

CONFERENCE REPORT  
2023 Religious Freedom Annual Review “Religious Communities: Worshiping, Serving, and  
Learning Together”  
June 15, 2023  
WRITTEN BY: John Zenger

## **Overview**

In 2020, the number of American adults affiliated with a church, synagogue, mosque, or other denomination fell below 50% for the first time. What is driving this departure from traditional religious communities? Is this a reaction to politicized religion, a result of increasing secularism, a move to a more eclectic or non-institutional approach to religiosity?

What do we lose when we move away from communities of believers? What are the implications for the religious freedom of denominations, religious schools, religiously affiliated charitable organizations, and other religious institutions? For some, institutional religion is seen as problematic, if not harmful. How can those of us who are part of religious institutions be both true to our beliefs and more welcoming to those who are unlike us or unsure whether to belong? How can we strengthen our society through the communities where we worship and practice our beliefs? Join us as we seek to learn together about the challenges and opportunities facing religious communities in the 21st century.

- ICLRS

## **Student/Fellows' Experiences**

### Valerie Agustin

The Religious Freedom Annual Review has been an enlightening experience for me. Aside from the people I met at the conference that helped me gain network, mentoring, and opportunities, the most valuable takeaway I have was the stories and ideas of the people I encountered regardless of their position or role. Before the conference formally started, I talked with Uzma Jafri, a Muslim immigrant and certified speaker for the Islamic Speakers Bureau of Arizona. While conversing with her, we discussed women's societal struggles and how they should be treated after giving birth. In addition, I have shared the struggle of Filipino women; they need to work immediately because of financial needs. Our discussion

has deepened to the point that I have discussed some of the hardships and discrimination faced by Muslims in the Philippines. Following that conversation, I remembered I had a Muslim friend who had been helpful to me, so I got in touch with him to see how I could support the Muslim community. Through my Muslim friend's assistance, I am motivated to conduct research about the struggles of muslim community. When I mentioned this to Uzma before she departed, she advised me to stay in touch and if I needed any assistance with the research project she's willing to help and give her support. In addition, I gave her my business card and noticed that she followed me on Instagram through their podcast account.

Moreover, some of the connections I have built were with Janett Scott, who is the CEO of the American Center for Religious Freedom and the former Deputy Director of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Obama's administration. I was touched and moved by her speech on how people should find what God wants them to do, and she enlightened me on how ministering would change someone's life. After the session, I had the opportunity to talk to her, and she gave me her contact information if I wanted to talk more about religious freedom and what she was doing. Before she left Utah, she came to me to say goodbye. Aside from her, one of the valuable people I met was David Pollei, who is part of the advisory council. We had a conversation that he would be going to the Philippines to talk to our President to help our country reduce plastic use and address environmental issues. With so much joy, I volunteered that I am willing to help them with their plans as I am passionate about helping my country. He asked her secretary to put my contact information on the list of his networks. Indeed, meeting Uzma, Jannah, and David helped me gain networks that would assist me in solving some of the dilemmas in my country, such as women's rights, discrimination in the Muslim community, and environmental issues.

Interesting insights were fostered during the sessions, such as Sharon Eubank introducing the JustServe app, Imam W. Deen's example and thought-provoking ideas from Todd McFarland and Nathan Diament. Sharon Eubank was the director of the Humanitarian Services for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As she introduced the JustServe App and how it works, I was impressed with the idea of using it in the service projects in the clubs at BYU-Hawaii. Aside from that, I am looking for opportunities to serve this summer using this application. Additionally, I was humbled to meet the Imam who initiated the Friendship Among Faiths programs after 9/11. Whenever I see him, he always smiles and gives an optimistic spirit; when he talks, he speaks authentically and truthfully. He inspired me to speak my mind and be able to break away from ideologies that

divide us. Also, listening to McFarlands and Diament's ideas about "undue hardship" in the workplace was thought-provoking. I can relate to this topic as it has been an issue among the church members that their employers ask them to work on Sundays and prevent them from finishing the sacrament session. I resonated with their topic as I have known some people who have not been accepted at work because of their religious denomination. The speaker's ideas have ignited my spirit to serve my fellowmen and challenge society's discriminatory acts that divide and instigate conflicts.

Furthermore, at this conference, we met a lot of professionals with outstanding careers that we can learn from. I am grateful to Prof. Kajiyama for connecting us to Judge Thomas Griffith of the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, introducing us to BYU General Counsel at BYU Provo, and making it possible to meet the people in the BYU MPA and BYU Law School programs. A retired federal circuit court judge, Judge Griffith imparted some of his experiences inside his chambers and colleagues. Also, he candidly shared his career path that even if he wasn't admitted at Harvard he found his way to achieve his goals, which helped me decide to pursue law school again. Besides that, our visits to the MPA program and law school have given me an overview of their programs and how they will benefit me in helping my country by applying and considering their courses. I have been fascinated by doing MPA and Law school as I aspire to help my country with its international and administrative work.

Whenever I go to a place, I share my country's story and culture. The conference has been a platform for me to share the situation and the practices of my country with the students in law school. For example, when I was with Taylor, one of the law students, I was inspired to share the people's struggles in my country concerning corruption, poverty, and human rights violations. As we converse, she mentioned that she had never heard about these things. Also, she shared some of her experiences and commented on the situation in my country. Being around and working with Lydia, Ashley, and some law students allowed me to gain networks and mentors in law school, as they are willing to help me whenever I have queries, introduce to me the different scholarships available and share how they manage their lives knowing the demands of the profession. Working with them allowed me to gain skills when it comes to planning and managing people that I could apply in any tasks in the University. Thus, this conference allowed me to share a part of my culture and country and gain mentors.

Overall, the experiences I gained at this conference exceeded my expectations and have been a call to action to remember the people in the Philippines. I am grateful for the people I have met who offered assistance and help in accomplishing my aspirations in life. In addition, the mentorship and inspiration I received helped me decide to go to Law school and have a clearer vision of my purpose. Beyond classroom topics and theories found in books, attending this conference has been a learning experience that has nurtured my mind, boosted my spirit, and revived my purpose.

### Fahina Lauti

Attending the religious freedom conference and actively participating in its various sessions, including the insightful podcasting panel and the impactful general session, has truly transformed my perspective and left an indelible mark on my life. The knowledge and experiences shared by the speakers resonated deeply within me, broadening my understanding of the immense value and significance of religious freedom.

One particularly powerful session was led by Uzma Jafri, who highlighted the importance of creating a safe space for mothers to express themselves without the constraints of religion. Her podcast served as a platform for diverse voices, shedding light on the challenges faced by religious minorities and prompting important conversations. Jafri's openness to engaging with those who held different beliefs profoundly struck me, emphasizing the need to embrace diversity and support religious minorities in their quest for freedom.

Adela Cojab's discussion on podcasting revealed the transformative power of technology in facilitating religious expression and fostering connections. Her courage to embrace her individuality and stand tall in the face of opposition resonated deeply with me. It served as a reminder of the bravery required to express one's faith in a world that may not always be accepting.

