



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Red Deer, AB

Day 3

April 28, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 3: James Coates

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[00:00:00]

Wayne Lenhardt

Good morning, Pastor Coates. Can you hear me?

I see your lips moving, but I can't hear any sound.

James Coates

Okay.

Wayne Lenhardt

There.

James Coates

I'm not sure how to mitigate that.

Wayne Lenhardt

I think we have you. We've got sound now. Okay, could you give us your full name, and then spell it for us, and then I'll do an oath with you.

James Coates

Yes, my name is James Coates, J-A-M-E-S C-O-A-T-E-S.

Wayne Lenhardt

Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth during your testimony today?

James Coates

Of course.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, just for our audience who may not be aware, I do recall that at one point you were interviewed by Tucker Carlson on his show, and you've had a certain amount of publicity, so I think I'll just turn you loose. Let's start in March of 2020 and start telling your story, and I will intervene if I think of something relevant.

James Coates

Yeah, sure, and just a word of correction: it was actually my wife that was on Tucker Carlson. So I was in prison at the time, and she was on Tucker's show and interviewed by him. And we think that may have been instrumental in my release, but I can put that aside for a moment.

So when the pandemic began, like everyone, we didn't know the full extent of the severity of the virus. And we were in the same place everybody else was as far as the information that was being given and trying to, you know, anticipate the severity of this thing. So when churches were ordered to close, shut down, limit gatherings, we opted to comply. We did that reluctantly, but we complied with nearly all of the guidelines that were in place for services. So we went to live stream. We were limiting to the capacity number that was given. We were, for the most part, reasonably socially distanced and all of that.

So we were largely in compliance, and during that time, during that first public health emergency, we were gathering data. All of us in the leadership were assessing the severity of the virus, evaluating the government's handling of the pandemic and the lockdowns, and the effects of them. So when the premier at the time, Premier Kenney, announced the end of the public health emergency in June of 2020, we were at that point in time prepared to open our doors and let our people decide whether or not they were going to return to normal, in-service gatherings. So we did that, and our people to some degree came back—not everyone—and our doors were open at that point in time. There were still guidelines in place; because the emergency had lapsed there was really no teeth in the legislation to penalize us for that.

And for the most part we were smooth sailing, as far as our services were concerned. We had a couple of cases of individuals coming to our gatherings—who were mildly symptomatic and then subsequently tested positive for COVID-19—and then did our own, internal contact tracing to see to what extent there was spread. And we had no evidence of any spread in our gathering, in either case. And we opted for two Sundays. During that time that we had opened up, we decided to go just to live stream for two Sundays, just to make sure that we weren't in some sort of ongoing spread of the virus. And again, this was still pretty early, so we're back in the summer of 2020.

But after those two Sundays, we had determined there was no ongoing spread of the virus, and so we reopened again. And that would have been in July, as I recall—July 2020—and we were open all the way until we ultimately were locked out of our facility in April of 2021.

Now, when things really kind of got dicey was in the second declared health emergency that was announced in November. At that particular point, our gatherings were getting some scrutiny from the community around us. Complaints were being made to AHS

[Alberta Health Services]; AHS was then contacting us. And we knew, come Sunday, December 13th, 2020, that AHS would be coming to our facility, and we were anticipating that. It turned out that they came that day with the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police]. We were trying to be, just, very transparent with our people, to give them as much information as possible

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to be able to navigate the very awkward circumstances that we were finding ourselves in. And so we sent an email ahead of December 13th and let our people know what they could expect. I found out later that that email was leaked to AHS, and so that's why AHS brought the RCMP to ensure they'd get entry into our facility.

So on December 13th, 2020, we had AHS and the RCMP in our services, standing on our balcony as we began our services. And we actually honour the RCMP; we actually believe that law enforcement is really important and realize that law enforcement officers are, you know, scrutinized pretty negatively—and especially with what was going on at that time in the U.S., south of the border of us. So we stood and gave a standing ovation to the RCMP, and honoured them and did that for multiple Sundays, in fact. And ultimately, we began our services, and they would kind of get the evidence that they needed and they would leave.

