

# Religious Liberty Committee

## Official Report

The Religious Liberty Committee met only once this year, on May 6, from 10:30am to 3pm, at River Road Church, Baptist, in Richmond. It met then and there because its members had been invited to attend the annual meeting of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, which met at that same place and on that date, and whose program was focused on religious liberty. Members attending were Ellis West (Chair), Mary Harris, Barrett Owen, Todd Blake, and Richard Clore. Also present was Ken Kessler, the RLC's liaison to the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

At that meeting, the Chair reported that no bills significantly threatening religious liberty had been introduced at the 2017 Virginia General Assembly.

Then, the question was raised as to whether the size of the Committee should be increased from nine to twelve. After discussion it was decided, largely as a way of getting more Virginia Baptists involved in the cause of religious liberty, that the Chair should explore with the BGAV leadership the possibility of increasing the Committee's size. (After the meeting, the Chair contacted the BGAV office, but as of the time this report was submitted, he had not received a response from it.)

The two major items of business then addressed were (1) whether to offer a breakout session at this year's annual meeting of the BGAV and, if so, on what topic, and (2) whether to submit a resolution to the same meeting and, if so, on what issue. To facilitate decision-making on those two questions, the Chair reviewed the major issues relating to religious liberty that are currently "hot" topics. After discussion revealed that reasonably good arguments could be made on both sides of these issues, it was decided that the Committee would not take an official position on or submit a resolution on any of them.

The Committee, however, decided that one issue was of enough interest and importance that it should be the topic of the Committee's breakout session at the annual meeting of the BGAV. That issue is whether the "Johnson Amendment" to the Internal Revenue Code, which prohibits tax-exempt, non-profit organizations, including churches, from endorsing political candidates or contributing to their campaigns, should be repealed or amended. The Committee further decided that the session should be entitled, The Johnson Amendment, A Dialogue, and involve two speakers with differing positions on the Amendment, and the Chair was charged with the task of finding the two speakers, subject to the approval of the Committee. After a lunch-break, the Committee met with Amanda Tyler, the new director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty, and information and opinions on the work of both the RLC and the BJC were exchanged. Amanda began by discussing some recent and planned innovations in the BJC's work, which were warmly received by the Committee. The discussion then switched to other changes that the BJC might consider making, which led to a candid, but constructive sharing of ideas.

Throughout the discussion the one objective that all present seemed to agree on was the need for Virginia Baptist churches to do a better job of emphasizing religious liberty and educating their members about its importance, meaning, and rationale, especially as explained by our Baptist forebears. As a result of this consensus, by the end of the meeting with Amanda, the earlier decision not to submit a resolution to the annual meeting of the BGAV was revoked. Instead, it was decided that the RLC should submit a resolution calling on Virginia Baptists to increase their emphasis on and education about religious liberty.

After the RLC meeting adjourned, most of its members then attended a panel discussion on current challenges to religious liberty in America that was part of the annual meeting of the VBHS. During that program, the issue that was most vigorously discussed was whether ministers should take positions on political issues and candidates. As a result, several days later at the Chair's suggestion and after an exchange of emails, the Committee decided to change the topic of the breakout session to the following: "Should Ministers Take Positions on Political Issues and Candidates? And Should Government Dictate the Answer to that Question?," which, if possible, would still be addressed by two persons with somewhat differing views. Several weeks after the RLC meeting the Chair drafted a resolution in accord with what had been agreed on at the meeting. It was then submitted to the other members of the Committee for their input and eventual approval. It was also decided via email that the RLC would compile a bibliography of works on religious liberty written by or about Baptists in England and America and that it would be made available to anyone requesting it from the chair of the RLC. The Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty also agreed to post the bibliography on its website.

Finally, it should be reported that the monthly postings on the BGAV website and elsewhere of historic passages on religious liberty have continued throughout the year. Most members of the RLC have taken turns selecting the passages, and for doing so, they should be commended.

Respectfully submitted,  
Ellis West, Chair  
R. Todd Blake  
Richard Clore  
Mary Harris  
Tommy McDearis  
S. Carter McNeese  
J. Barrett Owen  
Steven Pollard  
Melanie Tennant

## RESOLUTION ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

WHEREAS religious liberty is a fundamental right bestowed by God on all humans;

WHEREAS it is guaranteed to Americans in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution;

WHEREAS it is a cornerstone of American life that serves to unify a diverse and often divided people;

WHEREAS religious liberty means freedom from laws discriminating for or against religion, particular religions, any religious beliefs or practices, or any persons/groups on account of their religion;

WHEREAS any legislation on religious matters, other than to protect religious liberty, threatens the integrity and vitality of the Christian faith;

WHEREAS among Americans today there is widespread confusion about the meaning and value of religious liberty, which has resulted in its sometimes being violated or misapplied;

WHEREAS Baptists, and Virginia Baptists in particular, have historically been champions and defenders of religious liberty; and

WHEREAS the Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom became law on Jan. 16, 1786, and Presidents have declared Jan. 16 of each year to be Religious Freedom Day;

THEREFORE, we, the messengers to the 2017 meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, call on all our member churches to:

1. Commit themselves explicitly, publicly, and officially to upholding religious liberty, especially as it was understood by early American Baptists and their ally, James Madison;
2. Ensure that religious liberty, especially as understood by early American Baptists and Madison, is regularly discussed and studied by their members, and their youth in particular;\*
3. Place special emphasis on religious liberty on the Sunday preceding or closest to Jan. 16, Religious Freedom Day; and
4. Speak out against threats to and violations of religious liberty, if and when they occur in their own communities.

\*A bibliography of sources is available upon request from the Chair of the Religious Liberty Committee and is also posted on the website of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty.