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INSIDE:

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Justice Antonin Scalia remembered as a man of faith and man of law

Associate Justice Antonin Scalia, the outspoken leader of the U.S. Supreme Court's conservative bloc, was found dead at a Texas ranch on Saturday, Feb. 13. Scalia, 79, was a guest at the resort.

During his nearly three decades on the High Court, Scalia's intelligence and acerbic opinions made him a hero to conservatives and a target for liberals.

The day of Scalia's passing, BJC Executive Director Brent Walker released a statement on social media, sharing that the organization was "shocked and saddened" at the news of his untimely death. "We extend our sympathy to the Scalia family and his colleagues on the U.S. Supreme Court, and we pray for God's grace and comfort for them during these difficult days ahead," Walker said.

"While the BJC often did not agree with his interpretation of the First Amendment's Religion Clauses, Justice Scalia will be remembered as a towering figure on the High Court for his intellect, his wit and his incisive opinions," Walker said. In the January *Report from the Capital*, Walker criticized Scalia's recent statement that government can favor religion over irreligion.

"Seeking to fill a Supreme Court vacancy in the midst of a highly-charged political campaign when the presidency and the Senate are led by different parties only heightens the potential for stalemate and acrimony," Walker continued. "We pray for our nation as well."

Scalia managed to steer the federal judiciary toward his twin theories of "originalism" and "textualism" — strictly reading the words of the Constitution and federal statutes to mean what their authors intended, and nothing more.

The first Italian-American to serve on the court when he was named by President Ronald Reagan in 1986, "Nino" Scalia established himself as a firm opponent of abortion, gay rights and racial preferences. He was the lone dissenter when the Court

Antonin Scalia
1936-2016

opened the Virginia Military Institute to women and consistently opposed affirmative action policies at universities and workplaces. When the Court struck down the key section of the federal Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, he angrily predicted that it would lead to same-sex marriage — and in 2015, he was proved right.

On the winning side of the ledger, Scalia was best known for authoring the Court's 2008 ruling in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, upholding the right of citizens to keep guns at home for self-defense. The 5-4 decision, he said, was "the most complete originalist opinion that I've ever written."

When it comes to religious liberty, Scalia was often criticized for the opinion he wrote in the 1990 case of *Employment Division v. Smith*, which effectively neutered the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause. The opinion held that the First Amendment does not require exceptions to neutral laws that incidentally burden religion, noting that robust protection for the exercise of religion is a "luxury" that would "court anarchy." Opposition united religious and civil liberty groups, and the BJC chaired the coalition that fought for the creation and passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to restore what the opinion undermined.

Scalia was not one to compromise his principles or cut a deal for a moderate opinion. His objections, he said recently, were not based on policy views but on "who decides" — and his answer almost invariably was the Constitution, the Congress or the

SCALIA CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Oklahoma Supreme Court upholds school vouchers

The Oklahoma Supreme Court ruled Feb. 16 that a school voucher program for students with disabilities is constitutional, over objections from the Baptist Joint Committee and others that it amounts to indirect taxpayer funding of parochial schools.

The state high court said the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program does not violate a ban in the state constitution on direct or indirect use of public funds for religious organizations because parents, not the government, determine where to send their children to school.

The court rejected arguments that because the vast majority of private schools qualified to accept the scholarships are religious, the program is tantamount to state support and control of religion, thereby violating an article in the Oklahoma constitution stating: "No public money or property shall ever be appropriated, applied, donated, or used, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, or system of religion, or for the use, benefit, or support of any priest, preacher, minister, or other religious teacher or dignitary, or sectarian institution as such."

A friend-of-the-court brief signed by the BJC, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU of Oklahoma and The Interfaith Alliance Foundation argued unsuccessfully that Oklahoma's "no-aid" clause was enacted because of historical attempts to use federal money to pressure Native American parents to enroll their children in Christian schools. That effort was an attempt to assimilate, by converting to Christianity, a population relocated during the Trail of Tears death march following the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Other groups, including the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, argued the real agenda behind the Oklahoma law and similar laws passed in other states was failure in 1875 of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution proposed by Republican Congressman James G. Blaine from Maine prohibiting the use of public funds by any religious school.

A Becket Fund brief said state Blaine amendments had their genesis "in anti-Catholic bigotry of the mid-19th century" and represent a shameful chapter in American history that needs to be repudiated.

The justices didn't address the amendment's history but said they were unconvinced that there is constitutional significance to the fact that more students receiving the scholarships attend sectarian private schools than schools that are non-sectarian.

