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FAITH UNDER FIRE
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American Christians face 'hate crime' for preaching gospel

Pastors told it's 'hate crime' to evangelize in Muslim area

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Two American-born pastors handing out gospel leaflets in a predominantly Muslim area of Birmingham, England, were threatened with arrest and warned of being beaten for committing what an officer called a "hate crime."

Arthur Cunningham, 48, and Joseph Abraham, 65, were handing out the leaflets and talking with local youths when they were approached and questioned by a police community support officer, or PCSO.

When the officer discovered the two Birmingham pastors were born in the U.S., he began a heated criticism of President Bush and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cunningham explained that the gospel message was not linked to American foreign policy, but the officer reportedly became belligerent.

"He said we were in a Muslim area and were not allowed to spread our Christian message," Cunningham told the London Telegraph. "He said we were committing a hate crime by telling the youths to leave Islam and said that he was going to take us to the police station."

(Story continues below)



In England a PCSO is a full-time employee of the police charged with community peacekeeping, but the officers do not have the power of arrest without a constable. In this case, the pastors refused to accompany the PCSO into the presence of a constable or to divulge their home addresses as, they said, the officer grew "threatening and intimidating."

The ministers also claim the PCSO bullied them, saying, "You have been warned. If you come back here and get beaten up, well, you have been warned."

The local police station has since announced that the matter was fully investigated and that the PCSO would be given corrective training, but the incident fuels concerns that there are areas in Britain where the Christian message is increasingly unwelcome.

In April, Rev. Michael Nazir-Ali, bishop of Rochester and the Church of England's only Pakistan-born bishop, wrote in the Telegraph that certain pockets of England were becoming "no-go" zones, places too dangerous for non-Muslims to enter.

Joseph Abraham, one of the threatened pastors agrees. He told the paper, "I couldn't believe this was happening in Britain. The bishop of Rochester was criticized by the Church of England recently when he said there were no-go areas in Britain, but he was right; there are certainly no-go areas for Christians who want to share the gospel."

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