

OPINION

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Northam's absurd double standard

REMEMBER the pastor of a storefront church in Chincoteague who was threatened with up to a year in jail and a \$2,500 fine for holding services for 16 socially-distanced congregants on Palm Sunday?

The criminal charges against Pastor Kevin Wilson were quietly dropped on June 10 after the Accomack County commonwealth's attorney admitted that "under the circumstances the interests of Justice are not served by the further prosecution of this violation."

Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring's office initially defended the criminal charges, claiming that allowing Wilson to minister to this tiny part of his flock at the Lighthouse Fellowship Church would "seriously undermine Virginia's efforts to resist a once-in-a-century pandemic and threaten irreparable harm to an unknown (and unknowable) number of people."

Dropping them was a tacit admission that Gov. Ralph Northam's March 30 Executive Order 55 limiting religious gatherings to no more than 10 people was unenforceable after thousands of George Floyd protesters were seen violating the governor's so-

against Northam, claiming that because his church had room for 293 congregants, the 10-person limit was arbitrary and discriminatory because so-called "essential" commercial and non-religious entities, including liquor stores, warehouse clubs, and big box retailers, were not subject to the same rule. The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Civil Rights filed a brief on Wilson's behalf, noting that "there is no pandemic exception to the Constitution and its Bill of Rights."

On May 26, a federal judge denied the church's request for a temporary restraining order and a preliminary injunction to allow it to hold religious services for more than 10 worshippers. Liberty Counsel then filed an appeal with the 4th Circuit on June 29, accusing Northam of violating the church's First Amendment rights while pointing out the absurd contradictions in the governor's COVID-19 executive orders:

"Lighthouse can serve food, provide overnight shelter, and give counseling to a group of hundreds in the same room together for hours or even days on end. But if Pastor Wilson offers a



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We need better local river stewardship

Regarding your July 3 editorial ["Some relatively good news about the Bay"] I'd like to move the needle a little closer to home.

While we can all agree to put greater pressure on the EPA and Pennsylvania to keep their promises to protect the watersheds we all hold dear, clearly Virginia, local governments in Fredericksburg and Stafford, and private citizens in particular could all be better stewards.

By all means write our Virginia legislators, as they're holding a special session in August. But what about our neighbors? Yes, it's nice to be able to eat blue crabs again, thinking that the Chesapeake Bay is recovering, but "relatively" means just that—not universally.

What are we doing locally? Why aren't Fredericksburg and Stafford challenging the historic sites on the Rappahannock River that have used loopholes to clear-cut their viewsheds? What about private

landowners who cut away trees, rip up natural river buffer pollinator meadows and use precious water resources to sprinkle turf they seeded on a floodplain?

Local river organizations who hold events at such places and turn a blind eye should be held accountable, culprits who destroy riparian zones should be fined, and local councils might consider less parking lots and hard surfaces along the river.

Virginia waterways provide a \$5 billion tourist industry, account for 45,000 related jobs, and another \$1.5 billion in seafood sales. Virginia's waters need to be looked after for the economic value they provide.

And they need to be cherished for their beauty, and for the healthy outdoor environment our families treasure.

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