No. 97-1361

In The
Supreme Court of the United States
October Term, 1997

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The Bronx Household of Faith,
Jack Roberts and Robert Hall,

Petitioners,

v.

The Board of Education of the City of New York,
Community School District No. 10 and
Charles Williams,

Respondents.

_____

On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the
United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit

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BRIEF *AMICI CURIAE* OF CHRISTIAN LEGAL SOCIETY, BAPTIST JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS, COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK, ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMISSION OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION, **[FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL]**, FOCUS ON THE FAMILY, GENERAL CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS, LIBERTY COUNSEL, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS, NEW YORK CITY CHURCH OF CHRIST, PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.), QUEENS FEDERATION OF CHURCHES, **[UNION OF AMERICAN HEBREW CONGREGATIONS]**, AND UNION OF ORTHODOX JEWISH

CONGREGATIONS OF AMERICA IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONERS

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Question Presented

Whether government officials may deny access to a community group solely because its religious speech includes religious worship and instruction, contrary to this Court's decision in Widmar v. Vincent, 454 U.S. 263 (1981).

Statement of Interest of Amici Curiae

The letters of the parties granting their consent to the filing of this brief have been filed with the Clerk. A complete statement of interest for each amicus curiae is included in the appendix.[1]

Several of the amici are religious organizations that have a longstanding interest in protecting equal access for private religious speakers to public facilities. Amici Christian Legal Society, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, National Association of Evangelicals, General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists, and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have worked to secure the right of equal access for nearly two decades. Several of the amici have member congregations or other religious affiliates in New York, Vermont, and Connecticut, that already have experienced actual harm, or are likely to be harmed in the near future, by the discriminatory policy approved in the decision below.

Summary of Argument

The issue presented, whether government officials may deny access

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[1]Counsel for a party did not author this brief in whole or in part. No one, other than the amici curiae, their members, or their counsel, made a monetary contribution to the preparation or submission of the brief. Amicus Christian Legal Society has applied for a grant from the Alliance Defense Fund to cover its expenses in producing this brief. The Alliance Defense Fund is a 501(c)(3) organization headquartered at 7819 East Greenway Road, Suite 8, Scottsdale, Arizona 85260. The Alliance Defense Fund exercised no control over the decision of the amici to file the brief or the content of the brief.

to a community group solely because its religious speech includes religious worship and instruction, is controlled by this Court's decision in Widmar v. Vincent, 454 U.S. 263 (1981). In Widmar, this Court ruled that "religious worship and discussion...are forms of speech and association protected by the First Amendment." Id. at 269. This Court specifically rejected the premise of the court below that religious worship and instruction could be segregated from other religious speech for discriminatory exclusion. This Court repudiated the argument that government officials could distinguish religious worship or instruction from other types of religious speech because the distinction: 1) lacks "intelligible content," (id. at 269 n.6); 2) is inadministrable by government officials, (id. at 269-270 n.6, 271 n.9); 3) creates a risk of excessive entanglement between government officials and religion in determining which religious speech is permissible and which religious speech is impermissible, (id. at 272 n.11); and 4) is irrelevant, (id. at 270 n.6).

The protection of religious speech, including religious instruction and worship, has been reaffirmed in numerous decisions by this Court before and since Widmar. See, e.g., Capitol Square Review Board v. Pinette, 515 U.S. 753 (1995); Rosenberger v. University of Virginia, 508 U.S. 819 (1995); Board of Education v. Mergens, 496 U.S. 226 (1990); Heffron v. International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Inc., 452 U.S. 640 (1981); Fowler v. Rhode Island, 345 U.S. 67 (1953);

Niemotko v. Maryland, 340 U.S. 268 (1951); Cantwell v. Connecticut, 310 U.S. 296 (1940).

The neutrality required by this Court's free speech decisions protecting equal access for religious speakers to public facilities parallels the neutrality required by this Court's free exercise and establishment clause decisions. The court below affirmed a policy that on its face discriminates against community groups wishing to engage in religious worship or religious instruction, which is a violation of the free exercise clause. See Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah, 508 U.S. 520 (1993); Employment Division v. Smith, 494 U.S. 872 (1990); McDaniel v. Paty, 435 U.S. 618 (1978). As explained in Widmar, the attempt to sever religious worship or instruction from other religious speech is itself likely to violate the Establishment Clause by creating an excessive entanglement of government officials with religion. 454 U.S. at 272 n.11. Furthermore, the decision below has created a framework in which discrimination among religions is likely to occur, favoritism that the Establishment Clause particularly prohibits. See Larson v. Valente, 456 U.S. 228 (1982). But see, Full Gospel Tabernacle v. Community School District 27, 979 F. Supp. 214, 221-223 (S.D.N.Y. 1997), appeal filed, No. 97-9235 (2d Cir. filed October 2, 1997)(relying on Bronx Household to uphold school district denial of access to religious group despite record evidence that previous uses by other religious groups for worship and instruction had

been permitted).

