



Christians Sue Virginia Over Law Forcing Them to Abandon Beliefs on Marriage and Gender

Christian churches and other ministries, plus a Christian photographer, are suing the state of Virginia over a new law that forces them to violate their core beliefs regarding sex, marriage, and gender or pay exorbitant fines.

The Virginia Values Act, which took effect July 1, added “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” to existing state antidiscrimination law. In addition, a companion law requires all health-insurance plans to cover sex-reassignment procedures. There are no religious exemptions to any of these mandates. In fact, “numerous legislators classified [beliefs contrary to prevailing LGBT ideology] as ‘bigotry’ and ‘discrimination’ while blocking every attempt to add religious exemptions to the law,” [wrote](#) Sarah Kramer of the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), which is representing the various ministries.

Two churches, three Christian schools, and a network of pregnancy centers are [suing](#) in state court. They argue that the Virginia Values Act would force them to act in numerous ways that are contrary to their beliefs.

First, it would require them to make employment decisions without regard to individuals’ adherence to Christian teaching on marriage, gender, and sexuality. They would not be free to hire only those who affirm these beliefs or to fire those who oppose them.

Second, the law would prohibit them from “directly or indirectly” communicating their beliefs on such matters to the general public, such as on their websites. In other words, it would interfere with their freedom of speech and their free exercise of religion.

Third, it would force them to stop offering sex-specific ministries such as parenting classes, sports, or women’s shelters — even if doing so would endanger women.

Fourth, it would make them pay for objectionable coverage in their employee health-insurance plans. Failure to comply with these mandates could subject ministries to investigations, lawsuits, and fines of up to \$100,000 per violation.

“The faith of many Americans inspires them to act for the good of their neighbors and also requires them to abide by its teachings,” ADF senior counsel Denise Harle said in a [statement](#). “Our clients offer spiritual guidance, education, pregnancy support, and athletic opportunities to their communities



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Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 29, 2020

because of the religious beliefs that motivate them. But Virginia’s new law forces these ministries to abandon and adjust their convictions or pay crippling fines — in direct violation of the Virginia Constitution and other state laws. Such government hostility toward people of faith has no place in a free society.”

ADF is also suing Virginia in federal court on behalf of Christian photographer Bob Updegrove. According to Updegrove’s [complaint](#), while he gladly serves many LGBT individuals, he objects to photographing same-sex weddings, yet the law would require him to do so if he also photographs opposite-sex weddings. Moreover, it would prohibit him from explaining on his website why he refuses to photograph same-sex ceremonies.

Updegrove could be fined up to \$50,000 for his first violation and up to \$100,000 for each succeeding violation and could be subjected to court orders requiring him to violate his conscience in order to remain in business. This, his lawsuit notes, was the intent of at least some of the legislators who passed the law; they wanted to force such businesses into compliance — or close them down — with the threat of “unlimited punitive damages.”

“Every American, including artists, should be free to peacefully live and work according to their faith without fear of unjust punishment,” said ADF senior counsel Jonathan Scruggs, director of the ADF Center for Conscience Initiatives. “Because of Virginia’s new law, photographers like Bob face an impossible choice: violate the law and risk bankruptcy, promote views against their faith, or close down. The government cannot demand that artists create content that violates their deepest convictions.”

ADF is hopeful that the lawsuits, which charge Virginia with various violations of state law and the Virginia and U.S. Constitutions, will succeed given recent Supreme Court decisions such as *Masterpiece Cakeshop*.

“If we want to be a truly tolerant, diverse society, we must provide room for everyone to peacefully live and work consistently with their beliefs — regardless of whether we agree with their views,” penned Kramer. “Because if the government has the power to decide which beliefs are welcome and which are not, that threatens freedom for us all.”



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