

Pentecostal Inmate Sues Prison for Banning Preaching

A convicted murderer, ordained as a Pentecostal minister while in prison, is the subject of a lawsuit aimed at allowing him to preach to fellow inmates.



[] A convicted-murderer-turned-Pentecostal-preacher is the subject of a lawsuit aimed at restoring what he believes is his right to preach to fellow inmates.

Howard Thompson Jr. was ordained a Pentecostal minister at the New Jersey State Prison (NJSP) eight years ago. He preached weekly worship services at the maximum-security facility until prison officials issued a blanket ban last year on all preaching by inmates, according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which filed the federal lawsuit on behalf of Thompson on Wednesday.

The NJSP administrator and the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Corrections are both named in the suit.

“Prisoners do not forfeit their fundamental right to religious liberty at the prison gate,” said Daniel Mach, legal director for the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. “The prison’s absolute ban on inmate preaching clearly violates the law and Mr. Thompson’s right to practice his faith.”

As a preacher at Sunday services, a teacher in weekly Bible studies, and the founder of the prison choir, Thompson’s religious activities have reportedly never caused any security incidents since he was incarcerated in 1986 for robbery and murder. The prison’s chaplaincy staff has supported Thompson’s preaching since the 1990s when he was asked to fill in for a sick chaplain.

“I have a religious calling to minister to my fellow inmates, and I’ve done so honestly, effectively and without incident

for years,” Thompson said. “All I want is to have my religious liberty restored and to be able to continue working with men who want to renew their lives through the study and practice of their faith.”

Last year, an ACLU-backed lawsuit challenging similar restrictions on prisoner preaching in Rhode Island successfully overturned a statewide ban.

“Ours is a country where people are free to express their religious viewpoints without having to fear repercussions,” said Edward Barocas, legal director of the ACLU of New Jersey. “The New Jersey State Prison may not deny its prisoners their most basic constitutional rights.” **—Paul Steven Ghiringhelli**