



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on March 26, 2024

Arizona City Abruptly Shuts Down Church Food Pantry

Something strange is going on in the town of San Luis, Arizona, located on the southwest corner of the Grand Canyon State on the border with Mexico.

The food pantry ministry of Pastor Jose Manuel Castro's Gethsemani Baptist Church has been feeding more than 300 needy families in San Luis every Saturday from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., and the city has been a strong supporter of the ministry for more than 20 years.

However, following the election of a new mayor, Nieves Riedel, in November 2022, everything changed. The city has forced the pantry to close, and, with the help of First Liberty, a nonprofit public interest law firm dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom, the church [has filed a lawsuit](#).



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The suit claims the city has violated, and continues to violate, the First and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), and the state's Free Exercise of Religion Act (FERA).

In the 28-page lawsuit, First Liberty makes a strong case for Pastor Castro and his church and ministry and is demanding a trial by jury.

Requests for comments from the mayor, her office, or members of the city council that rubber-stamped her move against the church, made by the *Washington Examiner*, *Reason* magazine, and National Public Radio (NPR), have been ignored. Further, according to the lawsuit, the defendants (the city of San Luis, its city manager, its code enforcement officer, and its mayor) have "refused to even discuss a solution that would allow the ministry to continue."

The ministry began in 1999 and, over the years, grew to the point where it was feeding and clothing more than 300 needy families in the city and the surrounding area. It operated on church property and was supported by the city through cash grants and members of the City Council who personally gave of their time and effort to assist the ministry.

As noted above, that changed in December 2022 with the election of Mayor Nieves Riedel. She apparently ran on a platform that included shutting down the ministry and, true to her word, began the process after taking office.

From the lawsuit:

When Mayor Nieves was elected in late 2022, everything changed.

The Mayor made clear that the Church's Food Ministry would receive no more support from the City.



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Shortly after taking office, the Mayor informed the Church that it could no longer use the City warehouse to store food or supplies — forcing the Church to move nearly 100 pallets of food to a different warehouse located outside the City.

Although there is a public park across from the Church, the Mayor would not allow the Church to utilize any of that area for activities related to its Food Ministry.

The Mayor also unsuccessfully attempted to veto the City Council's approval of approximately \$7,000 in grant money, which the City had frequently given to the Church in the past. The City Council overrode her attempted veto.

The attack on the ministry began officially with a letter Riedel sent to Pastor Castro in September 2023 informing him that "semi-trucks were not permitted in residential areas," and that the city would immediately "commence enforcement" of the violation.

This was followed by a letter to Castro from the city's Planning and Zoning Commission affirming that the church was now officially in violation of the city's zoning code. Previously the ministry was allowed to operate as "non-conforming use," but the mayor decided to override that by claiming it as "illegal."

When Pastor Castro and more than 100 members of the community pled with the City Council to allow the church to continue to operate as it had in the past, their pleas were ignored. Following that meeting the mayor upped the ante, sending Castro a letter in October reiterating her claim that his ministry was continuing to violate the city's zoning ordinances.

That's when First Liberty entered the picture, sending a letter to the mayor informing her that her actions were unconstitutional and that the city, under her direction, had "misapplied" the ordinance that put the church in jeopardy.

She responded to this letter, but changed nothing in her determination to shut the ministry down.

The church offered to make some changes to its ministry in an attempt to placate the mayor, but to no avail. In December she had the city send Castro another letter accusing him of "routinely operating vehicles in a way that violates numerous provisions of the San Luis City Code and the laws of the State of Arizona."

Pastor Castro closed the ministry and canceled a number of its fundraising events, including its annual Thanksgiving turkey drive-thru and its Christmas toy drive.

The mayor learned that Castro had handed out some emergency supplies to about 10 people at his church, and sent the city's "code enforcer" to write him not one but *four* citations for violating the city's code. When she learned that a driver made a mistake by attempting to make a delivery at the church instead of another location nearby, that was cause for the issuance of another four citations.

The code enforcer, Alexis Gomez Cordova, apparently expecting armed resistance from the pastor, "arrived at the Church with [multiple] City vehicles — two police motorcycles, a City Code Enforcement Specialist truck, a City Transit Enforcement truck — and was accompanied by a police officer. With this entourage in tow, City Code Enforcer Gomez Cordova cited Pastor Castro with identical code violations."

The lawsuit continued:

As these two incidents show, Defendants are now attempting to extract civil and potentially



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criminal penalties against the Church's pastor for feeding the hungry and having structures on its property that have been in plain sight for decades.

That Pastor Castro was cited the second time, for a third-party's mistake, shows an ongoing and increasing pattern of harassment and intimidation against the Church to stop its ministry efforts....

But despite these aggressive tactics against the Church, Defendants do not appear to be treating similarly situated entities in the residential neighborhood equally.

Within blocks of the Church, 18-wheeler semi-trucks and other commercial vehicles from FedEx, furniture stores, buses, food trucks, a tow truck company, and a local Head Start program are frequently seen parking, loading, and unloading on residential streets and residences — sometimes, for hours or days at a time.

On information and belief, the City has not threatened or formally taken any enforcement action against any of these similarly situated entities.

In a telephone interview with [The Washington Times](#), Jeremy Dys, a senior counsel at First Liberty, said, "Because of Mayor Riedel, there are people tonight who are going to go to bed without enough food. Here's a church who is trying to not only care for the souls of the people of San Luis but also to fill their bellies and now because of these aggressive tactics by the city, neither is happening."

First Liberty is demanding a jury trial "on all issues" presented in its complaint.

This should be more than enough to cause the mayor, who, as noted above, has ignored requests for comments from various news entities, to respond. *The New American* will keep its readers informed as the lawsuit proceeds.



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