The high court was persuaded by the fact that scholarship funds "are paid to the parent or legal guardian and not to the private school." It is the parent "who then directs payment by endorsement to the independently chosen private school," the court said, without any control or direction of the state, breaking "the circuit between government and religion."

The scholarships, authorized by a state law passed in 2010, are named after Lindsey Nicole Henry, infant daughter of former Gov. Brad Henry, who died in 1990 from spinal muscular atrophy.

—Bob Allen, Baptist News Global and BJC Staff Reports

SCALIA CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

president, not unelected judges with lifetime appointments like himself.

"Don't paint me as anti-gay or anti-abortion or anything else," he said. "We are a democracy. Majority rules."

Despite his sometimes petulant personality, which he used on occasion to berate unprepared litigators standing alone at the lectern, Scalia was popular with his colleagues. He maintained close friendships with liberal Justices Elena Kagan and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Ginsburg recently recalled listening to Scalia deliver a speech to the American Bar Association. She disagreed with the thesis, she said, but "thought he said it in an absolutely captivating way."

"If you can't disagree on the law without taking it personally," Scalia was fond of saying, "find another day job."

Scalia's claim to fame remained his reliance on the plain language of the Constitution and congressional statutes to guide his decision-making. The founding documents, he said, should not be subject to "whimsical change" by five judges.

"The Constitution means what the people felt that it meant when they ratified it," he said. "Only in law do we say that the original meaning doesn't matter."

While he faced difficulty convincing liberal members of the Court to follow his lead on the Constitution, he had more luck when it came to statutory interpretation. "He has won that battle," Kagan said.

On the bench, Scalia was one of the Court's most active and incisive questioners. Virtually every year, he led all justices in quips that elicited laughter in the courtroom, according to tabulations by Boston University law professor Jay Wexler.

At a Feb. 20 memorial service, Scalia was remembered as a man whose deeply held religious faith brought him peace.

Rather than a star-studded funeral service featuring judges and politicians, Scalia's sendoff at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception was a traditional Mass of Christian Burial befitting a true believer.

All the current Supreme Court justices attended, along with former justices John Paul Stevens and David Souter, sitting on folding chairs in front of the first pew.

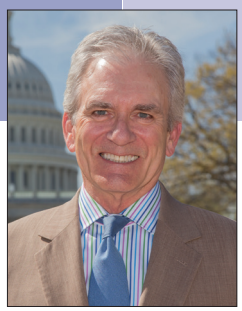
On the day before, more than 6,000 people paid their respects as Scalia's body lay in repose at the Great Hall of the Supreme Court. The building remained open to allow everyone in line to get in.

Born March 11, 1936, in Trenton, N.J., Scalia graduated from Georgetown University and Harvard Law School. In 1982, he was named to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, a well-worn stepping-stone to the Supreme Court. Four years later, he won unanimous Senate confirmation.

He is survived by his wife, Maureen. They have nine children and 36 grandchildren.

—Reporting from Richard Wolf, Susan Page and Gregory Korte of USA Today and BJC Staff Reports

REFLECTIONS



J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

We need to restore the Court to full strength

While watching a basketball game on TV on the afternoon of Feb. 13, my iPhone hummed with a Facebook message from one of my friends: "Things just got interesting…" What in the world, I thought? Within seconds, word of the death of Associate Justice Antonin Scalia popped up on my news app.

"Indeed," I responded.

My friend then wrote back with a bit of black humor about the justice. Social media blew up that afternoon, revealing strong views of Justice Scalia, both pro and con. And, as is typical of today's world, many were more than scurrilous.

As a lawyer, I must say any jurist who served on the U.S. Supreme Court for nearly three decades is worthy of my respect. Nevertheless, I disagreed with Justice Scalia's overall jurisprudence, his constitutional hermeneutic, and his understanding of the First Amendment's Religion Clauses in particular. In addition to having a truncated view of the Establishment Clause — as I wrote about in my January 2016 column — he led the charge in the Native American peyote case, *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990), which effectively gutted the Free Exercise Clause.

To be sure, Justice Scalia was friendlier to religious liberty when interpreting and applying free exercise-related legislation, such as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with its mandate for religious accommodations. But, as to constitutional interpretation, he emptied both clauses of any meaningful protection as he consistently deferred to the political branches of government.

Yet, Justice Scalia will be remembered as a towering figure on the High Court for his intelligence, wit and sometimes scalding opinions and as the justice who tugged the Court's center of gravity to the right over the past three decades.

