



Written by [James Murphy](#) on March 31, 2020

## Florida Pastor Arrested for Defying “Safer at Home” Edict and Holding Services

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The pastor of the [River at Tampa Bay Church](#) has been arrested for violating a Hillsborough County, Florida, “safer at home” order meant to halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne turned himself in on Monday after the Hillsborough County sheriff announced that a warrant had been issued.



Howard-Browne was charged with unlawful assembly and violating public health emergency rules of isolation and quarantine. The pastor was released in less than an hour after posting a \$500 bond.

The church held two services on Sunday and offered transportation by bus to those services. Somewhere around 500 people are said to have attended.

At a press conference on Monday, Sheriff Chad Chronister laid out Howard-Browne’s alleged offenses.

“His reckless disregard for human life put hundreds of people in his congregation and thousands of residents who may interact with them this week in danger,” Chronister said. “They have access to technology allowing them to live stream their services over the internet and broadcast to their 400 members from the safety of their own homes, but instead they chose to gather at church.”

Chronister says his concern now is with the possible spread of the virus due to the church services. “I was appalled and also frightened at the fact that those individuals [were] thinking and believing they were doing the right thing. How many people are they going to infect if they have COVID-19?” Chronister asked.

“There is nothing more important than faith especially during a pandemic, but like every other church here in the Bay Area, do it responsibly.”

Howard-Browne, who is originally from South Africa and became a U.S. citizen, defended his decision to hold services in the days leading up to Sunday. He believes the issue is less about public health and more about the Constitution.

“We know what our rights are as citizens of this constitutional republic,” Howard Browne said. “As a citizen of the United States, I took my oath seriously. And so, I have no option, I have no choice. Not only does the First Amendment give me the right to speak freely, it also gives the right for peaceful assembly and practice religion freely.”

State Attorney Andrew Warren dismissed Howard-Browne’s First Amendment claims. “I think it’s



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unfortunate that the pastor here is hiding behind the First Amendment,” Warren said. “One, it’s absolutely clear that emergency orders like this are constitutional and valid. Second of all, leaders from our faith-based community across this country have embraced the importance of social distancing.”

Then, for good measure, Warren used the Gospel of Mark in an attempt to illustrate his point. “There is no more important commandment than to love thy neighbor as thyself,” Warren said. “Loving thy neighbors is protecting them, not jeopardizing their health by exposing them to this deadly virus.”

But Howard-Browne claims that the church took precautions seriously. For instance, families were allowed to sit together — as they would be at home — but social distancing standards were followed beyond family units. He also claimed that the church had machines that would basically keep the virus at bay. “We brought in thirteen machines that basically kill every virus in the place,” he said. “If they sneeze it shoots it down like at 100 miles per hour and it will neutralize it in a split second.”

A statement on the church’s website said: “We feel that it would be wrong for us to close our doors on them, at this time, or any time. In a time of crisis, people are fearful and in need of comfort and community.”

It can be argued that churches fall into the essential services category of institutions. For people who take their faith seriously, their eternal soul is far more important than any damage a virus might do. And listening to a sermon or singing hymns to a computer or a television is nowhere near the same as experiencing it first-hand.

Far more unnerving than the coronavirus itself is how easily our federal, state, and local governments have slipped seamlessly into an authoritarian mode of operation. It is in this way that tyranny becomes normalized. The fear of a virus must not outweigh our love of liberty.

As Ben Franklin said, “They who give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.”



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