

Commentary: Why all of us should stand up for the Uighurs

September 11, 2018

KELLER (RNS) — I am a Baptist minister, church planter and an evangelical Christian.

And I am worried about religious freedom for billions of people around the world.

In nations from Afghanistan to Vietnam, religious people are being threatened, jailed, banned or otherwise restricted from practicing their religion, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Perhaps nowhere in the world is this seen more than in China.

No faith group faces more persecution than Uighur Muslims

Recently, tens of thousands of Uighur Muslims have been put in re-education camps. They've seen their places of worship and their way of life being destroyed by a government that sees them as a threat. "We're a people destroyed," one Uighur man told The Guardian recently.

The Xinjiang province, where many Uighurs live, is being turned into a "police state," USCIRF said earlier this year.

"By installing Communist Party cadres in Uighur homes and detaining countless innocent Uighurs in extrajudicial 're-education camps,' the Chinese government has created a culture of fear, suspicion, and mistrust

throughout Xinjiang,” USCIRF Chairman Daniel Mark said.



Bob Roberts, pastor of NorthWood Church in Keller

Some of my evangelical friends see this news and are unconcerned. Instead, they ask: “What about Christians in China? Aren’t they being persecuted?”

Yes, Christians in China suffer and have suffered religious persecution for decades in China and other nations. But so have other religious traditions.

In China, right now, no faith group is facing more persecution than the Uighur Muslims.

For a Christian, an evangelical, and especially a Baptist — this is unacceptable.

Religious freedom must be for all people

Religious freedom isn’t just for your own faith. It’s for people of all faiths or it isn’t religious freedom at all. In our globalized, connected world, where all religions are now in all places, religious freedom has never been more critical.

I remember being at a church event once and praying for unreached people

groups and the Uighur Muslims of western China were mentioned. I had never heard of them before. I didn't know that there were Muslims in China. I only knew about the Christians there.

It may sound like a conflict of interest to pray that people come to know Jesus and yet also want them to have the freedom to practice a different faith. But it isn't.

It is instead a rejection of my faith not to support the religious freedom of a person of another faith even if I believe Jesus is the only way.

It's easy to fall into the trap of religious freedom just for me and mine. That is dangerous and not just for other people of other faiths but for my tribe of Christians as well.

The Puritans came to America for religious freedom, to escape persecution and freely practice their religion. Sadly, they wanted to be free to practice "their" religion. Anyone else they persecuted.

It took one of their own, Roger Williams, to push that issue. Ultimately, he left the Puritans and became a Baptist who espoused religious freedom for all. In early America that included Jews — which is why Rhode Island — the colony founded by Williams — is home to the nation's oldest synagogue.

Why Christians should support religious freedom for others

Let me give you three reasons why religious freedom for Muslims, Jews, atheists, Hindus, Buddhists, Yazidis, and the thousands of religions around the world should matter to my fellow Christians.

First, Williams spoke of religious freedom as freedom of conscience. Freedom of religion means choosing what you believe without

coercion.

This is why religious freedom is enshrined in the First Amendment. No faith should be enforced by law or sword. I want people to believe in Jesus not because they don't know there are other ways of seeing God, but because they see Jesus as fundamentally different from anything else. I don't want them to believe — or say they believe — because someone forced them to.

Second is reciprocity. I can't be willing to expect to receive from others what I myself am not willing to give to them. I am part of a group of pastors and imams in Pakistan and the U.S. that work together and watch out for each other.

Some of my fellow Christians disagree with the work I do. They look at some Muslim-majority nations — where the rights of Christians are restricted — and say that the U.S. should restrict the rights of Muslims in this country as payback. But religious freedom is a conviction, a doctrine, a truth that I practice regardless of what others do because it is a right — not a bargaining chip.

Third is a concern for Christians in other parts of the world. When Christians work in a coalition side by side with other religions for everyone's religious freedom, it radically speeds up religious freedom and reduces persecution. My interest in promoting and fighting for religious freedom for Muslims and other religious groups makes it easier for me to ask for Christians to be protected.

'I pray for the Uighurs'

For now, I will pray for the Uighurs. And for all those who are not free to practice what they believe.

This week I head to Uzbekistan with an imam and other members of a

delegation to talk about religious freedom. That nation is beginning its journey towards more expansive religious freedom. Leaders there will present their plan, sign documents, and begin executing their plan to promote religious freedom — in a country currently on USCIRF's list of countries of particular concern.

Their leaders are all on board and taking their first steps. Their efforts may not be perfect but they really are trying. I pray they succeed.

I pray for the Uighurs that their persecution will soon end and they will be free to practice their religion without restriction. I pray for my fellow Christians facing persecution in China and around the world. And I pray for all people of other faiths who are denied the right to worship as they choose.

Religious freedom for all religions in all places is coming to the whole world. It's just a matter of time.

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