

Bellville Village Council  
142 Park Place,  
Bellville, Ohio 44813

Sent electronically and in hard copy form

January 9, 2024

## **Re: Local clergy response to proposed marijuana dispensary on I-71/Ohio 97 interchange**

Dear Village Council,

As elected officials, thank you for your service to our community in deciding what is morally best for the citizens of the Clear Fork Valley. Whether decisions involving finance or policy, your decisions affect our lives.

Presently Richland County has no marijuana businesses in its jurisdiction, and most recently in the 2023 general election, our county voted against the statewide issue of legalizing “recreational” marijuana. It is now our understanding that the Village Planning Commission will be deciding whether to allow a new marijuana dispensary at the Interstate 71/Ohio 97 interchange. As community partners, we regret that very little information about this highly-consequential project has been released to the public. To our knowledge, no village official reached out to faith leaders about this plan.

**There is no question the local faith community consistently opposes the use of the Schedule 1 narcotic marijuana.** This past election cycle saw clergy from over one hundred-forty congregations publicly oppose the legalization of “recreational” marijuana. Last year, one hundred-ten clergy sent a letter electronically opposing recreational marijuana to every mayor in Richland County, including Bellville. Thirdly, in March of 2017, a clergy letter opposing “medical” marijuana, an addictive drug with no FDA approval, was also sent to every mayor in Richland County, including Bellville. This 2017 letter successfully persuaded officials to prevent marijuana development in the nearby cities of Ontario and Mansfield.

Additionally, thirteen clergy in 2013 advocated for the implementation of a random drug testing program for students involved in extra-curricular activities in Clear Fork Valley Schools. This program, which was approved by the School Board at the clergy’s request, was designed to protect the health and safety of young people and prepare them for the workforce where drug-free work cultures exist.

We believe the injection of marijuana to our community, a drug associated with mental illness, would undermine this drug testing program. As a result, the approval of a commercial marijuana business would inflame an illicit drug culture leading to a spike in emergency room visits similar to 2016 when twenty-four young people were hospitalized for ingesting THC-laced candy. This ill-fated concert event, entitled “The Last Weekend on Earth,” took place at Ohio Dreams outside the Village of Butler attracting national news outlets, and bringing shame to our region.

In stark contrast, our LORD says, **“The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy; I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”** (John 10:10)

It is our belief that a marijuana dispensary in Bellville will do just that: steal, kill and destroy.

**Furthermore, as local stakeholders and lead clergymen from sixty-six (66) congregations, we publicly value human life and oppose harmful substances that jeopardize public health and safety. Therefore, we are calling on Bellville Village Council to pass emergency legislation banning all businesses involving the cultivation, processing, and dispensing of marijuana located in the Clear Fork Valley area that will ultimately poison our local culture.**

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Pastor Chad Hayes, Caeserea Baptist Church  
Pastor Chad Berry, New Liberty Baptist Church  
Pastor William Cole, Recovery Church  
Pastor Paul Staton, Honeycreek Baptist Church  
Pastor Nickolas Kelly, North Liberty Church  
Pastor James Hill, Mansfield Paradise Church  
Reverend El Akuchie, Godsfield House of Prayer  
Pastor Matt O’Harra, Bellville First Baptist  
Pastor Hank Webb, Belmont Community Church  
Pastor Hank Webb, Belmont 96 Church  
Pastor Bruce Philippi, Journey Life Center  
Pastor Rick Lewis, Shelby Connect Church  
Pastor Russ Smith, Shiloh Wesley Evangelical  
Pastor Dink Porter, First Church of the Open Bible  
Pastor Kevin Evans, Ganges Liberty Lifesong Church  
Pastor Larry Carnes, Trinity Grace Fellowship  
Deacon Derrell Hall, Mansfield Holiness Chapel  
Pastor Jeffrey Lord, Mayflower Congregational  
Pastor Brian Phillips, New Beginnings Freewill  
Pastor Les Farley, Lexington Irresistible Church  
Pastor LaMont Lindsay, Book of Life Church  
Bishop Eli Miller, Perry Amish District 2  
Pastor James Spencer, Peoples’ Baptist Church  
Pastor Jason Price, Mansfield Victory Baptist  
Pastor Eric Byrom, Mansfield Grace Fellowship  
Pastor Matt Pond, Shelby First Freewill Baptist  
Pastor Les Vnasdale, Cornerstone Grace Brethren  
Pastor Ron Puff, Pleasant Valley Baptist  
Pastor Paul Lintern, Oakland Lutheran Church  
Pastor Joe Nichols, ARK Empowerment Center  
Bishop Sylvester Ginn, Hesed Agape Fellowship  
Pastor Joe Smith, Ontario Westside Baptist  
Pastor Clyde Kerby, Hope & Healing Ministries

