

More Churches Take Fight Against Covid Ban to Court

Aldergrove, B.C. – Legal action against B.C. government bans on public worship will expand today as another 11 churches ask the province’s Supreme Court to quash the prohibitions.

A group of Canadian Reformed Churches representing 3500 B.C. residents from Surrey to Smithers has filed a petition arguing the orders by Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry violate Charter of Rights guarantees to freedom of religion and assembly.

The petition is independent of the case being pursued by the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, though a spokesman for the Reformed Church group said the objectives of re-opening houses of worship and protecting religious freedom are shared.

“We took the position that the ban on church openings was wrong, but that we would temporarily comply with it. Temporarily just left town. The ban has gone on too long and cannot be justified,” said Pastor Robert Schouten, of Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church.

Schouten stressed the Reformed Churches taking the legal action do not dispute the reality or risk of Covid-19. But he noted the government itself has acknowledged in a court affidavit only one quarter of 1% of all Covid cases can be linked to religious gatherings.

“We understand this is a deeply serious public health concern. But we question why we’re subjected to a special prohibition that does not apply to the hundreds of thousands of other B.C. citizens who use gyms, eat at restaurants, work on construction sites or shop at Costco, Walmart, Shopper’s Drug Mart and other stores,” he said.

So far, Schouten said, the health ministry has ignored the Reformed group’s calls to lift the ban despite four requests since Dec. 8, 2021, including the filing of a 9-point safety plan.

“The one reply we got was a form letter that didn’t address any of the points we raised, didn’t acknowledge the existence of our safety plan, and didn’t meet what our lawyers advise is the minimum standard of procedural fairness required by law,” he said.

Schouten said the only conclusion is that the Provincial Health Officer is prepared to continue violating Charter rights to freedom of religion and assembly on grounds that are neither reasonable nor scientifically justifiable.

“Public worship is not an app that can be downloaded or not as we choose. It is how our identity, the love, grace and nearness of God are expressed for us. We’re confident the Court will do the right thing in our case.”

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