



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Seventh-day Adventist Church
SOUTHERN UNION CONFERENCE

“God, in Bible times, directed the children of Israel . . . with those in our midst who may be infected.”

Religious Liberty

IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

While the world has been turned on its head over the current pandemic, many people are still concerned over issues of religious freedom. Since the stay-at-home order and other social gathering restrictions were put into place because of the virus outbreak, the Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty has been monitoring and evaluating this very fluid situation. Our concern over the closures of churches, whether voluntarily or by order, is to evaluate the motivation and method behind such.

Many people, not just Adventists, have questioned the constitutional authority of the government to prohibit churches from meeting. How can this be constitutional? Isn't this infringing upon my personal rights to free exercise of religion? The religious liberty department is grappling with these same issues.

Through prayerful study, review of current and past history, as well as the few court cases that have arisen since the start of the pandemic, we offer the following assessment.

The term “unprecedented times” seems to be the catchphrase of the year. And, while this is true in many ways, it is not true on the issue of a contagion spreading around the world. A hundred years ago, the world was faced with a similar pandemic when the Spanish flu started in 1918 and did not end until 1920. The Church was faced with many similar issues that we face today — but this time, we count ourselves lucky. We can still worship together in a meaningful way through live streaming, video chats, and other social media platforms. We can even continue to be faithful in returning our tithes and offerings using the Church's secure AdventistGiving app. These tools all allow for the continued work of the Church and its ministry, as well as providing a means to worship together that was not available a century ago. We can be thankful for the tools at our disposal; they allow us to safely shelter for the good of the whole while we continue to go about our Father's business, though a bit differently.

A hundred years ago, protective and timely quarantining was not utilized early enough or consistently enough to prevent more than 50 million people from dying from that pandemic. There are certainly lessons to be learned from history.

There have already been a few court cases (with more coming down the line) that were decided very rapidly in regards to church closings and the rights to free exercise of religion. All of those cases were decided in favor

of the quarantine. And, since we are speaking of the quarantine, we should evaluate the issue again in light of reason and understanding. The limits placed upon public gatherings were not implemented with the specific purpose of denying us the right to worship. On the contrary, governments are encouraging churches to reach out and share their faith in a safe manner. We should count ourselves fortunate to be able to live stream services and share in fellowship together with like-minded believers in different and innovative ways.

To date, the closing of churches has not singled out religion or even a particular religion. The state has a compelling interest in issuing stay-at-home orders. Church members should understand our own moral imperative in making sure that we do all we can to keep our fellow humans safe. With no vaccine, no medical cure, limited testing, as well as asymptomatic spreading of the virus, we must act with proper Christian charity in temporarily sacrificing our in-person worship services. Acting together to stop the spread of the epidemic will hopefully get us back worshipping together all the sooner.

God, in Bible times, directed the children of Israel (Leviticus 13) on what to do with those in our midst who may be infected. Remember that leprosy had no treatment or cure in biblical times, and, like COVID-19, could be passed along from person to person through contact and droplets. God's directive to the children of Israel was to quarantine, and continue to quarantine the infected until cured. Our problem today is that we do not know who is infected, so all must act judicially for the sake of our loved ones.

Some will say, as was said of leprosy, that COVID-19 is a curse from God upon this world for its wickedness. The appeal is made for you to reject this claim for what it is: satanic. Pestilence in our time is brought about by the architect of sin and suffering, Satan. It is another way for Satan to get people to turn away from a loving and caring God by accusing Him of cruelty, and to make people believe that God would do this to small children, the elderly, or chronically sick. Instead, we should utilize this time as a means of getting closer to God, realizing that even though His protection is surely being slowly withdrawn from the world, we will continue to abide in Him and He in us.

The God of our faith asks us to use discernment and utilize prudent measures to save lives. We use discernment to understand a threat to real religious freedom versus simply our preferred method of worship styles. We acknowledge everything is fluid. Everything is changing. Our assessment of this issue weeks from now may be totally different, depending on other factors. We have been given light that others do not have. God expects us to use proper discernment in these trying times.

The Southern Union Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty welcomes comments and discussion on this topic. We also offer town hall meetings via Zoom for your church during times of quarantining. Reach out to the department with your religious liberty needs. We are here for our church members, even during the quarantine.