The decision below threatens the religious speech rights of citizens living outside, as well as within, the Second Circuit. A past decision of the Second Circuit was particularly damaging to the equal access right of private religious speakers. Brandon v. Guilderland Central Sch. Dist., 635 F.2d 971 (2d Cir. 1980), cert. denied, 454 U.S. 1123 (1981). The Brandon decision was followed by several other courts of appeals to deny equal access to high school students' religious speech. An Act of Congress, the Equal Access Act, 20 U.S.C. 4071 et seq. (1994), and a decision by this Court, Board of Education v. Mergens, 496 U.S. 226 (1990), were necessary to repair the damage done to religious speech by the Brandon decision. Again, in 1993, this Court unanimously reversed a Second Circuit decision quite similar to the decision below and required that religious speakers be granted access to a school auditorium after school hours for the showing of a religious film series. Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District, 508 U.S. 384 (1993), rev'g, 959 F.2d 381 (2d Cir. 1992).

Amici respectfully request that this Court grant the petition for writ of certiorari. Amici respectfully suggest that the decision below may meet the criteria for summary reversal. The decision below presents an issue controlled by this Court's authority, Widmar v.

Vincent, and threatens the stability of the equal access precedents of this Court and lower federal courts that protect religious citizens from discriminatory denial of access to public facilities.

ARGUMENT

I. The Second Circuit decision is directly contrary to the controlling authority of this Court's decision in Widmar v. Vincent, 454 U.S. 263 (1981).

The decision below cannot be reconciled with this Court's decision in Widmar v. Vincent, 454 U.S. 263 (1981), in which this Court rejected a state university's attempt to prohibit a student group from meeting solely because the group wished to engage in religious worship or instruction. Numerous decisions by this Court before and after Widmar have protected citizens' religious speech, including worship and instruction. Forty years before Widmar, the Court held that a government official could not exercise unbridled discretion to determine whether private citizens' speech was religious. Cantwell v. Connecticut, 310 U.S. 296 (1940). This bedrock principle was also applied in Fowler v. Rhode Island, 345 U.S. 67 (1953), when this Court rejected a city ordinance that had been interpreted to allow "religious services" in a park but not "religious addresses." Widmar has been the basis of several decisions by this Court and lower federal courts protecting private religious expression, with which the decision below also conflicts.

A. In Widmar, the Supreme Court rejected a policy essentially

identical to the school district policy in this case and ruled that groups seeking to meet for religious worship and religious instruction may not be discriminatorily denied access.

As in this case, in Widmar, public university officials did not deny all access to a religious group but conditioned access upon the group agreeing not to use the university facilities for "religious worship" or "religious teaching." 454 U.S. at 265, 266 n.3. Indeed, the University had "routinely approved" access to university facilities for the student religious group for a number of years. Id. at 266 n.3. The University denied the student religious group continued access only after the University realized that the group's meetings included religious worship and religious teaching. Id. The University concluded that the students' meetings violated its policy "prohibit[ing] the use of University buildings or grounds 'for purposes of religious worship or religious teaching.'" Id. at 265.

Like the university officials in Widmar, the respondent school district has denied access to school facilities during nonschool hours to a religious community group solely because the group's religious speech would include worship and instruction. While it allows the group to distribute religious literature or discuss religious material at its meetings, the school district policy, Standard Operating Procedure ("SOP") 5.9, prohibits religious services or instruction, stating:

> No outside organization or group may be allowed to conduct

> religious services or religious instruction on school premises after school. However, the use of school premises by outside organizations or groups after school for the purpose of discussing religious material or material which contains a religious viewpoint or for distributing such material is permissible.

Pet. app. 53.

In Widmar, the Supreme Court held such a policy unconstitutional because it violated "the fundamental principle that a state regulation of speech should be content-neutral." 454 U.S. at 277. Accord Rosenberger v. University of Virginia, 515 U.S. 819, 828 (1995)("It is axiomatic that the government may not regulate speech based on its substantive content or the message it conveys.")

In Widmar, the Supreme Court specifically ruled that "religious worship and discussion...are forms of speech and association protected by the First Amendment." Id. at 269, citing Heffron v. International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Inc., 452 U.S. 640 (1981); Niemotko v. Maryland, 340 U.S. 268 (1951); Saia v. New York, 334 U.S. 558 (1948). And again recently, this Court reiterated that religious worship is protected by the First Amendment, explaining:

> Indeed, in Anglo-American history, at least, government suppression of speech has so commonly been directed precisely at religious speech that a free-speech clause without religion would be Hamlet without the prince. Accordingly, we have not excluded from free-speech protections religious proselytizing, Heffron, supra, at 647, or even acts of worship, Widmar, supra, at 269, n.6.

