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With Religious Freedom Under Threat, Is There a Way Forward?

By Bettina Krause, Melissa Reid, and Dan Weber

On Friday, December 6, 2019, the Fairness for All Act was launched in Washington, D.C., by Congressman Chris Stewart (Utah-R), with support from several religious groups and coalitions. Fairness for All (FFA) is centered on two core beliefs: no American should lose their home or job simply for being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender; and no religious person should be forced to live, work, or serve their community in ways that violate their faith. Below is a commentary describing FFA's importance and why Adventists support this bill.

Seventh-day Adventist advocates are working to protect this vital human right within a culture that has grown skeptical of many religious freedom claims.

There was a time, not that long ago, when the idea of religious freedom was seen by almost everyone in society as a good thing, worthy of legal protection. But today this ideal — long revered as a foundational human right and a central value of the American Republic — has become tainted with controversy. In fact, within two decades, religious freedom has gone from being one of the most unifying ideas within America’s public discourse to one of its most polarizing. In opinion pieces nationwide, legal protections for religious freedom are now being called everything from “a sword for discriminating against others” to “outdated and unnecessary” in today’s pluralistic society. And for those who watch religious liberty trends or belong to a religious minority, this seismic shift in public attitudes is both unmistakable and worrying.

It doesn’t take long to locate the frontlines of this increasingly bitter culture war. It’s a dispute that is centered largely on the interplay between religious freedom protections and LGBT civil rights. Increasingly, people of faith who uphold a biblically based, traditional view of marriage and human relationships are cast as intolerant or bigoted.

But this issue is about more than just negative perceptions and labels. There are real and significant challenges ahead because, as the fabric of society shifts, so inevitably do its political and legal realms. It is this reality that raises a number of tremendous concerns for people of faith and for religious denominations that seek to operate churches, schools and other institutions while staying true to their purpose and mission.

A Lopsided Approach

For religious freedom advocates, these issues have recently taken on a new sense of urgency. In March 2019, with great fanfare and a large majority, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a piece of legislation called the Equality Act. For those who care about religious freedom, it was a wake-up call. Although it's unlikely the Equality Act will move forward in the Senate during this Congress, the significance of its passage in the House — and the overwhelming public support it generated — shouldn't be taken lightly.

Why was this so significant? For the very first time, a piece of federal legislation was voted by the House substantially expanding civil protections for LGBT individuals, but *without* also including corresponding protections for religious organizations and people of faith. In fact, not only were these basic protections missing, the Equality Act went a step further and cut off appeals to other federal laws protecting religious freedom.

The Equality Act isn't wrong in what it seeks to do — that is, to prevent harassment and discrimination toward those who face hostility in many areas of civic life today. But the Equality Act is wrong in what it fails to do — recognize and protect the foundational right of religious conscience and religious free exercise.

If federal legislation of this kind did become law, what would it mean for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its many institutions in the United States? What would it mean for other faith groups and for individuals whose religious convictions compel them to reject current social norms about sexual orientation and gender identity?

There is no doubt that such legislation if passed would, by design, leave very little protection to those whose religious beliefs are out of step with current social attitudes. It would, for instance, impact the ability of religious institutions to make hiring decisions that take applicants' religious beliefs into account. It could lead to the government or professional bodies withholding accreditation to religious schools and organizations. It could hamper the church in its ability to run community service programs or put its disaster response institutions at risk.

The mass of litigation that would inevitably arise in order to resolve these issues would be long, expensive, disruptive, and destructive.

A False Choice

Watch cable news or scroll through your social media feed and you might be

forgiven for thinking the culture war around LGBT rights and religious freedom is a zero-sum conflict. These voices calling for a “winner-take-all” approach are both forceful and strident — and yet they are mistaken.

We don’t have to choose between religious freedom protection or equal civil rights protection for everyone in the public space. In fact, our beliefs and values as a church suggest these two broad goals are not at odds, but complementary.

Yes, our commitment to religious freedom means that we will continue to assert, unequivocally, our right to express our faith and to administer our churches and institutions according to our biblical values and beliefs — including our beliefs about human relationships. We will also continue to defend the rights of individual church members to honor their conscience as employees and business owners.

Yet at the same time, should we not also affirm the right of every person to be treated with dignity and to have legal protection in secular employment, housing, credit and many other areas of life, regardless of whether we agree with their choices or beliefs? Adventists know that every human being is created in the image of God and deserves to be treated with compassion, dignity, and respect. This, too, lies at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Fairness for All

Over the past few years, Seventh-day Adventist advocates, from both the General Conference and North American Division, have worked with other groups to draft a unique piece of federal legislation. The [Fairness for All Act](#), which was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives on December 6, is a proposed law that rejects the bitter, polarized approach that has long dominated public discussion about these issues.

Fairness for All lays out strong protections for religious groups and individuals of faith. Religious organizations would continue to be able to hold internal policies and make hiring decisions that reflect their beliefs. Further, they would not be punished by the government — through loss of tax-exempt status, or accreditation for instance — for their beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity. Nor could they be found to be engaging in discriminatory actions simply because of these beliefs.

In the general secular workforce, the religious beliefs of employees would be respected by employers unless these create “significant difficulty or expense”

for the employer. For Adventists and other people of faith, this would also offer more robust protection for Sabbath accommodation than currently exists at the federal level.

At the same time, the legislation extends much-needed civil rights protections to LGBT individuals and acknowledges that they should never be subject to discrimination or harassment in secular employment, housing, or many other commonly protected areas—protections currently lacking in 29 states.

Fairness for All says, in essence, that there *is* a clear and principled way forward through this difficult cultural and legal landscape.

