

Rodney Howard-Browne Closes Church, Addresses 'False Statements' About His Arrest

My name is Dr. Rodney Howard-Browne. My wife, Adonica, and I are the founders of Revival Ministries International, The River at Tampa Bay Church, River Bible Institute, River School of Worship and River School of Government in Tampa, Florida. I am the senior pastor of the church. We are a multi-ethnic local church, with an international outreach and influence.

In December 1987, my wife and I, along with our three children, immigrated from our native land of South Africa to the United States. I felt a call from God on my life to preach the gospel and to come to America. I am proud to be a citizen of the United States of America. When I became a citizen, I swore the Oath of Citizenship, before God—to uphold and defend the Constitution—and I have done everything in my power to do just that. My family and I are deeply appreciative to be able to live in this great nation, the beacon of freedom to the world.

The two greatest commandments mentioned by Jesus, to love God and to love people, exemplify my life. My greatest passion in life is to introduce people to Jesus, so they can experience His love and forgiveness.

As you know, I was arrested on trumped-up charges for conducting a church service on Sunday, March 29, which Sheriff Chad Chronister claimed, in a press conference, allegedly violated the Hillsborough County Executive Order that went into effect last Friday, March 27, at 10 p.m. The two charges are second-degree misdemeanors that carry a maximum penalty of two months in jail and \$500 fine.

The fanfare and drama that surrounded my arrest was completely

unnecessary. A simple phone call informing me that I had been charged with violating the Executive Order and needed to come to the Hillsborough County Sheriff's office would have sufficed. I would have been willing to turn myself in but was not offered that option. It was unnecessary to send law enforcement to my home. And it was unnecessary to hold a press conference even as I was being arrested.

Before addressing some of the false statements made in the press conference, I want to say that even though the drama and made-for-TV press conference was not appropriate, I do not hold any ill-will toward anyone at the press conference, including Sheriff Chronister. I have the utmost respect for law enforcement. In fact, in January of 2020, I had the pleasure of honoring the Hillsborough County law enforcement by presenting a plaque to Sheriff Chronister at The River at Tampa Bay Church. Afterward, we held an event for our church community (which includes many from the inner city) to interact with, and build a rapport with, our local police and deputies.

I also want to say that I was treated well and with dignity by the deputies and staff of the Hernando County Sheriff's Office who came to my home and walked me through the booking process.

Sheriff Chronister made statements at the press conference that the arrest was conducted at my home because the church has an arsenal of weapons. This is patently false. The church, like many churches, had armed off-duty deputies on Sunday to provide protection against anyone who might have ill intentions.

A statement was also made that I was "reckless" for holding the church service. With all due respect to Sheriff Chronister, the church went above and beyond the requirements for secular businesses to protect the health and well-being of the people who attended. None of this seems to have been taken

into consideration but appears to be a knee-jerk reaction to hyped-up reports by media (who were not in the building at any time).

A statement was also made that we ignored repeated warnings. This is patently untrue! On Thursday, Sheriff Chronister spoke to some of our staff by speaker phone. I was also present. After we told Sheriff Chronister that we were enforcing 6-foot social distancing, had installed over \$100,000 of high-grade hospital air purifiers and were taking other actions to protect the health of anyone who attended, he said the church could operate on Sunday, and that he had no intention to close the church or arrest anyone. The order then became effective on Friday night at 10 p.m.

On Saturday, we prepared our building, and our staff and ushers, to take all possible, reasonable precautions. On Sunday, we held our usual meeting with the precautions (listed below) in place. At no time, before or during the service, did we receive any "warnings" from the sheriff or any other official.

The March 27 "safer-at-home" order contains, in paragraph three, 42 sub-paragraphs of exceptions, including "religious personnel." Following this long list of exceptions, in paragraph five, the order adds another huge exception: "Business which are not described in paragraph 3, and are able to maintain the required physical distancing (6 feet) may operate" (emphasis added). In other words, any business that is not in the long list of specific exceptions, is also exempted if it is able to comply with the 6-foot separation between people. In such case, there is no limit on the number of people who can be present.

The church took extra precautions to more than comply with the Executive Order, which included the following:

—Any persons who was concerned for their health, or who had

physical symptoms of any kind, were encouraged to stay home.

–Every person who entered the church received hand sanitizer.

–All the staff wore gloves.

–The church enforced the 6-foot distance between family groups in the auditorium as well as in the overflow rooms.

–In the farmer's market and coffee shop in the lobby, the 6-foot distance was enforced with the floor specifically marked.

–The church spent over \$100,000 on a hospital-grade purification system set up throughout the church that provides continuous infectious microbial reduction (CIMR) that is rated to kill microbes, including those in the coronavirus family.

The church sanctuary has moveable chairs. Chairs were removed from the sanctuary so that the remaining chairs were separated by 6 feet. Any small group that may have been closer than 6 feet were family members who came to the church together. This 6-foot separation was maintained throughout the church.

