



REPORT

from the Capital

Report: Religious freedom deteriorating around the world



WASHINGTON — Religious freedom remains under “serious and sustained assault” around the globe, according to a new annual report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

“At best, in most of the countries we cover, religious freedom conditions have failed to improve,” commission chairman Robert P. George said on May 10. “At worst, they have spiraled further downward.”

The independent government advisory body recommended that the State Department add the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria and Vietnam to the U.S. government’s list of the world’s worst abusers of human rights and religious freedom. Of the 17 countries USCIRF says are of “particular concern,” only 10 have been recognized as such by the State Department.

The official list remained unchanged for nearly a decade, until last month’s rare addition of Tajikistan, a Sunni-majority country where a severely restrictive 2009 law allows the government to crack down on all independent religious activity, particularly that of Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Officials there use concerns of extremism to justify monitoring and suppressing acts of worship: in the past year, police there have forced thousands of women to remove their headscarves and detained hundreds of thousands of bearded men.

“The incarceration of prisoners of conscience, including religious prisoners, remains astonishingly widespread,” George said. He pointed to China, which has imprisoned some opposed to a state campaign to remove crosses from churches, and Iran’s majority-Shiite regime, where Sunnis, Christians and Baha’is have been persecuted, imprisoned and even sentenced to death on dubious unrelated charges. And in Pakistan — which USCIRF recommended for recogni-

tion as a country of particular concern but, for the 14th year in a row, has not been listed officially — more people are on death row or serving life sentences for blasphemy charges than in any other nation in the world.

As much attention as was given to the refugee crisis in Iraq and Syria, for which the USCIRF largely recycled its recommendations this year, it’s only the tip of the iceberg.

“I don’t think we can account for everything we’ve seen simply by reference to the refugee crisis in the Middle East,” George said, noting oppressive conditions for minorities in East Asia, where a Vietnamese religious freedom activist was imprisoned the day after meeting with a USCIRF ambassador. “The American public needs to understand that this is truly a battle for ideas. Protecting our interests really does mean advancing our values, including our belief in religious freedom.”

Other areas of focus included rising anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim bigotry throughout Europe, the continuation of a “brutal legacy of persecution against Burma’s Rohingya Muslims” and the “negative trajectory” for Christians, Muslims and Sikhs living in India. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s rhetoric has been positive in the Hindu-majority country, a USCIRF delegation was effectively denied visas in March. India’s foreign minister said the USCIRF report “fails to show proper understanding of India, its constitution and its society.”

Good news was scarce, but there may be hope. Last year’s report commended Nigeria, Cyprus and Sri Lanka’s new government for progress in promoting religious freedom and harmony. While Nigeria remains on the USCIRF’s list of countries of particular concern, Cyprus and Sri Lanka were let off the hook.

—Aysha Khan, Religion News Service and BJC Staff Reports

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BJC, others oppose religious discrimination by federal contractors

The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty was among 42 religious, education, civil rights, labor and women's organizations opposing an amendment to a defense policy bill that would exempt religious organizations receiving any federal grant or contract from employment anti-discrimination statutes and regulations.

The House Armed Services Committee voted 32-29 during a markup April 29 for an amendment to the FY 2017 National Defense Authorization Act offered after midnight by Rep. Steve Russell, R-Okla., who is a graduate of Ouachita Baptist University and member of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Oklahoma. The amendment entitles "any religious corporation, religious association, religious educational institution, or religious society" seeking federal contracts to the same exemptions allowed by federal civil rights law and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

An April 27 letter from the Coalition Against Religious Discrimination, signed by the BJC, said the Russell

Amendment "would authorize taxpayer-funded discrimination in each and every federal contract and grant."

"The government should never fund discrimination and no taxpayer should be disqualified from a job under a federal contract or grant because he or she is the 'wrong' religion," the coalition said.

"... no taxpayer should be disqualified from a job under a federal contract or grant because he or she is the 'wrong' religion."

Religious organizations already have exemptions from many civil rights laws, and those exemptions are not jeopardized if they do not take federal money.

The groups said they appreciate the important role that religiously affiliated institutions play in addressing the nation's most pressing

social needs, and many are involved in that work, but "the separation of church and state is the linchpin of religious freedom."

"In our view, effective government collaboration with faith-based groups does not require the sanctioning of federally funded religious discrimination," the coalition said.

—Bob Allen, Baptist News Global and BJC Staff Reports

BJC joins push for legislation to prevent religious-based bans on people entering the country



The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and more than 100 other organizations are supporting a bill that would prohibit the use of religious litmus tests to ban people from entering the United States.

