

IMAP United States Panelists Discuss Church-State Relations

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March 24, 2026
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IMAP, United States – The International Media Association for Peace (IMAP) USA sponsored a webinar on March 24, 2026, titled “Negotiating the Church – State – Religious Freedom Relationship.” It featured two speakers from the Czech Republic, who shared their experiences with religious persecution under the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia and in the newly formed Czech Republic.

The discussion was moderated by **Mr. Ray Lipowcan**, executive director for UPF-Pennsylvania. **Ms. Cheryl Wetzstein**, senior advisor to the Times Global Media Group, provided historical background on religious freedom in the United States, and advocated for more experienced and educated reporters on religious affairs.

The first speaker, **Dr. Juraj Lajda**, president of UPF-Czech Republic, discussed the relationship between the church and state under communism in Czechoslovakia, including his own arrest, interrogation and imprisonment. He highlighted how the state controlled religious institutions and how over 200,000 people were convicted for political reasons related to their faith during the Communist era. Key aspects of the persecution were raids on Catholic monasteries, placing churches under state supervision, and controlling priests through mandatory state approval.

Dr. Lajda drew parallels between this abuse of power and the methods currently being employed against political opponents from faith communities in Japan and South Korea. He cited the treatment of Dr. Hak Ja Han in detention in South Korea as being more severe than his own imprisonment under the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

The next speaker was **Mr. Martin Sležák**, lawyer and vice president of the Family Federation, Czech Republic. Mr. Sležák explained ongoing challenges to religious freedom in the Czech Republic, focusing on the Family Federation’s struggle to obtain legal recognition as a religious corporation. Although the group did receive civil recognition in 1996, efforts to register as a religious entity have been rejected due to unreasonable and discriminatory practices. He also discussed media relations, noting that while his church faced negative coverage in the 1990’s, its proactive responses to media inaccuracies have resulted in more unbiased treatment.

Ms. Cheryl Wetzstein then presented an historical overview of religious freedom in America, explaining how the country’s founding was influenced by different interpretations of religious liberty among early settlers. Concerning media coverage, she asserted that dedicated and well-informed religion reporters are essential for fair treatment of faith communities, adding that IMAP could play a role in this regard. She concluded by calling for better media coverage of religious issues and continued efforts to promote religious freedom globally.

Dr. Michael Jenkins, president of UPF-USA and Canada, concluded the program, pointing out the seriousness of a global struggle for religious freedom, particularly in Asia, and praising efforts in Europe and the United States to champion this cause.

The webinar may be viewed at this [link](#).