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January 23, 2023

Dear Delegate Moon, and other members of the Maryland General Assembly,

On behalf of our congregation, we, the pastors and church council of Hyattsville Mennonite Church, are writing in support of H.B. 0133 which would require each court in the State to provide remote audio-visual access to all public court proceedings (unless a proceeding is deemed closed, confidential, or restricted by federal or State law).

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 to our congregation 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 and in Maryland.

As newspaper headlines continue to remind us, mass incarceration, over-policing and over-criminalization of Black and brown communities continues unabated, despite widespread protests, lawsuits, press coverage, and grass roots efforts to bring about change. The public needs to be aware in order to continue to press for change. Increasing access for journalists, court watch

programs, family and community members will build a more trustworthy, equitable court system.

We urge you to make virtual access a permanent feature of the Maryland 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. For the reasons above, we support H.B. 0133 and urge the Judiciary Committee to vote favorably.

Thank you,

Cynthia Lapp and Michelle Burkholder, pastors

Wyatt Feeler, congregational chair

Sarah Hall Aguila, treasurer

Janelle Tupper

Lisa Zammuto

Tim Wiens

Penny Russell

Meryt McGindley

Mary Hershberger

Murray Penner