

REPORT

FROM THE

CAPITAL

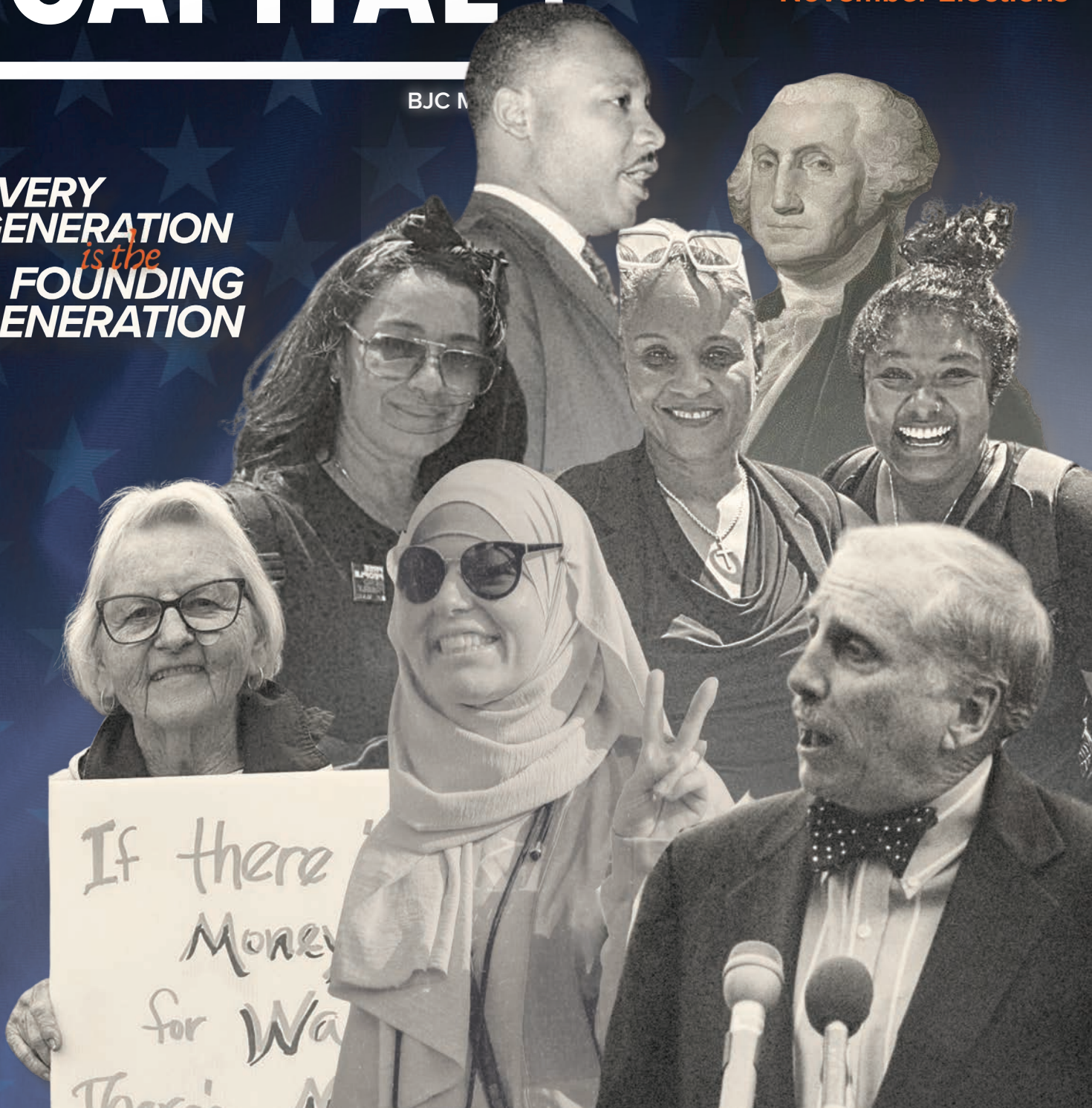
AMANDA TYLER Testifies
Against Anti-Sharia Laws

HOLLY HOLLMAN Shares
Her Final Report

Join People of Faith
Preparing for the
November Elections

BJC M

EVERY
GENERATION
is the
FOUNDING
GENERATION



A New Look Online

For 90 years, BJC has been a steadfast voice for religious freedom, no matter what comes our way. We rise to new challenges, engage in new efforts, and create new partnerships.

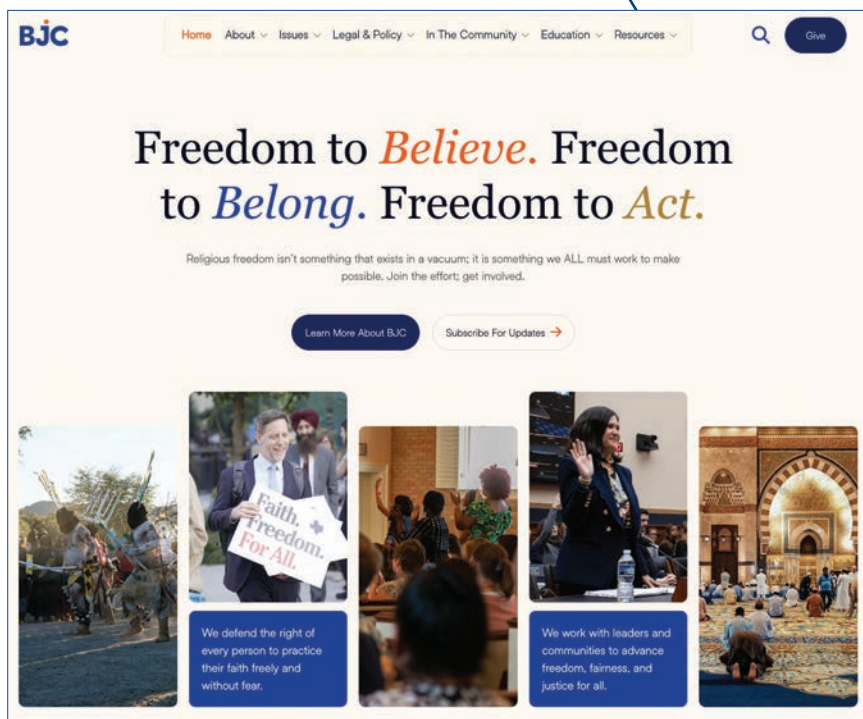
And now we have an all-new [BJCOnline.org](https://www.bjconline.org).

The look has changed, but our dedication to faith freedom for all hasn't.

We remain rooted in a Baptist commitment to soul liberty. Our new website helps us build a movement toward a just society that cultivates and expands religious freedom for all.

It showcases the Baptist distinctives that undergird our work. It illuminates the ways religious freedom intersects with real life. It invites people to participate with us.

Visit our new online home. Find the work you've always supported, and discover new ways to connect.



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Why I Testified Against Anti-Sharia Laws

By Amanda Tyler, BJC Executive Director



With the approaching midterm elections, candidates for office are making their case for your vote. They're all claiming to best represent your interests in Congress, state legislatures, and other seats of government on the state and local level. Americans have many concerns right now — affordability, health care, immigration enforcement, the rule of law, access to voting, the war in Iran, AI, education, the environment, civil rights, corruption, and more.

Yet many elected officials and candidates — particularly but not exclusively in my home state of Texas — are focused on an issue that doesn't make any of the top lists of voters' concerns: the rise of "Sharia Law." Sowing misinformation about Islam and Muslims in Texas was a centerpiece of many heated Republican primaries, including the race for Texas Attorney General. One candidate — Rep. Chip Roy, currently serving as a member of Congress — decided to bring his arguments into a congressional hearing room.

As Chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution and Limited Government, Rep. Roy called a hearing in May titled "Sharia-Free America: Why Political Islam and Sharia Law are Incompatible with the U.S. Constitution." It was full of classic fear-mongering, misinformation, and discrimination against American Muslims, falsely suggesting that the practice of Islam and presence of Muslims in a community pose a terroristic threat to the United States.

I was honored to be asked, at the invitation of Democratic members of the Committee, to offer testimony about how targeting individuals and groups based on religion violates our country's constitutional commitment to religious freedom for all. In fact, it is precisely because of the separation of church and state and the disestablishment of religion from government control that the governing law in this country is secular and not religious in nature. The false idea of *any* religious law being imposed on everyone is easily debunked by referencing the first 16 words of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The hearing was built around a premise that betrays our constitutional values — that Congress has the authority to determine which religion is compatible with American life. It does not. That is

not a partisan position; it is the founding logic of religious freedom in this country.

Baptists have been making this argument for more than 400 years — and we have been making it on behalf of everyone, not just ourselves. In 1612, Thomas Helwys, one of the founders of the Baptist movement, wrote to King James I and argued that the king had no authority over the religious conscience of his subjects. He named Muslims specifically (as "Turks") when he said, "For men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and person. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

This is not a new argument for Baptists. It is our oldest one.

What is happening right now in Congress and in campaign rhetoric not only betrays our values, but it also puts our neighbors at risk for violence.

Just five days after the U.S. House held this hearing and two days before a similar hearing was scheduled to be held in the U.S. Senate, two gunmen attacked the Islamic Center of San Diego, killing three people before killing themselves. The perpetrators were reportedly motivated by virulent anti-Muslim hatred and antisemitic conspiracy theories that cast Muslims and Jews as a threat. The brave and self-sacrificial actions of Amin Abdullah, father of eight who worked as a security guard at the center, protected the lives of 140 children who were present at the mosque's school.

This attack did not occur in a vacuum; it happened as our society is besieged by increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric and fear-mongering. The Senate subcommittee's decision to postpone its hearing following the attack reflects an apparent recognition that anti-Muslim rhetoric has real world consequences. That recognition was fleeting, given that Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, rescheduled the hearing for August, even though the premise of the hearing similarly risks encouraging suspicion toward Muslim Americans and organizations through guilt-by-association. Congress should be working to reduce these harms rather than adding fuel to the fire.

Religious freedom will not be achieved in our society until it is a lived reality for every person, regardless of their faith. With your support, BJC can continue to provide this necessary testimony, from the halls of Congress to state education hearings to communities across the country.

COMPELLED TO BE *free*

A JOURNEY ACROSS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

THOSE WHO WROTE

ISAAC BACKUS: (right)

A Baptist minister who wrote *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty* in 1773, making the case that taxing citizens to support an established church was a violation of conscience. He brought the Baptist argument directly to the Continental Congress.

VINE DELORIA:

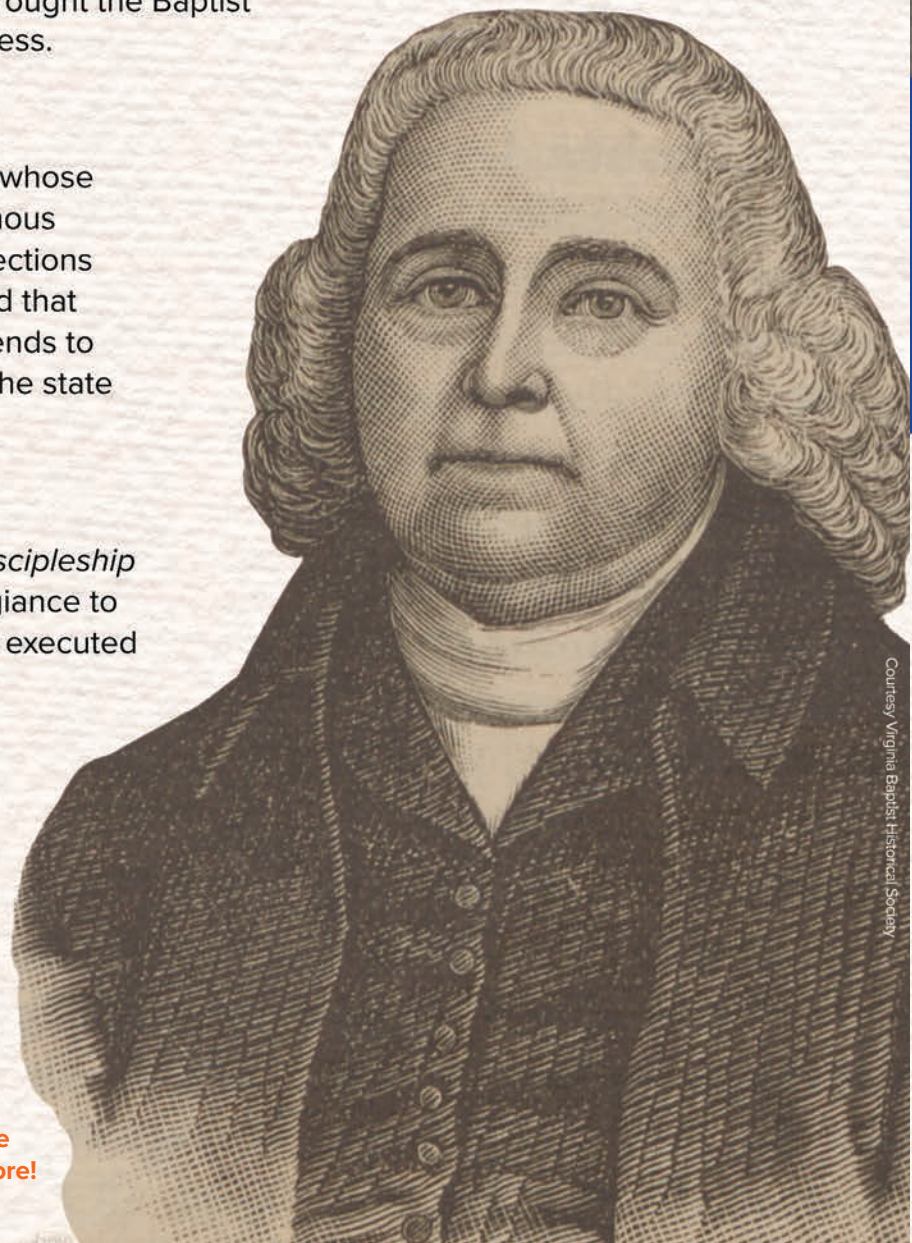
A Standing Rock Sioux scholar and activist whose book *God Is Red* (1973) argued that Indigenous spiritual traditions deserved the same protections as any other faith in America. He contended that religious freedom means little unless it extends to Indigenous communities whose traditions the state had long tried to erase.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER:

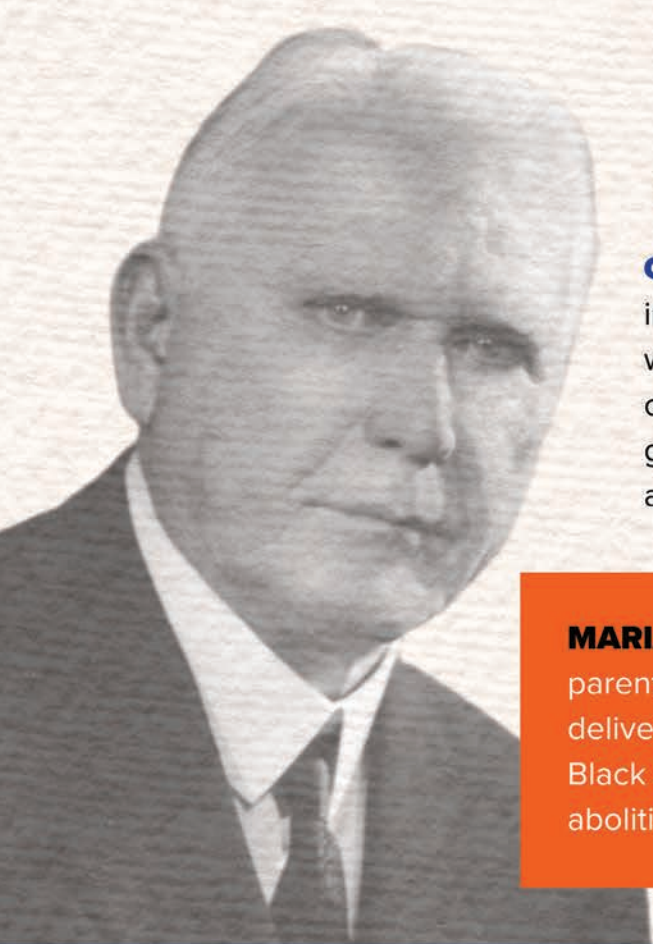
German pastor whose work *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) argued that the church owes its allegiance to God alone, not to any government. He was executed by the Nazis in 1945 for his resistance.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR:

An American theologian whose book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) argued that democracy requires humility — that no person, party, or faith tradition is righteous enough to rule without accountability.



These are just a few of the people who are part of the story. Visit our Instagram page @BJContheHill for more!



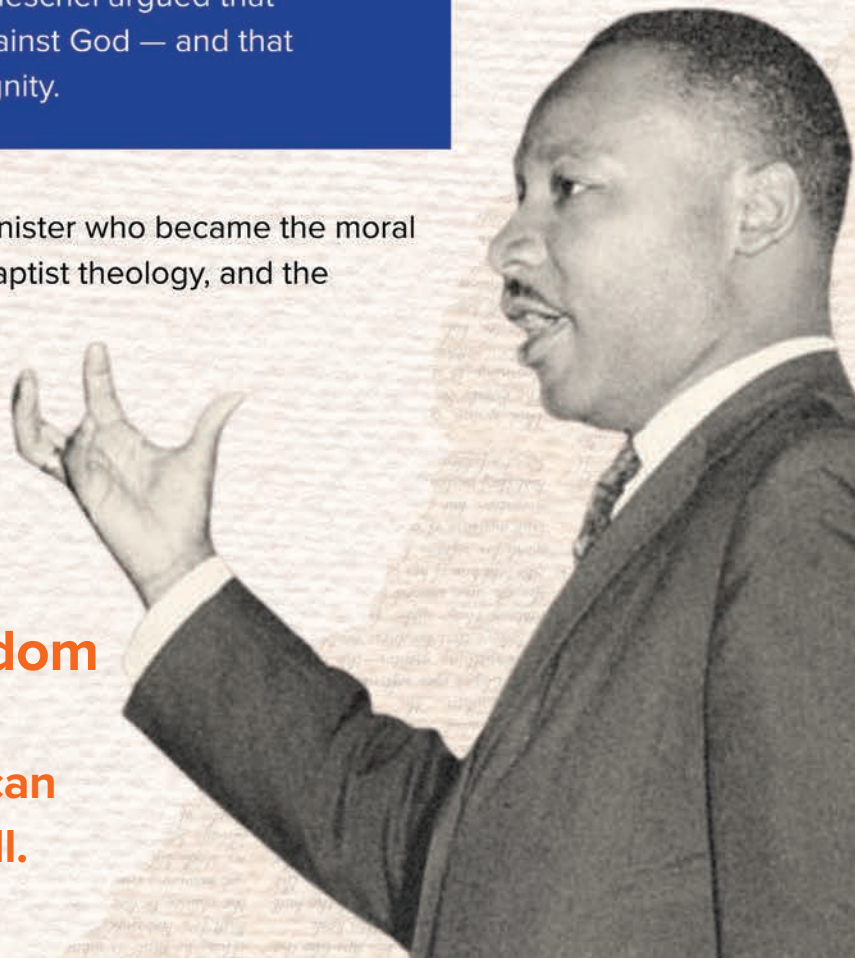
THOSE WHO ACTED

GEORGE W. TRUETT (left): A Texas Baptist pastor who, in 1920, stood on the steps of the U.S. Capitol and delivered what became the defining Baptist argument for the separation of church and state. He declared that religious freedom is the gift of God, not the state — and that no government has the authority to compel or restrict the conscience.

