

7 Crucial Questions Driving the Pro-Life Movement in 2016

“Stand up for others: especially the weak, especially the vulnerable.” –President Barack Obama, State of the Union Address, Jan. 12, 2016

During his final address to Congress on Tuesday night, President Obama’s words near the end resonated with Americans of all political persuasions. Yet in delving into what he means by weak and vulnerable, worldviews begin to clash. In law and public policy, specifics matter.

While the president’s speech sidestepped his signature issue of abortion rights—without even a mention of “reproductive choices” or other euphemisms for ending innocent lives—clearly his worldview does not see the preborn as weak or vulnerable. By contrast, compassion for mother and child is the heartbeat of the pro-life movement.

Over the past seven years, the central conflict of pro-life and pro-choice has grown more contentious; 2016 will bring issues into sharp focus. In reaching out to leading pro-life voices, including former nurse Jill Stanek and research scholar Michael New, they illuminate what questions are driving the cause to protect and defend every life.

1. Who Will Win the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election?

Already fraught with unexpected twists and turns, the road to the White House has placed pro-life issues front and center in our culture. Moderators of the first debate last August pressed candidates on their stances against abortion, while the Values Voter Summit again cast a spotlight on their convictions.

Jill Stanek, national campaign chair at Susan B. Anthony List,

begins with Congress when illuminating why the 2016 election matters. "For the first time in history, a majority in both houses voted in favor of a bill to ban all abortions in the second half of pregnancy," says Stanek.

"The only reason our nation hasn't passed a late-term abortion ban is because we have a pro-abortion president—resulting in the direct, calculable loss of 15,000 babies per year who are older than 20 weeks," she states.

Meanwhile, the nation's top abortion provider has made no secret of its political activism. "Planned Parenthood has said it will spend \$20 million in this election. They know this is the big one; if they lose this election, Planned Parenthood will lose more than half of its funding—over \$500 million annually coming from taxpayers. Their political and financial futures are literally on the line."

Several organizations have published comparisons of the candidates' stances on life issues, notably National Right to Life, Heritage Action for America and Susan B. Anthony List.

2. How Will the Supreme Court Rule on Major Pro-Life Cases?

For the first time since 2007, the Supreme Court has taken up a court case centered on abortion practices—specifically, a case in which abortion providers have sued over a Texas state law passed by bipartisan majority. Media outlets from the *Wall Street Journal* to *MSNBC* list the case as one of 2016's biggest.

"HB 2, enacted in 2013, attempts to improve women's health by requiring abortion facilities to have a doctor on staff with admitting privileges at a local hospital," says Michael New, a research scholar at Charlotte Lozier Institute and *National Review* blogger. "It also requires abortion clinics to meet state standards for ambulatory surgical centers."

On March 2 when they hear the Texas case, the nine justices

will consider if the Texas law has been effective in its stated purpose. New adds, "Preliminary data from the Texas Department of State Health Services indicates the number of abortions in Texas fell by 15 percent in 2014."

Another pro-life case surprised Genevieve Plaster of Charlotte Lozier Institute and many others: when the Supreme Court accepted all seven major challenges to the contraception mandate in Obamacare.

"The Supreme Court's decision to hear the Little Sisters' case and the recent bipartisan amicus brief submitted on behalf of 207 Members of Congress in support of the Little Sisters speak to the urgency for a permanent resolution that will respect moral convictions," says Plaster. "Aside from respecting conscience rights, data analyzed from nearly all 50 states show that contraceptive mandates, in fact, do not even reduce the rate of either unintended pregnancies or abortion."

The case hinges on whether the Obama administration can force nuns (among others) to cover abortion-inducing drugs in insurance plans, Plaster notes: "Pro-life individuals and even nonreligious entities continue to challenge the mandate because it includes drugs that can cause abortion before implantation."

Take notice when liberals and conservatives both state the highest court will be pivotal in 2016. In an event last week about the current Supreme Court term, Neera Tanden of the Center for American Progress said, "The court has the potential to place itself at the heart of the political debate we're going to have in the country."

Conservative scholar George Weigel also highlights the court's significance, stating, "The most important numbers to keep in mind between now and Election Day are 78, 80 and 83"—the ages of the three oldest sitting Supreme Court justices, likely to

retire during the next president's term.

3. What Will Congress' Investigation of Planned Parenthood Uncover?

"The Center for Medical Progress videos and the Congressional investigation of Planned Parenthood has damaged their reputation," says Michael New, visiting associate professor of economics at Ave Maria University in Florida. "That said, the government will continue to fund Planned Parenthood as long as Barack Obama (or just about any other Democrat) is in the White House."

New points to recent House and Senate votes on a reconciliation bill as progress. "The Congressional vote to defund Planned Parenthood was historic. This is powerful evidence that, if we elect a pro-life president in 2016, Planned Parenthood may well be defunded at the federal level." Though Congress passed the bill by large majorities, President Obama vetoed it last week.

Congressional leaders will continue to investigate the abortion industry's unethical practices through a select committee with ongoing meetings this year.

4. Why Not Adoption?

Parents of 10 children—six through adoption—Randy and Kelsey Bohlender serve on the pro-life movement's front lines. "The present public opinion about abortion seems to be trending towards disapproval," he says. "Young women are looking at their unintended pregnancy differently than they would have 18 months ago, and many are saying yes to life."

