

Pentecostal Snake-Handling Pastor to Defend Practice in Court

An East Tennessee pastor who has appeared handling serpents on national television has been cited with possession of venomous snakes by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA), and the reptiles have been confiscated.

According to TWRA's Matt Cameron, wildlife officers visited the home of Andrew Hamblin, pastor of Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tenn., Thursday morning and asked if he had any venomous snakes, reports.

Hamblin said he did but that they were at an undisclosed location. When the officers asked if the snakes were at his church, he said yes. He led them there, where they seized about 50 snakes, including rattlesnakes and copperheads as well as some non-native species. The reptiles were being taken to the Knoxville Zoo.

"I'm not going to lie. They asked if they were at my house. I said no, but when they asked if they were at the church, I said yes," says Hamblin, who has pastored Tabernacle Church of God for nearly two years.

Hamblin is charged with the misdemeanor of possessing Class 1 wildlife, a species inherently dangerous to humans. His court date is scheduled for Friday, and the TWRA says he is cooperating with their investigation.

"It doesn't bother me that they took the snakes because I can always get more snakes," Hamblin says. "There can always be more snakes that can be found. And that don't deter me. What bothers me is that this is not a place of business. This is not a home. Had this been a home or a business, yes, raid it.

But this is a church. This is a place of worship.”

The preacher says he understands some people disagree with his religion but that the law should not stop him or other church members from practicing.

“People are going to live and believe the way they live and believe,” he says. “I’m not trying to change anyone’s mind about their specific beliefs. And I don’t expect anyone to change mine. The only thing I ask people is to say, ‘Yes, he has a right to religious freedom.’”

Hamblin appeared on the National Geographic reality show *Snake Salvation*, which the TWRA says confirmed for them Hamblin had the snakes. They also say they received several complaints from the public.

“Possession of a large number of venomous snakes is a significant public safety hazard,” Campbell County District Attorney Lori Phillips-Jones told . “I truly appreciate TWRA’s efforts to keep all our citizens safe.”

But Hamblin is convinced his church was singled out because of its unique practice.

“They targeted my church no doubt because of the television show. No doubt because of what I do. A lot of these churches, they hid away. They hide out. I don’t have anything to hide,” he says.

When asked why the church didn’t use legal, nonvenomous snakes, Hamblin said, “The point of it being a venomous snake is to show a nonbeliever, not of snakes being right, but of God’s true power.”

Hamblin says he obeys other laws but that this particular law violates the law of God. Despite the citation and upcoming court date, Hamblin says church services will continue to include serpent handling.

"If I don't get the snakes that they came and took from me, one way or another there will be serpents here for the services," he says. "If we have to fly them in by an airplane, one way or another, we'll see serpents here at the service."

Serpent handling was outlawed in Tennessee in 1947 after five people died of snake bites in two years. Hamblin says he was bitten by a snake while cleaning one in 2010 but that no one has been bitten in the church since he's been pastor.

He insists that he kept the snakes behind two locked doors that only he had the key to, and he says he kept them well-fed and cared for, despite the claims by the TWRA that some of them were in poor condition.