

Randel Everett made global impact at 21Wilberforce

August 9, 2023

Randel Everett—who recently told the board of 21Wilberforce he plans to retire at the end of the year as the organization’s president—recalled the reaction nine years ago when he stepped down as pastor of First Baptist Church in Midland.

The congregation was “pretty shocked” when he resigned as pastor to launch a nonprofit human rights organization focused on international religious freedom, Everett said.

“But within a few weeks, they began to own this,” Everett said, regarding the birth of what originally was known as the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative and now as 21Wilberforce. “They realized this was an extension of their church. Midland has been at the center of religious freedom movements for a couple of decades.”

He noted Deborah Fikes, a member of First Baptist in Midland, led the Midland Ministerial Alliance to lobby President George W. Bush to promote peace and human rights in Sudan. She served several years as the World Evangelical Alliance’s representative to the United Nations, advocating for international religious freedom and peace initiatives.

Everett also was inspired by Bob Fu, founder of Midland-based ChinaAid, a Christian nonprofit organization that provides legal aid and support for persecuted religious dissidents and other prisoners of conscience in China.

“I don’t think 21Wilberforce could have started any place other than Midland, Texas, and at First Baptist in Midland,” Everett said.



Randel and Sheila Everett
(Courtesy of 21Wilberforce)

Darrell Dunton was among the members of First Baptist in Midland who embraced the 21Wilberforce vision. Dunton was chairman of deacons when Everett was pastor there, and he has served on the 21Wilberforce board since its inception.

“God convicted Randel and [his wife] Sheila to leave what truly could have been a comfortable retirement destination in Midland to a place of unknown possibilities,” he said.

Dunton characterized Everett as “a man of great vision, resolve and conviction” who “always thinks big and surrounds himself with individuals who can help make those dreams and visions happen by giving them the freedom to exercise the gifts God has given to them.”

Everett, a former executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, said he long had “a heart for social justice” and passion for religious liberty rooted in Baptist heritage.

“A lot of times we are prophetic in speaking about injustices that affect us personally, but we often are not on the cutting edge of speaking on behalf

of those who have no one to speak for them—the most vulnerable,” Everett said.

Conversations shaped 21Wilberforce

Long-term involvement with the Baptist World Alliance particularly raised his awareness about Christian brothers and sisters globally who suffer from religious repression.

Conversations with Michael Horowitz, a Jewish lawyer from the Religious Liberty Project at the Hudson Institute, and former Congressman Frank Wolf, a Presbyterian layman, led directly to the creation of 21Wilberforce.

During a trip to Midland, Horowitz noted Jews around the globe rally around persecuted Jews, and he asked why Christians fail to do the same when the basic human rights of those who share their faith are denied.

Wolf raised a question about religious persecution in a phone call that haunted Everett: “What is it going to take to wake up the church in America?”

Discussions between Horowitz, Wolf and Everett helped shape 21Wilberforce. When Wolf retired from Congress in 2015, he began several years of service as a senior fellow with the human rights organization.

Wolf praised Everett as “a great man, a good friend and a visionary” leader who made a tremendous impact as founding president of 21Wilberforce.

Everett’s experience as pastor of Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., a congregation filled with members who have political connections and experience in the nation’s capital, made him “uniquely qualified” to lead 21Wilberforce, Wolf said.

“Randel has a pastor’s heart, and he also understands how Washington

works,” he said. “He bridges both worlds.”



Former Congressman Frank Wolf (center) and Randel Everett (right) journeyed to Iraq to document the persecution of religious minorities. (Photo courtesy of 21Wilberforce)

Early on, Wolf suggested a trip to Iraq to gain a firsthand perspective on the plight of religious minorities in the ISIS-occupied Nineveh Plain.

“Within a month after we opened our offices, four or five of us literally were standing behind sandbags with Kurdish generals a mile and a half from ISIS,” Everett recalled.

When Everett talks about “standing” near the front lines, he means it literally, Wolf noted. Wolf recalled his concern that at 6-foot, 4-inches tall, Everett offered an all-too-inviting target for ISIS snipers.

The visiting 21Wilberforce team interviewed hundreds of people and documented widespread persecution of Christians and Yazidis in Iraq.

21Wilberforce produced a report, [“Edge of Extinction: The Eradication of Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Iraq,”](#) asserting actions by ISIS in Iraq against Yazidis and Christians met the legal definition of genocide.

