

Canada Watch

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EFC supports religious expression

As Canadian Christians, we all care deeply about being able to hold and express our beliefs. Searching the Scriptures, sharing our faith and teaching our children are vital elements of our Christian life. At the same time, we are all aware that some of our beliefs are not widely held or popular in Canadian culture.

But we believe God calls Christians to seek good laws for our country – laws that support life, help those who are vulnerable and make room for religious expression and practice. That's why one of the EFC's centres engages directly with federal laws and provides resources to equip you to engage as well.

EFC donors do engage, and we are very thankful for that. You hear the call and respond both financially, prayerfully and with practical action steps again and again.

The limits of speech and what constitutes hate speech have become major topics of discussion in Canada. This follows an increase in hate crimes and hate speech, especially online.

Legislators are looking for ways to address these concerns. The EFC shares these concerns, but we want to ensure any efforts to address them allow for sincere religious expression.

A Bloc MP has introduced a private member's bill, Bill C-367, to remove the religious expression defense from the *Criminal Code* offence of promoting hatred.

If a person is found to have wilfully promoted hatred, the *Criminal Code* provides a defence if the person was, in good faith, expressing an opinion on a religious subject or based on a belief in a religious text. The court

would then determine if the defence could be used.

The defence ensures the law will not be used to silence minority religious beliefs. When the Supreme Court reviewed this law, all its defences were considered vital to ensuring a balance between the protection of minorities and freedom of expression.

In practice, the defence is considered only after the court has determined a person has *wilfully* promoted hatred against someone because they belong to a protected group. The *Criminal Code* doesn't allow a person to say any hateful thing and claim it is religious expression. It only protects opinions expressed in good faith.

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How you can help

- **Read!** Read up about this bill and others at TheEFC.ca.
- **Respond!** We often invite you to partner with us by reaching out to MPs and sharing insights and your opinion. This works. Please keep working with us. We are more effective together.
- **Relay!** Share this information with others in your circle. Word of mouth is very important in increasing people's awareness of bills like this one.



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The religious expression defence has rarely been invoked and has never been successfully used. But it is important that it exists just in case it is needed.

The bill that would remove the defence is a private members bill, which means it would be on a slower track to be debated and voted on, and less likely to pass.

Another MP has proposed that a removal of the religious expression defence be added to a government bill on online harms, Bill C-63. Government bills tend to move more quickly through Parliament and have a much greater chance of passing.

So, there are now two proposals to remove the religious expression defence. Why does the desire to remove the religious expression defence exist?

Some groups want to see this defence removed because they are concerned it will be improperly used to shelter hateful speech. An example given of hateful speech in a religious context is the imam at a rally in Montreal last October who prayed for the extermination of "Zionist aggressors." A criminal complaint has been made and police are investigating whether to lay charges.

While the religious expression defence has rarely been used, it provides protection for the sincerely held religious opinions of minority groups.

The EFC believes Canada must grapple with how to address the rising tide of hateful and violent speech and actions, but in a way that doesn't have unintended consequences or stifle good faith religious expression.

The EFC will be asking MPs to keep this defence in the *Criminal Code*. As always, EFC donors and partners are a huge part of our work. You can keep informed about how you can engage at TheEFC.ca/C-367. Whenever you have a question about our work, you can also reach out by phone or email.



EFC media studio turns on the lights

Every Friday morning, Brian Lopez, EFC video content producer and studio manager, turns on the lights in the new EFC media studio in Ottawa and prepares the space for the arrival of Shoab Ebadi of Square One World Media.

Ebadi is the studio's first regular client. Square One World Media is an EFC affiliate. Ebadi connects with his team in Winnipeg and together they host a live evangelistic television show that makes its way across the world.

"Media and digital world are advancing rapidly," reflects Ebadi. "Are we [evangelical Christians] ready to adopt new technology and to use it for the Kingdom of God around the world and in very restricted countries like Afghanistan? Thanks to the EFC for supporting and helping us to achieve that goal."

This is music to the ears of EFC President David Gurezki, who first had the idea of creating affordable, accessible media studio spaces that EFC affiliates could rent at below-market rates to make it easier for them to produce excellent material on the kinds of budgets typical for most churches and ministries.

Lopez is also pleased to have the studio begin to open its doors to affiliates. "I'm excited about the opportunity it gives the EFC to expand the medium of communication and do it at a high level. It gives us a chance to be creative, informative and inspiring," he says. "We had an open house recently at the office and people shared that it was great we had a space like this. There was excitement about what could be and how it could be used."

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You can read more about the studio spaces in Ottawa and Toronto and the possibilities for use at TheEFC.ca/studio.



A note from EFC President David Guretzki

I was so pleased when a press release by the Peace and Reconciliation Network, the EFC, the Canadian Council of Churches, and Slavic church leaders in Canada was picked up by global media outlets like Vatican News. It is good to join with partners to speak into national and global issues. World Evangelical Alliance staff, on behalf of the

WEA and the EFC, presented at the UN Human Rights Council as part of its review of human rights in Canada, calling on the Canadian government to repeal euthanasia for mental illness for those who are not dying and to stop further expansion. The EFC Ottawa studio will also help amplify Christian voices. EFC affiliate groups are already using this space to produce video and audio that share a compassionate biblical perspective. Thank you for how you energize us with your support in so many ways.



PRN issues public letter about peace in Ukraine

The Peace and Reconciliation Network recently gathered members of the EFC, the Canadian Council of Churches, and Canadian Slavic church leaders to consider the impact of the war in Ukraine on our Slavic sisters and brothers and what role Canadian Christians might have in response.

