

REPORT

FROM THE

CAPITAL

BJC Magazine



AMANDA TYLER goes inside the ReAwaken America tour and provides a counter-witness in Miami

Working to save the sacred *Chí'chil Bitdagoteel*, also called "Oak Flat"

HOLLY HOLLMAN reviews new federal guidance on religious expression in public schools

Advancing the work of faith freedom

BJC is traveling the country, defending faith freedom for all through our education and advocacy work.

We traveled to Miami to provide a COUNTER-WITNESS to the Christian nationalism touted by the ReAwaken America tour. Amanda Tyler shares what she saw and heard on page 3.

Protecting students' religious freedom rights in public schools was a focus this spring. Holly Hollman looks at new federal guidance on RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS on page 5, and read tips from a webinar on PROTECTING PUBLIC SCHOOLS FROM CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM on pages 6-8.

Dr. Sabrina Dent shares more about the work of the BJC CENTER FOR FAITH, JUSTICE and RECONCILIATION on pages 10-11. You can attend our BJC LUNCHEON virtually to learn more — read insights from our speaker, the Rev. Dr. Adam L. Bond, on page 13 and see how you can get online streaming tickets.

Our work to SAVE OAK FLAT continues, and we share new victories and challenges on pages 14-15.

The Rev. Darryl Gray from the Progressive National Baptist Convention shares how the denominational home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is building NEW BRIDGES FOR ACTION on page 24.

BJC staff appeared at events large and small in the past few months, speaking to both religious and secular audiences. Take a look at some of our RECENT APPEARANCES on pages 18-21, and connect with us for your next event.

A counter-witness to Christian nationalism

BJC joined with Christian leaders to provide a counter-witness to the Christian nationalism spouted by the ReAwaken America tour when it came to the Trump Doral resort in Miami in May (see Amanda Tyler's column on page 3 for more). Here are a few scenes.



Amanda Tyler speaks at the counter-witness press conference held in Miami during the weekend of the ReAwaken America tour.



The Rev. James T. Golden speaks. He is the pastor of Mt. Zion AME Church in Port Tampa and co-founder of Pastors for Florida Children.



There were troubling views of religious and political conflation.



Our mobile billboards had several messages.

Inside ReAwaken America

By Amanda Tyler, BJC Executive Director



For the past two years, the ReAwaken America tour has traveled across the country, mixing Christian nationalism with COVID-19 and election conspiracy theories. BJC's Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign has partnered with Faithful America at multiple stops of the tour to organize a Christian counter-witness from local and national Christian leaders who don't want to let the tour's distortion of our Christian faith go unchallenged.

I witnessed the tour firsthand when I attended the stop at the Trump Doral resort in Miami in May, along with BJC Communications Director Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons. We also went inside the kickoff event for the "Pastors for Trump" group.

I was surprised by how much I learned. The content itself was not that surprising — I'd seen clips from prior events and extensive reporting about Michael Flynn and his "army of God," as it was called by a Frontline/AP documentary. But my insights came not from watching the stage but from watching the people around me.

We should not take these tour events lightly. There were people of all ages, including small children. Younger, college-aged students were working registration. They are organizing and creating communities at these events. For many there, it seemed like a genuinely religious experience. I noticed that in the excitement to be baptized, for instance, or in the response to the music and prayers. And that realization made me feel sad. This is an empty form of religion, based on accruing political power. And it was all in service to former President Donald Trump.

The baptisms were the strangest part of the event. Each one took less than a minute. People being baptized would step into a plastic kiddie pool one at a time, sit down, tell three people their name, and then be dunked. The officiants didn't even say anything when doing it — no liturgy or explanation of what the act represented. People wore whatever they had on for the conference, such as a ReAwaken America T-shirt or — for one person I saw — a QAnon T-shirt. It wasn't a recognizable Christian baptism to me.

The calls for political violence were bolder than I expected. Speakers talked about "spiritual warfare" and that we were meant

to be lions instead of sheep for Jesus. Greg Locke, in an incredibly fiery "sermon," talked about the need to use our Second Amendment rights if the government won't respect our First Amendment rights. This was a huge applause line, with people jumping to their feet and pumping their fists. A pastor at the Pastors for Trump event told a story from Marine lore about a unit that was surrounded by enemy troops. The unit went to the commanding officer in despair, and the officer said that that was exactly where we want them — now we can shoot in all directions. Then that pastor told Mike Flynn (who repeated to the whole crowd) that he was "packing" right then.

As horrifying as it was to see the ReAwaken America tour in person, going inside the Trump Doral resort wasn't the main reason I went to Miami. I wanted to be there to work with Florida and national Christian leaders to ensure an alternative Christian message rooted in love was offered at the same time as ReAwaken America's message of power. We partnered with Faithful America, Faith in Public Life Action, the Florida Council of Churches, and many other Christian groups to hold a press conference at an Episcopal church near the resort. "We are here to say to the millions of Christians across this country who are likewise horrified and angry about Christian nationalism: You are not alone," I said at the press conference.

In addition to our press conference, we had three mobile billboards traveling around Miami to share an alternative Christian message to the tour's Christian nationalism. Two were on trucks that circled the Trump Doral resort, while another was on a boat. The boat billboard is pictured on the cover of this magazine, as well as on pages 2 and 28.

Our work in Miami and across the country challenging the ReAwaken America tour has generated positive attention for our Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign in the media, including coverage in *The New York Times* and MSNBC. It brings to life the final line of our Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement: "As Christians, we must speak in one voice condemning Christian nationalism as a distortion of the gospel of Jesus and a threat to American democracy."

Supreme Court hears case on religious accommodations in the workplace

The U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Groff v. DeJoy* in April, a case brought by a U.S. postal worker under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act over the denial of his request to not work on Sundays in accordance with his religious beliefs. The appeals court agreed with the trial court that requiring the postal service to accommodate Groff's religious beliefs would be an "undue hardship" on his employer and thus was not required under the law.

Groff is asking the Court to reconsider the meaning of "undue hardship" and specifically to overturn the 1977 case *TWA v. Hardison*, in which the Court ruled that any cost that is "more than *de minimis*" qualifies as undue hardship. BJC and many other religious advocates filed a friend-of-the-court brief agreeing with Groff that the "more than *de minimis*" standard is too minimal a burden for employers to establish, making it easier to deny accommodations than Congress intended when enacting the Civil Rights Act.

During the oral argument, a couple of notable points came to

the surface. First, justices questioning Groff's attorney explained their concern about overturning a previous Court ruling interpreting a statute that Congress could change if it desired. In other words, they seemed more interested in defending the principle of statutory *stare decisis* than they were defending the "more than *de minimis*" standard established in *Hardison*.

Second, on the other side, the solicitor general was also not interested in defending the phrase "more than *de minimis*" as a test for undue hardship, but she argued that the phrase has generally not been interpreted by courts in a way that conflicts with "undue hardship." She worried that overturning the *Hardison* standard would render decades of case law as irrelevant.

Amanda Tyler and Holly Hollman provided a full review of the oral arguments in episode 19 of the Respecting Religion podcast.

Learn more about the case at BJCOnline.org/Groff. A decision is expected by the end of June.

—Don Byrd, "Latest News" section of BJC's website

Congress rejects nationwide school voucher amendment

During debate over the Parents Bill of Rights Act (H.R. 5) — a bill that would establish numerous parental rights in the context of elementary and secondary education — a problematic voucher amendment was defeated.

Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, proposed an amendment that would divert federal education funds to "follow" each child, whether for public or private — including religious — education. The proposal effectively would have created a nationwide school voucher scheme, sending federal tax dollars to fund religious education and destabilizing public education funds across the country in the process. We alerted our BJC Advocacy Team about it, asking them to reach out to their congressional representative to vote "no" on the amendment. After all, public dollars belong in public schools where there is public accountability.

In an enormous victory for public school advocates, the measure was soundly defeated by a vote of 311-113. More than 100 Republicans joined all Democrats in voting no.

BJC has been a consistent voice for many years on this topic, standing up in the name of religious liberty against efforts to implement school voucher systems. There are three major reasons.

First, while parents absolutely have the right to choose religious education for their children, BJC has long emphasized that taxpayers should not shoulder the financial burden of funding

religious teachings.

Second, and perhaps more than ever, robust religious liberty protections for all rely on a strong public school system, which could be decimated financially in many areas by voucher funding schemes. As BJC's Jennifer Hawks explained in a recent column, a robust public school curriculum "may be the most practical way to oppose Christian nationalism."

Third, voucher programs that fund religion do no favors to the religious institution receiving the funds. Vouchers threaten the religious autonomy of the religious institution receiving them, and the institution itself often sees a decline in donations. For churches, this means a decline in tithes and offerings.

While the U.S. Supreme Court continues to weaken religious liberty protections designed to safeguard taxpayers from funding religion, polls have shown that Americans disapprove — or at best are evenly divided on — voucher schemes. As FiveThirtyEight describes the available data, "universal vouchers aren't universally popular."

All who believe in religious liberty and support a strong public school system must continue to educate others on the dangers of school vouchers. For now, it's heartening to see that there is a strong, bipartisan majority in Congress willing to draw the line at a nationwide voucher system using federal tax dollars.

—Don Byrd, "Latest News" section of BJC's website

Good news on the religious freedom frontlines

By Holly Hollman, BJC General Counsel

“Our goal is to provide clarity and reaffirm our students’ freedom of religion,” U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in a video address introducing updated federal guidance on prayer and religious expression in public schools. “Educators and school leaders should continue fostering inclusive environments and making accommodations for students from all religious and non-religious backgrounds.”

