

DOMINICA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of thought, freedom to practice one's religion, and freedom from oaths contrary to one's beliefs. Religious leaders continued to support government COVID-19 vaccination efforts. Rastafarians continued to press the government to legalize marijuana use. The Dominica Association of Evangelical Churches (DAEC) reported it continued to stand firmly against homosexuality and continued to support the government's ban on same-sex marriages. The Dominican Christian Council, with the participation of the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist Churches, continued its opposition to a constitutional challenge seeking to overturn the country's anti-sodomy law.

Interdenominational organizations continued their efforts to advance respect for religious freedom and diversity. Televised, electronic, and drive-in religious services were available throughout a government-mandated COVID-19 shutdown in August. Interdenominational dialogue between Catholic and Protestant communities continued on a regular basis.

The U.S. embassy continued its engagement on religious freedom issues. Embassy officials met twice during the year with the Ministry of Governance, Public Service Reform, Citizen Empowerment, and Social Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs, and they discussed the role of religious groups in encouraging COVID-19 vaccinations and in promoting education and health care. Embassy officials also conducted outreach both with evangelical Protestant and Catholic leaders on the state of religious freedom in the country and their views on same-sex unions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 74,600 (midyear 2021). According to the U.S. government, Catholics represent 61.4 percent of the population, Protestants 28.6 percent, Rastafarians 1.3 percent, Jehovah's Witnesses 1.2 percent, and those listing "other" 0.3 percent; 6.1 percent report no religious affiliation, and 1.1 percent are unspecified. According to the most recent census in 2011, approximately 53 percent of the population is Catholic. Evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 20 percent of the population. The largest evangelical Protestant groups are Pentecostals with 6 percent, Baptists with 5 percent, and the Christian Union Mission, with 4 percent. Seventh-day Adventists

constitute 7 percent of the population. Other smaller religious groups include Anglicans, Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Rastafarians, and Baha'is. According to the census, 9 percent of the population professes no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of thought, freedom to practice one's religion, and freedom from taking oaths contrary to one's beliefs. By law, the government may make exceptions to constitutionally required provisions in the interests of public order and morality if the exceptions are for activities "shown not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society."

The constitution prohibits a minister of a religion from being qualified to run in an election.

Religious groups seeking nonprofit status must register with the Attorney General's Office. They must submit a letter signed by five executives of the religious group and provide the official name of the group and an address identifying the place of worship. The registration fee is 25 Eastern Caribbean dollars (\$9). The Attorney General's Registry Office reviews and approves applications. Any organization denied permission to register has the right to apply for judicial review. By law, religious groups also must register buildings used to publish marriage banns (announcements of marriage) or used as places of worship.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain private schools and to provide religious instruction. Students of different religions may attend private schools run by religious groups of another affiliation. Public schools may hold nondenominational prayers, and attendance is optional. The law requires the vaccination (non-COVID-19) of all children to attend both public and private schools. The government does not offer a waiver for children without vaccinations. Parents may homeschool their children.

Dreadlocks are prohibited in all government-funded schools as well as in prisons; however, the law is not enforced.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In addition to establishing a series of COVID-19 prevention measures, the government also encouraged religious leaders to conduct services by electronic or virtual means. In August, Catholic Bishop of Roseau Gabriel Malzaire broadcast his support for the government's efforts to combat COVID-19 and urged his followers to get vaccinated as "an act of love." During the year, religious leaders met with the government's COVID-19 task force to address vaccine hesitancy.

The DAEC continued to advocate for the repeal of a law prohibiting licensed clergy from running for public office.

Rastafarians continued to press the government for complete legalization of marijuana use. In October 2020, parliament decriminalized the possession of up to 28 grams of marijuana to individuals 18 years and above for personal religious use. Representatives of the Rastafarian community said authorities did not enforce the law against using marijuana when the community used it in its religious rites.

The government continued to subsidize teacher salaries at all private schools run by religious organizations, including those affiliated with the Catholic, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches.

At public schools, teachers, principals, and students continued to lead nondenominational prayers during morning assemblies, but students were not required to participate.

In June, the DAEC reported it continued to stand firmly against homosexuality and continued to support the government's ban on same-sex marriage. In 2020, the Dominica Christian Council, with the participation of Anglican, Methodist, and Catholic Churches, applied for, and received, the High Court's permission to intervene in opposition to a 2019 constitutional challenge seeking to overturn the country's anti-sodomy law. The case remained pending at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious groups produced live and recorded televised religious services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, broadcasting on radio, television, and social media. Places of worship also provided drive-in services throughout the year. The DAEC and other religious groups continued to operate counseling hotlines for persons experiencing fear, worry, or emotional stress because of COVID-19.

During the year, the Catholic church-associated Caritas Dominica Youth Emergency Action Committee's (YEAC) trained individuals regardless of their religious background as first responders in cases of natural or manmade disasters. YEAC used the opportunity to demonstrate and promote religious tolerance. Interdenominational organizations continued their efforts to advance respect for religious freedom and diversity. Interdenominational dialogue between the DAEC and the Christian Council occurred on a regular basis throughout the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met twice during the year with the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Governance, Public Service Reform, Citizen Empowerment, Social Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs and discussed the important role of religious groups in encouraging COVID-19 vaccinations and in promoting health care and education.

In January, the embassy promoted religious tolerance through supporting YEAC's efforts to train first responders. In June, an embassy official met with the president of the Evangelical Association to discuss religious freedom in the country, the DAEC's position on homosexual unions, and its current position on constitutional provisions prohibiting a minister of religion from running in an election. In June and September, embassy officials met with Bishop Malzaire to discuss the same topics, as well as the role of the Catholic Church in helping youth.

Embassy officials and staff maintained social media engagement on religious freedom.