



THE RIGHTS AND RELIGIONS FORUM COMMUNITY SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

Rights and Religions Forum (RARF) is a nonprofit that addresses the marginalization of individuals in insular religious groups. RARF seeks to create spaces and curate conversations around the often ignored and complex questions surrounding the rights of individuals from insular religious groups and gives a voice to those who experience religious oppression.

BACKGROUND

Shortly after its founding, RARF had its first convening in October 2019, bringing together over 100 people from a broad range of insular religious groups (IRG), including Amish, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Muslim, Quiverfull, and many others. At this historic event, it was clear that there were activists on the ground doing critical and life-saving work in their respective communities, but there were shared challenges and needs among their constituents that for too long have been unaddressed by the state and charitable organizations. At this first conference, RARF's founders discovered the impact of convening and serving a broader community of leaders supporting individuals leaving IRG.

In order to better understand the landscape of leaders serving individuals who left IRG, and to determine how RARF could best serve them, RARF hired Secular Strategies to conduct a community survey. The aim of the community survey was to better understand the experiences, challenges, successes, and goals of those working on the ground with current and former members of IRG so that RARF can mobilize resources to support them. The preliminary findings were presented at RARF's second conference in October 2022, which we leveraged as an opportunity to incorporate feedback from attendees and to connect with additional survey participants.

Between June and November 2022, we attempted to contact approximately 95 organizations and individuals for interviews. We conducted 44 interviews, representing a total of 15 denominationally specific communities. Interviews also included employees of eight organizations that served the nonreligious community more broadly, and four researchers.

Interviewees tended to work in one of three broad categories: direct services for those in or leaving IRG, public education on the reality of living in and emerging from such communities, or broader advocacy and legal work to improve the opportunities and

daily lives of those who have left insular religion. These constituencies' experiences vary widely and include difficulties receiving medical care, lacking birth certificates or social security cards, family ostracization, social isolation, lack of formal education, and more.

Interviewees came from a variety of IRG and experienced these challenges first-hand. For some, the consequences of leaving their IRG were primarily social or emotional. These challenges cannot be underestimated, but many interviewees personally experienced enormous logistical challenges. IRG disaffiliates may lack the basics (i.e. food, housing, education, medical records, and access to or knowledge of government documentation such as a birth certificate or social security number) so that when they leave their community they don't even exist on paper. Many individuals don't know what they don't know about how to function in broader society. At the October 2022 RARF Conference, individuals used the phrases "domestic refugee" and "native born immigrant" to capture this feeling of displacement and uncertainty. For some of our interviewees, who provide support to those in or leaving insular communities, their position as a leader came only after they dealt with these

IRG disaffiliates may lack the basics (food, housing, education, medical records, access to or knowledge of government documentation, etc.) so that when they leave their community they don't even exist on paper.

barriers alone. They identified the need for support because they did not have access to it, and have taught themselves how to navigate a foreign and complicated world without needed support.

This report will summarize the demographic backgrounds of our interviewees, their experiences with funding and marketing, existing programming and challenges, larger systemic gaps that impact their communities, advocacy interest and opportunities, and recommendations. The report identifies trends and broad needs, but it cannot fully capture the lifetime of experiences each interviewee brought to our meetings.

There is no word that can easily summarize the distinct individual experiences of the leaders surveyed and the communities they serve. Some of the organizations our interviewees lead serve former and current members of these insular

groups. Some interviewees identified as atheist, agnostic, or humanist. Others discovered or adopted new or modified religious practices after they left an insular religious group. This group is not a monolith and, in our language, we do not wish to minimize or dismiss the complex relationship many interviewees have with faith in a higher power or religious practice.