The Republican Senate leadership — notably Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Judiciary Committee Chair Chuck Grassley — were quick to declare their opposition to holding hearings or otherwise considering anyone the president might nominate to replace Scalia, as they and the president are constitutionally instructed to do. As days went by, their resolve became even more entrenched.

They argued that the nomination of Justice Scalia's successor should be taken up only after the fall election and the inauguration of a new president. "Let the people decide," they declared. Well, the people already decided when President Barack Obama was re-elected in 2012. And he was elected for four years, not three years and one month. They point out that Democrats also have been dilatory — pointing to remarks of then-Senate Judiciary Committee Chair Joe Biden opining in 1992 that Senate confirmation would be inappropriate in an election year for Supreme Court nominees. As my mother would say, two wrongs do not make a right. But, in fairness, Biden's remarks were hypothetical (there was no pending Court vacancy), he was speaking in June (not February), and the president was running for re-election.

The U.S. Supreme Court has an odd number of justices for a reason. The prospect of a 4-4 decision on very important cases — even where it might serve the positions advanced by the Baptist Joint Committee — is unacceptable for any longer than is absolutely necessary. Any delay until after the inauguration in January 2017 would mean a vacancy for more than a year — probably deep into the 2016-2017 term. This is unacceptable. The president should nominate the best qualified, consensus candidate. (Let's not forget, Justice Scalia, himself, was confirmed 98-0.) The BJC signed a letter with 30 other religious organizations urging Senate leaders to offer "advice and consent," as provided in the Constitution, on "whomever is nominated." Sent to Sens. McConnell and Grassley, it said, in part, "Justice delayed is anathema to us as Americans and as people of faith seeking to create a more just nation and world." The Senate should hold hearings and provide an up or down vote on the nomination.

The likelihood of this happening appears slim. Worse yet, the future of fair, expeditious confirmations might be in jeopardy. When the new president is inaugurated, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg will be pushing 84, Justice Kennedy will be 80 and Justice Breyer will be 78. President Obama's successor may have three nominations that would accomplish a sea change in the High Court even beyond Justice Scalia's succession.

Beyond urging the president and the Senate leadership to do their constitutional duties, the Baptist Joint Committee will not formally support or oppose the nominee. We could do so under the tax code because the nominees will be appointed to office — not elected. But, for prudential reasons, we have never weighed in to endorse Supreme Court nominees. Nevertheless, we have in the past and shall in the future critique the nominee's expressed views and record on matters relating to religious liberty and the separation of church and state. We stand ready to provide that educational function.

Justice Antonin Scalia — whether viewed as virtuous or villainous — is gone. The health of our judiciary and the vitality of our democracy require that we move forward to fill that seat. Now!

A guide to the consolidated contraceptive m

On Feb. 17, the BJC filed a friend-of-the-court brief defending the sufficiency of the government's religious accommodation in the contraceptive mandate cases, known as *Zubik v. Burwell.* The brief makes clear the importance of free exercise exemptions, and it was written by leading religious liberty scholar and advocate Douglas Laycock.

In *Zubik*, religiously affiliated nonprofits are challenging the government's accommodation procedure designed to allow them to avoid paying or contracting for contraception as stipulated by the Affordable Care Act. It is a consolidation of seven cases, which include religiously affiliated hospitals, schools, and other nonprofit charities (including one often mentioned in news coverage called Little Sisters of the Poor). In all seven cases, the Circuit Courts ruled that the accommodation was not a violation of their rights.

The BJC's brief explains how, under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the far-reaching claims of the nonprofits can harm religious liberty. The brief argues that the procedure – which requires written notification of a religious objection – does not amount to a substantial burden on the exercise of religion. The organizations have been wholly exempted from providing contraception themselves, and the objection is to the government's efforts to deliver contraception separately through secular insurers, with segregated funds and segregated communications.

More information is available on our website at **BJConline.org/Zubik** and in Holly Hollman's column on page 6.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How does the contraceptive mandate apply to religious organizations?
Because birth control is an issue that sometimes involves deeply held religious opinions, especially regarding contraceptives that some believe act as abortifacients, the government created a two-tiered exemption for religious objectors who do not want to provide it. Houses of worship, denominational associations, and some entities that are closely related to them are automatically exempt from the mandate, though many choose to provide the coverage. In addition, religiously affiliated nonprofit employers (some colleges, hospitals and charities) that oppose contraceptives have an exemption through a specified accommodation procedure.

