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## **Gov. Northam Agrees with Madison County Churchmen That His COVID-19 Orders Don't Apply to Churches With Less than 250 Attendees.**

*Madison County, Virginia, September 22, 2020* – The attorneys for Governor Ralph Northam and the four Madison County churchmen who sued him have submitted to Madison County Circuit Court Judge David B. Franzén an Agreed Order declaring that none of Gov. Northam's COVID-19 Orders apply to churches which have less than 250 attendees.

This Agreed Order ends the case (*Brian Hermsmeier et al. v. Hon. Ralph S. Northam*, Case No. 20004844-00) which had been brought by four Madison County plaintiffs: Brian Hermsmeier, Joe Sansone, Mike Sharman, and Charlie Sheads. These four churchmen filed suit against Governor Ralph Northam, claiming the Governor's orders illegally put more COVID-19 limitations, restrictions, and mandates upon churches and churchgoers than he has placed on any other category of operation in Virginia.

The plaintiffs' Complaint said that the Governor's COVID-19 orders against churches violated the Virginia Constitution, Virginia's Bill of Rights, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and other provisions of the Code of Virginia. These laws of the Commonwealth, the plaintiffs said, give Virginians even more freedom of religion than is granted to them under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Plaintiff Joe Sansone, a private business owner and church attendee, pointed out that Gov. Northam's heavy restrictions on churches had completely violated Section 16 of Virginia's Bill of Rights, which mentions our "duty to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other." Sansone said, "Arbitrary restrictions on church attendance limit my ability to practice these articles of my faith."

Under the Agreed Order, the only remaining restriction on church attendance is Executive Order 63 regarding face coverings. The other Executive Orders had demanded that if a church's attendees couldn't comply with all of the restrictions, then the church had to close. Now, under the Agreed Order and Executive Order 63, the face covering restriction is on the individuals, not the churches.

With this victory, says plaintiff Charlie Sheads, a master mechanic and church musician, "We as a church can come together and decide if we want to restrict ourselves, but the government cannot step in and do it for us."

"This is really a time where we absolutely have to give God all the credit," says plaintiff Mike Sharman, a lawyer who teaches an adult Sunday School class at his church. "In our suit, we simply asked for the law to be followed and justice to be done so that churches would be treated fairly," he says. "With our Agreed Order, we got more than justice, we received the blessing of seeing a Bible verse being fulfilled, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.' "

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