

‘False Imprisonment’ or Residential Care? Georgia Pastor Disputes Charges Over Unlicensed Group Home

A Georgia pastor who, with his wife, was arrested on charges of false imprisonment after police discovered up to eight disabled people locked in the basement of an unlicensed group home under the auspices of their church is now denying those charges.

Police in Griffin, Georgia, arrested Curtis Keith Bankston, 55, and Sophia Simms-Bankston, 56, earlier this month after crews with Griffin Fire Rescue responded to “an unlicensed ‘group home’” “under the guise of a church known as One Step of Faith 2nd Chance” in response to a report of someone having a seizure at the adult care facility, per a press release from the City of Griffin Police Department.

The press release says the emergency personnel “noticed the entry door to the basement was double keyed (dead bolted), and access had to be gained by climbing through a window to reach the patient. ... Preliminary information indicated that as many as eight individuals resided in the basement of this residence and that they were ‘locked in’ at certain times by the ‘caretakers.’ The ‘caretakers’ have been leasing this property for approximately fourteen months, using the basement as a personal care home for the individuals, which essentially imprisoned them against their will as the individuals could not exit the residence if there were an emergency.”

“It was determined that Curtis Bankston, who claims to be a ‘Pastor,’ was the individual responsible for locking the individuals in the location with the assistance of his wife,

Sophia," the press release adds. "It was further determined that the Bankston's [sic] were in control of the disabled individuals' finances, medications, and public benefits. The investigation also revealed that these individuals had been denied their medications and, in some instances, medical care as well."

Dexter Wimbish, Curtis Bankston's attorney, spoke on his behalf to dispute the charges against the pastor, per *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He said the doors were locked at night as a security measure, and the one resident who had a key to unlock the basement was not present when the emergency personnel arrived.

"That is poor judgment; it is unfortunate; it is likely a violation of a local ordinance," he said. "But it is not kidnapping, and it's not false imprisonment."

"At no time was anybody held against their will," Wimbish told a Jan. 20 press conference. "There is no fraud here. This is simply a Christian man who was following his calling to help those who are in need. We cannot sit by and allow ministry to be attacked."

"We are one of the most notable family-oriented churches in the city that works to bring closer to one another in love and unity," says a note on the website for the church's parent ministry, One Step of Faith Ministries Inc., with addresses in both Atlanta and Thomaston, Georgia. Founded in 2002, the ministry "addresses the growing need for churches to model reconciliation in a racially divided society." The website mentions a food bank ministry and Second Chance Employment Program but includes no information about the group home.

Wimbish told reporters the problem was "a zoning issue that has become criminalized," per the *Journal-Constitution*, noting that residents were fed three times a day and that he had checks to prove that many of them had conservators who

controlled their finances but paid money directly to Bankston's church to cover their room and board.

Georgia Secretary of State records obtained by the paper confirm Bankston registered the 2nd Chance Program as a nonprofit in August 2020 that offers room and board; the records listed Simm-Bankston as the organization's secretary. Attorneys said Bankston had failed to have the home licensed in compliance with local ordinances.

Several church leaders spoke on behalf of Bankston and his wife, mentioning their ministry to the poor and underprivileged.

Curtis Carter, pastor of 1st True Faith Deliverance Church in Decatur, said Bankston, whom he's known for more than 30 years, has always focused on helping people in need.

"For me to hear the allegations against him, it disturbed my spirit because he's worked with my church, he's worked in my community and his character is beautiful," Carter said. "He's not a so-called pastor or so-called preacher. He is a man of God." {eoa}

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