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CHURCHES FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS RESTORED SYNAGOGUES, MOSQUES, AND CHURCHES NOW FREE TO REOPEN

Word of Faith Christian Center Church, et. al. v Whitmer (U.S. District Court)

Lansing, Michigan – The Great Lakes Justice Center (GLJC), on behalf of a number of Michigan churches and individuals, filed a federal civil rights lawsuit in Grand Rapids on May 6, 2020, against Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The suit challenged the Governor’s illegal and unlawful Executive Orders (EO) issued since April 30, 2020.

A copy of the Complaint can be found at https://greatlakesjc.org/cases/wofccc_v_whitmer/. It alleged various constitutional and statutory violations committed by Governor Whitmer. Plaintiffs’ requested a declaratory judgment to vindicate their rights and injunctive relief to allow them to safely reopen their churches for services.

In response to the lawsuit, Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued a new EO 2020-77 on May 7, 2020, that agreed with the relief requested by GLJC. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and all places of religious worship may now open without threat of penalty or criminal prosecution. Individuals may attend such services with no threat of penalty or criminal prosecution. The specific language added to EO 2020-77 (paragraphs 16 and 17) states:

“No individual is subject to penalty under section 20 of this order for engaging in or traveling to engage in religious worship at a place of religious worship ... nothing in this order shall be taken to abridge protections guaranteed by the state or federal constitution under these emergency circumstances.”

Given this new language in the EO, the relief requested by Plaintiffs is no longer needed, as the Governor has acquiesced to the fact that churches and all faiths have a First Amendment right to freely assemble and freely exercise their religious beliefs. If the Governor abides by her words, this lawsuit is no longer necessary. This does not mean, however, that GLJC believes her EOs are valid, legal and binding. Many of the constitutional and statutory violations as stated in our Complaint are still present. There are numerous other pending cases addressing those issues, and GLJC will be involved in those lawsuits through *amicus* briefs.

David A. Kallman, Senior Counsel with the GLJC, stated, “Churches are essential to the health and well-being of everyone. The Governor now appears to recognize this fact and will not attempt to prohibit people of all religious faiths to meet and freely exercise their religious beliefs. Places of worship can operate responsibly and safely using CDC guidelines and protocols.” Professor William Wagner, President of GLJC said, “Today, we take a small step toward returning to constitutional governance in the state of Michigan.”

The Great Lakes Justice Center is a non-profit corporation dealing with First Amendment liberties and other civil rights issues. The attorneys at GLJC have spent countless hours to protect its client’s constitutional freedoms and are grateful to minister to such important causes. To support the Great Lakes Justice Center’s important work to protect our nation’s first freedoms, please visit them at www.greatlakesjc.org.