The language in this report acknowledges the shared experiences and challenges of those who leave insular religious environments and distinguishes between their religious communities of origin (IRG), and the new communities they join upon emerging from IRG. While IRG refers broadly to and describes the environments interviewees and the people they serve come from, we will use the term "IRG disaffiliate(s)" to describe individuals who have left their respective IRG. This term can be used to describe both the leaders interviewed and the individuals they support. We will use the terms "Disaffiliate leaders" or simply "Leaders" to describe the interviewees, the majority of whom are building and leading new communities specifically created to support IRG disaffiliates.

In working with our interviewees, we made several strategic decisions that contributed to our ability to reach and engage in a meaningful conversation

with the leaders. Both of our lead interviewers had personal experience as former members of IRG themselves. They led in designing our questions and in our interview outreach, which facilitated powerful conversations with interviewees. We prioritized a listen-first approach, which led to some variation in the questions discussed but brought out essential nuances in the individual experiences of each interviewee. Many of the individuals interviewed work with those leaving IRG because they themselves left those communities. The reality facing those who walk away from insular groups varies broadly, but can require leaders to face significant challenges. In reading this report, we ask you to keep in mind that the common challenges faced by community leaders in general are compounded by the fact that these leaders are learning to lead in an entirely new context, within a broader society unfamiliar to them given the insular communities they come from.

Many of the leaders we interviewed who grew up in IRG did not have access to a full secular education. Some attended public schools through middle school and never went to high school. Others spent their entire K-12 education in schools that did not teach a full history,

science, or health curriculum, and still others come from communities where primary education was predominantly religious with only a few hours to cover writing, reading, and basic mathematics. Several interviewees earned their GED after leaving their religious community, and others went to religious seminars and colleges. Many interviewees had nontraditional educational backgrounds, which exacerbated the difficulties they faced entering professional spaces, incorporating their organizations, networking, learning to manage websites and social media accounts, and more.

The majority of our interviewees were women. The concentration of women in nonprofit and community service roles is not unique to IRG disaffiliates, but these women face unique challenges. IRG are at varying levels of patriarchal, usually encouraging women to spend their lives performing unpaid care work and discouraging them from pursuing a formal education. IRG disaffiliates were raised in male-led spaces with little if any female leaders. As a result, the women we interviewed reported that leaving insular groups and then positioning themselves as leaders required teaching themselves a variety of professional skills and encountering both external and

internal biases. Many saw this as an ongoing process. At the 2022 RARF Conference, several women discussed their struggles to ask for time and support from their communities and donors. Others discussed difficulties earning the respect of others leaving insular groups whose worldviews have been shaped by patriarchal systems. Working to build a sustainable and equitable community poses specific challenges. Spending a lifetime in IRG means that the only leadership and organizational structure many interviewees were initially familiar with when they started their work was the one they came from. The RARF Conference included a discussion on this topic, highlighting a shared fear leaders have about unintentionally replicating the high-control nature of their former religious communities. Leaders crave healthy and enriching community building strategies.

METHODS

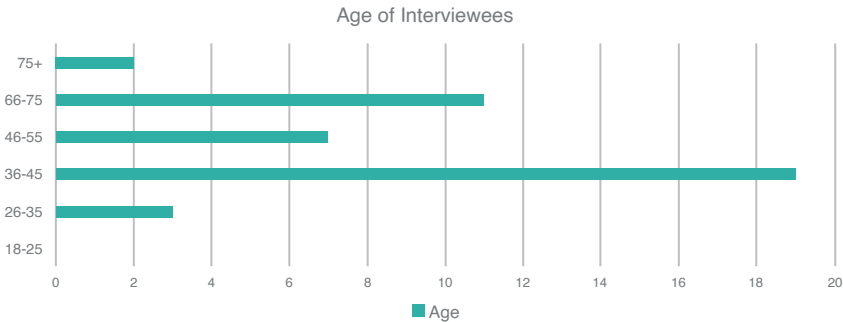
This report is the product of individual outreach and qualitative data collection through a series of interviews. In order to put interviewees at ease, we chose not to record interviews and relied on note taking from our interviewers. We also did not use personal anecdotes from interviewees.