Trey Ferguson's session on digital spaces unveiled both the negative and positive aspects they bring. Through his podcast, he discovered the surprising common ground he shared with individuals who held different perspectives, emphasizing the power of dialogue and understanding. This inspired me to seek connections with people of diverse backgrounds, recognizing the potential for mutual growth and enlightenment.

During the general session, Kori Porter's personal journey of transformation captivated my attention. From her experiences of loss and self-destruction, she discovered solace in her faith, underscoring the crucial role of religious freedom. This poignant story made me deeply reflect on the freedoms we often take for granted and their immense impact on individuals' lives.

Sharon Eubank's discussion on the results pyramid and the power of experiences to effect change resonated profoundly with me. The examples she shared, such as the unifying influence of refugee sports teams and the transformative impact of music, showcased the potential of these activities in promoting unity and understanding. Her call to action, urging us to actively engage with individuals of different faiths and partake in meaningful activities together, ignited a passionate desire within me to foster interfaith connections and contribute to a more harmonious world.

Moreover, the religious freedom conference provided an invaluable opportunity to reconnect with familiar faces and forge new connections. Reuniting with esteemed individuals like Janet and Jeff Nelsons, Bryson and Jan Garbett, and others who recognized the significance of our work with the Religious Freedom Human Dignity Initiative was truly heartwarming. The sense of camaraderie and shared purpose among like-minded individuals at the conference created a powerful synergy, reinforcing the importance of collaboration and unity in advancing the cause of religious freedom and human dignity.

Reflecting on the conference and the connections forged, I am humbled by the realization that our work resonates with individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The shared experiences and stories of attendees showcased the tangible impact of our collective efforts in fostering understanding, tolerance, and respect. This reaffirms the relevance and indispensability of our mission in today's world.

Gratitude fills my heart for being part of such an empowering conference where people came together to engage in meaningful dialogue, share experiences, and work towards a common goal. The deep sense of purpose and fulfillment derived from the connections made and the positive feedback received further strengthens our commitment to tirelessly advocate for religious freedom and human dignity. The conference has ignited a fire within me to continue striving towards a more inclusive and harmonious society, where the fundamental rights and dignity of every individual are safeguarded and celebrated.

Andrea George

The Religious Freedom Annual Review was a beautiful experience for me and helped me build my testimony of the importance of religious freedom in the betterment of society as a whole. I had the opportunity to immerse myself in a space that broadened my understanding of religious freedom and human dignity. Not only this but the conference provided valuable networking opportunities and mentorships by faculty and students at BYU.

One aspect of the conference that was truly meaningful was the chance to meet professionals and scholars working in the space of religious freedom. It was inspiring to see so many individuals with diverse faiths and backgrounds come together to gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of this important issue. Their expertise and passion inspired me to pursue a career that I can immerse myself into and use to leave an impact on the world. Moreover, visiting the BYU Law School and BYU MPA program, set-up by Professor Kajiyama was also an enlightening experience. It was inspiring to witness the success and impact alumni have had in their respective fields, which further reinforced my desire to pursue a similar path. Because of these visits, I was able to envision myself studying in these programs and the possibilities felt within reach, even as an International student with the daunting costs associated with graduate programs in the United States.

During the conference, I also felt a profound sense of spirituality in the atmosphere. Although people were from various faiths, we were all united in a collective commitment to religious freedom. It was beautiful to see what could be possible for all of society if this message reaches more souls. The unity and collective understanding would be transformative. As we learned about the importance of religious institutions, it became more clear to me that these communities are often crucial for individuals so that they feel safe and free to practice their beliefs. If society is kinder to people of faith, and if each person could feel safe to practice their faith, I can only imagine the amount of collaboration and unity that could be possible. Instead of pluralism dividing people, it could unite people.

I was immensely proud of my team and the members of the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative at BYUH. Everyone demonstrated the potential to become a transformative leader. The dynamics of our group were perfectly balanced and representative. With two members from the Asian rim, two from the Pacific area, and the final two representing the diverse student body of the U.S., I felt deeply honored and

grateful for the opportunity to have such comprehensive representation from these significant regions. This united and diverse team truly embodied the spirit of BYUH's mission to go forth as leaders in our respective areas. The collective strength and unity we displayed throughout the conference underscored the power of collaboration and understanding across different cultures and backgrounds. Together, we exemplified the values of BYUH, striving to learn, serve, and lead with a shared commitment to religious freedom and human dignity. I am confident that each person will carry forward these lessons and experiences and promote religious freedom. We are excited for the next Perspectives on Human Dignity so that this message can spread to more students here at BYUH. This is the kind of leadership I see taking place. Each person will go forth as faithful Latter-day Saints safeguarding the rights of others, even while treasuring their own.

For me personally, attending the conference was an experience that profoundly impacted my perspective on religious freedom, particularly in the context of the Cook Islands. It solidified my belief that religious freedom should be accessible to all, even in small island nations like the Cook Islands where Christianity dominates. The conference empowered me to become an advocate for change and strengthened my resolve to return to my home community, where I hope to promote greater religious freedom and foster acceptance, especially among the growing community of Muslims. I am committed to cultivating understanding, fostering dialogue, and nurturing a culture of inclusivity, working towards a society where diverse religious beliefs are valued and respected. This conference has inspired me to take action and contribute to this effort in my home country. For the time being, I will be an example here at BYUH and work on educating my peers and be a part of programs and events that work towards these goals.

### Abish Torio

The biggest highlights of the 2023 Religious Freedom Annual Review Conference for me is split into two parts: connections and action. These two aspects have created a profound lesson and experience on my part, which I believe creates a significant foundation in how we do our roles as members of society and of the BYUH campus.

#### *Connections*

Being able to connect with the presenters, the law students, the alumni, and even with the BYUH group unlocked many levels of depth to how these people came to where they are. I

was able to create a meaningful conversation with the Nelsons during the dinner at Sundance and had a chat with Bill Benac about his future projects. Me, alongside another BYUH student from the Philippines, Valerie Agustin, were given opportunities to volunteer for David Pollei's projects that will help our home countries. Blythe Shupe, communications specialist for the ICLRS, alongside students working for the Wheatley Institute were able to train me about the communications side of conferences. Additionally, I learned a whole lot from presenters Terry Ferguson, Zaiba Hasan, and Uzma Jafri as I got to talk to them during airport runs, lunches, and dinners.

I was able to reconnect with friends, alumni, and ICLRS fellows and senior fellows that I worked with during the Law and Religion Symposium in 2022, including Sherie Rogde.

It was also very special to be able to work closely with the summer fellows during the conference. Getting to know them, their dreams, their purpose, and what they hope to get from this event along with witnessing their dedication and hardwork inspired me to serve others in my own way.

### *Action*

As we were cleaning up the concierge table in the Marriott Hotel, we were approached by three presenters who claimed that they had missed the bus going to the dinner in Sundance. On top of that, we had another presenter who we did not know if he would need a ride that day or not. There were only three of us left whilst everyone was on their way or were already at the resort. I could feel the panic and confusion from everyone, which prompted me to go and explain the situation to the presenters that were left behind. The other two fellows did their parts, and in the end we all arrived at Sundance without any problem. It was a situation that could've gone differently if it weren't for the teamwork and trust between the three fellows. Two of us joked in the car ride that the events from earlier made us feel like we were needed. A rather simple incident, but it boosted the confidence we had in our capabilities to handle stressful situations.

