



The United States Department of Justice Religious Liberty Commission
Minutes of the April 13, 2026 Hearing
Capstone Hearing: Religious Liberty in America: Past, Present, and Future

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) held a meeting on April 13, 2026, at the museum of the Bible in Washington, DC.

RLC Chairman, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, led the meeting in furtherance of and alignment with the RLC's charter and mission.¹

All Commission Members attended except Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Rev. Franklin Graham, and ex-Officio Commission Members Secretary Scott Turner and Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, who were unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts.

This synopsis includes key highlights from the meeting.

OPENING AND WELCOMING REMARKS

Mrs. Mary Margaret Bush, the Designated Federal Official (DFO), opened the meeting, as required by the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

Chairman Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick began the meeting and introduced Professor Helen M. Alvaré for opening remarks.

PRESENTATION TOPIC: Religious Freedom in the American Story

- **Professor Helen M. Alvaré**

¹ Additional information regarding RLC can be found at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/05/establishment-of-the-religious-liberty-commission/>.

Professor Alvare spoke about the beauty of the American Founding and commitment to religious liberty. She noted with admiration how religious liberty brings together people of diverse backgrounds in love and respect. She noted that friction between church and state is the exception, not the rule, but that it does arise. She noted that many of this friction arises because of a misunderstanding of the concept of “separation of church and state.” She outlined the beauty of religion’s contributions to education, health care, social services, and family. She then clarified the meaning of the non-establishment clause, noting that the standard does not mean that government should disfavor religion, suspect religious perspectives, or be consigned to social invisibility.

Question and answer among the Commissioners and witnesses followed.

PRESENTATION TOPIC: Religious Liberty in American History

Chairman Patrick introduced the next panel:

- **Clarence Henderson**
- **Helen Aguirre Ferré**
- **Erika Bachiochi**
- **Dr. Akshar Patel**
- **Dr. Paul Brintley**

Mr. Clarence Henderson described his experiences as a civil rights activist and his participation in the Greensboro sit ins. He explained that “Religious liberty was not incidental to the civil rights movement. It was essential to it. Churches were the meeting places. Faith was a language. Scripture was the foundation... Because the argument for equality was not simply legal. It was moral. It was grounded in the truth that all men are created equal. Not by government but by God.” Ms. Helen Aguirre Ferre spoke about her perspective observing the oppressive regimes in Nicaraguan and other South American countries and their targeting of religious liberty. She observed that religious liberty protects culture against totalitarian state ideology and thus promotes all freedoms. Ms. Erika Bachiochi followed, outlining the key role of faith and religious liberty at the foundation of the women’s suffrage movement. Dr. Akshar Patel then outlined the role of religious liberty in facilitating the flourishing of Hindu American communities. He noted that a pattern of violence and targeting of Hindu temples has arisen, without any resolution and or full investigations. He urged the Commission to recommend steps to investigate violence against Hindu communities and houses of worship. Dr. Paul Britnley closed the panel by outlining the key role of pastors in facilitating societal health and flourishing and noting the importance of freedom of religion so that clergy are free to provide pastoral care to those in need and suffering.

Question and answer among the Commissioners and witnesses followed.

PRESENTATION TOPIC: Religious Liberty and the Freedom to Serve Society

- **Heather Rice-Minus**
- **Sister Mary Elizabeth, SV**
- **Oriel Ekşi**
- **Rabbi Aaron Lipskar**

Ms. Heather Rice-Minus opened by describing the Prison Fellowship ministry, which brings faith to individuals who are incarcerated. Graduates of the program have a 6% recidivism rate, a 53.8% reduction in recidivism relative to a non-participating group with the same history. She also discussed how the ministry serves children and families who have family members in the prison system as well as leaders within the prison system. She commended federal Bureau of Prisons Director and Deputy Director for their recognition of the contributions that faith-based programs make to the success of the prison system. Sister Mary Elizabeth, SV followed, testifying to how her community's religious beliefs in the dignity and sanctity of life lead them to serve women and children in need. She shared the story of the convent being unexpectedly visited by a group of Yale football players and learning that one of the players had been born and spent his early years at the convent, which provided a safe environment for his mother in her time of need. Sister Mary Elizabeth, SV also described how a New York law threatens the ministry's ability to continue serving women with confidential and necessary care. Oriel Ekşi, managing partner at the Woolf Group, closed the panel by describing her firm's work to protect the vulnerable. She described how faith led her to overcome her experience of being trafficked as a minor, and she urged the Commission to protect the unique contributions faith makes in society for those who have suffered. Rabbi Aaron Lipskar closed by describing the work of Aleph Institute to support incarcerated individuals who seek to practice their faith in a meaningful way and often, in doing so, recover a full sense of their dignity and worth.

Question and answer among the Commissioners and witnesses followed.

DISCUSSION: Commissioner Reflections on Hearing Findings

Commissioners presented prepared remarks regarding their conclusions from the Commission's seven hearings.

Bishop Barron outlined three key points for the Commission to consider: (1) the principal enemy of religious liberty is the ideology of self-invention; (2) conscience protections for medical professionals of faith are critical; (3) federal funding to faith-based groups should not be conditioned on concessions or renunciations of religious beliefs; (4) individuals who are incarcerated pursuant to immigration violations must still have humane treatment and sacraments; and (5) the Commission should continue in some form to persevere in monitoring threats to religious liberty at home and abroad.

Eric Metaxas outlined his conclusions, which focused on (1) ideologies opposed to religious liberty; and (2) the critical role of faith in the American story.

