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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Church Granted First Exemption for Ayahuasca Through DEA Petition

SPOKANE, WA - In a significant legal development, the DEA has granted the first-ever approval for a Petition for Religious Exemption from the Controlled Substances Act (CSA) Pursuant to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) for the Church of Gaia. This exemption allows the church to legally use Ayahuasca in religious ceremonies, making it one of just several other legal Ayahuasca churches in the United States.

The petition process was established in response to *Gonzales v. O Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal* (UDV) (2009), in which the Supreme Court ruled that the UDV could use Ayahuasca as part of its sincere religious exercise under RFRA, despite federal prohibition, affirming that RFRA protections extend to religious groups that use controlled substances. Following that decision, the DEA was directed to create an administrative process for religious groups seeking exemptions from the CSA under RFRA.

While this process has been in place since 2009, no petitions have been approved until now. The exemption granted to the Church of Gaia differs from other religious groups who received federal permission through litigation or settlement agreements that have allowed them to legally use Ayahuasca.

“As the sacrament for the Church of Gaia, Ayahuasca serves as a profound ceremonial tool for accessing spiritual connection and abundance. In pursuing the religious exemption, we aimed to ensure the safety of the church's members, Indigenous elders, and leaders while protecting the right to practice our sacred ceremonies without persecution. This exemption means the church can fully embrace its religious offerings, including the Ayahuasca ceremonies we've long prayed for,” said Connor Mize, founder of the Church of Gaia.

Gaia's religious traditions are rooted in deep spiritual beliefs, and its sacramental practices will be conducted in a respectful and structured setting. In accordance with their agreement with the DEA, the church is required to adhere to stringent security protocols. Gaia has worked extensively on their commitment to safe and responsible practices while maintaining its community's well-being and ensuring the Indigenous traditions are upheld appropriately.

“With the emerging use of Ayahuasca in the United States, it poses both unique opportunities and challenges. Ayahuasca has a deep spiritual significance in Indigenous Amazonian cultures. It is important that those who wish to use it respect the sacred cultural context of its traditional uses. Ayahuasca is not just a plant, but a portal to understanding oneself, nature, and the interconnectedness of all,” said Maestro Tito Amasifuen Valera, Indigenous Shipibo Elder & Church of Gaia Ceremonial Leader.

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The Church of Gaia is a non-denominational church whose mission is to provide spiritual growth and community. We achieve this mission through safe and sacred Ayahuasca ceremonies held by experienced leaders, inclusive community events, and gatherings for integration that foster relationships based on compassion, honesty, and respect.