Testimony of Dr. R. Drew Smith
Scholar-in-Residence at the Leadership Center at Morehouse College
Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights
November 17, 2011

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Payne, and Members of the Committee:

I am honored to be asked to share my perspectives on this important matter of religious freedom, especially as it relates to sub-Saharan African contexts. I greatly appreciate the U.S. State Department's engagement on these issues, and the vital research and analysis on religious freedom being done by the State Department and by the Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Both the State Department report and the Commission report very effectively cover the urgent situations in Sudan, Eritrea, and Nigeria, and the mounting problems in Somalia. The challenges in those countries have been carefully itemized, and I would only add that there has been troubling continuations of religious conflict and violence subsequent to the reporting periods in all four countries, especially in the border states between North and South Sudan, and in the Plateau state in Nigeria and in Abuja where the UN headquarters may have been bombed by a radical Islamic group. While many factors (including social inequality, interethnic grievances, and governmental manipulation) contribute to these interreligious conflicts, and demand attention in efforts to resolve these conflicts, religion features prominently and religiously explicit forms of mediation are required.

With that in mind, I would like to emphasize the important role interdenominational and interfaith organizations should increasingly play in mediating these conflicts. The All Africa Conference of Churches is an ecclesiastical network extending across sub-Saharan Africa that is developing ever stronger partnerships with national and regional councils of churches and with the African Union on social development matters but, also, on peacemaking—especially in Sudan, the Great Lakes, and the Horn. Also, each region in Africa has a regional Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches, and there are at least two regional interfaith networks in Africa (with both located in East Africa). Moreover, national church councils and interfaith councils exist in many African countries, including Sudan, Nigeria, and Eritrea. Although the impact of these various types of councils on conflict resolution has been debated, and the impartiality and diplomatic skills sets of religious leaders questioned at times, some of these councils have been very strategic to mediation and peacemaking.

These religious councils have demonstrated a number of significant strengths that uniquely position them for effective mediation and peacemaking, including:

- Extensive and deep-rooted relationships with localized constituencies in situations where there oftentimes is a scarcity of local civil society infrastructure;
- Capabilities to reach beyond culturally confined localisms and politically constricted local contexts so as to facilitate broader collaborative platforms for expression and action; and
- An ability to speak to religious struggles with a religious authority that comes from theologically and ecclesiastically positioning responses to social problems.

In building consensus around the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Sudan, the Sudan Council of Churches, the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference, and the Sudan Interreligious Council worked systematically to increase support for CPA among their local constituencies and to leverage local pressure on governmental parties—while deriving support from regional and international religious councils in the form of material resources, insertions of skilled personnel, and leveraging of pressure from other governments and multilateral organizations in support of CPA. But without the credibility local councils had with their Sudanese constituencies (across denominational and religious lines), the external support for CPA may not have been sufficient to keep the process from collapsing. These local, regional, and international faith-based collaborations are continuing to evolve in East Africa in response to ongoing problems in Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, and elsewhere. The Religious Leaders Peace Initiative for example, a multilateral, interfaith initiative involving faith leaders from various denominational and conciliar bodies as well as staff from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, are facilitating broad-based dialogue, research, and training in response to conflicts in the region.

With increased capacity the contributions by these religious councils to mediation and peacemaking can be expanded. Unfortunately, expanding mediation and peacemaking activities of religious organizations seemingly has not been a U.S. foreign policy priority. There has been a policy interest in faith-based organizations within the context of the AIDS relief prioritizations within US-Africa policy, but very little attention to the strategic positioning of faith-based organizations for crucial mediation and peacemaking work. My first recommendation is that more attention be given within our overall government strategy to utilizing and helping to expand the mediation and peacemaking capacities of religious councils.

I would also like to draw attention to a broader range of government intimidation and coercion of the religious sector. On a less severe scale than in the "Countries of Particular Concern", religious repression exists in multiple African countries where civil and political freedoms have been significantly constricted in general. A poignant example is Zimbabwe, ruled by Robert Mugabe for 31 years. Mr. Mugabe's repressive response to challenges to his continued rule has been well documented, but less well known has been his targeting of the religious community (although briefly mentioned in the State Department report). Especially during the past several years, the Mugabe regime has unleashed violence on churchpersons or

intimidated them by other means for being insufficiently supportive of his leadership and his ZANU-PF political party or because they supported the leadership of his political rival, Morgan Tsvangirai, who has been in a power-sharing arrangement with Mugabe since 2009.