We attempted to connect with approximately three times the number of organizations and individuals we ended up interviewing. For formal organizations we reached out through website requests, emailing leaders, or messages on LinkedIn. Many of our early contacts came from the leaders of Facebook and Meetup groups. As we started our first round of interviews, interviewees were able to connect us with others doing similar work and offer an introduction. This sped up the process of identifying interviewees, but the informal nature of many efforts to serve IRG disaffiliates made it difficult to find leaders.

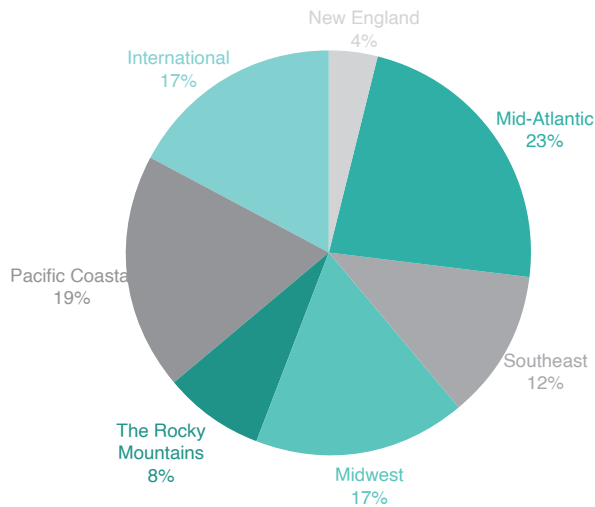
The interviewee pool this report describes has a bias toward those with a stronger online presence, since they were easier to reach. If we were to repeat this project, adding questions regarding the resources interviewees have used to address their own mental health needs would be valuable. We would also add a section asking specific questions about the quality of their interactions with therapists, social workers, policymakers, and law enforcement and other authority figures so as to identify specific knowledge gaps.

DEMOGRAPHICS

We conducted 44 interviews and spoke with 48 individuals. Our interviewees brought diverse backgrounds and experiences to the table. Fifty-eight percent were women and 39% were men. Our youngest interviewee was 29, and our oldest was 77. Most had a deep personal connection to the work they were doing, having grown up in the communities they now serve. Work with insular

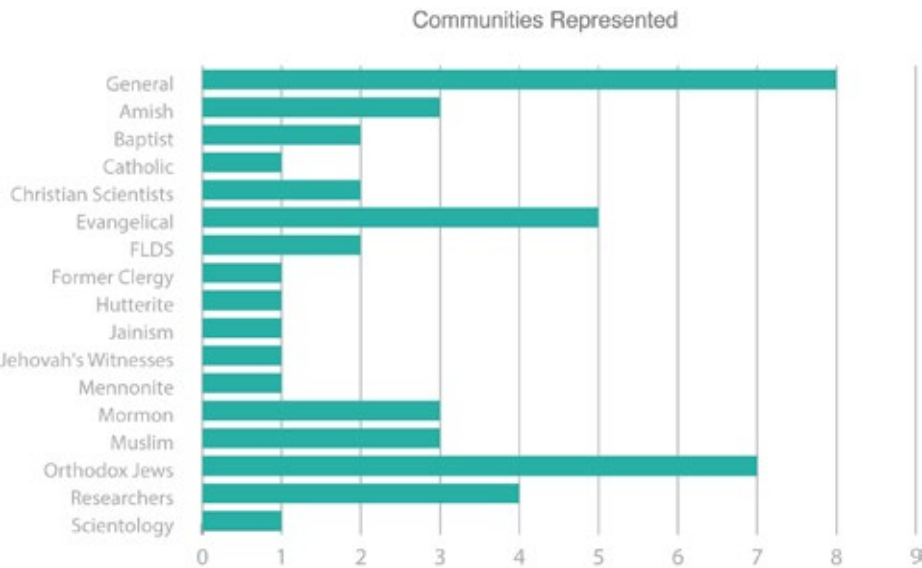


communities is happening across the United States and throughout the world. We spoke to individuals in almost every region of the United States, with the strongest concentrations in the mid-Atlantic, the Midwest, and the Pacific Coast. Seventeen percent of our interviewees lived and worked internationally in locations such as Canada and the United Kingdom. Half of those interviewed participate in work with insular religious communities on a volunteer basis, with



