

IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE 1 Alabama Executes Muslim Inmate who Requested Imam's Presence

PAGE 2 Jehovah's Witness in Russia Sentenced to Jail

PAGE 2 Waymarks Bullets

PAGE 2 Prayer Case of Football Coach Unheard

PAGE 3 Student Group's Rights Violated

PAGE 3 Southern States Weighing School Vouchers

PAGE 4 Jury Awards \$21M to Miami Hotel Dishwasher Forced to Work Sundays

EDITOR: Sheila Elwin
religiousliberty@southernunion.com

2019 | Volume 2

“... the very purpose of the Establishment Clause is to prevent this sort of religious preference.”



Alabama Executes Muslim Inmate who Requested Imam's Presence

Muslim inmate Dominique Ray, 42, sentenced to death for a 1995 rape and murder, was executed February 8 in Atmore, Alabama. Ray had filed a legal challenge because Alabama wouldn't let his Islamic spiritual adviser be present in the execution chamber.

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals stayed the execution over the religious arguments, but the U.S. Supreme Court allowed it to proceed in a 5-4 decision. The Supreme Court's order did not deal with the religious issue, but said that Ray's request on January 28 was made too late. His lawyers and the dissenting Supreme Court justices disagreed.

A Christian chaplain who works for the prison system is in place for other executions. Ray argued that Alabama's procedure favors Christian inmates, but the state said only prison employees are allowed for security reasons.

Robert Dunham, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, said that other states allow spiritual advisers to

accompany condemned inmates up to the execution chamber but not into it, but that he did not know of any other state where the protocol calls for a Christian chaplain to be present in the execution chamber.

According to the *Washington Post*, Amir Ali, Supreme Court and appellate counsel at MacArthur Justice Center, said the court's order was in contrast with recent decisions that have protected religious rights. "Consider the opposite circumstance — a Christian person who is told that, during the final moments of his life, he can have only the services of an Imam," Ali wrote. "It is hard to imagine the court reaching the same result as it did here. And that's a real problem because the very purpose of the Establishment Clause is to prevent this sort of religious preference."

Imam Yusef Maisonet watched the execution from an adjoining witness room. There was no Christian chaplain in the chamber, a concession the state allowed.

Jehovah's Witness in Russia Sentenced to Six Years Jail

A Russian court has sentenced a Jehovah's Witness to six years in prison for promoting extremism.

Dennis Christensen is a Danish citizen with a Russian residency permit. He was arrested at a worship service in May 2017 after delivering a sermon, though he was not a staff member of the organization, and has been held 20 months pre-trial.

His chapter of Jehovah's Witnesses — one of nearly 400 in Russia — had been banned by a local court in 2016, and the Russian Supreme Court banned the denomination as an extremist group on par with the Islamic State one month before his arrest.

Christensen is the first Jehovah's Witness to be sent to prison in Russia, but 22 others are in detention waiting for trial, and

25 more are under house arrest. Authorities have targeted more than 100 Jehovah's Witnesses so far with charges of extremism, and Human Rights Watch reports that they have conducted hundreds of raids, interrogations, and acts of harassment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, encouraging "traditional values," has built a close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church, which sees Jehovah's Witnesses as a heretical sect. However, in December Putin said labeling religious communities as terrorist organizations was "complete nonsense," and that the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses would be looked into.

Anton Bogdanov, Christensen's lawyer, said, "The man was sentenced to six years behind bars, because he, along with others of the

"The same thing could happen to any of us."

same religious beliefs, read the Bible and spread their religious views."

"The same thing could happen to any of us," Christensen's wife, Irina, told AP reporters.

Danish Foreign Minister Anders Samuelsen called on Russia to respect freedom of religion. He said the ministry would assist Christensen if he chose to appeal.

Supreme Court Refuses to Hear Prayer Case of Football Coach

The Supreme Court has refused to take on a First Amendment battle between a Washington State school district and a football coach fired for kneeling to pray at the 50-yard line after games.

Joseph Kennedy, Bremer-ton High School coach, was fired in 2015. In 2017 the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit ruled that he acted as a public official when he

prayed, along with some athletes, while wearing school attire and in full view of students and parents.

The Supreme Court generally has meted out protections for religious groups and individuals, including a church receiving federal funds, private corporations avoiding federal regulations regarding contraceptives, a city opening meetings with

prayer, etc. Nevertheless, a majority of justices agreed that Kennedy went too far with his public display of faith on school grounds, or felt the case was not prime for review.

"Such activity can promote disunity along religious lines...[in] an environment that must be open and welcoming to all," the appeals court ruled last year.

