

Virginia Church Urges U.S. Supreme Court to Reverse State Court Decision Interfering with Church Doctrine

First Liberty Institute files petition on behalf of Fredericksburg, VA, church after decision by city officials to deny parsonage exemption upheld by state court

Washington, DC—Today, First Liberty Institute, Christian Legal Society, and the law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLC, on behalf of the New Life in Christ Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia, asked the Supreme Court of the United States to reverse a state court decision denying the parsonage exemption to property occupied by the church’s college ministers.

You can read the petition [here](#).

“Government officials have no right to substitute their theology for that of the church,” said Kelly Shackelford, President, CEO, and Chief Counsel for First Liberty Institute. “New Life in Christ Church considers its college campus ministers’ actions to be essential functions of the ministry of the church, and the city should abide by that decision. The city’s own interpretation of this church’s doctrine and what is a minister unnecessarily requires the government to delve into issues of faith and doctrine in a way that violates the First Amendment.”

“For over 150 years, the Supreme Court has protected the rights of churches to determine in good faith who serves as their ministers,” explained Allyson Ho, partner at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, and veteran Supreme Court advocate. “The New Life Church deserves that same protection.”

“The Constitution requires all government officials to respect a religious congregation’s good faith understanding of who serves as its ministers,” explained Kim Colby, Director of the Christian Legal Society’s Center for Law and Religious Freedom. “New Life in Christ Church simply seeks the respect that the Constitution guarantees.”

New Life in Christ Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia, has a parsonage that is presently occupied by its college ministers, a married couple. The couple ministers to the students at nearby University of Mary Washington, hosting Bible studies and times of worship at the parsonage. The City of Fredericksburg denied a tax exemption to the church for the parsonage because, according to the city, the college campus ministers do not qualify as “ministers” as they are not ordained. In addition, according to the city’s interpretation of the Presbyterian Book of Church Order, they are not qualified to be “ministers.” The Circuit Court of the City of Fredericksburg upheld the city’s determination and the Virginia Supreme Court denied to review that decision.

In their petition, attorneys for New Life in Christ Church argue, “The Court should summarily reverse the decision below because it reflects a ‘demonstrably erroneous application of federal law.’ For over 150 years, the Court has confirmed that civil authorities may not second-guess religious organizations on ‘questions of discipline, or of faith, or ecclesiastical rule, custom, or law.’” The petition continues, “It is a foundational premise of our constitutional system that

religious organizations enjoy ‘power to decide for themselves, free from state interference, matters of church government as well as those of faith and doctrine.’”

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About First Liberty Institute

[First Liberty Institute](#) is a non-profit public interest law firm and the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

To arrange an interview, contact Lacey McNiel at media@firstliberty.org or by calling 972-941-4453.