

Religious Liberty Takes Center Stage in Iowa as Presidential Race Heats Up

Every four years, for about a year, Iowa becomes the epicenter of American politics as candidates from both of the major parties roll through the state to make the case that they should be the next president of the United States.

Iowans understand the issues quite well, despite being landlocked in the center of the country. The main east-west and north-south arterial interstate highways intersect in the middle of the state, it is a leader in both agriculture and manufacturing, its capital city is home to many of the world's leading insurers, and it is a major producer of alternative energy.

But another issue is quickly building prominence, particularly in the Republican presidential field, and it's quickly found a home in Iowa: religious liberty.

In August, presidential candidate U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) held his Rally for Religious Liberty at The Iowa Events Center in downtown Des Moines, which 4,500 people attended. They heard from people all around the country—including some from Iowa—who had their religious liberties violated, and their lives forever altered.

Among them were Dick and Betty Odgaard, a Menonite couple who owned Gortz Haus Gallery, which hosted weddings. After they refused to host a same-sex wedding, they were forced to spend thousands of dollars on a legal defense and fines, and eventually had to lay off their employees and close the business forever.

It's a story repeated over and over, even in landlocked Iowa.

This past week, two more events in Iowa brought religious liberty back to the forefront. Together, they drew hundreds of Christians, dozens of Christian political activists, and three presidential candidates back to the first-in-the-nation state to discuss what many say has become the most important political issue of our generation.

The first of the two events, which began on Thursday at the Iowa Events Center, was the American Renewal Project's "Pastors and Pews" rally. That event concluded Friday, and was followed by American Renewal Project's "Issachar Training" program.

The other big-name event was the Freedom 2015 religious liberty conference, which began on Friday, also at the Iowa Events Center, just two floors down from the American Renewal Project's event. Billed as the nation's biggest religious liberty conference, it featured faith leaders, Christian broadcasters, and personal accounts from Christians who have been persecuted for their faith.

Sponsors of Freedom 2015 included Generations with Vision, Samaritan Ministries, American Vision, and Heritage Defense. The event also featured an impressive lineup of keynote speakers: entrepreneurs David and Jason Benham, Kevin Swanson of Generations with Vision, Kelly Shackelford of Liberty Institute, Pastor Rafael Cruz, Bob Vander Plaats of The Family Leader and Dr. Joel McDurmon of American Vision.

Both events drew three Republican presidential candidates: Cruz, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal. All three spoke about the dire consequences all Americans—not just Christians—face if they fail to rise up and demand a defense of religious liberty in the 2016 election.