

How We Must Respond When Governors Violate Christians' First Amendment Rights

Note: In my podcast today with Mat Staver, we discuss the very disturbing way some elected officials are violating our religious First Amendment rights during this COVID-19 pandemic and what it means for the future of America. Mat also shares what each of us can do about it. In our podcast, Mat discusses a particular case Liberty Counsel is working on involving Lighthouse Fellowship Church. Here is the press release, which first appeared on , on this case:

Lighthouse Fellowship Church on Chincoteague Island has filed its reply legal memorandum seeking an emergency motion for injunction pending appeal in the federal lawsuit against Governor Ralph Northam for violating the religious freedom of churchgoers on Palm Sunday. Liberty Counsel represents the church.

Police served a summons to Pastor Wilson for holding a church service with 16 people spaced far apart in a sanctuary that is rated for 293 people. The charge is violating Virginia Governor Northam's COVID Order 55 with a penalty up to a year in jail and/or a \$2,500 fine.

On April 5, before the service on Palm Sunday, a local police officer entered the church. He gave no introduction and did not ask for the pastor. He abruptly said they could not have more than 10 people spaced 6 feet apart. Then, after the service, two police officers entered the church in full mask and gloves and asked to speak with the pastor. They issued him a summons and informed him that if he had service on Easter, all attending would get the same summons.

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a Statement of

Interest and Vice President Pence said he “strongly agrees” with the DOJ filing in support of the church. “Even in the midst of a national emergency, every American enjoys our cherished liberties, including the freedom of religion,” Pence said on *The Brian Kilmeade Show* on Fox News Radio.

Lighthouse Fellowship Church helps keep people free of drug addiction, brokenness, mental illness, poverty and prostitution. The church, which does not have internet, provides physical, emotional and spiritual services to the community. Many of the members do not have driver’s licenses and are dependent on the church family for rides to get food, supplies and go to medical appointments and personal care services like haircuts. Many attendees are on limited income obtained from government assistance—whether disability or Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid, and the church has helped various members with electric or gas bills, rent, groceries and physical labor. The church also offers a blanket ministry, prayer ministry, discipleship programs and counseling services.

Liberty Counsel Founder and Chairman Mat Staver said, “We must balance the First Amendment with protecting the health and welfare of people, but picking an arbitrary number of 10 people for every church is not the answer. Governor Ralph Northam has clearly discriminated against Lighthouse Fellowship Church, which does not have internet and cannot flip a switch to broadcast online. Pastor Wilson protected the health and safety of the 16 people. Yet because the church had six more people than the 10 allowed by the governor, the pastor is being criminally charged. This unequal treatment of churches is insane.”