- *Proposed Senate Bill 20 in the New Mexico State Senate would allow individuals to change their birth certificate gender identity to male, female, or the letter "X" for undesignated or other gender; and no longer require people to prove they've gone through surgery before changing their birth certificate.*

- *Masterpiece Cakeshop and the State of Colorado agreed to drop their ongoing, six-year-long legal battle on March 5. Jack Phillips, the shop owner who refused to create a cake for a same-sex couple's wedding, agreed to dismiss his federal case, and the Colorado Civil Rights Commission will dismiss the state action against Masterpiece.*

- *The Supreme Court has declined to become involved in a religious liberty dispute about using taxpayer funds for historic preservation at churches. "At some point, this court will need to decide whether governments that distribute historic preservation funds may deny funds to religious organizations simply because the organizations are religious," Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote. Waymarks readers may wish to stay aware via the internet.*

De-registering University's Christian Student Group Violates First Amendment

The U.S. District Court for the District of Iowa ruled in February that the University of Iowa violated the First Amendment rights of a Christian student group, Business Leaders in Christ (BLinC). The University had de-registered the group because it required its student leaders to sign a statement of faith which included religious beliefs about sexuality and sexual identity.

BLinC is a student group at University of Iowa. Using Bible study, fellowship, and networking in the Christian community, the group offers to help Christians learn "how to continually keep Christ first in the fast-paced business world." The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a statement arguing that University of Iowa had violated BLinC's First Amendment rights to free association, free speech, and the free exercise of religion, and the court agreed.

The university was ordered to allow the student group to follow its religious values when selecting leadership.

University policies do not allow discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, but BLinC, though putting no limitations on general membership, requires its leaders to sign and follow its statement of faith, including a belief that sexual relations should be limited to husband and wife.

University of Iowa admitted that BLinC did not discriminate against any who wanted to sign the statement of faith, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but said that their faith statement makes LGBT

people feel unwelcome, therefore excluding them. The university de-registered BLinC, taking away the club's right to use the university website or space for meetings and events, or to participate in the student activity fair.

The District Court agreed with BLinC and the DOJ, and ruled the University's de-registering of BLinC unconstitutional. The court held that the University's actions were in violation of BLinC's right of free speech, expressive association, and the Free Exercise Clause.

"The university was ordered to allow the student group to follow its religious values..."

SAVE THE DATE FOR UPCOMING EVENTS!

- MAY 17-20 **Religious Liberty Summit**
ReligiousLiberty.info
- SEPTEMBER 26-29 **Conscience and Justice Conference**
AdventSource.org
- SEPTEMBER 26-29 **NAD Adventist Attorney Retreat**
Details coming soon

Southern States Weighing School Vouchers

National School Choice Week was in January 2019, and school vouchers are in the news across Southern Union territory:

- Public school educators in **Alabama** are trying to have private school vouchers repealed.
- The **Florida** Senate has stated it will revisit laws on vouchers
- **Georgia's** new lieutenant governor has declared he wants to broaden school choice.
- **Kentucky** will be introducing legislation

to create the Scholarship Tax Credit for school choice.

- Parents and students are rallying for school choice in **Mississippi**.
- A poll in **North Carolina** found that Democrats are the strongest in favor of the state's Opportunity Scholarship voucher program for private

schools.

- In **South Carolina**, where a school choice bill was voted down in 2018, the governor is calling for a 5% teacher raise, joining other states wary of teacher walkouts.
- In **Tennessee** legislation for school vouchers is being considered.

Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Public Affairs and Religious Liberty
P.O. Box 923868
Peachtree Corners, GA 30010

NONPROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
MAILED FROM
ZIP 30304
PERMIT NO. 6849

Jury Awards \$21M to Miami Hotel Dishwasher Forced to Work Sundays Against Her Beliefs

A former dishwasher at a hotel in Miami has been awarded a \$21 million jury verdict. Marie Jean Pierre, 61, was fired after missing work on Sundays for religious reasons in March 2016. She had been an employee of the Conrad (formerly Hilton during her employment) Miami Hotel for more than 10 years.

Pierre, a devout Christian missionary born in Haiti, says she informed her employer when hired that she

could not work on Sundays because of her religious beliefs. Nevertheless, she says she was fired after she missed six Sundays from work to attend Bethel Baptist Church in Miami.

"I love God. No work on Sunday, because Sunday I honor God," Pierre said in an interview with NBC 6 Miami.

Hilton said in a statement that "...multiple concessions were made to accommodate her personal and religious commitments." They

had apparently accommodated her for her first seven years in their employment.

Her lawsuit argued that her former employer had violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which protects workers from discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin. A jury in federal court ruled in her favor and granted her \$21 million in damages, plus \$35,000 in back wages and \$500,000 for emotional pain and mental anguish.

**"I love God.
No work
on Sunday,
because
Sunday I
honor God,"
Pierre said...**