

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ALABAMA**

HISPANIC INTEREST COALITION
OF ALABAMA; *et al.*,

Plaintiffs,

vs.

ROBERT BENTLEY, in his official capacity
as Governor of the State of Alabama; *et al.*,

Defendants.

RT. REV. HENRY N. PARSLEY, JR., in his
official capacity as Bishop of the Episcopal
Church in the Diocese of Alabama; *et al.*

Plaintiffs,

vs.

ROBERT BENTLEY, in his official capacity
as Governor of the State of Alabama; *et al.*,

Defendants.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Plaintiff,

vs.

STATE OF ALABAMA; GOVERNOR
ROBERT J. BENTLEY,

Defendants.

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) Case Number:
) 5:11-cv-02484-SLB

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) Case Number:
) 5:11-cv-02736-SLB

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**STATE DEFENDANTS' MOTION TO CERTIFY QUESTION TO
THE SUPREME COURT OF ALABAMA**

Governor Robert Bentley, Attorney General Luther Strange, and Madison County District Attorney Robert L. Broussard (the State Defendants) respectfully move this Court to certify to the Supreme Court of Alabama the question of what Sections 13 and 27 of Act No. 2011-535 mean, given that they must be interpreted in compliance with the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment, Ala. Const. Art. I, § 3.01.

1. On August 1, 2011, Rt. Rev. Henry N. Parsley, Jr., in his official capacity as Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Alabama, Rev. Dr. William H. Willimon, in his individual capacity as Bishop of the Northern Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, Most Rev. Thomas J. Rodi, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Mobile, a corporation sole, and Most Rev. Robert J. Baker, Roman Catholic Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama, a corporate sole, (“Church Leaders”) filed suit against the State Defendants challenging Act No. 2011-535. Case No. 5:11-cv-02726-SLB, doc. 1.

2. The Church Leaders contend that, on its face, Act No. 2011-535 violates various federally protected rights and should be enjoined in its entirety. Case No. 5:11-cv-02726-SLB, doc. 1 at ¶¶ 78-105, *id.* at Prayer for Relief.

3. Specifically, however, the Church Leaders only focus on Section 13 (which creates new crimes related to concealing, harboring, shielding, inducing, or

transporting illegal aliens), Section 27 (which concerns contracting), and Section 25 (which concerns solicitation, attempt or conspiracy to commit any crime created by the Act). Case No. 5:11-cv-02726-SLB, doc. 1 at ¶¶ 57-68.

4. On August 5, 2011, the Church Leaders filed a motion for a preliminary injunction, incorporating a memorandum in support. Case No. 5:11-cv-02726-SLB, doc. 15.

5. The Church Leaders' motion alleges that Act No. 2011-535 "also violates the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment that guarantees that Alabama residents' freedom of religion is not burdened by [S]tate or local laws." Case No. 5:11-cv-02726-SLB, doc. 15.

6. "The purpose of the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment is to guarantee that the freedom of religion is not burdened by [S]tate and local law; and to provide a claim or defense to persons whose religious freedom is burdened by government." Ala. Const. Art. I, § 3.01 (III).

7. It was passed in the wake of the Supreme Court's holding that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act was unconstitutional in *City of Boerne v. Flores*, 521 U.S. 507 (1997). Ala. Const. Art. I, § 3.01 (II)(6); *see also* historical note indicating that the Amendment was proposed to the electorate at the November 1998 election.

8. The Amendment prohibits the State of Alabama from “burden[ing] a person’s freedom 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: (1) Is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (2) Is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.” Ala. Const. Art. I, § 3.01 (V).

9. The Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment is to “be liberally construed to effectuate its remedial and deterrent purposes.” Ala. Const. Art. I, § 3.01 (VII)(a).

10. The Amendment clearly acts as a constraint on the meaning of Act No. 2011-535. *See* Ala. Const. Art. I, § 3.01 (VI)(a) (“This amendment applies to all government rules and implementations thereof, whether statutory or otherwise, and whether adopted before or after the effective date of this amendment.”).

