

Pastors to Houston Mayor: Don't Mess With Texas Pulpits

Christians across the nation are mobilizing to defend a group of Houston pastors who were ordered by the city to turn over any sermons dealing with homosexuality, gender identity issues or Houston mayor. Their message is simple: "Don't Mess with Texas Preachers."

Dave Welch, the executive director of the Texas Pastor Council, is one of the five ministers who received a subpoena. He said he will not be intimidated by Annise Parker, who is the city's first openly lesbian mayor, nor will he comply with the city's demands.

"My answer to that is: 'Bring it on,'" he said.

Houston's city attorney issued the subpoenas in a response to a lawsuit filed related to the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (.), the city's new non-discrimination ordinance, also known as the "Bathroom Bill."

The new law, which has yet to take effect, would (among other things) allow men who identify as women to use the restrooms of their choice—and vice versa. Opponents launched a petition drive to put the issue on the ballot.

However, the city threw out the petitions claiming there were not enough legitimate signatures. Opponents then filed a lawsuit, which led the city to issue the subpoenas.

Ironically, none of the five subpoenaed pastors are plaintiffs in the lawsuit.

Welch told me pastors across the Lone Star State are mobilizing and in the very near future they plan to hold a "Don't Mess with Texas Pulpit Sunday" event.

"We are dealing with bullies used to getting away with abuse of power," Welch said. "We called their bluff on this."

But City Attorney David Feldman told me that doesn't matter. He said in an interview Tuesday that the five pastors were actively involved in leading the fight against the Bathroom Bill and launching the petition drive.

"They are not party plaintiffs but they certainly appeared before council repeatedly regarding the ordinance and the petition," Feldman told me.

The city attorney defended the decision to issue the subpoenas.

"This petition was organized at the churches," he said. "That's where the organizing drive took place. That's where rallies were held. That's where signing parties were held."

Russell Moore, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission told me the city needs to mind its own business.

"The government has absolutely no reason to bully congregations who are speaking out about what they believe," he said. "It's none of the government's business."

Alliance Defending Freedom, a law firm specializing in religious cases, is representing the pastors. They accused City Hall of going on a fishing expedition.

"City Council members are supposed to be public servants, not 'Big Brother' overlords who will tolerate no dissent or challenge," ADF attorney Erik Stanley said. "This is designed to intimidate pastors."

Attorney Feldman denied that was the case.

"I'm just doing my job," he said. "I don't have any issues with these pastors. What I'm doing is defending a lawsuit that

was brought against us.”

Moore said he could not believe the city had taken such drastic steps.

“It didn’t sound like something that would happen in America,” he told me. “It is shocking in its audacity and it is buffoonish in its strategy. I can’t imagine who in City Hall thought this was a good idea.”

And that brings us back to Attorney Feldman—who dutifully took full responsibility and said the mayor had absolutely nothing to do with the subpoenas. He said she was never informed.

So at what point was Mayor Parker informed that her administration had declared war on the fine Christian pastors of the nation’s fourth-largest city?

“When you guys broke the story,” he said.

I’m not sure what’s harder to believe—that the mayor wasn’t involved or that she reads my column.

Moore called the Houston incident a case of “legal bullying” and addressed it in a recent blog posting:

“The separation of church and state means that we will render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and we will. But the preaching of the church of God does not belong to Caesar, and we will not hand it over to him. Not now. Not ever.”

Ultimately, this is not about gays or lesbians or a Bathroom Bill. This is about the U.S. Constitution. This is about religious liberty.

This is about a group of pastors refusing to comply with the demands of the government. And they do so at the risk of being held in contempt of court.

Heaven forbid that happens. But if it does, I for one will

gladly fly to Houston with a toothbrush in hand and join these brave men of God—behind bars.

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