Capitol Square Review Board v. Pinette, 515 U.S. 753, 760 (1995).[2]

In Widmar, this Court rejected the argument that religious worship can be distinguished from other religious speech and discriminatorily excluded from public facilities for four reasons:

1. The distinction lacks "intelligible content." A distinction between "religious worship and instruction" and other religious speech lacks "intelligible content" because, as this Court explained in Widmar:

> There is no indication when 'singing hymns, reading scripture, and teaching biblical principles,' cease to be 'singing, teaching, and reading'--all apparently forms of 'speech,' despite their religious subject matter--and become unprotected 'worship.'

454 U.S. at 269 n.6 (citation omitted). See also, Rosenberger, 515 U.S. at 845.

2. The distinction is inadministrable by government officials.

In Widmar, this Court concluded that government officials should not

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[2]Worship exercises by student religious groups on public secondary school property are protected by the Equal Access Act, 20 U.S.C. 4071 et seq. (1994). The United States Secretary of Education has advised school superintendents that students' prayer services and worship exercises are protected in public secondary school facilities, as stated in his August 10, 1995, "guidance letter" to the nation's school superintendents:

> Prayer services and worship exercises covered: A meeting, as defined and protected by the Equal Access Act, may include a prayer service, Bible reading, or other worship exercise.

Religious Expression in Public Schools, Department of Education, Letter from Secretary Richard Riley (August 10, 1995).

be making the inquiries necessary to administer a distinction between religious worship or instruction and other religious speech. Indeed, this Court "doubt[ed] that it would lie within the judicial competence to administer" a distinction between "religious worship" and other "religious speech," (454 U.S. at 269 n.6), and characterized the distinction as "judicially unmanageable," (id. at 271 n.9). As this Court explained:

> Merely to draw the distinction would require the university--and ultimately the courts--to inquire into the significance of words and practices to different religious faiths, and in varying circumstances by the same faith. Such inquiries would tend inevitably to entangle the State with religion in a manner forbidden by our cases.

Id. at 269 n.6 (citations omitted). See also, Rosenberger, 515 U.S. at 845.

Similarly, in Fowler v. Rhode Island, 345 U.S. 67, 69 (1953), this Court rejected a city ordinance that had been interpreted to allow "religious services" in a park but not "religious addresses." This Court characterized government officials' determination that speech was a "sermon" as opposed to an "address" as "merely an indirect way of preferring one religion over another." Id. at 70. This Court stated that it was not "in the the competence of courts under our constitutional scheme to approve, disapprove, classify, regulate, or in any manner control sermons delivered at religious meetings." Id.

In its landmark decision in Cantwell v. Connecticut, 310 U.S. 296

(1940), this Court held that government officials may not exercise unbridled discretion to determine whether speech is or is not religious. As Justice Souter recently stated, it is hard to "imagine a subject less amenable to the competence of the federal judiciary, or more deliberately to be avoided where possible" than determinations about the religious content of speech. Lee v. Weisman, 505 U.S. 577, 616-617 (1992)(Souter, J., concurring). See also, Employment Division v. Smith, 494 U.S. 872, 889-890 n.5 (1990)(federal judges should not "regularly balance against the importance of general laws the significance of religious practice"); Corporation of the Presiding Bishop v. Amos, 483 U.S. 327, 336 (1987)("it is a significant burden on a religious organization to require it, on pain of substantial liability, to predict which of its activities a secular court will consider religious").

3. The distinction will result in excessive entanglement between government officials and religion. Inquiries by government officials trying to administer a distinction between religious worship and religious speech "would tend inevitably to entangle the State with religion in a manner forbidden by [this Court's] cases." Widmar, 454 U.S. at 269-270 n.6. Excessive entanglement would result because government officials "would need to determine which words and activities fall within 'religious worship and religious teaching.'" Id. at 272 n.11. The Court suggested such determinations were "an

impossible task in an age where many and various beliefs meet the constitutional definition of religion." Id. (quotation marks and citation omitted).

This Court reiterated this principle in Rosenberger, when it rejected the university's argument that university officials should determine which student publications were religious and which were not. The Court condemned such decisionmaking as raising "the specter of governmental censorship." 515 U.S. at 844. The Court continued:

> As we recognized in Widmar, official censorship would be far more inconsistent with the Establishment Clause's dictates than would governmental provision of secular printing services on a religion-blind basis.

Id. at 845.

Beyond the "impossible task" of determining which words constitute "religious worship and religious teaching," the Court in Widmar recognized that application of such a policy would create "a continuing need to monitor group meetings to ensure compliance with the rule." 454 U.S. at 272 n.11. See also, Board of Education v. Mergens, 496 U.S. 226, 248, 253. This continual supervision of religious groups' meetings is itself the quintessential example of unconstitutional excessive entanglement.

