

What does religious freedom mean today?

Given the strong foundation of religious liberty built by those who established our nation and the history of painful challenges to that liberty, where do we look now? What are we as leaders to do to ensure religious freedom and liberty? What guidelines might we consider for Religious Freedom?

Not an excuse to do anything in the name of religion. “Religious liberty does not mean persons can do whatever they please,” maintains Molly Marshall. “We live in community as citizens in a democracy that has both legal and social obligations.... Thus, the limits of religious liberty have to do with whether or not its exercise causes harm to another.”

Never a pretense for discrimination. Religious freedom has to do precisely with religious freedom. People have the right to worship where and how they choose without government interference. Marshall believes “the principle of religious liberty, as set forth in the First Amendment, is being hijacked by religious leaders and others who give it a narrow sectarian meaning that argues for personal privilege and concomitant discrimination.”

Doesn't mean religious comfort. Corey Fields says, “Being required to conduct your business fairly and within commerce regulations does not constitute the loss of freedom or religious persecution.” He wonders why the business owners who don't want to offer their services to some people on the basis of principle are quite willing to do business with those violating other tenets of faith ... American Christians tend to confuse criticism with persecution

The calling of Christians in a pluralistic world ~ Biblical prophets warned about the danger of a sense of religious superiority. Some of Jesus's harshest words were directed to proud and intolerant religious people. Our God is larger than any human understanding of who God is. Therefore, Christians are called to resist abridging the freedom of those whose understanding of God varies from our own. It is increasingly unlikely religious leaders serve where they are surrounded only by those who share their understanding of faith. The U.S. has long been a nation of diverse religious traditions, but many of us have experienced just the denominational variations of Christianity, often living where one strong tradition shaped the religious ethos of the region. For others, Will Herberg's classic book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955), describes the shape of the religious world they have experienced. Today's world is notable for the presence of people practicing a great range of world religions as well as a rapidly growing group who claim no religion. This different world does not mean the uniqueness of Christian witness should be forgotten. Christians are still resolved to make an active and sometimes distinctive witness in society. But Christians who know genuine religious freedom do not feel the need to use public laws and institutions in a way that violates the religious freedom of others who don't share their faith or profess any faith. ~ **Lewis Center for Church Leadership**

Learn about District Listening Sessions

A diverse group of representatives from United Methodist advocacy groups with contrasting views and bishops from around the world has collaborated on a proposed agreement for the separation of The United Methodist Church (UMC) that has the unanimous support of all the parties involved. The proposed agreement, the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation, was achieved on December 17, 2019. District Listening Sessions on the Protocol have been ongoing with more scheduled for the coming months.

If you are interested in learning more about this proposed legislation, districts are setting up sessions to discuss:

March 9 at 6:30 p.m. **South Hill UMC**, 105 Franklin St, South Hill 23970 (all welcome).

March 11 at **Annandale United Methodist Church** (with the Rev. Tom Berlin and the Rev. Keith Boyette) 6935 Columbia Pike, Annandale, Va. 22003 Clergy Session: 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.; Laity: 7:00-9:00 p.m.; **Mt. Laurel UMC**, 8077 Newbill School Rd, Clover, Va. 24534. (all welcome)

For a complete list of these sessions, visit: <https://vaumc.org/pages/news/2020news/protocol-sessions>.

Mission Encounter set for July

Are you looking to learn more about issues important to you, your family and your church? Are you seeking to grow spiritually as you come upon stories, Scripture and information that may help you deal with these issues? You are invited to Mission Encounter, **July 24-26**, at Smith Mountain Lake. The United Methodist Women (UMW) and the Board of Global Ministries work together in creating this weekend event, providing important studies of interest and purpose. One continuing education credit for full participation in the weekend is offered and the registration fee is all inclusive with meals and lodging. Study books are typically a nominal fee and can be ordered through the UMWmissionresources.org.

You may find a listing of study offerings at <https://vaumc.org/pages/news/2020news/missionencounter2020>

This event is highly recommended for all who work or volunteer in children's or youth ministry, mission ministry, clergy, UMW, United Methodist Men, and anyone who wants to learn more and grow deeper in their understanding of how faith and commitment to a just and peaceful world are important.

Registration will be available soon. For more information contact Darlene Runalduie, dean of Mission Encounter, at darrunalduie@gmail.org.