

Submission to USCIRF: the religious persecution of Christians in South Africa

A submission to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (Chair Vicky Hartzler and Commissioners) concerning escalating state restriction of religious freedom in South Africa, on behalf of the Plymouth Brethren community resettled in the United States. Enclosures: (1) FOR SA Legal Opinion — risk of religious persecution in South Africa (Aug 2025); (2) The South African Government's Committal to Socialism & Communism (Mar 2025); (3) Exhibit: COVID-era enforcement; (4) Exhibit: the Rwanda model the CRL is copying.

1. In short

This submission brings to the Commission's attention a documented, escalating pattern of state restriction of religious freedom in South Africa — one that has not yet featured in USCIRF's monitoring, but that belongs to a category the Commission knows well: the move by the State to license, regulate, and ultimately control independent Christian worship. An independent South African legal body that contributes to the State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report has examined the community's situation and **concluded that it faces "a clear and credible threat of religious persecution"** (Enclosure 1). The Plymouth Brethren are approximately **[N] families / individuals** now resettled in the United States. The community asks USCIRF to examine South Africa, and offers its evidence and testimony.

2. The religious-freedom violation

The pattern is documented in the enclosures:

- **State licensing of churches.** The Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Rights Commission (CRL) is moving, through its Section 22 Committee, to license and regulate religious organisations and leaders; its Chair, Thoko Mkhwanazi-Xaluva, has stated on record that "*Christianity needs to be regulated as well*" (Enclosure 1, p.8). The Commission has **named its model: Rwanda** — which has closed roughly 7,700 churches, requires pastors to hold theology degrees, and has banned house-church worship and open-air evangelism (Enclosure 4). The Commission's own appointed Christian-sector chair, **Rev. Prof. Musa Xulu**, resigned and swore an affidavit (17 May 2026) stating that he was contacted by a person claiming to represent the **National Intelligence Agency / State Security Agency**, and that Christian organisations opposing the CRL — including Freedom of Religion South Africa — had allegedly been **referred to the State's security structures for investigation and surveillance**. South Africa's 2024–2028 National Security Strategy reportedly identifies the "*mushrooming of charismatic churches*" as a national-security concern.
- **Criminalising religious expression.** The Hate Speech Act (Act 16 of 2023) — enacted, though not yet brought into force — will expose ordinary statements of Scripture to criminal liability of up to

five years' imprisonment, subject only to a narrow good-faith exemption.

- **Subjecting doctrine to the State.** The Equality Act (PEPUDA, Act 4 of 2000), §8(d), treats "*religious practice... which impairs the dignity of women and undermines equality between women and men*" as unlawful gender discrimination, placing core Christian doctrine before the State's Equality Courts.
- **Demonstrated willingness to enforce.** During COVID-19 the government banned worship, baptism and the Lord's Supper, dispersed services (in one case with rubber bullets and stun grenades), and arrested more than 411,000 people — force that fell on citizens of every colour, while singling out Christian worship for prohibition (Enclosure 3).

3. A pattern the Commission will recognise

USCIRF has documented state control of religion in contexts from China to Eritrea. South Africa's trajectory — a state commission moving to license churches and openly modelling itself on Rwanda — belongs in that frame. The driver is the governing alliance's own published programme, the "National Democratic Revolution" (adopted in 1969, pursued in government since 1994), which subordinates independent institutions to the State. Race has been the visible instrument of that programme — but the restriction of Christian worship falls **across every racial group**. (The United States already operates a race-framed refugee program for South Africans; the religious dimension described here is parallel and overlapping.)

The mechanism is on open display in mid-2026. Amid a wave of anti-foreigner unrest — vigilante movements imposing a 30 June 2026 departure deadline on migrants, and Ghana, Nigeria and Malawi repatriating citizens — the leader of the third-largest party redirected the racial grievance rather than opposing it, recasting popular anti-migrant anger as "false consciousness" to be re-aimed at white land ownership and the Expropriation Act. Such racial incitement is judicially shielded — South African courts have held the "Kill the Boer" chant is *not* hate speech (*AfriForum v EFF* [2024] ZASCA 82) — even as anti-migrant violence goes under-prosecuted. For USCIRF the relevance is direct: where a state tolerates and its leaders steer racial mobilisation at will, and a Chapter 9 commission is simultaneously moving to license churches, a small Christian minority that cannot register has no reliable protection between the two.

4. The community

By sincere conviction, the Plymouth Brethren cannot submit to state licensing of their faith. They have no formal, degreed clergy; they worship in homes and halls under decentralised governance; they share their faith publicly; and they recognise no government as the arbiter of doctrine. Under the Rwanda model the CRL has named, a community such as this **could not lawfully exist** — which is the basis on which FOR SA found their return would expose them to harassment, criminal charges, or the closure of their worship, "*merely for exercising their religious convictions*" (Enclosure 1). Nor could they look to the courts-on-paper for practical protection: in 2026 a domestic High Court (Gauteng Division) found that the police and two national departments had **failed in their constitutional duty to protect** people from vigilante violence, and the police service now carries some **R56.7 billion in**

unlawful-arrest and detention liability (~42% of its annual budget) — a justice system that does not reliably protect, and that would itself process any criminalisation of their worship. The United States' own record concurs: the U.S. State Department's **2024 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: South Africa** found the human rights situation "*significantly worsened,*" citing "*arbitrary or unlawful killings; arbitrary arrest or detention; and the repression of racial minorities,*" and a government that took no "*credible steps to investigate, prosecute, and punish*" officials for racial rhetoric or violence against minorities.

5. The request to USCIRF

The community respectfully asks the Commission to: - **examine South Africa** for inclusion in USCIRF's monitoring and its Annual Report; - **receive this submission for the record**, and consider hearing the community's testimony — including, if appropriate, within any future hearing on the persecution of Christians abroad; and - **recommend that the United States recognise religious persecution of Christians** within its South Africa refugee program, alongside race.

USCIRF's findings and recommendations are conveyed to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress — which is part of why this matter is brought to the Commission.

6. In closing

The community is grateful for the Commission's work on behalf of the persecuted, and would welcome the opportunity to present this evidence in person and to answer any questions.

Prepared on behalf of the Plymouth Brethren community in the United States.

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