Other than these, the messages and aspirations of the professionals in the conference were full of power and hope. Enough to empower students like me to strive for the betterment of my community. It's definitely an unforgettable experience that's touched my life, and it made me want to utilize the things I learned to be able to touch the lives of others as well.

John Zenger

The Religious Freedom Annual Review was a formative experience for me. From an educational or academic perspective, the breakout and plenary session provided a lot of information. I attended a breakout session about podcasting in America. At first, I was unsure what these people were doing at a law conference, but their insights were profound. For many, podcasting and the podcast community have become a new denomination or gathering place.

Many people are finding community in that space, and fewer and fewer people are sticking to physical religious communities and meetings. Information and perspectives fascinate me, especially when they are shared through a diverse panel of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. I also loved Elder Gilbert's call to be "stewards of the first amendment." I have thought a lot about that phrase since then. I think it sums up the main idea of the conference, which is that religious communities and people need to help protect religious freedom but also use our religious freedom in a way that doesn't alienate others. We should always be inviting and loving. In summation, I would say the conference was academically stimulating and definitely informative, but we all know the real reason we come to conferences is to learn from and interact with people.

I connected with many people on this trip. The first real connection was with Ben Schilaty, an Honor Office administrator and professor. He was the kindest man I have ever met, and his session on inclusive congregations was riveting. Dr. Schilaty is gay, and he tells his story of being a member of the church, with all its ups and downs, from the perspective of a licensed therapist. More of that can be read in his session report by Andrea George. I also connected with Judge Griffith, a former DC Court of Appeals appellate justice. His was an important connection to make for career advancement; we learned so much from his advice about law schools, whether that's a good decision for us, and more. The law students we worked with were also really helpful and friendly. They gave us advice on admissions, what to expect, and things to keep in mind. I always came away reassured after talking to one of them about my future plans.

One of the most important connections I made was with their conference planner Lydia Veraga, a second-year law student at BYU. I will most likely assist somehow in BYU-Hawaii's conference next year, and I learned much from her about planning, organizing, and being a leader. I certainly only saw the tip of the iceberg, but I am excited to

contact her with questions and advice on how to ensure our conference runs as smoothly as theirs.

The career development parts of the trip were enjoyable and educational. After touring the BYU MPA and BYU Law program, set up by Professor Kajiyama and visiting with those professors, I am seriously considering chasing an MPA and a law degree. Because of our meetings with the BYU General Counsel and the MPA program, I feel like I have a much better idea of how to plan my future. More importantly, those departments have now had a chance to interact with my five amazing fellow students. It's a good day when BYU-Hawaii gets the recognition it deserves. On a somewhat related note, I believe that the multicultural nature of our school has led us to be far more comfortable with people of other faiths and cultures. A haole like me is blessed to come to a school like BYUH to experience and learn from diversity.

### Gavin Cranney

No words can truly encapsulate how meaningful and beneficial attending the Religious Freedom Annual Review conference was to me; however, I have outlined the benefits into three major categories: education/career development, learned skills and resources, and academic benefits.

#### *Education/Career Development*

This trip greatly benefited me in ascertaining a more comprehensive understanding of options of how I can best use my degree upon graduation. Attending this conference has greatly benefitted me in demonstrating a whole host of ways I can best use my degree upon graduation and the paths I can take to further my education. I have been keenly interested in attending law school and grad school upon graduation; however, I have felt apathetic and unmotivated towards it, as the process is daunting. However, this trip reaffirmed my desire to go to law school, as well as being tremendously beneficial in learning how to be successful in law school and the applications through two main ways: tours, meetings, and Q and As with official representatives of various programs, and second through personal and earnest conversation with students, faculty, and professors. Professor Kajiyama set-up the tours of the law school and MPA program and allowed for me to speak with students and faculty. This reignited my excitement about grad school and has made me very optimistic

about how I can further my education and do my piece in instituting peace internationally. Grad school no longer seems like an abstract idea, but being on campus interacting with the people, I could really envision myself there and thrive with the skills I have developed from BYU-Hawaii.

In terms of professional development, this conference was a fantastic opportunity to network and learn about the speakers' various lines of work and interests. It was a great opportunity to represent the mission and objectives of the Church, BYU-Hawaii, and our various departments, programs, and majors. I was able to put two BYUH students who are moving to Armenia upon graduation to help with cultural conflict with Jannah Scott, Deputy Director in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under President Obama, who worked extensively in the region.

The highlight of the conference that also illustrates this point is when I ate dinner with presenters at Sundance the night before the conference. Our table was very diverse ethnically, religiously, professionally, and politically. I talked with Muslims, Protestants, and members of the Church; also represented the three branches of government and people appointed by Democrats and Republicans. Despite these differences, we engaged in delightful conversations discussing the commonalities of our faith traditions, values, ideologies, and perspectives and highlighting and respecting the differences that make us unique. This really showed me how we could earnestly engage and facilitate unity and love even among differences.

#### *Academic Benefits*

The content of this conference was very intellectually stimulating and especially pertinent to ongoing social issues. While primarily focused on religious freedom, the conference also discussed how we could better create environments that protect and accept people who may feel secluded and feel as if they don't belong in the current systems. I feel much better informed on contemporary issues and can consider and empathize with various perspectives while collaborating to find a mutually beneficial solution. As a result, I feel much more capable and confident in facilitating nuanced and empathetic conversations around complex issues. Upon returning from the conference, I joked that I learned more in that one day than I had in the entire semester, but I think it has some real truth. The conference reignited my passion for learning and getting involved in prosocial causes. I have ordered several of the presenter's books and am excited to further engage with some of the concepts and ideas they

outlined at the conference.

### *Conference Skills, Insights, and Resources.*

Not only was this conference life-changing for me individually, but it will also greatly benefit BYU-H as it takes a more prominent role in hosting future conferences. This conference allowed us the opportunity to oversee how a complex conference is effectively run and the necessary steps and resources required to produce a seamless event. In April, I had the privilege of being the assistant student lead for the Asian Perspective on Human Dignity Conference, where we were responsible for most of the logistics of the conference. And while the conference was a great success, it was clear that there was a lot we could learn and improve on for future conferences. At this conference, we worked closely with ICLRS student fellows and conference organizers to learn how to pragmatically and organizationally run a smooth and efficient conference. With the skills, resources, and insights we received, we will hold an even better conference this coming year and create institutional knowledge that will persevere long after our graduation from BYUH. Through training and training, we can create a more efficient and sustainable conference that will enrich future students, faculty, community members, and guests, furthering the university's goal as well as positively representing the Church.

