

# Meet the activists behind the Texas school chaplains bill

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AUSTIN (RNS)—Rep. James Talarico approached the microphone on the House floor May 25 with a stack of papers in hand.



Rep. James Talarico speaks on the floor of the Texas House of Representatives in Austin. (Submitted photo)

It was time for the final vote on a bill that would allow public schools in Texas to hire their own unlicensed chaplains. It was largely ceremonial, but Talarico, a vocal critic of the bill, still had a few questions.

Looking down at his notes, he asked Rep. Cole Hefner, chief champion of the bill in the House, if the head of the National School Chaplains Association had worked on the proposal that has drawn controversy and national attention.

“They provided some input,” Hefner offered.

It was an understated acknowledgment of a coalition that shepherded the chaplains bill through the Texas Legislature.

## **Powerful coalition promoted chaplains bill**

Whereas two other bills introduced this session that involved religion and public schools—one that dealt with school prayer and another requiring classrooms to hang donated Ten Commandments signs—never made it across the finish line, the chaplains bill was carried by an alliance of activists, Christian groups and conservative lawmakers who have aided each other’s rise while championing forms of Christian nationalism.

Their victory points to the ascendant power of the ideology in red states, where legislators are lining up behind bills involving religion, including opposition to the expansion of LGBTQ rights, that critics say only reflect a specific Christian vision for society.

The lawmaker most associated with the Texas chaplains bill is Sen. Mayes Middleton, a former Texas House member serving his first term in the state Senate in a district that includes Galveston.

As head of the Freedom Caucus during his time in the Texas House, Middleton was a vocal supporter of U.S. lawmakers from Texas who attempted to halt the certification of the 2020 presidential election on Jan. 6, 2021.

He also articulated support for Christian nationalist ideas, such as insisting that the separation of church and state is “not a real doctrine” during debate over the chaplains bill.

And in a recent interview with *The Washington Post*, Middleton declared, “there is absolutely no separation of God and government, and that’s what

these bills are about,” referring to the chaplains bill as well as the Ten Commandments bill, which he also authored.

## **Julie Pickren a rising star**

As head of his own oil company, Middleton has been an influential political donor in Texas, including providing a \$5,000 donation to Julie Pickren, who successfully ran for the State Board of Education last year in a district that includes Galveston.



Julie Pickren

Pickren—an ardent supporter of Donald Trump—sparked outcry in March 2021 when it was revealed she was in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6 to attend the Trump rally that preceded the attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Although Pickren, then a local school board member, did not appear to enter the Capitol herself, her presence nearby was criticized by area NAACP representatives, as were her false claims the Capitol attack was led by “antifa” members instead of Trump supporters.

Pickren lost her local school board seat two months later but remained a rising star in the Texas Republican Party.

She appeared on an education-focused panel at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2022 and also developed connections with the

prominent state-level activist group Texas Values, which champions “faith, family and freedom” and played a role in authoring the state’s controversial heartbeat bill.

## **Close ties to Texas Values Action**

During a September 2021 appearance on the Right Side Broadcasting Network, a host asked Pickren about the Texas heartbeat bill. Instead of responding herself, Pickren simply turned her camera slightly as Jonathan M. Saenz, the head of Texas Values, leaned in to speak next to her.

The following year, the political arm of Saenz’s group, Texas Values Action, formally endorsed Pickren’s campaign for the State Board of Education.

Also among Pickren’s supporters is activist and self-declared prophet Lance Wallnau, who identifies as a Christian nationalist. Wallnau promoted Pickren during CPAC in 2021, seeking her out on the conference floor and recording a video with her while encouraging viewers to support her.

Pickren, for her part, has called on voters to elect Christians.

“It’s so important to elect conservatives and Christians to our local school board races, so that they can pass policy that will protect (the) children in each school district,” she said in an interview conducted earlier this month on the conservative Brighteon network.

In that same interview, Pickren noted during her time as a local school board trustee, she created a “Superintendent’s Pastoral Team” that invited pastors and youth pastors to volunteer at schools, which she insisted lessened violence and drug use. When she began running for the State Board of Education, she said, she prayed for a way to replicate the local program at the state level.

# Mission Generation at work

According to Pickren, the answer to those prayers came via a call from a staffer who worked for U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz. The staffer put her in touch with the leaders of Mission Generation, a Christian mission organization specializing in placing school chaplains around the world.

Pickren went on to serve on the board of the National School Chaplain Association, a project of Mission Generation. The group openly has expressed a desire to “influence those in education until the saving grace of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with Him.”

Pickren, too, has spoken of the group’s religious intentions during a Mission Generation event last year. In a video posted to the group’s Instagram page, she encouraged attendees to donate to Mission Generation because “there are children who need chaplains,” explaining there is “a whole generation of children that have never stepped foot one day inside of a church.”

Six months later, when Middleton introduced the chaplains bill to the state Senate, Malloy of Mission Generation was among those who testified in support.

So, too, was Pickren, who appeared to indicate personal involvement in authoring the chaplains bill. When discussing funding aspects of the proposal, she said it drew from a subset of government funds “because I did not feel, in talking with Sen. Middleton, that we needed to affect academic counseling budget.”

Two days earlier, Pickren had [tweeted](#) a photo of herself and Malloy with Pastor Rafael Cruz, Sen. Ted Cruz’s father, saying the trio were “discussing the importance of school chaplains.”



But neither Malloy nor Pickren mentioned their group’s evangelism-minded goals during their testimonies before the Senate committee, with Malloy instead insisting chaplains “are not working to convert people to religion.”

As the bill—supported by Texas Values— progressed through the House, Mission Generation’s website vanished, with its URL redirecting to the National School Chaplain Association website. When *The Texas Tribune* reached out about the Instagram video of Pickren’s comments unearthed by Religion News Service, it promptly disappeared from Mission Generation’s account.

## Future remains uncertain

As the bill came before the Texas House of Representatives, Democrats attached a provision introduced by Talarico that required school chaplains

to be endorsed by an organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The amendment potentially imperiled the ability of NSCA chaplains to serve in Texas schools, as the group is not currently recognized by the Department of Defense.

But as noted by *The Washington Post*, the amendment was stripped from the bill after passage, likely clearing a path for NSCA chaplains to begin working in the Lone Star State.

While the bill will become law, its future remains uncertain. David Donatti of the Texas American Civil Liberties Union said his group is mulling a legal challenge.

“It is truly a real-time experiment on our children,” he said of the proposal, arguing it could end up “eroding our fundamental freedom of religion and belief.”