

The *Seattle's Union Gospel Mission* Case

Case Name: *Seattle's Union Gospel Mission v. Woods*

U.S. Supreme Court Docket No.: 21-144

U.S. Supreme Court Cert Petition Filing Date: August 2nd, 2021

Significance: Whether churches and religious organizations have the right to hire those who share their beliefs without being punished by the government.



Background: Seattle's Union Gospel Mission is a nonprofit ministry that exists to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the homeless in King County, Washington. The Mission serves its homeless neighbors by providing food, shelter, addiction-recovery, job placement, and legal services. Its roots go back to the Great Depression, when the Mission opened its doors as a soup kitchen. The Mission's religious convictions are the foundation for *everything* it does—every staff member and high-impact volunteer must share and live out the Mission's religious beliefs. And it is that evangelization that makes the Mission so successful at the work it does.

One of the Mission's ministries is Open Door Legal Services, a legal clinic where staff attorneys and volunteers help Mission guests and others resolve legal issues. In 2016, the clinic expanded and a staff attorney position became available. A prospective applicant asked if it would be a bar to employment that he declined to follow the Mission's religious-lifestyle requirements. The Mission said it would. The applicant applied anyway, asked the Mission to "change" its religious practices, and failed to provide the pastor recommendation that the Mission requires. Since the Mission's primary purpose is preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it hired someone who aligned with the Mission's religious beliefs and practices instead.

Woods then sued. The Washington Supreme Court ultimately presented the Mission with an impossible choice: Either hire those who disagree with and seek to change your biblical beliefs or stop serving your homeless neighbors. Instead, the Mission has now asked the U.S. Supreme Court to hear its case.

Key Points

- Under the First Amendment, the government doesn't get to interfere when a church or religious organization chooses to hire only those who share the organization's faith.
- The government is giving the Mission an impossible choice: either shut down and stop serving the homeless or give up your biblical beliefs. Neither is acceptable.
- If the lower court's ruling stands, this will not only impact Seattle's Union Gospel Mission—it will force churches to hire people who disagree with their core beliefs.

Key Facts

- Two years after program graduation, nearly 70% of the Mission's clients are sober and either working or in school. That amazing outcome is due to the Mission's evangelical approach.
- Approximately 25% of the Mission's staff are graduates of its programs.

The Bottom Line: The government should stay out of churches and religious ministries' internal faith matters, including hiring those who share their beliefs.