Kelly Shackelford presented his conclusions by returning to the testimonies from everyday Americans and the recommendations they made. He noted that the rights of parents with respect to the upbringing of their children should be clarified. He recommended that any school district receiving federal money must have teacher trainings on religious liberty protections. He noted that judges demurring on questions of religious liberty is of grave concern, and he recommended that the President ensure the judges he appoints have a track record of courage and non-avoidance of controversial decisions. Kelly continued with a third point advocating for private rights of actions for individuals whose religious liberty has been violated. He closed by advocating for the Department of Justice to advocate for religious liberty on behalf of parents advocating for clearer protections for religious leaders to speak on political issues, perhaps through a test case challenging the Johnson Amendment, and for military servicemembers penalized because of religious beliefs related to vaccinations to be made whole.

Chairman Patrick noted the harm done by confusion about the proper relationship between government and faith groups.

Rabbi Soloveichik offered his closing remarks. He opened by echoing Bishop Barron's call for continuing the work of the Commission. He mentioned that, in addition to legal and policy remedies, the Commission should be committed to passing on the values of religious liberty in education. He noted that statements that the United States is too diverse to protect religious liberty for all are misguided—in fact, when the country was founded, the differences in the denominations of the Founders were significant enough that people in Europe had been killing each other over the disagreements. In the face of some debate over opening the Continental Congress in prayer, Sam Adams said he would hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue who was also a friend to his country, and a reverend was invited in and led the group in the prayer Psalm 35. The result illustrates who religion can be a positive force for united in American without denying our differences. He proposed monuments to such important unifying moments of faith in the Independence National Historic Park. He closed by noting that there are few monuments in the National sites who describe the importance of religion and religious freedom, and he recommended that some be considered.

Mrs. Allyson Ho spoke next, opening by noting the theme of courage that arose in every hearing. She echoed concerns about the need for judges who are committed to supporting and defending the Constitution even in difficult religious liberty decisions.

Dr. Ryan Anderson followed. He opened by underlining Mrs. Ho's observation about the courage of everyday Americans, many of whom were not public figures, yet did not bend the knee when persecution came to them and put them in the spotlight. He recommended that these individuals be honored for standing up with heroic courage to defend the Constitution, rather than taking the comfortable route of simply bowing in the face of pressure. Dr. Anderson noted the classical principle that a political community should celebrate and honor what it values. He noted that something should be done to honor the individuals who testified before the

Commission. He also echoed Bishop Barron's conclusion that the Commission should offer some clarity on the religious and philosophical roots of religious liberty because those fundamentals offer insights into the fitting scope of religious liberty. He noted the importance of clarifying that religious liberty isn't mere toleration—putting up with people as a matter of policy—but rather a fundamental recognition of natural rights. He emphasized the harms of laws that are unjust in the first place, not only as a matter of religious liberty. He then noted the critical role of public officials, in all branches, who have the courage to protect religious liberty. He closed by recognizing the fundamental contributions of religious liberty to social and humanitarian relief and civil rights in the country.

Pastor Paul White-Cain opened by commending President Trump's commitment to religious liberty and noting that the Faith Office is the first ever located in the West Wing, an indication of religious liberty's central role in the Trump Administration. Pastor White reflected on the moving testimony of Americans of all faiths who have experienced religious persecution and the human cost and suffering of what they've been through. She noted that much of the religious persecution comes from the government and recommended that steps be taken to ensure that the government can't weaponize against people for legally practicing their faith. She also noted the role of the United States in setting the standard for religious liberty on the international stage. She advised that federal funding opportunities for human services initiatives should be more inclusive of people of faith.

Dr. Phil McGraw reflected also on the courage of the individual witnesses who told their stories, and he noted that public discourse around religious liberty has devolved due to ideology. He urged America to return to the First Amendment, the first declaration of right. He concluded by advocating a change in the approach to religious liberty, with Americans standing up and celebrating the contributions and diversity of faith and refusing to be treated as second-class citizens because of their religion.

Vice Chair Dr. Ben Carson recounted President Reagan's words, included in the Commission's organizing document, that "Freedom was never more than one generation from extinction." He noted that religious freedom is the first freedom, and all others rise and fall with it. He closed by noting that "We cannot be the land of the free if we're not the home of the brave."

Chairman Patrick closed by stating how moved he was by the testimonies heard. He recommended that the Commission create a poster of religious liberty rights to be hung in businesses and teachers' lounges, perhaps with a hotline.

Chairman's Closing Remarks

Chairman Patrick closed by urging the Commission to continue its work and thanking all involved in the hearings for their work.

Chairman Patrick adjourned the meeting – approx. 1:37 p.m., ET

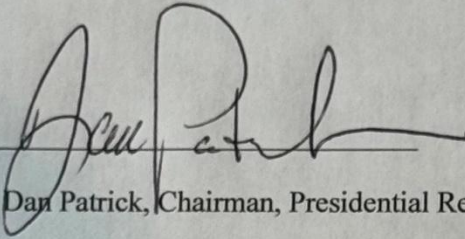
April Public Comment

Public comment submitted for the meeting includes submissions from:

1. Ben Olsen
2. Olivia Summers
3. Nik Nartowicz
4. Graham West
5. Zainab Khan
6. Lauren Cooley
7. Joset Roberts
8. Cynthia Figueroa-Lugaro
9. Steven Quinn Singleton
10. Kelly Flory
11. Dusty Tillery
12. Sarah Johnson
13. Isabella Russian
14. Rachel Deitch

Certification of Minutes

As required by the Federal Advisory Commissions Act, Commission Chairman Dan Patrick certifies these minutes by his signature below.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan Patrick', is written over a horizontal line.

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, Chairman, Presidential Religious Liberty Commission

04/25/2026

Date