11. This Court lacks jurisdiction to direct State officials to comply with State law, including the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment. U.S. Const. Amend. XI; *Pennhurst State School & Hosp. v. Halderman*, 465 U.S. 89, 106 (1984) (“A federal court’s grant of relief against [S]tate officials on the basis of [S]tate law, whether prospective or retroactive, does not vindicate the supreme authority of federal law. On the contrary, it is difficult to think of a greater intrusion on [S]tate sovereignty than when a federal court instructs [S]tate officials

on how to conform their conduct to [S]tate law. Such a result conflicts directly with the principles of federalism that underlie the Eleventh Amendment.”).

12. Accordingly, this Court cannot adjudicate any claim that the Church Leaders may be attempting to put before it concerning the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment.¹

13. Nonetheless, as a State law may not violate the State Constitution, the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment is key to interpreting Act No. 2011-535.

14. Act No. 2011-535 is entirely new, and the Alabama “courts have had no occasion to construe the law in the context of actual disputes . . . , or to accord the law a limiting construction to avoid constitutional questions.” *Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, 552 U.S. 442, 450 (2008).²

15. Only the Alabama Supreme Court can authoritatively construe Act No. 2011-535. *Gooding v. Wilson*, 405 U.S. 518, 520 (1972) (“Only the Georgia courts can supply the requisite construction, since of course we lack jurisdiction authoritatively to construe state legislation.”) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

¹ There is no reference to the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment in the Complaint. See Case No. 5:11-cv-02726-SLB, doc. 1, generally.

² A challenge to Act No. 2011-535 was filed in the Montgomery County Circuit Court on July 22, 2011. See *Doe v. Bentley*, Case No. CV-2011-882 (Montgomery County Circuit Court, Hardwick, J.). The *Doe* litigation originally raised State constitutional claims, and an amended complaint raising federal claims has been filed. The Plaintiffs moved for a preliminary injunction, but have now moved to stay the proceedings. The Circuit Court has set a hearing on the stay motion for September 7, 2011.

16. If the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment requires that Sections 13 and 27 be read in a more limited manner, it is the Alabama Supreme Court that can offer “a limiting construction.” *Washington State Grange*, 552 U.S. at 450; *Baggett v. Bullitt*, 377 U.S. 360, 375 (1964) (“[T]his Court ordinarily accepts the construction given a state statute in the local courts and also presumes that the statute will be construed in such a way as to avoid the constitutional question presented . . .”).

17. As the Eleventh Circuit has noted:

When substantial doubt exists about the answer to a material [S]tate law question upon which the case turns, a federal court should certify that question to the [S]tate supreme court in order to avoid making unnecessary [S]tate law guesses and to offer the [S]tate court the opportunity to explicate [S]tate law. Only through certification can federal courts get definitive answers to unsettled [S]tate law questions. Only a [S]tate supreme court can provide what we can be assured are ‘correct’ answers to [S]tate law questions, because a [S]tate’s highest court is the one true and final arbiter of [S]tate law.

Forgione v. Dennis Pirtle Agency, Inc., 93 F.3d 758, 761 (11th Cir.1996) (*per curiam*) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted); *see also Riley v. Kennedy*, 553 U.S. 406, 425 (2008) (“A State’s highest court is unquestionably ‘the ultimate exposito[r] of state law.’”) (alteration by the Court; *quoting Mullaney v. Wilbur*, 421 U.S. 684, 691 (1975)); *McMahan v. Toto*, 311 F.3d 1077, 1079 (11th Cir. 2002) (“[W]hen we write to a state law issue, we write in faint and disappearing ink.”) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

18. Alabama's Rules of Appellate Procedure allow this Court to certify questions to the Alabama Supreme Court to give it the opportunity to interpret the Act once and for all. Rule 18(a) provides:

When it shall appear to a court of the United States that there are involved in any proceeding before it questions or propositions of law of this State which are determinative of said cause and that there are no clear controlling precedents in the decisions of the Supreme Court of this State, such federal court may certify such questions or propositions of law of this State to the Supreme Court of Alabama for instructions concerning such questions or propositions of [S]tate law, which certified question the Supreme Court of this State, by written opinion, may answer.