## **Conference Schedule**

### Thursday, June 15

- 8:30 A.M. – 5:00 Pm Registration
- 9:00 – 10:00 Am - General Discussion Session: Challenges And Opportunities For Religious Institutions
  
- 10:00 – 10:10 Am Break
  
- 10:10 – 11:10 Am Breakout Sessions
  - Why Protect The Religious Freedom Of Religious Organizations?
  - How Can I Get Involved?
  - Accommodations In The Workplace At The Supreme Court
  
- 11:10 – 11:20 Am Break
  
- 11:20 A.M – 12:20 Pm Breakout Sessions
  - How Can We Better Welcome Those Who Feel Like They Don't Fit?
  - Podcasting Religious Community In America Part 1
  - Religious Organizations: Engagement In The Broader Community

- 12:20 – 1:20 Pm Break
- 1:30 – 2:10 Pm General Session
- 2:10 – 3:00 Pm - General Discussion Session
- 3:00 – 3:10 Pm - Break
- 3:10 – 4:10 Pm - Breakout Sessions
  - Faith-Based Humanitarian Action: What Does This Mean On The Ground?
  - Respect For Marriage Act And Protections For Religious Institutions
- 4:10 – 5:20 Pm Break
- 4:20 – 5:20 Pm General Discussion Session: Strengthening And Renewing Religious Institutions
- 5:30 – 6:50 Pm - Dinner Break
- 7:00 – 8:00 Pm - Closing General Session

## **Summary Reports**

*Breakout Session: Religious Organizations in the Broader Community*

### **Introduction:**

The speakers shared how their organizations have helped people around the world. Some of them were done through humanitarian aid and partnership with other groups. Mr. Becerra pointed out how to lift communities and mentioned some church reports. At the same time, Mr. Peña discussed the efforts, achievements, and plans to expand in Utah. Besides that, he mentioned the challenges in their organization and how the partnership has helped them address those dilemmas. Lastly, Jannah Scott encouraged everyone to disregard their differences and reminded them to do things out of love and compassion to address the community's needs. Overall, they dwell on how organizations can be a tool to solve some of the societal issues.

**Juan Becerra:** *Manager, Government and Community Relations Team, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Juan Becerra shared the efforts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, how the Church conducts interfaith with other communities and interacts with nonprofit organizations, especially in Utah. He mentioned that Utah had been the home of most of the members of the Church, with almost 2.2 million members and 14 temples. Mr. Becerra stated that one of the strengths of the Church was that it was rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the importance of family, temple work through family history, and especially humanitarian aid. Besides that, he emphasized the two essential commandments of Christ, that is, to love God and to love one another. In doing this, members are expected to feed the hungry and comfort those afflicted, whether they are part of the Church or not.

Moreover, Mr. Becerra presented that the Church has provided approximately 1.8 million hours with an estimated 488 service projects that involve financial support. In addition, he wants to encourage everyone to be part of lifting communities by partnering with other organizations or volunteering. The organization has been part of elevating the kindergarten program by providing tutoring, creating a community resource center, and providing immigration clinics for people to find support. Also, the youth has been partnering with organizations such as “Latinos in Action”, where they render service hours to lift communities. Overall, the Church has been making many humanitarian efforts and even elevating them through partnership and collaboration with other communities or organizations.

**Gerardo Peña:** *Director of Program Development and Coordination, Chicanos Por La Causa*

Gerardo Peña focuses on the effort made by Chicanos Por La Causa. This community development organization aims to empower people's lives and support marginalized communities through various health, education, housing, and economic development services. Besides that, he pointed out their plans to expand their services in Utah. Mr. Peña reported that they impacted more than two million people who are part of a marginalized group. In their efforts to help combat unemployment, they manage to have \$400 million in net assets as they employ over two thousand employees with eighty different programs throughout the southwest. As part of their efforts to empower people, they have provided help regarding domestic violence, HIV awareness, and human trafficking. Peña shares one of their fascinating experiences where they do not know how to handle the migrant children traveling 3000 miles across Mexico into the United States seeking asylum. Nevertheless, the providers were willing to open up shelters and build tents for these people. As a result, they have helped the Latino youth to at least have hope in their new place. Since most of their efforts have been in Mexico and Puerto Rico, they have announced that they plan to extend their services and even partner with other organizations in Utah. Indeed, the organization has been beneficial in assisting and solving some of society's problems.

**Jannah Scott:** *CEO, American Center for Religious Freedom*

Jannah Scott argued that despite the differences in religion and practices, the primary motivation for helping was founded on love, compassion, and addressing the needs of the people around them. She emphasizes that people should move beyond what divides them rather focus on what God calls people to do. Ms. Scott mentioned that she is a follower of Christ and a friend of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. As evidence, Janna Scott shares the story of how the church members helped her with her children and in overcoming the obstacles in her life. In addition, she shares that the Jewish, Catholic, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and African American engaged in helping immigrant communities, and that is because what they are doing is rooted in love. Moreover, she mentioned that the Christian churches worked with the

Police Department and the Nation of Islam on active shooter preparedness. She argues that no one is trying to convert anyone, but both are trying to share what they know for the betterment of everyone. Besides that, she pointed out that churches and organizations were there to assist the homeless, veterans, and people affected by disasters, and many more efforts to help, and people do this because they are grounded in love and compassion.

*General Discussion: Serving Together: The Roles of Religious Organizations in the Humanitarian Work*

### **Introduction**

The speakers dive into how organizations, especially religious affiliations can assist in humanitarian response. The speakers share different but valuable insights. Sharon Eubank talked about fostering positive change by changing people's experiences through music, humor, and uplifting experiences. Also, she mentioned some examples and shared the concept of the JustServe app. While Mary Ana McGlasson shares an equally valuable idea that through the people's faith, they can formulate ideas to address the urgent need for humanitarian response.

**Sharon Eubank:** *Director, Humanitarian Services, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Sharon Eubank dwells on building resilience and fostering positive change in humanitarian work, especially in addressing religious and ethnic conflict. Eubank emphasizes the need to change people's experiences and foster shared activities to promote solidarity and understanding. Sharon mentioned three powerful drives for people to change their behavior: humor, music, and emotional or spiritual experiences. Besides that, the church's humanitarian aid looks for activities that will allow people to work together. For example, as part of the UNESCO project, the Muslim community will rebuild the Cathedral, while the Muslim community will rebuild the Christian facilities. In this sense, rebuilding houses of worship promotes unity and collaboration that can improve resiliency. In building an inclusive society, she discussed the idea of JustServe app that promotes community outreach and service projects in which people from different backgrounds can participate. Therefore, the positive shared experiences among different faiths could contribute to strengthening the resiliency in society.

**Mary Ana McGlasson:** *Director, Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, Deakin University, Australia*

Mary Ana McGlasson imparted the idea that individuals driven by their faith can make significant changes and address the needs of the people in their community. She shares her personal experience and how she used her career to be involved in humanitarian aid. In addition, Henry Dunant and Florence Nightingale were cited as an example of how faith-based actors

shape humanitarianism that they have provided aid and established organizations like the Red Cross. Due to the alarming reports, there is an urgency for humanitarian response. McGlasson reminded everyone of the value of ethics and respect for diversity in humanitarian aid, encouraging the people to establish and adhere to a code of conduct by faith-based organizations. Although the challenges regarding religious disparities, genuine concern, listening, and understanding were recommended to lessen the gap that continually divides the people. Moreover, the collaboration and partnership of different organizations will be beneficial to develop an effective humanitarian response. Also, the involvement of a code of conduct, making leaders accountable, and positive involvement produce a compassionate world. Thus, the people's faith can assist in solving the world's needs.