MARIA W. STEWART: An indentured servant born to free Black parents in Connecticut in 1803, she became a prolific activist and delivered powerful public speeches — something unthinkable for a Black woman at the time. She spoke about religion, women's rights, abolition, and prejudice.

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL: A Polish-born rabbi and theologian who became one of the most important religious voices in 20th century America. He marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, famously saying he felt as though his legs were praying. Heschel argued that indifference to the suffering of others is a sin against God — and that religious freedom is inseparable from human dignity.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. (right): A Baptist minister who became the moral conscience of America. Drawing on Scripture, Baptist theology, and the Declaration of Independence, he argued that segregation was a violation of the God-given dignity of every person. His campaigns in Birmingham and Selma demonstrated that faith is not a private matter — it is a public obligation.



Who keeps religious freedom alive today? *You!*

Turn the page to see how you can participate in our Founders Wall.

Every Generation is the *Founding* Generation

By Israel Iguarate, Communications Director

The country was founded in 1776. It was also founded in 1965, on a bridge in Selma. It was founded in a one-room schoolhouse where a teacher taught children to read against the law. It is being founded this morning, in a food pantry in a church basement, by someone whose name will never appear in a textbook.

We have been taught to think of the founding as a moment — a room in Philadelphia, a document, a set of signatures, a generation that did the work so the rest of us wouldn't have to. But a country is not a document you inherit. It is a practice you take up. The founders did not finish America. They started it, and then they handed us the pen.

Because America is not something you inherit passively. It is something you create actively.

This is the whole idea. The most famous names in our history and the most anonymous people in our communities are doing the same work: writing the country into being through what they do. George Washington was founding this country. So is the poll worker checking people in at a folding table. So is the parent at the school board meeting. So is the congregation that opens its doors to neighbors it was told to fear. The founding never ended. It just changed hands.

At BJC, we care about this for a

America is not something you inherit passively. It is something you create actively.

specific reason. Religious freedom is not a promise that keeps itself. It requires a country where people can participate fully in civic life. Where they can gather, speak, vote, and stand in the public square without intimidation or state-imposed barriers. Religious freedom requires pluralism, and pluralism requires people to show up. When people withdraw from civic life, or are pushed out of it, the ground that religious freedom stands on gives way. Civic participation is not adjacent to religious freedom. It is the soil it grows in.

Which means the work of founding this country and the work of protecting religious freedom are the same work. Every person who acts, who joins, who shows up, who bears witness, is founding this country and defending the freedom that lives inside it.

So this year, as the country marks 250 years, we are not looking backward at a finished thing. We are looking around us at an unfinished one, and at the people still building it.

We want to show them to you. We are building a Founders Wall — a place where we highlight the people, famous and unknown, historical and living, who are still founding this country through what they do. And we want you on it.

Tell us about a founder. It might be a name from history that shaped the freedom we live in. It might be someone in your congregation, your family, your town, doing the quiet work of holding a community together. It might be you.

Every generation is the founding generation. This one is ours.

Religious freedom can only be lived if we will it to be. So let's found this country again and again.



Volunteering can make a difference for everyone involved. Lorraine and Chris Harry lead Claremont Christian Fellowship: a queer-affirming, justice-seeking, question-loving community at The Claremont Colleges in Southern California. Their organization strives to make space for students to wrestle with and live out their faith in tangible ways. "That can look like building community, fostering dialogue, volunteering together at food banks, participating in protests, or simply resting together," Lorraine says.



A ministry can turn into a vision that brings others along. Lutheran Pastor Matthew Best is a co-founder of the Homeless Remembrance Blanket Project, an initiative that is going into its 6th year. The Project asks people to make and send in blankets, which are made into a large display to highlight the issue of homelessness and what can be done about it. All the blankets are given to those who need them.



BJC90
BUILDING A MOVEMENT

VISIT THE FOUNDERS WALL.



See the stories. Share yours.

BJCOnline.org/FoundersWall



Whose *Bible*? Whose *Kids*?

By Israel Iguarate, Communications Director

In June, the Texas State Board of Education decided that the best way to teach five million public school kids about literature was to assign them Scripture — David and Goliath for the eight-year-olds, the Sermon on the Mount for the middle schoolers, and the Book of Job for the teenagers who've already lost enough sleep over algebra.

Nobody's mad about the Bible being good literature. It is. Hemingway himself turned to it for inspiration — *The Sun Also Rises*, anyone? The problem is a small detail: the state of Texas is assigning these biblical texts to kindergartners on up. Not parents or their faith leaders; the state of Texas — a government entity who is now apparently more adept on deciding how to teach the Gospels to schoolchildren.

And in a state where roughly a third of residents aren't Christian, the list somehow found room for Protestant translations of everything, plus one lonely, outdated Jewish translation, and nothing else. No Quran, no Bhagavad Gita, one faith's Scripture, stamped with a state seal, handed to every kindergartner in Texas whether their family wanted it or not.

Supporters insist this isn't proselytizing — just "introducing kids to the wealth and breadth of a canon of Western literature." Nothing says objective literary survey quite like assigning 9th graders the Parable of the Prodigal Son and calling it Tuesday.

Supporters have also been generous enough to explain that choosing the King James Bible had nothing to do with theology and everything to do with "cultural and literary relevance" — a genuinely creative way to describe picking the translation most associated with one Protestant tradition and insisting, with a straight face, that this was a curriculum decision and not a religious one.

BJC and its partners in Texas pointed out the actual problem — translation exclusivity, zero representation for

other faiths, the state taking the role of a parent or faith leader — with a fact sheet, nearly 200 clergy signatures across faith traditions, a busload of Texans who drove to Austin to testify, and a biblical analysis handed directly to Board members who asked for it.

The vote passed 9-5 anyway.

Somewhere, a kindergartner is about to learn the Bible from the state of Texas — whether they're Christian or not and whether their parents want it or not. Somewhere else, that's being filed under objective literary education.

For more, visit BJCOnline.org/TXSBOE.



Phyllis, a member of the North Texas Coalition, holds a sign in front of the media gathered on the grounds of the Texas Capitol.



Rabbi David Segal, BJC's policy counsel, adds his voice to those testifying against the proposals from the State Board of Education.



A Funeral for Religious Liberty

A copy of the First Amendment. Flowers made out of pipe cleaners, created by students. Rituals of mourning. Pleas to do better.

BJC's North Texas Coalition joined with Texas Impact and the Religious Action Center of Texas to stand up to the problematic proposals from the State Board of Education. But, we didn't stop there — steps away from where the elected representatives were voting to pass an absurd reading list, we held a funeral for religious freedom. We did so to recognize the parents and students who will have part of that precious right taken away in classrooms across the state.

Photos provided by Texas Freedom Network





Local Groups

BJC's local groups are doing the work across the country on the issues that matter most to their communities. Local groups are people who show up, organize, and refuse to let religious freedom become a principle on paper rather than a reality on the ground.

From stopping immigration detention centers, fighting government-mandated religious instruction in schools, and rallying communities to stop federal rules that would evict tens of thousands of families from their homes, local groups work on the civic conditions that keep religious freedom alive.

Find a group. Or start one. Visit BJOnline.org/LocalGroups for the current list, and see how you can be connected.

Questions? Contact Devin Withrow at dwithrow@BJOnline.org.



Illinois



Our group in Illinois is growing at breakneck speed. Formed just a few months ago, they got involved immediately in efforts to stop federal tax dollars from being directed to private religious schools. The group organized and delivered a letter to Gov. JB Pritzker in May, urging him not to opt in to the federal program created by the “Big Beautiful Bill,” and they are actively working to pass legislation along the same lines. This group — known as “Christians Against Christian Nationalism Illinois” — already hosted an exercise to identify existing partners, leaders, and opportunities for further growth. More groups in the state are on the horizon. Want to connect? Contact Rev. Karen Atkins at karen.il.cacn@gmail.com.

North Carolina: Triangle Area



Based in Raleigh, the Triangle Area group is focused on supporting public education. They fought a problematic state bill that allows students to leave school during the day for private religious instruction, which stripped control from local school boards. After presenting to a local church on the issue, they saw church members get engaged immediately, contacting their state senators with concerns about the policy. The group’s efforts created new connections and got people involved who had never participated in this way. Want to be part of the work in the Raleigh-Durham area? Contact Tirzah Turner at Triangleareacacn@gmail.com.

