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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**Church Stands Up to A&E and A&E Blinks – A&E Postpones Premiere of Ethically-Compromised *The Devil Next Door* Docu-Drama Focused on The Word of Faith Fellowship – New Facts Continue to Emerge Deepening A&E’s Quandary**

Spindale, North Carolina – December 3, 2018 – Within twenty-four hours of initial media coverage of a Word of Faith Fellowship press release raising significant ethical concerns about the production of a purported documentary entitled *The Devil Next Door*, A&E Television Network decided – on the eve of its heavily-promoted premiere – to postpone the troubled series. Improbably, the entertainment behemoth stumbled, bumbled and fumbled in its public statements about the series as its responses to media inquiries left audiences with more questions than answers.

Amid a sea of absurd statements issued by A&E, perhaps the most incredible notion is the claim the network made last Tuesday to *The Daily Courier*. The newspaper based in Forest City, North Carolina, quoted A&E Executive Vice-President for Corporate Communications, Michael Feeny, as indicating that complaints from the church (presumably from our November 23 press release) had nothing to do with the delay of the series and, instead, the delay was implemented to allow for addition of newly-available footage.¹ In attempting to explain its delay decision, A&E expects viewers to suspend disbelief, sacrifice logic and accept A&E’s notion that just one day prior to the aggressively-marketed premiere, a sudden decision was made to add additional footage – a decision that just happened to occur after Word of Faith called on the network not to air the program because of the network’s failure to adhere to its own ethics policies on payments to participants.

Our prior revelation of significant payments to participants in the A&E show found the network caught with its hand in the proverbial cookie jar. While A&E produced and promoted the series under the banner *A&E Investigates*TM (positioned as a network vehicle providing “journalistic...nonfiction” documentary filmmaking²), the network attempts to explain its lack of adherence to ethical documentary journalism by telling a reporter for ABC-affiliate WLOS that it is simply an “entertainment company [and] not a news provider” and, as such, participants are paid for certain items like missed work, childcare and travel.³ While it is shocking that a sophisticated corporate communications department would allow such an obvious contradiction to remain unresolved, the network’s statements lay bare that A&E wants to arrogate to itself the legitimacy and marketplace

¹ Wicker, M. (2018, November 28). A&E: WOFF didn’t cause postponement. *The Daily Courier*, pp. A1, A6.

² “A+E Networks Inks Overall Production and First-Look Development Deal With Award-Winning Journalist Elizabeth Vargas.” (2018, April 19). Retrieved from <http://www.aetv.com/news/ae-networks-inks-overall-production-and-first-look-development-deal-with-award-winning-journalist-elizabeth-vargas>

³ Emert, J. (2018, November 26). Controversial WNC church asks network not to run docu-series. Retrieved from <https://wlos.com/news/local/controversial-wnc-church-asks-network-not-to-run-docu-series>

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credibility due an investigative journalism outfit that produces groundbreaking documentaries without playing by those rules. Instead, it wants to play by the fast-and-loose principles (or lack thereof) of an “entertainment” company. Hiring an independent production company like Collins Avenue that produces low-brow reality television such as *Bridezillas* and *Dance Moms* is simply further evidence of the fact that – despite its announcements to the contrary – A&E had no intention to produce quality documentary journalism in conjunction with Collins Avenue on this project.

A&E also continues to cling to an ever-thinning reed in its repeated assertions that payments made to participants were “minimal.”⁴ Only in Hollywood or New York City are payments of thousands or ten of thousands of dollars considered “minimal.” However, in western North Carolina and in Rutherford County such payments are more than sufficient to motivate payees into saying what they think the payor wants to hear. The church now has solid information coming out of the camp of church critics that multiple participants were paid amounts in excess of \$25,000. In a recorded telephone conversation provided to church attorneys, John Huddle (a key participant in the A&E series) states: “I hired an attorney out of Charlotte to negotiate the contract...I didn’t know anything about the entertainment industry...and that was on the recommendation of Ben Cooper to hire an attorney and he’s an attorney.” Clearly, Cooper and Huddle understood they were negotiating compensation for appearing in an entertainment series. Or perhaps Huddle just needed help in negotiating his “minimal” expense reimbursements.