several spending significant personal funds to facilitate their work. Volunteer interviewees work in a variety of capacities. Two mentioned committing full-time hours or more to their work with IRG disaffiliates. Several run Facebook pages and/or Meetup groups in their local area. Others are bloggers, podcasters, writers, or other content creators. Only 35% were paid while 56% were volunteers. In addition, 8% are researchers. Out of 48 interviewees, just 37% have full-time jobs working with IRG disaffiliates.

For a handful of interviewees, pursuing formal incorporation into a 501(c)3 organization would be valuable. Two mentioned that they were in the process of incorporation, but two others shared that the challenges associated with the work



and maintaining 501(c)3 status led them to dissolve their nonprofit. Others created LLC organizations to add formality to their one-person operation with less upkeep than a nonprofit. Nonprofit status is useful for some efforts but inaccessible or unrealistic for others.

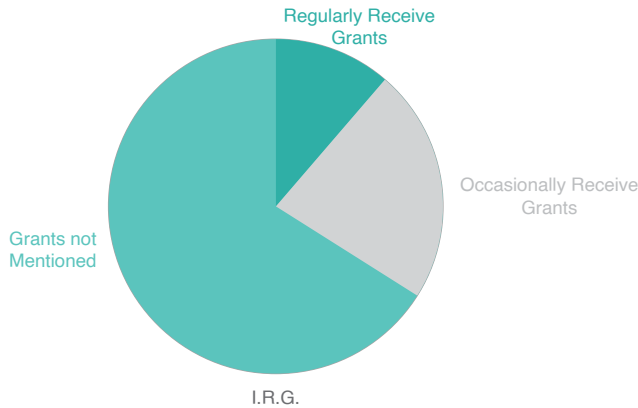
Several individuals worked with organizations broadly serving the nonreligious community, such as Black Nonbelievers, Divorcing Religion, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation. But the majority of our interviewees have a specific

focus on working with individuals who are current or former members of a specific IRG. The highest concentration of denomination specific interviewees included those working with Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish communities and Evangelical communities. Each community had programming and issue interests specific to the background of those they serve, but leaders from all communities highlighted shared challenges and hopes for the future.

FUNDING & MARKETING

Interviewees engaged in a variety of fundraising tactics. Ten (23%) mentioned utilizing online email fundraising campaigns. Social media is used as a fundraising source by 14 (32%) interviewees, and 23 (52%) mentioned having a regular donor pool. Three (7%) interviewees clarified that they are primarily funded by one major donor. Twenty-seven percent of our interviewees expressed an interest in receiving assistance with fundraising. The number of interviewees who reported formal fundraising efforts and expressed a desire for help with fundraising was lower than we anticipated, although this is largely explained by the number of interviewees that operate on a volunteer basis.

Sixty-eight percent of interviewees reported regularly communicating with the general public, and 77% shared a desire to expand their outward facing communications. Almost every interviewee (98%) reported communicating regularly with their target audience, but 93% indicated that they wanted to expand their reach within the IRG they left. Most interviewees did not report having access to grant money. The time and expertise required for grant writing and management is prohibitive for most. Only five interviewees (11%) reported regularly receiving grants, and 10 (23%) reported occasionally receiving grants.



EXISTING PROGRAMMING

We categorized the work of the organizations and the individuals who represented them in our interviews into three major categories: direct services, advocacy, and creation of educational content. Several interviewees performed more than one of these functions. Leaders are offering a wide variety of services.

