



News Release

For Immediate Release: 3.19.24
Contact: John Manning, media@firstliberty.org
Direct: 972-941-4453

Church Files Lawsuit Against the City of San Luis for Blocking Food Distribution to Impoverished Families

The city issued fines and threatens criminal charges for parking transport trucks in the church's parking lot.

San Luis, AZ—Today, First Liberty Institute and the law firm Snell and Wilmer L.L.P. filed a complaint and a motion for preliminary injunction in the United States District Court for the District of Arizona urging the court to stop the City of San Luis from blocking Gethsemani Baptist Church from distributing food to the poor. Gethsemani's food distribution is a 25-year ministry to impoverished families in the southernmost part of Yuma County.

You can read the complaint [here](#).

“It’s unconscionable that the City of San Luis won’t allow Gethsemani Baptist Church to continue its 25-year mission of providing food for the hungry, hurting people in the surrounding communities,” said Jeremy Dys, senior counsel at First Liberty Institute. “People who take action to care for the hungry should be encouraged and affirmed, not threatened and fined.”

Since 1999, Gethsemani Baptist Church has operated its food ministry mere blocks from the Mexico border, sharing the Gospel as it distributes hundreds of thousands of pounds of food and other household items to the most vulnerable families in the surrounding areas. It is the only food ministry in the city serving desperate families. Gethsemani uses semi-trucks to transport food where it is off-loaded on the church’s parking lot.

When a new mayor took office, the city went from celebrating and supporting Gethsemani’s ministry to escalating tactics to shut it down. The city has sent letter after letter, moving the goalposts and not even allowing the church to benefit from laws already on the books. But even while the city has relentlessly worked to stop the church from parking its truck or storing and distributing food, the city turns a blind eye as commercial trucks and businesses regularly violate the same city codes in the same zoning district. Even after switching to smaller trucks in an attempt to comply with the city’s demands, the city continues to enforce its “cease and desist” order, preventing the church from ministering.

The City even resorted to citing the church’s pastor when he handed out small quantities of emergency food supplies to ten people. Less than a week later, after a third-party truck accidentally parked in front of the church for just five minutes, the City cited the pastor again instead of the driver. The church and its pastor cannot afford the city’s heavy fines

and fear that more citations could result in the pastor going to jail. The city's actions have forced the church to pause its ministry as it seeks relief from the court.

The complaint states that the city is, "engaged in efforts of increasing severity to clamp down on the Church, but throughout the same time period, Defendants have not enforced the same ordinances against similarly situated secular organizations that also use semi-trucks and store food in the same residential zone. Defendants are wielding City ordinances as a cudgel in a persistent lawfare campaign to stop the Church's ministry activities. Their treatment of the Church violates both federal and Arizona law."

###

About First Liberty Institute

First Liberty Institute is a non-profit public interest law firm and the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

To arrange an interview, contact John Manning at media@firstliberty.org or by calling 972-941-4453.