What Fairness for All doesn't do, however, is to signal a change in thinking on the part of the Church regarding issues of sexual orientation or gender identity. Indeed, if there was an intent to do so, there would be no need to seek to preserve the legal right to act on those beliefs and administer our schools and institutions accordingly.

The Adventist Church's beliefs on human sexuality are unequivocal and are clearly expressed in various statements and guidelines touching on [marriage](#), [sexual orientation](#), and [gender identity](#).

In all these statements there is a common thread of compassion and love; an affirmation that “all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, are loved by God” and that Adventists will never “condone singling out any group for scorn and derision, let alone abuse.”

It is this dual message—of upholding both religious freedom and human dignity — that is at the heart of the Fairness for All legislation.

Moving Forward

For many, this is not an easy topic. The public discourse around these issues is awash with pain-induced and fear-filled rhetoric. Amidst the anger and bitterness, though, we pray that Seventh-day Adventists will speak boldly with a voice of reason and kindness. A voice that echoes the loving and gentle compassion of our Savior. A voice that speaks for both the central place of religious freedom in our society and the inherent worth and dignity of every child of God.

What Is Fairness for All?

Fairness For All protects both religious institutions and people of faith from being forced to violate their conscience in the areas of sexual orientation and gender identity. While the bill itself runs nearly 70 pages, its major religious liberty protections can be distilled as follows:

- Protects Religious Education
 - Accreditation cannot be denied to schools because they uphold biblical standards.
 - Can maintain housing policies based on religious principles.
 - Cannot be penalized by federal or state governments for teaching according to their religious mission.
- Protects Religious Employers — Institutions Can Maintain Employment Standards
 - Religious employers, including schools, can continue to require their employees to uphold and adhere to the institution's religious views and practices.
- Protects Religious Employees — Passes the Work Place Religious Freedom Act
 - People of faith who need accommodations in the workplace (such as Sabbath off) get the same legal protections as people who are disabled. Currently the law allows employers to discriminate if it requires more than a minimal cost to accommodate.
 - Protects employees in the workplace who express views on marriage and other religious topics.
- Protects Houses of Worship and Other Religious Spaces
 - Houses of worship and other religiously-owned spaces cannot be required to rent or share their facilities for uses that violate their beliefs.
- Protects Small Businesses Owned by People of Faith
 - Allows owners of small businesses (less than 15 employees) to continue earning a living without being forced to provide services that violate their religious beliefs.
- Protects Healthcare Institutions
 - Healthcare providers will not be required to provide and/or perform medical procedures that violate their beliefs. However, they will still be required to treat all patients, as they currently do, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
 - Does not change any of the current protections surrounding abortion

for religious healthcare providers.

- Protects Social Service/Humanitarian Agencies
 - Agencies such as ADRA and Adventist Community Services will be protected from losing funding because they maintain religiously based hiring standards. Would continue to serve all in need regardless of religious faith or practice.
- Protects the Church's Tax-Exempt Status
 - IRS could not revoke the tax-exempt status for churches, schools and other religious organizations because of their religious beliefs and practices.

[Click here](#) to read this commentary on the NAD website; [click here](#) to read an editorial on why we should mirror Christ's approach to others.



A New Commandment

By Kyoshin Ahn

Jesus is our perfect example of the way to live in this world. While on earth, He gave His disciples a “new” commandment, that is, “love one another” just as He loved them (John 13:34, ESV). He faithfully lived out this commandment in His life and ministry. He loved people fearlessly, unconditionally, and extravagantly.

Boundless

Jesus was infamously indiscriminate in displaying His love. No exception was ever practiced. Jesus greeted all people “as children of God” (Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 186). Refusing to give in to fear, rejection, and hatred, He crossed all kinds of boundaries—political, religious, economic, ethnic, and gender — and willingly made Himself available to everyone.

Why boundless? We all fall short of God’s will and glory (Rom. 3:23). Anything that falls short of His perfection is sin. And all sins are equal to God, in that they separate us from Him. Paul’s declaration in Romans 6:23, “for the wages of sin is death,” applies to all sins. Human beings may rate sins, but Jesus does not. For Him our sins, whether big or small, place us in a place diametrically opposed to God and His grace.

Compassionate

In His display of love, He showed genuine compassion (“moved with compassion,” Matt 9:36) for all people, regardless of their social status. This expression literally means “moved in the bowel.” He felt a visceral and gut-wrenching compassion toward His children, which compelled him to take action — healing, feeding, and delivering. These life changing actions demonstrated the heart and mind of God.

With Respect

Loving one another means that we treat people with respect and dignity, as Jesus did, even if they are “different” from us. The inhumanity we display toward other members of the family of God is “our greatest sin” (White, *A Ministry of Healing*, p. 163).

To a woman who had been severely bent over for 18 years, He declared her instantaneous freedom (Luke 13:12), and conferred on her a status equal to her male counterparts when He called her a “daughter of Abraham” (verse 16). On

another occasion Jesus didn't rebuke the bleeding woman for making him "unclean" according to the Levitical law. Rather He complemented her faith (Luke 8:48).

Jesus also treated those who didn't think the way He did with respect, ultimately transforming some of their lives. As the Rich Ruler chose money over Him, Jesus still "looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21). Jesus willingly participated in a debate with Nicodemus, who questioned His teaching, eventually leading him to become one of His followers (White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 177). In fact, the most beloved passage in the Bible (John 3:16) was uttered in His engagement with Nicodemus.

Through such genuine acts of love and kindness, walls of hostility were destroyed. A bridge was built over the deep chasm of sin that separated humans from God. God's family was also reclaimed and reborn. Humanity was restored. The dignity of all persons made in the image of God was upheld. Humanity now has direct access to God and His amazing grace.

Jesus invites us today to live a life that faithfully points to and mirrors Him. Good news for the world and an opportunity for us as a church to reflect the character of His kingdom.



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