

Pitch-Perfect Justice: Christians Settle with City After Maskless Worship Arrests

Moscow, Idaho, announced a \$300,000 settlement this week with three Christian churchgoers who sued the city after being arrested during a “psalm sing” at an outdoor service in September 2020.

The plaintiffs, Gabriel Rench and Sean and Rachel Bohnet, alleged that their rights under the First and Fourth Amendments were violated when they were detained for not wearing masks.

The peaceful protest took place in front of Moscow City Hall, with participants from Christ Church, a local congregation of approximately 1,000 members. The arrests garnered widespread attention when footage went viral, drawing condemnation from then-President Trump on Twitter.

Despite exemptions for religious activities in the city’s health ordinance, Rench and the others were charged with violating the COVID regulations, which were repeatedly extended by city officials. However, a magistrate judge later dismissed the charges, and U.S. District Court Judge Morrison C. England, Jr., stated in a memorandum that the plaintiffs should never have been arrested in the first place.

Following the settlement, Rench revealed that he has faced backlash from his predominantly liberal community, becoming a pariah since the incident. Accusations of not loving his neighbor and being labeled “an idiot” have been hurled at him by members of his community, urging him to “take the money and run.

"I think it's no secret that portions of our government and political groups are now starting to target Christians in a way that has never really happened in America or Canada," Rensch says, noting how he knows some of the pastors who have been jailed in neighboring Canada in recent years for holding church services.

"I'm in a conservative state, but I live in a liberal town, and the liberals had no problem arresting me for practicing my religious rights and my Constitutional rights," he continues. "But my [Republican] governor also didn't defend me either. If you look at what's going on in Canada, I think America's 10 years, at most 20 years, behind Canada if we don't make significant changes."

The legal battle extends to the family of Douglas Wilson, the senior pastor of Christ Church, whose son and grandsons received misdemeanor charges for protesting the arrests. Placing stickers on city utility poles, depicting a hammer and sickle with the phrase "Soviet Moscow, enforced because we care," the grandsons sought to challenge the city's COVID and mask mandate slogan. Wilson expects the case to reach the Idaho Supreme Court.

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Wilson emphasizes the connection between his family's experience and broader concerns about the Department of Justice targeting people of faith under President Biden's administration. He is sounding the alarm that private citizens increasingly face the threat of being financially burdened by the government's seemingly limitless resources.

"The saying that 'You can't fight city hall,' I think, largely has to do with finances," he said, adding that authorities are using criminal prosecution to punish political dissent. "And it's also what's happening with the DOJ, only writ large. So

basically, we're dealing with the weaponization of the justice system. We are seeing it here in small-town America, and you see it in Washington, D.C."

The settlement in Moscow highlights the ongoing challenges Christians face in certain areas, particularly when expressing their faith in public settings. As the case continues to unfold, it brings into focus the need for protecting religious liberties and upholding the rights enshrined in the Constitution. {eoa}

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