

LATEST NEWS

Florida pastor arrested for holding services, other congregations meeting in defiance of COVID-19-related orders





You may have seen video of the River Church in Tampa, Florida, which held church services on Sunday in apparent violation of a safer-at-home order banning large gatherings. Like similar orders around the country, Hillsborough County's is designed to protect against the spread of the Coronavirus. Now, the pastor of that church, Rodney Howard-Browne **has been arrested for unlawful assembly**, a development that intensifies the debate over whether religious gatherings should, or even must, be exempt from public health orders like those going into effect all across the country.

While some states and local governments have made a point of explicitly allowing religious gatherings to occur, others have not. As I **posted** earlier, even if allowed to meet, the vast majority of churches across the country are hosting online services or finding other creative ways to worship as a congregation while complying with social distancing requirements.

This week, Vice President Mike Pence said he was grateful for the houses of worship that have heeded the social distancing guidance, and he reiterated its importance. "We really believe this is a time when people should avoid gatherings of more than 10 people," Pence **said**. "And so, we continue to urge churches around America to heed to that." He also mentioned that he and his wife and the president have "been enjoying worship services online."

Meanwhile, a very small but increasingly vocal number of clergy are actively resisting orders to avoid large gatherings. In Louisiana, the Life Tabernacle Church **hosted hundreds** in a service despite a statewide order banning gatherings of more than 10.

Bloomberg News **reports**:

Pastor [Tony] Spell told local news outlet NBC15 earlier this month that he didn't believe his congregation was in danger of infection. "It's not a concern," he said. "The virus, we believe, is politically motivated. We hold our religious rights dear and we are going to assemble no matter what someone says."

Not to be outdone, Pastor Jonathan Shuttlesworth is [calling](#) for a massive public church gathering on Easter that is akin to "Woodstock."

Meanwhile, Rev. Howard-Browne was released on \$500 bail and claims that the church went out of its way to practice appropriate "social distancing" and to lessen the risk of community spread. Liberty Counsel, which represents him, downplays the seriousness of the public health crisis, saying in a [press release](#) that America's real enemy is not the virus but "anti-Christian petty tyrants." They claim that the arrest amounts to religious discrimination in light of the secular exemptions available.



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