From BJC’s perspective, it was good news that can move conversations from a football coach prayer controversy to religious freedom consensus in education and extracurricular opportunities. We can all cheer about that! The guidance builds on decades of agreement about how the Constitution protects the religious liberty of public school students and teachers.

BJC has long been a leader in promoting religious liberty in our nation’s public schools. Two things drive our efforts. First, public schools educate the vast majority of students in America — students that reflect the religious diversity of our nation’s population. Public schools are where many of us first met friends from different religions and learned to value Americans of other faiths as equal citizens. Second, public schools provide a useful context for understanding the way the religion clauses work together. Public schools are government entities constitutionally bound to avoid any establishment of religion, while protecting the free exercise rights of the students they serve and teachers they employ.

The U.S. Department of Education’s practice of providing guidance to public schools, along with a requirement that local educational agencies must certify their compliance, helps reduce conflicts over religion. BJC supports these efforts, including the Biden administration’s decision to update the guidance after the U.S. Supreme Court’s 6-3 decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton* — the football coach prayer case.

The *Kennedy* decision continued the Court majority’s shift in religion cases away from principles that have protected against government-sponsored religion. The Court abandoned a long-standing test for deciding what constitutes a government establishment of religion, leaving a fair amount of confusion in its wake. The good news, however, was that the Court’s ruling in favor of the coach was based on selective facts that do not change expectations that teachers cannot coerce students into religious exercises. The coach’s success in the case hinged on his praying alone when his players were otherwise engaged.

We knew the coach’s “win” may be misused by some who would prefer government-sponsored religion — because the facts were convoluted and the plaintiff claimed to be a victim of anti-religious persecution. But a close reading of the decision is in line with long-prevailing standards that the Court maintained and the administration has now clarified. The guidelines make clear: “Teachers, school administrators and other school employees may not encourage or discourage private prayer or other religious activity.” There are times that school employees are free to engage in their own private religious observance. They cannot, however, “compel, coerce, persuade, or encourage” students to join them.

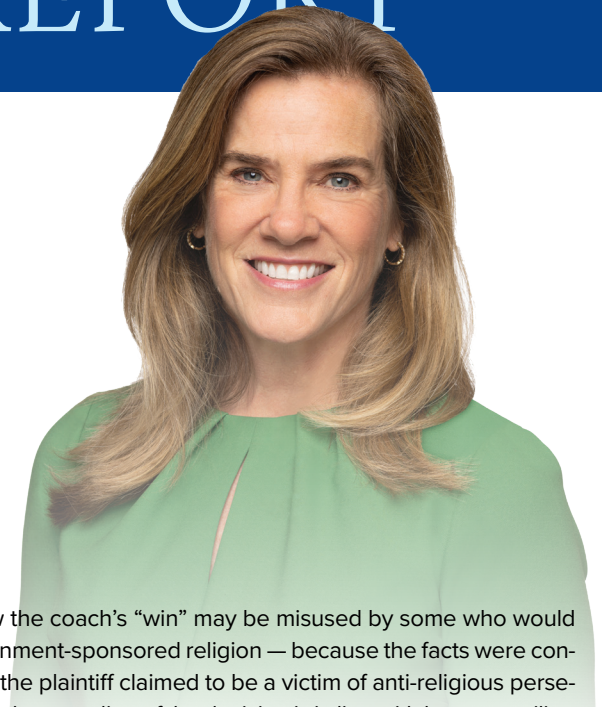
Students may engage in religious expression during instructional time to the same extent that other nonreligious private expression is allowed. The guidelines spell this out. The rule is similar when it comes to the distribution of literature, use of school property and student dress codes.

The guidelines don’t indicate sweeping changes. The decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton* did not upend the long-standing consensus on prayer in public schools. But the guidelines offer every school district the opportunity to examine their policies and uphold important religious liberty standards.

It’s clear that the Biden administration understands the vital role that public schools play in ensuring faith freedom for all students. While occasionally hard questions arise, most debates over legal and constitutional protections for religious expression in public schools have been settled for a long time. The new guidance is in line with that from prior administrations from both parties, going back to the Clinton years.

Students should be free to express their religious beliefs by praying, wearing religious clothing and accessories, and discussing their faith with their peers. Religious groups should be free to meet on school grounds, and educators should teach about religion as an academic subject. Religious liberty in public schools is safeguarded by forbidding teachers and other government employees from leading students in religious exercises while on duty or otherwise coercing students in matters of religion.

I agree with Secretary Cardona’s statement that religious liberty is “one of America’s super powers.” We should respect and celebrate our differences, and this guidance will help public schools do that while avoiding unnecessary conflict.



CHRISTIANS AGAINST CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Protecting public schools from Christian nationalism

By Molly Racsko, spring semester BJC intern

To equip advocates to make a difference, Christians Against Christian Nationalism held a webinar on the role of public education in protecting faith freedom. Amanda Tyler, lead organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism and executive director of BJC, hosted the webinar Feb. 23, titled “Advancing religious freedom in public schools.” The program shared perspectives from the federal government and from an advocate, as participants heard from Maggie Siddiqi, Director of the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Education, and the Rev. Dr. Brian Kaylor, President and Editor-in-Chief of *Word&Way*.

Siddiqi highlighted the freedom to worship without fear as a dimension of protecting religious freedom in our nation’s public schools. For many people, religious freedom means a lot more than just maintaining legal protections — the ability to choose to worship, or not to worship, must be free from fears for their physical safety. “There is some dangerous overlap between those who are seeking to create an America that excludes those with minority religious affiliations and those who are seeking to exclude communities of color,” Siddiqi said, adding that addressing this is especially pressing given the rise in hate fueled by white nationalism and antisemitism.

Siddiqi identified several actions currently being taken by the White House and the Department of Education to defend the constitutional right to the free exercise of religion, including developing a national strategy to counter antisemitism. The federal government also maintains guidance on constitutionally protected prayer and religious activity in public schools, and it requires certification from state educational agencies that the agencies are abiding by the guidelines. (For more on these guidelines, see page 5.)

On the topic of religious literacy, Siddiqi stressed the importance of inclusive school policies and curricula which teach students about different religions and respect for reli-

gious pluralism. “Religious literacy is also critical to guarding against bullying and hate that is born of ignorance about religious difference,” Siddiqi said. She emphasized that these programs should teach **about** religions rather than teaching a particular religion. Religious education happens outside of government institutions, and more important for our public schools is cultivating the skill set of respecting diversity and understanding the world. She noted that faith and community leaders often ask not only how they can protect their children from being bullied, but they also ask how they can protect their children from becoming bullies themselves.

Ensuring that students of all faiths and none can thrive in public school is another necessary component of protecting religious pluralism. School policies should therefore reflect that and accommodate different religious needs, such as dress codes which allow for religious head coverings or school calendars which don’t force students to choose between taking their final exams and observing their religious holidays. “We need to be able to bring our full selves into that process of identity formation and learning what it means to be human,” Siddiqi said. “And for students of faith, their religious identities will be a part of that.”

Tyler underscored this principle, emphasizing that “no one is asked to shed their religious identity when they come into a public school, nor do we want that.” To combat Christian nationalism, she explained, it is important to remind people that there is protected religious expression already happening in public schools. “That rich pluralism and religious diversity adds to our communities.”

Dr. Kaylor’s commentary provided an academic perspective, focusing on the struggles that public schools are currently facing in upholding religious liberty. Dr. Kaylor attended public schools, has children in public schools and taught at a public university in the past. “I believe in

public education, and it is something that is foundational to our democracy, to the health of our communities, and it is important for all of our children — whether you have children that are in the public schools or just the children in our community,” he said.

Dr. Kaylor noted that attacks on religious liberty in public schools are often connected to systemic racism. Religious rhetoric was used to oppose school integration in the 1950s and 1960s, and private Christian schools provided a path for white flight out of integration. Current battles over school vouchers and private school funding, he argued, are a direct result of those 20th century conflicts. Christian nationalism now targets public schools because they highlight and defend pluralism in our society. He added that low-income families and those with limited opportunities are the most at risk when public schools are attacked.

Dr. Kaylor pointed to a number of modern efforts to push for an establishment of religion in public schools. One such venture involves a campaign that creates model legislation for state lawmakers, putting forth goals including: “To protect the free exercise of traditional Judeo-Christian religious values” and “To properly frame the narrative and the language of religious liberty issues.” The campaign, which up until recently called itself “Project Blitz,” is organized by the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation.

“They want to create a system where to be considered a ‘good American’ is to be a Christian, and that Christians receive a privileged place not just in government, not just in society, but in curriculum and the school system,” Dr. Kaylor explained.

He also identified the introduction of Bible literacy courses in public schools as a product of Christian nationalism. These bills, he stated, send the message that a specific type of Christian faith is preferred. Amendments to add other religious texts to the curriculum — which would create a comparative religious studies class rather than one which pushes the Bible exclusively — are often voted down. One Bible literacy course proposed in Montana “says the quiet part out loud,” he said, by asserting that youth need God’s word in order to survive in “today’s postmodern, anti-Christian culture.” It also says that a Bible course will provide students with the “marvelous opportunity to study God’s Word and have it change their lives for eternity” and that religion is “essential” to well-being and morality in our nation.

