

Freedom, Family, and Faith: Introduction to IRF Summit 2026

Katrina Lantos Swett

Katrina Lantos Swett opened the 2026 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit by welcoming participants and highlighting the significance of the global coalition gathered to defend freedom of religion or belief. She announced the upcoming IRF dinner themed “Religious Freedom: Democracy at Risk,” featuring speakers such as former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Paula White-Cain, former EU Special Envoy Ján Figel, and Moriko Hori of the Women’s Federation for World Peace International. She reflected on the origins of the IRF Summit, conceived by Ambassador Sam Brownback, noting that what began as an ambitious idea has quickly become “the most important and consequential gathering of religious freedom leaders, advocates, and experts from around the globe.” She described the current moment as both “the best of times” and “the worst of times,” observing that while the movement for global religious freedom has unprecedented momentum, more people than ever live under regimes that restrict or repress their most basic rights of conscience. She highlighted two prisoners of conscience adopted by the summit—Pastor Jin of China and Faizullah Asimov of Uzbekistan—and affirmed that the IRF community answers the question “Am I my brother’s keeper?” with a resounding yes.

Ambassador Sam Brownback

Ambassador Sam Brownback followed by emphasizing the global nature of the movement and the profound threat it poses to authoritarian regimes. He stated that dictators fear religious freedom because it represents “the heart of freedom—a soul choosing its own course for this life and beyond.” He argued that communist, authoritarian, and totalitarian governments attack this right because they know that people of faith often stand up to oppression with courage rooted in spiritual conviction. Brownback described these individuals as living “behind enemy lines,” carrying within them the spirit of God and testifying through their lives of a different, freer way. He characterized the struggle for religious freedom as a defining conflict of the age, asserting that oppressive regimes fear the moral power of faith more than military might. Brownback concluded by sharing that the idea for the annual IRF Summit came to him during prayer in November 2020, affirming that “God answers prayer,” and expressing hope that the summit would continue to be guided by divine influence as participants work to advance freedom for all.

Pastor Paula White-Cain: Commitment to Global Religious Freedom

Pastor Paula White-Cain expressed gratitude for the IRF Summit and described her lifelong commitment to defending freedom of belief. She has traveled to nearly 140 countries and witnessed both the beauty of worship and the suffering of those persecuted for their faith. She noted her current role as Senior Adviser to the White House Faith Office, where religious liberty remains the top priority.

The Moral Center of Religious Freedom

She praised the summit’s nonpartisan spirit and grounded its mission in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She emphasized that freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is a fundamental human right—not a privilege granted by governments. Protecting this right means defending the dignity of every person and their ability to live, worship, and raise families without fear.

Global Threats and Human Cost

White-Cain highlighted severe violations of religious freedom worldwide, including repression of Uyghurs and Tibetans in China, attacks on Christians in Nigeria, persecution of Bahá'ís and other minorities in Iran and Yemen, and rising hostility toward Jewish communities. Drawing on her work in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she described staggering death tolls and ongoing violence, stressing that behind every statistic is a family, a community, and a life forever changed.

Principles for Action

She outlined three commitments for advancing religious freedom:

1. **Challenge governments** that restrict worship, criminalize conversion, or weaponize blasphemy laws.
2. **Defend religious freedom universally**, not only for one's own community.
3. **Remind the world** that societies flourish when freedom of belief is protected for all.

She also reflected on past efforts—including the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and the Abraham Accords—as examples of effective international cooperation.

Hope and Collective Responsibility

White-Cain closed by reminding advocates that their work is personal and urgent. Defending religious liberty protects human dignity and can change lives. She insisted that civil society, diplomacy, and truth are powerful tools, and that united action can bring real consequences for persecutors. She urged the summit to continue building a broad coalition to advance religious freedom worldwide, calling it “the cornerstone” of human dignity.

