

Separate and Unequal: How One Church Is Standing Up to Local Government Discrimination

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), has protected many churches against discriminatory zoning practices. But land-use disputes continue to be used as a cover to discriminate against religious groups—particularly churches.

Redemption Community Church in Laurel, Maryland, is one such church. It is threatened with daily fines if it does not immediately stop all worship gatherings in a building it recently purchased in an underserved community in downtown Laurel.

Just days after the purchase, the city made the first of multiple changes to its land-use ordinances. It altered an ordinance to exclude nonprofit businesses like the church from the area before passing a law requiring all churches on lots less than one acre to obtain a costly special exemption. Even after opening a for-profit coffee shop on the property—with worship reserved for Sundays only—the church still faces an uncertain future.

Under RLUIPA, churches have the same rights as theaters, health clubs and cafes. If municipalities are found in violation of RLUIPA, they can be liable for legal costs incurred by the church.

Redemption Community Church found a way to protect itself against government overreach.

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