**A** **BILL**

TO AMEND CHAPTER 32, TITLE 1, CODE OF LAWS OF SOUTH CAROLINA, 1976, RELATING TO THE “SOUTH CAROLINA RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT”, SO AS TO PROVIDE THAT RELIGIOUS SERVICES ARE DEEMED AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE DURING A STATE OF EMERGENCY AND MUST BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE OPERATING THROUGHOUT THE STATE OF EMERGENCY.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina:

SECTION 1. Chapter 32, Title 1 of the 1976 Code is amended to read:

“CHAPTER 32

South Carolina Religious Freedom Act

Section 1‑32‑10. This chapter may be cited as the ‘South Carolina Religious Freedom Act’.

Section 1‑32‑20. In this chapter:

(1) ‘Demonstrates’ means meets the burdens of going forward with the evidence and of persuasion.

(2) ‘Discriminatory action’ means any action undertaken by the State to:

(a) alter the tax treatment of a religious organization, cause any tax, penalty, or payment to be assessed against, or deny, delay, revoke, or otherwise make unavailable from exemption;

(b) disallow, deny, or otherwise make available a deduction for state tax purposes of a charitable contribution made to or by a religious organization;

(c) impose, levy, or assess a monetary fine, fee, penalty, damage award, or injunction; or

(d) withhold, reduce, exclude, terminate, or materially alter the terms or conditions of:

(i) a state grant, contract, subcontract, cooperative agreement, guarantee, loan, scholarship, or other similar benefits from or to a religious organization;

(ii) an entitlement or benefit under a state program from or to a religious organization; or

(iii) a license, certification, accreditation, recognition, or other similar benefit, position, or status to or from a religious organization.

(3) ‘Exercise of religion’ means the exercise of religion under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution or Article I, Section 2 of the State Constitution.

~~(3)~~(4) ‘Person’ includes, but is not limited to, an individual, corporation, firm, partnership, association, or organization.

(5) ‘Religious organization’ includes, but is not limited to, churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, nondenominational ministries, interdenominational and ecumenical organizations, mission organizations, faith‑based social agencies, and other entities whose principal purpose is the study, practice, or advancement of religion.

~~(4)~~(6) ‘State’ means the State of South Carolina and any political subdivision of the State and includes a branch, department, agency, board, commission, instrumentality, entity, or officer, employee, official of the State or a political subdivision of the State, or any other person acting under color of law.

Section 1‑32‑30. The purposes of this chapter are to:

(1) restore the compelling interest test as set forth in Wisconsin v. Yoder, 406 U.S. 205 (1972), and Sherbert v. Verner, 374 U.S. 398 (1963), and to guarantee that a test of compelling state interest will be imposed on all state and local laws and ordinances in all cases in which the free exercise of religion is substantially burdened; and

(2) provide a claim or defense to persons whose exercise of religion is substantially burdened by the State.

Section 1‑32‑40. The State may not substantially burden a person’s exercise of religion, even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability, unless the State demonstrates that application of the burden to the person is:

(1) in furtherance of a compelling state interest; and

(2) the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling state interest.

Section 1‑32‑45. This chapter does not affect the application of and must be applied in conjunction with Chapter 27 ~~of~~, Title 24, concerning inmate litigation.

Section 1‑32‑50. If a person’s exercise of religion or a religious organization’s ability to operate during a state of emergency has been burdened in violation of this chapter, the person may assert the violation as a claim or defense in a judicial proceeding. If the person prevails in such a proceeding, the court shall award attorney’s fees and costs. A religious organization also may seek injunctive relief and compensatory damages for pecuniary and nonpecuniary losses.

Section 1‑32‑55. (A) During a state of emergency, religious services are deemed an essential service and are considered necessary and vital to the health and welfare of the public.

(B) The State may not limit the ability of a religious organization to continue operating or engage in religious services during a state of emergency to the same or greater extent that other organizations or businesses that provide essential services are permitted to operate.

(C) Nothing in this section may be construed to prohibit the State from requiring religious organizations to comply with health, safety, and occupancy requirements issued by the state or federal government that are applicable to other businesses and organizations that provide essential services. However, the State may not enforce any requirements that would substantially burden the religious organization unless the State demonstrates that the burden is:

(1) in furtherance of a compelling state interest; and

(2) the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling state interest.

(D) The State may not take any discriminatory action against a religious organization on the basis that the organization:

(1) is religious;

(2) operates or seeks to operate during a properly declared state of emergency; or

(3) engages in religious activity including maintaining policies and practices that further the religious mission of the organization.

Section 1‑32‑60. (A) This chapter applies to all state and local laws and ordinances and the implementation of those laws and ordinances, whether statutory or otherwise, and whether adopted before or after the effective date of this act.

(B) Nothing in this chapter may be construed to authorize the State to burden any religious belief.

(C) Nothing in this chapter may be construed to affect, interpret, or in any way address:

(1) that portion of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibiting laws respecting the establishment of religion;

(2) that portion of Article I, Section 2 of the State Constitution prohibiting laws respecting the establishment of religion.

(D) Granting state funding, benefits, or exemptions, to the extent permissible under the constitutional provisions enumerated in subsection (C)(1) and (2), does not constitute a violation of this chapter.

As used in this subsection, ‘granting’, with respect to state funding, benefits, or exemptions, does not include the denial of government funding, benefits, or exemptions.”

SECTION 2. This act takes effect upon approval by the Governor.

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