

REPORT

from the **Capital**

North Carolina proposal to establish religion defies constitutional reality

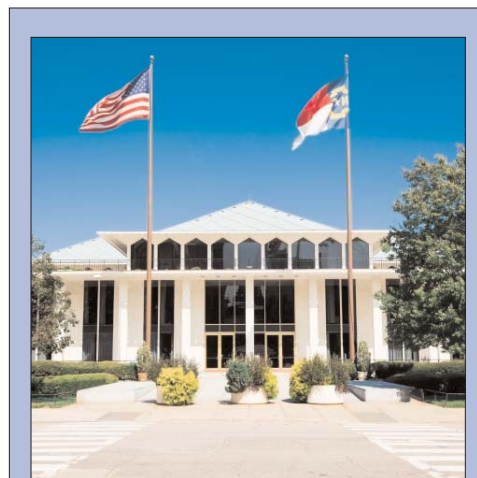
A group of North Carolina legislators recently proposed a measure that would have permitted the establishment of an official state religion.

The bill maintained that the First Amendment restriction on governmental establishment of religion applies only to the federal government, not to states and municipalities, and that the General Assembly would not “recognize federal court rulings which prohibit and otherwise regulate the State of North Carolina, its public schools, or any political subdivisions of the State from making laws respecting an establishment of religion.” Both contentions directly contravene well-settled Supreme Court precedent.

The measure, filed April 1, stemmed from a legal battle over the Rowan County (N.C.) Board of Commissioners’ longtime practice of opening its meetings with Christian prayers. The bill’s language clearly violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which applies to the states by virtue of the 14th Amendment.

In its 1983 *Marsh v. Chambers* decision, the High Court upheld a state legislature’s prayer practice, finding that such prayer was “deeply embedded in the history and tradition of this country.” Nonetheless, there are important constitutional limitations on such practices. Federal courts of appeals have examined the extent to which a governmental body has affiliated itself with a single religious tradition through its prayer policy.

Constitutionality aside, legislative prayer during official government meetings remains controversial for many religious liberty advocates. “Just because something is constitutional does not make it right,” said K.



The North Carolina State Legislative Building in Raleigh is the home of the state House of Representatives and Senate.

Hollyn Hollman, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. “For those who are careful about separating the responsibilities of the government from the private religious practices of the citizens it serves, the practice is something to be avoided.”

The North Carolina resolution, if passed, would not have had the force of law. Even the bill’s sponsors admitted it was largely symbolic, with one saying he “didn’t expect it to go anywhere.” It was effectively killed April 4 when House of Representatives Speaker Thom Tillis said it would not come up for a vote. In addition to raising questions about efficient use of legislative time and resources, the measure illustrates ongoing attempts to thwart the very constitutional safeguards that have allowed religious liberty to thrive.

—BJC staff reports,
with reporting from *The Religious Herald*

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Religious liberty is Baptists' 'gift to the nation,' says new director of faith-based office

The new head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships told reporters March 22 she values Baptists' "special gift to the nation" — religious liberty — and looks forward to tackling religious liberty issues in her new role.

Melissa Rogers, a Baptist church-state expert who has been on the faculty of Wake Forest University School of Divinity, said in a conference call organized by the White House that she both understands the Baptist "point of view" and aims to work with adherents of "different faiths and none."

"Baptists have always joined hands across lines with those of many faiths and those who don't claim faith and have a commitment to the common good," said Rogers. "The Baptist history of religious liberty is a special gift to the nation, and I look forward to working on religious liberty issues in this new role."

Rogers, who was appointed March 13, had been director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest, where she also taught courses on church-state relations and Christianity and public policy. She is a former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee.

The office is tasked with forming partnerships between government and nonprofit organizations — both faith-based and secular — to meet human needs.

Among the first issues Rogers will face will be whether faith-based partners, which receive federal money, can continue to hire or fire staff on the basis of religion — a contentious issue since President George W. Bush created the office in 2001.

In the past she has disagreed with the current policy. "While I believe religious organizations should have full freedom to make religious calls regarding jobs subsidized by tithes and offerings, when government-funded jobs are involved, I

"The Baptist history of religious liberty is a special gift to the nation, and I look forward to working on religious liberty issues in this new role."

—Melissa Rogers



believe the calculus changes," *The New York Times* quoted her as saying in one of her presentations for the BJC's 2011 Shurden Lectures.

But asked twice about the issue in the March 22 conference call, Rogers said the administration is still reviewing the policy and "I will carry out President Obama's views on this."

In response to another question, Rogers acknowledged tensions between the administration and Catholics over the contraception mandate, but said she hopes her work over the years with the Catholic Conference of U.S. Bishops and "scores of Catholic friends" will provide a basis for working together.

"I'm really looking forward to reaching out to these folks and making new friends," she said. "I want to work with them to promote the common good and address these issues in the most positive way possible."

Rogers said she anticipates ramping up the office's partnerships in combating human trafficking, malaria and tuberculosis, making flu vaccinations more accessible, recruiting volunteers in public schools and challenging college students to be more deeply engaged in service projects.

—Robert Dilday, *The Religious Herald*

Imprisoned Iranian-American pastor gets push from State Dept.

WASHINGTON — Secretary of State John Kerry is calling for the release of an Iranian-American minister from a Tehran prison, a welcome step for advocates who had accused the State Department of being "AWOL" on the case.

"I am deeply concerned about the fate of U.S. citizen Saeed Abedini, who has been detained for nearly six months and was sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran on charges related to his religious beliefs," Kerry said in a statement released March 22.

"I am disturbed by reports that Mr. Abedini has suffered physical and psychological abuse in prison, and that his condition has become increasingly dire."

Kerry said such treatment violates "international norms" and Iran's laws.

"The best outcome for Mr. Abedini is that he be immediately released," Kerry concluded.

The American Center for Law and Justice, a conservative Washington law firm that is representing Abedini's wife, welcomed his involvement.

Kerry and his department came under fire at a March 15 Capitol Hill hearing on Iran's treatment of religious minorities when the State Department did not send a representative, citing "scheduling conflicts." Naghmeh Abedini, who lives with her two children in Idaho, met with State officials after the hearing.

"I am hopeful that this will put more pressure on the Iranian government to act and free Saeed so he can return to our family in the United States," she

said in a statement after Kerry called for her husband's release.

In a letter posted on the ACLJ's website, Saeed Abedini, 32, spoke of being beaten and housed in a "dark room void of any natural sunlight."

"I did not recognize myself" when he looked in a mirror after being beaten, Abedini said. "My hair was shaven, under my eyes were swollen three times what they should have been, my face was swollen, and my beard had grown."

The day before Kerry's statement, Ambassador Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe, the U.S. representative to the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, called for Iran to release Abedini "and others who are unjustly imprisoned."

—Adelle M. Banks,
Religion News Service

REFLECTIONS

A lunch that launched a vital lectureship

Our good friends, Buddy and Kay Shurden, invited me to come to Macon to have lunch with them in the fall of 2004. They said they had something they wanted to talk over with me. You cannot possibly imagine how hard my jaw hit the floor when, after a very nice lunch, they handed me a check for \$100,000 to endow a lectureship on religious liberty and the separation of church and state. This was an astonishingly generous gift from two teachers on the cusp of retirement after rearing and educating three children and performing many acts of generosity toward their church and other charitable causes.

Their idea was for the Baptist Joint Committee to join with different colleges and seminaries once a year — with the lectures returning to Mercer University every third year — to inform and excite the next generation of students about the importance of these topics to both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. They expressed to me an urgent desire to foster accurate and inspiring education about this topic for which they harbored a signal passion.

“We believe that the threat to religious liberty and the separation of church and state is epidemic in America today,” they said. “This threat comes from the courthouse, the White House and church house. No potatoes are hotter in public discourse than issues of church and state: vouchers, prayer in public schools, faith-based charities and the places of the Ten Commandments. The BJC is the kitchen where those potatoes are being baked. We, therefore, believe that the BJC is one of the most crucial religious organizations in this republic.”