Ala. R. App. P. 18(a).

19. If this Court certified questions to the Supreme Court of Alabama, the parties to this litigation would have the opportunity, and responsibility, to brief the issues to the State court. Ala. R. App. P. 18(g).

20. Certification of novel questions of State law to the State's highest court promotes judicial economy. "Certification procedure ... allows a federal court faced with a novel [S]tate-law question to put the question directly to the State's highest court, reducing the delay, cutting the cost, and increasing the assurance of gaining an authoritative response." *Arizonans for Official English v. Arizona*, 520 U.S. 43, 76 (1997).

21. In the consolidated case of *Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama v. Bentley*, Case No. 5:11-cv-02484-SLB, the State Defendants similarly argued that

this Court should consider certification to the Supreme Court of Alabama as a tool for interpreting Act No. 2011-535. *See, e.g.*, Case No. 5:11-cv-02484-SLB, doc. 82 at 25-29.

22. The reasons for certification are all the more compelling in the Church Leaders' case because a proper construction from the Supreme Court of Alabama may moot the entire litigation.

23. Prompt certification may allow the Supreme Court of Alabama to offer an authoritative construction of Sections 13 and 27 of Act No. 2011-535 before this Court rules on the Church Leaders' motion for preliminary injunction. In the alternative, prompt certification may help to avoid the expenditure of additional resources thereafter.

For the foregoing reasons, the State Defendants respectfully move this Court to certify to the Supreme Court of Alabama the question of what Sections 13 and 27 of Act No. 2011-535 mean, given that they must be interpreted in compliance with the Alabama Religious Freedom Amendment, Ala. Const. Art. I, § 3.01.

Respectfully submitted,

LUTHER STRANGE
(ASB-0036-G42L)
Attorney General

BY:

s/Misty S. Fairbanks

Margaret L. Fleming
(ASB-7942-M34M)

Winfield J. Sinclair
(ASB-1750-S81W)

James W. Davis
(ASB-4063-I58J)

Misty S. Fairbanks
(ASB-1813-T71F)

William G. Parker, Jr.
(ASB-5142-I72P)

Assistant Attorneys General

Of counsel:

John C. Neiman, Jr.
Solicitor General
(ASB-8093-O68N)

Prim F. Escalona
Deputy Solicitor General
(ASB-7447-H69F)

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
501 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-0152
Telephone: 334.242.7300
Facsimile: 334.242-4891
jneiman@ago.state.al.us
pescalona@ago.state.al.us

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
501 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-0152
Telephone: 334.242.7300
Facsimile: 334.353.8440
mfleming@ago.state.al.us
wsinclair@ago.state.al.us
jimdavis@ago.state.al.us
mfairbanks@ago.state.al.us
wparker@ago.state.al.us

Attorneys for Governor Bentley, Attorney General Strange, and District Attorney Broussard

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on August 9, 2011, I electronically filed the foregoing with the Clerk of the Court using the CM/ECF system which will send notification of such filing to the following:

Mary Bauer
Samuel J. Brooke
Andrew H. Turner
SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
400 Washington Ave.
Montgomery, Alabama 36104
Telephone: 334.956.8200
Facsimile: 334.956.8481
mary.bauer@splcenter.org
sam.brooke@splcenter.org
andrew.turner@splcenter.org