On May 11, Rep. Don Beyer, D-Va., introduced the Freedom of Religion Act, which would bar the use of religion as a way to deny refugees, immigrants and international visitors from entering the United States.

"We cannot allow fear and paranoia to drive our public policy, especially when it comes to the defining values of our country," Beyer

said. "Our Founding Fathers guaranteed religious freedom for all in the First Amendment to our Constitution. People all around the world look to us as the standard for freedom, liberty, and tolerance."

The Baptist Joint Committee's Holly Hollman and Jennifer Hawks joined Beyer and a few of the 70 congressional co-sponsors on stage at the announcement to show support for the bipartisan bill. The BJC also signed a letter with 30 religious groups that calls on all members of Congress to support the legislation.

—Cherilyn Crowe

From top: Rep. Don Beyer, D-Va., introduces the bill with co-sponsors and representatives of supporting organizations; BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman (left) and Associate General Counsel Jennifer Hawks speak with Interfaith Alliance President Rabbi Jack Moline (right) and Benny Witkovsky of West End Strategy Team; Hollman speaks with Beyer before the press conference.

REFLECTIONS

Exercising responsible, selfless freedom

James Dunn used to say, from time to time, “No one is ‘free as a bird.’ Only a bird is as free as a bird.”

As important as freedom is to what it means to be a Baptist and to the mission of the Baptist Joint Committee, freedom is not and cannot be absolute. It must be tempered by and held in tension with responsibility — duties we owe to each other, to the church, and even to government.

This idea of responsible freedom finds expression **theologically**. The apostle Paul admonishes the church in Galatia not to use their freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but to serve one another in love. He told the Galatians and tells us today the whole law can be summed up in one commandment, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:13-14).

This truth also has implications **ecclesiological**. Yes, we all come to God one at a time, personally and willingly. But our relationship with God must always be nurtured in the context of the community — with the admonishment of the family and the worshipping congregation. As Baptist journalist Bill Moyers has aptly reminded us:

“[Our Baptist] beliefs do not make for lawless anarchy or the religion of Lone Rangers. ... They aim for a community with moral integrity, the wholeness that flows from mutual obligation. Our religion is an adventure in freedom within boundaries of accountability.”

This truth unfolds **politically**. It recognizes our responsibilities to government. Jesus clearly outlined our duties to both God and government when he said to render unto the emperor things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s (Matthew 22:21). And Paul acknowledges the legitimacy of government rule as a divinely ordained enterprise (Romans 13:1). Unlike some of our Anabaptist cousins, we Baptists have always been willing to engage culture and participate in the political process. From Thomas Helwys to Roger Williams to John Leland to Isaac Backus to Jimmy Carter, Baptists have been involved in politics — acting sometimes as prophets, sometimes as priests, sometimes as participants.

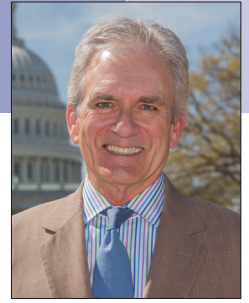
The notion of limited freedom is grounded **constitutionally**. Even the First Amendment — the pinnacle of our commitment to individual liberties — is not absolute and often requires a balancing of interests. We do not have the free speech right to shout “fire” in the proverbial crowded theater. Our freedom of the press does not mean one can publish malicious lies in newspapers — even about public figures — without risking a libel suit. Our First Amendment right to assemble and to petition the government for redress of grievances must be peaceable and is subject to reasonable time, place and manner restrictions by government.

The First Amendment’s religion clauses are not susceptible to black and white treatment either. The Establishment Clause does not ban all government-sponsored encouragement of religion. It only requires that governmental acts have at least one secular purpose and the primary effect does not advance religion. The institutions of government and religion can cooperate in many ways, as long as it does not result in excessive entanglement between church and state. Balancing of interests and line-drawing are part of the Establishment Clause’s calculus.

The same goes for the Free Exercise Clause. You can believe what you want and worship as you please, but you cannot exercise your religion in a way that unduly harms other people or seriously compromises the public interest. Insistence upon unfettered religious freedom, no matter what the impact on others or the sufficiency of governmental accommodation, is not only untenable but may engender a backlash that actually impedes religious freedom. (This is one of the main points of the BJC’s *Zubik* brief.) In short, the wall of separation between church and state is not impenetrable. Sometimes it looks more like a chain link fence.