And so AHS, at that point in time, was driving the investigation. They came back on December 20th. I preached a sermon on that Sunday called, "The Time Has Come." In that sermon, I laid out a theological defense for why the church ought to be open. I also did get into some of the medical and legal aspects of the whole issue at play. And it was that sermon that really dialed things up because that sermon went viral. It made the six o'clock news on Monday, where they took an excerpt from that sermon, played it on live TV. And really, from my perspective, picked a phenomenal excerpt because the excerpt climaxes in the statement that Jesus Christ is Lord. And he is Lord! And so we were thrilled that they had selected that excerpt to use on the six o'clock news.

And so yeah, I mean, I spent that week wondering if I was going to get a knock on my door and whether I'd be with my family for Christmas. So things were dialing up. So I was already, at that point in time, concerned that there might be repercussions to me legally and that I could be potentially arrested for the fact that we were just opening our doors.

I mean, all we were doing as a leadership was opening our doors and letting our people decide whether or not they wanted to be there. They wanted to be there, and as shepherds of the flock, as shepherds of Christ, we're not going to tell people they can't come to the gathering. We knew, at that point in time, that the virus wasn't nearly as serious as they were making it out to be, that the measures that were in place were definitely government overreach. We knew at that particular point, in our obedience to Christ, that we had to stand and keep our doors open. That to capitulate at that point in time would have been born out of fear, would have been born out of any one of a number of motivations that would, ultimately, just be summed up as disobedience to Christ. We had to be obedient to Him, to honour Him, to glorify Him, so we took that stand.

And in the days and weeks subsequent to December 20th, I would say that the government utilized every possible tool they could to force us into submission. They used the court of public opinion through the media because we were severely treated in the media. They used the court system. The Court ordered us to comply with this health order that we had been given on December 17th.

And so at that particular point we had to decide what are we going to do? Are we going to appeal this? If we appeal it, then it's going to be, like, an eight-week wait for the appeal. And in theory, if you're going to appeal something, then you really ought to be complying with the legislation in place leading up to that appeal. We just did not feel we could do that. And so we opted to continue to meet—and could have been held in contempt of court, which can come with up to two years in imprisonment.

I mean, I can remember the Saturday where it was the Sunday before that Sunday that we would be in contempt of court, and I asked my lawyer at the time, James Kitchen, I said: "What's the likelihood of me doing jail time for this?" And he said, "Pretty likely." And I said, "How much?" He said, "Well, probably a couple of months." And that was a heavy Saturday. I mean, that was a really heavy Saturday. The pressure that was on me at that particular point was immense and difficult, in this moment, to describe.

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But we're here wanting to obey Christ and willing to lose it all for Him. So by God's grace, I was able to settle that turmoil that I was in that day, complete my sermon. And we met that following Sunday and could have been held in contempt of court—which AHS never took us back to court to do—which, at that point in time, seemed to indicate that they weren't ready to jail a pastor.

And so they basically ordered us to close our building unless we were going to comply with the *Public Health Act*. We just thought, well, that's kind of a lateral move. I mean, we've been having that discussion all the way along. So we were expecting them, in the week following that one Sunday where we would have been in contempt of court for them to take us back to court, but they were just ordering us to shut our doors, which is kind of what they were doing anyway. So we just continued to meet.