Immigrant Church Focus Group



All of us can learn from immigrant faith communities, as they navigate an ongoing crisis of safety and stability. BJC’s organizing team created a focus group of pastors serving Latino and Asian immigrant faith communities to hear firsthand how religious freedom overlaps with their engagement in public life. Immigrant churches remind us that survival itself is sacred, and they model how to embody a deep practice of faith that does not depend on the government. Currently, many are focused on helping congregants meet basic needs, respond to immigration-related challenges, and care for one another in an increasingly uncertain environment.

Clergy Quarterly Touchpoints



Each quarter, we’re giving clergy the chance to check-in with each other and take action. These online gatherings are open to people across the country, and we get more and more participants each time! Our gatherings in January, April, and July let faith leaders engage with each other directly, explored practical steps about moving communities into action, and provided opportunities to act on pressing issues. If you are a member of clergy of any religion or denomination, we want to see you at our next one! Get notified by joining our email list at BJCOnline.org/subscribe.

Help Us Pilot a New Course



How do we move from concern about Christian nationalism to action? We developed a new 5-session course for faith communities who want to take the next steps, and we need volunteers to help us pilot it! **“Organizing for Religious Freedom: From Concern to Faithful Action”** helps your community identify strategic action steps through faith-rooted organizing. Before we release the course to everyone, we need groups to test it out and offer feedback. Do you have a group that can give the course a trial run before October 31? Scan the QR code to sign up and get connected!



Marchers with signs at the March on Washington, 1963. Available from the Library of Congress. Original photo by Marion S. Trikosko, colorized by Jordan J. Lloyd.

Protect the *Ballot*, Protect *Faith Freedom*

By Cherilyn Crowe Guy, Content Strategy Director

As we see new state laws and Supreme Court rulings that hamper access to the ballot and roll back the right to vote, what is the role of people of faith who feel called to stand in the gap?

This summer, the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation joined with Sojourners and Protect Democracy to host a webinar to discuss the threats and the practical steps people can take. The work begins now, well before Election Day.

“Attacks on voting are attacks on religious freedom,” said BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler during the webinar. She pointed out that both religious freedom and the people’s power to elect their representatives are foundational to our constitutional system.

“Put plainly, if people cannot vote, they cannot protect their communities or their own churches,” she said. “If we do not protect our right to vote, then our very foundational freedoms — including our right to worship — may be compromised.”

The Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, president of Sojourners, named the complicated feelings that come with celebrations of America’s 250th birthday when we see so many freedoms under attack. When our country was founded, voting was restricted to white, land-owning men.

“Since then, there has been an ongoing struggle to expand who is fully included in ‘we the people’ enshrined in our Constitution,” he said. He pointed out how the vote has expanded to women and people of color, but not without great effort and struggle, often led by people of faith.

The efforts to subvert our elections are well under-

way, according to Corey Dukes of Protect Democracy. He outlined the threats, explaining how the White House is marshalling federal power toward undermining a free and fair election, using strategies that deceive, disrupt, and deny if things don’t go how they want.

Faith communities are not powerless in the face of such threats, and they are rising to meet the moment. If you aren’t sure where to start, check out the new Executive Override Faith Companion Action Guide, which provides practical strategies that faith communities can engage in to ensure every vote is counted. It moves from naming the moment to grounding a moral response to it.

“Faith communities need more than an analysis,” said the Rev. Moya Harris, senior director of projects at Sojourners, who introduced the guide. “Congregations need practical ways to understand when and where they can act, what this moment requires, and how their role changes across the life of an election.”

She explained how restrictions on voting deny the full dignity of people and their ability to live freely in our society, thus impacting other foundational freedoms. Election integrity is connected to religious commitments to justice, truth-telling, and protecting the vulnerable.

Dr. Sabrina E. Dent, director of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation, invited everyone to remember the people they care about in the face of threats to free and fair elections. In light of the challenges, she asked us all to consider: “What is your moral obligation in taking your next steps?”

Access this resource and many others related to voting on our website at BJCOnline.org/ElectionResources.

Get Ready for November



What can *you* do to ensure access to the ballot this November? How can you make an impact as an individual? Can your house of worship take action?

We have a new online home to give you specific, actionable steps, which you can adapt for your community.

Visit BJCOnline.org/ElectionResources for items you need, including:

- Links to webinars BJC hosted this summer
- Downloadable guides with detailed suggestions from BJC and our partners
- Instructions for signing up to be a poll chaplain
- Ways to report issues you see at the polls, whether during early voting or the November midterms
- Reminders on how houses of worship can speak out on issues without violating their 501(c)(3) tax status

BJCOnline.org/ElectionResources

Spotlight: Progressive National Baptist Convention Advocates for Voting Rights

There is a massive amount of energy in the Black church to get voters registered for midterms, according to leaders of the Progressive National Baptist Convention. One of BJC's member bodies and the denominational home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., PNBC held their annual convention in Washington, D.C., this summer. They scheduled time for participants to take their concerns about voting rights and other issues to Capitol Hill. Many said they were specifically motivated by the recent Supreme Court decisions that are leading to more gerrymandering.

But their work is not limited to in-person visits. In advance of Independence Day celebrations, PNBC released a liturgical guide for churches called "The Hope of America and the Reality for Black and Brown People," which is still available online.

"We follow a tradition that did not wait for an invitation to the nation's table before speaking truth to it," said the Rev. Dr. David Peoples, president of PNBC at the time of the guide's release. "It is time for us to resist the status quo and demand full inclusion in this democratic experiment."

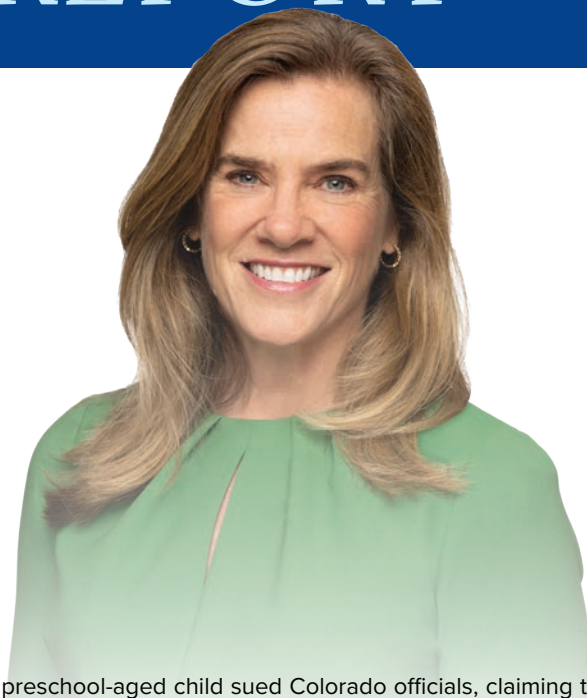


Photographer: Landon Brooks, MAWH Productions

Inside a congressional office building in Washington, D.C., Rep. Wesley Bell, D-Mo., stops for a photo with members of PNBC's leadership during their Capitol Hill visits. Pictured left to right: Rev. Thomas Bowen, general secretary of PNBC; Rev. Dr. David Peoples, president of PNBC; Rep. Bell; Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Thompson, 2nd vice president of PNBC; and Rev. Dr. Darryl Gray, PNBC director general of social justice. This visit was before PNBC's 2026 officer elections.

25 Years of Defending Faith Freedom For All

By Holly Hollman, BJC Chief Legal Officer



After 25 years at BJC steeped in the fight for faith freedom for all, I am leaving. I do so with deep gratitude — I have loved spending such an extensive stretch of my professional career at a treasured and historic organization, advancing ideals I admire. As I told the BJC staff and Board, the years went by quickly as I put my head and heart into this work.

Now is the right time for something new.

This column has been a consistent part of my work — giving me an opportunity to share with all of you about BJC's activities in Washington, including in the U.S. Supreme Court, Congress, and the executive branch. Long before the proliferation of constantly updated websites, social media posts, and podcasts, this space provided an outlet for writing about legal developments, what's ahead, and what it all means. I'm glad to share that one last time.

As usual, the Supreme Court released its final flurry of decisions in late June. Among the most significant was the disappointing ruling in *Landor v. Louisiana Department of Corrections*. In *Landor*, the Court limited the remedies available under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 (RLUIPA), a federal statute designed to protect the religious rights of those in government custody. Based on a cramped reading of that law, the Court's decision left a former prisoner without compensation for a gross violation of his religious rights. The 6-3 majority also raised questions about Congress's power to attach conditions to federal spending that goes to the states.

There's more BJC analysis of *Landor* elsewhere, but the bottom line is that protecting religious freedom takes persistent effort and enforcement. That's particularly true for vulnerable populations, such as religious minorities and those held in government custody. The *Landor* decision imposes new and unfortunate obstacles.

Now that summer has arrived, the Court is focused on filling out its docket for the next term, which begins in October. Already we know there will be at least two cases involving religious claims. In *Saint Mary Catholic Parish v. Roy*, the Court will (again) review the effect of nondiscrimination conditions on religious organizations. Two Catholic parishes that operate preschools and the parents

of a preschool-aged child sued Colorado officials, claiming that the state had unconstitutionally excluded them from a government-funded universal pre-K program. The program conditions participation on a requirement not to discriminate based on protected categories, such as race, religion, sexual orientation, income level, or disability.

