

Phoenix Pastor Jailed, Fined for Hosting Home Bible Studies

A Phoenix man was fined and punished with jail time for holding Bible studies in his home. He began his 60-day sentence Monday morning.

Michael Salman, an ordained pastor and restaurant owner, has been ordered to pay more than \$12,000 in fines and faces three years of probation for hosting weekly religious meetings on his property.

"While those at our home are praying and seeking the Lord's face we ask you all to please pray for us," the father of six wrote on his Facebook page, Jailed For Home Worship. "I want you all to know that we love you and thank you all for your support. Though it will be very difficult we know that we will win in the end. Glory to God!"

Salman and his wife, Suzanne, have been battling the city of Phoenix for about five years. They received a letter from the city in 2007, prohibiting them from continuing with the Bible studies in their living room because it violated the construction code.

The family then built a 2,000-square-foot building in their backyard, which Michael said he received all the appropriate permits for.

"At that point we took our Bible study from our living room, and we moved it into that building," he said. "We started worshipping in that building every weekend."

However, nearly a dozen police, along with city inspectors, raided the family's home in the summer of 2009. The city

prosecutor's office said Salman violated city building codes, and insisted that the issue is due to concerns with public safety, not religion.

"It came down to zoning and proper permitting," Vicki Hill, the chief assistant city prosecutor, told Fox News Radio. "Any time you are holding a gathering of people continuously—as he does—we have concerns about people being able to exit the facility properly in case there is a fire."

However, Salman argues that his Bible studies are no different than people hosting weekly poker games or inviting friends to their homes for Monday Night Football.

"They're cracking down on religious activities and religious use," he told Fox News Radio last week. "They're attacking what I as a Christian do in the privacy of my home."

But Arizona courts have continuously ruled against him, declaring Salman was running a church out of a private dwelling. The city said it is not violating his constitutional rights to religious freedom. In a January 2010 ruling, the court said the state requires that Salman abide by "fire and zoning codes" before he can run a church or worship service in his home.

"We want to stand for not only our beliefs," Suzanne Salman said, "but for every believer in Phoenix that wants to host a Bible study in their home, that they can do it without fear of the city coming in and saying, 'No, this is no longer just your home. This needs to become a church.'"

A judge has not yet issued a ruling on the emergency appeal Salman's attorney filed with the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.