



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 13, 2012

Phoenix Pastor Jailed Over Bible Studies on His Property

A Phoenix pastor who was fined over \$12,000 and sentenced to 60 days in jail after he refused to close down a Bible study at his home began his incarceration July 9. "I have spent time with my family this morning praying, crying, and saying our goodbye," the Rev. Michael Salman (pictured with wife, Suzanne) wrote on his [Facebook](#) page the morning he went to jail. "My heart is broken, but glory to God. Our God will take care of us and my family. Please pray for us! Until God opens the prison's door, I will be with you all in prayer and spirit."



Salman's conflict with the city of Phoenix began in 2008 when he was ordered to comply with code requirements for a church after his neighbors began complaining about a weekly Bible study he held on his property. According to the [Phoenix New Times](#), up to 50 people would gather at a gazebo in Salman's backyard, which prompted the city to call the gathering a church and cite him for several zoning and fire-code violations, ultimately slapping him with the fine and jail time. Additionally, he was told he could have not more than a dozen people on his property at one time.

Salman appealed the penalties to a U.S. district court, but in June a federal judge dismissed the case, ruling that a lower federal court had already heard and dismissed his complaint because he had failed to first exhaust his state-level legal options.

Salman, who owns a local burger restaurant but who is also an ordained minister, insisted that his Bible studies are private gatherings and are not open to the public. He told the *Phoenix New Times* that while his ministry is called [Harvest Christian Fellowship](#), the name was required in order for him to provide outreach to inmates at local jails, and he is not running a church.

Salman said he believes he is being targeted because of his Christian faith, noting that other local residents often host dozens of people for picnics, family gatherings, or other recreational functions. "They're cracking down on religious activities and religious use," he told [Fox News Radio](#). "They're attacking what I as a Christian do in the privacy of my home."

The minister and his wife posted a [YouTube](#) video tour of the property in question, showing that their meetings were no more a violation of city codes than a non-religious gathering on a neighbor's property, where several cars blocked a parkway.

But the Phoenix prosecutor's office insisted that the citations were not about the Salmans' religious services, but were purely a matter of zoning violations and what is permitted on private property. "Any time you are holding a gathering of people continuously as he does, we have concerns about people being able to exit the facility properly in case there is a fire, and that's really what all this comes down to," explained Vicki Hill, an assistant prosecutor for the city.

The [Christian Post](#) reported that three days after Salman began his jail sentence, the city of Phoenix released a [fact sheet](#) about the case and the scores of code violations for which the pastor was



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convicted. “The case is about the building that is used for regular assembly does not meet construction and fire code requirements for assembly,” the fact sheet explained.

According to the city, Salman “had regular gatherings of up to 80 people,” on his property. “He held services twice a week and collected a tithe at the services. The building that he held services in had a dais and chairs were aligned in a pew formation.” Additionally, the fact sheet explained, Salman “held himself out as a being a church through the media ... and claimed a church status for tax exemption purposes on his property.”

The city explained that because of the “regular, reoccurring high vehicular traffic in this quiet residential neighborhood, neighbors repeatedly complained about the public assembly occurring on his property.” Upon investigation city officials “discovered numerous building code violations primarily related to fire safety standards. Once apprised of these violations, the City could be held liable for not enforcing safety code requirements in the event anyone was injured on the premises.”

The fact sheet noted that before being fined and sentenced to jail time, Salman was repeatedly asked to comply with the city’s codes. “He chose to ignore these requests for voluntary compliance prior to the commencement of any proceedings.” The city claimed that officials had warned Salman of possible violations on his property as early as 2006.

Salman’s situation is not the first time in recent years that Christians holding home Bible studies and gatherings have been targeted by local officials. As reported by [The New American](#), last year a couple in San Juan Capistrano, California were fined \$300 by the city for holding Bible studies and Christian get-togethers in their home. The city overturned the citation and reimbursed the money after the couple threatened a lawsuit.

And, reported [Christianity Today](#), in 2009 “San Diego county officials issued a warning to David and Mary Jones for hosting a weekly Bible study in their home without a permit for religious assembly.” The county rescinded the warning later that year.

Also in 2009, reported the Christian news site, “Joe Sutherland of Gilbert, Arizona, was given a cease-and-desist order for church meetings in his home because it violated the city’s zoning code. The city council revised the code the following March to allow the meetings.”



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