Other troubling initiatives include banning books, mandating the posting of “In God We Trust” in schools and passing “trigger laws” which would reinstate government-led prayer in schools if the Supreme Court overturns its long-standing precedent forbidding the practice. Dr. Kaylor said these policies send “a tragic and horrific message” to schoolchildren: telling them that if they are not a specific type of conservative Christian, that they are not fully American or fully welcome in their own schools.

Dr. Kaylor shared actions that all of us can take to combat this assault on public education. He noted that people can get their congregations involved in public schools, such



“We need to be able to bring our full selves into that process of identity formation and learning what it means to be human. And for students of faith, their religious identities will be a part of that.”

Maggie Siddiqi



“It’s important for those who are Christians to show up at these hearings, because otherwise it can very easily just become religion-and-church people versus everyone else.”

Rev. Dr. Brian Kaylor

Combat Christian nationalism in public education

- **Get your congregation involved.**

Public schools are often underfunded, so community involvement can provide valuable support to students. Firsthand experience, such as through tutoring and mentorship programs that the public can participate in, can also help people of faith see the value in public education.

- **Participate in school board meetings.**

Attending local school board meetings to speak up on the importance of religious pluralism can have a direct impact on your schools.

- **Contact your representatives.**

Go online to find the elected officials who represent you and who serve on education committees, and contact them to voice your opposition to Christian nationalism and your support for religious pluralism in schools.

- **Testify in state and local government hearings.**

Search your state government website for bills with terms like “Bible,” “In God We Trust,” “Christian” and “Scripture.” If these bills have upcoming hearings that are open to the public, you can sign up to testify against them and tell elected officials to protect religious liberty and pluralism in our public schools.

as through tutoring and mentorship programs, to help people of faith to see firsthand the importance of the public education system. He also suggested getting involved in your local school board, speaking up and encouraging board members and teachers who are underpaid and underappreciated when they are being attacked for trying to educate the next generation.

He also pointed to the importance of being involved in your state government, attending hearings and contacting your state representatives to counter talking points informed by Christian nationalism.

“A lot of times when I show up on these church-state bills,” he said, “I will be the only Christian that’s testifying against some of these Christian nationalism bills.” Dr. Kaylor shared that he feels like he is filling an important role by appearing as a Baptist minister alongside minority religious and nonreligious groups. “It’s important for those who are Christians to show up at these hearings, because otherwise it can very easily just become religion-and-church people versus everyone else.”

Tyler agreed on the importance of Christians speaking up. “We bear a special responsibility in being active in opposing Christian nationalism and to bring our faith-based selves into those public policy spaces when we do that,” she said. “We can be patriotic in our public schools and in our communities and support and advance religious freedom for all.”

Visit the resources section of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism website to watch a recording of this webinar. You will also find additional resources to take a stand against this dangerous political ideology in our nation’s public schools.

Support Christians Against Christian Nationalism

You can make a gift directly to support the efforts of Christians Against Christian Nationalism. Scan the QR code or visit the campaign’s website and click on the “give” button, and your donation will be earmarked for this work.



You also can make a gift in honor of or in memory of someone.

Honorary and memorial gifts

In honor of Reba Cobb, by Jane Emke
In honor of Holly Hollman, by Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden
In memory of Pat Dickinson, by John Dickinson
In memory of Ima Lennington, by Leslie Neal
In memory of Lanetta Weller, by Cecil Weller

Texas is first step in a national plan to install ‘chaplains’ in public schools instead of professional counselors

By Mark Wingfield, Baptist News Global

A Texas proposal to allow unlicensed “chaplains” to take the place of public school counselors undermines religious liberty, according to BJC and others.

The Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 763, which would allow Texas schools to hire chaplains to perform the work of school counselors but without any required certification, training or experience.

“Religious instruction for Texas students is best left to houses of worship, religious institutions and families. Allowing Texas schools to hire anyone under the label of ‘chaplain’ to perform the work of school counselors threatens religious liberty by substituting an undefined religious title for licensed counselor. The goal of public schools is not religious indoctrination,” said the Rev. Jennifer Hawks, associate general counsel at BJC and graduate of George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University in Texas.

The House bill’s sponsor is state Rep. Cole Hefner of Mount Pleasant, Texas. Hefner, the father of seven children, is a member of South Jefferson Baptist Church in Lindale. The Senate bill’s sponsor is state Sen. Mayes Middleton of Galveston, a proponent of taxpayer-funded vouchers for private Christian schools. Both legislators are conservative Republicans.

The exact language of the bill states: “A school district or open-enrollment charter school may employ or accept as a volunteer a chaplain to provide support, services, and programs for students as assigned by the board of trustees of the district or the governing body of the school. A chaplain employed or volunteering under this chapter is not required to be certified by the State Board for Educator Certification.”

Currently, Texas law requires school counselors to pass a school counselor certification exam, to hold at least a 48-hour master’s degree in counseling from an accredited institution of higher education, and to have two creditable years of teaching

experience as a classroom teacher.

Hefner’s bill would allow “chaplains” to replace these trained and licensed school counselors.

“Professional chaplains help individuals explore their own religious beliefs, especially in contexts such as military service, hospitals and prisons where one’s individual ability to engage in religious exercise may be limited,” Hawks explained. “School counselors perform critical work helping students achieve academically, manage their emotions, learn interpersonal skills and plan for post-graduation options. We should not blur the differences in these important professions. Misusing the title of ‘chaplain’ to shortcut standards for public school counselors undermines religious freedom in public schools.”

“Misusing the title of ‘chaplain’ to shortcut standards for public school counselors undermines religious freedom in public schools.”

Rev. Jennifer Hawks

“If more counselors are needed, then the Texas Legislature should give public schools the resources to hire more counselors,” she concluded.

Hemant Mehta, editor of The Friendly Atheist website, also warns of church-state separation problems with the bill.

“Even though Texas has a budget surplus of roughly \$32.7 billion, these lawmakers aren’t even thinking about giving schools the resources they need to hire more mental health professionals. Instead, they want those positions staffed by chaplains who would undoubtedly be Christian and who don’t need any paperwork to attest to their abilities to do the job,” Mehta wrote.

“We’ve seen plenty of symbolic examples of Christian nationalism, like putting ‘In God We Trust’ in public schools, but this legislation would actively harm children by not giving them access to qualified professionals in a place where, and at a time when,

they arguably need them more than ever.”

The bill appears to be driven by the National School Chaplain Association, which has announced a U.S. campaign “to provide school chaplains” and cites Texas as “a national leader in school safety because of the courageous actions of its legislators to protect public school teachers and students.”

The association says it was established “to promote school chaplains as a legitimate and necessary member of a school staff through national standards for school chaplains.”

Its news release about the national campaign praised the Texas House and Senate bills as ways “to lower school violence” and urged other states to follow this example. School chaplains, the release says, can help reduce “the prevalence of school violence, which includes shootings, fighting, bullying and physical assault” by giving students “a solid spiritual foundation and a safe space to express their pain and frustrations.”

The association’s founder is Rocky Malloy, a self-styled missionary who has published 13 books for students from kindergarten to 12th grade to teach what he considers biblical principles.

“Everything about the books is covert, because we’re delivering Jesus in a package that can fit into the public school system,” he said in an interview with *Risen* magazine. “Each book talks about what in Latin America are called ‘universal truths’: health, gender, environment, government and economy. It’s a 35-week course, which is a complete school year. Everything has purpose and they learn why they’re studying math and why ethics, government and morals are important. It’s all based on seven principles found in Genesis, the first two chapters, before sin.”

This is yet another attempt to implant Christian teaching into public schools, Mehta warned.

“Why would a Muslim or atheist student be better off meeting with a Christian chaplain and not a trained social worker?”

Faith freedom for all calls for justice and reconciliation



By Dr. Sabrina E. Dent
Director of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation

The United States continues to be shaped by theological, political and economic stories as well as assumptions that seeded it nearly 250 years ago. These limited mainstream narratives tell us who counts as human, who speaks for truth, who defines what's good, and how our communities should be governed. Religious freedom always has cut through these questions.

Earlier this year, I began serving as director of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation. Dr. Keisha McKenzie, an advisory board member of the Center who works at Auburn Seminary, shared this with me at the time: "At this fragile point in our nation's development, with toxic politicians using religion to grasp power and influence, inclusive and pluralistic religious freedom educators and advocates have a constructive role to play."

Since 1936, BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty) has worked to protect religious freedom out of the historic Baptist commitment to "soul freedom." This perspective can only be fully realized when freedom points to full liberation.

That is, the ability for all people to live in a world where their humanity is recognized and affirmed. The struggle of advancing justice in our society requires we make intentional efforts to expand our understanding of how the limits of religious freedom for some have shaped public policies and social norms while causing harm to many communities.

BJC's investment in the Center points to an initial step in reimagining the work of protecting faith freedom for all. In the past year, the Center partnered with academic, grassroots and national nonprofit organizations to raise the visibility of justice issues rooted in systemic racism, white supremacy and Christian nationalism. Simultaneously, BJC expanded its mission to engage in deep truth-telling by repairing and building relationships with Black Baptist denominations and elevating underrepresented voices in these critical discussions. This reaffirmed BJC's commitment to addressing the problem that religious freedom has been white too long.

In 1954, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached the convicting sermon "Transformed Nonconformist." He admonished white Christians with high and noble ideals to take risks by embodying the moral courage of Jesus to go against what is popular to do what is right.