Because the school district policy in this case is essentially identical to the university policy struck down in Widmar, it creates the same excessive entanglement between school district officials and

religion. Ironically, in its overly zealous attempt to avoid an Establishment Clause violation, the court below infringed upon the Establishment Clause by permitting government officials to implement a policy distinguishing between "religious discussions" and "religious services or instruction."

4. The distinction is irrelevant for constitutional purposes.

In Widmar, this Court stated:

> [There is] no reason why the Establishment Clause, or any other provision of the Constitution, would require different treatment for religious speech designed to win religious converts than for religious worship by persons already converted.

454 U.S. at 270 n.6 (citation omitted). In a long line of pre-Widmar precedent, the Court has held that the First Amendment protects private religious speech for purposes of proselytizing persons of other faiths, or persons of no particular faith.[3] In Widmar, this Court saw no valid reason for distinguishing these numerous precedent in order to give less protection to religious worship and instruction among members of

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[3]See, for example, Fowler v. Rhode Island, 345 U.S. 67 (1953)(religious speech in park); Niemotko v. Maryland, 340 U.S. 268 (1951)(same); Kunz v. New York, 340 U.S. 290 (1951)(denunciation of religion on public streets); Saia v. New York, 334 U.S. 558 (1948)(amplification of religious speech in public park); Marsh v. Alabama, 326 U.S. 501 (1946)(religious solicitation); Tucker v. Texas, 326 U.S. 517 (1946)(same); Murdock v. Pennsylvania, 319 U.S. 105 (1943)(same); Largent v. Texas, 318 U.S. 418 (1943)(religious literature distribution); Jamison v. Texas, 318 U.S. 413 (1943)(same); Martin v. Struthers, 319 U.S. 141 (1943)(same); Cantwell v. Connecticut, 310 U.S. 296 (1940)(religious solicitation); Schneider v. New Jersey, 308 U.S. 147 (1939)(religious literature); Lovell v. City of Griffin, 303 U.S. 444 (1938)(same).

the same faith. In other words, religious worship and instruction among members of the same faith should be at least as protected as religious speech (such as religious literature distribution) to persons who do not agree with, and often object to, a particular religious message.

B. The Widmar decision is the foundation for numerous decisions by this Court and lower federal courts protecting equal access for private religious expression that also conflict with the decision below.

This Court's decision in Widmar rests on numerous earlier decisions requiring neutral treatment of citizens' religious speech. See, e.g., Cantwell v. Connecticut, 310 U.S. 296 (1940); Kunz v. New York, 340 U.S. 290 (1951); Niemotko v. Maryland, 340 U.S. 268 (1951); Fowler v. Rhode Island, 345 U.S. 67 (1953); cf., McDaniel v. Paty, 435 U.S. 618 (1978)(prohibiting discriminatory treatment based on religious profession). And Widmar is the bedrock for important subsequent decisions in Board of Education v. Mergens, 496 U.S. 226 (1990); Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District, 508 U.S. 384 (1993); Rosenberger v. University of Virginia, 515 U.S. 819 (1995); and Capitol Square Review Board v. Pinette, 515 U.S. 753 (1995).

This Court's decision in Widmar is also the foundation for numerous lower court decisions protecting the right of equal access for private religious expression. As a result, amici agree with Petitioners' argument that the decision below directly conflicts with the decisions of other circuits, particularly in Church on the Rock v.

City of Albuquerque, 84 F.3d 1273 (10th Cir. 1996), cert. denied, 117 S. Ct. 360 (1996), and Fairfax Covenant Church v. Fairfax County Sch. Bd., 17 F.3d 703 (4th Cir.), cert. denied, 511 U.S. 1143 (1994). See also, Grace Bible Fellowship v. Maine School Admin. Dist. No. 5, 941 F.2d 45 (1st Cir. 1991); Gregoire v. Centennial Sch. Dist., 907 F.2d 1366 (3rd Cir.), cert. denied, 498 U.S. 899 (1990); Concerned Women for America v. Lafayette County, 883 F.2d 32 (5th Cir. 1989). Numerous additional federal appellate decisions have relied upon the Widmar analysis to protect equal access for private religious expression. See, e.g., Ceniceros v. Board of Education of San Diego Sch. Dist., 106 F.3d 878 (9th Cir. 1997); Good News/Good Sports Club v. Ladue Sch. Dist., 28 F.3d 1501 (8th Cir. 1994), cert. denied, 515 U.S. 1173 (1995); Hedges v. Wauconda Community Sch. Dist., 9 F.3d 1295 (7th Cir. 1993); Sherman v. Community Sch. Dist., 8 F.3d 1160 (7th Cir. 1993), cert. denied, 511 U.S. 1110 (1994); Garnett v. Renton Sch. Dist., 987 F.2d 641 (9th Cir.), cert. denied, 510 U.S. 819 (1993); Pope v. East Brunswick Bd. of Educ., 12 F.3d 1244 (3d Cir. 1993). See also, Shumway v. Albany County Sch. Dist., 826 F. Supp. 1320 (D. Wyo. 1993); Randall v. Pegan, 765 F. Supp. 793 (W.D.N.Y. 1991); Verbena United Methodist Church v. Chilton County Bd. of Educ., 765 F. Supp. 704 (M.D. Ala. 1991); Youth Opportunities Unlimited v. Bd. of Educ., 769 F. Supp. 1346 (W.D. Pa. 1991); Country Hills Christian Church v. Unified Sch. Dist. No. 512, 560 F. Supp. 1207 (D. Kan. 1983).

