

Canadian Police Block Driveways, Issue Tickets at Drive-in Church Services

Churches in America aren't the only ones heading to court to fight for the freedom to worship. As a show of force and enforcement, Canadian Mounties are blocking the driveways of churches to enforce bans on church gatherings, even those where attendees remain in their vehicles and tune into a radio station for sound.

Wednesday, Springs Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, filed a lawsuit in the Court of Queen's Bench against Manitoba Province calling for a stay of the public health order that prohibits people from attending its drive-in service. The church was issued four \$5,000 tickets over the weekend for each of the drive-in services it held over Saturday night and Sunday morning.

Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Brent Roussin said, "The message has been clear—people need to stay home when they can."

Drive-in services were permitted in the spring lockdowns but banned in the latest round of health orders. The government issued the newest order Nov. 22.

The Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedom (JCCF) has issued a warning letter to Premier Brian Pallister for violating the freedoms of faith communities in the province. The letter states that declaring drive-in religious services outlawed by a public health order violates the fundamental freedoms of religion and peaceful assembly.

Filed Wednesday, the JCCF gives Pallister two days to reverse this decision, or it will file for an injunction to prevent

the continual enforcement of fines and tickets against churchgoers.

Tim Sanderson told the Global News he has been going to Springs Church for 26 years, and he's baffled that the province isn't allowing drive-in services under the new public health orders.

"I'm not into risking people's safety but again, this is a platform which has been provided that we believe is perfectly safe right now for this time, and the government is saying, 'No, it's not,' and we want to know why. Furthermore, we want to say we're not happy with this and hopefully, that makes a change and a difference," he said.

Sanderson also said the church has established its own safety rules, which require attendees to remain in their cars once they arrive for church. But Mounties are under orders, said Manitoba Mountie Sgt. P.J. Manaigre. He explained that police are positioning themselves at the entrances and approaching each car, giving the people the option of leaving or entering the parking—and being fined.

"They were given the option of whether they wanted to leave or enter the property. Out of about 125 people we spoke to, one chose to enter the property and was charged," he said of Sunday's interaction outside Springs Church.

According to Pallister, tickets have been and will continue to be issued to people who attended a "freedom rally" Nov. 14 to protest government restrictions.

Last week, a total of 202 warnings and 100 tickets were issued valued at \$140,739 U.S. Since April, 353 coronavirus-related tickets have been issued in the province, valued at nearly C\$550,000.

Manaigre said Mounties are using Facebook and other advertisements along with phone-in tips to determine where to

station officers prior to services.

"This will be the norm now until these public health orders change," he said.

Sanderson said members like himself believe the drive-in platform allows them to have an outlet to see their community.

"That's something in the Christian community people have asked too, 'Why don't you be quiet and stay in your house?—your PJs are quite comfortable to watch church—and just sit there and ride out the pandemic and eventually you'll be able to go back to church'" he said. "The question, in my opinion, is not whether can we do that, but rather, should we and should we be forced to do so?"

Churches Being Singled Out

Steinbach Church of God in rural Manitoba shared a video on Facebook Sunday showing police cars lined up along the roadside in an effort to prevent anyone from entering the church's parking lot.

The church was fined \$5,000 the week prior for holding an indoor worship service amid government restrictions imposed because of the coronavirus. Senior Pastor Henry Hildebrandt asked why the government has banned worship services but is permitting "liquor, cannabis and department stores" to stay open.

This past Sunday, the church was again fined \$5,000, and six fines worth \$1,296 each were issued to individuals attending the outdoor service.

"This principle is not just about in-person services. This is a wholesale attack on faith and the freedom of the church to do its God-called duty," Hildebrandt said.

The pastor called efforts by police, a "fearmongering tactic," adding that churches have the right and freedom to assemble.

“Yesterday evening, the Manitoba government deemed drive-in services to be illegal,” the church wrote on Facebook. “This worship service will be held in protest of these tyrannical edicts. Make no mistake, this is not about a virus.” {eoa}