Temuulen Togochoog's Remarks: A Family's Asylum Journey and a Commitment to Advocacy

Temuulen Togochoog, a Southern Mongolian activist, explained that her parents fled Southern Mongolia to seek asylum in the United States—her father arriving in 1998 and her mother in 2001. Her father founded the Southern Mongolian Action Center and has advocated for ethnic minority rights in China since the late 1990s. After accompanying him to the United Nations at age fifteen, she committed herself to continuing his mission and hopes to inspire a new generation of youth advocates to defend cultural and religious freedom.

The Richness of Mongolian Cultural Identity

She described the beauty and uniqueness of Southern Mongolian culture, emphasizing its sacred vertical script, the art of Mongolian calligraphy, and globally recognized musical traditions such as throat singing, long song, and the horsehead fiddle. She highlighted traditional clothing, jewelry, and headpieces as further expressions of a culture that has preserved generational wisdom for centuries. These cultural elements, she stressed, are deeply tied to identity, spirituality, and community.

Systematic Cultural and Religious Repression by the CCP

Togochoog detailed the Chinese Communist Party's long-standing efforts to suppress Mongolian culture and religion, particularly since the Cultural Revolution. She explained that the CCP views religious expression—especially shamanism and Buddhism—as a threat to its authoritarian control. As a result, sacred temples have been destroyed, monks and religious figures persecuted, and religious texts and art

eliminated. Portraits of the Dalai Lama have been replaced with images of Xi Jinping, and monks and nuns are forced into political re-education. Although China has rebuilt a few temples in recent years, she described these as hollow gestures that do not restore genuine religious freedom.

Personal Loss and the Global Reach of Oppression

She shared the emotional toll of exile, noting that she has been unable to attend major family events, including funerals, hospitalizations, and weddings. For a culture where family and community are central, this absence causes profound pain. She emphasized that the CCP's oppressive reach extends far beyond China's borders, affecting diaspora communities and severing family ties even from across the world.

A Call to Protect Cultural and Religious Freedom

Togochog warned that the CCP's repression threatens not only Mongolian culture but global peace and diversity. By eliminating cultural and religious pluralism, she argued, the CCP is engaging in cultural genocide to maintain its authoritarian regime. Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s reminder that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," she urged people everywhere to unite in defending cultures facing oppression and to work toward a future where all can freely practice their spirituality and preserve their heritage.

Global Democracies' Responsibility: Panel Discussion

Global democracies should prioritize international religious freedom commitments. The panel discussed this issue, featuring former U.S. Special Advisor Knox Thames, scholar Melissa Rogers, ACLJ executive director Jordan Sekulow, and former UN Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed.

Summary of Knox Thames' Remarks: A New Kind of Multifaith Movement

Knox Thames opened by noting how remarkable it is to gather in a genuinely multifaith space—something that barely existed when he began this work 25 years ago. Despite differing theological, philosophical, and political backgrounds, participants are united in defending freedom of religion or belief for all. He highlighted the growth of global advocacy networks over the past decade and the strength of international human-rights standards, especially Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which he described as the "soul" of the human-rights system.

An Inflection Point for the Movement

Thames cautioned that the movement for international religious freedom is operating outside historical norms and now faces extraordinary challenges. Global instability is rising, while political and financial support for human-rights work is declining. Persecution continues to affect people of every faith tradition. At the same time, governments in Europe and the United States are shifting back toward hard-interest foreign policy priorities. He argued that this moment requires serious reflection and strategic adaptation.

The Need for Nonpartisan, Principled Advocacy

He urged the community to keep religious freedom a nonpartisan priority. By "nonpartisan," he did not mean disengaged from political realities, but rather principled—willing to work with every administration and to praise or critique any political party based on actions, not allegiance. He

acknowledged that in every administration, words and deeds sometimes fail to align. A principled movement, he said, must celebrate when the “other side” gets it right and challenge its own side when it falls short.

Innovation in a Time of Declining Resources

Thames warned that persecution is evolving, and advocates cannot rely on old strategies. He invoked a quote from Nobel Prize–winning chemist Ernest Rutherford: “We haven’t got the money, so we have to think.” With political and financial support shrinking, the movement must become more creative, collaborative, and strategic. He emphasized that in democracies, public voices still matter, and advocates must use them with purpose and wisdom.

