

21 Rules for Engagement in the Age of Trump

Communities of Faith as Communities of Action: What to Do and How to Do it

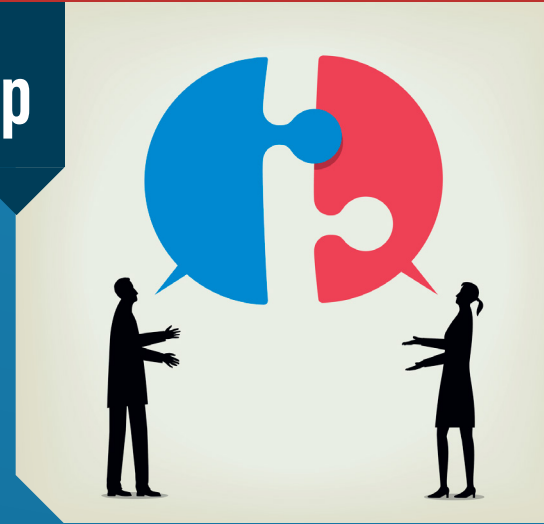
By James E. Cople

Donald Trump's election to the presidency has generated heat, light and for many, perplexing grief. We have entered into a new time and a new place in our history. People are trying to figure out the most appropriate response. People are demonstrating, acquiescing to the reality that he is now "our" president, and others are figuring out what the "loyal" opposition looks like and how do we behave.

While coming to terms with my new reality, numerous (mostly young) people have asked for advice about responding to a

Trump presidency. Most know my history of faith-driven civil-disobedience, as well as my experience navigating an opposing party in power. I have worked in, or for, every administration since Ronald Reagan.

At the heart of these inquiries: How do I get involved? How do I speak out and speak into the process to advance my agenda or stop another's agenda? Most of these inquiries are genuine expressions of "I can't sit on the sidelines and do nothing." There's a sense of "I must do something, but how do I go about it?"



Taking a cue from Saul Alinsky, that radical community organizer once embraced by both the progressive movement and the Tea Party, I am posting my own "Rules for Radicals" with a slight modification of the title. So, here are Cople's "Rules for Engagement."

Cople's 21 Rules for Engagement for People of Faith in the Era of Trump

- 1 Begin locally** – think locally and don't be intimidated by your age, gender, ethnicity, religion or geography. The organizing I did at age 16 prepared me for the influence I now have at 67. It all began with local involvement.
- 2 Get to know your local elected officials**, especially your members of Congress. Be present at city-council meetings, school-board meetings or meetings involving local law-enforcement. Show up at events; express your concerns; and if they ignore you, send letters or social-media messages letting your followers know. Be sure to copy officials' offices.
- 3 Organize small groups**. Identify other people in your cause. For women's issues, seek out other people who share your concerns. Meet regularly; talk issues; and do your own research. Don't depend on

the media hype or spin - find out what is true or not true about an issue. Become an activist group like the Clapham group of London in the early 19th Century. They supported Wilberforce to end slavery and produced other changes in social, political and economic institutions. Small groups are a potent tool and a good way to hold each other accountable.

- 4 Be prepared to organize your own "Confessing Church in America."** It could be a house church, Bible study, discussion group or a neighborhood-planning group. Don't quit your organized religion – you need to raise your voice in meetings. Organized religion has become complicit in its silence, or blatant support, of a nationalism that threatens certain religious groups or diverse populations that look different than we do. As with most things in the general culture, this is often about money. Denominations or religious traditions that are struggling financially are afraid to anger segments of their donor community. Therefore, they say nothing. You say something! In the mean time become in-

involved with organizations like Red Letter Christians: www.redletterchristians.org.

