

Church Challenges Ban on Home Bible Study

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✘ A congregation in Gilbert, Ariz., is appealing a local zoning ordinance that bars churches from holding services, Bible studies or other activities in private homes.

The Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) claims the code is unconstitutional and filed the appeal on behalf of The Oasis of Truth church last week.

The seven-member church was given a violation notice in November after a compliance officer noticed a sign advertising a Sunday service. The congregation began meeting that month and rotated holding Bible study and fellowship at the homes of its pastor, Joe Sutherland, and the two other couples in the church.

They stopped holding services in December after receiving the cease-and-desist order and now meet in a local school.

A zoning administrator told the church that Bible studies, church leadership meetings, potluck dinners and other religious fellowship activities are not permitted in private homes.

ADF said the ban is based on traffic, parking and building safety concerns. But the legal group argues that the zoning code is biased against religion because it allows for some home-based day cares and does not prohibit Cub Scouts meetings, football parties or similar events from being held regularly in private homes.

“Christian church groups shouldn’t be singled out for

discrimination and banned from meeting in their own homes,” ADF Litigation Counsel Daniel Blomberg said in a statement. “The interpretation and enforcement of the town’s code is clearly unconstitutional. ... The First Amendment’s Free Speech Clause prevents the town from stopping the church from holding its meetings on the public sidewalk outside the pastor’s home, yet the town won’t allow him to hold the same meetings just a few feet away in the privacy of his own living room.”