Preparing for Practical Solutions

He concluded by encouraging the audience to discern the moment and respond with renewed energy. He introduced the panel as an opportunity to think practically about how to ensure that freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief remains a global priority rather than a historical anomaly.

Melissa Rogers: Building Broad, Persistent, and Strategic Coalitions

Melissa Rogers emphasized that the most effective advocacy for freedom of religion or belief comes from broad, diverse coalitions. While smaller or single-issue groups have value, she encouraged advocates to continually seek the widest possible partnerships across faiths and beliefs. Broad coalitions, she noted, are both louder and more influential.

She stressed the importance of “pleasant persistence.” One meeting with government officials is never enough; progress requires repeated engagement, ongoing communication, and patience with the realities of government schedules. Rogers also highlighted the need to balance big-picture goals with incremental steps. Advocates should articulate the overarching principles they seek to advance while also identifying smaller, achievable actions that demonstrate progress and build momentum.

Ahmed Shaheed: Multi-Level Engagement and the Impact of Speaking Out

Ahmed Shaheed drew on his experience as UN Special Rapporteur for Iran and later for Freedom of Religion or Belief to describe the tools democratic governments can use to influence change. He emphasized the importance of multi-level engagement—working simultaneously with government officials, parliamentarians, civil-society groups, and grassroots actors. Democracies possess this layered capacity, and when these actors coordinate with UN mechanisms, their impact is significantly strengthened.

Shaheed explained that speaking out on behalf of prisoners of conscience has both subjective and objective effects. Individuals in detention consistently report feeling safer and more hopeful when their cases are raised publicly. Governments also respond differently when they know the world is watching. Although change may be incremental, he stressed that without such interventions, conditions almost always worsen. Persistence, coordinated advocacy, and consistent pressure remain essential tools for protecting vulnerable individuals and advancing freedom of belief.

Jordan (ACLU): Why Religious Liberty Matters for Security, Diplomacy, and Public Engagement

Jordan emphasized that countries protecting religious liberty—where individuals can choose, change, or reject a faith without fear—tend to be strong allies of the United States. Such nations share human-rights values, cooperate at the United Nations, and contribute to global security. He contrasted this with countries where religious practice is forced underground, noting that the ACLJ has worked with UN partners, including Ahmed Shaheed and Bill’s office, to save Christian pastors from execution in such environments.

He explained that personal stories are essential for engaging the American public. Graphic images of ISIS atrocities awakened many to the scale of global persecution, far beyond the minor discrimination some experience domestically. When advocates highlight individual families, spouses, or survivors, people begin to care about countries they previously ignored. Jordan stressed that the ACLJ defends religious freedom for all—not only Christians or Jews—and that storytelling remains one of the most powerful tools for mobilizing support.

He closed with an example from Israel: helping a Palestinian Christian widow escape Gaza the day before a major conflict. That rescue demonstrated that advocacy can save lives, not just win legal arguments. He argued that robust religious liberty strengthens a nation’s global reputation and aligns with the moral obligations of many faith traditions.

Melissa Rogers: Why Political Leaders Should Listen to Faith Communities

Melissa Rogers argued that policymakers must hear from religious groups because religion shapes every dimension of human life and is central to understanding global events. She stressed the importance of having officials in senior government roles who understand faith dynamics and religious-freedom issues, both domestically and internationally.

She also emphasized that democracies must lead by example. Protecting religious freedom for everyone—equally and consistently—strengthens democratic institutions, reinforces the rule of law, and supports programs such as refugee resettlement. Rogers noted that defending religious liberty at home is inseparable from promoting it abroad; credibility requires integrity.

Ahmed Shaheed: Global Stakes and the Power of Common Ground

Ahmed Shaheed explained that religious repression is systemic, widespread, and deeply intertwined with global crises such as protracted conflicts and refugee displacement. Because religion often becomes entangled in conflict, violations of religious freedom can prolong violence and make resolution more difficult.