Dr. King emphasized the work of Christians in this minority group would be an eternal challenge that called for discernment and a new mental outlook. As he framed it, "The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace and brotherhood [community]." He continued: "The great creative insights have come from [wo]men who were in a minority. It was the minority that fought for religious liberty; it was the minority that brought about the freedom of scientific research."

This moment in our nation calls for each one of us to be transformed nonconformists in addressing racial justice and religious freedom issues in the 21st century. Under the leadership of Amanda Tyler, BJC is taking meaningful steps to decenter whiteness within the context of religious freedom.

This has manifested in tangible ways through BJC's Project on Race and Religious Freedom and by sponsoring the Center's key education program, the Religious Freedom Mobile Institute (see page 12). The Center reaffirms BJC's commitment to racial justice and building a beloved community. We are using our collective agency to protect and advance faith freedom for all.

This work takes all of us — scholars, faith leaders, organizers, citizens and policymakers — dedicated to upholding ideals that create an inclusive society and democracy where all people can freely live according to their conscience.

I asked several of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation advisory council members to share what this moment

means to them.

“The challenges facing our society and world continue to call for audacious actions, conscious commitments and deep faith,” said the Rev. Dr. Corey D.B. Walker, the Center’s past president. “As the Center moves into a new and exciting relationship with BJC, I know its rich heritage, bold vision and brave voice will continue to ground us in creating a beloved community for all.”

In reimagining how our faith or moral compass compels us to take action, we are called to cultivate curriculum and innovative programming where education stimulates changed hearts, behaviors, attitudes and ultimately policies and laws. The BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation “deepens the witness of both the Center and BJC academically, racially and nationally because the witness of both movements is essential ‘for such a time as this,’” said the Rev. Dr. Bill J. Leonard, founding dean and professor of divinity emeritus at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

“In contentious cultural contexts where some people seek to eradicate religious diversity, the Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation fearlessly empowers communities to embrace religious diversity,” said Dr. Brad R. Braxton, president at Chicago Theological Seminary. “By merging into BJC — another fearless champion of religious freedom — the Center will exponentially extend its already remarkable reach and effectiveness.”

In 2015, the BJC Fellows Seminar was a transformative experience that allowed me to define my truth, inhale my hopes and exhale my anxieties about the ways religion has been used to liberate some while oppressing others.

It was in Colonial Williamsburg that I made a personal commit-

ment to disrupt the historical narratives about religious freedom that omitted the experiences of African Americans. Since that day, I have been faithful in my call to be in solidarity with underrepresented groups while making room at the table no matter what identities we hold or who we love.

“It was in Colonial Williamsburg that I made a personal commitment to disrupt the historical narratives about religious freedom that omitted the experiences of African Americans.”

This is the work of human dignity, social justice and liberation. As Dr. King said, “The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific and religious freedom have always been nonconformists. In any cause when it comes to the progress of [hu]mankind, put your faith in the nonconformist!”

I invite you to join us on the journey ahead as we live into our faith by unapologetically advancing faith freedom for all.

This article originally appeared in Baptist News Global, and it is part of a series on religious liberty authored by BJC Fellows and made possible by a grant from the Prichard Family Foundation.

Honorary and memorial gifts to BJC

In honor of Preston Clegg
By Jim and Gayle Maloch

In honor of Ella Prichard
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In memory of Roger Horan
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In memory of Garry Schenk
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In honor of Dane Martin
By Tyler Tankersley

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In memory of De-Anna Alba
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In honor of Jeff Parker
By Lynelle V. Mason

In memory of Joyce Alexander
By Danielle A. Tyler

In memory of Eldon F. Wood
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You can make a gift to BJC in honor of or in memory of someone at any time. Simply send a note with your check or specify who the gift should recognize when you give online at [BJCOnline.org/give](https://www.bjc.org/give).

Connect with the Religious Freedom Mobile Institute

Join the dialogue in October as we consider key questions in conversation with Black nontheists and Black Church leaders



RICE UNIVERSITY
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Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning

Throughout its history, the Black Church faced critiques and challenges, such as 20th century Black Power advocates and Black communists and socialists before them in their pursuits of justice and liberation. Perhaps the most enduring shift in the nature and meaning of the Black Church in public will result not from the work of a particular organization or socio-economic movement but through the growing population of African Americans who claim no particular religious tradition — the “nones.” African American nones aren’t easily dismissed, nor are they easily sidelined when one considers their involvement in social justice activism and their moral-ethical grammar of life that has captured the attention of the media as well as both a churchgoing and anti-religion audience.

A range of pressing questions emerge in response to this growing population of nones:

- Is our current theological language sufficient to capture the thought and ethics of African Americans outside Black churches?
- Is the relationship between Black churches and disbelief necessarily antagonistic?
- Does the thriving of Black people in the United States require the presence of the Black Church? If yes, how might its role change and shift to address the complexities of the Black community? If not, what organizational forms and structures of thought and action might replace the Black Church?

Join us October 26-27 as we address those questions and create new and needed dialogue between Black nontheists and Black Church leaders during the Religious Freedom Mobile Institute. This online program will feature two days of learning, listening and creating new ways to address social justice and religious freedom issues, featuring speakers from academia, grassroots organizations and faith communities. Presenters include Dr. Christopher Cameron, the Rev. Dr. Kevin Cosby, Candace R. M. Gorham, Sikivu Hutchinson, Dr. Terrence Johnson, the Rev. Dr. Eboni Marshall-Turman, the Rev. Dr. Brianna Parker, Dr. Anthony B. Pinn and Dr. Teddy Reeves, among many others.

The event also includes a special screening of *gOD-Talk*, which is the first feature film of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History & Culture and produced in association with the Pew Research Center. The documentary explores the lives of seven Black Millennials — Atheist, Buddhist, Christians, Muslim, African Traditional Religion, and Spiritualist — and their challenges and discoveries with faith in the 21st century.

The Religious Freedom Mobile Institute is a virtual symposium, hosted jointly by the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation and the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning at Rice University.

Religious Freedom
Mobile Institute

(Dis)Belief:
Reimagining the Religious Landscape of Black America
October 26-27 online
Register: BJCOnline.org/Center

Support the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation

Your support makes it possible to create new programs and conversations at the intersection of racial justice and religious freedom. Visit BJCOnline.org/Center for a special link to support this work, or scan the QR code.



A conversation with the Rev. Dr. Adam L. Bond



Join religious liberty supporters on June 30 for our annual BJC Luncheon, which will introduce the work of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation. This year's keynote speaker is the Rev. Dr. Adam Bond, the former pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church of Jackson Ward in Richmond, Va., who will begin serving as Associate Professor of Religion at Baylor University in August.

An ordained minister in the American Baptist Churches USA, Dr. Bond maintains a commitment to the local church and higher education. An advocate for students, congregations and community groups that strive for justice, Dr. Bond is also a historian of American Christianity. We asked him to share about his work and calling. Read the full interview at BJCOnline.org/Luncheon.

What does faith freedom for all mean to you?

Faith freedom for all means to me that people are able to explore and encounter and discover what it means to be a human being. That at the core of who we are as individuals — as a community of people — is the distinct fact that we are part of the human family. That's true whether you place it in religious terms of the God-given right or whether you place it in legal terms as the legal right to discover what it means to be fully human.

Your research and writing on the history of American Christianity focuses on the narratives and ideas of Black Christian leaders of the 19th and 20th centuries. What calls you to study history and focus your scholarship in those centuries?

I really wanted to learn more about what went into my faith lineage. I wanted to learn how we came to do the things that we do within the life of a congregation — why we sing the songs that we sing, why the preachers sound the way they do — and I wanted to get to the core of those areas of my faith that were created in some ways that I inherited by persons who came before me who thought that the best ways to practice, to be faithful and to live in relationship with God were to operate as persons who expressed their faith in these diverse and beautiful ways. I was curious to discover the source of what made me but also what contributed to the formation of my grandmother, my grandfather, my mother and my father.

The title of your presentation for the 2023 BJC Luncheon is “Reimagining Religious Freedom.” What can we expect at the event?

I believe there is room for us to have a more nuanced and intentional conversation about religious freedom as both a blessing and as a burden — as a principle that has done great good in the world but also that has done great harm in terms of the way that it has been constructed and executed at different points in history. I'm inviting us as a community to be in conversation to think about what it means to redefine, to reinvent, to critique and to interrogate how religious freedom can be lived in such a way that it enhances the life prospects and the empowerment of our communities of faith, as well as of individuals who are exploring, encountering and discovering what it means to be truly human.

How can we best be in partnership while working for a more just society?

I would encourage us to acknowledge how diverse activism can be: We can honor both the activists who are on the front lines shouting the words of freedom and those who watch as marches take place. I believe that there is room for the quiet activists — the persons who have been convicted to do great things behind the scenes, who are the advocates in spaces where a lot of people cannot go, who help to influence policy, who help to make the decisions, who have the kind of conscience that won't let them be quiet in spaces where it is civilized or it is expected for people to be quiet. When we acknowledge how diverse activism can be, we create the pathways for more people to see themselves as activists, for more people to find their way and their voice into the struggle for freedom for all. Not everyone is built to march and not everyone is built to carry picket signs, but there are people who are equipped, who are brilliant, who are ready and willing to build the infrastructure and the capacity for justice to find its way into our society. But that takes many of us acknowledging this call to a certain type of activism that is not necessarily going to look like your neighbor's activism.

BJC Luncheon

Livestream tickets available!