The parishes want to participate while serving only families that support Catholic teachings, including teachings on sex and gender. They argue that because the program allows participating providers to give preference to certain student populations (such as those with disabilities or from low-income families), it must also allow the parishes to give preference to families that share their Catholic faith. In effect, the parishes claim that having offered other preferences, the state must grant them a religious exemption from the nondiscrimination provision. Lower courts rejected this claim without applying the higher level of judicial scrutiny that recent Supreme Court rulings demand.

The Court also granted review of *Grand v. City of University Heights*, a case about a religious gathering in a private home. Daniel Grand, an Orthodox Jewish man, has a long-running dispute with neighbors and local authorities in his Ohio town. The city required a zoning permit and prohibited the use of his home as a place of religious assembly. Grand later withdrew his application for such a permit, but he sued the city claiming various violations of his religious freedom rights, including under the land use provisions in RLUIPA. The lower courts did not address his substantive claims, dismissing the case on procedural grounds. Now the Supreme Court will have an opportunity to strengthen those protections by allowing his case to proceed.

In addition to these cases, the Court likely will be asked to review a recent decision by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that upheld the Texas law requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools. BJC has led a coalition of Christian groups in filing briefs to support the parents who have challenged these laws in several states, and BJC will continue to stand with the parents and against government-sponsored religious indoctrination if the case proceeds.

“It is profoundly satisfying to stand for the dignity of all people, as reflected in our vision of religious freedom.”

All of these cases demonstrate the importance of defending religious liberty and cultivating its expansion through litigation, as well as the growing complexity of the doctrinal landscape in recent years. By remaining active through *amicus* briefs and legal advocacy, we adhere to our most important principles and advance BJC’s core mission.

I first learned about religious freedom, including how freedom and responsibility go together, in a caring Baptist congregation. After college, I had formative experiences — including a BJC internship — working with lawyers who litigated cases and lobbied for changes in the law. I became a lawyer to develop the skills that would allow me to do the same. When BJC was looking for a new general counsel in 2001, I wasn’t sure it was the right time. I had new family obligations that made leaving private practice seem risky. But I took the leap, and I’m so grateful I did. At BJC, I have deepened my skills as an advocate and joined the ranks of specialists devoted to fulfilling the promise of our Constitution, which protects religious freedom for all.

It is not hard to understand why this work has mattered to me. First, religious freedom is a value that provides deep and abiding connections among people who may have little in common. It is profoundly satisfying to stand for the dignity of all people, as reflected in our vision of religious freedom.

Second, church-state law involves interpretation of the First Amendment’s Religion Clauses, as applied to the states by the Fourteenth Amendment. This is challenging and rewarding work. The terrain includes countless legislative and regulatory provisions that define the boundaries between the institutions of religion and government, which are debated with vigor and relevance to everyday lives.

Third, Baptists have contributed to the flourishing of religious freedom from our very beginnings. As persecuted minorities resisting religious establishments in Europe and the American colonies, and as worshipping communities in increasingly diverse settings today, Baptists have invoked their commitment to conscience to demand meaningful separation between government and essential matters of faith and practice. This principled advocacy, informed by history, has operated for the benefit of all. That speaks to my spirit, formed in Baptist Sunday school, so it’s little wonder that I have had such an incredibly meaningful and fulfilling professional life serving BJC.

As BJC enters its 10th decade of fighting for faith freedom for all, its legal advocacy continues. We can all be hopeful and grateful for this organization as it continues to carry the work forward.

Editor’s note: We’ll have more on Holly’s service in the next edition of Report from the Capital.



Speaking to reporters in front of the Supreme Court in 2005.



Leading a symposium in 2013 on the 20th anniversary of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.



Leaving oral arguments at the Supreme Court in 2019.

SCOTUS Weakens Prisoners' Ability to *Seek Justice* for Religious Freedom Violation

When prison officials in Louisiana shaved Damon Lander's dreadlocks, courts acknowledged it was a gross violation of Mr. Lander's religious freedom. But, when he pursued his case for monetary damages, the Supreme Court didn't provide a path forward, and it undermined a landmark work of Congress.

A devout Rastafarian, Mr. Lander knew the law accommodated his religious practice of keeping long hair. The First Amendment protects the free exercise of religion, and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) — championed by BJC and passed by Congress in 2000 — ensures the religious rights of people in government custody.

Officers in previous institutions followed the law, letting Mr. Lander keep his hair despite the grooming policies of the state department of corrections.

When Mr. Lander was transferred to a new facility, he came prepared: He actually brought a physical copy of a federal court decision upholding Rastafarian prisoners' right to long hair. But these officers threw that paper in the trash, held him down, and forcibly shaved his head.



Damon Lander leaves the U.S. Supreme Court after his case was heard on Nov. 10, 2025.

The 6-3 decision in *Lander v. Louisiana Department of Corrections* said individuals may not be held liable in their personal capacities under RLUIPA unless they gave express consent to do so.

"The Court held that the statute's promise of 'appropriate relief against a government' does not allow money damages against the individual officers responsible — weakening prisoners' ability to seek justice and to deter future violations," said BJC Chief Legal Officer Holly Hollman.

BJC joined a brief in this case supporting Mr. Lander. We were in agreement with a number of groups that do not often see eye-to-eye on Supreme Court cases, including the Christian Legal Society, the ACLU, the Alliance Defending Freedom, and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The piece of paper that protected his rights in theory did nothing to stop prison officials. BJC and our coalition partners will continue to defend RLUIPA and the religious freedom it guarantees for everyone.

Johnson Amendment *Survives* Runaround Court Filing

Pastors say they want to keep it.

People in the pews say they appreciate it.

But there are persistent attempts by some candidates to undermine the law and weaken its protections.

We're talking about the Johnson Amendment, the portion of the tax code that protects the integrity of 501(c)(3) organizations, ensuring they are not used to intervene in political campaigns by opposing or endorsing candidates for office.

Last summer, the IRS attempted to recast the idea of an endorsement of a political candidate from the pulpit as "a family discussion concerning candidates" in a filing in *National Religious Broadcasters v. Bessent*. It was a bold attempt to create law through a lawsuit instead of through Congress, and it was a

threat toward turning churches into Political Action Committees.

But, in a surprising move, Judge J. Campbell Barker dismissed the case in an order issued March 31. The court found that it lacked jurisdiction to issue the relief sought by the proposed consent judgment.

In the wake of the dismissal, the Trump administration announced plans to develop and issue additional guidance on the application of the Johnson Amendment. As of this writing, none has been released.

BJC will continue to advocate for tax law that protects the integrity of houses of worship and other charitable organizations from pressure to endorse candidates or otherwise engage in partisan ways in elections.

BJC *Files Comments* on Problematic Religious Liberty Commission Report

After months of airing selective grievances in its highly choreographed hearings, the Trump administration's Religious Liberty Commission released its draft report in June.

The 224-page report provides the Commission's analysis, reveals its "findings," and proposes solutions. Some of it just goes over best practices that everyone should know. But, the analysis is skewed. The findings mostly come from the invitation-only hearings. The solutions would not advance religious freedom for everyone. And the entire tome is full of misunderstandings and misrepresentations of our country's foundation of religious freedom.

The Commission's report emphasizes that "separation of church and state" is not in the Constitution, and it refers to the wall of separation "myth" as a "belabored metaphor." The report never acknowledges how our constitutional framework — which separates the institutions of religion and government — allows religion to flourish by making sure no state power compels or coerces religious belief.

Using selective anecdotes of isolated incidents, the Commission suggests that religious freedom is broadly under attack in public schools. We know issues arise from time to time — that's why we have legal protections for students' rights to religious

expression at public school. The specific grievances in the report should be addressed, but the Commission instead makes recommendations that cause more problems. For example, they propose expanding school vouchers and displaying the Ten Commandments in schools. Ideas like this don't secure students' First Amendment rights — they instead undermine our public schools and religious freedom.

Military chaplains are undercut in this report. These servicemembers are one of the best examples of how the government can use its power to meet various religious needs. But, the Commission wants to emphasize the individual faith of military chaplains instead of ensuring they serve the spiritual needs of all. That would hit minority faiths the hardest, since they are less likely to have access to a chaplain of their same tradition.

BJC told the Commission all of this and more in comments submitted on July 13. We shared the wisdom of Madison and Jefferson, too, who helped create our First Amendment and championed religious freedom for all.

Now that the public comment period is over, we hope the Commission will listen — not just to BJC, but to others, from the founding generation forward, who recognize that religious freedom is for everyone, and church-state separation is vital to protecting it.

Courts Split on *Ten Commandments* Mandates

As several states try to force public schools to display the Ten Commandments, it looks like the U.S. Supreme Court will get the final say. After an unfavorable ruling from the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Texas, advocates are planning to seek review from the highest court.

In the past two years, Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana have passed bills to require government-approved versions of the Ten Commandments in children's classrooms.

Parents sued to stop them, challenging the bills as a violation of their religious freedom.

BJC supported parents in Louisiana, the first state to propose such legislation. We led a brief explaining how Louisiana's law creates unavoidable state-sponsored religious indoctrination,

There is a stark difference between state-sponsored religious indoctrination and teaching about religion.

selecting a preferred version of the Ten Commandments that aligns only with certain faiths and denominations. There is a stark difference between state-sponsored religious indoctrination and teaching about religion.

As the cases in those three states worked their way through the courts, judges were consistently siding with the families, striking down the Ten Commandments mandates as clearly unconstitutional under a decades-old precedent in *Stone v. Graham* (1980).

