WAYMARKS

THE SOUTHERN UNION DEPARTMENT
OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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Adventists and Mormons make the military code cut. Unitarians and Native American religions do not.

Three Changes in Military Bring Religious Liberty Concerns

Three changes in the military, directed by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, have happened in recent months.

The Department of Defense previously recognized roughly 211 religious affiliation codes for military personnel records, but has reduced that number to 31.

Remaining religions include world religions like Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Latter-day Saints; and 22 Christian denominations, including Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist. Removed were approximately 180 minority, secular, and non-traditional classifications, including Atheism, Unitarian Universalism, Wicca, and Indigenous/Native American religions.

Officials say it will help chaplains quickly assess unit faiths to tailor spiritual support. Veterans' advocacy groups, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, and other critics say it marginalizes minority troops, and there could be constitutional concerns.

Second, the federal government will now automatically register young men for the draft, without consent. The Selective Service says this will save money. However, the government will now access records from Social Security, each state's Department of Motor Vehicles, and the Census Bureau to register young men.

The change will also threaten the rights of conscientious objectors. Automatic registration removes individual moral decision making. That and many other issues have caused three senators to sponsor the Military Selective Service Repeal Act.

And, Hegseth has announced the creation of the Office of Religious Affairs for the military. His speech made reference to "Almighty God," Psalm 33:12, and spiritual battles, and he stated that "Two hundred and fifty years ago we rejected an earthly King an ocean away, appealing instead to a Heavenly King above." Obvious concerns exist related to the ongoing blurring of church and state separation.

Adventist Attorneys Retreat Precedes Religious Liberty 250

"Give me liberty or give me death!" Patrick Henry didn't actually say that at the convention, but he did speak to the group on some religious liberty issues. Ironically, Henry was one of the few founding fathers who was in favor of a state run religion.

The Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty held "Celebrate 250: Celebrating America and Religious Liberty" in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, August 17-21, 2026, with an array of captivating speakers.

That convention was immediately preceded, however, by the Southern Society of Adventist Attorneys Retreat, August 13-16, in the same location. Attorneys from across the Southern Union gathered to hear guest speaker Dwight Nelson (pictured below), author and evangelist.

Nelson addressed Bible prophecy in three parts, and spoke directly about the threat of Christian nationalism as it relates to prophecy.



The attorneys were also given the opportunity to earn continuing legal education in a class taught by Earnest Staat. He spoke on AI threats and AI pros and cons.

Their Sabbath offering will be used for its traditional goal of supporting the student stipend fund. They had time in the afternoon — and throughout the retreat — to take walking tours of Colonial Williamsburg and explore its history. And, a Saturday night social ended the day with table games and a haystack buffet.

Wrapping up the retreat, new president Carlton Robinson and vice president Astrid Monroing were voted in, and the outgoing president and vice president, William Cochran and Michelle Ruff, were thanked for their work.

The day after the attorneys retreat was over, Religious Liberty 250 began, welcoming a broad spectrum of attendees, from those who represent the department for their conference, to pastors and other Church workers, to laymen who share a special burden for maintaining religious freedom in this country.

In addition to that group and the religious liberty and communication teams from the Southern Union Conference were a contingent of talented presenters: historical interpreters, musicians, worship presenters, and engrossing speakers from within and outside of the Adventist Church. Their presentations focused largely on the need for — and threat to — separation of church and state.



A historical impersonator of Patrick Henry gave a riveting presentation and answered questions.

Following are quotes and condensed thoughts from the speakers' and writers' presentations and post-convention reports.

The current issue is that many believe government should stay out of church, but church should be involved in government. Christian nationalism privileges Christianity and ONE day of worship — Sunday. "At the heart of the religious liberty debate is a question

Cases that the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) is picking up this term:

- **St. Mary Catholic Parish v. Roy** ***addresses Catholic preschools in Colorado that are challenging their exclusion from the state's universal preK program. They do not meet the state's funding conditions for nondiscrimination against sexual orientation and gender identity, but argue this violates their Free Exercise Clause by penalizing admissions and staffing requirements.***

- **Missionaries of St. John the Baptist, Inc. v. Frederic** ***deals with a religious nonprofit group challenging a local zoning ordinance in Park Hills, KY, that blocked them from building a shrine on property belonging to their church, which violates federal protections for use of property by faith-based organizations.***