Friday, June 30
12 p.m. ET

Ticket sales for our in-person event in Atlanta are closed, but livestream tickets are available **for only \$5**. Hear from Dr. Bond and get an introduction to the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation.

BJCOnline.org/Luncheon

What's new in the work 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 of *Chí'chil Bitdagoteel* — loosely translated in English as "Oak Flat."

For the past few years, BJC has been a leader in the work to protect this land, bringing together more than 100 religious and religious freedom organizations to support the religious freedom of our Indigenous neighbors. The issue is ongoing, and we asked the **Rev. Jennifer Hawks**, BJC's associate general counsel, to give us an update on this important work.

Why is protecting this land important to BJC?

BJC works to defend faith freedom for all, and that includes our Indigenous neighbors. We joined this advocacy effort because the San Carlos Apache Tribe wanted allies to remind Congress, the administration and everyone else that *Chí'chil Bitdagoteel* is their church. Sacred ground isn't always marked by a steeple.

What have we seen from the White House and Congress over the past few years?

One of the last acts of the U.S. Department of Agriculture under President Trump was the premature release of the report that triggers the transfer of Oak Flat to the mining company within 60 days. Before the 60 days were up, the USDA under the Biden administration repealed the report, finding it incomplete and acknowledging a need to engage in meaningful consultation with the San Carlos Apache and other local Tribes. Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., reintroduced the Save Oak Flat Act in March 2021 and held a hearing on the bill the following month. Despite receiving a record number of cosponsors, the bill never was scheduled for a vote on the House floor.

Is this current Congress poised to take action on this issue?

Rep. Grijalva revised the bill from last Congress and introduced the Save Oak Flat from Foreign Mining Act (H.R. 1351) in March of this year. The bill text includes a section of congressional findings about how China will profit off this land transfer and other reasons to oppose it. The bill has already picked up several cosponsors, though none are Republicans at this time. With a divided Congress, this bill will have to garner bipartisan support in order to pass. Historically, the bill receives bipartisan support, so I'm optimistic.

What's been happening on this issue since the new bill was introduced?

In late March, the Biden administration appeared poised to transfer Oak Flat to Resolution Copper, a foreign-owned mining company. The USDA indicated it was resuming the process to complete the land transfer, while the Department of Justice told the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals during an oral argument that the report that triggers the land transfer would be released in late spring or early summer. Clearly, some within the Biden administration are interested in completing this deal. Our diverse coalition jumped into action, reaching out directly to White House officials and asking advocates to amplify our messages over social media. And it worked — at least for now. The White House responded that no decision was imminent. In late May, the DOJ notified the 9th Circuit that the transfer of Oak Flat is still under review and that it does not know when this review will be completed. This is an important victory that gives us a small window to redouble our congressional outreach. Ultimately, Congress is the branch of government that can permanently save Oak Flat.

What is unique about this work compared to other work you do at BJC?

Oak Flat advocacy is more tactile than many of the religious freedom issues we work on. It is a religious freedom issue that can literally engage all five senses. Visits to Oak Flat often spark an increased commitment to save the sacred land.

In March, the **Rev. Jennifer Hawks**, BJC's associate general counsel, spoke at a congressional briefing about the importance of saving the sacred land of *Chí'chil Bitdagoteel*. BJC supports the Save Oak Flat from Foreign Mining Act, and she shared why during the briefing at the U.S. Capitol. "A steeple is not the only marker of sacredness — this land is sacred," she said. "The religious community is proud to be allies with the San Carlos in this fight."





Naelyn Pike, who is Chiricahua Apache, speaks out about the importance of saving the sacred land of *Chí'chil Bítáagoteel* during a rally and prayer vigil in front of the White House. In April, Pike and other Indigenous leaders from across the country gathered in D.C. to meet with White House officials and congressional offices to advocate on issues important to all of them, including saving Oak Flat. Behind her on the left is Chairman Terry Rambler of the San Carols Apache Tribe.

What sort of impact is BJC making on this issue?

While advocacy to save Oak Flat has been ongoing for more than 20 years, the religious freedom community was not leading any advocacy efforts until 2021 when the San Carlos Apache Tribe asked BJC to get involved. Many congressional staffers and White House officials do not expect to hear religious freedom arguments in an issue dominated by environmental concerns. Because of this, outreach from BJC and other religious freedom advocates sometimes gets a quicker response than other coalition partners.

Thus far, we have recruited more than 100 religious and religious freedom organizations to support the San Carlos and other Indigenous communities who hold Oak Flat as sacred. We have created resources for individuals and partner organizations to use. Thanks to the advocacy of our BJC staff and members of the BJC community, we recruited several new cosponsors to the bill in the previous Congress.

What is one of the biggest obstacles in the effort to save Oak Flat?

There is an aggressive misinformation campaign by the mining company that wants to obtain this land, and we spend a lot of time countering their lies and half-truths. Here's what we often have to remind people when we meet about this issue:

- The San Carlos Apache Tribe is not the only tribal government opposing the mine. An overwhelming number of tribes in Arizona and across the country oppose the mine. Also, the Inter Tribal Association of Arizona (ITAA), the National Congress of American Indians, and other inter-tribal organizations passed resolutions condemning the mine.
- The copper extracted from under Oak Flat will not remain in the United States. Copper is already Arizona's top export, and the smelters in the U.S. that refine the ore into usable copper are at capacity (and thus not able to handle an influx of new copper from Oak Flat). More than 25% of the copper mined in the U.S. last year was exported overseas.
- The mining company does not get to define sacred land for Indigenous people. Oak Flat is sacred no matter how many times the mining company tries to argue that they should just pray and perform ceremonies somewhere else.
- The sacred and outdoor uses of Oak Flat cannot continue when the mining company owns the land. Within a few years, the surface will become unstable and collapse into a massive crater, estimated at 1.8 miles across and 1,100 feet deep.

What can we do to make an impact?

Ask your congressional representative to cosponsor the Save Oak Flat from Foreign Mining Act (H.R. 1351). If your member of Congress is already a cosponsor, ask your representative to do one — or all — of the following three things: Solicit support from colleagues; give a 1-minute floor speech on the importance of saving Oak Flat; and/or request a committee hearing on the bill.

And, please share your personal support for saving Oak Flat on social media — you can see ideas and examples on our website by visiting BJCOnline.org/saveoakflat.

A religious freedom wake-up call

What is the most serious threat to religious liberty in America? Youth skepticism.

By Jaziah Masters
BJC Advocacy and Outreach Manager



Religious liberty is a long-standing American value. Yet this freedom to worship or act upon religious conscience without unnecessary interference by the government is also a principle taken for granted, misused and underappreciated. There is growing concern that this trend will continue or worsen.

The latest edition of the Religious Freedom Index shows that some aspects of religious freedom are controversial, and the divide often breaks down by generation. When it comes to the intersection of religious belief, law and public policy, Gen Z (a group generally defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s) is skeptical. Young people today seem to be suspicious of policies that protect the right of people of faith to hold unpopular or controversial beliefs.

A Break With the Past

As a young person and a faith-based advocate, I am intrigued. Because religion touches on so many aspects of public life, religious liberty invites us to consider how people with vastly different systems of beliefs can live peacefully together. In my advocacy role at BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty), I often explain this to younger audiences. Our historic faith-based organization is dedicated to protecting faith freedom for all. Since 1936, BJC has advocated the golden rule of religious freedom: Do not ask the government to promote your religion if you do not want the government to promote somebody else's religion.

But younger audiences are not so quick to defer to the high value of our country's religious liberty tradition. Instead, they are more likely to ask, *Why I would advocate for religious liberty in light of all the negative actions done in the name of religion and the pain it inflicts on others?*

I attribute this hesitation to coming of age during incredibly disruptive times: global recessions, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing awareness about climate change, the summer of racial unrest, historic income inequality and an attack on the U.S. Capitol, to name a few. Is there any wonder that younger generations

are questioning — that they are far less deferential to — the assumptions and narratives to which Americans historically cling?

There is also the reality of increasing racial and religious diversity. In the United States, our youngest generations are incredibly diverse. According to Pew Research Center, Gen Z is more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation. This demographic shift requires reconsideration of the status quo. The next generation cannot be assumed to understand and approach religious liberty in the same way as previous, more homogeneous generations.

Room for All

So what is the alternative? What is the future we would like to see? What is our collective goal? The Religious Freedom Index suggests that religious pluralism is that vision. Of all the dimensions measured, religious pluralism enjoys robust support from every generation. In fact, Gen Z's score "helped push support for pluralism to its highest point yet."

The peaceful coexistence of diverse people in this country is something long strived for. We should want a nation in which all can worship freely while respecting the differences of our fellow humans. Religious liberty is at the foundation of that picturesque vision.

This presents an opportunity for everyone. Perhaps the religious liberty vision of prior generations needs to broaden. A principle articulated as a bold declaration of a God-given inalienable right has been dimmed by human-made social confines. Those who claim the Christian religion and religious liberty have often used both to protect and complement the powerful, the privileged and the status quo.

Today there is much attention on the declining numbers of youth participation in church and the waning support of religious liberty. However, I don't see enough attention to the prospect of another generation inheriting an American ideal infected with white supremacy, racism and other social evils. Who would want to inherit something incompatible with their personhood?

Achieving an understanding of religious liberty

worthy of being passed down to the next generation requires some intersectional thinking and an honest reckoning by those who hold this fundamental right most dearly. It means acknowledging that religious liberty, like virtually all other aspects of American society, has been affected by white supremacy, racism and xenophobia. It means disrupting the traditional narratives of religion that ignore the reality of historically marginalized people. It means emphasizing the responsibility that comes with liberty.

The BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation is a leader in this space. With its educational programs and resources, we are expanding and deepening our understanding of religious liberty with a broader justice lens. We know that we must take an honest look at how faith freedom intersects with other freedoms and how it has been denied to many in our country. Doing so is essential to achieving a faith freedom nation.

BJC is also the lead organizer of Christians Against Christian Nationalism, a movement making clear the distinction between our identity as Christians and our identity as Americans. Christian nationalism is the antithesis of a faith freedom nation, and there is no doubt that its current manifestations contribute to younger generations' skepticism of religion.

A Fresh Vision

The future of religious liberty is at risk, but the threat is not an outside force or demographic change. People of faith have not always embraced a religious freedom that is inclusive of the diversity of experience. A robust and prophetic understanding of this principle, however, must recognize individuals and their complexities.

As an advocacy professional, I am driven by a compelling vision of what this country should look like. My advocacy is informed by faith rooted in a religious idea that all are entitled to their full personhood. Religious liberty does not stand in the way of achieving that goal. It is at the very heart and foundation of this work. Religious liberty is compatible with racial justice. Religious liberty is compatible with sexual liberation. Religious liberty is compatible with pluralistic democracy.

We cannot rely on old assumptions about religious freedom to inspire the commitment we seek. To reach new generations, we must acknowledge new realities. For me, it means embodying the change I wish to see and live it. That is my challenge, and that is how I hope to reach the next generation of religious liberty advocates.

This article was written for the July/August edition of Liberty Magazine, published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A version is published here with permission.

Bring your students to BJC

BJC welcomes student groups to our offices in Washington, D.C., throughout the year. We introduce them to our work and provide a background on the First Amendment and Supreme Court cases. Interested in an educational session? Visit our website page at [BJCOnline.org/visit-bjc](https://www.bjconline.org/visit-bjc) and let us know!



Bluefield College



Wake Forest University Divinity School



Ardmore Baptist Church (Winston-Salem, N.C.)



Loyola University Chicago



Bringing BJC to you

BJC travels the country to connect with groups and individuals, sharing about our work defending faith freedom for all and combating Christian nationalism. Here are a few photos from events this spring — from high-profile appearances at national landmarks to regional conferences.

Want to invite BJC to your community? We're open to connecting with you! Visit BJCOnline.org/invite-bjc-to-your-community for details and additional information.



Executive Director Amanda Tyler joined historian Jon Meacham at the Washington National Cathedral in April for a discussion on the sacred and the civic, addressing a gathering of Episcopal clergy at the North American Deans Conference. Tyler gave a presentation on Christian nationalism and how Christians are working to combat the dangerous ideology, and Meacham provided an overview of the impact of Christian nationalism throughout American history. They later joined the dean of the Washington National Cathedral, the Very Rev. Randolph “Randy” Marshall Hollerith, for a panel discussion and took questions from the audience of clergy.



Dr. Sabrina E. Dent, director of the BJC Center for Faith, Justice and Reconciliation, shared about our work during The Katie Geneva Cannon Center For Womanist Leadership 2023 Spring Conference, held in Charlotte, N.C.

Endowed by Union Presbyterian Seminary, The Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership nurtures the soul of Black women as they cultivate pathways to whole communities. The spring conference is the premiere gathering of womanist scholars, practitioners, activists and leaders. Dr. Dent led a workshop during the conference, and other staff members attended the event, meeting leaders from across the country and connecting them to our mission of ensuring faith freedom for all.

General Counsel Holly Holman spoke at the Lincoln Ideas Forum, which explored current threats to democracy, their ramifications and what solutions might be possible. She addressed the threat of Christian nationalism and spoke about the genesis of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign. The event was held at President Lincoln's Cottage in Washington, D.C.



Associate General Counsel Jennifer Hawks participated in a panel in April titled "The Supreme Court and Sabbath Keeping," which focused on the Supreme Court case of *Groff v. DeJoy*. Other panelists were leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.



Dr. Sabrina Dent and Amanda Tyler were part of the Elizabeth and Robert Strickland Symposium at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, focusing on religion, pluralism and the fate of democracy. Their fellow panelists were Dr. Keisha E. McKenzie, the Rev. Dr. Ryan Burge and the Rev. Alan Sherouse. Photo courtesy WakeDiv/Roger Epps Jr.



At an event for the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Amanda Tyler joined the Rev. Dr. Adam L. Bond (left) and the Rev. Dr. Bill Leonard (right) for a conversation on the threat of Christian nationalism and how churches are responding.



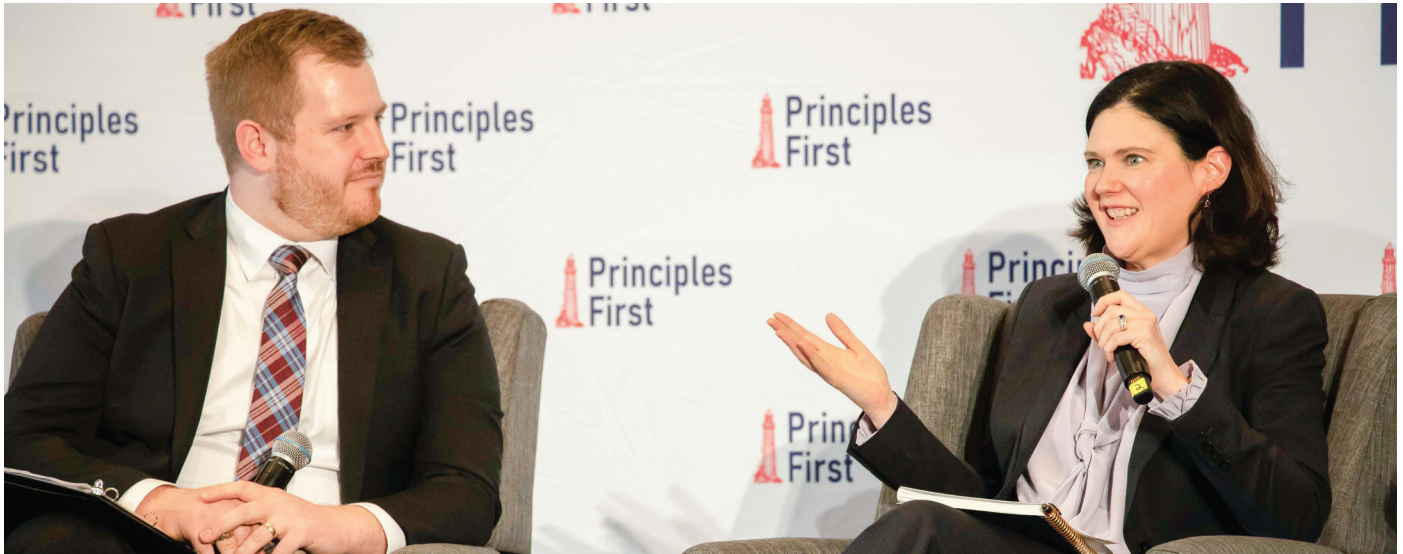
Amanda Tyler joined the Rev. Dr. Jay Augustine (center) in Asheville, N.C., for an event hosted by the Western North Carolina Baptist Fellowship. In a conversation moderated by the Rev. Dr. Austin McIver Dennis, they discussed the threats of Christian nationalism to faith and to democracy.



We are grateful for BJC's recurring donors. A monthly donation to BJC – of any amount – helps us connect with our constituents across the country. Knowing gifts are coming on a regular basis allows us to plan for the future and say "yes" when opportunities arise to be present in churches, universities, classrooms and conferences, and participate in events large and small. Be part of this movement dedicated to sharing an inclusive vision of faith freedom for all.



Join our dedicated Faith FULL Community of monthly donors today. Visit BJCOnline.org/give-monthly or contact Associate Director of Development Danielle Tyler by email at dtyler@BJCOnline.org or by phone at 317-523-4076.



Amanda Tyler participated in a panel at the Principles First Summit in March, titled “Church and State: Finding Faith in America.” Panel moderator Jeff Pickering of the American Enterprise Institute (left) reflected on how both he and Tyler have Baptist backgrounds, and he asked her to share how Baptist history informed the foundational freedoms they continue to enjoy and advocate for today. “Baptists had a theological calling to freedom,” Tyler said. “Those seeds of advocacy are in the DNA of Baptists.” Principles First is an organization committed to revitalizing and championing conservative principles.





BJC Donor Database Coordinator Julia Bradley attended the Bluegrass & Brews festival in Richmond, Va., alongside BJC’s Jennifer Hawks to talk about efforts from the religious freedom community to save the sacred land of *Ch’chil Bihdagoteel*, translated in English as “Oak Flat.”



Amanda Tyler preached at churches in South Carolina, Kentucky and Texas this spring, and Communications Director Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons preached at a church in Maryland. If you’re interested in having someone from BJC preach at your church, we’d love to join you for a service, whether it is in person or virtual. Visit our website at BJCOnline.org/bjcpredching for details.

Visit the BJC booth at a conference near you!

In addition to our speaking engagements, we often attend conferences and gatherings across the country. This spring, we went to the Alliance of Baptists Annual Gathering in Atlanta; the Progressive National Baptist Convention’s Eastern Regional Conference in Richmond; the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina’s Annual Gathering in Winston-Salem, N.C.; and the meeting of the Philadelphia Baptist Association in Pennsylvania, among others.