Specifically, regarding payments to participants, the church has been provided a recently-recorded conversation with show producer Francis Gasparini in which Gasparini continues to maintain that participants were merely paid for their expenses. However, in a moment of reflection, Gasparini tellingly admits that revelations that participants were compensated “appear to be correct.” Resuming his original defensive narrative, Gasparini goes on to say that “As far as I know, nobody said ‘Get on the show and we’re going to give you X thousand dollars.’” Yet, that is exactly what happened, as explained in our previous press release in which a source revealed to us that they were offered \$8,000 to appear in the series without any discussion of what expenses they might incur if they appeared. Gasparini is apparently the face of this A&E production, given the total lack of visibility of previously-announced collaborator Elizabeth Vargas. Gasparini’s credibility is irretrievably damaged from this contradiction. Gasparini’s assertion is not true, and the contrast in statements between transcripts of the conversations with Gasparini and the source approached to appear in the series is very revealing.

The church has also learned that the shelved A&E series contains highly defamatory content on a number of subjects and makes insinuations about church leaders that are simply not true but only designed to trigger a visceral response in the audience. One only has to look no further than the name *The Devil Next Door* to reach the obvious conclusion that this series is designed to incite hatred against

⁴ Wicker, op. cite., p. A1.

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a conservative, Christian church. Legal efforts addressing the defamation are commencing and A&E will be receiving legal demands shortly.

Word of Faith previously called on A&E to comply with its internal standards as described in the network's December 24, 2016 press release addressing its cancellation of a documentary due to payments made to participants.⁵ A&E maintains that its policy as applied in that instance is being taken out of context and only limits the network from making payments to members of hate groups. However, that is clearly not what their previous press release said. The public is invited to review A&E's December 2016 statement on the subject and reach their own conclusions.

Taking A&E at its word that its policies at least prohibit payments to members of hate groups – assuming that policy has not changed – it is clear that the network has problems with *The Devil Next Door* production even under that creative reading of its own standards. Participants in the A&E series have a history of making outrageous and hateful statements against Word of Faith and its leaders in their attempts to denigrate their constitutionally-protected religious beliefs and practices. In particular, John Huddle has repeatedly made defamatory comparisons of the church and its leaders to a convicted child molester (Warren Jeffs and his church, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), a murderer (Jim Jones, leader of the People's Temple) and a genocidal despot (Adolph Hitler), among others. These comparisons and criticism are designed to enrage the listener or reader and have, in many cases, incited hatred against the Word of Faith in its community. As such, at least some of the A&E participants, including John Huddle, are purveyors of hatred against the Word of Faith and our religious beliefs and should be barred from receiving compensation by A&E's stated internal strictures on payments.

A&E has been reckless in attempting to give a voice to church critics who spew hate. Unsurprisingly, those sown seeds have resulted in a bumper crop of hateful and violent references against the church and its leaders online. Recent online comments spurred by *The Devil Next Door* series include wishes and threats that our church or our pastor Jane Whaley be “burned,” “destroyed” or “str[uck]...dead.” The frequency, intensity and level of aggression of hateful comments directed at the church has increased of late during the heavy promotion of *The Devil Next Door* series. The church has found it necessary and prudent to report some of these threats to law enforcement, as we have also found necessary in the past. This is the fruit of A&E's reckless and misguided efforts.

Finally, the church has uncovered evidence of ethically-compromised reporting at the Associated Press and apparent collusion between the Associated Press and A&E at senior levels. The tail is now wagging the dog as efforts to maximize entertainment value trump long-standing journalism maxims. Multiple sources now willing to be heard publicly are prepared to reveal the lengths that the Associated

⁵ “Statement from A&E Network on ‘Escaping the KKK.’” (2016, December 24). Retrieved from <https://www.aetv.com/news/statement-from-ae-network-on-escaping-the-kkk>

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Press has gone – in violation of its own standards – to assist an entertainment company in the promotion of a reality series/hit job.

This series is a vivid example of the anti-religious bent of the entertainment industry. This is another incremental step in the war of the secular media against sincerely-held religious beliefs and Christianity in particular. Other religious groups should take note: you could be next.

Again, the Word of Faith Fellowship calls on A&E to follow the only ethical course and permanently cancel *The Devil Next Door* series that is the fruit of its irresponsible conduct.

We will be releasing more information as the story continues to unfold.

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