Things changed on February 7th because, at that point, the RCMP came into our building without AHS, on a Sunday. So that was a significant change for me; I knew things were different at that particular point, and that meant that the RCMP was now driving the investigation. So we had the RCMP in our gathering, on our balcony, on February 7th. And following that service, I was informed by one of the members of our leadership that they were going to arrest me, and so sort of up to me to determine when that would be. Would I turn myself in, or how would that look? And I just said, "Well, let's just do it now. I mean, let's not wait." So the RCMP came back to our facility—within about 15 minutes actually—and we went into the office. I was read my rights; I was arrested. I was released in the same moment, but officially arrested and served with what's called an "undertaking." The undertaking was ordering me to comply with the *Public Health Act*. I indicated to the officers, at the time, that I could not agree to the terms of the undertaking, so they wrote "refused to sign" where my signature would have gone and then indicated they'd be back next week, which meant they knew I'd be back next week.

Which was an amazing week because that following week I was doing—

Wayne Lenhardt

Excuse me?

James Coates

Yeah.

Wayne Lenhardt

Do you recall exactly what the undertaking was?

James Coates

Well, it was an undertaking ordering me to comply with *the Public Health Act*.

Wayne Lenhardt

Oh, okay. Okay.

James Coates

That was the whole thing the whole way along, they were trying to utilize every tool they possibly could to get us to comply with *the Public Health Act* and we're saying we can't do that. And we can't do that because it's in violation of the Lordship of Christ. Christ is head of His church. He dictates to the church the terms of worship. You know, initially when the pandemic broke, given our ignorance around the virus and even the new circumstances that we were dealing with at that time and our call to be submissive to the governing authorities—Romans XIII—we complied initially. But by that point in time, compliance with the government would have been disobedience to Christ, and so we knew that we couldn't comply with the *Public Health Act*.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay. Carry on.

James Coates

In that following week, I did a funeral. So I'm doing a funeral in the following week. So I've got the RCMP in my services, I'm doing funerals, and I'm just thinking to myself, does the government really want to jail a pastor who's just doing exactly what the Bible commands him to do?

So anyway, that following week we met, I preached a sermon called "Directing Government to Its Duty." That sermon went viral, as well. That sermon, I think, has over a hundred thousand views, if I'm not mistaken. And so that sermon went viral and it was on the heels of that sermon that I was going to be arrested again. I would need to turn myself in on the Tuesday because the Monday was Family Day. So I had two more sleeps in my bed and would turn myself in on Tuesday.

I turned myself in, and was brought before the justice of the peace. I had two hearings. The first was adjourned, and the second was going to result in my release. Ultimately, the Justice didn't think that it was necessary to imprison me, and he didn't think that imprisoning me would actually prevent our church from continuing to gather—and he was right, obviously—, and so I'd be released. So at that point in time, the question was for me at that point, I'm just in waiting: What kind of condition am I going to get?

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Like, am I going to be released and given a condition or am I going to have to agree to my condition to be released? And I knew I wouldn't be able to agree with the condition to be

released. So both myself and the RCMP officer were just kind of waiting to see how the condition would be written.

And the release of my bail condition required that I agree to the terms and I just couldn't do that. I couldn't agree to the terms because that would— Basically, the bail condition was, any time that I set foot on Grace Life Church property, I would need to be in compliance with the *Public Health Act*; which would mean that I can't just open our doors and host church services because we wouldn't be socially distanced. I'm not going to mandate the people mask and so forth. We'd be over the capacity limits and everything. So I just said, "Well, I can't agree to that condition." And at that point in time, I therefore couldn't be released. And so I was going to be held overnight until the morning, when I'd be taken to a courthouse.

In the middle of the night as I recall, it was about 3 a.m., I was woken up to be printed and my mug shot to be taken; which I thought was very strange in light of the fact that all I had to do was sign my condition, I'd be home. So I thought that was unusual.

To get to the courthouse the following morning, I was shackled and cuffed. Again, seems a bit strange in light of the fact that I'm not a flight risk. I mean, all I have to do is sign my condition and I can go home, so I don't need to be shackled. But I was brought to the courthouse the following day on, I guess it would have been, the 17th, Wednesday, of 2021, and it was determined at that point in time that I'd be taken to Remand Centre. And we would obviously appeal the bail condition that I was given, but there would be a period of time between that day and when that bail hearing would take place.