He emphasized that the most effective advocacy involves multi-level engagement—governments, parliaments, civil society, and grassroots actors working together. When these groups coordinate with UN mechanisms, their impact increases significantly. Shaheed noted that speaking out on behalf of prisoners of conscience has real effects: detainees feel safer, and governments behave differently when they know the world is watching.

He highlighted the importance of finding shared goals rather than remaining in polarized positions. As an example, he cited the successful UN effort—supported by U.S. leadership—to develop a common framework for addressing incitement and discrimination. Durable progress, he argued, comes from building consensus around universal rights.

Elder Eric Baxter's Remarks: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

A Personal Encounter With Suffering

Elder Eric Baxter opened with heartfelt gratitude for those defending religious freedom, especially for the oppressed and imprisoned. He recalled an experience as a young missionary in Saint Petersburg, Russia, when a war-weary man confronted him with the anguished question: *"Where is God when children are torn apart by bombs, women raped, or men maimed?"* Baxter admitted that his youthful faith was untested, and the man's raw honesty pierced him deeply. He explained that he could never condemn someone who looks at the world's suffering and despairs of God. Yet he expressed profound gratitude for people who face injustice directly and still perceive God's presence amid suffering.

Lesson One: Faith Must Come First

Baxter shared that his own faith endured because he had learned from courageous believers who found meaning in suffering and hope in darkness. He argued that for religious freedom to flourish, vibrant personal faith must come first. Legal protections, historical arguments, and government support are important, but they cannot replace the sustaining power of genuine belief. He urged religious communities not to neglect foundational spiritual practices—studying scripture, praying, meditating, and worshiping together—because these cultivate humility, love, service, and the conviction that all people are children of God deserving dignity and respect. If religion becomes merely political, he warned, there is nothing distinctive left to defend.

Lesson Two: We Need Each Other's Light

Baxter emphasized that religious freedom is strengthened when believers of different traditions stand together. As a religious-liberty lawyer, he said his own faith has been deepened by the devotion of Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Zoroastrians. He noted that protecting the rights of one group protects the rights of all.

A Shared Calling to Relieve Suffering

Baxter concluded by invoking a teaching from the Christian New Testament: pure religion is to care for the vulnerable. He argued that only a faith rooted in compassion and service can ultimately confront the reality of suffering. He urged the audience to strengthen their own faith and to stand side by side in defending every person's right to pursue their beliefs according to conscience. He closed with a blessing of gratitude for all who lead this work.

Beyond the List – Sanctions, Strategy, and Solutions:

Strengthening the Global Accountability Toolkit for Religious Freedom

The session opened with a challenge to view the discussions not merely as information but as a practical toolkit for shaping a new world—one where victims of religious persecution are restored and accountability deters future abuses. Because of the sensitive nature of the panelists' work, the first portion of the session was held off the record to ensure privacy. Participants were encouraged to speak directly with panelists before sharing any information publicly.

Moderator Cole Durham: Purpose and Focus

Moderator Cole Durham explained that the panel aimed to explore the practical use of global religious-freedom toolkits. Some panelists would describe how they have applied these tools in real-world situations, while others would explain the tools themselves. Due to limited time, formal introductions were skipped so the panel could move directly into substantive presentations.

Kirsten Lavery (USCIRF): Strengths and Gaps in the CPC System

Kirsten Lavery outlined the role of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. USCIRF monitors global religious-freedom conditions and provides policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

CPC Designations

She explained the system of **Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs)**—the world’s worst violators of religious freedom. While CPC designations effectively spotlight abuses, they often fail to produce meaningful consequences. Since 1998, there have been 165 CPC designations across 17 countries, yet most administrations rely on “double-hatted sanctions,” meaning they claim existing sanctions already fulfill the law’s requirements. About one-quarter of cases involve waivers, usually for national-security reasons.

Lack of Consequences

Lavery noted that **unique, direct consequences** have occurred in fewer than 4% of cases. Only six times have CPC designations resulted in new sanctions or binding agreements. She argued that this weakens the system’s effectiveness and called for reforms, including binding agreements with clear benchmarks and targeted sanctions against specific officials responsible for violations.