The Parliament of the United Kingdom cited the 21Wilberforce report when

it declared ISIS in Iraq guilty of genocide. On March 17, 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry similarly declared ISIS guilty of genocide.

Working in neglected areas

21Wilberforce also devoted significant time and resources to document religious persecution and human rights atrocities in Nigeria at a time when international media paid little attention.



Randel Everett (center) talks to the inhabitants of a camp for internally placed people in Nigeria. (Photo courtesy of 21Wilberforce)

“We went all over the Middle Belt of northern Nigeria. We went places where they had not seen their own military—places where our State Department had never been,” Everett said. “We went past dozens of villages that were burned to the ground. We heard horrific stories.”

The 21Wilberforce team produced a report on their findings, [“Nigeria: Fractured and Forgotten—Discrimination and Violence Along Religious Fault Lines.”](#)

“Over seven years ago, my religious advocacy work on behalf of the persecuted Christians in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region brought me in

contact with 21Wilberforce, which has a powerful model to engage government and nongovernmental agencies in the area of religious freedom,” said Stephen Enada executive president of the International Committee on Nigeria.

21Wilberforce provided ICON “a platform to engage U.S. policy and civil society space,” Enada said.

He praised Everett as “a skilled coalition-builder” and “a mobilizer” who has helped facilitate dialogue involving religious leaders and international victims of violence.

21Wilberforce has gained a solid reputation among key officials in Washington, D.C., and in the international community as the “go-to resource” about international religious freedom, Dunton said.

“Today, legislators on the Hill, other NGOs and the White House respect and seek input from 21Wilberforce in the arena of the persecuted church and religious freedom,” Dutton said.

Partners with the Baptist World Alliance



Randel Everett (center) and Elijah Brown (right) meet with local

leaders in Nigeria while on a trip to document religious persecution and human rights violations. (Photo courtesy of 21Wilberforce)

BWA General Secretary Elijah Brown participated in the fact-finding missions to Iraq and Nigeria—along with other locations—when he served as executive vice president of 21Wilberforce.

“To stand in places of ongoing persecution, looking into the eyes of those who have held fast to their faith and hearing them speak words of joy and blessing over you is a transformative experience that leaves you humbled,” Brown said.

In addition to the major initiatives 21Wilberforce has launched in the past nine years, Brown also pointed to its “quiet impact” through projects such as helping to meet the educational needs of children in Nigeria who fled from Boko Haram.

He praised Everett as a “visionary leader with prophetic navigation” and as a “theologian in action,” as well as a “friend and mentor.” Brown also expressed appreciation for the ongoing collaborative partnership between BWA and 21Wilberforce.

Three years ago, 21Wilberforce entered into a formal relationship with BWA that provides the organization “eyes and ears in over 130 countries around the world,” Everett said.



Rushad Hussain, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom with the U.S. Department of State, and Randel Everett, founding President of 21Wilberforce, waited at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport to welcome members of the persecuted Mayflower Church to the United States. (Courtesy Photo)

“Baptists aren’t our destination in these other countries. Baptists are our gateway. We want Baptists to introduce us not only to other Christians who are there, but also to other faith groups.

... We believe religious liberty must be for people of all faiths and people of no faith. Faith cannot be coerced. It’s got to be a decision made voluntarily.”

Through its Global Freedom Network, 21Wilberforce is seeking to inform and engage churches in international religious liberty issues, Everett added.

21Wilberforce also is working in partnership with the Baptist General Convention of Texas to involve congregations in 30 days of prayer for persecuted people of faith in November.

Linking churches in the West with persecuted Christians in other parts of the world will benefit both, he emphasized. In particular, Christians in the West can gain biblical insights from brothers and sisters who suffer for their faith, he asserted.

“The Bible was written by persecuted people for persecuted people,” he said. “It makes sense to them. ... They understand it.”

Everett expressed joy about international religious freedom victories, such as the safe resettlement of the Chinese Mayflower Church to East Texas, working in partnership with ChinaAid and Freedom Seekers International.

However, he voiced concern about continued religious repression and persecution in places such as Nigeria, Myanmar, China, Nicaragua and India.

“There is much that still needs to be done,” Everett said. “I think 21Wilberforce is just finishing its first chapter. There are several more chapters to write.

“I’ll continue to be an ambassador for religious freedom and will look for ways to encourage participation in 21Wilberforce and other partners who are on the front lines dealing with this.”