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FAITH UNDER FIRE

Pastor waits for final word in Bible study citation

Couple ordered to get permit to host friends not out of woods yet

Posted: June 01, 2009
10:07 pm Eastern

By Drew Zahn
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A California pastor and his wife who were ordered by county officials to obtain a permit to continue hosting home Bible [studies](#) have been told the county's "cease and desist" order will be lifted and they may [resume](#) their studies, but they still await written confirmation that the county's threat of fines is over.



[WND first broke the news](#) of Pastor David Jones and his wife Mary, who was confronted by a [San Diego](#) County official, grilled over what is said at the couple's Tuesday night Bible studies and then later issued a citation barring the couple from hosting further studies until they obtain a Major Use Permit, the costs of which can escalate into the thousands. Mrs. Jones further reported the county official warned her that hosting the study – deemed a "religious assembly" subject to county codes – without the permit could result in fines escalating from \$100 to \$1,000.

Under a deluge of public response and a demand letter from the [Western Center for Law & Policy](#), the county has since backed off its demand and told the couple that they may resume their studies.

"It appears they're dropping the requirement of a Major Use Permit, and they're not considering them a 'religious assembly' any longer," said Dean Broyles, chief of the [law](#) center.

Broyles told WND that the couple met with county officials and were assured the citation would be rescinded. The county still has a few days left in a [five-day window](#) the WCLP established to issue a formal retraction in writing.

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"We're expecting a response from the county momentarily," Broyles said. "They've been telling the press that they're backing out of it, but we'll see what they actually do when they send us a letter."

Still at question is whether or not the county intends to pursue any action against the Joneses over [parking](#) restrictions, which is no trivial matter, asserts the pastor.

(Story continues below)

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"We're in trouble if they are going to go with a parking issue, because that means that thousands of people in Bible study groups could be cited for a parking violation," Jones said in an interview reported in the San Diego Union-Tribune.

"What about people who gather to play Texas Hold 'Em, Mommy and Me, 'Monday Night Football,' Boy Scouts, [Alcoholics Anonymous?](#) Everyone has a right as a homeowner to the quiet enjoyment of their [property](#)," Jones said. "We're not going to let it go."

Chandra Wallar, the county's general manager of land use and environment, earlier told the press that the county's action wasn't meant to clamp down on free [exercise](#) of religion, but to respond to parking and traffic issues.

"We've advised the pastor he has the authority to continue to hold his meetings just as he's held them," Wallar said. "My hope is we will be able to resolve the traffic concerns."

Broyles told WND he thought it unlikely that the county will pursue parking restrictions, as the Joneses' neighbors have said they have no complaints, but until the Joneses have something in writing, he won't know for certain.

"We're hoping they don't drop one issue and go after the Joneses on another," Broyles said. "We're hoping that issue will be dropped as well. We're just a little suspicious of their motives at this point."

After WND first broke the story, it spread to California television and newspapers and from there to CNN, Fox News and the Associated Press. The San Deigo Union-Tribune reports County Supervisor Greg Cox's office received hundreds of e-mail messages from concerned people as the news spread and Wallar said her department received hundreds of e-mails and phone calls as well.

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According to a letter issued by WCLP demanding the county retract its citation, the sequence of events developed this way:

"On April 10, 2009, Good Friday, a female county [employee](#) came to the Joneses' residence. The county employee appeared in the front yard and proceeded to take pictures of our clients' home," the letter said. "She noticed the Joneses' daughters in the front yard and asked to speak with their mother. Although she did not provide any paper work or identification, subsequent information obtained by the WCLP leads us to believe that the county employee who went to the Joneses' residence was Code Enforcement Officer Cherie Cham."

"Do you have a regular weekly meeting in your home? Do you sing? Do you say 'amen'?" the official reportedly asked. "Do you say, 'Praise the Lord'?"

The pastor's wife answered yes.

She says she was then told, however, that she must stop holding "religious assemblies" until she and her husband obtain a Major Use Permit from the county, a permit that often involves traffic and environmental studies, compliance with parking and sidewalk [regulations](#) and costs that top tens of thousands of dollars.

If they fail to pay for the MUP, the county official reportedly warned, the couple would be charged escalating fines beginning at \$100, then \$200, \$500, \$1000, "and then it will get ugly."

"Four things become clear when this case is legally analyzed," said the letter. "First, the Joneses' weekly Bible study is not a 'religious assembly' as defined by the county's ordinances rendering the requirement of an MUP inapplicable. Second, the county's order to stop hosting the weekly Bible study is a blatant violation of the Joneses' First Amendment right to freely exercise their religion.

"Third, the order also violates their First Amendment right to peaceably assemble. Fourth, the county's action is a substantial burden on the Joneses' ability to practice their religion in violation of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000," the letter said.

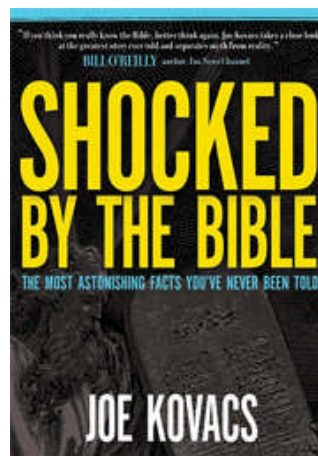


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Drew Zahn is a news editor for WorldNetDaily.



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