

Florida City Wages Soviet-Style Crackdown on Churches

A government crackdown on churches has Christians in Lake Worth, Florida, wondering if they live in the United States or the former Soviet Union.

Churches in Lake Worth, population 36,000, have been ordered to acquire a business license. As if the church has to get the government's permission to preach and pray.

But wait. It gets worse, folks.

City officials were so concerned about one congregation that they dispatched a code enforcement officer cloaked in a hoodie to spy on a Southern Baptist church that was meeting in a coffee house.

Folks, it's like the plot of a Cold War spy novel.

"Government employees are public servants and prohibited by the Constitution from inhibiting religious freedom," said Mat Staver, founder of the religious liberty law firm Liberty Counsel. "That is a far cry from sneaking around and into a church and acting like KGB agents."

Staver is calling on city leaders to immediately rescind the business license mandate on churches. He is also representing Common Ground Church, the congregation that was targeted by the city's investigator.

The church owns and operates a coffee house in downtown Lake Worth. For the past three months, it has used the coffee house for a weekly worship service. Prior to that the congregation rented space in other buildings in the community.

Pastor Mike Olive told me there had not been any problems until early last month, when he had an encounter with Andy

Amoroso, a city commissioner.

"After we opened up the coffee bar and started doing services, I heard that he told people we were anti-gay," Olive said. "So I went to his shop to ask him about that."

I reached out to Amoroso on Wednesday but he did not return my telephone calls.

Pastor Olive told me he tried to convey to Amoroso that the church's message is 'Love God, Love People.'

"Our message to the gay community is the same as it is to the straight community," he said.

The commissioner, Olive said, did not seem to appreciate his message.

"He pointed at me and said, 'Listen, you better not have a church down there," Olive told me.

By the strangest of coincidences, a code enforcement officer showed up for a Sunday service on Feb. 8. He was wearing a hoodie and was armed with a concealed video camera, according to the letter Liberty Counsel sent to the city.

The code enforcement officer's notes read like something out of a KGB report.

"I walked back to the Coffee Bar and was able to visualize, in my opinion what appeared to be a ministry in progress," he wrote in the report.

He documented how he observed "people holding what appeared to be Bibles or religious books as one had a cross on it" and "what appeared to be a ministry in progress."

"I was approached by an unknown man with a cross around his neck," he wrote.

I'm surprised the code enforcement officer didn't call up the

National Guard for reinforcements.

The officer wrote that he was “able to capture on my city phone a video which will be attached to this case file for future court presentation.”

It’s pretty shocking stuff for a city that prides itself on being a tolerant, multicultural city. But as we all know—tolerance and diversity do not extend to Christians.

“It was pretty shocking,” Pastor Olive said. “We had no prior warning.”

The following Sunday a city employee showed up again and told the church it had one week to vacate the building. They were accused of operating a church in a business rental property without a Lake Worth business license.

For the record—the church was only licensed to sell java—not preach Jesus.

William Waters, the city’s community sustainability director, told me they have nothing against the church—they were simply responding to a complaint.

“We had a complaint that a gathering of people was taking place there in the form of a church,” he said. “We investigated that and determined that, yes, there were people gathered there.”

So if 115 people gather for coffee, that’s OK. But if they gather for worship—it’s against the law?

“We have to treat everybody the same,” Waters said. “We couldn’t give preferential treatment to churches versus other businesses.”

And in the city’s opinion, a church is, in fact, a business—just like grocery store, a Waffle House or an adult novelty shop.

So why all the super-secret spy stuff? Why send an investigator to infiltrate a Southern Baptist worship service? Why not just call the pastor and explain the rules and regulations?

"It could eventually go to the special magistrate," Waters told me. "Evidence had to be documented as to what the gentleman found when he went to visit the place on that Sunday."

He said every business in the community received letters about the permits and fees—including churches.

Joan Abell, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, told *The Lake Worth Tribune* she was troubled by the city regulations.

"We've been there 99 years and we've never had to have a license," she told the newspaper. "Where do you all of a sudden say the church has to have a license to gather and pray?"

Waters could not tell me how many churches have complied with the city's demands. Local news accounts indicate the First Baptist Church paid nearly \$500 in fees to the city.

Staver said the city's actions violate the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Florida Constitution, the Florida Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the federal Religious Land Uses and Institutionalized Persons Act.

"Churches are not businesses and need not obtain such licenses," Staver wrote in a letter to the city.

Waters said any church that refuses to comply could be shut down by the fire department.

"There's a variety of things that could happen if you don't comply with the use and occupancy requirement," he said.

As for Pastor Olive—his church will no longer meet in its

church-owned coffee house. Instead, it is taking its congregation “underground” until the issue is resolved.

“We just want to urge the city—don’t allow God and our faith to be zoned out of downtown,” the pastor said.

It appears to me that this is a standoff that could use a healthy dose of all that multicultural tolerance and diversity that Lake Worth takes pride in.

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