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October 29, 2021

Honorable Lisa Hall Johnson
District Administrative Judge
14735 Main Street
Upper Marlboro, Maryland 20772

Dear Honorable Judge Johnson,

We commend you on your efforts to ensure that the public has virtual access to court hearings during the pandemic and respectfully urge you to make this virtual access permanent.

Several years ago, Hyattsville Mennonite Church formed a Racial Justice Group that meets regularly to spur one another and lead our congregation in the work of self-education and local partnerships, recognizing that followers of Christ are called to be changemakers for justice. Specifically, we support the organization Life After Release and its subgroup CourtWatchPG, where several members of our congregation have committed to observing and collecting data from bond hearings in the Prince George's County District Court. The sharing of their experiences has exposed our congregation to the crucial importance of public access to judicial proceedings, a hallmark of democratic government, which serves to promote accountability within the legal system to promote fairness and equity for community members.

As a congregation we have learned that the pandemic has highlighted the importance—and feasibility—of providing the public with access to court proceedings virtually, including via telephonic and videoconferencing technologies. We believe preserving virtual access for the public should remain a top priority for court officials in Prince George's County. Even as COVID transmission rates begin to subside, contracting the virus remains a threat, particularly as new variants emerge, and herd immunity remains out of reach.

Moreover, in addition to these ongoing public health concerns, we have learned that the lack of affordable and accessible public transit options for visiting the Prince George's County Courthouse in Upper Marlboro makes it functionally impossible for

many County residents to attend court proceedings in person. Indeed, for many of our neighbors in Hyattsville, a roundtrip visit to the Upper Marlboro Courthouse via public transit would take more than four hours. Our community members should not have to undertake such a heavy burden to exercise their constitutional right to attend or observe public court proceedings.

We urge you to make virtual access a permanent feature of the Prince George's County court system. In making this request, we recognize that judges would maintain the ability, in consultation with counsel, to close individual, sensitive proceedings to the public by following the same processes that exist for closing in-person court proceedings. Additionally, we ask you to make permanent the current system of telephonic access and restore the system of video access for CourtWatchPG and other observers that existed for the first several months of the pandemic.

We understand that Maryland law empowers local administrative judges to provide virtual access to the public. We encourage you to exercise that authority and commit, on a permanent basis, to providing the public with virtual access to all judicial proceedings that are publicly accessible in person.

Thank you,



Cynthia Lapp, pastor

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