

Edmonton faith leaders defend religious freedoms

Faith leaders in Edmonton say religious freedoms are under threat and it's time to defend them.

"None of us are free until all of us are free, and there are no exceptions to this," said Netta Phillet, one of 250 delegates to the inaugural Religious Freedoms: A Community Conversation.

"Religion and culture are inseparable."

The March 18th event, at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), offered a chance for representatives of Catholicism, Islam, Sikhism and a wide range of other faiths to talk about the threat.

In Canada, freedom of conscience and religion is specifically protected under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But Phillet, co-ordinator at the Edmonton Interfaith Centre, said the threat is real.

She lamented the abolishment of prayer at city council in 2015. For more than 30 years, meetings opened with a prayer prepared by various faith groups on a rotating basis.

"We lost a truly unique initiative that demonstrated that City Hall belongs to everyone," said Phillet, who is Jewish. "So the freedom from religion in this case, I think, has backfired and we have lost something very valuable."

Teresa Haykowsky, a Catholic lawyer who has represented religious schools, said there are a number of cases before the courts that impact religious freedoms.

One example is Trinity Western University, a Christian institution in Langley, B.C., which is facing attempts to block its law school accreditation over its policies on sex outside of heterosexual marriage.

But Haykowsky said people of faith can't rely on the courts alone to protect their liberties. She recommended raising awareness and speaking out at events like the Edmonton conference.

Delegates refuted the claim that religion has no place in forming decisions in society and expressed the need to find ways to unite, without infringing against anyone's own beliefs.

"We're at our best as a society when we have a free and open exchange of ideas, something that can only happen when we honour our differences," added Lawrence Spackman, an elder in the LDS Church.

Nakita Valerio, a Muslim, said there's room for people who are religious and those who are not. "That is why I personally and professionally remain committed to protecting the religious freedoms of all ways of life, even when Islam is not part of the picture."

"A lot of intolerance toward all faiths is due to lack of education, understanding, and respect," added Spencer Bennett, a member of the LDS Church in Spruce Grove.

Mustafa Farooq, a spokesman for the Alberta Muslim Public Affairs Council, called the religious freedom conference "an amazing starting point in our community."

"I am sure that this event will continue to grow until it becomes a mainstay for religious Edmontonians who believe that the path forward is to hold hands with each other and to think deeply on what our future holds."

Other panellists at the conference included Bob McKeon, former social justice co-ordinator of the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton; Khushwant Singh, a program manager for the Sikh Research Institute, and Crown prosecutor Jeff Morrison, a member of the LDS church.