Persons affiliated with the Johane Masowe Apostolic Church, one of Zimbabwe's largest denominations at roughly a million members, have been murdered, tortured, assaulted, or arrested, primarily because of their political inclinations and disinclinations. One church leader, Prophet Patric of Machaya was purportedly killed for not allowing access to his church for ZANU-PF campaign meetings. Two other church members were beaten to death in 2008, including the son of a church leader. The homestead of a church leader, Prophet Obey Mapuranga, was burned down for supporting Tsvangirai's MDC political party. Another church leader, Prophet Wainege, was beaten, tortured and his home burned down for supporting the MDC party. Yet another church leader, Apostle Harrison Chimutsimhu was beaten and tortured for attending church on Friday rather than ZANU-PF campaign meetings. There are also quite a few additional instances reported of church members who were beaten, tortured or detained for presumed disloyalty to ZANU-PF.

Mugabe's demands for allegiance have been forcefully imposed on other churches and church leaders as well. A Catholic priest was arrested in April 2011 for holding a memorial service in remembrance of the 20,000 Zimbabweans from the Ndebele ethnic group massacred by Mugabe's troops shortly after he came to power in 1980. The priest was charged with "communicating false statements against the state" by referring to the killings and stirring "offense to a particular tribe." In another April 2011 incident, police in Harare used tear gas to disperse a group of churchpersons gathered for a peace vigil. Thirteen of the worshippers were arrested, including four clergymen, on charges related to fomenting public violence. But there has been a particularly systematic effort to politically reorient, if not expel, the majority of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe, a church that has been a consistent promoter of political reform.

When the former head of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe, a pro-Mugabe bishop named Nolbert Kunonga was excommunicated by the church in 2007 for inciting violence through his sermons, he and his followers took over the main cathedral, the church's bank accounts, and dozens of Anglican schools and properties with the help of Mugabe's police force. Meanwhile, it is reported that the Anglican majority in Zimbabwe are being prevented by Bishop Kunonga's followers (with assistance from the police) from accessing many of their church buildings in various parts of the country. Where access to church buildings may still exist, worship services have frequently been disrupted by police using tear gas and batons. Anglican priests and church leaders have been arrested with some regularity and held in jail over weekends so as to prevent them from holding worship services. Anglican bishops have received death threats, and an elderly Anglican member was found murdered after repeatedly refusing demands to join Bishop Kunonga's church. The result of these repressive measures is that many Anglican churches lie empty on Sundays.

These and other intimidation tactics have been widely reported in the media and were itemized in a report delivered to Mr. Mugabe in October 2011 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who traveled to Zimbabwe for an urgent meeting with Mr. Mugabe. Although the situation facing Anglicans in Zimbabwe has been characterized by many Zimbabweans locally as factionalism, Archbishop Williams characterizes the situation as "serious persecution," and the Anglican Bishop of Bath and Wells recently remarked on "the persecution of Anglican Christians in Zimbabwe [as]one of the most serious and sustained violations of human rights and religious freedom" and one demanding "international advocacy."

Another country where the government has curtailed religious freedom through intimidation and coercion is Cameroon, a country ruled by the same president, Paul Biya, for 29 years. Although the country engages in periodic multiparty elections and has a constitution that enshrines civil liberties and religious freedom, the power of the Biya regime is essentially without challenge and the regime's capacity for manipulating or cowing opposition is extensive. The religious sector has not been especially politicized within post-colonial Cameroon, but in recent decades there has been a cadre of religious leaders that have openly criticized the Biya regime for policies and practices that continue to mire the country in poverty (especially the Anglophone population)as well as in a culture of corruption. One of the most consistent critics has been Christian Tumi, a Roman Catholic Cardinal, whose outspokenness has sometimes encouraged other Catholic clergy to speak out, though apparently not without consequences. Cardinal Tumi has endured death threats, government surveillance, and the Catholic Radio Veritas station was banned. Also, in the last 25 years, a number of Catholic religious leaders have been killed in Cameroon under suspicious circumstances:

- Father. Joseph Mbassi, an editor-in-chief of the country's Catholic newspaper was murdered in October 1988, with his body mutilated;
- Father. Bernabe Zambo, a pastor in the Bertoua archdiocese was poisoned in 1989;
- Father. Anthony Fonteh, principal of Saint Augustine College in Nso was assassinated on campus in May 1990;
- Retired Archbishop Yves Plumey of Garoua was murdered in 1991;
- Sisters Germaine Marie and Marie Leonie of the Congregations of Daughters of Our Lady of Sacred Heart were killed in August 1992;
- Jesuit Father. Englebert Mveng, a noted theologian was killed in 1995;
- Father Appolinaire Ndi, Parish Priest of Nkol-Top, Yaounde Archdiocese, was killed in 2001;
- Father Henryk Dejneka, an Oblate Missionary of Mary Immaculate (OMI), was found shot dead at his mission in Nguoudere in 2001;
- German missionary Fr. Anton Probst was murdered in 2003; and
- a priest was also murdered in the Anglophone section of Cameroon in 2006.