Buoyed by their kind words and armed with wherewithal to match, the Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State commenced 18 months later in the spring of 2006, with Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, delivering the inaugural lectures at Mercer University in Macon, Ga. As you read elsewhere in this publication (see p. 4-5), we recently concluded the eighth annual Shurden Lectures at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla. I was privileged to have the opportunity to deliver these at my law school alma mater.

In between Rabbi Saperstein and me, six others have helped advance the Shurdens’ vision,

delivering lectures at Carson Newman University (James Dunn), Wake Forest University (Charles Adams), Samford University (Martin Marty), Georgetown College (Melissa Rogers) and Mercer University (Randall Balmer and Frank Lambert). The venues for the next three Shurden Lectures have been set: Baylor University (2014), Mercer University (2015) and Bethel University (2016).

These lectures have provided wonderful opportunities for thousands of students, professors and other campus visitors to imbibe the wisdom the speakers supplied. All lectures delivered after 2008 are posted on the Baptist Joint Committee’s Vimeo website in video form (Vimeo.com/bjcvideos) and more recent ones as podcasts on the BJC’s iTunes channel for an untold number of learners to enjoy.

The Shurdens have always put their money where their hearts lie. After making their generous gift, they expressed their desire “to ignite renewed passion for historic Baptist ideas.” They concluded, “We want our grandchildren and their children to live in an America where those values are not only preserved but also championed. Those values, we believe, make for a more vigorous religion and a healthier state.”

With the opening of the new Center for Religious Liberty last October, the BJC’s opportunities for educating the next generation of religious liberty advocates have never been better.

During the past six months, the BJC staff has deliberately focused on crafting goals and priorities to fully employ the Center and the BJC’s resources for our education efforts. We are eager to reach the audiences the Shurdens had in mind. As part of this, the BJC will hire a new, full-time Education and Outreach Specialist to implement a strategy to accomplish our goals. This is a major investment for the BJC, and we hope to fill the position by mid-summer.

Just as the Shurden Lectures would not be possible without Buddy and Kay’s vision and financial commitment, we cannot fund the Education and Outreach Specialist position and the programs she or he will implement without your support. Your gift of any amount will help us fund these new initiatives. Won’t you join the Shurdens in this effort to help the BJC defend and extend religious liberty by teaching others how to join in this fight? Can you imagine a more worthy legacy to leave?



J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

Clearing up misconceptions at the church-state intersection

DELAND, Fla. — In a September 1992 comic strip, the precocious 6-year-old half of *Calvin and Hobbes* called the separation of church and state a “touchy subject.” Over the course of three presentations at Stetson University April 9-10, Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director Brent Walker drew on this description, presenting some of the misunderstandings that make religious liberty and church-state separation controversial and suggesting ways to accommodate religious differences, even in the political realm.

Walker was the speaker for the BJC’s eighth annual Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State. In 2004, the Shurdens of Macon, Ga., made a gift to the BJC to establish the annual lectureship, held annually on college campuses.

Walker explained that issues at the intersection of church and state “go to matters of the heart, to our faith in God and the dizzying diversity of religious expression we find in this country.”

In his first lecture, Walker laid the foundation for the proper relationship between church and state with respect to theology and history. “Religious liberty is a gift from God, not the result of any act of toleration on the part of government,” he said. God is seen as a “liberating deity” in Scripture “who loves his people and cares about that relationship enough to create them free to say ‘no,’” Walker said.

Walker then discussed Baptists’ role in championing religious liberty and church-state separation. From their reliance on Scripture to suffering the hard lessons of persecution, Baptists’ understanding of religious freedom “was not academic, it was existential,” Walker said. He listed Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, Obadiah Holmes, John Leland and Isaac Backus as “among the pantheon of early Baptist freedom fighters.”

But this freedom gifted by God is protected by political and constitutional institutions, he said.

