

California County Apologizes for Citing Home Bible Study

A California pastor received the apology he was seeking from San Diego County officials who had ordered him and his wife not to hold a Bible study in their home without a permit.

In letters released Wednesday, San Diego County attorney John Sansone and Chief Administrative Officer Walt Ekard rescinded the previous cease-and-desist order and apologized to David Jones and his wife, Mary, who were told they could be fined \$100 to \$1,000 if they continued the Bible studies.

Ekard said the county had received complaints from a neighbor about traffic and parking issues. Jones, pastor of South Bay Community Church, said the calls may have been prompted when a Bible study member hit a car belonging to a neighbor's visitor.

But the Joneses' attorney, Dean Broyles of the Western Center for Law and Policy, questioned the parking concern. According to One News Now, Broyles said the county code enforcer asked the couple questions such as "Do you sing?" and "Do you say, 'Praise the Lord?'"

Broyles argued that the couple's First Amendment rights to free exercise of religion were being violated, and dozens of others agreed, flooding Ekard's office with calls and e-mails.

Last week county officials said Jones could continue leading the Bible studies without a permit, but the pastor said he wanted an apology and the decision in writing.

"We want something very clearly that states people can pray in homes and have friends over and read [the] Bible together and study a bit," Jones told the San Diego ABC affiliate 10News.

In his letter, Sansone said the county had determined that the couple does not need a major use permit to host their weekly Bible studies, which average 15 people and involve dinner and fellowship. In a separate letter, Ekard apologized to Jones, his wife and their congregation for the "unfortunate events."

He said no citation should have been issued and that the county code enforcement officer who visited the couple "incorrectly made the finding based in no small measure on unclear language in the zoning ordinance."

Ekard said he had requested a thorough review of ordinances involving assemblies to clarify that meetings such as the Joneses' Bible study may continue without county regulation.

Ekard insisted that the citation was a land use matter and "in no way" an attempt to infringe on the couple's religious freedom. "If you knew me personally and were familiar with my background, I think you would be satisfied that as the chief executive of San Diego County government, I would never condone a deliberate attack on religious activity," Ekard wrote.

He added that the county "does not condone and never will condone" religious discrimination.

Broyles said his organization was "very encouraged" by the county's response.

"We look forward to working with the county to ensure that the clarification of its ordinances and training of its personnel are implemented promptly and efficiently so that all citizens of San Diego can be assured that their constitutional rights are protected," Broyles said in a statement Wednesday.

"We are confident that, as a result of the county's statements, Bible studies and prayer meetings held in homes throughout San Diego County will be free from government regulation, as is guaranteed by the First Amendment."