



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on October 15, 2013

Youth Pastors Barred From School After Complaints of Proselytizing

A group of youth pastors in Bainbridge Island, Washington, have been barred from an area middle school following accusations that they were speaking to students about the Christian faith during the lunch hour.

Seattle's [KIRO-TV](#) reported that the Bainbridge Island School District has brought in outside investigators to determine if the pastors, who were working as cafeteria supervisors at Woodward Middle School, were guilty of evangelizing during school hours on district property.



"We can't ignore this," declared school board president Mike Spence. "There are just too many serious issues to consider here. That's pretty dangerous. It's a pretty slippery slope I guess I would say."

According to the allegations, students at the school reported to parents that the pastors were speaking to them about church, with one student calling the presence of the pastors at the school "creepy."

One of the pastors, Danny Smith, denied the allegations and took exception to the charges that there was anything untoward in their behavior or presence. "That for me is when I take an issue," Smith said, "when there are personal accusations about my character, creepiness, [or] weirdness. My purpose is to just be with these kids and make them feel valued and to help our community."

Smith, a pastor at [Island Church](#) in the community, emphasized that the only time he spoke about church was when students asked what he did. "My response is, 'I'm a youth pastor.' Even sometimes I say I'm a leader, because most of the kids don't know what a youth pastor is," he explained. He added that "I don't want to defend myself. I want to defend my motives. It's not about me; it's about why I'm there. It's not for evangelizing and it's not for proselytizing or recruiting."

One parent of an eighth-grade student at the school called it "a very dicey situation. I think they have to be really careful what they say."

Another parent defended the three pastors, saying that they "shouldn't be thought of as weird just because they want to volunteer at the school. It is a very litigious sort of community, but I also think it's a very open-minded community, so it's a contradiction."

In an e-mail sent to parents, the school's principal, Mike Florian, said, "I have not had a single report of any of our volunteers proselytizing or recruiting students on campus." Florian added, however, that "we are taking the concerns brought forward seriously. To ensure that volunteers in our school have been complying with all district policies, we will be having a non-district employee talk with students, staff, and parents for the purpose of fact-finding and determining if anyone has violated our policy."

At an October 10 school board meeting convened to discuss the situation, one parent, Darryl Martin, spoke out in defense of the pastors, saying they provided a strong supportive influence for some students. "If some of those volunteers were not there, taking the opportunity to meet my son, and help



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introduce him to other students, my son would spend most of the year eating lunch by himself,” Martin said.

In an emotional statement he offered at the meeting, Danny Smith said that his purpose in volunteering his time at the school is “to show each student that they are valued and they have worth.”

The [Christian News Network](#) recalled that a similar conflict arose in 2012 at a school in Wayne, Indiana, where the ACLU filed a lawsuit on behalf of a student whose parents alleged that a local youth pastor who visited the school during the lunch hour had handed the girl a pro-life brochure. The school district promptly revised its policy and banned the pastor from the school in an effort to persuade the ACLU to drop its suit.

Matt Staver of Liberty Counsel said such actions are unnecessary and unacceptable. “More often than not what you find is that these schools allow people to come to speak to people there and have lunch with those that they know and are associated with,” Staver said. “And in that particular situation, they can’t exclude a youth minister just because he’s a minister — because he is sharing a religious or Christian message with the students. He has every right to be able to be there, just like anyone else.”



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