Cecilia D. Wang
Katherine Desormeau
Kenneth J. Sugarman
AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
39 Drumm Street
San Francisco, California 94111
Telephone: 415.343.0775 Wang
 415.343.0778 Desormeau
 415.343.0777 Sugarman
Facsimile: 415.395.0950
cwang@aclu.org
kdesormeau@aclu.org
irp_ks@aclu.org

Sin Yen Ling
ASIAN LAW CAUCUS
55 Columbus Avenue
San Francisco, California 94111
Telephone: 415.896.1701 ext. 110
Facsimile: 415.896.1702
sinyenL@asianlawcaucus.org

Michelle R. Lapointe
Naomi Tsu
Daniel Werner
SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
233 Peachtree St., NE, Suite 2150
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
Telephone: 404.521.6700 Lapointe & Werner
404.221.5846 Tsu
Facsimile: 404.221.5857
michelle.lapointe@splcenter.org
naomi.tsu@splcenter.org
daniel.werner@splcenter.org

Erin E. Oshiro
ASIAN AMERICAN JUSTICE CENTER
1140 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20036
Telephone: 202.296.2300
Facsimile: 202.296.2318
eoshiro@advancingequality.org

G. Brian Spears
G. BRIAN SPEARS PC
1126 Ponce de Leon Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia 30306
Telephone: 404.872.7086
Facsimile: 404.892.1128
bspears@mindspring.com

Ben E. Bruner
BRUNER LAW FIRM
1904 Berryhill Road
Montgomery, Alabama 36117
Telephone: 334.201.0835
brunerlawfirm@gmail.com

Andre Segura
Elora Mukherjee
Omar C. Jadwat
Lee Gelernt
Michael K.T. Tan
AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION FOUNDATION
125 Broad Street, 18th Floor
New York, New York 10004
Telephone: 212.549.2676 Segura
 212.549.2664 Mukherjee
 212.549.2620 Jadwat
 212.549.2616 Gelernt
 212.549.7303 Tan
Facsimile: 212.549.2654
asegura@aclu.org
emukherjee@aclu.org
ojadwat@aclu.org
lgelernt@aclu.org
mtan@aclu.org

Linton Joaquin
Karen C. Tumlin
Vivek Mittal
Melissa S. Keaney
Shiu-Ming Cheer
NATIONAL IMMIGRATION LAW CENTER
3435 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 2850
Los Angeles, California 90010
Telephone: 213.639.3900
Facsimile: 213.639.3911
joaquin@nilc.org
tumlin@nilc.org
mittal@nilc.org
keaney@nilc.org
cheer@nilc.org

Tanya Broder
NATIONAL IMMIGRATION LAW CENTER
405 14th Street, Suite 1400
Oakland, California 94612
Telephone: 510.663.8282
Facsimile: 510.663.2028
broder@nilc.org

Freddy Rubio
RUBIO LAW FIRM, P.C.
438 Carr Avenue, Suite 1
Birmingham, Alabama 35209
Telephone: 205.443.7858
Facsimile: 205.433.7853
frubio@rubiofirm.com

Herman Watson, Jr.
Eric J. Artrip
Rebekah Keith McKinney
WATSON, MCKINNEY & ARTRIP, LLP
203 Greene Street
Post Office Box 18368
Huntsville, Alabama 35801
Telephone: 256.536.7423
Facsimile: 256.536.2689
watson@watsonmckinney.com
artrip@watsonmckinney.com
mckinney@watsonmckinney.com

Diana S. Sen
LATINOJUSTICE PRLDEF
99 Hudson Street – 14th Floor
New York, New York 10013
Telephone: 212.219.3360
dsen@latinojustice.org

Foster S. Maer
Ghita Schwartz
LATINOJUSTICE PRLDEF
99 Hudson Street – 14th Floor
New York, New York 10013
Telephone: 212.219.3360
fmaer@latinojustice.org
gschwarz@latinojustice.org

Victor Viramontes
Martha L. Gomez
MEXICAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND
634 S. Spring Street, 11th Floor
Los Angeles, California 90014
Telephone: 213.629.2512
vviramontes@maldef.org
mgomez@maldef.org

