**ABHMS Encourages BJC Essay Scholarship Contest Entries**

**VALLEY FORGE, PA (ABNS 12/14/15)—**American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) encourages entries to the [2016 Religious Liberty Essay Scholarship Contest](http://bjconline.org/contest/), sponsored by the Religious Liberty Council of the Baptist Joint Committee (BJC). High school students in the graduating classes of 2016 and 2017 can win up to $2,000 for college by writing an essay examining whether elected or appointed officials should be able to opt out of certain job duties. Each year, the contest engages high school students in church-state issues by directing them to express a point of view on a religious liberty topic. The grand prize is **$2,000** and a trip for two to Washington, D.C. Second prize is **$1,000,** and third prize is **$250**.

High school students can enter the contest by writing an essay of 800-1,200 words addressing the following:

*At times, an elected or government-appointed official may encounter a conflict between his or her job requirements and a personal religious belief. For example, a county clerk may not want to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples because of his or her religious view of marriage. Similarly, a clerk who is a pacifist may object to issuing a gun license based on his or her religious belief.*

*Should an elected official be able to opt out of certain job duties? How far should government go to accommodate elected or appointed government officials who have religious objections to certain job requirements?*

*Discuss both the rights and responsibilities of the official and of the individual(s) applying for the license. In what way does your solution affect all parties involved?*

“How far should government go to accommodate the religious beliefs of public officials who object to certain job requirements?” asks Curtis Ramsey-Lucas, ABHMS managing director, Resource Development, and a BJC board member. “The 2016 essay contest presents a wonderful opportunity for junior and senior high school students to wrestle with this question while learning about religious liberty and church-state separation.”

Entries must be postmarked by **March 4, 2016,**to be eligible. [Contest forms and complete details](http://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2016-RL-Essay-Contest-Entry-Form-for-web.pdf) are available online. Winners will be notified by the end of summer 2016.

Visit <http://bjconline.org/contest> for complete contest rules. If you have questions, contact Charles Watson Jr., BJC education and outreach specialist, by email at cwatson@BJConline.org.

*The Baptist Joint Committee is a 78-year-old, Washington, D.C.-based religious liberty organization that works to defend and extend God-given religious liberty for all, bringing a uniquely Baptist witness to the principle that religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government.*

*American Baptist Home Mission Societies—the domestic mission arm of American Baptist Churches USA—ministers as the caring heart and serving hands of Jesus Christ across the United States and Puerto Rico through a multitude of initiatives that focus on discipleship, community and justice.*

*American Baptist Churches is one of the most diverse Christian denominations today, with over 5,200 local congregations comprised of 1.3 million members, across the United States and Puerto Rico, all engaged in God’s mission around the world.*