What is the accommodation procedure provided to objecting nonprofits?
If a religiously affiliated nonprofit objects to the coverage, it must give written notice to either its insurance provider or the Department of Health and Human Services. The insurance company then contacts the employees to let them know they can receive the health benefit, but they cannot receive it through their objecting employer. The objecting employer does not have to contract, arrange, pay, or refer for the coverage that may or may not be chosen by the employee.

What's the difference between the exemption and accommodation?
In practice, there is very little difference. Both the exemption and accommodation relieve religious organizations that object to contraception coverage from having to provide it. Houses of worship and other entities covered by that exemption do not have to take any steps to claim the exemption, and their employees will not receive the coverage unless the organization chooses to include it in its health plan. Religiously affiliated entities who are not automatically exempt must provide written notice to obtain the accommodation. Employees of accommodated entities will be entitled to contraception coverage through the organization's secular insurance provider separate and apart from the employer's health plan.

Didn't the Court address this in the *Hobby Lobby* case?
In 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that a closely held **for-profit** employer whose shareholders have religious objections to contraception should be entitled to the same accommodation procedure provided to religious **nonprofits** when it comes to their health care plan. The Court used the accommodation that these nonprofit employers are objecting to as a way to accommodate the Hobby Lobby shareholders' beliefs and provide coverage for the employees.

Why do these nonprofits object to the accommodation?
The nonprofits make various arguments, all arising from a conflict between their opposition to contraception and the government interest in providing access to contraception. In general, the claims are based on a religious belief that the accommodation makes them complicit in the use of the objectionable contraception.

If religious organizations sincerely believe their religious exercise is being burdened, shouldn't the courts defer to their religious understandings?
RFRA provides broad protection for religious exercise based on a claimant's sincere religious beliefs. While courts should defer to religious understandings of burden, that deference should not be absolute. Ultimately, RFRA is a legal standard and courts must determine if a burden is **substantial**. Otherwise, RFRA's statutory design loses its meaning.

Here's a simple example of how not all burdens on religious exercise are legally "substantial." If someone gets a speeding ticket on the way to a worship service, he could claim that the speed limit burdens his religious exercise. Missing much of the service would surely be a substantial religious loss. The court would have to determine, however, whether

Note: Insurance plans here are referred to as "employer-provided" and the people under the health care plans as "employees." Some of the conso
does not require colleges to provide health insurance to their students, if a college chooses to do so, the plan must comply with the ACA including

nandate cases, known as *Zubik v. Burwell*

Important terms to know

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act

RFRA became federal law in 1993, providing legal protection against government actions that interfere with the exercise of religion. Under RFRA, the government cannot substantially burden religious exercise unless the government can show that it is pursuing a "compelling governmental interest" in a manner that is the least restrictive on a person's religious exercise.

The contraceptive mandate

This is the requirement, under the Affordable Care Act (sometimes called "Obamacare"), that most employer-provided health insurance plans cover all 20 FDA-approved methods of contraception without any out-of-pocket costs to employees. Its purpose is to advance the ACA's emphasis on no-cost preventive health care services.

enforcement of the speed limit is a **substantial** burden on the person's exercise of religion.

Who is harmed if these religiously affiliated nonprofits win?

If successful, these claims would deny thousands of employees and their dependents access to a government program. The government has provided a system that exempts these religious nonprofit organizations from any obligation to contract, arrange, pay, or refer for contraception. Instead, coverage is provided through secular insurers, so that employees are not denied full and equal health benefits. While some frame this case as religious people versus an intrusive government, it is really about how the government can provide adequate protection for religious liberty without harming the rights of others. No employee is being coerced into contraception use, but the exemptions being challenged protect the right to free access to preventative health care – which includes contraception.

Religious exemptions that relieve burdens on religious objectors while protecting government interests should be encouraged – not threatened with "all or nothing" demands.

Why did the BJC file a brief in this case, and what does it say?

The BJC filed a friend-of-the-court brief in this case to explain how the far-reaching arguments made by these nonprofits can endanger religious liberty. Written by University of Virginia School of Law professor Douglas Laycock, a leading religious liberty scholar, the brief makes clear the importance of RFRA's standard in creating exemptions to policies that substantially burden religion. It also points out that the government must have the ability to enact exemptions that apply to specific situations. The regulations in these cases do not substantially burden the free exercise of religion. The organizations have been wholly exempted from providing contraception themselves, and their objection is to the government's efforts to deliver contraception separately through secular insurers. In other words, they aren't taking "yes" for an answer.