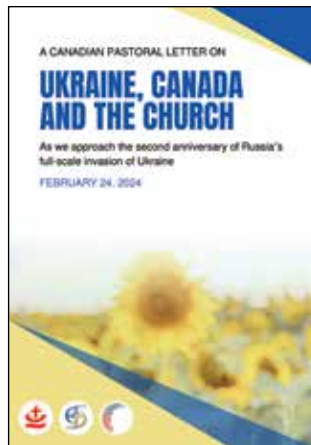
The collaboration led to a major pastoral letter, shared widely in February to media and signed by many Christian leaders (see a copy at TheEFC.ca/Statements). This has encouraged Ukrainian and Slavic people globally that they are not alone.

The letter calls Canadians to six actions:

- Pray.
- Serve the wounded among us.
- Listen to stories of lament.
- Advocate for an end to the war.
- Build relationships with Slavic churches carrying a heavy burden and need of friendship.
- Hope and work for a future marked by reconciliation, found in Jesus Christ.

Previous collaboration that led to the letter included online events (videos at bit.ly/4aTSkYA) where denominational leaders explored the religious underpinnings of the conflict and the impact of some 200,000 Ukrainians who have arrived in Canada since March 2022. The groups also hosted a national online prayer event.

"More common work lies ahead," says Joel Zantingh, Canadian coordinator for the Peace and Reconciliation Network. "The war is not yet over, and suffering continues in Eastern Europe. The need for Canada's Christians to speak and act as people of peace and reconciliation is crucial. The EFC and our network are active and available to resource your church as a centre of reconciliation."



Updating you on Canada's most immediate issues

■ Stopping online sexual exploitation:

The EFC supports a private member's bill to require commercial pornography producers and distributors to verify the age and consent of each person depicted in explicit content *before* it is uploaded. Ask your MP to support Bill C-270. See TheEFC.ca/C-270.

■ Online harms bill:

The government has introduced a lengthy and complex bill to address online harms. The bill has three main sections. The first would set up a commission to hold social media platforms responsible for online harms, such as content that sexually victimizes a child or that foments hatred. The second section would make changes to the *Criminal Code*, such as a new stand-alone hate crime offence. The third section would bring back a revised section 13 to the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and add hate speech. See TheEFC.ca/C-63.

■ Religious expression:

Currently, if a person is found to have wilfully promoted hatred, the *Criminal Code* has a defence for sincerely held religious beliefs. A private member's bill proposes to remove the defence. See TheEFC.ca/C-367.

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■ **Prostitution case:** The EFC and ARPA (the Association for Reformed Political Action) have applied to be co-interveners before the Supreme Court in the *Kloubakov* case. In this case, two men convicted of benefiting financially from the proceeds of prostitution and procuring women into the sex trade are challenging whether the laws are constitutional.

■ **Conscience protection:** The EFC has asked the Nova Scotia regulatory body for doctors to set a high bar for conscience protection. The EFC asked the body to ensure discussions about MAiD are only initiated by patients, not doctors. It also asked them not to require an effective referral but to protect doctors' conscience rights.

■ **Canada Summer Jobs report:** The EFC's submission to a parliamentary committee on the Canada Summer Jobs program was mentioned in the committee report. The main report noted that faith-based organizations have concerns about the transparency of the screening process. A dissenting opinion by the Conservative Party noted that the serious concerns of faith-based organizations such as the EFC and the CCCC about religious freedoms and fairness in the delivery of the program were not clearly presented and need to be considered.

President emeritus and senior ambassador reports

“I am grateful to be serving the evangelical community as president emeritus and senior ambassador,” says Bruce Clemenger. “I continue to oversee EFC legal interventions, increasing our engagement with constitutional and human rights lawyers, and tracking court cases on issues such as prostitution and religious freedom.”



Clemenger serves as senior advisor to EFC's Centre for Faith and Public Life analyzing proposed legislation such as online harms protection for children and youth, euthanasia, and collaborating on new policy initiatives. Meetings with MPs and senior civil servants on issues of religious freedom and the important contributions evangelical communities make to the public good amplifies the work of the EFC

“Strategically networking with decision-makers and stakeholders to address religious persecution worldwide and conflicts such as the wars in Ukraine, and between Israel and Hamas and increasingly other countries has been a very fulfilling part of my work.”

Clemenger was awarded the Victor Goldbloom Award for Outstanding Interfaith Leadership in recognition of his leadership in collaborative interfaith dialogue and advocacy on religious freedom and social concerns to government. He continues to serve on the Interfaith Committee for Canadian Military Chaplaincy in support of military chaplains from 22 EFC affiliate denominations.


“The EFC continues to foster collaboration and advocacy on freedom of religion and belief both in Canada and internationally. I'm honoured to continue to advance this essential work, as I continue to write for *Faith Today* and speak into the dominant political paradigm discussed in my new book *The New Orthodoxy: Canada's Emerging Civil Religion*,” says Clemenger. “Opportunities to speak and write about Canadian evangelical political engagement and how to effectively engage the currents of an increasing secularized Canadian culture is critical to our public witness as Evangelicals.”

UPDATES ON ALL THE ISSUES are always available on our website www.TheEFC.ca

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The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (*Alliance évangélique du Canada*) is the national association “uniting Evangelicals to bless Canada in the name of Jesus.” Since 1964 the EFC has provided a national forum for Evangelicals, fostered ministry partnerships, conducted research on religious and social trends and provided a constructive voice for biblical principles in life and society.



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



SANCTITY OF LIFE



CHURCH & MISSION



FAMILY & COMMUNITY



CARE FOR THE VULNERABLE