

City of Phoenix Accused of Criminalizing Christian Homeless Ministry in Major Lawsuit

A small Orthodox Christian ministry that gathers each week to feed and pray with Phoenix's homeless population is now at the center of a legal battle.

According to Blaze News, St. Herman's Table, which is a ministry of Exaltation of the Holy Cross Orthodox Church, has filed a federal lawsuit against the city of Phoenix after a new ordinance regulating food distribution in public parks threatened its ability to continue its weekly ministry.

For founder Lance Brace, the ministry was never intended to become the focus of a court fight. It began as a simple desire to help.

Brace told Blaze News that after being baptized into the Orthodox Church, he felt a strong conviction to serve the homeless in his community. What started with distributing care packages filled with food, water and other essentials eventually grew into something more personal. As Brace and his family repeatedly encountered the same individuals at Cave Creek Park, they began to build relationships and felt called to return regularly.

By October 2025, the family was preparing homemade meals each week and serving them buffet-style at the park, along with offering prayer. Soon, fellow church members joined the effort.

Now that the ministry faces uncertainty because of Phoenix's Medical Treatment and Food Distribution in Parks Ordinance,

which took effect earlier this month.

According to Blaze News, the ordinance requires groups that distribute food in city parks to obtain permits. Critics argue the regulation significantly limits outreach efforts by allowing only two permits per park each month and restricting food distribution activities to parking and hardscape areas.



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The city has said the ordinance was created to establish oversight where none previously existed and to help manage competing uses of public parks. Officials maintain that the regulation applies equally to all groups and is not targeted at religious organizations.

Brace and St. Herman's Table disagree.

Their lawsuit argues that caring for the poor is not merely charitable work but a fundamental component of Orthodox Christian faith. The complaint contends that requiring government permission before carrying out that ministry violates both the First Amendment and Arizona's Free Exercise of Religion Act.

The legal challenge quickly gained traction in federal court. Several days after the lawsuit was filed, a judge issued a temporary restraining order preventing Phoenix from enforcing the ordinance against St. Herman's Table while the case moves forward.

In the ruling, the judge questioned whether the city's distinctions were being applied consistently.

"Phoenix provides no evidence or meaningful argument explaining why a birthday party providing cake to twenty select two-year-olds is any less likely to strain park resources with noise or mess than a religiously-motivated

gathering open to twenty members of the public,” the judge wrote, according to Blaze News.

Phoenix has vowed to defend the ordinance, arguing that it is a lawful tool for balancing the many demands placed on public parks, including youth sports, recreation and family activities.

Violations of this ordinance could result in a class-1 misdemeanor and possibly a jail sentence of 180 days and a \$2,500 fine.

As the case proceeds, it raises broader questions about how cities regulate charitable activities in public spaces and where the line is drawn between government oversight and the free exercise of religion. For now, what began as a weekly meal shared among neighbors has become a closely watched dispute over faith, service and constitutional rights.

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