As executive director of Zoe's House Adoption Agency in the Kansas City area, Randy Bohlender reports their work is ramping up. "We are currently considering where our next expansion will be—looking for that right blend of community support and legal environment."

A podcast host and avid blogger, he believes pro-life and adoption ministries will increasingly emphasize new media. "As technology gets cheaper and digital natives mature, influential ministries will begin to reach people with interactive social media, podcasts and platforms yet to be developed," says Bohlender.

"The large brick-and-mortar ministries of the past few decades that struggled with overhead expenses will morph or be overtaken by groups with smaller administrative teams and larger digital footprints," he concludes.

5. Will States Continue to Lead in Protecting Vulnerable Lives?

When pro-life bills in Congress have been thwarted by veto or inaction, states have stepped in to protect preborn lives. "There was almost as many state-level pro-life laws passed between 2011 and 2015 as there were in the past 15 years combined (1996-2010)," says scholar Michael New.

"In 2015, states passed 57 pro-life laws according to Guttmacher Institute. I think the pace of pro-life activity will remain about the same in 2016," he states. Clearly this corresponds to the fact that 219 abortion centers have closed (net) since 2013, and the abortion rate continues to decline.

"States have passed a wide range of pro-life laws, and there is good evidence that these laws are effective," notes New. "The most common types of pro-life laws enacted over the past five years include limits on medication abortion (specifically telemed abortions), limits on the ability of insurance plans to cover abortion and parental involvement laws."

"At least 17 peer-reviewed studies show that parental involvement laws lower minor abortion rates. Additionally, a substantial body of economic and public health research shows that when abortions are subsidized, abortion rates go up," New

concludes, the research showing why defund efforts have had momentum.

At the same time, so-called “death with dignity” laws were proposed in over half of state legislatures last year. “The recent legalization of assisted suicide in California this past October has further emboldened advocates,” says Genevieve Plaster, while noting the bill circumvented normal process.

“Despite their long history of mostly failure, the assisted suicide lobby can be expected to continue their push for legalization in the states,” she continues. “Groups who uphold human dignity would do well to educate and mobilize voters this year on the harms of assisted suicide.”

6. Can the Next Wave of Pro-Life Films Change Hearts and Minds?

Creative filmmakers reveal the value of every life as only good storytellers can. 2015 was no exception, with award-winning documentary *The Drop Box*, real-life drama *Noble* and many others informing the cultural conversation.

2016 brings to the forefront two films that expose serial killer Kermit Gosnell—an abortionist currently serving three life sentences for three murders and more than 200 counts of violating state abortion laws. Starring Dean Cain (TV’s *Superman* during the 1990s) as the lead detective, the crime drama *Gosnell* is expected to release widely in theaters this fall.

Meanwhile, the documentary *3801 Lancaster: American Tragedy* tells the story in Gosnell’s own words ... using exclusive interview footage captured since his prison term began. The independent film is already in limited release.

Two other 2016 documentaries—*Hear from Heaven* centered on the rise of pro-life prayer and *Sweetening the Pill* regarding the risks of contraceptives—are also expected to be conversation

starters, to say the least. An independent feature film, *Voiceless* brings to light one community's effort to curb abortion.

Reaching for a broader audience, *The Young Messiah* offers a speculative look at the boyhood of Jesus Christ. Evoking pro-life themes with a flashback to the infanticide Jesus escaped, one character in the film observes how "Herod choked to death on the blood of children." Produced by Chris Columbus (*Home Alone*, *Pixels*), *The Young Messiah* releases March 16 in theaters everywhere.

7. Will the Church Proclaim Life—Through Prayer?

Last spring, it came to light how three pro-life prayer groups all launched at the same time one decade ago—in different parts of the country. The intertwined stories of Bound4LIFE, 40 Days for Life and Stand True reflect how prayer has become a hallmark of the pro-life movement's unprecedented advance.

"I'm struck by all the fervent words prayed over the past decade—and how specific ones are converging right now," says Matt Lockett, executive director of Bound4LIFE.

He points to the undercover Planned Parenthood videos, filmed in part at an abortion supercenter in Houston where more than 15,000 people gathered to pray in 2010. "The Supreme Court granting the Texas case is another answer to prayer—since 2013 in the Texas Capitol, seeking God in prayer has been at the forefront of this state effort to save lives," he notes.

For the second year running, Bound4LIFE has teamed up with Ryan and Bethany Bomberger of The Radiance Foundation to bring together OneVoiceDC—a prayer and worship gathering held the evening before the March for Life.

"The church has been speaking up this past year," says Bethany Bomberger. "Pastors and local ministry leaders are openly expressing their biblically based beliefs about the intrinsic

worth of every human life. OneVoiceDC 2016 on Jan. 21 is one more expression of our nation's spiritual awakening on life."

As millions of people work daily in diverse roles—in crisis pregnancy centers, in churches praying faithfully, on the mission field, in public policy groups and in a thousand other places—America's pro-life movement looks forward to seeing more children welcomed into life and protected by law.

Josh Shepherd serves in communications at Bound4LIFE International, a grass-roots movement to pray for the ending of abortion, carry the spirit of adoption, and believe for revival and reformation. Reprinted with permission from Bound4LIFE.