



BJC Fellows begin advocacy journey

This summer, ten young professionals from across the country became the fourth class of BJC Fellows.

Representing a variety of professional and educational backgrounds, the newest class gathered in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, for a four-day intensive seminar that explored foundations of and how to be an advocate for religious liberty. They heard from members of the BJC staff and other scholars, engaged with historical interpreters and the area around them, and discussed how they can make an impact on the future.

In these pages, the BJC Fellows share in their own words what they learned, alongside snapshots of their time together (for more photos of the 2018 BJC Fellows, search #BJCFellows on social media).

If you or someone you know is interested in applying for the BJC Fellows Program, visit BJCOnline.org/Fellows for information.



On the classroom experience



Chelsea Clarke, Washington, D.C.

The BJC Fellows Seminar in Colonial Williamsburg is a bit like off-season training camp for religious liberty advocacy and education. The incredible staff not only open up their playbook, but my BJC Fellows cohorts shared ideas that both validated and challenged my own beliefs and world view. The guest lecturers, historical interpreters, tours and assigned readings were like watching old game tapes – they provide valuable information and a historical context that inform today's realities.

At the end of the BJC Fellows Seminar, we left feeling equipped and empowered to contribute our gifts and talents to the important work of defending and extending religious liberty for all within our respective spheres of influence, and we know there is still a lot of work to be done.



Daniel Headrick, Smyrna, Georgia

I was joined by nine others who were devoted to religious liberty — seven Baptists, a Mormon, a Catholic and a Muslim. We bonded over history, theology, law and seeing the anachronism of a person dressed in 18th century garb driving a golf cart.

So, what did I learn? I reaffirmed the wisdom of our church's support for the BJC. The Baptist Joint Committee advocates for issues arising out of the two religion clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The Free Exercise Clause allows for broad exercise of religious liberty unconstrained by governmental interference except in cases of generally applicable laws. The Establishment Clause operates as a check on governmental attempts to establish an official religion or favor one religion over another.



Erika Perez, Edinburg, Texas

I was surprised to learn that the Pew Research Center reports that more than 79 percent of the world's population lives in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion. Fortunately, here in the United States, the First Amendment of the Constitution prohibits the government from establishing or sponsoring a religion or interfering in the free exercise of religion.

This is a reminder that the freedom to our thoughts and beliefs is granted by God and protected by our government. It also helps us recognize that we are not the only ones in this world, but that there are minds that think and believe differently than we do, and we should lift our voices when anyone's religious freedom is jeopardized.

Q On religious liberty



Brent Newberry,
Worcester,
Massachusetts

Religious liberty is about so much more than simply allowing people to worship. It's about their fundamental right to exist — to be human.

When we begin to allow our governments to diminish or denigrate or discriminate against people because of their religion, when entire religions are misunderstood or misrepresented or mischaracterized by our governments, we aren't protecting anyone — we're harming everyone.



Annette Owen,
Warrenville, Illinois

Ringling the Freedom Bell at First Baptist Church of Williamsburg both as a group as well as individuals was a powerful moment. It made me realize my own responsibility to take up the song of freedom. While my presence and participation in the BJC Fellows Program was the result of my interest in religious liberty, ringing the Freedom Bell with my colleagues was a call to action — a reminder that we all have a part to play in this ongoing work of protecting and promoting religious liberty. It reminded me of the good news that we're not alone in this work.



Tanner Bean,
Boise, Idaho

Now I am aware why the BJC is so important and why awareness of, and education in, our inheritance of religious liberty is so important. Until people are fully aware of how unsettled such liberties truly are, silence and often neglect provide avenues for those same liberties to be undermined.



Imran Suhail,
Canajoharie, New York

Freedom of religion goes far beyond just allowing us to pick what religion, or lack thereof, we choose to follow. Without freedom of religion, we cannot have freedom of thought. ... Through hearing different speakers, it became clear that the government doesn't give us our rights but merely recognizes and protects them.

Snapshots from Colonial Williamsburg





What's next?



Britt Luby, Fort Worth, Texas

Using what I learned at the BJC Fellows Seminar, I will be reframing the “why” of interfaith work on the Texas Christian University campus. I serve as a staff advisor for TCU Better Together, our campus interfaith club that works closely with Interfaith Youth Core. This diverse club meets weekly to engage in activities like interfaith dialogue, community service and visits to local places of worship. While facilitating a student club that centers on free food and conversation is both fun and meaningful, I now have the knowledge I need to inject a more intentional *why* into the organization. Our student organization matters because we are learning about our neighbors. Learning about our neighbors matters because we are called, as people of faith, to love our neighbors. And loving our neighbors requires us to advocate for our neighbors. In continued collaboration with the BJC, I know I can empower these students to be advocates for all.



Will Thomas-Clapp, Falls Church, Virginia

In the time since we left Colonial Williamsburg, I've been reflecting on how I am different now. It's taken all of that time to dig into the depths of my recollection and find those nuggets that gleam with possibility. It has taken this time to find that one thing that I want others to know. I have gone over my notes and the slides I have in my possession and re-read the content of our Dropbox as I contemplated my experiences. Through that process, I was reminded of just how much information we covered over those few days. ...

I have come home with a renewed sense of urgency for making those new challenges something my community — of friends, family and church members — aware of how our world could change, if only we would get involved.



Claire Hein Blanton, Houston, Texas

I spent most of the three days in the throes of a pessimism that has persisted since late 2016. And then, on the third day, hope sprung anew. We started talking about our power to advocate for those not in power. We heard about the work that the BJC does alone and in coalitions to protect the right of religious liberty.

I left our final session strangely energized and slightly optimistic. History often repeats itself, but every once in a while, committed individuals are able to alter it in small but foundational ways. In this room were nine other individuals with different spheres of influence that were as committed to protecting the right of religious liberty as I was. Going before us were 30 other BJC Fellows, the staff of the BJC and their predecessors from the past 80 years.



Go online for more!

Read longer reflections from our latest class of BJC Fellows and learn more about them by visiting a special section on our website at BJCOnline.org/Fellows.

You can support future classes of BJC Fellows by participating in the BJC's Giving Tuesday campaign. Watch our social media channels for details and make a donation on November 27 (the Tuesday following Thanksgiving).

Know someone who would be a great fit for the program? Let them know that applications for the 2019 class will be available December 1.