

Leaders of the Interfaith Federation speak on HB 71 and exploring faith

Written by Charles James IV



{Executive Director Jon Parks explains an art piece displaying the overlap between the three major abrahamic religions}

Leaders within various faiths have come together in agreement: faith is not to be forced. Concerns arose that many are losing sight of the path towards common goals amidst the legislation of HB 71.

HB 71 is a legislation that requires Louisiana public schools to display the Ten Commandments in classrooms. This brought about the discussion of passive religious coercion toward children. The consistent display would program a bias in children toward a singular religious faith.

Jon Parks, Executive Director of the Interfaith Federation of Greater Baton Rouge and minister of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, spoke briefly in terms of the Interfaith Federation on HB 71.

“From the Federation’s point of view it would definitely be favoring one religious tradition over others,” Parks stated. “The Federation, we are all about unity, finding common ground together, appreciating and learning from other faith traditions.”

The appellate oral argument on HB 71 legislation opened on January 23, 2025. This followed the court action in the case *Rev. Roake v Brumley* to halt procedures. The case is ongoing.

Leaders within the federation spoke upon their personal views of the legislation.

“I don’t think our founding fathers could have envisioned a day like this,” said Parks. “By doing this in public schools and public places we are definitely violating the establishment of religion clauses in the constitution.”



{A framed text of the First Amendment posted in the Manship Building}

The district court concurred with this sentiment. This infringed upon First Amendment rights to religious expression. This must be upheld though many prominent faith groups adhere to the Ten Commandments.

"I don't think it's appropriate," said Barbara Wittkopf of St Paul Lutheran Church.

Communication with people of different faiths can further affirm one's own. This was the case for Senior Pastor J.C. Richardson of Wesley United Methodist Church.



{Pastor J.C. Richardson serves the Wesley Methodist Church community as their Senior
Pastor}

Richardson was vexed with the idea of “an eye for an eye” expressed in the Old Testament. In college, he spoke to a professor who was a pastor and an Imam. Each gave their perspective.

It was through differences of opinion that allowed Richardson to fully develop his own.

“[HB 71] is a ruse to get people riled up,” said J.C. Richardson. “It is the wrong answer to the right question.”

Richardson spoke about asking the right questions. Political movements to “force feed” religion in school settings skewed public attention from recognizing the issues of ethics and education are intertwined.

“Society was built upon certain answers to certain questions,” Richardson explained. “Education is a means of how we assure society is perpetuated.”

Individuals need to ask themselves the questions that their answers actually solve, rather than only what they aim to solve. The disparity between the two brings clarity in the pursuit.

A common concern through these interviews was losing sight of the path towards common goals. An anecdote from Parks's time in Slovakia illustrated this concept.

"As we wear that path down it gives us something to go back to in times when the world doesn't look like it did before," said Parks.

His team frequented a cabin with a large yard. The yard spanned grass towards a shed. Over time, the path the members took together to reach the shed became defined. The grass was lower and yielded less resistance. Snow would cover the path at times. This caused the team to lose sight of it. However, Parks could always identify the lower set of grass as he maneuvered the snow. The tribulations of life often mirror this snow.

"The political division, the polarization. [The public] feel kind of like we become unmoored in a way," said Parks.

"We live in a blind world," said Richardson. "We are more blind, than we are broken."

The nature of society is based on an offset of values. The issues of constitutionality should serve as a rallying call to the USA's roots as a country rather than a division of its people. America must examine the disparity between how it began and its current status according to Richardson.

"Education serves a meritocracy instead of the common good," said Richardson.

Religion is a practice of strengthening community. It transforms a neighborhood into a brotherhood. This is accomplished through dialogue.

Parks cited Krister Stendahl's three rules for religious understanding. First, one must learn from those who practice the religion. This allows people to meet the members of their faith on their own terms.

Second, one must not compare their best to another's worst. This creates an unfair scaling that prevents proper understanding and respect.

Finally, the third step is to seek "holy envy." This is an appreciation for aspects that other religions and faiths possess that one would want in their own.

Respectful conversations and interactions build community. They create the hope that Parks sees in the world.

"There's a lot of ways we can look around, see just fear and feel like things are falling apart and never come back together again," said Parks. "But then you look around and see people making a difference."

Photos:



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Sources:

Jon Parks, Interfaith Federation (225) 267-5600

J.C. Richardson, Wesley United Methodist Church (256)-508-5606

Barbara Wittkopf, St Paul Lutheran Church (225) 923-3133

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www.laaclu.org/en/press-releases/clergy-public-school-parents-sue-block-louisiana-law-requiring-public-schools-display.