So later that day, I was taken to the Edmonton Remand Center. I spent 35 days in Edmonton Remand and was released on, I believe, Monday, March 22nd, 2021. I was released because the Crown adjusted the terms of my release and gave me terms that I could agree to. And so there was a deal that was struck between my legal team and the Crown to give me terms that I could agree to. I agreed to those terms, was released, and then we had our first service now that I'm out.

What's very interesting is that, during the entire time that I was imprisoned, AHS did not attempt to get into the facility, nor did the RCMP, but on the first Sunday that I'm back, they wanted to come in again. And we had two gentlemen from our church—wonderful men—who used Section 176 of the Criminal Code to keep them from interrupting our worship service and they were successful. And so we had that gathering. And in the following week, would have been, now— I think it was April 7th when this happened, Wednesday, April 7th, 2021. In the following week after that service—my first service back—I believe it's the RCMP, they broke into our building, changed our locks, locked us out, put up three layers of fencing around our facility so we couldn't access the property at all. There was 24/7 security surveillance of the property. There was security staff that wouldn't let us on our facility, and we were locked out.

So at that point in time, we went underground, and were going from location to location in undisclosed service locations. And we were just continuing to do exactly what we're called to do in obedience to Christ, is worship Him, and we did that. And you know, on the one hand, that was a really sweet time of worship because we were truly just worshipping, in the hundreds, the Lord, under the blue sky and out enjoying the elements. What was not so wonderful about that is that the government, law enforcement was, you know, dogging our steps. So had we not moved at one point, very likely that our entire leadership would have been arrested, had we gone forward with that gathering. Because we know that they were where we were the week before and there was apparently a canine unit.

And so anyway, we were pretty sure that that would have resulted in an arrest. In fact, I think that would have been the same weekend that Tim Stephens got his first arrest. And that was all revolving around the court order that AHS got in conjunction with the Whistle Stop—

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Is it Chris Scott, who was just on a moment ago? Anyway, so that's when AHS was using that dirty court order and using it very liberally. When it was for a particular purpose, they were using it for everyone. And of course, thankfully, the court system did rectify that. A higher court ruled that that was an unlawful use of that court order, which is wonderful.

And so we just basically were the underground church until we received our building back on July 1st—when everything opened up on Canada Day—and had our first service in our building on July 4th. And then just continued to meet.

And everything was, again, going along rather smoothly, until the third declared public health emergency took place. And you know, we just didn't know exactly how the government was going to handle it at that point in time. That was in September of 2021. And the question on our minds was, did the government want to have round two of that same battle or not? And it turns out that they didn't; they completely left us alone. There was no media coverage. AHS wasn't there, RCMP. We were left entirely alone at that point in time. There may have been an RCMP vehicle in the vicinity a couple of times during that period of time, but, for the most part, we were just entirely left alone and able to meet in peace as we had always intended.

Wayne Lenhardt

So at this point, you pretty much got back to normal, but it took until about September of 2021, am I right?

James Coates

Well, I mean— It's a good question because we were still meeting during a public health emergency. So is that normal? Like, we were meeting, but our government, on paper, wasn't permitting it. And I'm trying to recall now when that emergency ended. I can't even recall right now when the third one ended. I can't. So that would have been normal.

Wayne Lenhardt

I don't exactly recall, either.

James Coates

So normal would have been we're meeting, and we can't be penalized, arrested, fined for meeting. That's normal, and that didn't happen until later; probably into 2022 sometime.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, so is there anything else still pending that you want to tell us about?

James Coates

You know, the only thing that is still kind of pending would be the legal stuff. And everything is hinging on the Ingram case at this point in time, which is another case that's currently in the court system—and has been for over a year now—that we're waiting for a decision to be made on that. Once that decision falls, then a number of other dominoes will fall in lower courts, and we'll deal with my stuff personally. Which, at this point, the worst-case scenario is I'd be on the hook for a \$1,200 fine; which is really nothing at this point in time. The piece that remains for me personally is more symbolic, in the sense that I'm contesting the Charter right violation.