The point cannot be over-emphasized: we must not exercise our freedom selfishly, but in a way that serves God, respects the well-being of others, honors the government and promotes the common good.

Come to think of it, James Dunn might not have been completely right. Maybe not even birds are as free as birds — the freedom to not flap their wings in flight will allow them to glide only so far before plummeting to earth.



J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

This is the latest in Walker’s series on indispensable principles that inform his understanding of the proper relationship between church and state.

What is Religious Liberty?

“Religious liberty” is the freedom to believe and exercise or act upon religious conscience without unnecessary interference by the government. Just as religious liberty involves the freedom to practice religion, it also means freedom not to practice religion. If you can’t say “no,” your “yes” is meaningless.

Just like any freedom, religious liberty is not without limits. As the old saying goes, “My right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.” Some religions involve beliefs or practices that conflict with other laws, such as compulsory education laws, animal protection laws and anti-drug laws. In those cases, legislatures and courts must step in to determine how to accommodate sincere religious beliefs while protecting other government interests, including protecting those who may not share the same beliefs. So, when government makes exceptions for religious exercise, it must look out for the rights and well-being of others who may be detrimentally affected.

The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty advocates a “golden rule” of religious liberty: Do not ask government to promote your religion if you don’t want government to promote somebody else’s religion; and do not permit government to hinder somebody else’s religion if you don’t want government to hinder your own religion.

How is religious liberty legally protected in the United States?

The U.S. Constitution protects the freedom of religion in a distinct way, allowing people with vastly different beliefs to live peaceably together.

The first 16 words of the First Amendment have two protections for religion. The prohibition on an **establishment** of religion keeps the government from advancing or privileging religion. The protection of **free exercise** keeps the government from unnecessarily interfering with religious practice.

The First Amendment keeps government neutral — neither helping nor hurting religion, but allowing people to practice their religion (or practice no religion). Additional protections exist in various federal, state and local laws.

First 16 words of the
First Amendment:
**Congress shall make
no law respecting an
establishment of religion,
or prohibiting the
free exercise thereof**

What about the separation of church and state?

The phrase “separation of church and state” is not in the Constitution. It is shorthand for the protections in the First Amendment and for a deeper truth: religious liberty is best protected when the institutions of church and state remain separated and neither tries to perform or interfere with the essential mission and work of the other.

People of faith generally agree that government should not unduly restrict religion. But, government promotion of religion is problematic. When government tries to aid religion — financially or otherwise — it also tends to regulate religion and often waters it down, robbing religion of its vitality. Decisions on religious matters are best left to individuals and houses of worship. As soon as government starts to meddle in religion or take sides in religious disputes — favoring one religion over another — someone’s religious liberty is denied and everyone’s is threatened. The separation of church and state ensures religious liberty in the United States.

Why do Baptists care about religious liberty?

Baptists believe that we are inherently free to choose whether to worship God and follow Christ without efforts by the government to advance or restrain religion. This historic commitment to religious liberty for all people can be traced back to 17th century England and Colonial America, where Baptist leaders called for complete religious freedom. Baptists declared that the government was powerless to control conscience and was incompetent to dictate spiritual matters.



The fight for religious liberty is an effort to prevent the government from doing what even God will not do: coerce faith.

A threat to *anyone’s* religious liberty is a threat to *everyone’s* religious liberty.

Protecting pastors without condemning neighbors

By Jennifer Hawks, BJC Associate General Counsel



There has been a lot of fear-mongering since last summer's U.S. Supreme Court decision recognizing same-sex marriage as a constitutional right. One frequent rumor has been that LGBT advocates want to force pastors and churches to violate their theological positions

and require them to participate in same-sex wedding ceremonies. That sort of conjecture is used to justify various legislation, including "pastor protection acts." The truth is, pastors and churches have always enjoyed wide discretion, subject only to their own convictions and denomination polity, to participate (or not) in any wedding ceremony. Nothing about *Obergefell v. Hodges* changes this.

All this rhetoric about pastors and churches needing legal protection gives the impression that they will suddenly be turning down weddings for the first time and opening themselves up to lawsuits. Ask any pastor about weddings he or she has been asked to officiate. Odds are they have said no to at least one couple. It is not uncommon to hear of refusals for a number of reasons, such as church policy, a previous divorce, or a lack of maturity, compatibility or connection to the church.

