

War On Religion? Lake Worth Orders Churches To Have License To Pray

Story By Kathleen Walter/CBS12

LAKE WORTH (CBS12) -- Undercover stings-- and crackdowns on churches.

That's what folks in one South Florida community say are happening.

Members of several Lake Worth congregations say they're being targeted by city officials and are asking if there is a war on religion?

At the Common Ground Coffee Bar in Lake Worth, Pastor Mike Olive--the owner--holds two religious services on Sundays that he says city officials are trying to stop.

He says a notice was sent to his landlord that the coffee bar doesn't have the permits to operate as a religious institution. Pastor Mike Olive said, "We had one gentleman come in from the city wearing a hoodie, and he was hiding the camera in the pockets of his hoodie."

Pastor Mike says a city code enforcement official secretly attended and videotaped one of his Sunday services. The narrative of the official's findings--which is featured on the city's website--reads, in part: "I was able to visualize... in my opinion what appeared to be a ministry in progress..

People holding what appeared to be bibles or religious books as one had a cross on it." What concerns Pastor Olive the most? "The separation of church and state," he said. "I think it's very important that people are not afraid to practice that faith-- whatever that faith is." Concerns are mounting in Lake Worth's church community after the city sent some churches notices requiring them to have a "business license."

The nearby First Baptist Church paid the almost \$500 inspection and use of occupancy fees. CBS12 asked city councilmember Christopher McVoy if this is a business tax? McVoy responded, "I can't tell you the exact answer on that. It's not a business tax, but there will be a fee involved." CBS12 investigated if this is in line with other municipalities. In the Village of North Palm Beach, churches are exempt from a business tax and are subjected to a \$50-to-\$75 fire inspection fee.

In Jupiter, there are no fees for churches. However, they must pay the county a fire inspection fee. The city manager, Mike Bornstein, said that the church licensing issue is a misunderstanding.

He told CBS12 the city hadn't enforced compliance in the past. When zoning officials took over compliance from the fire department, they attempted to streamline the process. He said that even though churches must have a business license the city will still recognize them as religious institutions.

Pastor Mike's will hold church services inside his coffee bar for the last time on Sunday. The high-powered Liberty Counsel legal group has sent a letter to Lake Worth asking them to retract its stance on local churches.

http://www.cbs12.com/news/top-stories/stories/vid_23794.shtml

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