

Sidewalk Sunday School Kicked to the Curb

A Sunday school program for **at-risk youth** has been thrown out of its public meeting place in Baton Rouge, La. But Voices of Mercy Outreach Ministries isn't giving up on the kids it loves so easily.

The East Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission kicked Voices of Mercy Outreach Ministries' Sidewalk Sunday School to the curb due to a ban on religious activities. The commission may end up rethinking its stance, though, since Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) attorneys filed a federal lawsuit against it.

"Faith-based groups shouldn't be singled out for discrimination—especially a group like this that has provided such selfless service to at-risk youth and their parents for many years," says ADF senior legal counsel Joel Oster. "The Sidewalk Sunday School program has the same constitutionally protected right as any other community group to hold its activities at a public park. There's no constitutional basis to throw them out, and it's a mystery why the commission would even want to do so in light of the valuable work this group does for the community."

Voices of Mercy Outreach Ministries had operated at a public park for five years before the ban stymied its efforts. However, ADF said the commission allowed at least one other religious group to hold an event at the park despite the so-called ban. ADF says the commission actually invited a local church to host a Community Outreach Day that included the distribution of **religious literature**.

Here's the backstory: Voices of Mercy Outreach Ministries obtained permission from the Recreation and Park Commission

for the Parish of East Baton Rouge to use Cadillac Street Park for its Sidewalk Sunday School ministry outreach in 2005. Five years after granting permission to use the park, the commission notified the ministry that its outreach events violated a policy that prohibits all religious use of parks the commission operates. The Park Use Policy states, "Under no circumstances can a public park be used for ... religious ... purposes."

Voices of Mercy Outreach Ministries has not been permitted to use the park since March 2010. That means the group can't minister to the youth living in the low-income communities surrounding Cadillac Street Park. ADF says the ban has greatly diminished the ministry's outreach.