Occasionally, pastors or churches refuse engaged couples for reasons that in other contexts would be illegal. In the summer of 2012, a predominantly white Mississippi Baptist church's refusal to allow an African-American couple to get married in the church because of the couple's race briefly captured national attention. While the refusal was denounced by church members as well as Baptist and non-Baptist Mississippians, no civil or criminal penalties followed.

If a racial refusal more than 50 years after the civil rights movement doesn't trigger intervention by government authorities, it is hard to imagine what would. Frankly, the state has little interest in a church's decision to solemnize (or not) any marriage. Nothing in the current legal landscape indicates that pastors or houses of worship will someday be required to officiate or host **any** wedding, much less one that doesn't conform to their religious doctrine. To allay the fear that *Obergefell* somehow changed this, several states have passed or are considering legislation often referred to as "pastor protection acts."

While not legally necessary, "pastor protection acts" are not controversial when they pursue their most obvious objective: to reassure pastors and churches that they are not required to solemnize any and all marriages on demand. Such legislation, how-

ever, becomes controversial when expanded beyond the church in ways that conflict with the public's understanding of fairness in the civil arena.

The first statute to address this issue was Connecticut's legislative recognition of same-sex marriage in 2009. It provided that "No member of the clergy authorized to join persons in marriage ... shall be required to solemnize any marriage ..." and "[n]o church or qualified church-controlled organization ... shall be required to participate in a ceremony solemnizing a marriage" In fact, every state that legislatively opened up civil marriage to same-sex couples included some form of explicit recognition that pastors can refuse to perform **any ceremony** as an expression of their free exercise of religion.

Post-*Obergefell*, several states that had previously banned same-sex marriage are now looking to pass stand-alone "pastor protection acts." Some of these independent proposals follow what other states had previously done and provide explicit reassurances to houses of worship and clergy that they are not required to solemnize any particular marriage.

Some states, though, have pushed the boundaries, fueling further conflict. For example, the first version of Texas' "pastor protection act" provided that religious organizations and certain individuals and entities associated with them could refuse to participate in the "solemnization, formation, or celebration of any marriage, or treat any marriage as valid for any reason." Controversy erupted over this final phrase. The potential reach of permitting any religious organization the ability to deny the validity of any marriage for any purpose went far beyond ensuring that pastors or churches would not be required to solemnize a marriage they found theologically objectionable. Fortunately, this controversial provision was eventually deleted from the bill, allowing it to be enacted with little fanfare and no calls for boycotts.

When carefully crafted, "pastor protection acts" non-controversially provide explicit reassurances that clergy and houses of worship can make theological decisions when it comes to wedding participation. This clarification can strengthen the public's understanding of important boundaries between church and state. If, however, the slogan of "pastor protection" is used as cover to exempt a wide range of entities from various interactions with the LGBT community, pastors and their supporters should ask if the legislation's goal is to protect pastors or condemn their LGBT neighbors.

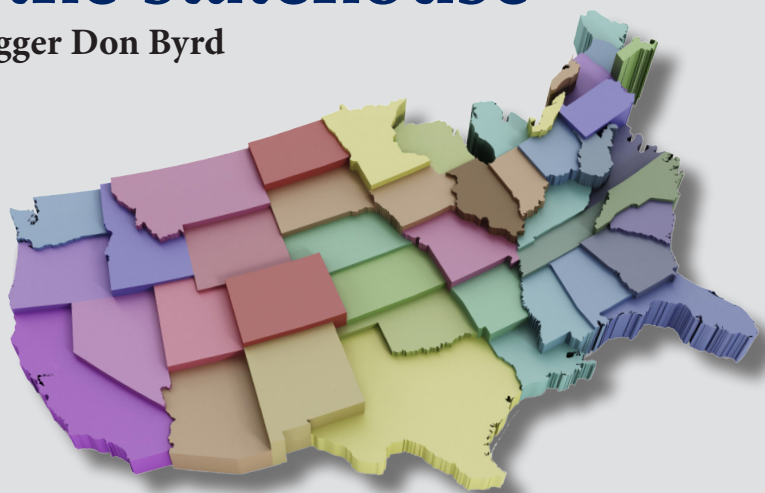
The Hollman Report will return in next month's Report from the Capital.

Religion in the statehouse

By BJC Blogger Don Byrd

The end of spring brought a flurry of activity in state legislatures across the country, raising questions about the proper relationship between religion and government. As BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman explained in the last issue of *Report From the Capital*, states are most prominently wrestling with the question of religious exemptions based on beliefs regarding marriage.

