



NEWS RELEASE

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2011 First Freedom Awards *Gala to Honor Three Religious Freedom Advocates*

RICHMOND, Va. (January 3, 2011) – On Thursday, January 13, 2011, 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 profound contributors to the advancement of religious liberty for the 2011 First Freedom Awards,” stated First Freedom Center President, Ambassador (ret.) Randolph M. Bell. “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 Day (January 16th), the First Freedom Center annually recognizes an international, national and Virginia award recipient. This year’s recipients are Asma Jahangir, John Graz, and Brent Walker.

- **Asma Jahangir** will be honored with the **International First Freedom Award**. As the [Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) from August 2004 - July 2010, she served as a senior authority appointed by the [United Nations Commission on Human Rights](#) to investigate the status of religious freedom worldwide. Jahangir is an advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and has been twice elected as Chairperson of the [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#). She is also a Director of the [AGHS Legal Aid Cell](#), which provides free legal assistance to the needy. Jahangir was placed under house arrest and later imprisoned for participating in the movement to restore political and fundamental rights under the Pakistani military regime in 1983. She has served as a leading figure in defending cases of discrimination against religious minorities, women

and children. Jahangir has authored two books and five papers and has received a number of international and national recognitions for her work.

- **John Graz** will be honored with the **National First Freedom Award**. Since 1995, Graz has served as the Secretary General of the [International Religious Liberty Association](#) (IRLA). Over a century old and organized by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, its purpose is non-sectarian with many faiths represented on its Board of Directors. Graz also serves as the IRLA liaison to the United Nations in Geneva. Graz initiated the annual IRLA Meetings of Experts for Religious Freedom and has organized additional world congresses on religious freedom. With his team, Graz has developed an IRLA world network in more than 80 countries. Currently a member of the Board of the International Academy of Religious Freedom, Graz has also written widely on religious freedom, is the publisher of the journal, *Fides et Libertas*, and is the executive producer of the television show, [Faith and Freedom](#). Graz also served for ten years as the Public Relations Director for the [International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty](#).
- **J. Brent Walker** will be honored with the **Virginia First Freedom Award**. Rev. Walker is the Executive Director of the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#) (BJC). Based in Washington, D.C., the BJC works with a wide range of religious groups and is dedicated to defending and extending religious liberty for all. It is the only religious agency devoted solely to religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Rev. Walker was an adjunct professor at the [Georgetown University Law Center](#) from 1994-2003 and, since 2003, has been an Adjunct Professor at the [Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia](#). He is widely published and speaks frequently on church-state issues at conferences and seminars. Walker also provides commentary on church-state issues to national print and broadcast media, including CNN, Fox News, PBS, NBC and NPR, the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Tampa Tribune*, and *St. Petersburg Times*.

On occasion, the **Distinguished Service Award** is presented to an individual or organization for an exceptional contribution toward promoting freedom of religion and awareness of the civic rights and responsibilities religious liberty brings. This year, the **Alexander Lebenstein Teacher Education Institute of the [Virginia Holocaust Museum](#)** will be recognized with this award. Since 2004, the institute has worked with administrators and teachers to expand understanding of the Holocaust and modern-day genocide. It provides educators with lesson plans

and other tools to implement that understanding in the classroom. This massive effort has substantially raised the level of understanding among Virginia youth of the kinds of hatred and bigotry which deny freedom of belief and conscience—and too often deny life itself—to victims around the world. The instructional staff includes Holocaust and genocide scholars and four classroom teachers who present historical, cultural and pedagogical materials to a wide array of public and private school teachers from all grade levels.

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 and organizations whose work has advanced understanding of and appreciation for religious freedom through innovative approaches, acts of personal sacrifice, or leadership. Then the nominees are judged by a panel of distinguished religious-freedom experts.”

This year marks the 17th year that the First Freedom Center has hosted the First Freedom Awards in conjunction with National Religious Freedom Day. Please find attached headshots of the award recipients and additional background information on the event and the Center. The gala is open to the news media by request to Chris Payton at (804) 239-1668 or cpayton@firstfreedom.org.

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About the First Freedom Center

The mission of the First Freedom Center is to advance the fundamental human rights of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. The Center is a religiously and politically neutral 501(c)(3) organization the sponsors multiple education programs and events.