*Breakout Session: Accommodations in the Workplace at the Supreme Court*

**Introduction:**

This session primarily discussed the evolution of religious accommodation jurisprudence, from codifying the 1964 Civil Rights Act to the pending Supreme Court case of *Groff v. DeJoy*. This session gave particular attention to this case and discussed at length the facts, their optimal outcome, what they predict will occur, and its implications on broader religious freedom in the United States.

**Nathan Diament: Executive Director, *Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America***

Nathan develops and coordinates public policy research and initiatives on behalf of the Jewish community. Nathan Diament laid the foundation of religious accommodations in the Supreme Court, beginning with Title VII in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which stipulated that employment discrimination based on religion is strictly forbidden. Yet, to monitor and assess this, the Equal Employment Opportunity Division (EEOC) has created guidelines that, while not being codified, have been upheld by the court. The standard stipulated that employers need to "reasonably accommodate" religious practices unless doing so would impose an "undue hardship" on the employer. However, in the case of *Trans World Airlines, Inc. V. Hardison*, 432 U.S. 63 (1977), the court diluted this standard of "undue hardship" to a lesser standard of "de minimus effect," which essentially permits employers not to give religious accommodations if doing so would be an inconvenience.

After laying the framework and context, this session focused on the current undecided case of *Groff v. DeJoy*, in which the plaintiff Gerald Groff was denied a reasonable accommodation to not work on Sundays. This case is significant because it is expected that it will either "formally or functionally" overturn the "de minimus effect" standard of *Hardison*, reinstating a higher threshold for denying accommodations, thus allowing for more religious freedom. Diament is optimistic for a favorable outcome of this case regardless of who writes the decision contending

that although religious freedom is not as bipartisan as it once was, this case is less controversial because it does not deal with other civil rights such as LGBTQIA+ or reproductive rights.

**Todd McFarlan: Deputy General Counsel, General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists**

Todd McFarland specializes in Church-state relations (first amendment) and religious discrimination (employment, zoning, land use, and other religious rights issues). His particular areas of emphasis include Religious liberty, Parliamentary procedure, Litigation, and Departmental activities. McFarland followed Diament's comments elaborating on the potential of the Groff case outlying several different outcomes of the case depending on a few factors. Todd's most favorable outcome would be for Justice Alito to write the decision, who would expectedly write the most expansive opinion formally overturning Hardison. McFarland also expects a favorable decision if Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Barret wrote the decision; however, expecting a more incremental change as opposed to an overturn of Hardison. McFarlands expects that if Justice Kagan does not join the majority, a dissent will stipulate that the decision should be left for Congress and not the court, emphasizing the importance of strong statutory stare decisis. Nevertheless, no matter who writes the decision, the results are expected to be favorable because "nobody really defends the Hardison standard," there haven't been many liberal amicus curiae around this case. The key takeaway is that in employment, "In order to be equal, I need to be treated differently," this case poses the potential to rectify previous decisions minimizing religious freedom by creating a new standard that protects religious freedom.

***Q: How will the Groff decision be applied to local businesses?***

Any new decision or standard set forth by the Supreme Court will be implemented into businesses. This is primarily done by HR conferences, in which HR officers of companies are regularly required to attend and in which they will be informed about the new standard as well as ways to enforce it. They will then notify their employers who will be legally obligated to comply. However, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act only applies to companies with over 50 employees, meaning for small, local businesses this decision will not make an impact.

***Q: What is the significance of the Justices in religious freedom cases?***

The justices' positions are predictable but not partisan per se. Many of the justices' decisions depend on circumstances and many have frequently ruled in favor of religious employees, the organization, depending on the facts. For instance, despite being nominated by a Democratic President, Justice Kagan has been favorable towards religious freedom.

***Q: What factors do you look for in a case?***

Cases that are intended to challenge the constitutionality of certain laws require certain criteria.

1. The case should be a vehicle for change, meaning that it has the potential to reach a high court and a favorable chance.

2. There should also be a potential for impact, if the facts are so narrowly tailored that a decision would not set a precedent for similar cases it may not require the amount of dedication needed to take it to a higher court.
3. Members also must be dedicated and committed. Cases can take several years and require sacrifice; cases should not be taken flippantly but rather there should be signs that the plaintiff is committed and willing to endure a prolonged legal dispute. However, it is important to note that the Seventh-day Adventist covers the legal expenses.

### *Breakout Session: Podcasting Religious Community in America I*

#### **Introduction:**

This breakout session primarily concerned the impetus for these three individuals to begin podcasting, how they manage podcasting, and finally the impacts and results resulting from this journey.

**Steven Kapp Perry**, *Radio Host and Producer, In Good Faith podcast, BYU Broadcasting, Brigham Young University.*

Perry is the host and producer of the "In Good Faith" that celebrates the power of faith and belief by listening with an open heart and mind to personal accounts of spiritual journeys, as well as discussions of topics affecting people of faith and their societies.

**Adela Cojab**: *co-host, Americanish Podcast*

Adela Cojab Moadeb is a Jewish activist and JD candidate at Yeshiva University's Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. Her work, from political advocacy to interfaith peace rallies, has been recognized internationally. Since 2022, Adela has been a co host of the interfaith podcast and digital show Americanish: Daughters of Diaspora. In this session, she discusses her upbringing, wrestling with her identity, and how she navigates the complexities of the world with her complex background.

**Trey Ferguson**: *co-host, Three Black Men Podcast*

Trey Ferguson is a Miami based minister, writer, and podcaster whose passions include jokes, justice, and Jesus. He's the creator of New Living Treyslation—a podcast that retells and relates scripture in a modern vernacular—and a co-host of Three Black Men, a podcast where he muses on theology and culture with Sam Gay, Robert Monson, and a wide array of riveting guests. In this session, he primarily discusses the inception of the Three Black Men podcast as well as discussing what it means to be unapologetically Christian and Black.

**Uzma Jafri**: *co-host, Mommying While Muslim Podcast*

Uzma Jafri was raised in Houston and is the daughter of Muslim immigrants from Pakistan and India. Her conservative upbringing in America with one foot on each continent gives her plenty of content for the podcast she now co hosts. This podcast, Mommying While Muslim, primarily serves to assist the one-million Muslim-American mothers with all things relating to health, child rearing, assistance, as well as a host of other subjects. One thing Jafri made a point to emphasize is that her podcast is not authoritative on Islamic doctrine, but rather is personal and practical advice to help those mothers who are neglected, that is rooted in a shared Muslim culture.

***Q: What was the catalyst for you creating the podcast? What need did you identify leading you to create the podcast?***

**Trey Ferguson:**

Ferguson wanted an outlet to be "authentically himself" and an opportunity to be unapologetically Christian and Black. He met his two co-hosts on Twitter and together they created a podcast designed to redefine Christianity through their lens that brought and illuminated the Black experience. Since they felt this was a neglected community, a podcast is a perfect vehicle to reach many people and provide them with a Gospel that speaks to them.

**Uzma Jafri:**

Jafri recognized a neglected community of Muslim-American mothers and thought it would be beneficial to provide a safe place for them to discuss important topics that might be taboo. However, Jafri stated that her initial audience was 90% Christian and predominantly Male, which came to a big surprise to her.