The court below attempted to distinguish this Court's rulings in Widmar on two grounds that are contrary to this Court's precedents. The panel deemed Widmar "inapposite," claiming that Widmar applies only if a forum is an "open forum" and that Widmar does not apply to schools below the university level. Pet. App. 11-12.

To the contrary, Widmar has been the basis for three other decisions in which this Court required equal access for religious speakers, none involving an "open forum" and two applying Widmar to public secondary schools. In Mergens, this Court found that the statutorily-defined "limited open forum" in that case was not the same as the forum in Widmar but, nevertheless, applied Widmar to uphold the constitutionality of the Equal Access Act, 20 U.S.C. 4071 et seq. (1994), and its requirement that student religious groups be granted equal access for prayer and Bible study on public secondary school property. Mergens, 496 U.S. at 242. In Lamb's Chapel, this Court applied Widmar to uphold equal access for a community religious group to New York school facilities, even if the public auditorium were assumed to be a nonpublic forum. 508 U.S. at 392. Again, in Rosenberger, this Court applied Widmar to require equal access for a student religious group to a public university student funding program, treating the program as a "limited public forum." 515 U.S. at 829.

Widmar is the controlling authority for the issue presented by this case: whether government officials may deny access to a community

group solely because its religious expression includes religious worship or religious instruction. By refusing to apply Widmar, the decision below conflicts with numerous precedents of this Court and lower federal courts.

C. The decision below is directly contrary to this Court's Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause decisions requiring government officials to treat religion in a neutral manner.

A policy that facially discriminates against private religious expression violates the core requirement of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses that the State treat religion in a neutral manner. As the Court explained in Mergens:

> [I]f a State refused to let religious groups use facilities open to others, then it would demonstrate not neutrality but hostility toward religion. 'The Establishment Clause does not license government to treat religion and those who teach or practice it, simply by virtue of their status as such, as subversive of American ideals and therefore subject to unique disabilities.'

496 U.S. at 248 (plurality opinion)(emphasis added), quoting McDaniel v. Paty, 435 U.S. 618, 641 (Brennan, J., concurring in judgment). See also, Rosenberger, 515 U.S. at 845-846 (government officials' review of publication for religious content "risk[s] fostering a pervasive bias or hostility to religion, which could undermine the very neutrality the Establishment Clause requires").

In determining whether government officials have violated the Free Exercise Clause, the Supreme Court examines the text of the law, "for the minimum requirement of neutrality is that a law not discriminate on

its face." Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah, 508 U.S. 520, 533 (1993). A law that is not neutral toward religion on its face must be justified by a compelling governmental interest narrowly tailored to advance that interest. See Employment Division v. Smith, 494 U.S. at 886 n.3; Lukumi, 508 U.S. at 531-532. The school district policy fails this minimal requirement of facial neutrality because it explicitly states that community groups wishing to engage in religious services or instruction will be automatically denied access. See also, Fairfax Covenant Church v. Fairfax County Sch. Bd., 17 F.3d 703, 707 (4th Cir.), cert. denied, 511 U.S. 1143 (1994)(school board policy that discriminatorily charged churches higher rental than other community groups for access to school facilities after school hours violated free exercise rights of church).

Equally important, allowing government officials to determine whether speech is religious provides fertile ground for discrimination among religions, which the Establishment Clause prohibits. See Larson v. Valente, 456 U.S. 228 (1982); Fowler v. Rhode Island, 345 U.S. at 70 (distinguishing between religious "sermon" and "address" is "merely an indirect way of preferring one religion over another"). Relying on the decision below, a federal judge recently upheld a school district's denial of access to a church despite the record evidence that the school district previously had allowed two other churches access for religious worship and instruction. Full Gospel Tabernacle v. Community

Sch. Dist. 27, 979 F. Supp. 214, 221-223 (S.D.N.Y. 1997), appeal filed, No. 97-9235 (2d Cir. filed October 2, 1997).

Finally, as discussed supra at pp. XX, in Widmar, this Court noted that a policy prohibiting religious worship and instruction was likely to create excessive entanglement between government officials and religion, an additional violation of the Establishment Clause. 454 U.S. at 272 n.11. See Mergens, 494 U.S. at 248, 253; Rosenberger, 515 U.S. at 844-845.

