

With Abrupt Notice, University Cancels Pastor's Easter Service

Easter Sunday is sort of like the Super Bowl for preachers.

It's all but guaranteed the pews will be packed and that presented a challenge to Roderick Richardson, the pastor of The Word Center Church in Jackson, Mississippi.

The nondenominational church has a membership of about 1,200 people—but only 275 can fit in the sanctuary. And the preacher estimated they could have as many as 1,500 people show up for Easter Sunday.

So last January Pastor Richardson started scouting out a new location for his growing church. And it wasn't long before he found a solution—a conference center run by the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

He signed a contract to rent the space on Jan. 27. On March 27, the university abruptly canceled the contract and told the church they would not be allowed to use their facility.

"It was a week and two days before the largest service of the year," Pastor Richardson told me. "They told me the climate at UMMC was not conducive for us to have a service at the facility."

The climate was not conducive?

"They were afraid IHL might come and say something about a church having a service (in their facility)," the pastor said. IHL is also known as the State Institutions of Higher Learning, the agency that oversees Mississippi's eight public institutions of higher learning.

"We're not angry at them because we are Christians," the pastor said. "We're just a little frustrated that this particular institution did not keep its word."

Marc Rolph, a spokesman for UMMC, confirmed they canceled the church's contract—a week and two days before Easter Sunday.

"It was unfortunate that the timing of the cancellation was so close to (the) date of the event," Rolph told me.

He denied it had anything to do with the church being a church. He said the booking should never have been made in the first place because they only allow their facilities to be used by health-related organizations.

"The event is not health related and thus is not compliant with our policy," Rolph said.

He said they didn't realize the church was a church until last week when the director of the facility ran it up the flag pole.

"It was deemed not within the guidelines of our policy and could not be allowed. The church was immediately notified," Rolph said.

UMMC offered to let the church hold their service inside a medical mall instead. The church declined that offer. I mean—who wants to hold a church service in a mall?

Pastor Richardson said UMMC's excuse doesn't make any sense.

"If that was a policy, we should have been told back in January when we signed the contract," he said. "We've been preparing for this for two and a half months."

And it's not like the church was hiding the fact it was a church.

"On the very first page of the contract it asked for the type

of event and it says 'church service,'" the pastor told me.

Pastor Richardson told me he feels like David battling Goliath.

"They are so large and so powerful they can do us however they want," he said. "They simply did not conduct business in an adequate fashion."

The church has been forced to hold services in their small sanctuary. The pastor said they will accommodate the crowds by holding multiple services throughout the day.

The Word Center Church signed a contract in good faith with UMMC. It wasn't their fault the UMMC made a mistake. So why not honor the contract and allow these good people to hold their Easter service?

"We have to follow our policies," Rolph said.

There's a strong argument to make that the church does meet the UMMC's guidelines of being a health-related organization.

A quick reading of the New Testament indicates our Lord was in the healing business. There are documented reports of giving sight to the blind, healing a leper and even raising someone from the dead.

I'm not too sure the Great Physician would be all that thrilled with the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

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