

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMITTEE

Official Report

Prior to its meeting in person, the Religious Liberty Committee, via email, reviewed bills that had been submitted to the Virginia General Assembly that impinged in some way or to some degree on religious liberty to see if they warranted the committee's speaking for or against the bills. The consensus was that none of the bills warranted the committee's taking action.

Also prior to its meeting in person, the committee tentatively agreed on a topic to be discussed at our meeting—the religious liberty of American Muslims—and agreed to invite a Muslim scholar or cleric to speak to the committee. After consulting with Brent Walker (BJC) and others about a possible speaker, the chair invited Dr. Azizah al-Hibris, former professor of law at University of Richmond and founder of Karamah, an organization of Muslim women lawyers for human rights, to speak to the committee about the compatibility of Islam and religious freedom.

The Religious Liberty Committee then met on April 21, 2016, in the BGAV Building in Richmond, VA. Members present were Ellis West (chair), Barrett Owen, Mary Harris, Michael Poole, Michael Lee, Steven Pollard, Carter McNeese and Nancy Stanton McDaniel (BGAV President). Rob James (former chair of RLC) attended as a guest.

At the meeting itself, Dr. al-Hibris, along with a staff-member of Karamah, spoke to the committee and were effective in making the case that Islam, both the Koran and the actions of the prophet Muhammed, condemns the use of force as a way of promoting Islam and, therefore, that the views of Islamic radicals, such as Isis, are not representative of the views of the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world. They also talked about the various ways that American Muslims are currently being abused and discriminated against.

In the afternoon, the committee decided to submit to the annual meeting of the BGAV a resolution asking for complete and equal religious freedom for American Muslims and to invite a Muslim cleric and scholar to speak at the RLC's breakout session at the annual meeting of the BGAV in November. The committee also decided to submit a resolution to the BGAV annual meeting a resolution in honor of Brent Walker, who is retiring at the end of this year as head of the BJC. The wording of both resolutions and the selection of the Muslim speaker were to be decided on at our next meeting.

The committee also decided to begin the public posting each month on Facebook and elsewhere of passages on religious liberty from historic documents written by Baptists and other notable defenders of religious liberty, and the chair was asked to confer with Nathan White, the marketing officer for BGAV, on how this could best be done.

Although the committee scheduled a second meeting to be held in August, as it turned out, the meeting was not necessary. A draft of the resolution to be submitted to the annual meeting of the BGAV was circulated, amended, and agreed to by email, and has been submitted to the office of the executive director for publication in the Book of Reports. Also, via email, the committee agreed to invite Ammar Amonette, the Imam of the Islamic Center of Virginia, to speak at its break-out session at the annual meeting of the BGAV. Imam Amonette has accepted the committee's invitation. Finally, the committee decided not to introduce its own resolution in honor of Brent Walker but to join the Executive Board in offering such a resolution.

Thanks to the assistance of Nathan White, starting on August 1, monthly postings on the BGAV blog and elsewhere of passages on religious liberty have begun and will continue indefinitely.

Respectfully submitted,

Ellis West, Chair
Mary Harris
Paul Lane
Michael Lee
S. Carter McNeese

J. Barrett Owen
Steve Pollard
Michael Poole

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY RESOLUTION

WHEREAS we believe that all persons regardless of their religion or lack thereof should have religious freedom, provided they do not exercise it in a way that violates valid civil law or the rights of others;

WHEREAS we believe in practicing the Golden Rule, whereby persons should do unto others as they would have others do unto them;

WHEREAS we do not believe in guilt by association, but rather in judging persons on the basis of their individual beliefs and actions;

WHEREAS the religious freedom of Americans depends not just on constitutional restraints on the government, but on the willingness of individual Americans to understand and respect each other's religious beliefs and practices;

WHEREAS some religious and political leaders in America have recently advocated that American Muslims be denied their religious freedom on the alleged ground that they want the government to establish Islam and deny non-Muslims their religious freedom;

WHEREAS some religious and political leaders in America have recently called for laws that would prevent refugees, immigrants, and even visitors from entering the United States, solely because they are Muslims;

WHEREAS recently American Muslims, solely on account of their religion, have been increasingly subjected to abusive and hate-filled remarks by some ordinary Americans, talk show participants, and politicians, and to bullying, violence, vandalism, and other hate-crimes;

WHEREAS some local governments, including some in Virginia, have made it difficult, if not impossible, for Muslim congregations to obtain permits to construct mosques;

WHEREAS the overwhelming majority of American Muslims are decent, peaceful, law-abiding, and patriotic citizens who respect the moral and constitutional rights of others, including their religious liberty;

WHEREAS eminent Islamic imams, jurists, and scholars from all parts of the world have condemned religious persecution, discrimination, and vilification of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries as inconsistent with Islam's values of peace, forgiveness, and coexistence, and have done so most notably in "The Marrakesh Declaration" of Jan. 27, 2016, which called on Muslim countries to model their laws on the "Charter of Medina," which was written by the Prophet Mohammed for a multi-religious society and which affirmed the principle of religious freedom; and

WHEREAS the overwhelming majority of Muslims, both in America and elsewhere, are not terrorists but condemn the violence used by so-called Islamic jihadists as contrary to the tenets of their religion;

THEREFORE, we, the messengers to the Baptist General Association of Virginia, at its annual meeting on November 15, 2016, ask

THAT all levels of American government refrain from discriminating against Muslims, including refugees, on the basis of their religion;

THAT our religious and political leaders characterize Islam and Muslims in a way that is fair, objective, and based on how Islam is interpreted and practiced by the overwhelming majority of Muslims in this country and not just by extremists, such as ISIS;

THAT Virginia Baptists, both individuals and churches, speak out against anti-Muslim rhetoric and bigotry, learn about Islam, get to know their Muslim neighbors, meet and talk with them about their respective faiths and common concerns, such as religious liberty, and above all else show them the love of Jesus; and

THAT Virginia Baptists support the passage in Congress of the Freedom of Religion Act, which would prohibit denying refugees, immigrants, and visitors entry into the United States on the basis of their religion.