***Q: Have you run into any issues with freedom of speech?***

**Uzma Jafri:**

Jafri discusses the threats and loss she received in followers after airing an episode with a transgender Muslim-American. Many people were upset, including relatives; however, she emphatically does not regret it whatsoever, as she viewed it as necessary and part of her responsibility to love everybody. She further elaborated that it is important to protect "minorities within minorities".

**Adela Cojab:**

Cojab discusses the inevitability of backlash resulting from topics discussed on podcasts no matter what is said. As she says, "haters gonna hate", especially when discussing issues connected to intersectionality in which views do not fit within one specific box. One specific example she discusses is being accused of being anti-feminist following her remarks discussing the beauty in modesty.

**Trey Ferguson:**

Ferguson also had experiences in which people criticized him over his thoughts and remarks. However, the key takeaway is that trolls are inherent within digital spaces in which people are anonymous.

***Q: How has podcasting influenced your religiosity?***

**Abdela Cojab:**

In her remarks, Cojab beautifully synthesized the main message of the session being that podcasting about religious topics is an awesome responsibility and requires a lot of diligence. As she says, "whether or not you want it, you become an ambassador for your faith". As a podcaster with a platform, you may be the only representative or voice others will hear from that community. It is thus difficult to represent the diversity and variety within your community, as well as staying true to your own beliefs and opinions. As a result, it requires more research and dedication.

*General Discussion Session*

**Elizabeth A. Clark:** *Associate Director, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, Anne Snyder: Editor-in-Chief, Comment Magazine*

Anne Snyder uses symbolically rich imagery and beautifully crafted metaphors to discuss the decline of religion in society and what can be done to reanimate the church to be soulful and a catalyst for good. Her central question throughout is "church, where are you?" in the context of social justice. She believes churches have become akin to "country clubs" and lack the necessary soul and real involvement. Churches have stagnated and become lethargic in social involvement, which does not mesh well with the younger generation who prioritize social justice. Essentially, churches need to provide something more fulfilling than mere affiliation, and that churches should balance between religious soul and social justice. She concluded by applauding public justice organizations and calling for more involvement.

**Bob Smietana:** *National Writer, Religion News Service*

Bob Smietana is a national reporter for Religion News Service based near Chicago. Bob Smietana focuses on the decline of religious congregations and provides reasons for their decline and then offers a way forward. The younger generation is more distrustful of institutions and less likely to join religious organizations. As a result, denomination sizes have decreased meaning there are less resources subsequently resulting in the waning of religious influence. Yet, Smietana humorously points out that organized religion is great precisely because it is organized, and to maintain its organization it needs to act decisively and urgently. He advises slow incremental changes as well as making churches "less awful", he then calls us to rebuild and create necessary institutions instead of committing "arson" to existing institutions. While recognizing the decreasing role of religion, Smietana is a proclaimed long-term optimist and contends that if these necessary changes are implemented religion will once again regain its role in being a catalyst for good.

**Daryl Paul Lobban:** *Director, Faith Partnerships, Stand Together*

Rev. Daryl Paul Lobban is the Director of Faith Partnerships for Stand Together, a philanthropic community committed to helping America's boldest changemakers tackle the root cause of our country's biggest problems. The Reverend's main concern surrounded how we can revive religious institutions; likewise with Anne Snyder he notes a stagnation in the churches. He asserts that religious institutions have become too comfortable with power and should be willing to give up some of that power to help assist those who are in need. He asserts that the best way to move forward is by looking to the past. Some of the notable examples he illuminates are Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King Jr., as well obviously the example of Jesus two millennia ago.

*Breakout Session: Why Protect the Religious Freedom of Religious Organizations?*

**Shaina Hullet** is a lawyer and member of the Bruderhof, an Anabaptist church community. Shaina argues that protecting the religious freedom of religious organizations is essential because religion extends beyond individual belief to include communal and institutional aspects. She recognizes that religious organizations enable believers to practice their faith collectively and engage in activities that benefit both their community and society at large. She argues that preserving the autonomy of religious organizations safeguards against government intrusion and maintains the crucial role they play in fostering religious commitments, supporting one another and contributing to the common good.

**Elizabeth 'Liz' Reiner Platt** describes herself as an outsider, an agnostic, and an abortion rights activist. She approaches the topic of protecting religious organizations from this perspective and raises three questions. Firstly, she highlights the distinction between smaller, exclusively religious institutions and larger organizations that provide secular services. She emphasizes that granting legal protections to these different types of nonprofits should be considered differently. Secondly, Platt explores what "protect" means and questions what exactly religious organizations need to be protected from. Lastly, she challenges the framing of conflicts involving religious institutions as solely between religious liberty and secular rights. Platt argues that there are often multiple interests at play, including religious, secular, and moral considerations, and that focusing solely on the binary perspective may not fully address the complexity of the issues involved. She expresses concerns that an excessive focus on protecting religious institutions could potentially limit the ability of individuals to practice their faith and religious values, undermining the principles of religious freedom and true pluralism.

**Thomas Griffith**, a former judge, expresses his gratitude to Elizabeth Reiner Platt and acknowledges the complexity of the issues surrounding religious liberty. He emphasizes that this discussion is not about good versus evil but rather about finding the best way to create a society where everyone can flourish, which requires compromise. Griffith discloses his Christian faith and his previous role as a judge, which restricted his ability to openly discuss certain topics. He reflects on the perception of religious freedom and shares a story from his experience speaking at

Yale Law School after the Obergefell decision on same-sex marriage. He encountered hostility due to assumptions about his position as a representative of his church. Griffith highlights the need for sensitivity and understanding, acknowledging that not everyone has positive associations with religious freedom due to the harm caused by some religious institutions throughout history. He emphasizes the importance of respectful dialogue and argues that overcoming contempt requires individuals to change their mindset about others.

*Breakout Session: How can we make others feel more welcome?*

**Ben Schilaty:** *Adjunct Professor, Honor Code Administrator, Brigham Young University*

Ben is a gay Latter-Day Saint employed at the Office of Honour at BYU. He emphasized the importance of listening and understanding in order to make others feel welcome. Ben shared his personal journey of realizing his orientation, struggling with societal and religious beliefs, and eventually coming out to his friends and ward. He highlighted the healing and acceptance he experienced when he was open about his orientation and received love and support from those around him. Ben also shared how some church leaders have encouraged better understanding and inclusion of LGBTQ individuals within the church community. He talked about the positive impact of leaders who genuinely seek to understand and serve others. Ben's experiences illustrated the power of vulnerability, acceptance, and creating a space where people can be their authentic selves.

**Barbara Gardner:** *Associate Professor, Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University*

As a member of the religious education faculty at BYU, she shared her experiences as a woman in the church. Having served as a chaplain at Harvard and MIT, she emphasized the importance of reaching out to individuals from diverse faiths and backgrounds. She acknowledged the need for improvement within the church community, stressing the significance of inviting and welcoming others. Barbara highlighted the harm of presenting a false image to those who are struggling and emphasized the importance of trust-building and open dialogue. She encouraged active listening and validating others' feelings, particularly women, while exploring the influence of culture on societal perceptions of women's roles and responsibilities. Barbara emphasized the value of recognizing women's unique strengths and their divine nature as mothers, teachers, and religious leaders. She acknowledged the impact of societal comparisons and traditions in undermining women's power and significance.

