

Preserving the Commitment to Religious Liberty in the Next Generation

Religious liberty is always one generation away from extinction. Protecting it demands our utmost vigilance, including a targeted approach to the education of young people.

For more than 75 years, the Baptist Joint Committee (BJC) for Religious Liberty in Washington, D.C., has fought to uphold the historic Baptist principle of religious freedom. Our organization engages in various arenas to defend and extend religious liberty for all people, including in the courts, in Congress and in the executive branch of the federal government.

As the BJC's education and outreach specialist, one of my tasks is to cultivate the same level of commitment to our mission in the next generation exhibited by previous generations of advocates. Fortunately, a passion for justice and freedom is not something we must create in the next generation. It already exists. Every day, I see younger generations taking an interest in defending those who cannot defend themselves. As they champion the rights of all people and fight for social justice, we can work together behind the belief that every individual is important in God's eyes.

At the BJC, education is at the core of our everyday activities. Our leaders continue to be called upon by churches to preach, teach and facilitate discussions concerning church and state relations. Executive Director Brent Walker and General Counsel Holly Hollman are eager to engage young advocates, and college professors often request them as speakers. The annual Religious Liberty Essay Scholarship Contest challenges high school students to research and evaluate specific religious liberty issues, while allowing us to connect with students far and wide. We received entries from 46 states in 2013, as well as from China and Sweden. The BJC also reaches future advocates with the annual Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State. The event brings to a college, university or seminary campus a speaker who can inspire and call others to an ardent commitment to religious freedom.

The BJC understands that our high expectations for the next generation must be matched with new ways of reaching them. With the opening of our Center for Reli-



gious Liberty on Capitol Hill in 2012, our capabilities for religious liberty education increased dramatically. We now host groups who visit Washington, D.C., in our own state-of-the-art facility and use various video means to reach groups who are unable to visit the area. Our new interactive whiteboard gives us the capacity to tailor presentations to each audience and helps us illustrate how religious liberty impacts their role in the community.

We, at the BJC, understand the vital roles future generations play in the defense of religious liberty, and the creation of my position speaks to that commitment. We plan to engage the energy and passion for justice of younger generations and unite that with the enduring heritage of religious liberty. We believe whole-heartedly that the result of this union will be the empowerment of future advocates in our churches, our courts, our community and our government, ensuring the Baptist tradition of religious freedom continues today and tomorrow.

Charles Watson Jr. is the education and outreach specialist at the BJC. To learn more about the BJC's education programs or to schedule a visit, contact him at cwatson@BJCOnline.org.