Eighteen percent reported providing direct services, such as offering short-term funding assistance and housing. Twenty percent reported offering education attainment services through scholarships, tutoring, and/or GED assistance.



Twenty percent of interviewees provide legal services, including assistance with welfare, obtaining birth certificates and government IDs, and litigation support. Twenty-five percent of interviewees offer therapeutic services in house, 23% refer IRG disaffiliates to therapists, and others offer cultural sensitivity training for therapists and government officials. Sixteen percent of those interviewed offer crime victim services. Seventeen interviewees (39%) reported holding conferences, seminars, or retreats. Most interviewees discussed the importance of community for IRG disaffiliates. They created community through in person and remote events, which have expanded dramatically in the aftermath of COVID-19.

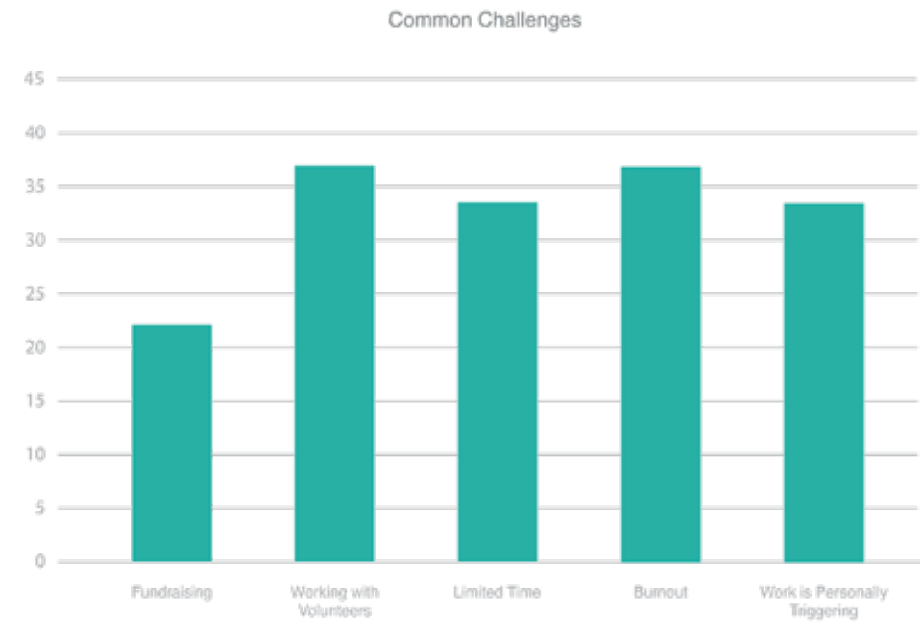
Sixteen interviewees (36%) are engaged in advocacy at the federal level and 17 interviewees (39%) at the state and local level. One participant reported that their organization was working to open a 501(c)4 branch so they could expand advocacy programming.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Most interviewees reported shared organizational and personal challenges. Regardless of organization size, interviewees discussed difficulties with fundraising, volunteer retention and management, and managing a social media presence. Working with IRG disaffiliates involves a high personal cost for many interviewees. Sixty-six percent of interviewees discussed emotional burnout, including one interviewee who was dissolving the organization. Because many leaders have a personal connection to their work, 36% reported that their

involvement triggered personally traumatic experiences. The prevalence of emotional distress amongst those on the ground working with IRG disaffiliates highlights the need for greater cooperation, connection, and support among disaffiliate leaders.

In our interviews, we encountered a few notable challenges that transcended the capacity and ability of any individual or organization. Addressing these systemic gaps will require not only collective work on the part of entities serving IRG



disaffiliates and secular organizations, but in some cases demand a larger cultural shift. Almost every interviewee (95%) mentioned that their work and/or those they serve struggled due to generally held prejudices and biases against those who have or had an affiliation with an IRG. Ninety-three percent referenced difficulties due to the general public's lack of knowledge regarding IRG. Eighty-two percent referred to the fact that laws and policies have been designed to benefit or protect religious organizations in ways that allow them to exert a powerful influence over current and former members. Examples include broad exemptions given to religious groups regarding education and vaccination status, as well as the legal and financial protections churches have as 501(c)3 nonprofits.