As far as our church is concerned, we could be on the hook for tens of thousands of dollars. But, again, you know, we'll just consider that money well spent because it was spent to worship our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Wayne Lenhardt

At this point, do the commissioners have any questions?

Commissioner Kaikkonen

I'm going to feel like the mayor in Texas at the beginning of COVID, who demanded that they get all the sermons from the ministers in that town. I'm just asking if, the two sermons that went viral, if we can have it introduced as evidence?

Sorry, Wayne, can we have the two sermons that went viral introduced as evidence?

Wayne Lenhardt

I suppose we could, if we have a copy of it.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Are you okay if we have a copy of those two sermons that went viral?

James Coates

Yeah, actually, there's two ways you can go about that. So the sermons are on our YouTube page. You can do that. I also have a book that I've co-authored, called *God vs. Government*. Both those sermons are in that book. They've been modified slightly for the nature of it being a book and not a sermon. But the record of those two sermons, in effect, is in that book,

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God vs. Government, that I've co-authored with Nathan Busenitz. Otherwise, there might be a way to get a transcript of the sermon itself.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you. And I'm sure that when you were in the wilderness, you felt like the church in the wilderness in Moses' time. So when the government was dogging your steps, how did you feel as a person—as an individual and a pastor—but, also how did the congregation feel?

James Coates

You know, it's difficult for me to be able to speak to how the congregation felt because I think that there would have been a variety of different responses to what was taking place. In some cases, there might have been excitement. In some cases, there might have been more concern, more turmoil. I think at that particular point, the congregation wasn't experiencing the heat of the government oppression.

If there was any sort of heat they were experiencing at that point in time, it would have been more from co-workers, employers, family members. Because our church had been made so public, in terms of what we were doing, that it did impact the work environment for certain folks and, certainly, the family relationships that would have existed in extended family. So I don't know that the congregation would have been feeling much, in way of — There would have been certain congregants who might have been involved in actually making their location available, and so they would have felt a little bit of cost in all of that, for sure.

But I think, you know, in my case, I can remember one Sunday in particular that we were heading out to a location, and we were trying to be discreet and fly under the cover, which is hard to do when you're, you know, three, four, five-hundred people, and it just seemed like we were blowing it at every point. And so you know, when all was said and done—

I'll tell you this story. So we were driving into a particular location and we can see that there are residents in the area who are there and watching us drive in, on their phone, not looking happy at all. And I'm just going, "Oh, we're finished. We're toast. I mean, this is it." So I'm going in thinking we're done and this is during the time that AHS had that court order they were using. It's the same Sunday, as I recall, that Tim Stephens had his first arrest, and it's the same Sunday that we would have been arrested had we met at the other location.

So anyway, we had one of our members go and speak to this this family and just say, "Hey, listen, we're a church and just let us know if you're going to call the cops and, you know, we'll leave." And they were thrilled! When they found out we were a church, they were thrilled. And then when they found out we were Grace Life Church, they were even more thrilled. And then they said they were going to phone all the neighbours and make sure all the neighbours knew everything was okay. Which was great in one sense, but probably gave that location away in another.

But, yeah, there were moments. It was hard. The whole time was hard. I mean, the level of intensity! There's no question, the government oppression, the intensity that we were experiencing on a, basically, daily basis was out of this world. I mean, our nerves were shot by the end of all of that. It was exhausting, but it was necessary because we believe there's a cost in following Christ and our desire is to bring honour and glory to His name.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And in terms of AHS, they would have had all the legal resources at their fingertips, and financial resources, as well, to get proper legal opinions that they couldn't apply that court case to every single entity, being the churches and the restaurants. What do you think they were thinking? Was it just laziness, perhaps, on the part of AHS, seeking out legal opinions that would have dug deeper, rather than having to go to a higher court ruling?

