

Evangelist Rodney Howard-Browne Arrested for Hosting Large Church Services During Stay-at-Home Order

Pentecostal Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne was arrested Monday, March 30, for continuing to hold large church gatherings despite a government order to desist due to COVID-19.

During a press conference, Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister announced the arrest of Howard-Browne, pastor of The River at Tampa Bay Church in Tampa, Florida. He confirmed the news again with a tweet:

Announcing the arrest of Dr. Ronald Howard-Browne, Pastor of The River at Tampa Bay Church, who intentionally and repeatedly disregarded state and local public health orders, which put his congregation and our community in danger.

– Chad Chronister (@ChadChronister) March 30, 2020

On March 20, Hillsborough County issued a “safer at home” order, which restricted “public or private gatherings, including community, civic, public leisure, faith-based events, sporting events, concerts, and any similar events that bring together more than 10 people in a single room, single space, or any venue, at the same time.”

Chronister says his department has been in touch with Howard-Browne since Friday, according to Fox40. He also says he received a tip that Howard-Browne was continuing to encourage his congregation to meet in-person despite the church’s ability to stream the service online.

“We received an anonymous tip that Dr. Rodney Howard-Browne

refused a request to temporarily stop holding large gatherings at his church," he said, according to WTSP. "And instead, he was encouraging his large congregation to meet at his church.
...

"His reckless disregard for human life put hundreds of people in his congregation at risk, and thousands of residents who may interact with them this week, in danger."

On March 18, the 4,000-member church posted a public statement on Facebook, explaining why they were refusing to close their doors. The post says:

In a time of national crisis, we expect certain institutions to be open and certain people to be on duty. We expect hospitals to have their doors open 24/7 to receive and treat patients. We expect our police and firefighters to be ready and available to rescue and to help and to keep the peace. The Church is another one of those essential services. It is a place where people turn for help and for comfort in a climate of fear and uncertainty.

Therefore, we feel that it would be wrong for us to close our doors on them, at this time, or any time. In a time of crisis, people are fearful and in need of comfort and community, more than ever before. Even people who do not attend church regularly, or perhaps never go to church, need to know that there is somewhere for them to go when they need help.

The River at Tampa Bay is doing, and will do, everything in our power to support the efforts of our wider community by cleaning and sanitizing surfaces and take any other recommended measures to protect our people and keep them healthy and safe. If anyone is either not feeling well or would prefer to take the precaution of remaining at home for their own health, we encourage them to do that and to continue to watch the services online.

We feel that it is very important, at this time, that we keep our doors open for anyone who needs prayer or ministry and to make ourselves available to minister hope and healing and comfort to them. We are the Body of Christ and the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe God's Word to us, which says to trust Him and to not be fearful but to have faith in Him. We are praying—as are our fellow Christians around the world—and we know that God answers prayers.

People everywhere are looking for their leadership – both natural and spiritual – to be calm and strong and to lead them through this. Because we will eventually come through this, as we have in the past. The last thing we need, in a time of crisis, is for people to be spreading false rumors and looking for somebody to attack, or a place to allocate blame. Right now, we need to rather all be working together to get through this.

We hope and trust that all media outlets would be able to hear from the President and his medical advisors and properly and correctly report the information and advice given by them. And to resist the temptation to report in such a way as to exacerbate people's panic, fear, and anxiety.

A word of encouragement to you, wherever you are: "Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, And He saved them out of their distresses. He sent His Word and healed them, And delivered them from their destructions." Psalm 107:19-20

Liberty Counsel announced they were representing Howard-Browne in his case. Liberty says the "safer at home" administrative order maintained that "shelters" were an exception to the mandate and did not modify the word.

"The Hillsborough County administrative order has so many exceptions it looks like swiss cheese," says Liberty Counsel founder Mat Staver. "The order allows a wide range of commercial operations that are either specifically exempt or

exempt if they can comply with a six-foot separation. Yet, if the purpose of your meeting is religious, the county prohibits it with no exception for the six-foot separation. The problem with this administrative order is it was not reviewed by constitutional experts or vetted by a deliberative body. Neither the Constitution nor Florida law protecting churches and the free exercise of religion disappear. This order from Hillsborough County is not narrowly tailored to achieve its underlying objective.

“Not only did the church comply with the administrative order regarding six-foot distancing, it went above and beyond any other business to ensure the health and safety of the people. Contrary to Sheriff Chronister’s allegation that Pastor Howard-Browne was ‘reckless,’ the actions of Hillsborough County and the Hernando County Sheriff are discriminatory against religion and church gatherings.

“I was shocked that Sheriff Chad Chronister held his press conference before the arrest was completed. I am astounded that Sheriff Chronister used his press conference to lecture about the Bible. This is entirely inappropriate for a government official to takes sides on religion.”

Liberty also maintains that Howard-Browne and his church took extra precautions to ensure the health and safety of the congregation, including by doing the following:

- Enforcing 6-foot gaps between family groups.
- Requiring staff to wear gloves.
- Giving hand sanitizer to every person who came into the church.
- Enforcing the 6-foot rule for their farmer’s market and coffee shop in the lobby.
- Using a \$100,000 hospital-grade purification system set up

throughout the church that provides continuous infectious microbial reduction.

As of this writing, Florida has 5,473 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 246 of those cases being in Hillsborough County.

Charisma News has reached out to The River for comment but has not yet received a response.