Invite BJC to your next event!

These pages contain only a few of our recent appearances. Are you interested in having BJC come to an event near you? Let us know! We’d love to connect with your community or house of worship. Visit our website at BJCOnline.org/invite-bjc-to-your-community to let us know what you’re planning, and see where we’re off to next by checking out our online calendar of events at BJCOnline.org/calendar.

BJC sets ambitious goals for digital growth



By Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons
BJC Communications Director

I'm proud to lead a creative, energetic and cutting-edge communications team at BJC that is innovative in our approach to digital communications. Our goals are to grow BJC's audience and inspire supporters of faith freedom for all to take action.

We surpassed our digital goals for the previous year and set ambitious new goals in April 2023. We launched new accounts for Christians Against Christian Nationalism on TikTok and Instagram in January of this year, and we've seen impressive growth on these platforms. Please make sure you're following us on both: [@endchristiannationalism](#). Our most exciting goal is to reach 1,000,000 likes and 100,000 followers on TikTok by March 31, 2024. Another area of dramatic growth is Amanda's Twitter account, [@AmandaTylerBJC](#). The account had fewer than 1,500 followers in April 2022, and it now has more than 7,000. Finally, we've put a lot of effort into our YouTube channel, where you can find our award-winning "Frequently Asked Questions" video series.

One way you can support BJC is by following our accounts and sharing our posts across social media platforms. Another way is to collaborate with us. We invite you to tag us when you see content related to religious freedom and Christian nationalism. You can also email ideas for social media posts to Karlee Marshall, our communications manager, at kmarshall@BJCOnline.org. We love hearing from BJC supporters, interacting with you in the comments section of posts, and hearing your suggestions for how we can best reach people online.

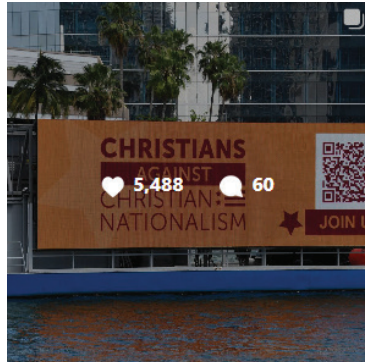
I know that there are many critiques of social media, many of which are legitimate. Social media companies need to be held accountable for the harm they inflict, and we should be mindful about how we choose to engage or not engage with certain social media platforms. Our BJC Communications Department regularly discusses the merits of engaging on different platforms and where to put our energy. Here's the thing: It's not the platform that matters to us. It's the people we reach through the platform that we care about. We want to reach more people so that we can grow the number of supporters of faith freedom for all. We do that by printing this magazine that you're reading now, talking with the news media, participating in both in-person and virtual events, and posting on a range of social media sites. Through these different channels, we can all make a difference.

Follow us on social media

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-  [/baptist-joint-committee](#)
-  [@AmandaTylerBJC](#)
-  [/ReligiousLiberty](#)



BJC's voice is critical in national debates that play out on social media.



Our boat billboard went viral on social media.



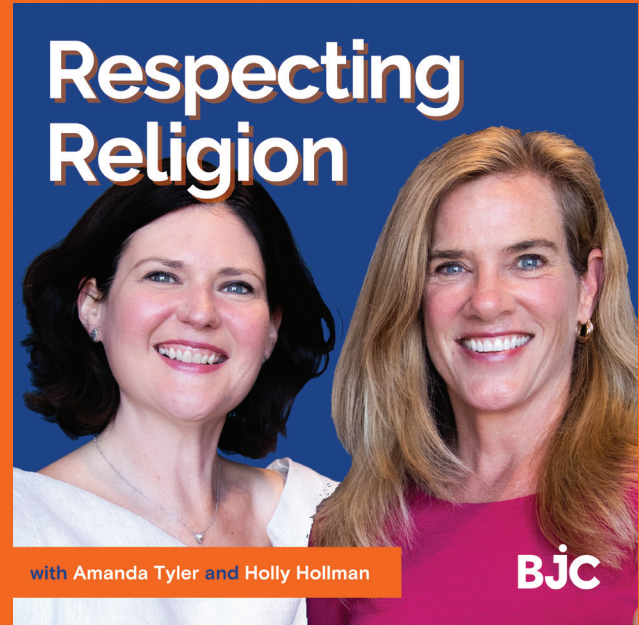
BJC Digital Communications Associate Georgia McKee leads our work on TikTok.

Respecting Religion podcast reaches new heights

The Respecting Religion podcast is breaking listening records in its fourth season, reaching as high as #32 on the charts for all podcasts talking about politics and tripling the number of listeners we had at the beginning of this season. Join others who are hearing Amanda Tyler and Holly Hollman discuss issues impacting faith freedom for all. The weekly conversations cover topics ranging from Amanda's visit to the ReAwaken America tour, new federal regulations, troubling bills proposed by the Texas legislature and Supreme Court cases. As the Court issues decisions on religious liberty cases in June, you can expect a look at what the decisions mean on the podcast.

Respecting Religion is available on all major podcasting providers. If you aren't a podcast listener, you can read transcripts of each episode. Go to RespectingReligion.org and click on each show title for a transcript and a list of additional resources.

If you have a question for the show, you can always send an email to RespectingReligion@BJCOnline.org. You might hear your question on a future show!



Excerpt from Season 4, Episode 20:

The Ten Commandments

Released May 4, 2023

Editor's note: This episode was released after the Texas Senate passed a bill that would mandate the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools. The bill later failed to pass the House.

HOLLY: You can be pro-religion — you can obviously be pro-religious freedom — and still think that [mandating the posting of the Ten Commandments] is a terrible idea and one that our Constitution should forbid, the government actually selecting particular Scripture and promoting it on government land.

[I said in the early 2000s when there were other Ten Commandments cases that] the debate would be much more interesting and productive if supporters of religious freedom would get involved and reframe the issue. We should use this as an opportunity to talk about how religion is best protected when the government does not try to do the work of the church. ...

AMANDA: What would you have us do, Holly?

HOLLY: Well, you should have conversations where you listen to people and understand their concerns, and then try to get them to see it a different way. First, recognize that, yes, the Ten Commandments are helpful teachings. They have broad, popular support. Really the debate is not about the Ten Commandments but about who is responsible for teaching religion. ... I find my Sunday school class extremely helpful, but I would never expect the government to support it. The government can endorse many things, but thanks to the First Amendment, it cannot favor your religion nor denigrate mine.

I think that's still important today, Amanda, even if the Court no longer follows the endorsement test or the *Lemon* test. I think that most people would agree that we really don't want the government choosing whose religion is most important.

AMANDA: And that's exactly what we have here, a government choosing a particular version of a religious text and promoting it in public schools.

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Putting faith into action

By Rev. Darryl Gray



What will it take to organize and mobilize your organization or congregation on justice issues?

At the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), we believe that is a critical question as we face our current environment and look toward the 2024 elections. We've been on a mission to find out what it will take to motivate people to make their voices heard — we know it's not simply apathy or a lack of empathy that causes people to disengage from the political process. As a denomination committed to social, racial and economic justice, we believe that the next year will be a critical time for all of us. And we're forging new partnerships.

In March, we listened to leaders at the Summit on Black Political and Economic Power, held in Washington, D.C. This event itself was more than a year in the making, and it came out of a newly revived partnership. In 2022, we engaged the AFL-CIO (the largest federation of labor unions in the United States) to discuss the historic relationship that Black Church leaders and labor leaders had in the past, including during the Civil Rights Movement. We wanted to see if there was a way to imagine “repair as an action” by co-creating and planning some intentional engagements with the Black faith community.

The Summit on Black Political and Economic Power was one of our first steps. We engaged more than 35 faith leaders across four denominations to discuss issues that disproportionately impact BIPOC and poor community members. Over the two-day discussion, we received feedback on how faith leaders saw many different social and economic issues play out in their pews, and we had open and honest conversations about what people need



to get others excited about engaging in issue-specific and electoral work.

When we asked those gathered what they need as “faith leaders of leaders,” we heard some eye-opening answers.

Leaders need visioning support, including access to important information and resources that allow ministries to equip congregations to make an impact.

Leaders need steady communication on the primary issues impacting others and what efforts are underway.

Leaders need messaging support, helping them ground conversations in values and biblical principles no matter how the online culture wars might try to distract.

And leaders need financial resources to support their congregation and their work for marginalized communities.

So, what are we to do?

First, we at PNBC are — as always — grounding our work in Liberation Theology and Abolitionist Theory. We need to ensure and brightly illuminate that our mission is clearly directed through our faith, making our theological grounding clear about the need to serve and stand with others.

Second, we need ways for individuals to duplicate the national-level work in their communities. We are working on toolkits and webinars to equip local pastors and leaders with the support they need, and we want to make these resources available to all.

And, third, as the denominational home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we need to reclaim the holiday our country has in his name. Dr. King's life was one of motivation, inspiration and action — not empty platitudes and cherry-picked quotes. And we need action now.

There are currently several pieces of legislation that PNBC cares passionately about, including the Farm Bill, protecting access to health care for all, and criminal justice reform. But, we are also focused on the future.

At our summit, we heard passion from and saw the tenacity of our diverse leaders and allies. As we continue to dialogue on economic and social justice issues, we hope you'll join us in putting your faith into action, speaking out against injustice and making your voice heard in 2024 and beyond.

