News




President Donald Trump addresses the White House Religious Liberty Commission during an event at the Museum of the Bible, Sept. 8, 2025, in Washington. (AP/Evan Vucci, File)

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One member calls for a Presidential Medal of Freedom for a baker who refused to create a wedding cake for a same-sex couple.

Another calls for court interventions by the Department of Justice on behalf of Amish parents fighting New York vaccine requirements and Catholic nuns challenging that state's requirement that they accommodate hospice patients' gender identities.

And the chair of the Religious Liberty Commission is calling for a federal hotline with this automated recording: "There is no separation of church and state."

These are just some of the recommendations that members of the advisory panel formed by President Donald Trump last year want to see included in the commission's final report.

That report is still in the works, but commissioners had an opportunity to describe their wish lists during their most recent meeting in April. There was little dissent as the commissioners, most drawn from Trump's base of conservative Christian supporters, covered the items they want in the report.

Their ideas reflect the prevailing perspectives on the definition of religious liberty among many conservative Catholic and evangelical activists: increasing avenues for religious expression in public schools; expanding opportunities for faith-based organizations to receive public money; and allowing for religious-based exemptions in areas ranging from labor law to classroom lessons to healthcare mandates.

Such views have also been reflected in Supreme Court decisions issued in recent years by its conservative majority.

**Commission criticized for narrow views**

Critics of the commission say it embodies a one-sided perspective of Trump's supporters and is threatening a well-established constitutional separation of church and state, despite the chair's claims.

A lawsuit by a progressive interreligious coalition argues that the commission fails to comply with federal law requiring advisory panels to feature diverse members and viewpoints.

The lawsuit echoes criticism that most commissioners are conservative Christian clerics and commentators; one is an Orthodox Jewish rabbi. The coalition says members have asserted that America is specifically a Judeo-Christian or Christian nation and notes that most commission meetings took place at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, an institution with Christian leadership.

The Republican administration is asking a federal court to dismiss the lawsuit. The government is citing legal technicalities and contending the law does not define how a commission should be fairly balanced or whose viewpoints should be represented.

Another entity created by Trump — the Task Force to Eradicate Anti-Christian Bias — issued a report saying Christians faced discrimination under the administration of Democratic President Joe Biden in areas such as education, tax law and prosecution of anti-abortion protesters. Progressive groups said that report failed to document systemic discrimination, focused on causes favored by conservative Christians and amounted to advocacy rather than an investigation.

In a further interlocking of Trump-related initiatives, several members of the Religious Liberty Commission are scheduled to take part in a May 17 prayer event marking the country's upcoming 250th birthday. Several also participated in a recent Bible-reading marathon staged largely at the Museum of the Bible.

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**Harmony and tension within the commission**

The commission has mostly featured agreement among members, with one dramatic exception. One commissioner, Carrie Prejean Boller, was ousted in February after a contentious hearing on antisemitism.

Commission Chair Dan Patrick said Prejean Boller sought to "hijack" the hearing, in which she had sharp exchanges with witnesses about the definition of antisemitism and defended commentator Candace Owens, denying her record of antisemitic statements. Prejean Boller, a Catholic, contended she was wrongly ousted for expressing her beliefs.

In other hearings, witnesses described how they defied workplace regulations that they said conflicted with their conservative religious values on gender, abortion,

COVID-19 vaccines and more. Some said they were prevented, at least temporarily, from displaying a religious symbol at work or trying to sing a Christian song at a school talent show.

At the hearing devoted to antisemitism, Jewish witnesses spoke of being harassed and threatened at campus pro-Palestinian protests against Israel. The commission has also heard from some Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and other witnesses.

Even so, critics said the commission mostly focused on conservative Christian and right-leaning political grievances.

The Rev. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, president of the progressive Interfaith Alliance, one of the groups suing over the commission's composition, said the panel's omissions are as significant as what it focuses on.

He said the commission has failed adequately to address such issues as anti-Muslim efforts in Texas and elsewhere, and also the rise of antisemitism on the right, not just the left.

**Separation of church and state debate**

Raushenbush said he is especially worried about the commission chair's challenging the very notion of church-state separation.

Patrick, a Republican who is the Texas lieutenant governor, repeatedly denounced a concept that is embedded in Supreme Court precedent.

"We need to say there is no separation of church and state," Patrick said at the April meeting. "That's a lie." He suggested printing "a million bumper stickers" to that effect.

No one at the commission meeting disagreed.

Trump made similar comments at a prayer event at the White House in 2025. "They say separation between church and state," Trump said. "I said, all right, let's forget about that for one time."

While the phrase "separation of church and state" does not appear in the Constitution, 20th-century decisions by the Supreme Court cited Thomas Jefferson's description of the First Amendment as creating "a wall of separation between church

and state." The court applied the First Amendment's prohibition of any church "establishment" to the states in addition to the federal government, citing the 14th Amendment's ban on states denying citizens' rights.

Courts have since wrestled with how to balance freedom of religion and freedom from government-sponsored religion.

**Concerns touch on schools, vaccines, workplaces and more**

Patrick has advocated for prayer and Ten Commandments postings in public schools.

"I don't have any malice towards anyone that doesn't believe in any type of faith," Patrick told fellow commissioners. "That's fine. That's what America is about. But these organizations that are pushed by some ideology and pushed by someone's bank account who wants to remove God from our country? We need to push back."

On other issues, various commissioners called for requiring schools and workplaces to post notices of the rights of religious expression and exemptions.

Some called for restoring full pay and pension benefits for military service members who were discharged for refusing COVID-19 vaccines.

Bishop Robert Barron of the Catholic Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, called for enabling religious groups such as Catholic Charities to receive federal money without compromising on traditional church teachings about the family.

He also said Catholic immigrants in detention should have humane treatment and access to sacraments and that immigration agents should not disrupt worship services in enforcement actions. The administration last year eliminated a policy against immigration enforcement in sanctuaries, which other religious leaders said should not occur at any time.

Kelly Shackelford, president and chief executive officer of the legal organization First Liberty Institute, called for new requirements that governments pay all legal bills if they lose a religious liberty case. He said many individuals lack the money to challenge the government in court.

"That would be a huge shifting of power in favor of citizens," he said.