

Iowans rally for religious liberties at state Capitol

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(Photo: Des Moines Register/William Petroski)

About 100 Iowans of varying faiths rallied for religious freedom at the Iowa Capitol on Monday, saying their beliefs bind them together more than separate their differences.

One of the speakers warned that religious liberties are under attack and outright hostility toward religion is on the verge of becoming mainstream in the United States.

The bipartisan event was unusual for a Statehouse forum because it didn't promote any pending legislation, even though the issue of religious liberties has frequently been in the news in relation to abortion and health care, same-sex marriage and other issues. The primary organizer was state Sen. Jake Chapman, R-Adel, who said his goal was to be welcoming and open to people of all faiths. The event's date coincided with the birth

date of Thomas Jefferson, who authored the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom that inspired the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Chapman noted.

Besides Chapman and state Sen. Jeff Danielson, D-Cedar Falls, the speakers included Baljit Singh Viridi of Des Moines, who practices the Sikh religion; the Rev. Sarai Rice, a Presbyterian who is executive director of the Des Moines Area Religious Council; and Eric Andersen, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and senior associate dean at the University of Iowa Law School.

Danielson told the audience they should celebrate their freedom to assemble. In many countries, a similar event would result in people being jailed or even killed, he said. And while their liberties include the right to practice their religion, it also includes what is sometimes a gray area to be free from religion, he added.

"From time to time we are reminded that part of our freedom is not perfect," Danielson said. "It is up to those of us in this room to work together and make it more perfect. Our differences are interesting, but our common goals matter more."

Viridi said Sikhs have felt welcome in Iowa, explaining that Iowa churches and colleges have invited them to visit and explain their faith. But he also said some American Sikhs suffered after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks because of their appearance — which includes a beard and a turban for men — and because of a lack of knowledge about their religion.

"It is positive. Over time, changes have come," Viridi said, noting that the U.S. military has honored Sikhs' religious customs. Respect and the pursuit of equality are things that both the First Amendment and the Sikh faith have in common, he added.

Rice, of the Des Moines Area Religious Council, said the organization is inter-faith, and it manages a food pantry for the greater Des Moines area out of concern and care for faith traditions.

"We see freedom of religion everywhere we look in this country," said Rice, noting that Iowa people of faith include Hispanic Catholics, Sikhs, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Baptists, Muslims and many others.

Iowa law professor Andersen said religious exercise in our society has always attracted some degree of controversy, but this is a moment when that controversy has boiled over in ways never seen in his lifetime.

"We are at a moment when not just disagreement with some religious beliefs, but outright hostility toward religion itself, is on the verge of becoming mainstream," Andersen said. "Religion, like every other system of belief, has always had its harsh critics, of course. In a free country, religion needs to take its lumps just like everything else. But our perception is that criticism of religion may be taking on a new dimension in size, character, and legal consequence. It is beginning to feel not just like ardent, honest disagreement, but as an attack on the concept of religious liberty itself. If that is true, it is bad news not only for me. It is also bad news for you."

One of the surest ways to create deep social strife is to silence people on the basis of the views and values they identify with most deeply and hold most dear, Anderson said.

"Most people can live with having others disagree with them," he said. "But being treated with fundamental disrespect — or, worse, being demonized — evokes deep visceral reactions. It polarizes. It creates caricatures. Trust evaporates. Each side filters the evidence in a way that produces the worst possible image of the other. Moving forward in a constructive way becomes very difficult, sometimes impossible. Social contests are perceived as war in which the winner will take no prisoners."

Whether the issue is freedom of speech, access to fair elections or the free expression of religion, it is essential that those on all sides of public debates have fundamental respect, Andersen said. "If that is missing, we risk tearing the basic social fabric on which we all depend. Socially disenfranchising segments of our society isn't right, and in the long term doesn't work."

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