James Coates

Yeah, I mean, I think at this point in time, if I were to comment on what I believe motivated that, it's not going to be flattering for AHS. I don't think it'd be profitable for me to presume on what was in their hearts. I think, yeah, it'd probably be better to ask someone like Leighton Grey that question because he was involved, as I recall, in dealing with that whole court order being modified—yeah, the JCCF [Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms]. So I'm reluctant to comment on that because I think it could get me into trouble.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

It might get me into trouble, too.

[00:30:00]

I actually have two more questions; theological. A lot of the churches in Ontario where I was, were arguing Romans XIII: I and II, as their basis for staying closed. And I asked this question of a minister in Truro, so I'm going to kind of put you on the spot a little bit here, as well. I'm just wondering, how did you respond, from a theological perspective, to that argument that Romans XIII: I and II applied, and that was justification for all churches being closed, while you were still open?

James Coates

Yeah, so I mean at the outset, it's typical. I don't know that there's any theological tradition that wouldn't acknowledge that there are limits on government authority. You see that in the context of the Apostles, in Acts 5, they declare, in no uncertain terms, "We must obey God, not man." So everyone agrees that there's a limitation on government authority. There's a point where they are beyond their authority, and so that would be a good place to kind of, like, frame everything.

But if you go to Romans XIII, this gets settled because all authority is from God. So He's the source of it. He delegates that authority to spheres of authority, the government being one. And anytime God delegates anything, it's always with a particular purpose and that purpose is outlined in the verses that follow. That the government is in place to bring law and order; they're in place to praise good behaviour. The Bible defines what is good. They're there to penalize evil conduct. The Bible defines what is evil.

And so the government doesn't have unilateral, total authority to do whatever it wants in the matters and affairs of a country. They have a very particular responsibility given to them. And when they're beyond that authority, we're not under obligation to obey.

Obviously, if you choose not to obey, there are consequences that can come from that, as is evident in our case. But there are clear limits that are placed on the governing authorities. And it's not their authority to tell the church when it can worship, how it can worship, how far apart people have to be, whether a mask is to be worn while one worships, whether you can sing or not. That is outside of their jurisdiction. That is entirely within the context of the Headship of Christ over his church, and it's our responsibility, as elders, to protect and guard that Headship. And so when the government is trying to infringe on the authority of Christ by telling the church when and how it can worship, we're going, "No, you can't do that." And it's our responsibility to say no.

So everyone agrees that there are limits on government authority. So appealing to Romans XIII to justify compliance in the context of COVID is just begging the question. It doesn't

answer anything. Romans XIII needs to be accurately handled and applied to particular circumstances.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And churches are known for their good works in the community, is that right?

James Coates

Well, they certainly ought to be. I mean, I certainly can't speak for every church. But from my vantage point, as Grace Life continued to meet, the accusation would have been that we were not loving our neighbour when, in reality, we were. There's a beautiful—

Whenever you are obeying Christ—and we were obeying Him at the context of His Headship over the church. Whenever you are obeying Him on any level, you're obeying Him on every level. So once we settled that, no, this is clear overreach. The government doesn't have this authority. Romans XIII has limitations. Christ is head of His church. This is how our worship services are to be governed. Once we checked those boxes and worked all that out, then you can go to loving your neighbour.

We did the best thing possible to love our neighbour, whether they realize that or not. So whether an Albertan loves us or hates us, whether they support what we did or don't, it doesn't matter. We did the best possible thing for our province. And ultimately, it's the Lord's judgment, to either vindicate or otherwise, that claim. We actually loved Albertans, whether they liked us or not, through and through. And I think that is a testimony of good works in the community, for sure.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And then my final question is a little bit heart-wrenching for me to ask, but I'm going to ask it anyway. When you think of the visual of the RCMP standing while the congregation may have been sitting—before the standing ovations, where they thanked and recognized and acknowledged the RCMP in the church service—I'm just wondering how the children felt.

