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The Real Chronological Facts Leading Up to the Arrest of the Florida Pastor

Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne of The River at Tampa Bay Church was arrested for conducting a church service on Sunday, March 29, which Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister had approved three days earlier.

The following timeline reveals the actual facts that have not been reported by the media.

Thursday, March 26

- The Hillsborough County Council in open session released a draft “directive” with 42 paragraphs of exceptions, and a catch-all paragraph stating any business could operate without limitation on the number of people if they can implement a six-foot separation. The pastor and church staff spoke with Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister by speakerphone to propose a number of health precautions the church would take to protect those who might attend. The church proposed to take extra precautions to more than comply with the directive, which included the following:
- Following the CDC Guidelines, persons of a certain age and those with predisposed health conditions were advised to stay home, including anyone who had any concerns for their health or had physical symptoms of any kind;
- Every person who entered the church was required to use hand sanitizer;
- All the staff wore gloves;
- The church reduced the capacity of the church by removing many chairs and enforcing a six-foot distance between family groups in the auditorium as well as in the overflow rooms;
- In the farmer’s market and coffee shop in the lobby, the six-foot distance was enforced with the floor specifically marked;
- The church spent over \$100,000 on a hospital grade purification system set up throughout the church that provides continuous infectious microbial reduction (CIMR) that is rated to kill microbes, including those in the Coronavirus family.
- Sheriff Chronister personally informed the pastor and the church staff that the church could meet on Sunday, March 29.
- A deputy sheriff also toured the church to inspect the premises the same day.

Friday, March 27

- The Hillsborough County Council passed the order and it went into effect at 10:00 p.m. *This was the first and only enforceable order passed by the county.*
- The March 27 order contains, in paragraph 3, 42 sub-paragraphs of exceptions, including “religious personnel.” Following this long list of exceptions, in paragraph 5, the order adds another huge exception: **“Businesses which are not described in paragraph 3, and are able to maintain the required physical distancing (6 feet) may operate.”** (emphasis added). In other words, any business that is not in the long list of specific exceptions, is also exempted if it is able to comply with the six-foot separation between people. In such case, there is no limit on the number of people who can be present.

Saturday, March 28

- The church was thoroughly sanitized.

Sunday, March 29,

- The church met for services.

Monday, March 30

- The same Sheriff Chronister who gave the green light for the church to meet three days earlier on Thursday, March 26, held a press conference announcing the pastor’s arrest, during which Sheriff Chronister made many false statements. As soon as the pastor was informed that he was being charged around noon, he sent a text to Sheriff Chronister stating he could drive to the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office, but the sheriff did not respond. Instead, he hastily called a press conference at 1:00 p.m. to announce the arrest while it was in progress, stating that the Hernando County Sheriff Deputies were at the pastor’s home to arrest him.
- The following statements by Sheriff Chronister are false: (1) He stated that the pastor “repeatedly” violated the orders, but there was only one enforceable order passed by the county and that occurred on March 27; (2) He stated that the pastor was “reckless,” but the church undertook more health and distancing precautions than the commercial businesses that were permitted, and Sheriff Chronister approved the church to meet on March 29; (3) He said the pastor put the people at risk, but again the church went beyond the health guidelines and the sheriff approved the church to meet; (4) He stated that he wanted to “shame” the pastor and “make him an example,” and “send a message” to other pastors, but this same sheriff approved the church meeting the day before the arrest. It is the sheriff who was reckless, and as a result of his false statements during the press conference and to other media, he placed the pastor and the church in physical danger.
- The pastor was arrested at his home and bonded out later that afternoon.

Wednesday, April 1

- Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued Executive Order 2020-91, stating: “Attending religious services conducted in churches, synagogues and houses of worship” is an “essential activity.” The same day, Executive Order 2020-92 required that his order supersede any contrary local government order respecting essential services and activities. The Hillsborough County order restricting churches was therefore overruled.