

Pentecostal Inmate Allowed to Preach Again

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- ✖ A New Jersey State Prison inmate has won back the right to preach to his fellow prisoners.

Howard Thompson Jr., an ordained Pentecostal minister, had been prohibited from preaching in 2007 when prison officials banned inmates from preaching, even when supervised by prison staff.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit on Thompson's behalf last year, arguing that the ban was unconstitutional. On Monday, the group announced that it reached a settlement with prison officials that allows Thompson to preach at weekly worship services and to teach Bible study classes.

"The decision by prison officials in New Jersey to allow Mr. Thompson to resume practicing his faith is a welcome acknowledgement that religious freedom in this country extends to all," said Daniel Mach, director of litigation for the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. "The ban on prisoner preaching was clearly at odds with the law and the American value of religious liberty, and this decision was long overdue."

Thompson, who was convicted of murder in 1985 and sentenced to 30 years to life in prison, has been active in the prison's Christian community since his incarceration in 1986. Ordained in 2000, he preached at Sunday services, taught Bible studies and founded the prison choir. Then two years ago, prison officials issued a blanket ban on such preaching by prisoners.

The ACLU said the prison's chaplaincy staff actively supported and encouraged Thompson's ministry work, believing he was a positive influence on other inmates.

Thompson said the ban kept him from fulfilling his ministry calling, which he had done "honestly, effectively and without any incident for years."

"All I have ever wanted was to have my religious rights restored so that I could continue working with men who want to renew their lives through the study and practice of their faith," Thompson said.

The settlement does not allow Thompson to lead services, but permits him to preach with the consent of a prison chaplain or approved volunteer. It also requires him to provide an outline of his sermon or Bible study lesson to the chaplain or volunteer in advance for review and approval.

If approval is denied, Thompson must be given a written explanation of the reason.