

AG Church Stands for Right to Hold Services as Oregon Supreme Court Reinstates Restrictions

An Assemblies of God church is standing for its right to reopen in Oregon. And although they and nine other churches won a lawsuit that allowed them to reopen, the Oregon Supreme Court has halted the judge's ruling on that case, temporarily reinstating Gov. Kate Brown's COVID-19 restrictions.

Churches across the nation are fighting similar legal battles as states grapple with how to reopen amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Some pastors who are standing for the First Amendment rights have chosen to meet in person despite governors' orders to the contrary. Some, such as Pastor Tony Spell from Louisiana, have even been arrested for resisting their states' orders.

But not Pastor Scott Erickson.

Erickson has pastored Peoples Church, an Assemblies of God congregation of 3,700 attendees in Salem, Oregon, for 20 years now. He tells Charisma News that when Gov. Brown originally set her coronavirus restrictions in place in mid-March, causing nonessential businesses and churches to close their doors, Peoples Church complied with the order and allowed whatever staff could work from home to do so.

They also started hosting drive-in services in their large parking lot, which Erickson says Brown approved. While this method was a great substitute that worked for many people and kept them safe, Erickson says it wasn't the same as meeting in person. He and the rest of his congregation were eager to start meeting in person again once Brown's 30-day expiration

for the order passed.

But that didn't happen. Earlier this month, Brown unexpectedly extended the order for 60 more days until July 6. As a result, many small businesses and churches are expected to stay closed. Erickson believes this is unconstitutional and unfair.

"All the pot stores are open," Erickson says. "Marijuana stores and liquor stores are all open. Costco and Walgreens and Walmart—all of them are wide open, and there are hundreds of people in there, in these big box stores. So we just didn't think it was appropriate. ... It was discouraging to see [Brown's] perspective on it, even though we've had a very minimal amount of incidents [of COVID-19] here in the state."

As a result, when Pacific Justice Institute approached Peoples Church and asked if the church wanted to join a lawsuit against Brown, Erickson agreed. Ten churches in total joined the lawsuit, suing Brown for her extended restrictions and demanding that they be allowed to reopen in a safe manner.

The legal firm brought the case to Baker County Circuit Judge Matthew Shirtcliff, who ruled that Brown was wrong to extend her restrictions beyond 28 days without the approval of the legislature.

"The governor's orders are not required for public safety when plaintiffs can continue to utilize social distancing and safety protocols at larger gatherings involving spiritual worship," Shirtcliff wrote.

But Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum urged residents to comply with Brown's orders while she appealed the judge's ruling to the Oregon Supreme Court.

On Monday, May 18, State Supreme Court Presiding Justice Thomas A. Balmer issued a ruling that temporarily halted Shirtcliff's previous ruling and reinstated Brown's restrictions.

While the case is pending, Erickson tells Charisma News that his church is continuing to meet in their cars in the parking lot.

"We're not rebels to those in authority over us," he says. "We pray for our governor and I pray for our president regularly. So we have no animosity. We just don't think it was right for our First Amendment rights to be put down in that manner."

If they win the case, Peoples Church will enforce social distancing during meetings, regularly sanitize the building and adhere to proper medical practices. But if the ruling doesn't go the way the churches hope, Erickson says it will not affect how his church continues to minister to the community. Peoples Church plans to "do business for the Lord until He comes" and not "go into a panic and hang our head."

"We're going to continue to preach the gospel because the gospel of the Lord Jesus is the answer for all of the problems we have in our country, and especially in this region of the world," he says.

As of Tuesday, May 19, Oregon has over 3,700 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with over 140 related deaths, according to the state's health department.