

Florida County Where Pastor Arrested for Services Now Recognizes Churches as Essential

Hillsborough County Council just met and voted to reverse its order from law last Friday. At the recommendation of County Attorney Christine Beck, the council voted to recognize churches as “essential.” Mayor Jane Castor wanted to impose the 10-person and 6-foot social distancing restriction on churches, but the council voted against her recommendation at the advice of counsel. Any future guidance the county may issue will be recommendations and not enforceable.

Last night, Gov. Ron DeSantis also amended his executive order from April 1 in which he recognized attending “religious services conducted in churches, synagogues and houses of worship” as “essential activities.” The order from April 1 still allowed local governments to impose greater restrictions. Gov. DeSantis amended the order to require his order to be uniform across the state of Florida. Churches are now recognized as “essential” and providing “essential activities” everywhere in Florida.

Liberty Counsel was hours away from filing a federal lawsuit against Hillsborough County. The County Council knew that lawsuit was forthcoming. As a result, the lawsuit will be placed on hold.

Sheriff Chad Chronister made many false statements this week about The River at Tampa Bay Church and Pastor Howard-Browne. Those statements must be retracted. His statements also placed Pastor Howard-Browne and the church in physical harm. Pastor Howard-Browne has received abusive words and death threats

since Sheriff Chronister's press conference on Monday and his media circuit. Liberty Counsel is calling upon the Hillsborough County Sheriff's office to provide protection to the church.

Liberty Counsel is also calling upon Sheriff Chronister to provide in writing an assurance that he will not arrest anyone at the church. Last Thursday, he told the pastor and staff they could meet, and then issued a warrant for Pastor Howard-Browne's arrest on Monday, in which he publicly shamed the pastor and the church.

The criminal charge must be immediately dismissed, and the file sealed. The sheriff has done great damage to Pastor Howard-Browne and The River church.

Liberty Counsel Founder and Chairman Mat Staver said, "We are pleased that The River at Tampa Bay Church can meet. This church is essential to the community. The church feeds 900 families each week and goes to certain places of the inner city where law enforcement does not go. The Hillsborough County order was unconstitutional. The county knew the lawsuit was coming this week and knew they would not win. We are also pleased that every church in Florida is now free to worship. Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne brought worldwide attention to an unconstitutional order and arrest." {eo}

This article originally appeared at Liberty Counsel.