She concluded that **visibility alone is not enough**. Naming violators must be paired with persistent messaging and real consequences—whether punitive or constructive—to drive meaningful change.

Stephen Osemwegie (Nigeria): Beyond the List—Urgent Need for Action

Stephen Osemwegie argued that listing Nigeria as a CPC is insufficient given the scale of violence. He described widespread attacks on Christians and Muslims who reject extremism, noting that more than 100,000 people have been killed since 2009 and 11 million have been displaced. He rejected claims that the crisis is driven primarily by climate change, emphasizing its clear religious and ideological dimensions.

Personal Testimonies

He shared stories from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, including a young woman who survived by hiding in a cave for a month. He highlighted the work of Reverend Ezekiel Dachomo, who conducts mass burials weekly in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. Osemwegie reported that **19,100 churches have been burned** since 2009 and that attacks continue with demands to convert or die.

Call for Stronger Measures

He urged the United States to take stronger action, including recognizing the Fulani militia as a terrorist organization. He stressed that Nigeria is now the **deadliest country in the world for Christians**, with

more deaths than the rest of the world combined. Listing Nigeria as a CPC is only the first step; meaningful intervention is urgently needed.

Katie Adamson (U.S. State Department): Visa Restrictions for Religious-Freedom Violators

Katie Adamson outlined a new U.S. visa-restriction policy targeting individuals responsible for violations of religious freedom abroad. Under this policy, anyone who directs, authorizes, supports, or participates in such violations—along with their immediate family members—may be barred from entering the United States. Although the policy prioritizes countries designated as **Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs)**, it applies globally.

She explained that the State Department uses Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act to deny entry when an individual's presence could have serious foreign-policy consequences. Another provision, Section 212(a)(2)(G), allows visa refusals for foreign officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom. Adamson emphasized that these tools are powerful but require accurate information. She urged advocates to submit full names and dates of birth of perpetrators to religiousfreedom@state.gov, noting that all submissions are confidential.

Ambassador Robert Řehák (Article 18 Alliance): Sanctions, Solidarity, and New Tools

Ambassador Řehák reflected on his own experience under communist repression and argued that perpetrators—not victims—should feel fear. He described sanctions as an essential tool for creating accountability, though they should be paired with dialogue and long-term strategies. He encouraged greater cooperation among democracies through platforms such as the **Article 18 Alliance**, which now includes 43 countries.

Řehák urged innovation in accountability mechanisms, including the use of AI to detect early warning signs of persecution and the sanctioning of religious leaders who incite hatred or violence. He cited the European Union's sanctions on Patriarch Kirill for supporting Russia's aggression in Ukraine as an example. He closed with a personal story about helping secure the release of Nigerian atheist Mubarak Bala, emphasizing that every policy tool must ultimately serve real individuals in danger.

Zo Tum Hmung (Burma Research Institute): Severe Persecution of Christians in Burma

Zo Tum Hmung presented findings from a new report documenting severe violations of religious freedom against Christians in Burma (Myanmar). Although Burma has been designated a **Country of Particular Concern** since 1999, he noted that no meaningful action has been taken under the International Religious Freedom Act.

He described the worsening situation since the 2021 military coup, which has targeted ethnic and religious minorities, especially Christians in Chin State. Key findings include widespread displacement, destruction of churches, and targeted killings. His data showed **343 Christian buildings destroyed, 249 Christians killed**, and entire villages burned between 2021 and 2022. He urged the United States to condemn these attacks, hold hearings, and take concrete action rather than relying solely on designations.

Ambassador Řehák (Closing Reflection): Coordinated Global Action

In closing, Ambassador Řehák praised the United States for its leadership on CPC designations but stressed that coordinated international action is essential. When multiple countries speak together, he argued, abusive governments face greater pressure and reputational costs. He encouraged multilateral cooperation to address crises in places like Nigeria and Burma, emphasizing that joint action is more effective than isolated national responses.