In attempting to meet the needs of the communities they serve, 52% of individuals and organizations talked about a lack of mental health service providers who are familiar with IRG, as well as a lack of providers who share their constituents' lived experiences. More than half of the interviewees (54%) observed that a lack of secure housing often presents a significant barrier for individuals seeking to leave IRG. A little over 20% of interviewees also discussed a persistent lack of diversity in the voices working on issues that impact IRG disaffiliates. More inclusive representation, including more people of color and younger voices as well as increased leadership from those who have lived experiences as members of IRG, would contribute toward diversifying the issues being addressed by the leaders interviewed and the secular community at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviewees representing organizations at every level of development highlighted three universal themes: a desire to increase public awareness and outreach, difficulty with personal burnout, and interest in coalition building.

SUPPORTING LEADERS

The documented burnout our interviewees deal with undermines the sustainability of their efforts and comes at great personal cost. This survey has demonstrated that interviewees have much more in common than may meet the eye, and are seeking opportunities to interact and collaborate with other disaffiliate leaders. Friendship and mentorship among leaders would provide opportunities to ask for advice, receive support, and acquire tools they can utilize as they engage in emotionally taxing work.

RARF can build the capacity of organizations serving IRG disaffiliates by investing in their leaders. Because our interviewees included individuals at a wide range of organizations at various stages of development, there are several potential avenues to provide support for these leaders. For our interviewees who are working on a volunteer basis to support Meetup groups, Facebook pages, blogs, and other informal contact points, we recommend:



- **Skills Training:** Several leaders discussed the difficulties they have encountered while teaching themselves how to manage websites, write fundraising appeals, develop donor pools, network in a professional setting, and participate in formal advocacy.
- **Technology Support:** Facilitate a more robust online presence for leaders and curate a list of vetted volunteers and technology support providers who can offer training or support for website updates, web safety software, and smaller online projects.
- **Fundraising Support:** The vast majority of interviewees discussed difficulties with fundraising as unpaid volunteers or part-time employees focusing on their services and programming for IRG disaffiliates. Grant writing and reporting is out of reach for many smaller organizations and individual efforts. Leaders can benefit from support in areas such as building and retaining donor relationships, and developing email fundraising lists and content.
- **Grant Giving:** RARF may pursue grants and major gifts and distribute funding to organizations working with IRG disaffiliates.
- **Fundraising for Collective Efforts:** Collective fundraising efforts to support collaboration among leaders could spur the interest of a broader pool of donors and grant-giving organizations.
- **Partnerships with National Secular Organizations:** Working with national secular organizations to offer resources to leaders that support their marketing and outreach needs, including the setup of social media accounts, creating social media ads, and teaching cost-efficient strategies regarding email outreach, database management, and basic fundraising tactics. Sharing larger organizations' access to a more formal suite of services would expand the reach of smaller groups working to support IRG disaffiliates.
- **Networking and Mentoring:** The creation of a formal mentorship program or network to support the leaders of newly formed organizations would not only offer support and community, it could also create resources designed to target the educational gaps among many IRG leaders that are the result of their upbringing in an IRG. We recommend including leadership training and professional development focusing on community building strategies, in addition to the range of support strategies mentioned above.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Working together to increase public awareness surrounding the reality of IRG disaffiliates' experiences would address most leaders' concerns.