The Framers of the U.S. Constitution had a vision for our national government that

differed greatly from the example provided by the Puritans, who came to New England in search of religious freedom. “What they gained for themselves, they denied to others,” Walker said.

The Framers drafted and approved a document that only spoke of religion once (and that was to ban religious tests for public office), and Walker pointed out that it never mentions Christianity. “[W]ith the adoption of the First Amendment’s religion clauses in the Bill of Rights (‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’), our Founders made it clear that one’s status in the civil community would not depend on a willingness to sign on the dotted line of any religious confession,” Walker said.

Walker stressed that the nation’s Founders, supported by Baptists and armed with Enlightenment values, fought for robust protection for religious liberty in the U.S. Constitution.

“Some today in the religious community, even the progressive Baptist community, see our current drive to perpetuate religious freedom and church-state separation to be rooted only in the Enlightenment, not theology or biblical principles,” Walker said.

But Baptists “got it” long before the Enlightenment thinkers did, he said, and that continues today.

The First Amendment’s religion clauses prevent the establishment of religion and forbid interference with the exercise of religion. Both are equally important and must be taken seriously as well as rigorously enforced if we are to adequately protect our religious liberty, Walker said.

In his second lecture, Walker suggested that religious freedom is threatened by a belief that religious disputes should be settled by majority vote.

“Although majoritarian principles are fundamental in a democracy — that’s how we settle most political and policy issues — the Bill of Rights generally and the First Amendment’s religion clauses in particular are ‘counter-majoritarian,’” Walker said. “They ensure the rights of minorities and protect against political majorities.”

He said religious liberty is best ensured when government treats religion differently, with special concessions and imposing on religion unique constraints.

Walker explained that religion and religious institutions often are given special accommodations from the government to lift burdens on the free exercise of religion. For example, a Baptist church is allowed to hire a Baptist music director instead of a Buddhist, while for-profit businesses cannot discriminate on the basis of religion in hiring, Walker said. And houses of worship are exempt from having to install ramps and elevators under the Americans with Disabilities Act, while a hotel chain must comply.

On the other hand, sometimes religion must endure unique constraints to prevent the establishment of religion or to ensure compliance with Establishment Clause values, Walker said. Public school teachers can say the Pledge of Allegiance, recite the Gettysburg Address, and express many other things in a classroom, but they may not lead in prayer or religious exercises, Walker said. Also, government may fund many things, including the public schools, but it should not directly fund religion or religious schools. “These limitations on religion operate to ensure government neutrality and promote religious liberty for all, especially religious minorities,” he said.

Turning to a controversial issue involving religious exemptions and government accommodations, Walker discussed the Affordable Care Act, the new health care law requiring employers with at least 50 employees to provide insurance coverage, including contraception for female employees.

He said the Baptist Joint Committee initially criticized the administration’s failure to offer broader accommodation for religiously affiliated employers with conscience-based objections to contraception, while exempting churches and other houses of worship.

Walker said the administration announced a modified policy in 2012, seeking to balance the conscience rights of religiously affiliated employers who object to forms of contraception and the public inter-

2013 Shurden Lectures



Top: Brent Walker, Stetson University President Wendy B. Libby, and BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman participated in the two-day event. Bottom: Brent Walker takes a question from an audience member during one of the lectures.

est of ensuring all women have access to preventative health care. And earlier this year, the administration announced additional rules to clarify and expand the definition of “religious employer,” detailing the process by which self-insured employers would be required to allow a third party administrator to work with health insurers to extend contraception coverage while providing some distance between the objecting employer and the employee desirous of contraception coverage.

Walker concluded his discussion of religious accommodation with a call for a “Golden Rule” for church-state relations.

“I cannot ask government to promote my religion if I don’t want government to promote somebody else’s religion; and I cannot permit government to hinder somebody else’s religion if I don’t want government to hinder my religion,” Walker said.

The third lecture concentrated on a common misconception about American public life. That is, the separation of church and state requires a complete separation of religion from politics and a public square stripped of religious discourse.