The Rev. Darryl Gray is PNBC's Director General for Social Justice and the senior pastor of Greater Fairfax Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri.

From BJC interns to staff members

Did you know there are five members of the BJC staff who are former BJC interns? In honor of Women's History Month in March, we asked our five former interns how their internship inspired them in their professional journey, including serving at BJC in our fight for faith freedom for all.



Georgia McKee

*Digital Communications Associate
Intern semester: Summer 2022
Years at BJC: 1 year*

My time as an intern at BJC was a transformative experience that broadened my perspective on the potential and vitality of the Christian public witness. After seeing how great of an impact BJC was making on the lives of people of all faiths, ages and identities, I was inspired to remain engaged with the organization as a member of the staff.



Carlton Baites

*Executive Assistant
Intern semester: Spring 2019
Years at BJC: 4 years*

My time as a BJC intern educated me about a type of religious freedom I did not previously know about — it's the kind that isn't just meant for me as a Christian, and it's the kind that BJC proudly endorses for everyone: faith freedom for all. I used to only see religious freedom through my eyes and based on my experiences, but BJC introduced me to people from all walks of life and how the vitality of religious freedom means more than just my free exercise. When I came on staff full-time, I was able to expand upon that knowledge while interacting with our diverse constituency.



Karlee Marshall

*Communications Manager
Intern semester: Spring 2020
Years at BJC: 3 years*

I gained invaluable skills in nonprofit management and communications during my BJC internship. Now, as a full-time staff member, I am not only confident in my role, but I get to work for an organization that is making a significant impact in the world at a time when our work is essential.



Holly Hollman

*General Counsel
Intern year: 1991
Years at BJC: 22 years*

Working at BJC as an intern solidified my interest in pursuing a legal career that began in private practice in large law firms and eventually led back to BJC. During my internship, I was inspired by BJC's clear voice in the political sphere, its dedication to fundamental principles, and its commitment to forming broad coalitions to defend religious liberty for all. Those things — as well as good camaraderie among staff, supporters and partners — are things that BJC continues to value today!



Amanda Tyler

*Executive Director
Intern semester: Spring 1998
Years at BJC: 6 years*

I grew up in a BJC church in Texas, where I learned about Baptist contributions to religious freedom. As a student at Georgetown University, I began volunteering at BJC and eventually became an intern and, later, an assistant to the general counsel. During my internship, leaders like James Dunn, Brent Walker and Melissa Rogers fostered my passion for religion, law and politics and the pursuit of justice. I continue to draw on the mentorship I received then in leading BJC today as we counter Christian nationalism and work towards a more inclusive vision for realizing faith freedom for all.

Meet our current interns on page 27! The BJC Internship Program includes housing in Washington, D.C., and a stipend, and let us know if you are interested in remote internship opportunities. We have interns each spring, summer and fall semester, and the deadline to apply for the fall is June 30.

Visit BJCOnline.org/internships for more information.

A Christian's Thoughts on the Problem of Christian Nationalism

By Bill McKibben for the New Yorker, April 18, 2023

THE
NEW YORKER

... Some good-faith Christians are beginning to rise to the challenge. Not long ago, William Barber told an interviewer, "When you have some people calling themselves Christian nationalists, you never hear them say, 'Jesus said this.' They say, 'I'm a Christian, and I say it.' But that's not good enough. If it doesn't line up with the founder, then it's flawed."

And a Baptist layperson named Amanda Tyler, having watched insurrectionists storm the Capitol on January 6th carrying crosses, heads a group called Christians Against Christian Nationalism, which circulated a petition stating that "Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy." The group has also developed a curriculum for churches, and, last December, Tyler testified at congressional hearings on extremism. Voices and projects like these need to grow louder and more numerous. The American experiment in pluralism is endangered, and so is public understanding of one of the world's great faiths. It's a perilous moment, but a teachable one.

The Department of Education updates guidance on public school prayer

By Jason DeRose for NPR, May 16, 2023



... The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty is also praising the Department of Education's updated guidance. The group's general counsel Holly Hollman says in a statement, "The U.S. Department of Education's new guidance does a good job protecting students of all faiths and students who don't practice a faith."

The statement goes on to say, "Religious liberty in public schools is safeguarded by forbidding teachers and other government employees from leading students in religious exercises while on duty or otherwise coercing students in matters of religion."

The Baptist Joint Committee's executive director Amanda Tyler earlier criticized the Trump Administration's rhetoric surrounding 2020 guidance on school prayer, saying it had "sounded a false alarm about the status of prayer in public school, echoing the claims of Christian nationalism."

Education Department warns against schools encouraging private prayer, other religious activity

By Aaron Kliegman for Fox News, May 18, 2023



The Biden administration this week updated its guidance on prayer and other religious expression in public schools, warning school employees not to encourage or endorse such activity. ...

Other groups such as Americans United, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty similarly applauded the Biden administration's guidance for protecting students of all beliefs and forbidding from leading students in religious exercises.

Whose Version of Christian Nationalism Will Win in 2024?

By Michelle Goldberg for The New York Times, May 15, 2023

The New York Times

... But it remains to be seen whether rank-and-file religious conservatives care more about consistency or charisma. For the religious following that Trump has nurtured, he's less a person who will put in place a specific Christian nationalist agenda than he is the incarnation of that agenda. Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and the organizer of Christians against Christian Nationalism, attended the ReAwaken America event at Trump Doral. She described a type of Christian nationalist fervor that was "very much tied to the political future of Donald Trump and nothing else."

Tyler didn't hear any of the ReAwaken speakers talk about abortion. Instead, she said, they spoke about "spiritual warfare." There was also "a lot of talking about guns, about this sense that you're put here for this time and this place." ...

BJC welcomes chief of staff

REV. JANNA LOUIE

joins BJC in the new role of chief of staff, directing BJC's programs and serving as chief people officer. She leads the BJC Fellows Program, BJC Internship Program, and BJC's diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Ordained in the American Baptist Churches USA, Louie joins BJC's staff after working for more than a decade in the university context with graduate students and faculty. She is the founder of the Coalition of Asian American Pacific Islander Churches, and she received a pastoral study project grant from the Louisville Institute that focused on coalition building for Asian North American church communities. She also received the Parish Pulpit Fellowship to study sociopolitical engagement through preaching in contexts without religious liberty.

Louie has directed various preaching courses and has preaching experience throughout the United States, South Africa, Kenya, Indonesia, Ghana, Viet Nam and Thailand. She earned a master of divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and a bachelor of science in mathematics and secondary education from Vanderbilt University.

Currently living in Los Angeles, she was born and raised in Chicago and is a daughter of immigrants. In her spare time, Louie enjoys running, cooking and learning to grow her own vegetables. You can contact her at jlouie@BJCOnline.org.



Have you included BJC in your estate plans?

Known for his stalwart defense of religious liberty, colorful turns of phrase and ubiquitous bow tie, James Dunn was executive director of BJC through the 1980s and 1990s. In retirement, he continued to raise funds for BJC to create a lasting financial legacy that would support religious liberty long into the future.

Today, the James Dunn Legacy Circle honors those who create a planned gift that benefits BJC into the future.

If you believe in religious freedom for everyone, consider including BJC in your will, trust, retirement accounts or insurance policy. Planned gifts can also include deeding real estate to BJC or creating a donor-advised fund. A planned gift of any size advances BJC's work promoting faith freedom for all for years to come.

For more information about creating a legacy gift to BJC, contact Danielle Tyler, associate director of development, at dtyler@BJCOnline.org.

Meet BJC's summer interns

TAYLOR EVERITT, from Shallowater, Texas, is a graduate of Abilene Christian University, earning her bachelor's degree in Sociology, minoring in Political Science and Public Service. She previously interned at the Texas Girls & Boys Ranch, a foster care and adoption children's home.

Everitt is the daughter of John and Quana Everitt. After the internship, she plans to continue her education by pursuing a master's degree in Public Policy or Public Administration.



LINDSEY GRADOWSKI, from Arlington, Virginia, is a senior at Georgetown University, pursuing a degree in government and history. Previously, she interned as a law clerk with del Cuadro-Zimmerman, PLLC, and served as president of Georgetown's Parliamentary Debate Team.

The daughter of Gerri Ratliff and Len Gradowski, Gradowski grew up in the Baptist tradition and is currently a member of Rock Spring Congregational Church. She plans on attending law school after graduation.



DEVIN WITHROW, from Wichita, Kansas, is a graduate of Friends University, earning his bachelor's degree in Religion and Philosophy with a minor in Writing. He currently is a student at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, working toward a Master of Divinity and serving as a research assistant for Dr. Austin Rivera, Assistant Professor of Church History.

Married to Olena Withrow, he is a member of First Baptist Church on Fifth in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Withrow plans to continue seeking opportunities for interfaith education and engagement and practicing his voice in public advocacy.



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We are attorneys, Capitol Hill insiders, ministers, mobilizers and scholars. We file briefs in pivotal Supreme Court cases, advocate for and against legislation, testify in Congress and unite with others across faiths to ensure that all Americans have, and will always have, the right to follow their spiritual beliefs.

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REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

Amanda Tyler EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Cherilyn Crowe Guy EDITOR

MORE FROM BJC



A counter-witness in Miami

We are part of a movement to show that not all Christians are on board with the Christian nationalism touted at the ReAwaken America tour. See pages 2-3.



Save Oak Flat

What's new in the work to protect the sacred land of our Indigenous neighbors? Get an update on pages 14-15.