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Prince George's County

Judiciary Committee
Criminal Subcommittee
Chair, Juvenile Subcommittee
Public Safety Subcommittee



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony for HB192 - Maryland Higher Education Commission - Religious Educational Institutions - Certificate of Approval

Good afternoon, Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Kaiser, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee.

For the record, my name is Delegate Jamila Woods, and I am here today to request a favorable report on **House Bill 192**, legislation concerning religious educational institutions and the Certificate of Approval process under the Maryland Higher Education Commission.

House Bill 192 addresses a narrow but significant regulatory conflict that has existed since statutory changes in 2013. Prior to the 2013 statutory change, Maryland recognized the distinct role of religious educational institutions and allowed qualifying institutions operating exclusively for religious education and ministry to function under a religious exemption without undergoing the full Certificate of Approval process.

After the 2013 changes, institutions seeking to maintain both religious exemption status and accreditation recognized by the United States Department of Education were required to complete a two stage Certificate of Approval process. The process includes substantial application fees, documentation requirements, on site visits, and structural standards that were designed for large non-religious institutions. For small faith-based colleges serving limited populations, those requirements have proven financially and operationally unworkable.

This has created an unintended regulatory conflict. To maintain a religious exemption under Maryland law, an institution must provide exclusively sectarian instruction. However, accrediting bodies recognized by the federal government often require general education components such as English or mathematics. Institutions attempting to meet accreditation standards risk losing their exemption, while institutions attempting to preserve their exemption cannot satisfy accreditation

requirements. As a result, they are effectively trapped between two conflicting regulatory pathways.

House Bill 192 restores clarity. It allows qualifying religious institutions that are accredited by a federally recognized accrediting body to operate without duplicative state certification, provided they meet the strict statutory criteria already outlined in law. Those criteria remain intact. Institutions must be established for religious purposes, offer programs solely for religious vocations, and clearly identify the religious nature of their degrees.

This bill does not create broad deregulation. It is narrowly tailored and impacts only a small number of long-standing institutions authorized to operate in Maryland prior to the statutory changes and serve exclusively religious educational functions. The intent is not to weaken oversight, but to correct a conflict that has already forced some institutions to close and threaten others with similar outcomes.

Maple Springs Baptist Bible College and Seminary has operated for decades, serving adult learners and working professionals seeking theological education. Following the 2013 changes, it received a cease-and-desist order because it could no longer reconcile the accreditation standards with the religious exemption framework. House Bill 192 provides a path forward so that similarly situated institutions are not placed in that position.

Maryland has long-balanced, appropriate higher education oversight with respect for religious liberty. House Bill 192 preserves that balance. It removes redundant administrative burdens that do not enhance consumer protection, while maintaining clear statutory guardrails around what qualifies as a religious educational institution.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 192.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jamila J. Woods".

Delegate Jamila J. Woods
Maryland House of Delegates
District 26 – Prince George’s County