The legal landscape shifted, however, when a circuit court that first struck down the mandate re-heard the case *en banc*, reversing the earlier decision and instead upholding the Texas law. It held that *Stone* was no longer good law and found no state establishment of religion.

Because of the split in the courts and the disregard for the Supreme Court's prior precedent holding such displays unconstitutional, this case is highly likely to end up at the Supreme Court. BJC will continue to advocate against government-sponsored religion and for religious freedom for all students.

Stories From the Movement

By Cherilyn Crowe Guy, Content Strategy Director



Rev. Dr. Michael Woolf and BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler

Religious freedom is only kept alive by those who choose to defend it. What that looks like depends on you.

You can engage in personal and collective advocacy. You can preach. You can have conversations with your local school leaders.

Or, like the Rev. Dr. Michael Woolf, you can be tackled to the ground and arrested.

His story was one of many shared at this year's BJC Luncheon, held June 19 in Jacksonville, Fla., in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's General Assembly.

News photographers captured the Rev. Dr. Woolf's arrest during a peaceful campaign to shut down the ICE detention facility in Broadview, Ill., in 2025. The image of him pinned to the ground, looking up at the camera while wearing his ministerial collar, was a news sensation, creating interest and curiosity about what was happening. He didn't go there looking for that type of notoriety, but he met the moment.

Your engagement might not look the same.

"There's something for everybody to do," the senior minister of Lake Street Church of Evanston, Ill., told the crowd.

If you're driving past a courthouse in Texas, you might see Pasty Meier. Maybe you don't know her name, but you can spot her holding a sign that says "Due Process For All."

She gets involved through her

"I hope that my risk-taking is paying off, making religious liberty real for my daughter and her peers."

Rev. Dr. Libby Grammer

church, which includes partnering with the North Texas Coalition of BJC's Christians Against Christian Nationalism initiative. They are taking individual and collective action, rising to meet the needs around them.

Sometimes they go to Austin to testify at the Texas State Board of Education meetings, reminding lawmakers that public schools are not the same thing as Sunday schools. Sometimes they counter the anti-immigrant bias they see in their community — Meier herself went through training to be a court observer in immigration proceedings, supporting families in tangible and intangible ways.

Do they have a lot of easy wins?

"No, but we keep on. We keep on," she said.

"Within your own church, develop your leadership, develop a team, pray together, strategize, and remember why you're doing it," she challenged the crowd.

The Rev. Dr. Libby Grammer intervened at her child's school after discovering students were being asked to recite Christian prayers at school events.

As a Baptist minister who leads Lakeside Church in Rocky Mount, N.C., she felt the children deserved the freedom not to be compelled in religion by the state. Unsure how she'd be received, the administrators expressed gratitude to have learned a little something about protecting religious freedom in schools. "I hope that my risk-taking is paying off, making religious liberty real for my daughter and her peers," the Rev. Dr. Grammer said.

When BJC organized a meeting this year for faith leaders in Missouri to meet with their senior U.S. senator, Josh Hawley, the Rev. Dr. Brian Kaylor was there.

It was a unique opportunity to speak directly about a matter of great concern: the detrimental effects of immigration enforcement at houses of worship and other "sensitive loca-



Patsy Meier and Lisa Endean-Jacob, Organizer for the North Texas Coalition of Christians Against Christian Nationalism



“It takes more than just one conversation to move legislation, but even our senator could be perhaps a part of the solution.”

Rev. Dr. Brian Kaylor

tions,” which used to have more protection.

Their meeting allowed them to show Sen. Hawley that it’s not a hypothetical issue, providing real-world examples. It was clear to the Rev. Dr. Kaylor that the senator had not heard of these events, and he worked with BJC to follow-up afterward with specific news articles.

“It takes more than just one conversation to move legislation, but even our senator could be perhaps a part of the solution,” he said.

The luncheon was more than a storytelling event — it was a place to take action. BJC provided postcards for each person to write their lawmakers about the need for the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act. This piece of legislation would protect churches — as well as schools and hospitals — from unwarranted immigration enforcement, allowing people to gather for worship without fear. Hundreds of postcards were written and sent to members of Congress, with personal pleas from constituents for this need to protect the religious freedom of our neighbors.

After he and his church made headlines, the Rev. Dr. Woolf said they received threats. As a mainly white congregation of Christians, it was their first experience of thinking about their safety in such a way.

“But it’s an everyday thing for minoritized religious communities,” he reminded the crowd.

Those threats are a lived reality for so many people who have their religious freedom threatened on a daily basis.

As he explained: some people might go to a protest like he did, while others might feel called to advocacy work, education work, or preaching about injustice. You don’t have to make headlines to make a difference.

Everyone has a responsibility to keep religious freedom alive.

Everyone can do *something*.

What will you do?

Want to watch the luncheon?
Visit our YouTube channel.
Want to tell your members
of Congress to support the
Protecting Sensitive Loca-
tions Act? Scan the QR code
to use our form.





BUILDING A MOVEMENT

Forming the *Next* 90 Years of BJC

By Rev. Dr. Katie Callaway, Director of Development

In 2026, our nation marks the 250th anniversary of its founding. Anniversaries invite us to remember. But they also invite us to ask difficult questions.

Are we simply inheriting a democracy, or are we building it? What does it mean to preserve freedom? What is required of me to move our country closer to its highest ideals? What does it mean to invest in the future?

The American experiment was never intended to be completed in 1776. Every generation has been called to become a founding in its own time, creating a more just and equitable union with every passing year.

The founders declared ideals of liberty and equality, and subsequent generations expanded those promises. They abolished slavery, extended voting rights, challenged segregation, protected the rights of religious minorities, and defended freedom of conscience for all people. Religious liberty was among

The work of advancing faith freedom now belongs to our generation.

our founders' greatest ideals and is one of our greatest hopes for creating a more just civic society.

But progress is not inevitable. It has always depended on people willing to build, defend, and renew democratic institutions.

For 90 years, BJC has helped ensure that religious liberty remains one of America's defining promises.

Long before religious freedom became a political talking point, Baptists understood something profound: faith cannot be coerced. No one, including the government, should stand between a person and their conscience. Religious liberty protects the freedom to believe, to worship, to dissent, and to live according to one's convictions without government favoritism or punishment.

Today, faith freedom faces new challenges. Christian nationalism seeks to merge religious identity with political power. Government actions increasingly test the boundaries of church-state separation. Public discourse grows more polarized. Too many Americans misunderstand religious liberty as a privilege for some rather than a protection for all.

The work of advancing faith freedom now belongs to our generation. And that is why we are inviting you to join a new generation of founders to invest in BJC's future.

Building the Future of Faith Freedom

Since 1936, BJC has been bringing our uniquely Baptist perspective of “soul liberty” to protecting religious freedom for all and defending the institutional separation of church and state.

We’re the only faith-based group working on the national level with this singular focus. You can see much of that work in the pages of this magazine. Some of it goes unreported.

And, while we are historically rooted in our Baptist commitments, we are a truly pluralistic movement.

Our legal advocacy is not just at the Supreme Court — it’s in other courts, too, as we speak truth and help shape the legal framework that protects faith freedom for future generations.

We’re engaging lawmakers, policymakers, and coalitions to advance bills and policies that recognize everyone’s religious freedom.

We cultivate ideas, relationships, and leaders for a just society through the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation.

We are organizing, building networks of advocates, clergy, congregations, students, and community leaders who are prepared to advance faith freedom in their communities.

As BJC enters our 10th decade,
we are inviting you to be a
founder. We need people
who understand that freedom
must be renewed, protected, and
expanded by every generation.

Be part of the next
chapter! Use the
QR code or visit
BJCOnline.org/give



A New Generation of Founders

The story of American religious liberty is still being written.

As BJC enters our 10th decade, we are inviting visionary supporters to become founders of our next chapter. Not founders in the historic sense, but founders in the democratic sense: people who understand that freedom must be renewed, protected, and expanded by every generation.

Your investment in our 90th Anniversary Campaign will help ensure BJC has the resources to meet this moment with courage, expertise, and conviction.

We anticipate the coming years to bring with them a wider variety of legal disputes related to religious liberty. To achieve our mission, we see it essential to cultivate a continuum of legal, policy, educational, and grassroots assets at all levels of public life.

Your gift to BJC will:

- Shape a new generation of advocates through our internships, BJC Fellows Program, local organizing efforts, and accessible curricula for education.
- Deepen legal and policy strategies to partner with federal, state, and local efforts to advance faith freedom for all.
- Provide legal and theological thought leadership to shape public narratives on religious liberty through op-eds, podcasts, testimonies, and speaking engagements.
- Mobilize and educate local communities to organize people in local contexts where religious liberty is threatened.

This work can’t happen without the strong foundation of investment you can provide. Can we count your name among the new generation of founders, committed to creating a future where faith freedom for all is a reality?

Honorary and Memorial Gifts

These gifts are more than contributions. They are a way to actively create faith freedom for all.
If you want to make a gift to BJC's work in honor of or in memory of someone, simply send a note with your check or specify who the gift should recognize at BJCOnline.org/give.