Not so, Walker said. “The question is not whether religious people will be involved

in politics, but how should they do it,” he said, and conversations about religion can be a positive force in politics.

“When candidates talk about their faith it can help us know who they are, learn what makes them tick, and examine their moral core,” Walker said. “The free and fluid discussion of candidates’ faith carries the promise of improving the electorate’s ability to make an informed decision in the voting booth.”

He then suggested that with those benefits, danger also lurks when we try to combine religion and politics. Walker mentioned several limitations and cautions about the intersection of religion and politics. For example, if a candidate’s religion is introduced, the question of how his or her religious views will impact public policy positions and leadership competence is vital.

Other words of caution to the general proposition that religion can be helpful to public discourse included that any foray into politics with focused religious motivation should be tempered with a dose of humility. The second caution dealt with the use or abuse of “civil religion” or as Walker described, the “blending of a generic

Judeo-Christian piety with American patriotism to the point that one can’t tell them apart.” The third cautioned churches and other nonprofits from supporting or opposing candidates for public office, which could jeopardize their tax-exempt status.

As for the 2012 elections, Walker was pleased with the way religion and politics mingled.

“With rare exception, we did a commendable job in balancing the pertinence of religion to public life with the prohibition on religious tests,” Walker said.

He pointed out that the outcomes in congressional races showcased Americans’ growing appreciation for religious diversity. In 2012, the two Muslim members of the U.S. House of Representatives were re-elected, and a Hindu and “religiously unaffiliated” Member were also elected to the chamber. The past election also saw the first Buddhist elected to the U.S. Senate. This religious diversity and a society that appears to have come to terms with lawmakers who are neither Christian nor Jewish taking oaths on their own holy books gives cause for optimism, Walker concluded.

—Jeff Huett



K. Hollyn Hollman
General Counsel

Free exercise standards increasingly debated

Recently, I served as a panelist at a symposium hosted by the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum called “Defining religious freedom: Current challenges, future directions.” The day-long event included two well-moderated panels and considerable audience participation, focusing on fundamental questions about religious liberty. With court challenges involving contraception and same-sex marriage as the backdrop, the symposium provided a rare and welcome opportunity for a broad, civil discussion about current and future religious liberty challenges in a changing landscape.

The conversation also reflected a need for more in-depth consideration of the free exercise of religion as we approach the 20th anniversary of the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). RFRA, of course, is the federal religious liberty statute passed after the U.S. Supreme Court’s harmful opinion in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) that discarded decades of strong constitutional protection for religious exercise. A diverse body of religious liberty and civil rights advocates coalesced to push for corrective federal legislation, culminating in RFRA, which President Bill Clinton signed into law in November 1993. As its name suggests, the law “restored” the pre-*Smith* First Amendment standard courts use to evaluate free exercise claims.

Under this test, the government may not *substantially burden* an individual’s free exercise of religion unless it shows it has a *compelling reason* for doing so, and it has pursued the *least restrictive means* of accomplishing its important interest. In constitutional law jargon, this is known as “strict scrutiny,” and it ensures that the government must satisfy a high burden of proof before infringing on citizens’ rights. Because the Supreme Court later held that RFRA only applies to the federal government, many states have enacted similar legislation to ensure state government actors are also held to this higher standard.

As of March 2013, 17 states have passed such laws, designed to bolster religious freedom in addition to state constitutional provisions, many of which already provide greater protection than the U.S. Constitution. A majority of these measures were passed in the late 1990s, but several have been proposed in recent months. Not all are identical to the federal RFRA, and controversies over the latest versions reflect changes in the legal and political landscape of state RFRA support — indeed, support for RFRA generally.

Many groups who once supported these laws have since changed course, fearing that RFRAs are being used too expansively in ways that harm other important rights. While RFRA sets a high standard for religious

freedom claims, without regard to any particular claim or outcome, its application in the context of civil rights and health care laws has dampened its popularity among some prior advocates. At the same time, others conclude the laws have not done enough to provide meaningful protection for religious liberty and should be strengthened.

