

Local Pastor, Sheriff Defend New Mexico Church's Religious Right to Hold Services

One of the things that has come out of this entire COVID-19 pandemic is the attack on our religious freedoms. When the coronavirus first showed up in the U.S., many were afraid of health experts who predicted we would lose 2 million people to the disease. As a result, governors across the country issued stay-at-home orders. In many of these states, churches weren't even allowed to meet.

I've been shocked at this newfound attack on religious freedoms and constitutional rights. One of the latest instances of this kind of injustice took place in New Mexico when Pastor Caleb Cooper was issued a cease-and-desist order on Mother's Day to bar him from holding in-person church services.

Cooper refused to back down from his constitutional rights, though. And interestingly enough, the sheriff of his county is standing with him! I invited both men onto my podcast today to discuss what happened at Cooper's New Hope Revival Church in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico.

Cooper says the first phone call he received from the police was quite alarming. The voice mail indicated clearly to him that the church is nonessential and should be shut down. Originally, he says, churches were exempted from the stay-at-home order, but then the day before Easter, the governor sent out alerts saying churches were no longer considered safe.

But who is the governor to say that Christians are not allowed to meet for their religious services? Cooper decided his church would meet anyway. That's when the call came.

"We believe we have a God-given First Amendment right," Cooper says. "It's not given by the government. It's not given by man. It's transferred inalienable by the hands of God into every one of us as American citizens. So we exercise the right to worship Jesus as Christ, and in that place is when I received my first phone call."

It's not that Cooper didn't care about his congregation's safety. He made sure about 100 chairs were pulled out of the church sanctuary. The order said not to have groups of more than five, so he put the chairs in groups of five and then put each group about 6 feet apart in the sanctuary. The church met this way for several weeks.

After receiving that first phone call, Cooper sat down with Sierra County Sheriff Glenn Hamilton and shared his concerns. He had seen law enforcement take a stand for gun rights when they were being threatened in the past. Now, he hoped the sheriff would take a stand for "God rights."

Thankfully, Hamilton did just that. He attended Cooper's service the next week to encourage people to stand firm in their First Amendment rights. The following Sunday, he actually deputized some people in the congregation. The media quickly grabbed hold of that, and New Mexico State Police issued a cease and desist on May 10.

But Sheriff Hamilton is still standing with the church, asking the governor to make churches an exemption to the stay-at-home order.

"When I raised my right hand, I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States in its totality, not just pick and choose those ones that I liked or that happened to fit my particular situation," Hamilton says.

Be sure to listen to my full interview with Hamilton and Cooper to find out not only what happened next, but also what you can do to stand for your God-given religious rights.

I'm so grateful for people like Hamilton and Cooper who are willing to take an unpopular stand for what is right. I hope you're willing to do the same. If you are, why not share this article on your social media and spread the word?