[00:35:00]

Here's these authority figures standing. They have guns. They are authority figures within the community. And then we take that respect that the church gave to those RCMP officers and then we take it, fast forward to the point where you were being arrested and other pastors were being arrested and the children had to watch.

I'm just wondering, has there been any conversations, either within your family or within the congregation members. where their families would be standing by and watching this where authority figures are put into their rightful place? And what, actually, they were thinking as children when these authority figures, that you readily and willingly gave respect to, suddenly changed their perspective, and said that what you were doing was not something that they acknowledged or approved of?

James Coates

Well, let me say this, that the officers that we were engaged with were guys that respected us, they treated us well. You know, we can disagree. I can disagree. I might have approached it differently if I were in their shoes.

In my estimation, the responsibility of a law enforcement officer, when an unjust order comes in, is to tell their superior, “No, we’re not going to do that.” Now, the superior can do a few different things at that point in time: they can fire you; they could just say, “Okay, well, you won’t, another guy will.” And that guy might not be as kind and nice, you know, so obviously these officers had to kind of weigh the pros and cons of being the ones that were going to be the front men on this case. But I would just say they were respectful, they were kind and gracious. And so apart from: I wish more law enforcement officers would have just said “no” to the superior above them and in unison—that would have been phenomenal. The next best thing is that they would treat us with respect, and they honoured us because we honoured them, and so I would just say that.

I think as far as the kids are concerned: yeah, it was confusing for the kids. I mean, kids grow up wanting to be police officers, right? They love law enforcement. To be a policeman is cool. So when the police are coming into your gathering and are arresting your pastor, yeah, it’s confusing for the kids. But the wonderful thing is this, though: Christ is a saviour of sinners. And we are all sinners; we have all sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.

And so as parents who love Christ and who have been saved through His death and resurrection, we are shepherding the hearts of our children and we’re wanting our children to receive the saving benefits of Christ and His work on the cross. And part of that is we’re shepherding their hearts and helping them understand that they need to extend forgiveness and grace to law enforcement and to honour and respect them, even if they’re not being honourable.

So there’s no question that there would have been discussions that would have come up at that time, but we have all the tools in the scriptures to shepherd their hearts and to help them to think through that. And to ensure that their heart toward law enforcement is what it ought to be, which is one of honour and respect. And so though it was confusing for sure, you know, we’ve got what we need to navigate that.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you very much for your testimony.

James Coates

You’re welcome.

Commissioner Drysdale

Good morning, Pastor Coates.

James Coates

Good morning.

Commissioner Drysdale

Can you tell me how many people were in your congregation prior to 2019, and how many are in your congregation today?

James Coates

Yeah, so on a strict average as we tracked our attendance, we would have been 350 on average, annually, in the years leading up to our whole saga with AHS. And at this point in time, now, it's hard to know what the annual average is, but we're often over 900. So it nearly tripled in size.

Commissioner Drysdale

What is the physical capacity of your facility?

James Coates

Yeah, so it's a little over 600, as far as the fire code occupancy, so we have two services now to accommodate that. And so yeah, we've got two services that we're currently running.

[00:40:00]

Commissioner Drysdale

So you have 900 congregants, plus or minus. Can you describe to me who makes up that congregation? What kind of people are in your congregation?

James Coates

Yeah, I don't know how to answer that. I mean—

Commissioner Drysdale

Well, are they all tall people? Are they all short people? Are they all plumbers? Are they carpenters? Are there doctors? Are there lawyers?

James Coates

Yeah, it's a wonderful cross section of Albertans. Yeah, doctors, professors. We've had law enforcement officers. We got mothers, widows. We've got a wonderful diversity of ethnicity. Yeah, it's exactly what you would expect the gospel to accomplish, where some from every tribe, tongue, and nation come together and worship the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Commissioner Drysdale

The reason I asked you that question is because I want to get a feel for whether this is an unusual group of people, or they're representative of the people of Alberta. You know, that it could be my neighbour, or they could be the person working with me at work. So having said all of that, can you describe for me how important it is for a believer to come to church and congregate? Is it a guideline? Is it a tenet? Why is that important?