The church took every precaution to protect the people who attended. In fact, the kinds of precautions the church undertook cannot be found existing in many commercial business establishments that freely operated in Hillsborough County under this Executive Order.

The Executive Order on its face, and as applied, discriminates against religious services and gatherings, despite the fact that the First Amendment provides express protections to houses of worship and assembly. There is no similar constitutional protection for commercial businesses; yet houses of worship and religious gatherings are signaled out for discrimination. The State of Florida's Executive Order exempts churches, as does the Orange County Executive Order, and many other county orders.

Yesterday, Gov. Ron DeSantis issued a new Executive Order that

states "religious services conducted in churches, synagogues and houses of worship" are "essential activities." Surely, Hillsborough County could follow their lead and not violate the Constitution. There are other means available to achieve the interest that we all share to protect human life.

The word of my arrest has traveled around the world. While I have received vulgar verbal abuse and death threats from people who do not know me and are not familiar with the facts, I have also received many words of support and prayer. Many people are deeply concerned that in America a pastor would be arrested.

As my wife and I prayed about what we should do this weekend, we have decided to close the church for this upcoming Sunday service, for the protection of our people in this antagonistic climate, in large part created by media hype and misrepresentations, which have undoubtedly been exacerbated by Sheriff Chronister's exaggerated and outright false accounts of the situation. We do not make this decision lightly. This is Palm Sunday. We are entering the time of year that is most important to Christians around the world in which we remember and celebrate the death, burial and Resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We did not hold church to defy any order; nor did we hold church to send a political message. We did not hold church for self-promotion or financial motives, as some have wrongly accused. We held church because it is our mission to save souls and help people, and because we in good faith did everything possible to comply with the Executive Order. Indeed, Sheriff Chronister told us last Thursday that we could hold church.

At this point, we believe it is prudent to take a pause by not opening the church doors this Sunday. This will allow an opportunity for people to take a deep breath and calm down. No matter your view on this matter, I encourage you to take a

step back and reconsider the options. I believe we can better balance the health and safety of our community without throwing out the Constitution.

At this time, I have not made any decision about Easter Sunday or services thereafter. Adonica and I are praying and seeking the Lord for wisdom. I will say, however, that the church cannot be closed indefinitely. We believe that there are less restrictive means available to balance all the various interests.

My attorneys at Liberty Counsel will vigorously defend me against this unlawful arrest. I have also authorized my attorneys at Liberty Counsel to file a federal challenge to the Hillsborough County Executive Order. As I said earlier, this order violates the First Amendment and is unconstitutional. I have authorized this constitutional challenge for several reasons.

First, I have already been arrested once on trumped-up charges. I am a law-abiding citizen, who respects law enforcement. Like any normal law-abiding person, I would prefer not to be arrested again. A second arrest could escalate to a higher criminal penalty, or even a felony. No one wants to face criminal charges. My attorneys at Liberty Counsel are representing me on the criminal case, which we will move to dismiss.

Second, because of the publicity, the vitriol and death threats that have been directed at us and the church, I feel compelled by these threats to not meet this upcoming Sunday for the protection of our pastors, staff and congregation. Also, I love my pastoral staff at The River, and they love us and are in agreement with our stance to obey the Word of God and also to stand up for our constitutional rights. If the church holds service this coming Sunday and the sheriff chooses to arrest me again under this unconstitutional Executive Order, he will probably have to arrest all of our

pastors for preaching in my place. Personally, I do not want to put my pastoral staff in a position of having to choose between criminal arrest or carrying out our God-given mission to worship together and lead people to Jesus.

Third, The River Church provides many ministries more than services, where we physically gather together to worship. We have various training schools, and we also provide food and clothing to people in need. The Farmer's Market and the weekly food boxes we provide are greatly needed at this time to help needy and hurting families. These ministries need to continue to operate to help people. We have many inner-city people who do not have the luxury of watching church online at home. We feel obligated to continue to serve them in person and to make sure we continue to provide groceries to them every week.

People in our community need help more than ever in this time of crisis, and the church is where many of them turn for spiritual and material help. We need to be able to minister, without unreasonably restrictive measures, to their spiritual and material needs. Church is a body of believers that cannot be substituted online, especially for people who do not have access to the internet, or their internet is too slow to watch video. Our church helps hurting people and those in need, both spiritually and physically. There is no substitute for meeting together to help one another. This can be done while also protecting the health and welfare of those who attend.

No one wants to face arrest for a criminal charge just for exercising a constitutional right. The threat of arrest, and worse, actual arrest, operates as a significant chill to the exercise of constitutional rights. No one should have to choose between the two. Even in times of crisis, the courts are open to protect our constitutional rights. We hope and trust that the authorities in this case would re-consider their actions and choose to uphold the Constitution, for all of our sakes, basing their decisions on actual facts and correctly applying any and all of the law, rather than

succumbing to pressure from certain antagonistic media.

May God grant us wisdom and blessings as we approach this sacred time of Palm Sunday and Easter. {eo}

This article originally appeared at Liberty Counsel.