The BJC files *amicus* briefs when its voice is needed to raise an important religious liberty principle in a case. As the leader of the coalition that fought for RFRA, the BJC continues to advocate for its use, allowing its carefully crafted language to balance competing claims that ensure religious liberty for all people.

A version of this FAQ is available online, including a printable handout. Visit BJConline.org/Zubik

lidated cases, however, involve schools that provide health insurance to students. While the ACA g covering contraception.

BJConline.org/Zubik

Video with Holly Hollman explaining the BJC brief in front of the Supreme Court

Podcast with Hollman discussing the details of the case and the BJC's position

Additional resources include:

- BJC friend-of-the-court brief
- Printable FAQ handout
- Information about RFRA
- BJC news release

K. Hollyn Hollman
General Counsel

The threat of 'all or nothing' demands

The government must be able to draw reasonable lines when it creates religious exemptions, which exist in local, state and federal law.

It takes more than a sentence or two to explain the factual background of *Zubik v. Burwell*, the current religious liberty case pending before the U.S. Supreme Court. The case is the latest development in a long-unfolding story about the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate, its application to religious entities, and the meaning of the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA). The Affordable Care Act in general, and contraceptives in particular, are important matters that warrant serious debate. It may be unfortunate, but it's not surprising in our current climate, that this case inspires a lot of emotion and political rancor.

By filing an *amicus* brief in *Zubik*, the BJC weighed in on the issues that we believe are most essential for continuing protection of religious liberty **for all**. In a brief authored by Professor Douglas Laycock, we defend the sufficiency of the religious liberty exemptions at issue in the case and respond to far-reaching arguments made by three dozen petitioners — including individuals, religious charities and Christian colleges — that we believe endanger religious liberty.

As noted at the outset of the brief, the BJC and Professor Laycock have worked for more than 25 years – often together – to enact, implement and defend RFRA. That law creates a unique balancing test between substantial burdens on religion and the compelling interests of the government. While the kinds of claims being pursued under RFRA (and RFRA's state counterparts) may have become more controversial, the standard is sound and continues to provide a measure of protection fitting for a country that prizes religious liberty as its first freedom.

While it is much more common for the BJC and Professor Laycock to be pushing against government action that does not adequately protect religious liberty, the brief in this case reminds the Court and other readers that "religious liberty can be endangered by exaggerated claims and overreaching as well as by government intransigence and judicial under enforcement." In *Zubik*, religiously affiliated nonprofits use RFRA to challenge the government's accommodation procedure designed to allow them to avoid contracting, arranging, paying, or even referring for contraception. The government has provided a careful system of exemptions that responds to religious objections about contraception without depriving thousands of employees important health care benefits. This is the win-win solution the Court pointed to in the *Hobby Lobby* case.

The brief argues that the exemption procedure for the petitioners (called the "accommodation"), which requires written notification of a religious objection, does not amount to a substantial burden on the exercise of religion. The organizations have been wholly exempted from providing contraception themselves, and the objection is to the government's efforts to deliver contraception separately through secular insurers, with segregated funds and segregated communications.

While deference should be given to religious understandings, the brief explains that absolute deference produces its own problems and "would produce absurd results that would discredit the cause of religious liberty." The *Zubik* petitioners' arguments illustrate the point. Their claims have moved fluidly as they articulated the exercise of religion burdened by the government. They first objected to providing contraceptive coverage, then to the accommodation form, then to providing contact information for their insurance company, and finally to maintaining contractual relationships with insurance companies that provide the employee benefits. While petitioners may have sincerely held beliefs against performing such acts, the brief explains that "substantial to the believer is not inevitably the same as substantial in law."

Additionally, the BJC's brief defends the practice of legislative and administrative exemptions, which are typical means of ensuring religious liberty while protecting other important government interests. The government must be able to draw reasonable lines when it creates religious exemptions, which exist in local, state and federal law. "If legislatures and administrative agencies cannot enact a narrow religious exemption without it being turned into a much broader religious exemption, many of them will not enact any religious exemptions at all, and many existing religious exemptions will be repealed," according to the brief.

Despite what petitioners argue, legislative and administrative exemptions designed to protect religious liberty without harming other important interests should be encouraged, not threatened with "all or nothing" demands. In short, the religious organizations have been relieved of paying for or appearing to approve of objectionable services. Their RFRA claims, however, cannot extend to the government's regulation of secular insurers.

Marshall to discuss competing religious liberties

Religious liberty and pluralism will be front and center when Dr. Molly T. Marshall speaks at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, April 4-5. She will deliver the 2016 Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State.

