



*****MEDIA RELEASE*****

ACLU of Maryland, Christian Ministry for the Homeless Vindicate Religious Liberty in Elkton, MD

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(ELKTON, MD) – Vindicating the fundamental right to religious liberty guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland today announced a settlement between the Meeting Ground and the Town of Elkton, affirming the church’s right to operate a day center for homeless individuals as part of its religious mission, and awarding monetary compensation to offset financial losses suffered by Meeting Ground as a result of the Town’s prior denial of that use. Aided by U.S. District Judge Catherine C. Blake and U.S. Magistrate Judge Beth Gesner, the settlement was reached in stages, with the final elements put into place this month. After more than two years of legal wrangling that had originally left Meeting Ground owning a building it was barred from using and prohibited even from renovating, Meeting Ground now has the opportunity to proceed full-speed with its ministry and continue developing its improving relationship with Town officials.

“We are so heartened that Meeting Ground and the Town can now put this difficult struggle in the past, and that Reverend Mazza can get on with the work of his inspirational ministry,” said Deborah A. Jeon, Legal Director of the Maryland ACLU.

Meeting Ground is a Maryland church that operates several overnight shelters and is devoted to work “with and among the poor, homeless, the sick, and any who are outcast, living on the margins of society, or those who seek a refuge or a home.” In 2007, Rev. Carl Mazza, a Presbyterian minister, and his church, Meeting Ground, purchased a property that was zoned for churches to create the Mary Randall Center, a ministry offering daytime services to meet a wide range of religious and social needs of the homeless, including Bible study, prayer and worship services, showers, food, job training, and telephone and computer access. Yet despite Meeting Ground’s status as a church, and the clearly religious nature of its ministry, Elkton’s zoning board classified the Mary Randall Center as a “philanthropic” use under the Town zoning ordinance and denied Meeting Ground’s application to use the property. As a result, Meeting Ground was unable to perform even basic religious services, including any ministry to the homeless, at the property.

Meeting Ground’s efforts to resolve these problems through administrative and state court appeals failed, so Rev. Mazza, working with the ACLU, filed suit against the Town of Elkton in July 2008, moving for a preliminary injunction soon thereafter to secure swift relief. The lawsuit contended that the Town’s actions discriminated against Meeting Ground and deprived the church and its members of their rights to freely exercise their religious faith under the U.S.

Constitution and under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, a federal law protecting the exercise of religious rights against improper interference by zoning officials.

“We are joyful that after two years of struggle, we have been successful in being able to do the ministry we have wanted to do all along at Mary Randall Center” said Rev. Mazza. “Patience, prayer, and persistence have been our strongest tools in our pursuit of justice and religious freedom. In the end we know it is the will of God for everyone now to work together for the common good of the homeless persons we care about so much and for the community we share.”

In October 2008, U.S. District Court Judge Catherine C. Blake entered a preliminary injunction against the Town, directing Elkton officials to reconsider Meeting Ground’s permit application. Following that order, the Town reclassified Meeting Ground’s proposed uses as those of a church, permitted renovations to begin on the property, and ultimately issued an occupancy permit.

In a moving standing-room-only ceremony in May, with guests from all walks of life spilling out the doors and onto the lawn, Meeting Ground dedicated the Mary Randall Center. Shortly thereafter, the Center was finally able to open its doors to begin offering services. Negotiations continued in the months following the Center’s opening to resolve additional issues concerning parking at the property and compensation to offset financial losses suffered by the church. In the wake of Judge Blake’s order, and as the parties moved through the settlement process, Meeting Ground observed a marked improvement in its relations with the Town that culminated in settlement, and Meeting Ground is hopeful that this relationship will continue to develop now that the Mary Randall Center is up and running.

Attorneys representing the plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit are Richard Leveridge and Steven Wellner from the law firm Dickstein Shapiro, LLP, donating their time *pro bono*, and Deborah Jeon from the ACLU of Maryland. Meeting Ground was represented during the zoning proceedings and state appeals by Dennis Clower from the law firm Clower, Parrack & Seaman, also donating his time *pro bono*.

Go online to read the complete settlement agreement:

<http://www.aclu-md.org/aPress/Press2009/themeetinggroundsettlement.html>

Go online to read more about the ACLU of Maryland: <http://www.aclu-md.org>

Go online to read more about the ACLU’s Defense of Religious Practice and Expression:

<http://www.aclu.org/defendingreligion>

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