Those bills, and others relating to religion, continue to wind their way through the legislative process. Here is a sampling of recent state legislation.



Missouri

A proposed constitutional amendment that passed the Missouri Senate in March failed in a House committee on a 6-6 vote. The proposal would have allowed voters to decide in November whether to shield some businesses, religious organizations and individuals from penalty for actions taken in accordance with their religious beliefs about same-sex marriage.

The amendment would have protected organizations that refused to provide adoption services to same-sex couples and businesses that declined to provide services related to same-sex wedding ceremonies.

The measure also purported to protect clergy and houses of worship that refuse to preside over or host same-sex marriage ceremonies, but – as the BJC often points out – the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution already provides robust protection that would prohibit the government from forcing ministers or churches to participate in weddings they object to on religious grounds.

Tennessee

Gov. Bill Haslam vetoed a bill that would have named the Holy Bible as the official state book. The legislature passed the measure overwhelmingly, but the state attorney general's opinion that the law would be unconstitutional plus Gov. Haslam's own concern that such an official declaration "trivializes" the sacred text apparently led him to reject the bill. The BJC's Jennifer Hawks outlined those same two concerns last year when this conversation first surfaced.

Meanwhile, Gov. Haslam did sign into law a controversial bill that would allow counselors and therapists to refuse to provide services to clients if it would violate their "sincerely held principles," including religious beliefs. The legislation has generated substantial backlash, including from many Christian counselors who argue that such a refusal violates both professional and religious standards.

Oklahoma

In accordance with a bill the legislature passed in April, voters in Oklahoma will decide whether to remove from the state constitution a key provision protecting the separation of church and state. Article 2, Section 5 of the Oklahoma Constitution – like similar provisions in many state constitutions – prohibits the state from using government funds or property for religious or sectarian purposes.

Last year, a court ruled that the state constitution prohibits a Ten Commandments monument from being displayed on the grounds of the state Capitol. Now, advocates of the monument are promoting the repeal of Article 2, Section 5, with the hope that removing that provision from the law will allow the return of the monument.

But, that is not necessarily the case: The U.S. Constitution still protects against unlawful government displays. Many courts have found such monuments violate the First Amendment's ban on the establishment of religion. The referendum will be included on the November ballot.

Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania House approved a measure on a 179-20 vote that would encourage school districts across the state to add the motto "In God We Trust" to public school buildings. House Bill 1640 does not require schools to display the motto, but declares the importance of such displays and notes that courts have found the motto in other contexts to be constitutional. In the post-9/11 surge of patriotism, many states enacted similar legislation. Some required public schools to display the motto while others explicitly allowed it or stated that its display could not be prohibited. The bill is headed to the state Senate for consideration.

As always, check the BJC blog for daily coverage and perspective on state legislation and other news related to the intersection of church and state. Follow me on Twitter (@BJCBlog) for headlines and commentary.

BJC announces new roles for staff members

Two members of the Baptist Joint Committee staff have expanded job responsibilities.

Taryn Deaton has been named senior director of operations and development. A native of Austin, Texas, Deaton joined the BJC staff in 2012 as the director of development. In her new role, she has responsibilities related to internal operations of the BJC, including the implementation of initiatives and special projects to advance the organization's strategic direction. She continues to oversee the BJC's fundraising initiatives.



Deaton

Jennifer Hawks has been named associate general counsel. A native of Germantown, Tennessee, Hawks joined the BJC in 2014 as staff counsel. Now a member of the U.S. Supreme Court Bar, she continues to provide legal analysis on church-state issues. Hawks also assists in the BJC's education efforts and responds to pastors and other constituents who have questions about church-state matters.



Hawks

BJC joins brief supporting N.J. Muslims' proposed mosque

The Baptist Joint Committee joined a brief in the U.S. District Court for New Jersey asserting that the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (known as RLUIPA) prohibits different municipal rules for building a mosque than for a church.

After receiving an application from the Islamic Society of Basking Ridge seeking to build a mosque on a site zoned for houses of worship, Bernards Township created several impediments before the necessary permits could be granted. After 39 hearings over four years and receiving numerous drawn and re-drawn plans, Bernards Township eventually denied the application. The Islamic Society filed suit asserting RLUIPA, First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment claims.

RLUIPA is a federal law that applies the familiar Religious Freedom Restoration Act standard (prohibiting the government from substantially burdening a person's religious exercise except in situations to pursue a compelling government interest in the least restrictive means) to state and local governments in land use and zoning issues. This case demonstrates why RLUIPA was needed in 2000 and is still needed today. Minority religious groups often face heightened scrutiny when attempting to engage in the freedoms to exercise their religion and peaceably assemble.

