

Mike Pence Supports Virginia Church That Sued Gov. Ralph Northam

Vice President Mike Pence spoke in favor of the Virginia church that sued Gov. Ralph Northam. Liberty Counsel represents Lighthouse Fellowship Church, whose pastor, Kevin Wilson, received a criminal summons on Palm Sunday for having 16 people, only six people over Gov. Northam's 10-person limit for religious gatherings, in a church that is rated for 293 people.

This past Sunday, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a Statement of Interest (SOI) and today issued a press release in support of Liberty Counsel's request for an injunction pending appeal regarding Lighthouse Fellowship Church on Chincoteague Island.

Vice President Pence said he "strongly agrees" with the Department of Justice filing a Statement of Interest in support of the church. "Even in the midst of a national emergency, every American enjoys our cherished liberties, including the freedom of religion," Pence said on *The Brian Kilmeade Show* on Fox News Radio.

Pastor Kevin Wilson and Lighthouse Fellowship Church filed a federal lawsuit against Governor Ralph Northam for violating their religious freedom by targeting churchgoers on Palm Sunday. Police served a summons to Pastor Wilson for holding a church service for 16 people spaced far apart in a sanctuary that is rated for 293 people. The charge is violating Virginia Governor Northam's COVID Order 55, with a penalty up to a year in jail and/or a \$2,500 fine.

The DOJ brief states, in part: "Plaintiff has demonstrated a likelihood of success on the merits of its claims under the

Free Exercise Clause of the U.S. Constitution that the Commonwealth's executive orders have prohibited religious gatherings at places of worship, even with social distancing and personal hygiene protocols, while allowing comparable secular gatherings to proceed with social distancing."

The DOJ SOI states that the church has "set forth a strong case that the Orders ... impermissibly interfered with the church's free exercise of religion."

The DOJ states "there is no pandemic exception to the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. Indeed, 'individual rights secured by the Constitution do not disappear during a public health crisis'" (*In re Abbott*, 954 at 784).

Liberty Counsel Founder and Chairman Mat Staver said, "I am pleased to see Vice President Mike Pence remind America of the importance of religious freedom. It is reassuring to have an administration that supports religious freedom. Recognizing the constitutional violations in Virginia against houses of worship, the Department of Justice filed in our case to support the First Amendment right to free exercise of religion in the face of discriminatory orders that give preferential treatment to secular gatherings." {eo}

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