Ninety-five percent of interviewees mentioned struggling due to generally held prejudices and biases, with lack of public knowledge close behind. Several potential programming ideas to advance education around the experiences of IRG disaffiliates include:

- Educational campaigns, roundtable discussions, “ask me anything” events, and other programming to expand public awareness would be beneficial to leaders and the respective IRG disaffiliates they serve.
- Coordinating a series of educational articles, for example a series on the role of coercion in different IRG, would offer a platform to expand public awareness.
- A larger educational project could include a documentary series highlighting the experience of living in particular IRG. Several interviewees have served as consultants on well-known documentaries and articles discussing faith groups ranging from Mormon, Amish, Hutterite, Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mennonite communities. Such a project would utilize this expertise to curate a discussion about IRG that includes several different IRG communities and highlights the threads of shared experiences across denominational groups.
- Piloting educational resources for relevant professionals, legal authorities, and advocates about how they can effectively meet the needs of IRG disaffiliates. This would include social workers, law enforcement, therapists and counselors, and housing providers. Starting in cities and states that have a high concentration of IRG would be most effective.

DIRECT SERVICES



Some larger issues, discussed in the systemic gaps section above, can be the basis of direct service collaboration. Providing direct services can relieve individual leaders and organizations from addressing these very basic and serious needs. Examples of shared direct service needs among IRG disaffiliates include:

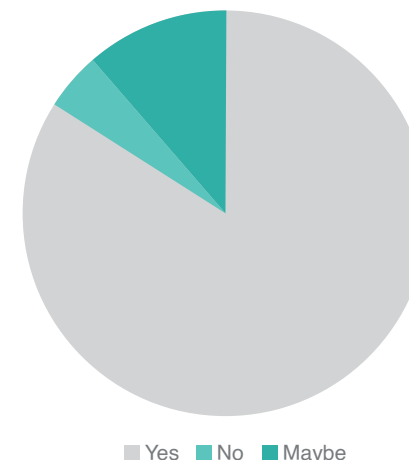
- **Housing:** Housing insecurity is a national policy failure, but the importance of efforts to expand access to safe housing for IRG disaffiliates cannot be overstated. The lack of safe housing for those leaving IRG was repeatedly raised during interviews. RARF could collaborate with nonprofit and government partners that offer housing and holistic support services to connect leaders with referral resources.
- **Counseling Services:** During the interviews, leaders repeatedly raised the loss of family and community support faced by IRG disaffiliates. RARF can work with organizations to build out a network of trauma/coercion informed therapists who can provide counseling for those in immediate need of mental health services yet lack the ability to pay for such services.

ADVOCACY

IRG disaffiliates come from communities that are proud of their insularity, however, the leaders we interviewed have sought to be part of a broader and more inclusive society where collaboration with others is viewed as an opportunity. More than 95% of interviewees expressed at least some interest in working with other organizations that support IRG disaffiliates, including those from communities other than the one they serve.

While most of our interviewees represent small groups that operate on an entirely volunteer basis or where they are the only paid employees, when asked if they

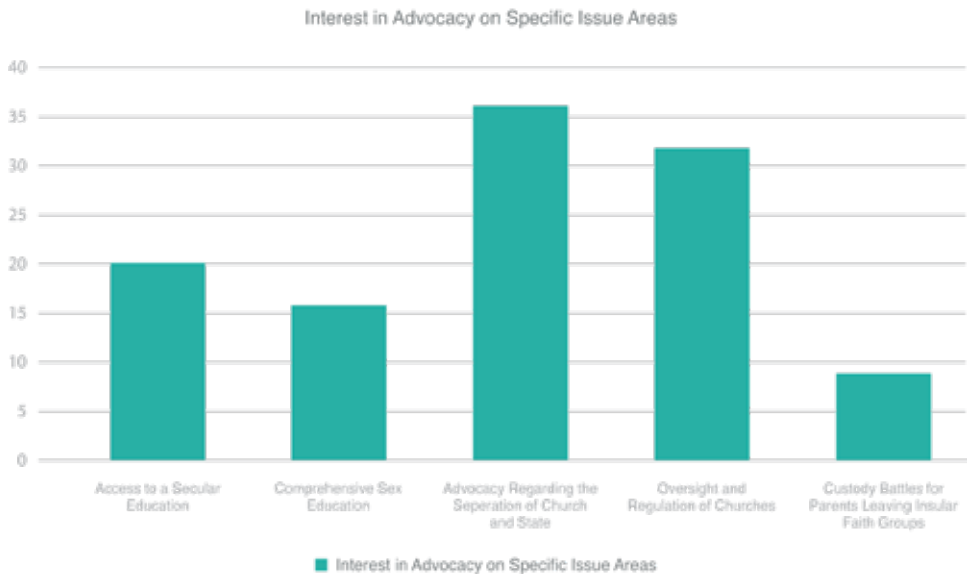
Are you interested in working with organizations that support current or former members of other IRG?



