

After Arrest of Rodney Howard-Browne, Should Churches Meet or Not?

Dr. Rodney Howard-Browne, pastor of The River at Tampa Bay Church, was arrested at his home Monday for holding a church service last Sunday. The church is in Hillsborough County, Florida. The Hillsborough County administrative order includes 43 paragraphs of exemptions, and then contains a catch-all paragraph stating that any commercial business that is not specifically exempted may operate, as long as it complies with the 6-foot distance requirement.

Commercial businesses such as Home Depot and others are teaming with people purchasing such items as potted plants, fertilizers and garden hoses. This business is free to operate without the 6-foot requirement.

Why do people so easily think that churches should close but places like Home Depot, Lowe's and Hobby Lobby should stay open? Churches have a First Amendment right to exist and assemble, but the commercial businesses do not. The Home Depots in Hillsborough County look like they're giving out free merchandise. They're packed with people. Truckloads are arriving to deliver such "essential items" as potted plants. There is no 6-foot separation and there is no special effort at all to keep people safe. Yet The River at Tampa Bay Church spent \$100,000 on special equipment and enforced a 6-foot separation throughout the sanctuary and lobby.

Why is it the church can't meet when it has a constitutional right to do so and has undertaken extraordinary efforts to protect people, but commercial businesses can meet with no constitutional protections and many do nothing to protect anyone? People need to think more rationally and critically

before they come to a knee-jerk reaction that churches should not meet. This is the United States of America, and we have a First Amendment for a reason. It's not an either/or—that the church should or should not meet. In America, churches have a constitutional right to meet, and in so doing, they can take precautions to protect people.

When balancing constitutional rights against public health and safety, the government must use a scalpel, not a chainsaw. The government must narrowly tailor restrictions on constitutional rights. The Constitution does not disappear even in times of crisis.

Since the arrest of Pastor Howard-Browne, Texas and Indiana both modified their Executive Orders to include churches as “essential services.” Florida exempts churches and recommends they follow public health guidelines. Other counties in Florida do the same things, such as Orange County, where Orlando is located. Michigan exempts “houses of worship,” and Kansas exempts activities necessary to “preserve constitutional or legal rights,” including to “perform or attend religious or faith-based services or activities.” {eo}

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