Departures in legislative language from the federal RFRA have taken a number of forms. Some proposed measures, like a North Dakota state ballot measure defeated last summer, just say government cannot burden religion, omitting the important modifier that the burden must be *substantial*. This appears to go beyond what the federal RFRA intended, triggering strict scrutiny of any state law or regulation and easing the way for exemptions. Another feature of several state RFRAs not found in the federal corollary concerns the burden of proof the government must meet in showing its “compelling interest” for the regulation at issue. The Kentucky legislature, for instance, recently overrode the governor’s veto to enact a state RFRA that requires the government to prove its compelling interest *by clear and convincing evidence*. Though not entirely unprecedented (Idaho and Tennessee use this standard), this language is not part of the federal RFRA and remains largely untested. Critics argue it will make it too easy for religious claimants to prevail.

Finally, a few recently proposed state RFRAs have defined “burden” in novel ways as including indirect burdens such as withholding benefits or exclusion from government programs. This language, not found in the federal RFRA, raises concerns that, in addition to inviting litigation, it will allow government support of religious entities and lead to other conflicts with important no-establishment safeguards.

While it is not surprising that RFRA — like religious liberty in general — is more popular in principle than in its specific applications, research suggests that even among states that have enacted some version of RFRA, there has been scant litigation testing the statutes’ application to various types of claims. Twenty years is long enough to see significant changes in our society, especially when it comes to recognizing the rights of minorities. While change brings challenges, it should not shake our commitment to the standards that have survived the test of time and provided a fair way to protect religious freedom for all.

Video of the March 18 event “Defining religious freedom: Current challenges, future directions” is available from the First Amendment Center website at www.FirstAmendmentCenter.org.

“While it is not surprising that RFRA — like religious liberty in general — is more popular in principle than in its specific applications, research suggests that even among states that have enacted some version of RFRA, there has been scant litigation testing the statutes’ application to various types of claims.”

Obama recalls Holy Land trip at Easter Prayer Breakfast

WASHINGTON — As he gathered with clergy at the White House April 5, President Obama recounted personal details of his recent Holy Land trip, calling it a chance to experience “the eternal spirit of Easter” and feel closer to Jesus.

“For Christians to walk where he walked and see what he saw are blessed moments,” Obama told religious leaders at the Easter Prayer Breakfast.

As in years past, Obama used the annual Easter-themed breakfast to meet with Christian leaders and also to speak openly about his faith.

The president said he visited Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity and the

patriarch of Jerusalem led him to the 14-point silver star that marks where Jesus was born and “welcomed me to, in his words, ‘the place where heaven and Earth met.’”

Many of the faith leaders dining in the East Room murmured in appreciation as the president described his experience.

“And there, I had a chance to pray and reflect on Christ’s birth, and his life, his sacrifice, his Resurrection,” he said, joining other “faithful pilgrims who for 2,000 years have done the same thing.”

Obama said he thought of the poor and marginalized, and of future pilgrims who would travel to the same sacred spot.

“I was reminded that while our time on Earth is fleeting, he is eternal,” the president said. “His life, his lessons live on in our hearts and, most importantly, in our actions.”

Attendees included megachurch pastors Joel Hunter of Florida and Bishop T.D. Jakes of Texas; Bishop John Bryant, senior bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; National Council of Churches President Kathryn Lohre and National Association of Evangelicals President Leith Anderson; Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Executive Coordinator Suzii Paynter; and the Rev. Luis Cortes, founder of Esperanza, a Hispanic evangelical faith-based network.

The Christian gathering contrasts with polling that has shown a significant minority of Americans believe Obama is a Muslim. A 2012 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 17 percent of respondents held that belief about the president, while 49 percent said he was a Christian and 31 percent did not know his faith.

In his weekly address before Easter, the president made a point of describing his Christian family.



Top: President Obama speaks at the White House Easter Prayer Breakfast on April 5. Bottom: BJC Executive Director Brent Walker joined other religious leaders at the annual breakfast. Photos: Adelle M. Banks/Religion News Service

“As Christians, my family and I remember the incredible sacrifice Jesus made for each and every one of us — how He took on the sins of the world and extended the gift of salvation,” he said.

