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INSIDE, 2A

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THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2026 | HILLSDALE.NET

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# Trump panel promotes church, state separation



Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the Religious Liberty Commission's chairman, called the notions of a necessary separation between church and state the "biggest lie that's been told in America since our founding." BRANDON BELL/GETTY IMAGES

## Commission criticized as promoting Christian nationalism

**BrieAnna J. Frank**  
USA TODAY

Members of President Donald Trump's Religious Liberty Commission criticized notions of a necessary separation between church and state at the group's final hearing in Washington, DC, on April 13.

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the commission's chairman, at one point called it the "biggest lie that's been told in America since our founding."

Patrick's statement echoed comments made in previous commission hearings and by the Trump administration more broadly that suggest the government can and should promote religion as a public good without violating the First Amendment, which says "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

President Thomas Jefferson popularized the phrase "separation of church and state" in the early 19th century, but it does not appear in the Constitution. Over the centuries, courts and scholars have debated where the line should be drawn as it relates to the government and religion.

**The commission's purpose is to "safeguard and promote America's founding principle of religious freedom," according to the White House.**

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State called Patrick's remarks "an attack on our democracy."

The separation of church and state "is an American original, something we should be proud of, fight for and cherish," said Rachel Laser, the organization's president and CEO.

Past commission hearings touched on topics including antisemitism and religious liberty in public education. A common theme across the hearings has been the commissioners' view that the legal system was weaponized against people of faith, particularly Christians, under past administrations.

Trump established the commission through an executive order in May. It

said the commission would end July 4 – the 250th anniversary of American independence – unless the president extends it.

Professor Helen Alvaré, who teaches law and religion at George Mason University's Antonin Scalia School of Law, was the first of numerous witnesses at the hearing, held at the Museum of the Bible.

She described religious liberty as an "objective good" for the country and asserted her view that there is "far more peace" than discord among faith groups in the United States. Government overreach of Americans' religious practices has historically been the bigger problem, she said.

Alvaré applauded the U.S. Supreme Court's shift in recent years toward a broader application of the First Amendment's free exercise clause, exemplified through a 2025 ruling in which the court sided with a group of Maryland parents who wanted to opt their children out of public school curriculum with LGBTQ+ themes.

The idea that public school teachers

See PANEL, Page 3A

## Experts: MI gas prices could stay high for months

**Frank Witsil**  
Detroit Free Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Michigan gas prices, which topped \$4 a gallon on average in the past week, might not be coming down for months or could even go higher, according to President Donald Trump.

And, in addition to concerned motorists, Up North businesses worry that higher gas prices could dampen summer tourism traffic as people seek to save money and take fewer trips and spend less.

Trump, when asked by Fox News' "Sunday Morning Futures" host Maria Bartiromo if oil and gasoline prices would come down by the midterm elections in November, said that he hoped so.

See GAS PRICES, Page 4A

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