were interested in working with other groups that had similar missions addressing the needs of IRG disaffiliates from other IRG, there was resounding interest.

We believe that there are opportunities for collaboration among IRG disaffiliates around advocacy. Of the 44 organizations and individuals interviewed, 21 (48%) are currently engaged in advocacy work in some way. An additional 20%, 30 organizations total, indicated that they were interested in pursuing advocacy work either at the local, state, or national level. Some of the most commonly discussed issue areas where joint advocacy can have an impact include general separation of church and state (82%), oversight and regulation of churches (73%), access to a secular education (45%), comprehensive sex education (36%), and legal

advocacy for parents who have left insular faith groups and now face custody trials (20%). Other topical themes included advocacy on reproductive rights, child sex abuse, coercive marriage, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and the rise of white Christian nationalism. Capacity was the most referenced limitation to advocacy work.



Organizational support to increase advocacy work at both the state and federal level could accelerate the incredible work leaders are already doing.

Recommendations to expand advocacy work include:

- Creating a multi-faceted campaign illustrating the dangers of coercion and how it impacts IRG disaffiliates. Such a campaign could include publishing op-eds and press releases, and creating social media content for smaller nonprofits to personalize, coordinated under a unified, branded campaign name. This format could become a template for similar educational campaigns on a variety of topics where RARF could coordinate efforts and provide materials to smaller organizations.
- Requesting a public hearing on coercion and religion, at which RARF founders and community survey interviewees could serve as expert witnesses representing a diversity of faiths worldwide.



- Working with legislative champions to introduce a bill on coercion, which has been done in several other countries.
- Coordinating participation in the 2024 International Religious Freedom Summit, inviting smaller organizational leaders to join RARF in hosting side-events and tabling in order to extend educational efforts to those in attendance.
- Lobbying the International Religious Freedom Summit to add the United States to its data tracking and reporting efforts.
- Creating a 501(c)4 organization to serve as a vehicle for joint advocacy on the issues listed above as common interests. This report is only an introduction to the experiences and needs of IRG disaffiliates and the leaders supporting them.
- Conducting further research into the familiarity and knowledge of IRG disaffiliates and leaders about their legal rights and protections. Such work could lead to the creation of resources that would empower IRG disaffiliates to know what support is available to them, and what their rights are as they navigate integration into society.
- As mentioned in the methods section above, a key opening for future research centers on understanding the interactions IRG disaffiliates have with authority figures and service providers, including social workers, police officers, government officials, therapists, and others who IRG disaffiliates may encounter early on in their disaffiliation. A specific branch of this research could also involve interviewing policymakers to understand their familiarity with IRG, and any misconceptions they may have. This research would facilitate the creation of a targeted curriculum for both first contact authorities and lawmakers whose decisions uniquely impact individuals who live in or have left IRG.



AUTHORS AND CONTACT

This report was commissioned by the **Rights and Religions Forum**, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization founded to challenge religious oppression and advance the freedoms of individuals raised in insular religious communities, and authored by **Secular Strategies**, a consulting firm specialized in government relations, nonprofit program management, and advancing secularism in public policy.

More information about RARF can be found on our website: rarforum.org. We can also be contacted by email at info@rarforum.org.