

Pastor's Sermons Were Reviewed Before He Was Fired by State

Dr. Eric Walsh is a public health expert with multiple advanced degrees who served on the Obama administration's Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDs.

As Director of Pasadena's Public Health Department, Dr. Walsh secured millions of dollars in grants to start an innovative, low-cost dental clinic for HIV positive patients, low-income adults and senior citizens. He also happens to be a lay pastor at a Seventh-day Adventist church.

"I am a devout member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and, as a part of my sincerely-held religious beliefs, I believe in expressing my faith," he said. "My faith is important to me; I regularly speak about my faith at churches and religious conferences.

"My mom was a single mother and what got us through was our faith. What I learned at church taught me the value of getting an education and led me to want to serve those in need. That's why I became a doctor and I've held onto those beliefs ever since."

In May 2014, following a lengthy interview process, Walsh was offered and accepted a position with Georgia's Department of Public Health to be the District Health Director for Northwest Georgia. He made plans to move his family across the country from California to Georgia.

A DPH representative announced their new hire to the media and emails show Walsh's new coworkers welcoming him to his new position. One week after he was hired, however, the Georgia DPH requested copies of the sermons he had preached, and he

complied with the request. Among the topics he covered in those sermons:

- following God
- having compassion on the poor
- health
- marriage
- sexuality
- world religions
- science
- creationism

In an email, the DPH human resources director assigned several of Walsh's sermons to DPH employees to review and critique. Two days later, he was informed his employment was being terminated.

"I couldn't believe they fired me because of things I talked about in my sermons," he said. "It was devastating. I have been unable to get a job in public health since then. By reviewing my sermons and firing me because of my religious beliefs, the State of Georgia destroyed my career in public service."

Walsh has retained the services of First Liberty Institute, along with the Atlanta law firm of Parks, Chesin & Walbert. Founded in 1997, First Liberty Institute is the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to protecting religious freedom for all Americans.

Walsh's legal team initially filed a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, alleging the Georgia DPH had committed workplace religious discrimination and retaliation for firing him over the content of his sermons. They received a Right to Sue letter from the EEOC in February.

"No one should be fired for simply expressing his religious beliefs," Walsh's lead attorney, Andrew Coffman of Parks, Chesin & Walbert, said. "In America, it is against the law to

fire an employee for expressing his religious beliefs, especially when that expression takes place in a church setting.”

Walsh’s attorneys filed a lawsuit this week in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Georgia against the Georgia DPH. The complaint charges the state with religious discrimination and retaliation in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

“Religious liberty means we should be able to find sanctuary in our own sanctuary,” First Liberty Senior Counsel Jeremy Dys said. “If the government is allowed to fire someone over what he said in his sermons, then they can come after any of us for our beliefs on anything.”