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NEWS RELEASE

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2010 First Freedom Awards *Gala to Honor Three Religious Freedom Advocates*

RICHMOND, Va. (January 6, 2010) – On Thursday, January 14, 2010, three renowned advocates of religious freedom will be honored at the **First Freedom Awards** gala, held at the Downtown Richmond Marriott.

“The First Freedom Center is proud to recognize three profound contributors to the advancement of religious liberty for the 2010 First Freedom Awards,” stated Rodney A. Smolla, Chair of the First Freedom Center’s Board of Trustees, Dean of the Washington and Lee University School of Law, and President-elect of Furman University. “In honoring these champions of religious freedom, we shine light on one of the most pressing issues facing humankind today. The ongoing quest to ensure that all societies of the world respect religious freedom as a fundamental human right is at the core of our shared aspirations for stability, peace, and the protection of human dignity.”

In commemoration of National Religious Freedom (January 16th), the First Freedom Center annually recognizes an international, national and Virginia award recipient. This year’s recipients are **President Abdurrahman Wahid, Felice Gaer, and Professor Melissa Rogers.**

- **H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid** [September 7, 1940 – December 30, 2009], recipient of the **International First Freedom Award**, served as Indonesia’s first democratically-elected president from 1999-2001. Better known as Gus (brother) Dur to his constituents, Wahid led the National Awakening Party, which he established in 1998. He also led the Nahdlatul Ulama (Awakening of Religious Scholars), the world’s largest Islamic organization with 40 million members. During the Suharto military dictatorship, Wahid stepped forward, virtually alone, to defend a prominent magazine shut down in 1990 and

its editor jailed for publishing a popularity poll in which the Prophet Mohammed received a low rating. Arguing for freedom of speech, Wahid warned Suharto that indulging religious extremism would not bury demands for democracy. During his term as president, Wahid encouraged religious freedom and equality and removed long-standing barriers that denied civil and religious liberty to various minorities. After his term, Wahid continued to defend religious minorities and the separation of mosque and state, to promote a secular legal and political system, and to speak out against religious extremists worldwide. The [Wahid Institute](#), which he founded, continues to promote his ideals to Indonesia and abroad, and the [LibForAll Foundation](#), a nonprofit organization that he co-founded, works to reduce religious extremism and to discredit the use of terrorism. President Wahid passed away peacefully on December 30, 2009, at the age of 69. (Visit <http://www.libforall.org/about-us-board-of-directors.html> for additional biographical information.)

- **Felice D. Gaer**, recipient of the **National First Freedom Award**, is Director of the [American Jewish Committee Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights](#), and former Chair of the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF). In 2001, she was first appointed to USCIRF—the federal commission that advises the President and Secretary of State on U.S. policy to advance freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief. Gaer has led USCIRF missions to Afghanistan, Egypt, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, Shanghai and Tibet, and has participated in delegations all over the world, visiting numerous detention centers for asylum seekers. In her 20 years in the human-rights field, Gaer has conceived, planned, and conducted significant research and advocacy on behalf of freedom of religion. In 2002 and 2003, Gaer was cited in *The Forward's* annual “Forward Fifty” list of Jewish leaders as “the American Jewish international human rights expert in residence.” *Encyclopedia Judaica* describes Gaer as having “played the key role in assuring passage by consensus of the UN General Assembly’s first-ever condemnation of anti-Semitism” in 1998, and being an “architect of many initiatives linking women’s rights to human rights.” (Visit: http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijlTI2PHKoG/b.817837/k.2F1F/AJC_Experts.htm for additional biographical information.)
- **Professor Melissa Rogers**, recipient of the **Virginia First Freedom Award**, is the Director of the [Wake Forest School of Divinity Center for Religion and Public Affairs](#). Her

career in religion and public policy began as general counsel of the [Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs](#) based in Washington, D.C. During her tenure there, Rogers helped lead a diverse coalition in support of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 and drafted several friend-of-the-court briefs in church-state cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. In 2000, she became the first Executive Director of the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#), which was established to promote a deeper understanding of the influence of religion on the ideas and institutions of society in the United States and beyond. Rogers directed a variety of projects at the Pew Forum, including the production of a guide to the Internal Revenue Code restrictions on the political activity of 501(c)(3) organizations. Rogers' current work at Wake Forest promotes research and dialogue regarding the intersection of religion and public affairs and provides policymakers, divinity school students, and religious leaders with resources on these issues. (For more biographical information, visit <http://divinity.wfu.edu/faculty-rogers.html> and <http://www.brookings.edu/experts/rogersm.aspx>.)

Isabelle Kinnard Richman, JD, PhD, First Freedom Center Vice President for Education, stated: "We solicit award nominations from legal, public-policy and academic experts across the country. We ask them to submit the names of individuals whose work has advanced understanding and respect for religious freedom through their innovative approach, acts of personal sacrifice, or leadership. Our three awardees are distinguished from one another by their place of residence, not by their accomplishments. Then the nominees are judged by a panel of distinguished religious freedom experts."

This year marks the 16th year that the First Freedom Center has hosted the First Freedom Awards in conjunction with National Religious Freedom Day.

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About the First Freedom Center

The mission of the First Freedom Center is to increase understanding and respect for religious freedom in diverse communities worldwide through education about this core value: *the freedom of thought, conscience and belief*. The Center is a politically and religiously neutral 501(c)(3) organization.