

Pastors Issue Declaration to Illinois Gov. Saying They Will Open Their Churches May 10

Romanian pastors in Illinois have issued a declaration to Gov. J.B. Pritzker announcing they are opening their churches for in-person services on May 10, with proper and extensive social distancing and safety precautions. Liberty Counsel represents these pastors and churches and will be filing a federal lawsuit against Gov. Pritzker's unconstitutional orders.

The six pastors who signed the letter, along with Horatio Mihet, chief litigation counsel for Liberty Counsel, once lived under the heavy hand of a totalitarian regime in Communist Romania. They are painfully familiar with government-suppressed religious freedom and the jailing of pastors and Christians as criminals for merely following their religious teachings to meet and preach the gospel. For many, like Mihet, their first day of freedom was on Dec. 25, 1989, when Nicolae Ceausescu's Communist regime was overthrown. These pastors know what it is like to not have freedom, and that is what they now see happening in the country they love.

The letter reads, in part:

The Romanian-Americans in our congregations have chosen Chicago as their homeland, many of them after fleeing communist oppression that targeted religious gatherings, houses of worship and communal exercise of their religion and faith.

We found a home in Illinois, where the promise of freedom has been consistently and faithfully achieved, until your Executive Order 2020-10 unlawfully required that our churches

shut their doors to our congregants, irrespective of any social distancing and health precautions that we are willing and able to implement, while allowing many other non-religious businesses and organization to remain open.

We love our adopted country, and the Freedom we have found here, too much to stay silent as you trample on our God-given rights. In light of our shared experience living behind the Iron Curtain – where discriminatory treatment of Churches by authoritarian governments was the norm – we are determined to do everything that we can to ensure that our beloved country and our State remain the beacons of freedom that brought us here.

We recognize your recent attempt to change course, yet we deem your April 30, 2020 allowance of churches to gather together with only 10 persons or less wholly inadequate. We regard this as further evidence of the arbitrary nature of your orders.

You have allowed supermarkets, liquor stores, hardware stores, abortion clinics and a host of other businesses deemed “essential” to operate without the same limitations. You have singled out churches as not essential, and you have closed our doors **even though we are willing and able to implement the same safety measures employed by those that remain open**. This is a flagrant violation of the United States Constitution, and the liberties we have risked our lives to be able to enjoy in this once-free Nation.

Our willing compliance with your orders thus far has been voluntary. But this should not be misunderstood as our acquiescence to the improper and unconstitutional authority you have sought to exercise over our worship.

Your orders are in clear violation of our First Amendment rights. The Constitution and the rights enshrined therein are not suspended during a pandemic, and neither is our religion.

Please be advised that, beginning on May 10, 2020, our congregations will resume in-person church gatherings, and we will no longer adhere to the 10-person limit or the other unconstitutional restrictions comprised within your orders. .

*We recognize that you have limited gatherings with the stated goal of reducing the spread of COVID-19 and protecting medical staff. **We share this desire and commit to doing our part in protecting the physical well-being of all those who attend our church services.***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we will implement protocols such as those recommended by the CDC.

*In the meantime, and until you reverse course, **we have authorized our legal counsel to immediately challenge your unconstitutional orders in federal court.***

*And, irrespective of how long you or the Courts take to vindicate our inalienable and non-negotiable rights, and to return the Constitution from exile in our State, **our decision is settled: we will reopen our churches on May 10, 2020.***
(emphasis in original).

On Sunday, May 3, the Romanian pastors each made statements to their congregations during their online services. Cristian Ionescu, pastor of the Elim Romanian Pentecostal Church in Chicago, made this powerful statement.

Liberty Counsel Founder and Chairman Mat Staver said, "Having heard many stories from my Romanian friends about the repression of their religious freedom under Communism, I never would have thought that in America they would experience similar treatment. We are proud to stand with these pastors who understand the importance and value of religious freedom. This shocking discrimination against houses of worship and people of faith must end."

Mihet remarked: "I am proud to stand with the Romanian-American community against the unconstitutional, government-imposed conditions and restrictions that discriminate against the church. There is no good reason to prohibit the church from implementing the same social distancing and safety precautions that liquor stores, hardware stores, law firms and accountants are allowed to implement. We must not let our fundamental Constitutional guarantees become another casualty of COVID-19." {eo}

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