

# DOJ Protects Houses of Worship

Wednesday, the Department of Justice (DOJ) announced the “Place to Worship Initiative,” which will focus on protecting the ability of houses of worship and other religious institutions to build, expand, buy or rent facilities provided by the land use provisions of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA).

RLUIPA is a federal law that protects religious institutions from unduly burdensome or discriminatory land use regulations. Specifically, RLUIPA bars land use regulations that impose a substantial burden on religious exercise without a compelling justification, requires governments to treat houses of worship as favorably as nonreligious assemblies, and bars governments from discriminating among religions and from totally or unreasonably excluding houses of worship.

Attorney General Sessions announced the Place to Worship Initiative Wednesday with a goal “to increase enforcement and public awareness of the land use provisions of RLUIPA.” In addition, the Place to Worship Initiative specifies “these provisions protect places of worship and other religious uses of property (including religious schools and religious social service providers) in the zoning and landmarking process from actions by local governments that: 1) Place unjustifiable burdens on religious exercise; 2) Treat religious assemblies and institutions worse than nonreligious assemblies and institutions; 3) Discriminate against religious assemblies or institutions based on religion or religious denomination or 4) Totally or unreasonably exclude religious assemblies and institutions from a particular municipality or county.”

AG Sessions said, “The Constitution doesn’t just protect freedom to worship in private—it protects the public exercise

of religious belief, including where people worship together. Under the laws of this country, government cannot discriminate against people based on their religion—not in law enforcement, not in grant-making, not in hiring and not in local zoning laws. President Trump is an unwavering defender of the right of free exercise, and under his leadership, the Department of Justice is standing up for the rights of all Americans. By raising awareness about our legal rights, the Place to Worship Initiative will help us bring more civil rights cases, win more cases, and prevent discrimination from happening in the first place,” said Sessions.

“The Place to Worship Initiative is a positive action from the Department of Justice and the Trump administration which will hold the government accountable to treating houses of worship as favorably as nonreligious assemblies,” said Mat Staver, Founder and Chairman of Liberty Counsel. “The Constitution protects the freedom to worship in private as well as in public, and that includes the facilities where people worship together.”

Dr. James Dobson and Dr. Tim Clinton of the James Dobson Family Institute (JDFI) issue the following joint statement on Wednesday about the Place to Worship Initiative:

“We commend Attorney General Sessions along with the entire Trump Administration for once again demonstrating they prioritize religious freedom in America. The new “Place to Worship Initiative” announced (Wednesday) by the Department of Justice rightly acknowledges our cherished Constitutional right to associate and worship in public together. In many ways this freedom represents the foundation of the church in America and it therefore must be preserved and protected at all cost.

“As Americans, our first freedoms include speech, association and free exercise of religion. This means our government specifically acknowledges its mandate to protect our right to

talk about God publicly and gather together in houses of worship. Churches have always been recognized in America as a protected community under the free exercise and association clauses of the First Amendment. This initiative helps ensure religious communities will continue to have safe places available under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), which has been strengthened today by a commitment to continue preventing discrimination.

“This action by the Department of Justice should encourage families and churches across the nation that President Trump is a strong advocate for their religious freedom.” {eo}

*For the original article, visit .*