In honor of Rosemary Brevard By Oliver "Buzz" Thomas	In honor of Amanda Tyler By Rev. James Lamkin & Rev. Elizabeth Harris-Lamkin Michael Lieberman	In memory of Roy Gene Edge By Cindy Edge	In memory of Allen Keith McFarland, Jr. By Jaclanel McFarland
In honor of Larry Chesser By Mrs. Angie & Dr. Kevin Heifner	In honor of Anita Tyler By Robert M. Behrendt	In memory of Richard Fee By Roy Medley	In memory of Rev. Dr. R. Quinn Pugh By Reuben Pugh
In honor of Rev. Chris Crowley By Bernard Henderson	In honor of Carol Visser By Thomas Visser	In memory of Jean & William Gwathmey By Ellen Gwathmey	In memory of Robert Y. Sandford By Bettina Sandford
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In honor of David Hall By Jonathan Hall		In memory of Rev. & Mrs. A.J. Hawes By Dr. Ronald Gravatt	In memory of Roy & Anna Jane Swiff By Roy Ann Carney
In honor of David Haun By Dennis Sacrey		In memory of Rev. & Mrs. A.J. Hawes By Dr. Ronald Gravatt	In memory of Roy & Anna Jane Swiff By Roy Ann Carney
In honor of Holly Hollman By Michael Catlett Rev. James Lamkin & Rev. Elizabeth Harris-Lamkin Michael Lieberman Robert Tuttle		In memory of Rev. & Mrs. A.J. Hawes By Dr. Ronald Gravatt	In memory of Roy & Anna Jane Swiff By Roy Ann Carney
In honor of George Mason By Leigh Ann Brown	In memory of Babs Baugh By Shirley Merritt	In memory of Kathleen D. Holland By Al Lindsey	In memory of Hargus & Doris Taylor By Dr. Philip Thompson & Mrs. Marcia Taylor Thompson
In honor of June McEwen By Drs. Kay & Walter Shurden	In memory of Rev. Thomas H. Caulkins & Mrs. Ann Caulkins By Rachel Chang	In memory of Grandson, Kingston By Rosanne Silvis	In memory of George and Connie Tooze By George Tooze
In honor of Kristi Noem By Michelle Madsen-Bibeau	In memory of Art Coltharp By LaNell Coltharp	In memory of Lucas Howell Horan By LaRinda Horan	In memory of Mary E. Varner By Mike Varner
In honor of Ilana Ostrin By Scott Ward	In memory of Shirley Crump By Kenny Crump	In memory of Harley Hunt By Dave Hunt	In memory of Mark Wiggs By Courtney Allen Crump Cherilyn Crowe Guy Holly Hollman
In honor of Dorothy Schleicher By Kristofer Schleicher	In memory of Sally Lewis Dodgson By Kenneth Dodgson	In memory of James A. Langley By Marilyn Langley	In memory of Glenda Williamson By Jimmy Williamson
In honor of Lilla Schmeltekopf By Jeff Schmeltekopf	In memory of Donald J. Dunlap By Laura Flick	In memory of Rev. & Mrs. L.C. Lemons By James Lemons	In memory of Slayden Alex Yarbrough By Frank Keller Eddy Perez Janis Yarbrough
In honor of Jenny L. Smith By Ronald Williams	In memory of Dr. James M. Dunn By Stephen Gooch Ircel Harrison Dr. Jim F Holladay, Jr. Emily Hull McGee Valerie Storms	In memory of Orba Lee & Peggy Malone By David Malone & Mary Massar	In memory of Bernice Zagaria By David W. Fox

How ICE Turned Immigration into a Church-State Power Struggle

By Alex Ashley for Rolling Stone, Jan. 30, 2026



Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has become the sharp edge of the administration's immigration crackdown. The agency now commands more funding than any other U.S. law-enforcement agency, with tens of billions in new multiyear appropriations layered on top of its annual budget; an expansion of power that has coincided with a rise in violent and fatal encounters now drawing national scrutiny.

Congregations across the country, many of which often function as food distribution sites, legal referral hubs, and support centers for immigrant families, now find themselves in the immigration enforcement crosshairs after the Trump administration last year rescinded long-standing guidance discouraging immigration actions near places of worship. ... "For generations, the church didn't interfere..." [Bishop Rob Hirschfeld] tells *Rolling Stone*. "We are a church full of intellectual, cultural, and social elites. We seem to have our hand on the levers of political power, economic power, and prestige. There was a sense of comfort that was allowing us to sleepwalk. To be blunt, it was like, 'pick up your cross and relax.'"

"I think that separation of church and state is weaker than it has been in a really long time," says Rabbi David Segal, Policy Counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC), a watchdog for these kinds of issues. "You see a lot of clergy stepping out very publicly, saying this is a faith issue for us, that we are going to be on the front lines of this, that this is a threat both to our places of worship and also to our practice of religious freedom."

It would seem that, under Trump, religion now finds itself in a paradox: welcomed as a source of power; punished as a practice of resistance.

White House to Host 9-Hour Prayer Festival Focused on Christian Roots of the U.S.

By Michelle Boorstein for The Washington Post, May 13, 2026

The Trump administration is hosting an all-day prayer festival on the National Mall on Sunday that organizers say will reflect the country's Christian origins and, they hope, spark "a movement of renewal" in America.

"Rededicate 250: National Jubilee of Prayer, Praise & Thanksgiving" is partly funded by millions in public dollars earmarked for the nation's 250th birthday celebration, organizers said. It will feature mostly evangelical Protestant leaders and members of the Trump administration, many of whom have embraced the message that America's founders wanted the country to be explicitly Christian. ...

"I'm unaware of anything like this, with this involvement of senior government officials, on this scale, trying to paint this false picture of the United States as a quote unquote Christian nation," said Amanda Tyler, executive director of BJC "Trump's rhetoric in the past 18 months is how he's 'going to make America Christian again,' that it's his job to push religion. This is all part of that piece."



A Christian Nation? At 250, America is Still Fighting Over What That Means

By Bob Smietana for Religion News Service, May 13, 2026

When people ask Holly Hollman if America is a Christian nation, she has a simple response. "What do you mean by that?"

The longtime general counsel of the Washington, D.C.-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, which promotes the separation of church and state, Hollman explains that if the question is whether most Americans are Christian, that's yes. But if they're asking whether Christians should have special legal privileges that others don't have, she says her answer is a hard no.



Supporting Sacred Land

A New Phase in the Fight to Save Oak Flat

What if your elected officials told you that your sacred place mattered less than that of a different congregation nearby?

That's the issue facing the San Carlos Apache Tribe in their struggle to save their sacred land *Chí'chil Bitdagoteel* — loosely translated in English as "Oak Flat."

Once protected within Tonto National Forest, this oasis an hour east of Phoenix is threatened with destruction. In March 2026, the federal government gave Oak Flat to the mining company Resolution Copper, and the area is on the brink of being permanently destroyed. Time is running out.

In October 2025, the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Recon-

ciliation partnered with CBF Advocacy to experience the sacred space for themselves. They heard from leaders in the work to protect it. They came back forever changed. Read two stories on the next pages.

What can you do? Only Congress can permanently protect this land, and you need to let your lawmakers know this matters to you. After the transfer, Rep. Adelita Grijalva, D-Ariz., introduced a bill to preserve public lands in the *Chí'chil Bitdagoteel* Historical District that are directly adjacent to the land that was transferred. This bill needs the support of your representatives. Keep up with the latest on our website at BJCOnline.org/SaveOakFlat.



Preservation is Not Passive

By Rev. Aaron Tinch



I am wrestling with a question that will not let me go: How is it that we share so much in common, yet so often fail to stand together? It continues to dwell deep within me after our experiences visiting sites in the southwest.

Throughout the four days we spent in Arizona, I heard about the expansion of data centers onto sacred lands, the ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP), and the long, painful history of more than 500 broken treaties. These are not isolated issues; they are part of a pattern, one that reflects systemic disregard, displacement, and erasure. As Mariah Humphries shared statistics on the violence experienced by Indigenous communities, I was struck by how easily those same statistics could be applied to African American communities. The parallels were undeniable. The names may differ, the geographies may shift, but

“I could see both the sun and the moon at the same time. It was not just land; it was memory, identity, and spirit.”



the underlying realities of violence, invisibility, and lack of accountability remain hauntingly similar.

In that moment, I felt a deep sense of urgency. Why are we not collectively raising our voices? Why are we not sounding the alarm louder for Indigenous women and African American women who go missing or are murdered, often without justice or even recognition? The silence is not just troubling, it is complicit. Our struggles are interconnected, and yet our advocacy too often remains isolated. There is power in unity, and there is a moral responsibility to stand not only for ourselves but for one another.

That conviction followed me to Oak Flat. Standing on that sacred land, I experienced something I cannot fully explain. I could see both the sun and the moon at the same time. It was a rare and sacred moment, one that invited stillness and reflection. I found myself fully present, aware of the beauty and significance of the land beneath my feet. It was not just land; it was memory, identity, and spirit.

In that sacred space, my mind drifted back to a baseball field in Northwest Washington, D.C., a place where my father, my Pops, would take me as a child. I remember the glow of the night lights and

the moon above us, stretching our time together long after the sun had set. That field was more than just a place to play; it was a space of connection, legacy, and belonging. Yet today, that field no longer exists. It was cleared for commercial development, replaced by something deemed more “valuable.” I will never be able to take my daughters there and say, “This is where your Pop Pop used to play.” That loss is personal, but it is also symbolic.

It raises a critical question: Is anything sacred anymore? Can anything be preserved for its intrinsic value, for its cultural and spiritual significance, without being reduced to its economic potential? Too often, land is treated as a commodity, something to be extracted from until only a shell remains. But for Indigenous communities, land is not just property; it is identity, ancestry, and sacred trust.