The BJC joined the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Interfaith Coalition on Mosques,

International Society for Krishna Consciousness, National Association of Evangelicals, Sikh Coalition and others in the brief in the case of *Basking Ridge v. Township of Bernards*.

—Jennifer Hawks

Court rules Muslim inmates may wear beards and skullcaps

Texas prisons must allow Muslim inmates to wear the beards and knit skullcaps their religion demands, a federal court ruled.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of David Rasheed Ali, who sued the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) in 2009, saying his faith required him to wear a "fist-length" beard and a white knit kufi.

Ali, an inmate at the Michael Unit near Palestine, Texas, asserted the TDCJ policies violated the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA). The law bars the government from imposing a "substantial burden" on prisoners' religious practices unless officials can show a compelling interest, and it requires the government to use the "least restrictive" means possible.

A district court ruled in Ali's favor, and the appeals court affirmed that decision.

The appeals court opinion demonstrates the "strong protections for the religious liberty interests of prisoners" RLUIPA provides, said Holly Hollman, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

"While safety and security are obviously important governmental interests, the Supreme Court has made clear that courts should not give undue deference to prison officials. This case follows that guidance," she said.

At the time Ali filed his suit, the prison system permitted inmates to wear religious skullcaps only inside their cells or during religious worship services, and the TDCJ grooming policy required all male inmates to be clean-shaven, aside from certain medical exemptions.

The agency later amended its policy to allow inmates to grow half-inch beards for religious reasons, but the TDCJ insisted longer beards and skullcaps presented a security risk because prisoners could hide weapons and other contraband in them.

The appeals court ruled the prison system has a compelling interest in maintaining security and eliminating contraband in prison. However, the court ruled, the TDCJ did not demonstrate banning longer beards and restricting when and where inmates could wear kufis was the "least restrictive" means to accomplish its legitimate security concerns.

Under prison system procedures, correctional officers require inmates with long hair to prove it is free of contraband, and the court asserted the prison likewise could require a similar process for long beards.

The appeals court ruling affirmed a 2014 decision by U.S. Magistrate Zack Hawthorn, which had been appealed by the TDCJ.

—Ken Camp, *The Baptist Standard and BJC Staff Reports*



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REPORT from the Capital

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Young ministers can purchase discounted tickets for 2016 RLC Luncheon

Siblings Lauren and Adam McDuffie are coming to this year's Religious Liberty Council Luncheon, taking advantage of the discounted ticket price of \$20 offered to young ministers. Lauren serves as a chaplain in Tennessee and was a member of the 2015 class of BJC Fellows. Adam is a student at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, and he served as a BJC intern in 2014. We asked them to share why they wanted to attend the event.



Lauren McDuffie

I grew up in churches where I learned about the impact of religious liberty advocacy in our Baptist story. As a student, attending the Religious Liberty Council Luncheon during the Cooperative Baptist

Fellowship General Assembly gave me the chance to connect with others who care about these issues, to hear compelling speakers address contemporary issues of religious liberty, and to connect with the work of the BJC as a young Baptist. The BJC Fellows program and the availability of discounted tickets for young ministers to the RLC Luncheon are just a couple of the ways I have been able to build connections between my ministry and the advocacy of the BJC. Especially this year, when the luncheon will be an invaluable opportunity to join the voices thanking Brent Walker for his 27 years of service with the organization, I am grateful for the BJC for making this connection for young Baptists feasible.



Adam McDuffie

Having interned with the BJC, I was able to see firsthand the importance of the work this organization does in fighting for the protection of religious liberty. I also cherished the opportunity to be able to work

alongside Brent Walker. His tenure with the BJC has been defined by excellence, including his efforts to expand the BJC's educational mission and to pass important religious liberty legislation, such as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Being able to attend the RLC Luncheon and celebrate Brent's career with the BJC is very important to me. Given that I am currently in seminary, and therefore living on a tight budget, I was unsure whether I would be able to attend the luncheon this year. The discounted tickets available to young ministers makes this experience possible for me and other young ministers. I am immensely grateful for that, and I look forward to attending in June.

The 2016 Religious Liberty Council Luncheon will be held June 24 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Young ministers can purchase tickets for \$20, and regular tickets are \$40 each. Tables of 10 are available for \$400. For more information, call 202-544-4226 or visit BJCOnline.org/Luncheon.