Amy Pederson
MEXICAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND
1016 16th Street, Suite 100
Washington, D.C. 20036
Telephone: 202.293.2828
apedersen@maldef.org

Jessica Karp
National Day Laborer Organizing Network
675 S. Park View Street, Suite B
Loa Angeles, California 90057
Telephone: 213.380.2785
jkarp@ndlon.org

J.R. Brooks, Jr.
Taylor P. Brooks
LANIER FORD SHAVER & PAYNE, P.C.
Post Office Box 2087
Huntsville, Alabama 35804-2087
Telephone: 256.535.1100
Facsimile: 256.533.9322
jrb@lfsp.com
tpb@lanierford.com

Donald B. Sweeney, Jr.
BRADLEY ARANT BOULT CUMMINGS LLP
One Federal Place
1819 Fifth Avenue North, Seventh Floor
Post Office Box 830709
Birmingham, Alabama 35283-0709
Telephone: 205.521.8000
Facsimile: 205.488.6275
dsweeney@babbc.com

C. Lee Reeves, II
Joshua Wilkenfeld
Varu Chilakamarri
U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE, CIVIL DIVISION
FEDERAL PROGRAMS BRANCH
20 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20530
lee.reeves@usdoj.gov
Joshua.i.wilkenfeld@usdoj.gov
varudhini.chilakamarri@usdoj.gov

Joyce White Vance
Praveen Krishna
US ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
1801 4th Avenue North
Birmingham, AL 35203-2101
joyce.vance@usdoj.gov
Praveen.krishna@usdoj.gov

Augusta S. Dowd
WHITE ARNOLD & DOWD PC
2025 3rd Avenue, North, Suite 600
Birmingham, AL 35203
adowd@waadlaw.com

Terry McElheny
DOMINICK FLETCHER YEILDING
WOOD & LLOYD
P.O. Box 1387
Birmingham, AL 35201
tmc@dfy.com

F. Grey Redditt, Jr.
VICKERS RIIS MURRAY & CURRAN LLC
106 St. Francis Street, 11th Floor
P.O. Drawer 2568
Mobile, AL 36652-2568
gredditt@vickersriis.com

John F. Whitaker
WHITAKER MUDD SIMMS LUKE
& WELLS LLC
2001 Park Place North, Suite 400
Birmingham, AL 35203
jwhitaker@wmslawfirm.com

and I hereby certify that I have mailed by United States Postal Service the document to the following non-CM/ECF participants:

Nina Perales
MEXICAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND
100 Broadway, Suite 300
San Antonio, Texas 78205
Telephone: 210.224.5476
nperales@maldef.org

Respectfully submitted,

LUTHER STRANGE
(ASB-0036-G42L)
Attorney General

BY:

s/Misty S. Fairbanks
Margaret L. Fleming
(ASB-7942-M34M)

Winfield J. Sinclair
(ASB-1750-S81W)

James W. Davis
(ASB-4063-I58J)

Misty S. Fairbanks
(ASB-1813-T71F)

William G. Parker, Jr.
(ASB-5142-I72P)

Assistant Attorneys General

Of counsel:

John C. Neiman, Jr.
Solicitor General
(ASB-8093-O68N)

Prim F. Escalona
Deputy Solicitor General
(ASB-7447-H69F)

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
501 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-0152
Telephone: 334.242.7300
Facsimile: 334.242-4891
jneiman@ago.state.al.us
pescalona@ago.state.al.us

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
501 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-0152
Telephone: 334.242.7300
Facsimile: 334.353.8440
mfleming@ago.state.al.us
wsinclair@ago.state.al.us
jimdavis@ago.state.al.us
mfairbanks@ago.state.al.us
wparker@ago.state.al.us

Attorneys for Governor Bentley, Attorney General Strange, and District Attorney Broussard