

Pastor Reportedly Faces New Criminal Charges Amid Battle With City

By: Billy Hallowell/CBN News

Just two months after reports indicated charges would likely be dropped against an Ohio pastor under legal fire for housing homeless men and women in his church, the battle is once again heating up.

Attorneys for Dad's Place Pastor Chris Avell filed a motion Apr. 25, to show cause against Bryan, Ohio, on the basis officials purportedly failed to abide by an agreement requiring them to notify the court if they planned to take any such actions against the pastor.

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The lawyers said Friday the city indeed served Avell "with new criminal charges for keeping his church open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."

In a press release from First Liberty Institute, a nonprofit legal firm representing Avell, the attorneys alleged police and fire officials showed up at Dad's Place one morning this week at 5:30 a.m. for an "unannounced inspection" that once again yielded violations.

"[They] alleged fire code violations, and threatened fines of \$1,000 per day if the church does not immediately halt its 24-hour ministry beginning on May 1, 2024," the release said. "This was the second time officials arrived for an inspection at 5:30 a.m."

A Reversal of Recent Reports

This latest row comes after it recently appeared a resolution was in sight. Statehouse News Bureau reported in February Bryan officials had moved to ax criminal charges against Avell amid accusations he violated city zoning rules.

The outlet did note Bryan officials reserved the right to refile charges as detailed in a motion to dismiss. News of the potential dismissal had come after Avell and his church filed a federal lawsuit against the city. According to the most recent First Liberty press release, Avell and the church were engaged earlier this year in what they called “good faith settlement discussions.”

“Hoping to resolve this case and in reliance on the city’s representations to the Court that they would take no further enforcement actions against the church, the church agreed to cancel the preliminary injunction hearing originally scheduled before this Court on Mar. 4,” the statement read. “Since that time, the church has addressed many of the alleged safety concerns raised by the city.”

But new criminal charges against Avell and the church have attorneys claiming city officials have no regard for the Constitution.

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“City officials demonstrated once again that they have no respect for the First Amendment or for the court,” Jeremy Dys, senior counsel for First Liberty, said in a statement. “The city’s blatant hostility toward Dad’s Place and the court is repugnant.”

As CBN News previously reported, the case against Avell originated late last year, with the pastor refusing to back down from officials’ demands to stop housing the homeless.

"[Pastor Chris Avell's] facing 18 criminal charges for violating the city's zoning laws," a news release from First Liberty read at the time. "The city is going after him, because, earlier this year, Pastor Chris opened the church 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He's seeking to serve homeless people."

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