



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 21, 2014

Pastor Jailed After Being in Pro-Life Demonstration Files Lawsuit

The conservative legal advocacy group [Liberty Counsel](#) has come to the defense of a pastor who was jailed in 2011 for holding a pro-life sign near an abortion clinic in Columbus, Mississippi. The Rev. Stephen Joiner, who pastors the Church of the Nazarene in Columbus, was arrested and jailed for several hours for holding the sign at a busy intersection of the city. The simple message on the sign was that abortion kills pre-born children.



Joiner recalled that he was out driving in the city when he noticed a large group of pro-life people holding signs encouraging the defense of the unborn. Joiner stopped and joined the group, picking up one of the available signs at hand. According to Joiner, a police officer on the scene, Captain Frederick Shelton, told him he was blocking traffic and ordered him to move, although the pastor was several feet from the road and obviously represented no hazard to traffic.

Shelton then proceeded to arrest Joiner for refusing to obey his order to leave the area, and for violating the city's parade and handbill ordinance. As he was being arrested Joiner observed to those around him: "See how this works? If we were out here protesting for gay rights, the police would be out here protecting us, not arresting us. But they come out to arrest good Christian folks."

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To which the arresting officer retorted: "Sir, you are being arrested by a Christian and a chaplain."

While the city ultimately dropped all charges against Joiner, Liberty Counsel has stepped forward to file a [lawsuit](#) on the minister's behalf, charging that the city's parade and handbill ordinances banning the distribution of literature in any public place represented an assault on Joiner's constitutionally protected right to free speech. The suit also seeks a preliminary injunction halting enforcement of the ordinances while the lawsuit moves forward.

The lawsuit recalled that upon his arrest Joiner was "handcuffed so tightly that his wrist bled from the handcuffs, taken into custody, shackled in leg restraints, and transported to the Lowndes County Jail. There he was denied food, water, and even use of a bathroom, although he had explained to them that he was diabetic and had not eaten anything for some time and that he needed to use the restroom."

In announcing the lawsuit, Liberty Counsel chairman Matthew Staver noted that "the First Amendment protects the right of citizens to express themselves on the public ways free of government interference. The city's actions were entirely unjustified and are an affront to the fundamental rights of all Americans. Even unpopular speech is protected when peacefully expressed, as Pastor Joiner did here."

Photo: Stephen Joiner



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