- ***Ten Commandments school challenges: Many multi-faith and nonreligious families represented by the ACLU and others in numerous cases have petitioned SCOTUS to review Texas Senate Bill 10, which mandates permanent, public display of the Protestant 10 Commandments in every public school classroom. They believe the law violates the Establishment Clause and parents' Free Exercise rights.***

about who God is and how we understand His character. Religious liberty battles in America today are being shaped by how preachers portray God." *~Joseph Reeves, assistant director of Sabbath School and personal ministries for the General Conference*

Quoting James Madison: "Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects?* *~Bettina Krause, editor of Liberty Magazine*

Thoughts on U.S. history: The majority of people on the Mayflower weren't Puritans, and there was much intolerance towards Quakers and Baptists in early days. The Great Awakening of the 1740s brought new religious diversity, and by the American Revolution, America was the most religiously diverse nation on earth. Additionally, Alonzo T. Jones, an Adventist, was named as a personal hero, because Jones personally helped save the U.S. Constitution when it was threatened in the 1890s via his testimony. *~Steven Green, law and history professor at Willamette University, and author of* Separating Church and State: a History



Daily, the participants broke into pairs and small groups to pray.

"John 18:36 — Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world.' Let's go home! What more needs to be said? 'My kingdom is not of this world.' That's pretty good." Also

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Kevin James Retires

Kevin James, associate director for the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL) Department for nearly 19 years, retired earlier this year, though he is still doing some part time work for the department as it transitions to a new associate.

James was a pastor for more than 20 years before coming to the Southern Union, but in addition to pastoring he also did some religious liberty work for the Nevada-Utah Conference. While there, he was trained in Sabbath accommodation work by Alan Reinach, currently president of Church State Council, a legal services ministry of the Adventist Church in the southwest. As a result of those past opportunities, he already had worked with 68 accommodation cases by the time he came to PARL.

Working primarily with religious accommodation and as a legislative watchdog for PARL, he recounts that he was fortunate to work with two cases which eventually led to prompting consideration in higher courts of older religious accommodation cases. That review paved the way for the positive resolution of the *Groff v. DeJoy* Supreme Court case in 2023, which dramatically raised the standard for religious workplace accommodations.

"I am amazed at how God led me and prepared me for this path," says James.



"Before I was even baptized into the Church, I had a personal religious liberty issue. I remember how it felt when you have no idea what you're doing — lost, powerless, don't know where to turn. I can imagine what our members must feel sitting in front of management or attorneys, and I'm thankful that God led me to working with our people in religious accommodation."

Are you having a work accommodation issue?

Remember, help is always available for religious accommodation issues. The earlier you reach out for help, the higher your success rate will be.

We also assist with noncombatant letters, Sabbath testing, vaccinations, and more.

We are here to serve you.

Call Monday-Thursday, closed Friday: 770-408-1800. Ask for Religious Liberty Department. Or, email religiousliberty@southernunion.com.

Religious Liberty Speaking Engagements Available

Would you like to highlight religious liberty in your church? Our office provides speakers free of charge.

Call to explore how we can personalize a day for your church: 770-408-1800, ext. 176.

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shared was that the origins of church-state separation in this country can be traced to Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island and a co-founder of the first Baptist church in the Americas. Williams' ideas became the foundation of the First Amendment. ~*Randall Balmer, author of* America's Best Idea: The Separation of Church and State, *Episcopal priest, and professor at Dartmouth College*

Though Patrick Henry was a founder who disagreed with separation of church and state, he was eventually overruled by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, who strove for nonsectarian governance. Jefferson had written a document several years earlier which Madison was able to get passed as the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. ~*Brian Kaylor, Baptist minister, Dangerous Dogma podcast host, and author or co-author of seven books on religion and politics*

"...it is critical to uphold the founding fathers' intention to separate church and state while remembering the Church's own history. In *The Great Controversy,* Ellen White wrote about the danger of joining church and state. Her writing still provides guidance for the Church's view of religious liberty today: 'The union of the church with the state, be the degree never so slight, while it may appear to bring the world nearer to the church, does in reality but bring the Church nearer to the world.'" ~*Christina Norris, associate director of communication for the Southern Union Conference*

Stay tuned for information about the next religious liberty convention, tentatively slated for 2028.