Obama added that they are committed to following Jesus’ example: “To loving our Lord and Savior. To loving our neighbors. And to seeing everyone, especially ‘the least of these,’ as a child of God.”

In remarks introducing the president, Vice President Joe Biden recounted his recent trip to Rome for the installation of Pope Francis, saying he was moved by the new pope’s focus on justice.

—Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service and BJC staff reports

Louisiana monks score second win in bid to sell caskets

A group of woodworking Louisiana monks is celebrating after a federal appeals court ruled they can sell simple hand-made caskets — and local funeral directors can’t stop them.

In a March 20 opinion, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled the Benedictine monks of St. Joseph Abbey near Covington, La., have a right to sell caskets in their home state. The ruling affirmed a lower court’s judgment, which said the Louisiana State Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors cannot restrict the market only to licensed funeral directors.

“Funeral homes, not independent sellers, have been the problem for consumers with their bundling of product and markups of caskets,” the 19-page opinion said. The “grant of an exclusive right of sale (for licensed funeral directors) adds nothing to protect consumers and puts them at a greater risk of abuse including exploitative prices.”

The monks’ victory helps them pursue the livelihood they’ve forged in the years since 2005, when Hurricane Katrina decimated timber holdings that had previously provided essential income for the abbey. It also gives Louisiana consumers access to basic cypress caskets that sell for \$1,500 and \$2,000 — far below prices charged at the state’s funeral homes, according to the court opinion.

“Our prayers have been answered,” said Abbot Justin Brown, head of St. Joseph Abbey, in a written statement. “We are especially gratified that the Court’s decision will protect the economic liberty of other entrepreneurs in Louisiana and around the country.”

The Catholic monks of St. Joseph have long been buried in plain wooden caskets built by hand at the abbey. When they needed an alternate source of income after Katrina, they invested \$200,000 to start Saint Joseph Woodworks. They were able to sell in other states, but the Louisiana board moved in 2007 to block them from doing business in their own state.

With the ruling, the 5th Circuit parts ways with the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals, which in 2004 upheld a similar law restricting casket sales in Oklahoma. The issue could ultimately be decided in the U.S. Supreme Court if the board members decide to appeal.

—G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Religion News Service



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- Seventh Day Baptist General Conference

REPORT from the Capital

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Religious Liberty Council Luncheon tickets on sale

Get your tickets today for the Baptist Joint Committee's annual Religious Liberty Council Luncheon. Visit our website at BJCOnline.org/luncheon to purchase tickets and to get the latest information about this year's event:

Religious Liberty Council Luncheon
Friday, June 28
11:30 a.m. - 1:15 p.m.
Sheraton Greensboro at Four Seasons
Imperial Ballroom
Greensboro, N.C.

Tickets: \$35

The event is held in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's General Assembly. The luncheon is open to the public, but **you must have a ticket to attend**. Tables of 10 are available for purchase.

This year's speaker is **Suzii Paynter**, the newly elected executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Before serving in her role at CBF, Paynter was the director of



Paynter

the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and of the BGCT's Advocacy and Care Center. She has led efforts to address a variety of public policy areas, including hunger, child and maternal nutrition, ending human trafficking, life issues, juvenile justice, foster care, immigration and education. She has been an advocate for religious liberty issues, literacy and early intervention for high-risk children.

At this year's event, Paynter will receive the BJC's highest honor — the J.M. Dawson Religious Liberty Award — for her work defending our first freedom.

If you cannot make it to Greensboro, you can still be part of the luncheon. You can sponsor a table in honor of your church or favorite college or seminary and encourage others to attend. Or, you can purchase a ticket that we will give to a seminary student who would be unable to attend otherwise.

To purchase your tickets for the event, visit BJCOnline.org/luncheon or call our office 202-544-4226. For more information, contact Taryn Deaton at tdeaton@BJCOnline.org. We hope to see you in Greensboro!