

# Panelists hope for common ground in divided nation

January 27, 2020

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Polarization in American Christianity and American politics may be at its highest in recent memory, but experts on the role of faith in public life nevertheless have some hope about ways to address it.



Melissa Rogers, former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, is the author of “Faith in American Public Life.” (Courtesy Photo)

Panelists at a Jan. 23 Georgetown University discussion on “Christians in American Public Life” suggested a few remedies even as they held up recent reaction to a *Christianity Today* editorial as Exhibit A of the divisiveness in the country as President Trump’s impeachment trial was underway.

“It has been a sadness to me that things have become more frayed over time,” said Melissa Rogers, author of the new book, *Faith in American Public Life*. That book was the focus of the event sponsored by Georgetown’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.

*Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, a senior research fellow at the center, served as moderator of the event that drew more than 100 people.

Rogers recalled thinking “the nadir of the religious liberty debate” had been reached during the Clinton administration. But current times have proved her wrong. She said religious differences over LGBTQ and abortion rights have intensified the battles.

“We need to respect everyone and find ways for the rights of religious liberty to co-exist with other key civil and human rights,” said Rogers, former executive director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships who served previously as the general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. “That’s the goal. We’ve got to get there.”

## **‘Heartbreaking’ reaction to editorial**

Ted Olsen, editorial director of *Christianity Today*, said reaction to his magazine’s editorial that Trump should be removed from office—published in December right after the president was impeached—filled his email box with a mix of messages.



Ted Olsen speaks at Georgetown University in Washington on Jan.

23. (RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks)

Olsen said it was “heartbreaking” to hear from readers who were disappointed in Christian leaders who said “character matters” during the Clinton administration but were now saying the opposite. He also cited an email from a conservative Christian concerned about liberals, who wrote: “Who then will save us from the tyranny that will befall us? Jesus? Where is he now when freedom depends on him?”

“I am praying for disillusionment,” Olsen said, hoping that people will follow the biblical admonition against putting your trust in princes. “If you don’t have your trust in the right place you’re going to flounder and you’re going to put your faith in idols,” he said.

Olsen cited criminal justice and religious freedom in prisons as examples of “massive opportunities for some win-win solutions” among people with differing political views.

Adam R. Taylor, executive director of Sojourners, said it’s important for people to get involved in politics instead of staying away from it.

“You can’t reduce our faith to politics, but we also cannot be apolitical,” he said. “I think this is a moment where we have to be politically engaged, because to not be engaged is to be complicit, and if Christ is Lord over every aspect of our lives that means our political life, right?”

Rogers encouraged seeking common ground with people who might be opponents on some issues but could join together on others—such as the faith, military, humanitarian and medical leaders who worked jointly to address the Ebola crisis during the Obama administration.

“This is how we’re going to get back to a better place—if we continue those relationships, extend grace to one another, realizing being opponents on one issue does not make us enemies; it makes us potential collaborators on

something else,” she said.

“And if we can pour more energy into that, blow those little embers into helpful flames, then that’s how we’ll get out of this quandary.”