## *Breakout Session: Podcasting Religious Community in America Part II*

### **Samuel Gay:** *Three Black Men Podcast*

Samuel shared his perspective on the podcast and its significance to him. He mentioned that the podcast was not born out of necessity but rather stemmed from a sense of need for community within himself. The initial motivation for starting the podcast was the desire for connection and friendship. He expressed that the growth of the podcast's community, including supporters through Patreon and word-of-mouth, has had a positive impact on him personally. While acknowledging that these personal benefits may sound selfish, he highlighted the importance of the podcast's primary target audience, emphasizing the desire to continue because of the community they have found and helped build. The growth of the community has been organic and not forced, although there have been learning curves and adjustments along the way. Overall, the podcast has been a labor of love, fostering love among the hosts and extending that love to other avenues and mediums.

### **Zaiba Hasan:** *Founder of Mommying While Muslim*

Zaiba shared how her oldest child's experience inspired her involvement in the podcast. Discovering her child's essay mentioning growing up in the shadow of the fallen towers made her realize the potential struggles other children in similar situations might face. Despite feeling like she had failed as a parent, Zaiba continued the podcast to address the need within the religious community. The podcast provided a platform for mothers to discuss tough issues and create a safe space, connecting them to valuable resources. Their motivation stemmed from making a positive impact, as seen through messages from individuals who found solace in their discussions. Money wasn't their driving force, but rather the feeling of making a difference, akin to God's word, kept them going.

### **Robert Monson:** *Theologian and Podcaster*

Robert, a graduate of the United Theological Seminary and fellow podcaster of Three Black Men, explained that the podcast originated from a desire for authentic conversations and a lack of diverse voices in Christian and faith-based podcasts. He wanted to explore God and faith in a more expansive and genuine way, discussing his fears, struggles, and thoughts openly. The podcast aimed to showcase the messy and real aspects of wrestling with spirituality. Robert also mentioned that the pandemic created a hunger for connection and meaning, leading to an increase in podcasting. However, for their podcast, it has been business as usual as they continue to find fresh topics from their different backgrounds and invest in themselves and each other to provide engaging content.

*General Discussion Session*

***Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Institutions***

**Moderator: Paul S. Edwards:** *BYU Wheatley Institute*

***Q: What are the challenges and opportunities for religious institutions in the 21st century?***

**Russell Moore:** *Christianity Today*

As Moore was putting his book entitled “Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical America” together, he identified two problems being dealt at once as he was working in the youth ministry. One was dealing with culturally Christian kids and kids that don’t know anything about religion. Continuing his observations, he sees that the greatest concern we have is the loss of moral authority within the church. He makes it a point that not having churches that tell people that they really believe what they’re saying will lead society to a crisis of cynicism and disillusionment. Moore believes that the first step in preventing this is to recover a kind of moral integrity and authority. He encourages religious institutions to create a role model within the church and to be people that are not just creating institutions just to wield power over others.

**Jonathan Rauch:** *Brookings Institution*

“Crisis for Christianity is also a crisis for democracy,” is a statement Rauch presents as he introduces what the underlying, most important cause of political crisis is. He states that religious liberty is not enough, and that things will go awry if Christianity and/or Evangelicalism are not in some positive alignment. Rauch presents three core values that a secular democracy needs from Christianity which are: (1) Forgive each other, (2) Do not be afraid. (3) Be like Me (Jesus). Society begins to fall down when the values represented are unforgiving and fearful, which Rauch then questions if there is a better model to avoid arousing hostility between state and religion.

**Stephanie Summers:** *Center for Public Justice*

Multifaith groups, according to Summers, face unique challenges and possess unique features to combat said challenges. She lays down the three key opportunities for attention or what she calls the 3P’s namely: Practices, Perception, and Public policy. She further explains that leaders are motivated by values like human dignity to continue their work. They value flexibility rather than something that could damage their ability to be generous to other groups. Summers states that we are given the freedom to explain whenever faith feels unpopular outside circles that are not centered or focused on religion. In order to maintain a religiously pluralistic society, we must be comfortable in explaining where our faiths come from.

*Breakout Session: Faith Based Humanitarian Action*

***Faith Based Humanitarian Action: What does that mean on the ground?***

**Moderator:** Paul E. Kerry, International Center for Law and Religion Studies

**Deborah Barry:** *Deakin University Centre for Humanitarian Leadership* Barry emphasizes the importance of being actively involved and having humanity, neutrality, and impartiality when doing humanitarian work. She also highlights that money from the government going to orphanages can be used to strengthen families.

**Jennifer Brewer:** *Global Humanitarian Consultant*

Brewer mentioned how religiosity, a feeling of yearning to connect with something beyond our moral selves, can also aid us in finding our authentic selves. She presents the parable of the elephant and blind men, where the latter characters get stuck on their own perceptions of the elephant rather than perceiving its wholeness. When we get stuck in our own systems of religiosity, that is where humanitarian work comes in. Humanitarian work, according to Brewer, is mostly done by those that are from faith based groups. She advises to help provide sustainable aid, see people as human beings, and inspire beliefs that can help solve crises in our humanitarian world.

**Leslie Wilson:** *Church World Service*

Wilson highlights how the ever present humanity responding to the call of humanitarian work is important. She reiterates Deborah Barry's point of possessing humility in doing so. We must be vigilant and active in responding to the call whenever there is a crisis and a need for aid. Wilson encourages the audience to actively promote values and asks how we can create a code of conduct for those who want to do humanitarian work.

*General Discussion Session*

**Introduction:**

Speakers answered the question "why is religious freedom important to you?" using their experiences and the work they have done in the religious freedom sector.

**Kori Porter:** *CEO, Peacemakers Coalition*

Kori Porter, the founder and CEO of the Peacemakers Coalition, spoke at the conference and discussed the importance of religious freedom. The Peacemakers Coalition focuses on teaching Christian students how to become peacemakers in society. Porter shared her personal journey and how her grandmother, the spiritual matriarch of her family, had a profound impact on her faith. Growing up in Mississippi, Porter attended church with her grandmother and witnessed the authentic faith she possessed. However, she faced significant challenges in her life, including the

loss of her step-father and brother, which led her down a destructive path of using and selling drugs. Ultimately, she found solace in her faith, and her experience led her to realize the importance of religious freedom and the importance of bringing

**Imam Marzuq:** *Imam W. Deen Mohammed's American Muslim Community*

Imam Marzuq also addressed the question of why religious freedom matters. He emphasized that as human beings, we are spiritual creatures with two fathers, Abraham and Adam. Marzuq shared a story highlighting the similarities between Muslims and Christians. He explained how Medina was originally a Jewish and Muslim community, and when the Christians arrived, they were considered already converted. He stressed that religious freedom and unity are essential for humanity, and it is crucial to guide people back to their respective religious texts, such as the Bible, Quran, and Torah, to foster a sense of belonging to one human family.

