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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**Word of Faith Fellowship Exposes Troubling Ethics of A&E Documentary Production –
*The Devil Next Door***

Spindale, North Carolina – November 23, 2018 – The Word of Faith Fellowship has just confirmed some very troubling information regarding the upcoming A&E documentary series *The Devil Next Door* that raises serious ethical questions about the creation of the series and the journalistic standards of A&E and journalist Elizabeth Vargas, the “face of the network’s new nonfiction primetime journalistic banner *A&E Investigates*,”¹ under which *The Devil Next Door* is produced. Contrary to A&E’s policies and practices and to universal principles of ethical documentary journalism, participants in the new six-part documentary series were paid significant sums of money for their involvement with the production.

Although such rumors have swirled for some time, Word of Faith Fellowship, the subject of the documentary series, can now reveal it has clear evidence that participants in the documentary were paid. For example, several sources reveal that former member Chad Cooper was paid on what was perhaps a monthly basis sums exceeding several thousand dollars per month. Word of Faith’s attorneys possess a copy of one such check dated February 6, 2018, from Fly Girls, LLC (believed to be related to A&E contract production company Collins Avenue whose street address matches that listed on the check) to Chad Cooper in the amount of \$3,335 (see attached photograph). Another source saw a second check to Chad in March 2018 for a sum exceeding \$2,000 and Cooper has consistently bragged to the same source throughout 2018 that he has continued to be paid from the production. Chad Cooper recently purchased a car at least in part with money from his “side job” (his repeatedly-used reference to his participation in the *The Devil Next Door* series). Cooper, a licensed attorney, also indicated to a source that at the time of the statement he “had more in his bank account than he ever had before” and indicated the money came from the producers.

Another potential participant indicates that they were offered \$8,000 for their appearance in the production and unconfirmed rumors swirl that a principal in the production negotiated a \$30,000 payment for their participation.

A&E has faced similar accusations of unethical practices in the past. In December 2016, A&E cancelled prior to airing its original documentary *Escaping the KKK* for the same issues. In A&E’s own press release canceling the airing of the heavily-promoted project intended to expose the racial hate group, the network revealed that “cash payments...were made...to some participants.... [T]hese payments are a direct violation of A&E’s policies and practices for a documentary.”²

¹ 4/19/2018 – “A+E Networks Inks Overall Production and First-Look Development Deal With Award-Winning Journalist Elizabeth Vargas.” <https://www.aetv.com/news/ae-networks-inks-overall-production-and-first-look-development-deal-with-award-winning-journalist-elizabeth-vargas>

² 12/24/2016 – Statement from A&E Network on “Escaping the KKK.” <https://www.aetv.com/news/statement-from-ae-network-on-escaping-the-kkk>

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A&E has marketed *The Devil Next Door* as a documentary, calling the production an “original docu-series”³ in a recent announcement. A&E explained that the series was intended to “provide a voice to the former members” and purports to “chronicle their tireless efforts” to get others to leave Word of Faith.⁴ Now knowing the full story that participants in the A&E documentary were paid, viewers will never know whether what is expressed in the series by paid participants is the truth or merely exaggerated or fabricated tales of opportunity seekers telling filmmakers the sensational tidbits they think an audience wants to hear.

Industry practice for documentary filmmaking eschews payments to participants for good reason. Participants who are paid tend to tell the filmmaker what they want to hear. Don’t just take our word for it. Jon Else, director of the documentary program at University of California at Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism, opines “Paying people to talk to you poisons what they tell you. Would you trust a *New York Times* article if you knew the reporter had paid the subject to talk?”⁵ Perhaps that’s why A&E’s own internal policies and practices ban this practice with documentaries?

After initially learning of payments to participants in this A&E production, attorneys for Word of Faith confronted Collins Avenue producer Francis Gasparini with the allegations that he and his crew had paid those depicted in the production. Gasparini denied compensating those who appeared and indicated that any payments made were small and intended to defray the expenses of the participants. We now know that Gasparini’s comments were disingenuous at best. Characterizing the multi-thousand dollar payments to Chad Cooper, for example, as expense reimbursements simply does not square with the reality of what expenses Cooper may have incurred for his participation, described by one of Cooper’s friends as several hours per week of filming for a period of time. The potential participant who was offered \$8,000 affirmed that the offered payment had no relation to their potential expenses, had they chosen to participate. Surely Gasparini and his production company are conscious of the troubling nature of the payments made to their documentary subjects. Perhaps that’s why some of the offered payments were intentionally misdescribed. In another example, a production member named “Jen” apparently wanted to compensate a former church member who was briefly filmed in the background of a public place with another former Word of Faith member. Jen indicated that while she couldn’t provide direct compensation, the former church member could provide childhood pictures or videos of their time at Word of Faith. In return, Jen would pay \$250. Jen made it clear that she had no intention of actually using the media she purportedly wished to purchase but this was merely a “loophole” by which she could put some money in the former member’s hands for being filmed for a few minutes by the documentary crew.

³ 10/9/2018 - A&E's New Series "The Devil Next Door" Provides a Voice to Ex-members of the Controversial Word of Faith Fellowship Church. <https://www.aetv.com/news/aes-new-series-the-devil-next-door-provides-a-voice-to-ex-members-of-the-controversial-word-of-faith-fellowship-church>

⁴ ibid

⁵ 8/31/2004 - "Money Changes Everything--or Does It?: Considering Whether Documentaries Should Pay for Play." <https://www.documentary.org/magazine/money-changes-everything-or-does-it-considering-whether-documentaries-should-pay-play>

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Word of Faith calls on A&E to follow industry practices and principles for documentary journalism and to abide by its own internal policies and practices. The payments made to participants in *The Devil Next Door* production were significant and pervasive. A&E has no choice but to decline to air this series just as they declined to air *Escaping the KKK* in 2016 for the same reasons. Failing that course of action – the only ethical course of action – A&E will leave viewers of *The Devil Next Door* wondering if they are watching a work of fiction or a work of unbiased journalism and whether those depicted in the series are paid actors or the aggrieved former church members they present themselves to be.

Should A&E fail to accept its ethical obligation to cancel this series, Elizabeth Vargas should denounce the practices of A&E and the production company in the series and decline to participate further. Anything short of her total repudiation of this tainted production will only tarnish her well-earned reputation as an award-winning journalist.

Members of the media may make contact per the instructions below regarding sources referenced herein. Some sources will speak on the record. Others will only speak on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation by members of the Cooper family, the driving force behind *The Devil Next Door* documentary series.

This morning, one of our parishioners spoke with A&E EVP, Corporate Communications, Michael Feeny about what we have described herein. Feeny dismissed our concerns and did not address the inconsistencies of this series with A&E's previously-referenced standards. Perhaps A&E has debased its standards.

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