.

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