
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMITTEE

Official Report

Each year, the Religious Liberty Committee of the BGAV is charged with “reporting to the General Association annually on the nature and importance of religious liberty and the separation of church and state, citing violations in principle and practice, and suggestions for correcting same.” It is also instructed to “make available information relating to the subject with the view of safeguarding these cherished principles.” This mission has been an essential part of the uniquely Baptist witness of the BGAV from its very beginning, and the need to safeguard our cherished principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state, as well as helping churches wrestle with what this principle looks like in practice in our current context, is as vital as it has ever been.

This year, our report covers both aspects of our charge from the General Association.

Under our directive to report on religious liberty and cite violations of principle and practice, the Religious Liberty Committee notes one specific example that is part of a broader and worrying trend. This year, a case (*St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School v. Drummond*) rose to the level of the United States Supreme Court challenging the long and principled practice of religious charter schools receiving no public funds to use for general operation, including religious education; the school, as plaintiff, challenged the decision of the Oklahoma Supreme Court to withhold such funds. The US Supreme Court, in a 4-4 decision (Justice Barrett recused herself), did not find in favor of the plaintiff, allowing the decision of the state court to stand.

The BGAV has historically opposed the diversion of government funds to parochial schools, and in the Religious Liberty Committee report of 1980 was the recommendation that churches oppose “all efforts to divert funds at any government level from the support of public education to that of church-related schools.”¹ The Baptist Joint Committee, in its amicus brief on the *Drummond* case, pointed to the nation’s history of our government avoiding the funding of religious education, and explained that changing that course would “forsake a foundational constitutional commitment”; the brief stated directly, “The state may not directly fund religious instruction. That line has long preserved both faith and freedom. It should be respected here.”² And Richard Land, former chair of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, essentially concurs, as he expressed in a March 21, 2025 article in Baptist Press:

“In the present *Drummond* case, public funds would be directly funding a charter *public* school, a school operated by Catholic officials to propagate the Catholic faith. While non-Catholic students could apply and attend this school, they would be taught within a framework that promoted the Catholic faith. (Let me be clear that I would oppose a “Baptist” charter school just as vehemently as I oppose a Catholic charter school. Indeed, I would oppose it because I am a Baptist and I believe in separation of church and state.)

“What is being proposed is a public school *paid* for with public tax money. Consequently, all taxpayers, whatever their faith commitment or lack thereof, would be forced to subsidize that which they believe violates their faith affirmations... I also want desperately to maintain the wisdom of our Establishment Clause and to protect religion from public money which will lead inevitably to government interference with religion (“with the government’s shekels, sooner or later come the government’s shackles!”).”³

The 2024-2025 Religious Liberty Committee of the BGAV agrees with our 1980 forebears, our colleagues at the Baptist Joint Committee, and Dr. Land. **We urge the BGAV and its churches to continue to oppose such efforts to fund religious schools, which are engaged in activities of religious devotion and education, with public funds, as such efforts are a form of establishing religion with government funds and a violation of our abiding commitment to religious liberty and the separation of church and state.**

¹ Religious Liberty Report from the 1980 Book of Reports of the Annual Meeting of the BGAV

² <https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-04-07-St.-Isidore-v.-Drummond-bsacBJC-CCAR-CBF-ELCA-UCC-InterfaithAlliance-Episcopal-MPAC-NCJW-URJ.pdf>

³ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/first-person-should-religious-charter-schools-be-funded-by-public-tax-money/>

This particular case, and the surrounding conversation over public funding of private religious schools, takes place against the backdrop of Christian nationalism and a particular framing of our national narrative as a Christian nation. Decades-long debate over issues such as prayer in schools and the display of religious teachings (such as the Ten Commandments) in public or governmental spaces has reemerged as a major point of contention in many states. The formation of a new federal Religious Liberty Commission and efforts to abolish the Johnson Amendment point to worrying trends to withdraw guardrails that keep religion from exerting undue influence on government or government from establishing religion in inappropriate ways in public life amidst a pluralistic society. Many states continue to struggle with balancing the need for protecting vulnerable communities with the need to protect the religious liberties of faith-based organizations. Finally, the influence of Christian nationalism – which “seeks to merge Christian and American identities” and “demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian”⁴ – is gaining traction with an increasing number of American Christians.

With such attention given to issues involving religious liberty and the separation of church and state, the Religious Liberty Committee is honored to continue to promote the historic Baptist understanding of these core freedoms for all people – freedoms created not by constitution or legal decree, but by the God who creates us all – and the Committee is committed to providing resources for Virginia Baptists to encourage our understanding of these principles and equip our churches to proclaim the Good News that is found in our freedom under God’s loving provision. That freedom includes the liberty to seek God, respond to God, and embrace God, not through coercion, but through the liberty of love that Christ has shown to us. This is the historic Virginia Baptist perspective: that each person is free to worship God in whatever manner they understand best, or not worship God at all; that the State provides no favor to any religious group or privilege to any particular faith over another; that no religious expression or practice be required by the State; and that all persons of faith, or no faith at all, are equally treated by the law. This Virginia Baptist perspective parallels that of many other Baptist organizations, including the Southern Baptist Convention as reflected in its 2024 resolution “On Defending Religious Liberty.” That resolution states, “Our Christian witness is better preserved by the separation of church and state,” and resolves “that we oppose any effort to establish a state religion of any nation, including the United States of America; that we refute the idea that God has commanded any state to establish any religion or any denomination; and we reject any government coercion or enforcement of religious belief.”⁵

With these principles in mind, the Religious Liberty Committee of the BGAV has been and continues to be at work to help BGAV churches better understand and safeguard the principles of religious liberty that are part of our Virginia Baptist DNA. Activities of the committee include:

- Participation in Religious Liberty Day: Each year, on the anniversary of the enactment of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, the Religious Liberty Committee invites interested Virginia Baptists to join it in visiting the State Capitol in Richmond to meet with legislators and legislative aides, providing information on religious liberty and advocating for religious freedom. The committee is making plans to visit the Capitol again on January 16, 2025, to share Virginia Baptist perspectives on religious liberty.
- Educational Videos: For each of the last two years, the committee created and published videos that told the story of religious liberty in colonial Virginia: the story of Elder John Weatherford in 2023 and the story of the meeting of John Leland and James Madison in 2024. We are premiering at this year’s annual meeting a third video, telling the story of Thomas Woolsey and the Overmountain Men; this was made possible through the generous support of EverBless.
- Curriculum: In conjunction with the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, the committee continues its work on updating and augmenting the VBHS Heritage Tours: “Freedom Trails, Sites Associated with the Baptists and Religious Liberty.”
- Breakouts: At the 2025 BGAV Annual Meeting, the Religious Liberty Committee is offering a learning lab on approaching religious liberty from the perspective of the Golden Rule. In addition, we are hosting an information session that will showcase the three videos that have been produced for the use of BGAV churches.

The Religious Liberty Committee of the BGAV is at work resourcing BGAV churches and safeguarding the religious liberty principles that Virginia Baptists have cherished for generations. We look forward to continuing this work in 2026.

⁴ <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>

⁵ <https://www.baptistpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2-On-Defending-Religious-Liberty.pdf>

Respectfully submitted,

Adam Tyler, Chair

Sarah Amick

Rick Clore

Warren Johnson

Alan F. Livers, Jr.

Nettie Stokes

Teresa Wallace

W. Shelton Miles III, by Virtue of Office

Wayne D. Faison, by Virtue of Office