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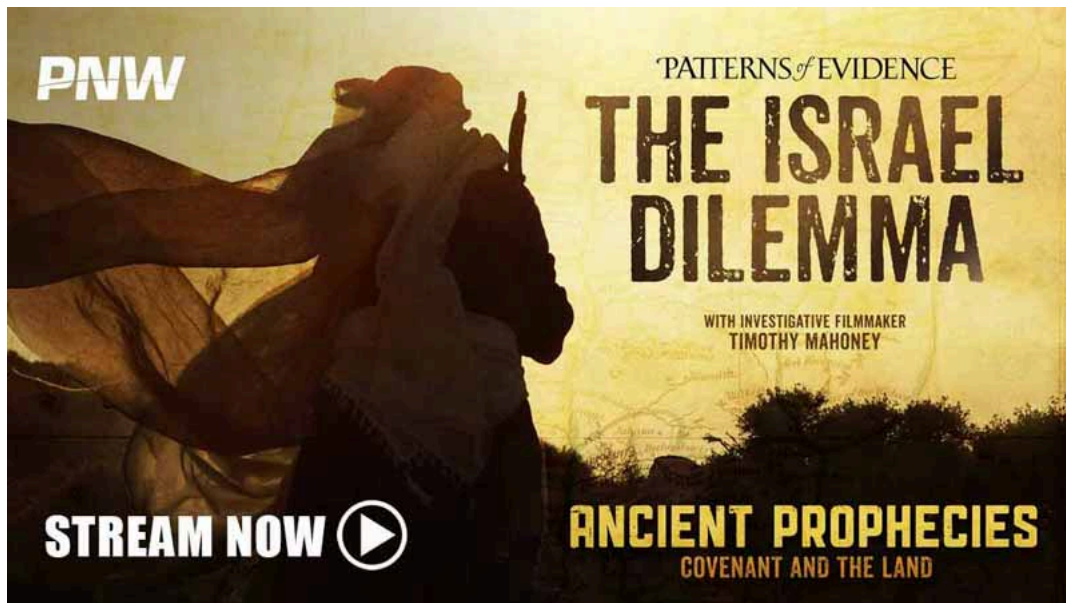
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ARTICLE

Landmark Court Ruling - Faith Groups Can't Be Forced To Hire Unbelievers





BY JOHN STONESTREET/BREAKPOINT.ORG JANUARY 09, 2026

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A decision issued on Tuesday, January 6, by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit may be one of the most significant religious liberty decisions of 2026.

In Union Gospel Mission of Yakima v. Brown, the court affirmed that religious organizations have a constitutional right to hire according to their faith, even for "ordinary" or non-minister positions, and they can do this without government interference. It's a moment worth celebrating, not only for the plaintiff, Union Gospel Mission, but for every church and ministry organization that takes its faith seriously.

At the heart of the case was this question: Can the government force a Christian organization to hire employees who openly reject its faith and mission? Attorneys for the state of Washington said, yes. The Ninth Circuit responded with a resounding, no.

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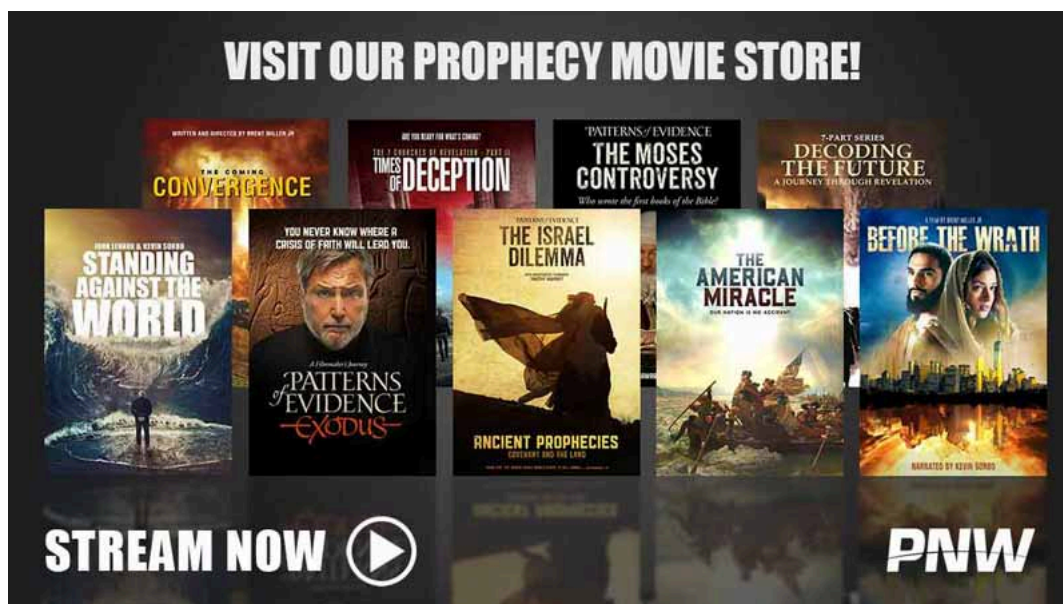
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Union Gospel Mission, a Christian ministry serving the homeless and addicted, requires its staff to affirm and live by its biblical beliefs, including Christian teachings on sexuality and marriage. Under the state of Washington's Law Against Discrimination, this long-standing policy was under threat. After Washington's Supreme Court narrowed the law's religious exemptions several years ago, Union Gospel Mission feared being punished simply for hiring those who shared its faith.

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Thi... ministries are forced to dilute their convictions in order to comply with secular norms, they cease to be who they are. As the Ninth Circuit noted in its decision, this kind of pressure would drive many religious missions out of the public square entirely. That would be a loss not just for churches and ministries, but also for communities and the countless people served by organizations of faith.



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The decision is all the more significant because of the court that handed it down. The Ninth Circuit covers states like Washington, Oregon, and California, progressive states that have, in recent years, become increasingly hostile to people and institutions of faith. At the same time, the Ninth Circuit has long been a bastion of judicial activism and progressive ideology. However, it now hosts a growing number of principled judicial conservatives, thanks to key appointments by President Trump, including Judge Patrick Bumatay, the author of the Union Gospel decision.

Now, as important as this decision is, it has its limits. For example, it does not grant religious institutions blanket immunity from employment laws. And it does not necessarily apply to for-profit businesses or hospitals. Still, it does affirm the right of ministries like Union Gospel Mission to make personnel decisions that flow directly from their religious convictions, even if those convictions conflict with secular orthodoxy.

The court's decision also reminds us of a critical truth: Faith is personal, but it is not private. Religious liberty doesn't just protect our rights to believe in the privacy of our heads, our hearts, our homes, or our houses of worship. The First Amendment protects religious exercise, the active, practical living out of one's deepest-held conviction, including the building and running of organizations designed to apply those convictions to the challenges and struggles of life. America in particular would be far worse off without the pre-political organizations that run headlong into the problems of our society seeking to help those in need.

Already in 2026, we can be thankful for a decision that understands the essential role these organizations play and the essential role that faith and morals play in making these organizations what they are. At the very least, this is not a bad way to start off a New Year.

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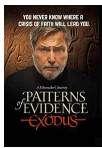
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