- 5 JOIN membership groups in harmony with your cause.** Membership in these groups is critical to producing change and creating voice. Think about groups like the ACLU, Environmental Advocacy Organizations, Women's Advocacy Networks, etc. Do a general Internet search for advocacy organizations around your issue(s) or cause. I don't agree with all positions of these groups, but organizations like the ACLU bring a history and activism that is committed to protecting the civil liberties of all Americans. Make a small contribution to groups of your choice and find out what they do in your state or local community. Look for other groups that support your ideas or agenda, particularly as it relates to the threat of racism and gender-bias.
- 6 BE BOLD & SHOW UP!** Create a faithful presence. Come to Washington to participate in civil actions or demonstrations. The Women's March on Washington on Jan. 21 is a good one. Sign up

for everything – you will be inundated with requests and opportunities to serve or volunteer. Look for local civil actions, speaking out on issues that are important to you. Don't minimize this strategy – pictures of a million people on the Washington mall or thousands of people in your city-centers show solidarity and commitment.

7 Write letters to your Senators and representatives. Letters work, and they have an impact. Get groups to support letter-writing.

8 Get engaged in voter registration and create better access for people to vote.

9 Success begins with obedience. To my friends in the Christian faith, keep in mind, we aren't called to succeed but to be obedient. We must be obedient during this time and be prepared to speak truth to power and to do it in a way that Jesus would do it. Lovingly, but prophetically. Develop outreach to other religious traditions that are also threatened by an overreach of government institutions. Remember, our citizenship is first and foremost in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God has long outlasted principalities and powers.

10 Subscribe to magazines and journals and not just religious ones like Sojourners or the Plough. Subscribe to blogs like Oxfam, Mother Jones, the Catholic Social Worker, etc., to broaden your horizons and find ways to connect with fellow dissidents or members of the loyal opposition.

11 Choose your issues and narrow-cast: Sexism, racism, poverty, peace and human rights. Focus on one or two, then work the issues.

12 You have gifts – use them! Use your gifts or talents as a volunteer or professional. Everyone brings something, from passion and prayer to sophisticated skill-sets that contribute to creating a voice.

Your words and actions create a collective voice that can bring down walls.

13 Reach out and help mobilize organizations that have mass constituencies – organizations like unions, associations and existing community-development efforts in your neighborhood.

14 Involvement creates involvement. Take baby-steps, and soon you will be running. One action gets you to the next action – look for those opportunities.

15 Set up “listening posts.” Invite people of different views and orientations into meetings to listen to concerns; develop common ground, where possible; or to better understand why there are differences.

16 Develop stories. Data is always important, but stories are often what moves a policy-maker or large constituency. Understand the victims in your cause and facilitate ways to give them a voice. Collect those stories and disseminate them through social-media and other communication platforms. Develop a speaker's bureau on your cause and reach out to audiences that can have political and social influence.

17 Engage youths and encourage candidate-development. Mentor young people into the work of the “loyal” opposition. Explore ways to engage them and to develop strategies that bring transformation through the legal process or voter mobilization.

18 Engage seniors. Many of the baby-boom generation are veterans of civil rights, environmental or anti-war movements. They gave birth to woman-empowerment and advanced many of the causes that are being challenged. Draw on their experience and their time.

19 Go deep into your faith. Be sure you understand the “why” of what you are

doing and let that “why” shape the “how” of your engagement. You do this through prayer, meditation, scripture-study and dialogue with leaders of faith.

20 Be persistent and consistent. Engagement around critical issues requires patience and fortitude. You won't advance your cause overnight. You must look for benchmarks of progress and understand that it may take years, decades or longer to achieve your goals. You set the example for the next generation and you create a legacy of faithfulness.

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**DON'T EVER GIVE UP!
HOPE IS WHAT PULLS
US INTO THE FUTURE!**

There are many other strategies.

Read, listen and learn from others. Some of the better activists and thinkers of the past thirty-years have mentored me. I wasn't the leader of any of the social movements that changed history – I was a volunteer or foot-soldier in movements for civil rights; peace in Vietnam; and women's empowerment. The older I get and the more experience I have, the more often I am invited into the room to plan strategy. However, I was simply one citizen working to support my President or to challenge my President.

I have always taken seriously the admonition by former Arkansas Sen. J. William Fulbright in *The Arrogance of Power*: “The willingness and courage to be a critic of one's country is the highest form of patriotism.”

For Trump – Against Trump – be willing to be a patriot and be willing to bring service leadership to the cause.

