



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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September 27, 2017

Dear Senator:

We write in support of S. 1823, the Federal Disaster Assistance Nonprofit Fairness Act, which will ensure that churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship damaged in Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, as well as future disasters, will be eligible for federal financial aid to repair their damaged buildings on the same terms as other, similarly eligible nonprofits which receive aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The legislation is consistent with Supreme Court jurisprudence, which recognizes the right of religious institutions to receive public financial aid in the context of a broad program administered on the basis of religion-neutral criteria. In the *Trinity Lutheran Church* case decided in June 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court held that it is unconstitutional to discriminate against churches—in a generally available government grant program—just because they are churches. The bill is not asking for special treatment, just equal treatment that conforms to constitutional protections.

It should be noted that in the aftermath of a natural disaster, houses of worship often play an irreplaceable role in the recovery of a community. Discrimination that treats houses of worship as ineligible for federal assistance in the wake of a natural disaster, beyond being a legal violation, hurts the very communities most affected by the indiscriminate force of nature.

The best approach to address questions of eligibility for houses of worship is a permanent clarification of federal law. For this reason, we support S. 1823 and ask that it be adopted by Congress.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of William E. Lori in blue ink.

Most Reverend William E. Lori
Archbishop of Baltimore
Chairman, USCCB Ad Hoc Committee for
Religious Liberty

Handwritten signature of Mitchell T. Rozanski in blue ink.

Most Reverend Mitchell T. Rozanski
Bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Ecumenical
and Interreligious Affairs