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Washington, D.C.
Ansel Oliver/ANN

On the day the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom released its 15th annual report, its policy and research director encouraged a group of religious liberty advocates to redouble their efforts.
“Sadly our report shows us that the forces of intolerance are on the move, be they repressive
governments or extremist groups,” said Knox Thames in describing the report monitoring religious
liberty worldwide.

Thames, who has worked throughout his career to promote freedom of conscience and has
known friends in other countries killed for speaking out against religious intolerance, described
religious repression and violence as “casting a shadow” to create darkness. The answer to
combat the darkness, he said, was “light,” and invoked the symbol of a flame, which is used by
many faith groups.

“With conditions the way are globally, we need to redouble our efforts. … I know that if we all carry
individual lights into dark places, the darkness is pushed back,” he said.

Thames delivered his remarks the evening of April 30 after receiving the International Award
during the 12th annual Religious Liberty Dinner in Washington D.C., held this year at the Willard
InterContinental hotel.

The annual dinner has become a tradition in the U.S. capital—Thames in a lighter moment called
it “the best religious freedom party in town”—and underscores the case of the hundreds of millions
of people who are mistreated because of their faith, now more than 60 years after the United
Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The annual gathering honors those who work to protect and promote religious freedom and draws
members from the diplomatic community, U.S. government, religious leaders of various faiths, and
religious freedom advocates. The dinner is jointly sponsored by the IRLA, the North American
Religious Liberty Association (NARLA), Liberty magazine and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Attendees also heard from Melissa Rogers, special assistant to the president and executive
director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. In a keynote
address, Rogers, who is the principal advisor on faith issues to President Barak Obama and the
administration, stressed the need to focus on commonalities in working for religious freedom in the
U.S.

“Americans don’t always agree on the specific applications of these principles,” Rogers said.
“Indeed, it’s when we have serious areas of disagreement that we ought to double down on trying
to find areas of agreement. Because when we don’t, we are apt to start treating one another as
enemies rather than as opponents on particular issues, we are apt to miss opportunities where we
can work together to do real good for our neighbors, and we are apt to forget that that which
unites us is far greater than that which divides us.”

Rogers said an example of various groups finding common ground was in 2009 when President
Barak Obama created an advisory council on faith-based and neighborhood partnerships, which
she chairs, to examine how government works with religious groups to serve people in need.

The task force, Rogers said, was comprised of advocates for religious freedom and separation of
church and state. She said the group has helped more clearly define roles of religious
organizations as they receive governmental funding for charity work—beneficiaries receiving
federal funds aren’t required to participate in the religious activities of the provider.

"May we always maintain this country as a place of incredible religious diversity and remarkable
religious cooperation and peace," Rogers said to end her speech.
The recipient of this year’s National Award was Eric W. Treene, special counsel for religious discrimination in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Recognition was also given to Seventh-day Adventist Minister Antonio Monteiro, who was jailed for nearly two years with a blood libel, a case that illustrates numerous people worldwide suffering for religious reasons.

IRLA Secretary-General John Graz called religious freedom a gift from God, but a “fragile gift.”

“We can lose it. The best way to lose religious freedom is to do nothing to promote it and defend it. … “And that’s why we have done our best to promote religious freedom around the world since our association was incorporated in 1893.”

Keynote speakers for the Religious Liberty Dinner in previous years have included Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird, former U.S. Secretaries of State and Senators Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, Senator John McCain, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives from both major political parties.

For more information, see irla.org.

**Oakwood wins $25k Campus Pride Grant from retailer’s voting, social media competition**

*Adventist university will use funds to improve athletic fields*

Oakwood/ANN staff
Huntsville, Alabama

Oakwood University is one of three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that won a $25,000 Campus Pride Grant in The Home Depot's 2014 Retool Your School Campus Improvement Grant Program.

An Oakwood spokesman said the university will use the grant to re-seed the softball and soccer fields and install sprinkler systems.

According to the results of the program, which is sponsored by the nation’s largest home improvement retailer, Oakwood was selected because of a combination of social media participation and the voting score. The three applicants with the highest votes and most social media activity, as determined by the sponsor during the voting period, were awarded with the Campus Pride Grants.

In 2013, Oakwood won the Tier 1 grant of $50,000, for the construction of an outdoor pavilion.

"We thank everyone who voted, tweeted and posted images on Facebook that allowed us to win
this grant," said George Johnson Jr., director of Oakwood's integrated marketing & public relations. "Truly the network that Oakwood has developed helped us to win. We wouldn't have been able to do this alone with just the amount of people we have here on our campus," he said.

In addition to the three campus pride grants, Home Depot also awarded one $50,000 grant and 13 $10,000 grants in this year's competition, totaling $250,000 to HBCUs for campus and facility improvements.