Pastor Patrick Bailey, Clear Fork North Bend Church  
Pastor Aaron Boggs, Fredericktown Freewill Baptist  
Pastor Mark Meyer, Lexington GracePoint Church  
Pastor Mark Dettmer, Pleasant Grove Community Church  
Pastor Matt Merendino, Clear Fork Alliance Church  
Pastor Denny Nezrick, Lexington Presbyterian Church  
Pastor David Howell, Powerhouse Worship Center  
Pastor Brad Gentile, Shelby First Baptist  
Pastor Doug Tackett, Taylortown Community Church  
Pastor Art Kennard, Shelby Maranatha Christian Center  
Pastor Mark Wireman, Shiloh Pentecostal Church  
Pastor James Marshall, Ganges Community Church  
Pastor George Lewis, Shelby Temple of GOD  
Pastor Taylor Howard, Apostolic Holiness Church  
Pastor Louis Blevins, Latter Rain Church of GOD in Christ  
Pastor Russell Stanford, All Believers in Christ Church  
Elder Moe Hill, Grace Evangelical Free Church  
Pastor John Campos, Bowman Street Church of GOD  
Bishop Anthony Cooper, Shelby Life Church  
Pastor Bobby Edwards, Jesus is Alive Holiness Church  
Pastor Lucian Baker, Christ the King Church  
Bishop Andy Keim, Perry Amish District 1  
Pastor Robert O’Brian, Apostolic Faith Assembly  
Elder James DeWeese, Providence Church  
Pastor Dan Zediker, Mansfield MissionPoint  
Pastor Rich Hurles, Plymouth LifePoint Church  
Pastor Larry Whited, Abundant Grace Fellowship  
Pastor Robert Kurtz, Mansfield Temple Baptist  
Pastor Paul Lintern, Southside Christian Church  
Pastor Patrick Bailey, Danville North Bend Church  
Pastor Larry Hill, Bethel Freewill Baptist  
Pastor David Parsons, Zion’s Refuge Baptist  
Pastor Nate Gailey, Hilltop Community Church

References:

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- 2) "Morally Wrong': Ohio Clergymen Unite to Oppose Legalization of Marijuana in Buckeye State" by Andrea Morris, CBN News, May 3, 2022, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2022/may/morally-wrong-ohio-clergymen-unite-to-oppose-legalization-of-marijuana-in-buckeye-state>
- 3) "Clergymen representing 70 congregations oppose medical marijuana in Richland County," by Staff Report, Richland Source, March 5, 2017, [http://www.richlandsource.com/news/clergymen-representing-congregations-oppose-medical-marijuana-in-richland-county/article\\_8d0b02b2-010a-11e7-a4a7-7b1361141b2d.html](http://www.richlandsource.com/news/clergymen-representing-congregations-oppose-medical-marijuana-in-richland-county/article_8d0b02b2-010a-11e7-a4a7-7b1361141b2d.html)
- 4) "Economic leader says local clergy prevented cannabis company from coming to Ontario," by Admin, Frontlines Ohio June 20, 2017, <https://frontlinesohio.com/index.php/2017/06/20/economic-leader-says-local-clergy-prevented-cannabis-company-from-coming-to-ontario/>
- 5) "Students could face drug testing: Religious group urges schools to adopt random testing program," by Todd Hill, Mansfield News Journal, front page, January 30, 2013
- 6) "Local clergy support proposed school drug testing policy," by Brigitte Coles, WMFD News, January 11, 2013
- 7) "Reverend Mark Stine talks in favor of drug testing program," photo taken by Kris Henderson, The Bellville Star, front page, January 17, 2013
- 8) "24 people at Ohio rap festival hospitalized for bad reactions to THC-laced candy," by Jason Silverstein, New York Daily News, August 7, 2016, <https://www.nydailynews.com/2016/08/07/24-people-at-ohio-rap-festival-hospitalized-for-bad-reactions-to-thc-laced-candy/>