



February 13, 2026

Chair and Members
House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee
Maryland General Assembly

RE: HB0356 — Human Relations – Protection of the Free Exercise of Religion

POSITION: FAVORABLE

My name is Pastor Paul J. Arcand II, Senior Pastor of Lighthouse Baptist Church in Severna Park, Maryland. I respectfully submit this testimony in support of HB0356.

HB0356 restores a clear and fair standard when government action substantially burdens a person's exercise of religion. The bill properly requires that any such burden must further a compelling governmental interest and must be the least restrictive means of achieving that interest. This standard protects religious liberty while still allowing government to act where true public necessity exists.

The bill wisely defines "person" to include individuals as well as religious organizations, associations, and corporations. Churches and ministries are often directly affected by regulations, policies, and administrative decisions. It is appropriate that they receive meaningful protection when their free exercise of religion is substantially burdened.

HB0356 also provides a real remedy when violations occur. A right without a remedy is easily ignored. Allowing for appropriate judicial relief ensures that the protections in this legislation are not merely symbolic.

As a pastor, I support HB0356 because government should not coerce the conscience where obedience to God is at stake, unless there is a truly compelling necessity and no less restrictive alternative. Scripture reminds us, "We ought to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29, KJV)

For these reasons, I respectfully request a FAVORABLE report on HB0356.

Respectfully submitted,

Pastor Paul J. Arcand II

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