

Court Forcing Pastor to Pay Nearly a Half-Million Dollars Over Free Speech Settlement

All he did was circulate recall petitions, the bishop says.

Two federal courts and the state attorney general have sided with him. But the former mayor and a local judge appear out for blood to the tune of \$475,000 straight from the pocket of Bishop Tom Brown.

"This is the most unjust action that has ever taken place against any church in the United States of America," Brown says. He leads Word of Life Church in El Paso, Texas.

Attorneys for the city said the recall election was a political process and as such, the city is not supposed to take sides. The former mayor argued he was sworn to defend the law and, since he believed petitioners broke election laws, the city should have backed him up, KVIA reports.

"He is clearly entitled to speak out publicly against an elected official," Brown's attorney Joel Oster says. "The Texas attorney general came in on the side of Tom Brown, and two federal courts say this is not violation, but Tom Brown was facing over \$1 million in attorney fees to appeal and lose. So rather than face that grave uncertainty, he settled the case for his church."

The court handed down the settlement last month, but Oster says the pastor has filed a counter claim in a lawsuit that's already sucked up five years of the Brown's life.

The free-speech battle began when Brown demanded a recall for the election of former El Paso, Texas, Mayor John Cook. The judge says Brown broke the law, and the bishop says the judge

refused to grant him a jury trial.

Cook sued for his attorney's fees, which amassed to more than \$1 million. Brown put his church up as collateral. If Brown did not settle, he would have lost his church.

"In America, someone is liable for speaking out against an elected official? This is an outrage!" Oster says.

Brown is heart-broken and confused. Religious freedom cases consistently make headlines, but he says few have acknowledged his.

"People are just not caring about what happened to our church in El Paso," Brown says. "Everyone's silent. This is serious. We have to pay \$475,000."