Pope John Paul II in 1995 asked the Cameroonian government to investigate unsolved deaths of Catholic clergy and religious leaders, but his request did not produce results. Nevertheless, according to a 2009 report on challenges faced by churches in Cameroon, "Catholics are broadly convinced [these killings] were an effort 'to intimidate the church, to keep it out of politics.'"

As startling as these killings are, the numbers still pale in comparison to the scale of religious violence in countries such as Sudan, Eritrea, and Nigeria—which partly explains why Cameroon and countries like it have not received as much attention in discussions of religious freedom. What also explains Cameroon's omission is the difficulty of seeing past constitutional and governmental declarations of religious freedom to the constrictions and constraints endured by religious communities on the ground.

As a Fulbright professor at a Protestant Seminary in Cameroon in 2009, I dialogued in and out of the classroom with clergy about challenges Christians are facing individually and institutionally within the country. What came through clearly in these discussions was a strong sense of frustration (even resignation), in the face of what was described as a political crippling of social, economic, and religious life (especially as it relates to the country's English-speaking minority). They talked about churches having little choice but to cooperate with a government whose unrivaled economic and institutional resources, and whose mastery in rewarding its friends and punishing its enemies could easily determine any individual's or institution's prospects within the country. They discussed how this dynamic has increasingly silenced existing pockets of opposition within the Church to the Biya regime, how it has condensed the Church's internal discourse by dissuading theological conversations bearing on inequality and injustice, and how it has undermined a broader sense of Christian community and collective purpose by cultivating a mindset of placing individual or subgroup interests ahead of a broader theologically defined community. These dynamics may not rise to the level of open repression of religion, but they are indicative of a coercive governmental impact on religious life that has resulted in a significant diminishing of religious freedom.

A somewhat more openly repressive mechanism governments have used to control religious life has been the requirement that religious organizations submit to a governmental registration and approval process. This requirement exists in Cameroon, as it does in many other countries in and beyond Africa, and has been used to regulate who is allowed to engage in an open, collective religious witness and practice. Several countries with these regulatory procedures currently ban groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, including Malawi, Ethiopia, and Tanzania. The extent and overall effect of these regulatory practices on religion is a matter deserving further attention, as part of a wider concern about government curtailment of civil society sector activities. Commenting on Equatorial Guinea, Human Rights Watch reports: "Freedom of

association and assembly are . . . severely curtailed, infringing on the development of civil society. The government imposes restrictive conditions on the registration and operation of nongovernmental groups. As a result, there is not one legally registered human rights organization in the country." In the same way that such regulatory screenings may filter out a range of civil society activities, these regulatory screenings may also filter out a range of religious activities that are not favored by the government in question.

Conclusions that can be drawn from these cases include the following:

The collective religious witness of faith groups suffers where religious believers are not free to openly express their convictions and to join together in public assemblies defined along lines of conscience they themselves establish—and this problem is more widespread than much of the official reporting on religious freedom makes clear—at least with respect to sub-Saharan Africa.

Repressive and coercive infringements of religious freedom are a strong likelihood in countries characterized by a lack of political rights and civil liberties in general, and perhaps greater emphasis on the connections between these factors may expand the countries in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere receiving close scrutiny within official discussions of religious freedom.

[This analysis might be employed in further considering religious freedom in several African countries classified as "not free" with respect to political rights and civil liberties, including: Zimbabwe; Equatorial Guinea; Congo (Kinshasa); Cameroon; Chad; Swaziland, and Angola (Freedom House, 2006). It is also important to note that five of the seven African countries with the longest serving presidents are on this list: Equatorial Guinea and Angola currently have presidents who have been in office for 32 years; Swaziland's king has presided for 24 years, and the Zimbabwean and Cameroonian situations have already been noted here.]

In accounting more fully for these sometimes less obvious forms of religious repression, my primary recommendation is that every effort be made to continue to seek assessments from within the religious sector in countries where religious freedom is verifiably endangered or is suspected to be—and not only assessments from persons at the top levels of ecclesiastical leadership, but also from younger religious leaders and activists.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for this opportunity to share perspectives on these matters.