The lectures kick off April 4 at 10:15 a.m. when BJC Executive Director Brent Walker speaks at Bethel's chapel service.

Marshall will give two lectures:

April 4 at 4 p.m.
"Understanding Religious Liberty Amidst Religious Pluralism"
Hosted by Bethel University's College of Arts and Sciences

April 5 at 12 p.m.
"Preserving Religious Liberty for a Christian Minority"
Hosted by Bethel Seminary

The lectures are free and open to the public. Visit our website at **BJConline.org/ShurdenLectures** for full details on the event.

Marshall is the president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kansas. A popular educator, she has vast and varied experience in ministry and has written monographs, numerous book chapters, journal articles and Bible study curricula.

Catholic 'seal of the confessional' upheld as religious liberty issue

A Louisiana judge has ruled that a state law requiring clergy to report child abuse or other crimes learned in the confessional is unconstitutional because it infringes on religious liberty.

At issue is a long-running case involving Rebecca Mayeaux, a 22-year-old who claims that when she was 14 she told the Rev. Jeff Bayhi, a Catholic priest, during confession that a church member was abusing her. Mayeaux claims Bayhi told her to "sweep it under the rug."

In his testimony, Bayhi told state District Judge Mike Caldwell that he had no choice but to keep Mayeaux's allegations private because of the inviolability of the seal of the confessional.

Caldwell agreed and ruled Feb. 26 in favor of Bayhi.

Confession is a Catholic sacrament in which a penitent recounts his or her sins privately to a priest, who then absolves them and usually sets up some regimen of penance, such as extra prayers.

The confidentiality of the sacrament is considered so paramount that under church law a priest who reveals anything he hears in the confessional incurs automatic excommunication.

The Louisiana State Children's Code includes clergy among the "mandatory reporters" of suspected or known abuse. It makes no exception for the confidentiality of confession and specifically states that "notwithstanding any claim of privileged communication, any mandatory reporter who has cause to believe that a child's physical or mental health or welfare is endangered" must report it to authorities.

Mayeaux's attorneys pledged to appeal. The seal of the confessional has been challenged before, and at least one bishop has said he would violate it in favor of "the greatest good, the protection of innocent people."

—Kimberly Winston, Religion News Service

India withholds visas from U.S. religious freedom monitors

A U.S. religious freedom panel says it has been unable to obtain visas for members who planned to travel to India to assess conditions there.

In its 2015 annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom included India on its list of Tier 2 countries — not the worst offenders but worthy of close monitoring due to religious freedom violations within their borders.

USCIRF chairman Robert P. George said in a statement that "a pluralistic, non-sectarian, and democratic state" such as India should have allowed the visit.

He noted that USCIRF has sent delegations to some of "the worst offenders of religious freedom," such as China, Burma, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam.

In the report, the commission said that while India had tried to protect religious minorities, incidents of "religiously-motivated and communal violence reportedly have increased for three consecutive years."

The Tier 2 designation was seen as unfair and part of what Jakob De Roover, a professor at Belgium's Ghent University, considers an effort by USCIRF to promote a society based on American notions of religion.

"It seeks to spread Protestant-Christian values across the world but does so under the guise of promoting and protecting human rights that are 'universally held sacred,'" he wrote on firstpost.com, an Indian website, shortly after the release of last year's USCIRF report.

—Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

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REPORT from the Capital

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2016 RLC Luncheon to celebrate Brent Walker

Join us for a very special Religious Liberty Council Luncheon in Greensboro, North Carolina, on June 24 as we celebrate the Rev. J. Brent Walker's 27 years of service with the BJC. Walker, who will retire at the end of 2016, will be this year's keynote speaker.

The luncheon, which is held in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, will be an opportunity to reflect on Walker's legacy at the BJC and look forward to the future. It is also an opportunity to connect with other supporters of religious liberty, meet members of the BJC staff and hear updates about our work on Capitol Hill.

The luncheon is open to the public, but you must purchase a ticket to attend. Tickets for the luncheon will be available for purchase April 1. The cost for an individual ticket is $40, and tables of 10 can be purchased for $400. Discounted tickets for young ministers are $20 each.

For more information on the event, visit **BJConline.org/Luncheon**. For table sponsorship opportunities, contact BJC Development Director Taryn Deaton at tdeaton@BJConline.org or 202-544-4226.

Religious Liberty Council Luncheon

June 24 • Greensboro, North Carolina

Tickets: $40 per person/$400 for a table of 10
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