



November 4, 2022

The Honorable Chris Coons
Chairman
Subcommittee on State, Foreign,
Operations and Related Programs
218 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign,
Operations and Related Programs
290 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Graham, and Subcommittee Members:

I am writing to you today as the President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). Our organization serves as the public policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation's largest Protestant denomination with over 50,000 churches and congregations and nearly 14 million members.

The purpose of this message is to convey our profound concerns with the Subcommittee's proposed language regarding funding the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Rather than matching the House appropriations funding levels of \$4.5 million, S.4662 reduces funding levels to \$3.5 million and adds language that unhelpfully broadens the scope of USCIRF's mission. In September, Congress and President Biden acted to reauthorize USCIRF and explicitly reaffirmed its initial mandate. It is inappropriate that the expressed will of Congress be circumvented through the appropriations process.

The ERLC has been charged by the SBC with advocating for religious freedom around the globe in every context. Freedom of religion is our essential right and is often the foundation for other basic human rights. At a time when people of all faiths, including over [360 million Christians](#), are facing intense persecution for their beliefs, the work of USCIRF is more important than ever.

The Subcommittee's decision to decrease USCIRF's funding while also broadening its scope poses a real challenge to the continued effectiveness of the Commission. The bill mandates that USCIRF must "monitor, report on, and advocate against laws



and policies or, foreign governments that permit or condone discrimination against, or violations of human rights of, minority groups and other vulnerable communities on the basis of religion.” This duplicates the role of many other governmental or global agencies that already work to monitor and advocate for human rights broadly.

Meanwhile, USCIRF is the only agency dedicated exclusively to the monitoring of and advocating for religious freedom. It has been this narrow scope that has allowed the Commission to be highly effective since its inception, even with a relatively small budget. If USCIRF’s mandate is unwisely widened in scope, while simultaneously facing significant budget cuts, it will impede the Commission’s ability to do the important work it was founded to do.

In its current form, USCIRF is vital for all people of all faiths around the world. This decrease in funding and expanded scope will only hinder this important work.

In light of these concerns, I urge you to fund USCIRF at \$4.5 million for Fiscal Year 2023 and to adopt the FY 23 House Report language. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Respectfully,

Frederick Brent Leatherwood
President
Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission