



Pastors and Churches Under Fire

This and more is happening in America . . .

Mathew D. Staver, Founder & Chairman, Liberty Counsel

What I share below reads like an excerpt from a book about the persecuted church in faraway places. But everything happened in the past few months right here in America. I want to share what's behind these attacks — especially with the election a few weeks away.

Dear Friend of Religious Freedom,

March 30 of this year was an otherwise typical spring day in Tampa, Florida. Lots of sunshine and temperatures rising into the 80s.

. . . Except for an extraordinary police bust that proved to be a tipping point in our nation's history.

Police helicopters circled over a residential home while marked police cars lined the street. It looked like a major drug sting, or perhaps the cops were apprehending a murder suspect.

But this massive police operation was not about a drug dealer or murder suspect. The target on this day was a Florida pastor of a local church – Dr. Rodney Howard-Browne.

While his arrest was unfolding, the Hillsborough County Sheriff held a press conference. There was no reason for this show of force. The policy for a low-level misdemeanor allows arrest only if the person is a flight risk, but that was not the case here. The sheriff said he wanted to “send a message” and “publicly shame” pastors.

Pastor cuffed, booked, fingerprinted . . . and openly mocked

The deputies were apologetic, but they were following orders. The pastor was cuffed like a common criminal. Pastor Rodney's wife looked on in shock as he was placed in the back of a squad car and driven to the county jail where he was booked, fingerprinted, photographed and placed in a cell.

The same sheriff who executed this dramatic arrest on Monday had spoken with Pastor Rodney the prior Thursday and assured him there would be no problem opening

Over, please. . .

the church on Sunday. What changed is that the lesbian mayor of Tampa became irate and wanted to put fear in the hearts of pastors.

Hundreds of churches under attack

This story has been repeated many times across America in the past few months as governors and local officials criminally charge, fine, or threaten pastors and parishioners for worshipping.

Pastors are being arrested and criminally charged or threatened with prison. Parishioners are being threatened by a prosecutor with up to a year in prison for attending church. Some churchgoers attending a parking lot Easter service were put on the equivalent of house arrest. Cities are threatening to seize and destroy church buildings.

All because they want to worship our Lord, even as the Bible commands (Hebrews 10:24-25).

In most of California, it is a crime punishable by up to a year in prison and daily fines of \$1,000 to worship in a church, or at home with anyone who does not live in the home!

Liberty Counsel is fighting on behalf of pastors and churches across the country against the illegal, unconstitutional restrictions placed on them by governors and local officials. Right now, we represent approximately 2,000 pastors and churches in 44 states.

Why tyrants always target churches first

Throughout history, the church has always been a target of tyrants. Just ask Pastor Cristian Ionescu. He grew up in Communist Romania where Christians were beaten, jailed or worse — for sharing a Bible with a neighbor, worshipping or preaching the Gospel.

Pastor Cristian never dreamed he would face similar persecution in America, but that's what's happening to his church in Chicago — Elim Romanian Pentecostal Church. Like many in his church who escaped communism, he says the tyrannical playbook he faced in Romania is the same one being used against his church today in America.

And the first phase of control is always FEAR . . .

How authorities are using FEAR to control us

When the COVID pandemic first hit, Pastor Cristian's church stopped meeting out of an abundance of caution. Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker deemed abortion centers and liquor stores "essential," but closed churches. He then threw out a few crumbs, announcing that churches would not be allowed to increase from 10 to 50 people until after a mandatory

Continued on next page. . .

vaccine was released in 12-18 months. Pastor Ionescu and his church said, “Enough! People are hurting. The church must open.”

The church took every possible precaution — professional cleaning and sanitation, masks, gloves, sanitizers and marked out social distancing in the sanctuary. These measures went *beyond* the safety protocols of so-called “essential” businesses. But that didn’t matter to Gov. Pritzker or lesbian Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

In the early hours of the morning before Elim was to re-open, Mayor Lightfoot had every single car within nine blocks of the church towed and impounded, with a notice that the action had been taken because of the church. Then, before the evening service, Mayor Lightfoot sent five marked police cars to block every entrance to Elim’s *private* parking lot. But the parishioners simply parked farther away and walked to the church. They had tasted communism before, and they wanted no part of it in America.

When it became clear the people of Elim would not be bullied, Mayor Lightfoot did what every tyrant does next — she threatened their freedom by charging the pastors with two counts of “disorderly conduct” for having more than 10 people in the large sanctuary. When that didn’t work, Lightfoot demanded a “meeting” with the pastor that was clearly designed to coerce him into caving to her agenda. Pastor Cristian said he would participate if his Liberty Counsel attorney was present. Lightfoot cancelled the meeting. The bully had met her match.

With the help of Liberty Counsel, Pastor Cristian exposed Mayor Lightfoot as a vindictive tyrant. But the mayor wasn’t finished. She threatened one of the most shocking actions against a church we have ever seen in U.S. history.

Church declared a “nuisance” with threat to destroy property

The church then received a “Summary Abatement” letter from the Chicago Health Department declaring Elim to be a “nuisance” for having more than 10 worshippers. This authorizes the city to immediately and without notice SEIZE AND DESTROY CHURCH PROPERTY.

Think about that a moment — a group of peaceful Christians worshipping the Lord within the confines of their own perfectly sanitized and structurally sound building were deemed a nuisance — for which the city continues to threaten to bulldoze their church.

I never imagined that a government in America would threaten to destroy a church for worshipping. This is the same playbook used by Communists, Marxists and radical Islamic terrorists.

It was the same pattern of persecution Pastor Cristian saw in Romania. With each successive state action, the “noose” of government control is tightened. It happened just

Over, please. . .

that way in Romania. And now he was facing the same regime of fear designed to force people into compliance. But this time, thanks to friends like you, Pastor Cristian is not fighting this battle alone!

Our case representing Elim Romanian Pentecostal Church against Gov. Pritzker is pending before the U.S. Supreme Court. It could be the first church closure case of its kind ever to be heard by the Court. And we still have five other cases on behalf of churches that could make it to the Supreme Court, including our lawsuits in California (170 churches), Colorado, Kentucky, Maine and Virginia.

Church members placed in MANDATORY quarantine; lose their jobs

This past Good Friday, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear issued a warning that Christians should UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES attend Easter services. He warned that he would send police officers to monitor churches, record the license plates and VIN numbers of parishioners and issue Notices of Quarantine — even for parking lot services.

Gov. Beshear had already declared liquor stores and abortion clinics to be “essential,” but not churches. Not on Easter. And not even if church members stayed in their cars in the parking lot! He even ignored a court order issued the day before Easter against the mayor of Louisville which upheld the right to have parking lot services.

On Easter Sunday, as church members arrived at Pastor Jack Roberts’ Maryville Baptist Church for the drive-in service, the police were waiting. Officers went car-to-car issuing citations. Some late arrivers drove away in fear. Mission accomplished. But the tyrants weren’t done.

The next day, as report of the governor’s actions hit the media, multiple church members were sent home and/or immediately fired from their “essential” jobs — simply for attending church. Every vehicle owner received a MANDATORY 14-day quarantine order even though they remained in cars and none tested positive or had any symptoms!

Pastor Roberts received a letter from the governor stating he was not allowed to leave the state or the county without permission.

So let’s review. Simply for having a socially-distanced, drive-in church service on Easter Sunday:

- Police went on church property and bullied attendees;
- Government authorities documented and recorded the names and identities of those who attended church;
- Some church members drove away because of fear;
- Some church members lost their jobs for attending church;
- Church members were subjected to a 14-day MANDATORY quarantine, even though none were sick;

Continued on next page. . .

- The pastor was ordered to not travel out of the state or county!
- We won two 3-0 decisions from the Court of Appeals, but the case is ongoing because the governor wants to reimpose tyranny.

And this all took place in KENTUCKY! Not Iran. Or North Korea.

Why this is all happening RIGHT NOW . . .

Liberty Counsel is fighting all these battles, and many more. I could share dozens more stories of anti-Christian persecution that have taken place this year — all against pastors and churches we represent.

Which begs the question . . .

Why are pastors and churches being singled out and targeted right now?
The answer is clear . . .

Throughout history, the Christian church has been the last and the best resistance to ungodly government dictates. That's because Christians love freedom and pastors can speak directly to their congregants, bypassing the manipulative fear and control techniques employed by lawless rulers. Tyrants cannot allow another voice to compete with their dictates! They want no god but the state.

The same is true in America right now. The fact is, the Christian church is the last bastion of true freedom in our nation today. Without the voice of Christians in our society, America will rapidly become an anti-God, anti-family and anti-life Marxist state. In 2016, Christians voted in record numbers and provided the margin of difference in the presidential race. Without the Christian vote, radical Marxists will win every election and the Marxists who want total control know this!

The church is the rallying point to stop oppression!

And they know that “rallying points” for Christians are the tens of thousands of churches across the country that meet regularly (or rather, used to meet)! Church gatherings are where Christians learn about God’s Word and discover how to apply it in our world.

Church gatherings are the most important social force in our nation — bar none!

Every case involving oppressive church restrictions has this in common — a governor or local official who (1) is radically pro-abortion, and (2) supports thousands of protestors and rioters. Radical extremists are doing everything in their power to CRIPPLE THE CHURCH! To them, churches are “non-essential.” This is why they threaten churches that dare to gather.

Over once more . . .

And this is why WE MUST FIGHT BACK!

But I need your help right now! My legal team is facing the most CRUSHING caseload we have seen in our history.

Your partnership is critical to this fight. We have a RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CHALLENGE GRANT that will effectively DOUBLE your gift. Help us fight these battles to make sure religious freedom remains FREE.

Please prayerfully consider making a substantial gift toward our CHALLENGE GRANT. Use the enclosed RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CHALLENGE GRANT REPLY to send your gift.

Finally, PLEASE PRAY for our nation! Pray for pastors to speak boldly in the coming weeks. And pray that God's people will RISE UP in faith and determination to save our land!

Fighting for our faith and freedom,



Mat Staver, Founder and Chairman
Liberty Counsel

P.S. We face several critical legal deadlines right now. We just filed an EMERGENCY REQUEST in federal court in defense of a network of 170 California churches in which members have been threatened with imprisonment. PLEASE HELP by making your best gift of 2020 to our **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CHALLENGE GRANT.**

One final note: The Florida sheriff who arrested Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne sought his forgiveness and later attended the church, where the pastor publicly forgave him. Since Pentecost (May 31), the church has been holding DAILY revival meetings for more than three months! Whenever we stand for our Lord, we can confidently expect God to turn evil into good!