Oak Flat stands as a powerful reminder that preservation is possible and necessary. It offers an opportunity for future generations to experience what I experienced: a sense of wonder, connection, and reverence. But that preservation will not happen passively. It requires collective action, unified voices, and a willingness to challenge systems that prioritize profit over people.

My time in Phoenix and at Oak Flat has reshaped how I understand land not just as physical space, but as sacred ground that holds stories, memories, and meaning. It has also deepened my commitment to advocacy. We must align our voices not only to protect Indigenous sacred lands like Oak Flat, but also to safeguard the spaces in our own communities that carry our histories and identities.

Because when we lose the land, we risk losing more than just space; we risk losing ourselves.

Rev. Aaron Tinch is the pastor of New Hope AME Church in Waldorf, Md., and a 2025 BJC Fellow.

When Bearing Witness Leads to Bold Advocacy

By Rev. Maggie Clark



Two miles. It doesn't seem like much, two miles. A short walk around the neighborhood. A quick drive to the store. It's a distance I know well, yet rarely give pause to think about until I stood atop the cliffs of Oak Flat. Staring into a vast, breathing sweep of desert sky and ancient earth, I truly felt the full weight of this seemingly innocuous measurement. You see, two miles is the width of the crater that will be left behind where Oak Flat now stands if Resolution Copper has their way — a permanent scar replacing sacred ground that has held life, memory, and worship for centuries.

When I made the trip to *Chí'chil Bítá-goteel*, the land we call "Oak Flat," I went hoping to bear witness to the sacred land. But as I walked its well-worn paths, this hallowed ground reminded me that while some places need witnesses, others need advocates and protectors.

For countless generations, Western Apache tribes have made the journey to this ground to perform sacred religious ceremonies, coming-of-age rituals, and healing rites. Ga'an Canyon, just adjacent, is understood by the San Carlos Apache to be where the spiritual beings who represent healing live. *Chí'chil Bítá-goteel* isn't a metaphor, it is their theology — deeply lived, practiced, and irreplaceable.

As I hiked the rugged terrain and walked the land, I stopped atop the nearest peak and closed my eyes. The warm Arizona sun pressed against my face. A breeze moved through the air, rustling loose the pebbles and dirt at my feet. Among the crunch of the treads of nearby hikers, I could hear the low hum of the wind. Somewhere in that stillness, I felt what I can only describe as the presence of the Creator, and I knew I was standing on sacred ground. It was clear, of course, this is sacred ground. You don't need to be Apache to feel it. You just have to be quiet long enough to listen.

It is almost impossible, standing in that beauty, to imagine a crater there instead. Almost two miles wide. Over a thousand feet deep. A wound in the earth that will not close in our lifetimes, or our children's, or their children's ... not for millennia. That is what Resolution Copper's proposed mine would leave behind. The sacred ground gone. The ancient oaks gone. The cere-

"You don't need to be Apache to feel it. You just have to be quiet long enough to listen."



monies, the rituals, the living faith of the Apache people, displaced, severed from the only place on earth where they can be performed.

Whether people realize it or not, the battle to save Oak Flat is a fight for religious freedom.

We, people of faith and people of none, people who believe the First Amendment means something, people who have fought to protect the places that matter most to us, cannot stay silent when another people's sacred land is handed to a foreign mining company for profit. The same principle that protects our churches, our synagogues,

our mosques, our temples, and every space where we gather to seek meaning demands that we protect theirs. Religious freedom is not a privilege reserved for people who worship in buildings with steeples. It belongs to the San Carlos Apache. It belongs to every tribe that has prayed on that red rock ground.

The land transfer has now gone through. The old bill is gone. But the fight is not over. New legislation is being shaped in an effort to preserve at least part of this land, to protect what can still be protected. This is the moment to act. Contact your lawmakers. Tell them you were on this land in spirit, even if you've never set

foot in Arizona. Tell them that religious freedom is not just something that exists on paper; it is a lived experience, rooted in specific places, practiced by real people, and worth protecting. Remind them that sometimes religious freedom is a modest two-mile stretch of desert in the middle of nowhere Arizona.

Two miles. Maybe, like me, this number hits a little differently now. I hope you'll join the fight to save Oak Flat.

Rev. Maggie Clark is the children's pastor at the First Baptist Church of Elkin, NC, and a 2023 BJC Fellow.

Catch Up on Season 7 of Respecting Religion



The “show” of the Trump Religious Liberty Commission. The various stages of the *Landor* case. The rise in anti-Sharia laws. Updates on the Ten Commandments cases. The latest on the Johnson Amendment. A series of “best of” episodes during Amanda’s sabbatical. A farewell to Holly.

Season 7 of *Respecting Religion* had a little bit of everything. Take time this summer to catch up on shows you might have missed, and hear the in-depth analysis you can expect from the podcast. Plus, for the first time, we released video of each new episode. Go to our YouTube channel to watch Holly and Amanda instead of just listening to them.

Episodes are available on your favorite podcast platform, or visit BJCOnline.org/RespectingReligion for a full list, including transcripts.

Johnson-Abbott Joins BJC Staff in Development Role

NATALIE JOHNSON-ABBOTT is the development manager at BJC, keeping BJC connected to our monthly donors — the FaithFULL Community — and new donors who support faith freedom for all.

Passionate about connecting supporters with opportunities to invest in meaningful change, she works to build the philanthropic partnerships that sustain the work of advancing our constitutional freedoms. Johnson-Abbott earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Mary Washington, and she has more than 15 years of experience in hospitality management, where she led diverse teams and complex operations before transitioning to the nonprofit sector. She also served as a BJC intern in the fall of 2024.

A native of Fredericksburg, Va., Johnson-Abbott is a proud wife and mother in a blended family of six. You can contact her at njabbott@BJCOnline.org.





Pilot our new youth curriculum

Interested in shaping the next generation? The BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation is piloting new educational materials for youth (ages 10-14), and we want your help!

The Neighborhood Love Quest teaches youth to understand their freedoms and how to advocate for themselves and their neighbors — promoting the principle of the Golden Rule.

Will you help us get it ready for release? Scan the QR code to connect with us and learn more!



Meet our Spring Interns



SETH ABOAGYE, originally from Ghana and now based in St. Louis, Mo., is a 2025 graduate of Washington University in St. Louis, where he earned a Master of Science in Quantitative Finance. He also earned a bachelor's degree in Mathematics at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana.

While at Washington University, Aboagye served as Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion on the SMCouncil and as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, supporting student learning and community-engaged projects. His professional interests focus on the intersection of public policy, financial systems, social justice, and institutional accountability.



AARON (YEMU) HUANG, from Wenzhou, China, is a junior at Calvin University, majoring in both Philosophy and Mathematics with a minor in Data Science. He has experience volunteering at the Church of Funtian in China, where he designed and directed engaging summer programs for K-12 students.

The child of Jianfeng Huang and Lijun Wan, Huang plans to pursue a master's degree in Philosophy after graduation and a career in teaching.



MICHELLE RUIZ-GARCIA, from Lexington, Neb., is a junior at Nebraska Wesleyan University, majoring in both Political Science and History with a minor in Spanish. Before coming to BJC, she interned with One House Strategies in Lincoln, Neb., which helps launch and run political campaigns as well as ballot initiatives.

The daughter of Felipe and Araceli Ruiz, Ruiz-Garcia has been involved with the TeamMates program since high school, where she has been able to be a mentee and mentor.



Meet our Summer Interns



MADELYNN "MADIE" KELLER, from Mocksville, N.C., is a rising senior at Wake Forest University, majoring in both Sociology and Religious Studies with a concentration in Religion and Public Engagement and a minor in Arabic Language Studies. She is pursuing a senior honors thesis examining how Christian rhetoric is used to politically mobilize youth on college campuses.

The daughter of Todd and Erin Keller, she attends First Baptist Church on Fifth while at Wake Forest University. Keller plans to earn a graduate degree in divinity or theological studies.



JENNA MCCOMAS, from Portland, Ore., is a rising junior at Claremont McKenna College, majoring in International Relations with a minor in Legal Studies. She previously interned with the office of Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. McComas also served as a research assistant with the Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies, conducting interviews for the Asia Experts Forum.

The daughter of Matt and Jody McComas, she is involved in campus ministry with Claremont Christian Fellowship. McComas plans to attend law school and pursue a career in immigration law.



CATHERINE STORKE, from King George, Va., is a 2025 graduate of the College of William & Mary, earning a degree in English. She worked on staff at her college newspaper and served as Communications Director of W&M's Baptist Campus Ministry. Storke previously served as a Heritage Fellow with the Center for Baptist Heritage and Studies and as a Clemons Fellow in Digital Media with Baptist News Global, where she now works as their Social Media Manager.

Storke plans to attend law school and pursue a career in intellectual property law.





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Rooted in a Baptist commitment to soul liberty, we are building a movement toward a just society that cultivates and expands religious freedom for all.

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We Are Creating Something New

As our country marks 250 years, we are celebrating almost a century of working for faith freedom for all. Hear stories from the movement at our luncheon (p. 18-21), see what our local groups are up to (p. 10-11), and partner with us for the next 90 (p. 22-23).



We can't do this without you! Visit BJCOnline.org/give to join our 90th Anniversary Campaign. If you sign up to be a monthly donor by Sept. 1, we'll send you our new T-shirt!