**Sharon Eubank:** *Director, Humanitarian Services, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Sharon Eubank presented the results pyramid, emphasizing that experiences bring about change. She highlighted the transformative power of sports, music, and humor. Eubank discussed the positive impact of sports teams for refugees, specifically mentioning soccer. Additionally, she emphasized how refugee music has the ability to bring about significant changes. Eubank also shared a humorous story about Gioran Saleem, who jokes about people mispronouncing his name as Muhammed. Lastly, she spoke about the importance of service and how President Bateman and President Surrender collaborated to feed the community. Eubank emphasized that we are all children of God and encouraged the audience to take action by finding someone of a different faith and engaging in meaningful activities together.

*Breakout Session: Respect for Marriage Act and Protections for Religious Institutions*

### **Introduction:**

The speakers talk about the Respect for Marriage Act and the importance of protecting religious freedom while addressing LGBTQ rights.

**Tyler Deaton:** *Senior Advisor, American Unity Fund*

Tyler Deaton, a political strategist with extensive experience in bipartisan campaigns at various levels of government, addressed the audience. Deaton manages political operations on a wide range of issues, including religious freedom and anti-extremism.

**Tim Schultz:** *President of the 1st Amendment Partnership (IAP)*

Tim Schultz spoke about the significance of the Respect for Marriage Act as the most important legislation on religious freedom since 2010. He noted that in 2014, religious freedom laws were viewed as anti-LGBTQ rights, making their passage nearly impossible. Schultz raised the

question of whether the success seen in Utah could be replicated at the federal level. He emphasized the need to work with both the left and right political factions to protect religious freedom rights while respecting the rights of the LGBTQ community. He advocated for continuing efforts on both fronts.

**Gene Schaerr:** *Senior Fellow, ICLRS; Schaerr | Jaffe LLP*

Gene Schaerr discussed specific provisions of the Respect for Marriage Act. He mentioned that Section 2 was inspired by Justice Kennedy's remarks in the Obergefell case. Schaerr then explained Section 6, which consists of subsections A and B. Subsection A reinforces religious liberty and conscience protections under the Constitution, affirming that the law does not repeal the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). Subsection B ensures that religious organizations are not compelled to provide goods, services, accommodations, or facilities. Schaerr clarified that the act does not aim to preempt state powers. He went on to discuss Section 7, which guarantees that institutions and individuals will not lose any federal benefits, including tax-exempt status, based on their beliefs regarding marriage.

During the conference, the speakers addressed the implications of the Respect for Marriage Act for church, family values, and traditional values. Schaerr emphasized that the act aligns with the church's support for religious liberty protections and assists in fulfilling the purposes of the Proclamation to the World on the family, particularly in the aftermath of the Obergefell case. Since the case is unlikely to be overturned, Schaerr noted that there has been a shift to include stronger religious freedom protections. He also acknowledged that progress in religious liberty often occurs incrementally.

*Breakout Session: How can I get involved?*

**Bill Benac and Hannah Smith** (co-workers):

Ben and Hannah, co-founders of a religious freedom fund, highlighted their initiative's progress since its inception. They emphasized the importance of educating citizens about principled pluralism, recognizing America's uniqueness in providing an opportunity for this experiment. They spoke about their diverse board of directors, consisting of leaders from various minority groups.

**Janet Nelson**

Janet Nelson, reflecting on her pluralistic upbringing, stressed the significance of expanding one's circle to promote religious freedom. She shared personal anecdotes from her time in Brooklyn, where her interactions with people from different faiths led to meaningful friendships. Janet's act of delivering applesauce to her Jewish neighbors on Hanukkah unknowingly coincided with a traditional practice, which touched their hearts and fostered mutual respect.

## **Jeff Nelson**

Emphasized that love and relationships are crucial in forming a religiously inclusive society. He argued that mere tolerance is not enough and that genuine love is the key. Jeff also encouraged the older generation to involve younger individuals, suggesting the use of "Heal the World" events. These interfaith community service events, coupled with short meetings emphasizing community, love, and religious freedom, can help educate and bring people together.

***Q: Is there a website or social group that we can be a part of for inspiration?***

**A:** - Ben- Yes, there is- The Religious Freedom Alliance Council. This group meets together virtually every quarter. It teaches action plans to create simple or complex events.

**A:-Jeff-** The path towards understanding is different for everyone. It's like blowing a dandelion; you never know where the seeds will go, but they will sprout in places you never imagined.

**Q:** Shared a quote from Thomas Jefferson

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men & citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect & to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private & public felicity. Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice?” – George Washington, 1796 Farewell Address.

In summary, the panel discussion emphasized the value of education, love, relationships, and community engagement in promoting religious freedom. By expanding circles, fostering understanding, and involving younger generations, individuals can make a meaningful impact in advocating for religious freedom within their communities.

## *Closing General Session*

**Elder Clark Gilbert:** *Commissioner, Church Educational System, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Elder Gilbert emphasizes the importance of embracing our countercultural role and recognizing the value our religious communities bring to the world. As stewards of religious freedom, it is our responsibility to exemplify integrity, morality, service, and love, while understanding the complementary nature of the establishment clause and free exercise in protecting religious conscience. By appreciating the centrality of religious freedom as the foundation that unifies other first amendment rights, we can fulfill our duty to society and God.

### ***Religious Freedom as a Central Freedom:***

Elder Gilbert underscores that religious freedom should not be seen as an isolated right, but rather as the essential amalgamation of other first amendment freedoms. By examining landmark cases such as *Hosanna-Tabor v the Equal Opportunity Commission*, *Trinity Lutheran Church v Comer*, *Our Lady of Guadalupe v Morrissey-Berru*, and *Carson v Makin*, we witness the intricate relationship between religious clauses and the broader constitutional framework. Recognizing that religious freedom is the linchpin for diverse and thriving societies, Elder Gilbert emphasizes the importance of maintaining and nurturing the infrastructure of first amendment freedoms.

### ***A Call to Action:***

Drawing parallels between religious freedom and global conflicts, Elder Gilbert challenges us to invest in understanding and safeguarding this fundamental right. While the secular world acknowledges the significance of religion to individuals and communities, we must move beyond passive reliance on societal tolerance. To control the narrative, we must step out of the isolated realm of faith and confidently proclaim our beliefs and values. By doing so, we can bridge the gap between legal protections and the ongoing cultural battle, which, despite legal victories, poses significant challenges.

### ***Religious Institutions as Agents of Social Good:***

Elder Gilbert highlights the transformative potential of religious institutions in fostering positive change within society. With their covenantal relationships with students, these organizations have a unique opportunity to shape and empower individuals. By embracing their role as educators and champions of faith, religious universities offer their students guidance, moral development, and a sense of purpose. Moreover, when inspired by their convictions, religious communities have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to positively impact society through acts of service and love.

### **Conclusion:**

Elder Clark Gilbert's insights shed light on our critical responsibility as stewards of religious freedom. By recognizing the central importance of this freedom, understanding its relationship to other constitutional rights, and boldly proclaiming our beliefs, we can address the challenges of the ongoing culture war. Moreover, religious institutions, with their capacity for social good, have the potential to effect positive change and shape the lives of individuals and communities. Through our collective efforts, we can fulfill our stewardship to society and God by upholding religious freedom and ensuring its continued vitality for generations to come.