II. Past Second Circuit decisions denying equal access for private religious speakers have had a negative national impact on religious citizens' free speech rights.

The decision below must be placed in context in order to understand the threat it poses to the free speech rights of citizens living outside, as well as within, the Second Circuit.

A previous Second Circuit decision was singularly damaging to equal access for private religious expression. Brandon v. Guilderland Central Sch. Dist., 635 F.2d 971 (2d Cir. 1980), cert. denied, 454 U.S. 1123 (1981). In Brandon, the Second Circuit ruled that a school district would violate the Establishment Clause if it permitted a student religious group to meet for prayer and Bible study in an empty classroom before school began. Id. at 979. Distinguishing "prayer" from "discussions about religious matters," the Second Circuit ruled that "the protections of political and religious speech are inapposite" for students meeting for prayer. Id. at 980 (citations omitted).

Fueling a decade of equal access litigation, the Brandon decision was followed by other courts of appeals to deny equal access for high school students engaging in religious speech, including prayer and worship. See Garnett v. Renton Sch. Dist., 865 F.2d 1121 (9th Cir. 1989)(relying on Brandon to hold Equal Access Act unconstitutional), vacated, 496 U.S. 914 (1990), on remand, 987 F.2d 641 (9th Cir.)(relying on Mergens, Equal Access Act requires equal access for high school student religious group), cert. denied, 510 U.S. 819 (1993); Bender v. Williamsport Area Sch. Dist., 741 F.2d 538, 551-557 (3d Cir. 1984)(citing Brandon, Establishment Clause trumps free speech right of high school student group to meet for religious speech, including prayer and Bible study), vacated on jurisdictional grounds, 475 U.S. 534 (1986); Lubbock Civil Liberties Union v. Lubbock Indep. Sch. Dist., 669 F.2d 1038, 1045-1046 (5th Cir. 1982)(relying on Brandon to rule that school district policy allowing equal access for religious student groups would violate the Establishment Clause), cert. denied, 459 U.S. 1155-1156 (1983).

Ultimately, an Act of Congress, the Equal Access Act, 20 U.S.C. 4071 et seq. (1994), and a decision by this Court, Board of Education v. Mergens, 496 U.S. 226 (1990), were necessary to repair the damage done to religious speech by the Brandon decision. Mergens, 496 U.S. at 239 (Equal Access Act "enacted in part in response to" Brandon), citing S. Rep. No. 98-357 at 6-9, 11-14 (1984)(describing damage done across

the country by the Brandon decision).

Again, in 1993, this Court unanimously reversed the Second Circuit in Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District, 508 U.S. 384 (1993), to uphold the right of access to a public school auditorium during nonschool hours for a church to show a film series with religious content. Because this Court reviewed and reversed the Second Circuit decision quickly, the damage done by Lamb's Chapel was contained. See, e.g., Good News/Good Sports Club v. Ladue Sch. Dist., 859 F. Supp. 1239 (E.D. Mo. 1993)(citing Second Circuit decision in Lamb's Chapel, court denied access to religious community group for after-school use on same basis as another community group), rev'd, 28 F.3d 1501 (8th Cir. 1994)(relying on Supreme Court decision in Lamb's Chapel, court required access for religious community group to school facilities after-school on same basis as another community group), cert. denied, 515 U.S. 1173 (1995).

If allowed to stand, the decision below will have negative repercussions for private religious expression across the country. Already the decision below is harming religious citizens' free speech rights within the Second Circuit. See Full Gospel Tabernacle v. Community School District 27, 979 F. Supp. 214, 221-223 (S.D.N.Y. 1997), appeal filed, No. 97-9235 (2d Cir. filed Oct. 2, 1997). The decision below creates a framework within which school officials will be allowed to pick and choose which religious groups will be allowed

access and which will be denied, an outcome that is a stark violation of the neutrality required by the First Amendment. See Larson v. Valente, 456 U.S. 228 (1982); Fowler v. Rhode Island, 345 U.S. 67, 70 (1953).

The decision below is directly contrary to this Court's decision in Widmar. The decision below is entirely inconsistent with long lines of this Court's precedent under the Free Speech, Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses, requiring government officials to treat religious citizens in a neutral manner. The decision below threatens the stability and correct application of a long line of precedent of this Court and lower federal courts that have upheld the right of equal access for private religious expression.

Conclusion

Amici respectfully suggest that this case is one of the exceptional cases in which it would be appropriate for the Court to grant the petition for writ of certiorari and summarily reverse the ruling of the court below. In the alternative, amici urge this Court to grant the petition for writ of certiorari for full argument before this Court.

