

Over 100 Pastors Demand Ohio Lift Its Stay-at-Home Lockdown

With health officials now projecting fewer deaths from the coronavirus pandemic, some Ohio clergy have cabin fever and would like to see the economy opened. If Governor Mike DeWine wants the pulse of the state's faith community, there is no more vocal region than in the Ohio Heartland.

J.C. Church serves as lead pastor of Victory in Truth Ministries based in Bucyrus, and is also the national director of Ministry Engagement for the Family Research Council. Pastor Church joined a group of 100 North Central Ohio clergy who want the "Ohio Department of Health Director's Stay at Home Order" to expire on May 1.

"We are in economic meltdown. We have to keep in mind that nearly 75% of the deaths attributed to COVID-19 have been to persons over the age of 70. When the stay at home orders were issued, social ills like the Opioid Crisis never went on lockdown," says Pastor Church.

A open letter sent by the 100 clergy to Governor DeWine thanked him for his "proactive efforts to protect health and safety," and added that they believed the governor's leadership has been "directed by Almighty God."

The open letter also stated, "Unlike other governors, you (DeWine) have respected the First Amendment's rights of citizens, notably for those persons of faith."

While the Ohio governor has set himself apart from other governors by exempting congregations from the director's orders and classifying them as essential, the clergy believe extending the orders will not be in the state's best

interests.

According to Pastor Church, "Restrictions of constitutional rights by the government during crisis must be temporary and the least burdensome approach to achieve a compelling interest. We cannot forget that a crisis is never a time to destroy constitutional liberty."

The clergy point out that when the initial "stay at home order" was first issued to when the extended orders are set to expire on May 1 will be a period of 40 days. The number "40" in the Bible generally represents the season of trials and testing.

Barring an unforeseen escalation in cases, the clergy are requesting the governor consider transitioning Ohio to a new season by allowing the orders to expire May 1. The clergy also included a suggested roll-out protocol for congregations to follow in their open letter.

Another co-signor of the clergy open letter authored the roll-out protocol for churches, which has received accolades from a local health department.

"Jill Hartson from Ashland County Health Department has been very sympathetic to the constitutional rights of the faith community and we thought it wise to have dialogue with her," says Pastor John Bouquet of Savannah Bethel Baptist.

"Our churches are highly invested in the community. Nevertheless, our congregation made a declaration that our congregation will be going back to church May 3, we did not ask permission. The health department gave their blessing and has even asked permission to disseminate our protocol to other health departments across the state as a guide."

All things considered, with anticipation for May 1 at its peak, a large clergy collaboration from across the Buckeye Bible Belt hope to guide Governor DeWine to a new season:

healthy people and a healthy economy. {eo}

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