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Putting faith in focus — and finding middle ground



Mark Hicks, [The Detroit News](#)

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(Photo: Viviana Pernot / Special to *The Detroit News*)

Detroit— As minorities and religious groups clash over hot-button issues across the U.S., more work can be done to protect everyone’s rights, experts said Tuesday.

“Part of the American dream is finding that middle,” said Frank Ravitch, a professor and Walter H. Stowers Chair of Law and Religion at Michigan State University Law School. “It is finding common ground to protect everybody: to protect people of faith, to protect members of the LGBT community and, when necessary, to work very hard together to compromise.”

Exploring challenges facing religious freedom and expression was the focus of [an interfaith conference](#) that drew more than 300 guests to SS. Peter and Paul Jesuit Church in Detroit on Tuesday.

The event comes as religion-based legal cases grab the spotlight and raise questions about the extent of beliefs embraced by a person, group or institution.

“Religious liberty secures the primacy of what is truly human,” Detroit Catholic Archbishop Allen Vigneron told the crowd.

The event sponsored by the J. Reuben Clark Law Society Detroit Chapter and Michigan Catholic Conference included a host of faiths including Roman Catholics; Muslims; Sikhs; Antioch, Russian and Armenian Orthodox; Jewish; Seventh-day Adventist; and Buddhist.

The conference evolved from plans by Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officials to work with Catholic and other religious leaders in southeast Michigan, said Elder Daniel Dunnigan, who is involved with the group’s churches in the state and moderated a question and answer session Tuesday.

The Trump administration is allowing more employers to opt out of providing birth control to women, claiming religious or moral objections, and has issued new rules that incrementally roll back President Barack Obama's health care law.

The Supreme Court also is weighing whether a baker who objects to same-sex marriage on religious grounds can refuse to make a wedding cake for a gay couple. The case asks the High Court to consider the religious rights of the baker against the couple's right to equal treatment under the law.

Groups such as Alliance Defending Freedom and Family Research Council also noted a policy guidance that the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service [recently issued](#) that addresses discrimination based on beliefs on marriage and sexuality. The guidance resolves threats inspectors made against a family-owned Michigan meat packing facility regarding placing religious material concerning marriage in the business' break room, the groups said.

"Nationally, a lot of individuals and organizations are feeling a bit of pressure, encroachment on traditional religious freedom," Dunnigan said.

Religious freedom includes citizens' expression and institutions setting practices, said Elder Von Keetch, executive director in the public affairs department for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

However, he pointed out that "our expectations for unfettered religious freedoms have to be tempered ... because it overlaps with what we have understood for decades to be civil rights."

Speaking near ornate depictions of Biblical scenes while the diverse attendees sat in pews, some panelists noted the challenge in balancing beliefs about contraception and worship accommodations and other controversial issues with respecting the rights of others.

"There is no getting around the fact that these issues are genuinely difficult," said Christopher Lund, an associate professor at Wayne State University Law School.

Some of the largest threats to religious freedom in the U.S. today are indifference, hate and fear, said Elizabeth Clark, associate director in the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University Law School.

"If people are being targeted because of their religious beliefs instead of their actions ... that violates the principles of religious freedom," said Clark, who has also testified before Congress on the topic.

The forum left Lydia Stumpf, who joined a group of mothers from Oakland County for the event, with more hope about how religious rights are addressed.

“In protecting that, we are protecting all of the other liberties we enjoy,” she said. “The controversies distract us.”

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