Respectfully submitted,

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STATEMENT OF INTEREST OF *AMICI CURIAE*

Amicus the **Christian Legal Society** ("CLS"), through the **Center for Law and Religious Freedom** (the "Center"), its legal advocacy and information arm, has since 1975 argued in state and federal courts throughout the nation for the protection of religious speech, association and exercise. Founded in 1961, CLS is an ecumenical professional association of 4,500 Christian attorneys, judges, law students, and law professors, with chapters in every state and at 85 law schools.

Using a network of volunteer attorneys and law professors, the Center provides accurate information to the general public and the political branches regarding the law pertaining to religious exercise and the autonomy of religious institutions. In addition, the CLS Center has filed briefs *amici curiae* on behalf of many religious denominations and civil liberties groups in virtually every case before the U.S. supreme Court involving church-state relations since 1980.

The Society is committed to religious liberty because the founding instrument of this Nation acknowledges as a "self-evident truth" that all persons are divinely endowed with rights that no government may abridge nor any citizen waive, Declaration of Independence (1776). Among such inalienable rights are those enumerated in (but not conferred by) the First Amendment, the first and foremost of which is

religious liberty. The right sought to be upheld here inheres in all persons by virtue of its endowment by the Creator, Who is acknowledged in the Declaration. It is also a "constitutional right," but only in the sense that it is recognized in and protected by the U.S. Constitution. Because the source of religious liberty, according to our Nation's charter, is the Creator, not a constitutional amendment, statute or executive order, it is not merely one of many policy interests to be weighed against others by any of the several branches of state or federal government. Rather, it is foundational to the framers' notion of human freedom. The State has no higher duty than to protect inviolate its full and free exercise. Hence, the unequivocal and non-negotiable prohibition attached to this, our First Freedom, is "Congress shall make no law. . . ."

The CLS Center's national membership, two decades of experience, and professional resources enable it to speak with authority upon religious liberty.

The **Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs** is composed of representatives from various cooperating Baptist conventions and conferences in the United States. It deals exclusively with issues pertaining to religious liberty and church-state separation and believes that vigorous enforcement of both the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses is essential to ensure the religious liberty of all

Americans. The Baptist Joint Committee's supporting bodies include: Alliance of Baptists; American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.; Baptist General Conference; Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; National Baptist Convention of America; National Baptists Convention, U.S.A., Inc.; National Missionary Baptist Convention; North American Baptist Conference; Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.; Religious Liberty Council; Seventh Day Baptist General Conference; and Southern Baptist through various state conventions and churches. Because of the congregational autonomy of individual Baptist churches, the Baptist Joint Committee does not purport to speak for all Baptists.

The **Council of Churches of The City of New York, Inc.**, is an ecumenical organization representing the several Protestant and Orthodox denominations and borough church councils having ministry in the City of New York. The Council was known as the Protestant Council of the City of New York before 1968. It is governed by a Board of Directors which is comprised of the bishop or equivalent officer of each diocese, association, synod, presbytery, conference, district or similar regional body of its member denominations and of the president and executive officer of the local councils of churches serving each of the boroughs of the City of New York. The leadership of the Council believes firmly that all citizens are entitled to share equitably in the use of public facilities for peaceable assembly and finds that the

Board of Education policy at the heart of the instant case targeting religious speech uniquely for prohibition to be blatant bigotry and an unacceptable demonstration of religious intolerance.

The **Southern Baptist Convention** is the nation's largest Protestant denomination, with over 15.4 million members in over 38,400 local churches. **The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission** is the public policy agency of the Convention and is assigned to address religious liberty and other public policy issues. *Amicus* produces publications and seminars to educate Southern Baptists about ethical and moral issues in daily Christian life, and to advocate responsible Christian citizenship as part of biblical decision-making. *Amicus* also seeks to bring biblical principles and Southern Baptist convictions to bear upon public policy debates before courts, legislatures and policy-making bodies. *Amicus* frequently files briefs as *amicus curiae* in important religious liberty litigation, such as this case.

Focus on the Family is a California religious non-profit corporation committed to strengthening the family in the United States and abroad. Focus on the Family distributes a radio broadcast about family issues that reaches approximately 1.7 million listeners each day in the United States, Canada and other western countries. Focus on the Family publishes and distributes *Focus on the Family* magazine and other

literature that is received by more than 2 million households each month. From its widespread network of listeners and subscribers, Focus on the Family receives an average of more than 33,000 letters each week and represents Americans numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

The **General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists** is the highest administrative level of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and represents nearly 41,000 congregations with more than nine million members worldwide. The North American Division of the General Conference administers the work of the church in the United States with nearly 800,000 members.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church strongly supports the twin concepts of free exercise of religion and the separation of church and state and actively promotes those ideals through its bi-monthly Liberty magazine. The Working Policy in North America points out "that religious liberty is best achieved, guaranteed and preserved when church and government respect each other's proper areas of activity and concern" and that "in matters where secular and religious interests overlap, government, in the best interests of both church and government, must observe strict neutrality in religious matters, neither promoting nor restricting individuals or the Church in the legitimate exercise of their rights."

