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Evangelical Group Banned From Tulsa Housing Projects, Chapter Leader Says

Monday, June 08, 2009

Fox News

By James Osborne

A Christian evangelical group that works to improve the lives of underprivileged children says it has been prohibited from conducting Bible study classes in public housing projects in Tulsa, Okla., potentially violating a Supreme Court ruling that upheld religious groups' right to the use of public institutions.

For more than 70 years, the Missouri-based Child Evangelism Fellowship has worked with underprivileged kids, not only to convert them to Christianity, but to improve their lives through education and after-school activities. In one program, fellowship missionaries visit prisons and sign up inmates' children for Bible study programs in an effort to keep them from winding up in jail themselves.

And for more than two decades, the fellowship has hosted a religious-themed summer program in Tulsa's tough housing projects, designed to keep children from falling victim to the temptations of drugs and crime.

But recently, the fellowship was told that it was in violation of a long-standing policy prohibiting religious instruction on public housing property, said Larry Koehn, who heads the organization's chapter in the city.

"They said they have a policy now whereby we can't come in and talk about God or Christ," Koehn said. "We can come in and play games and talk about moral things, but we can't mention the name of God."

Koehn said he was informed of the decision by Youth at Heart, a non-profit company that administers recreational programs for the Tulsa Housing Authority. A company representative said she had been told to refer all calls about the evangelical group to the housing authority.

Chea Redditt, the housing authority president, declined to comment when reached by phone. She later issued a statement saying that religious groups had been present on housing authority property for some time, and those decisions were left to the resident associations at each complex.

Subsequent attempts to get housing authority officials to explain whether the evangelical group would be allowed back into the projects were unsuccessful.

Koehn said he didn't know why the fellowship was being forced out after 20 years. He said Youth at Heart said the rule has "always been in effect, but it's just never been enforced."

Mathew Staver, founder of the Liberty Counsel, a Florida-based law firm specializing in religious cases, said he will file a lawsuit in federal court against the housing authority if the fellowship isn't allowed back in.

"The rules are fairly straightforward," he said. "Some people dig their heels in and don't want to deal with it."

"There is a mistaken notion if you allow equal access to a religious group, you're violating the Constitution."

The Supreme Court ruled in 2001 that religious groups are afforded the same right as any other citizens' group to use and meet in public institutions, including schools and government buildings.

"Prior to that, sometimes they were and sometimes they weren't," Staver said. "There's still litigation that happens, even though that ruling should have resolved 98 percent of all issues."

The evangelical group in Tulsa hosts summer and after-school programs at a number of housing projects around the city, Koehn said. During each one-hour session, about 20 minutes is devoted to a Bible reading, with the remaining 40 minutes

tes devoted to games and other activities.

"Then at the end, there's an opportunity for the children to respond to an invitation to accept Christ as their savior," he said.

Koehn, 58, who has been working in Tulsa as a missionary with his wife since the mid-1980s, said he has encountered similar resistance before.

"Last fall, one of our schools said we couldn't hold a club after school for the same reasons," he said. "I contacted the Liberty Counsel and they wrote a letter to the school board explaining equal access, and they let us in."

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