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RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONCERNED ABOUT STATE CAPTURE OF RELIGION

This week, Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA) convened meetings in Cape Town and Johannesburg to analyse and raise serious concerns in response to the CRL Rights Commission's Report on the "Commercialisation of Religion", which was released last week. These meetings were attended by over 200 senior religious and church leaders and denominational heads from across the faith community.

While it was agreed that the CRL Report was addressing valid concerns regarding some abuses by a fringe minority of the religious community, it was unanimously agreed that the recommendations for a broad-based Act of Parliament to regulate religion would not solve these problems. On the contrary, the Commission's recommendations - if implemented into law (and which the Commission wants to "fast track") - will effectively amount to State capture of religion and are therefore an unacceptable erosion of the rights to freedom of religion which the South African Constitution guarantees.

"There are better alternatives to solve the valid problems and issues the Commission has identified, while leaving the faith community - 99% of which is law abiding and legally compliant - free to believe, teach, preach and live out their beliefs without interference and control by the State," said Michael Swain, Executive Director of FOR SA. *"We are asking for an urgent meeting with the Commission to alert them to the pressing concerns of the religious community in South Africa regarding the Report, and particularly the unacceptably tight timeline of only three weeks which has been given for responses".*

Further concern was expressed about the "random sample" of only 85 interviews which the Commission conducted with religious and traditional leaders across the country and subsequently used to draw its conclusions. While this "sample" may have been adequate to get a sense of the issues raised and a possible direction to find solutions, it was deemed completely inadequate as a basis for proposing sweeping and draconian changes to the current law governing the religious sector of South Africa.

On request of the religious and church leaders who attended the meetings, FOR SA will continue to guide and assist the faith community in South Africa as it engages on this matter of critical importance and to offer constitutionally permissible, practical, solutions to the problems identified in the CRL's Report.

ENDS

(The Report is available for download at <http://www.crlcommission.org.za/download-documents.html> - scroll down to "Commercialisation Report").

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