Liberty Counsel is a nonprofit religious civil liberties education and legal defense organization dedicated to preserve religious freedom. Established in 1989, Liberty Counsel's charter is to provide information on First Amendment religious rights, and pro bono legal defense to defend those rights. Liberty Counsel's efforts reach nationwide to protect our religious civil liberties. Liberty Counsel defends the rights of all citizens and organizations to equal access to public facilities for peaceful meetings, conferences, and assemblies.

The National Association of Evangelicals is a non-profit association of evangelical Christian denominations, churches, organizations, institutions and individuals. It includes some 43,500 churches from 74 denominations and serves a constituency of approximately 27 million people. NAE is committed to defending religious freedom as a precious gift of God and a vital component of the American heritage.

The **New York City Church of Christ** ("NYC Church of Christ") is a Christian church of almost 5,000 members, with 20 congregations that meet separately in all five boroughs of New York City at least once a week, for worship and other purposes. As a relatively new and growing church, NYC Church of Christ owns no real property and depends on the

availability of reasonably priced rental facilities for holding all of its meetings, including religious services and instruction. The Church has been denied access to New York City school properties for religious services because of the Board of Education's policy prohibiting such use, but has been permitted to rent City school facilities for purposes other than religious services.

The NYC Church of Christ also is interested in the outcome of this case because of (1) its affiliation with ACES World Sector, an association of churches which includes congregations in Albany, Syracuse, Buffalo, and South Connecticut which are likely to be harmed by the discriminatory policy approved by the decision below, and (2) its affiliation with the International Churches of Christ, which have numerous churches throughout the country that rent facilities and are likely to be harmed if the decision below becomes precedent for other circuits.

Clifton Kirkpatrick, as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, is senior continuing officer of the highest governing body of the **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States, with approximately 2,750,000 active members in 11,500 congregations organized into 171 presbyteries under the jurisdiction of 16 synods.

The General Assembly does not claim to speak for all

Presbyterians, nor are its deliverances and policy statements binding on the membership of the Presbyterian Church. The General Assembly is the highest legislative and interpretive body of the denomination, and the final point of decision in all disputes. As such, its statements are considered worthy of the respect and prayerful consideration of all the denomination's members.

Presbyterians have long supported the separation of Church and State. It was Presbyterians that sought this separation at the founding of this Nation. However in its 1988 policy statement, ***God Alone is Lord of the Conscience***, the 200th General Assembly adopted a policy that said: "Religious speech and assembly by private citizens and organizations, initiated by them, is protected both by the Free Exercise of Religion and Free Speech clauses of the Constitution and cannot be excluded from public places." The Stated Clerk urges this Court to accept jurisdiction over this very important matter.

The Queens Federation of Churches, Inc., was organized in 1931 and is an ecumenical association of Christian churches located in the Borough of Queens, City of New York. It is governed by a Board of Directors composed of equal number of clergy and lay members elected by the delegates of member congregations at an annual assembly meeting. Over 290 local churches representing every major Christian denomination and many independent congregations participate in the Federation's

ministry. The Queens Federation of Churches has appeared as *amicus curiae* previously in a variety of actions for the purpose of defending religious liberty. The Queens Federation of Churches and its member congregations are vitally concerned for the protection of the principle and practice of religious liberty, believing that governmental hostility to and discrimination against religious speech and religious worship, as in the present case, are egregious offenses against citizens which can only breed more destructive intolerance.

The **Union of American Hebrew Congregations** (UAHC) represents 1.5 million Reform Jews in 850 congregation nationwide. For over a century, the UAHC has fought for religious liberty and tolerance, believing these to be among the greatest rights America has bestowed upon the world. The UAHC has participated as *amicus* in a wide array of religious liberty cases, often before the United States Supreme Court. Recent Supreme Court *amicus* participation includes Board of Education of the Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Louis Grumet (1993) and City of Boerne, Texas v. P.F. Flores, Archbishop (1997).

The **Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America** (the "U.O.J.C.A.") is non-profit synagogue organization for over 1,000 Jewish congregations throughout the United States. It is the largest

Orthodox Jewish umbrella organization in this nation. Through its Institute for Public Affairs, the U.O.J.C.A. researches and advocates the legal and public policy positions promoted by the mainstream Orthodox Jewish community. The U.O.J.C.A. has filed briefs in federal and state courts throughout the nation in cases that affect the interests of the Jewish community and American society at large.

The U.O.J.C.A. has been particularly active and interested in cases that center upon the role of religion in our society and the interpretation and application of the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses in that regard. It has been the consistent position of the U.O.J.C.A. that the Establishment Clause does not require government to disfavor religion in any way. Thus, the U.O.J.C.A. joins in this brief for it believes that the court below erred in its interpretation of what the Establishment Clause requires.