James Coates

Well, and there's different ways to answer that question because, on the one hand, it's a command. I mean, we're commanded not to forsake the gathering of the Saints: Hebrews X. So on the one hand, we could go in the direction of the command. And there's all kinds of

commands in scripture that necessitate gathering corporately as the body of Christ, from all of the commands to one another: to love one another, to serve one another, and so forth. So we could just load up a grocery list of commands that necessitate gathering, but then we can go a different route and say, if something's commanded, there's a reason why it's commanded. And the reason why it's commanded that we gather is because the corporate gathering of the church is critical to the spiritual growth and development of the believer. And so it's in the corporate gathering that all of the means that the Holy Spirit uses to strengthen the believer, to grow the believer, to make the believer more like Christ, all of the different means that he uses, are most operative in that gathering: the preaching of the word, corporate prayer, corporate singing, the fellowship that takes place before and after the corporate gathering. All of that is absolutely critical to the spiritual growth and development of the Christian.

So when the government is saying that you can't meet, not only are they telling you can't do what God commands, but they're also keeping you from all that is critically necessary for your spiritual health. And I would make the case that your spiritual health is fundamentally more important than your physical health. Because look, if you don't know Christ— Let's just cut to the chase. If you don't know Christ savingly, then when you die, you enter everlasting hell. So that's problematic. That means that you could be the healthiest person today, get hit by a car, and enter eternal judgment. All of us need to be delivered from the consequences of sin.

I think, yesterday, the Ten Commandments were read. And the law is wonderful; it is good and holy and perfect. And yet, in reality, it makes us aware of our sinfulness. I mean, when you look at the commandments, you know you come short of them. Who hasn't lied? All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And so the law condemns; it makes us aware of our sinfulness. And that's why we need a saviour, and Christ is the saviour. God, the Father, sent His son into the world to live the life that we couldn't: the perfect holy life, die the death we deserve. Where He suffered under God's wrath, upon the cross, for the sin of all who would ever believe in His name. He died, went into the grave, and rose again, proving He had conquered both sin and death. We need to believe that message in order to be saved. And if you've believed that message, then regardless of what happens to you in this life, your eternity is secure.

So we can go from the command—you are commanded to meet—but there's a reason why you're commanded to meet

[00:45:00]

and it ties into your spiritual health. And your spiritual health is far more important than your physical health. Far more important because it has consequences for eternity.

And I would just say that if there are any who are listening to this now, who have not received Christ by faith, that they would turn from their sin and believe on Him now. What an opportunity, in this moment, to hear the saving message of the gospel and to be reconciled—

Commissioner Drysdale

I appreciate that, sir, but we have limited time, and I needed to interrupt you a little bit.

The reason I asked you that question is—I'm going to try to condense, in my clumsy way, what you were saying—essentially, this is a fundamental tenet or a fundamental belief of being a Christian.

What I'm going to ask you now is that, I don't know how much of the testimony you've been watching, but over and over and over again with the testimony that I've been watching, I've heard as a matter of fact, a previous witness, Dr. Susoeff—I'm not good with names—anyway, a previous witness who's a doctor said that one of the basic, fundamental tenets of medicine is informed consent. I heard lawyers and judges testify what the basic, fundamental tenets of justice was, and that is that two parties can appear before the court and be treated equally, and that's been violated. And I can go on and on about all of these groups who have basic, fundamental tenets, and they violated those.

And you didn't, and you went to jail. As a matter of fact, you were handcuffed and shackled, which I might want to talk to you a little bit about. But can you comment on the fact that so many of these other groups that I've talked about actually violated their fundamental requirements, and some of them are written in law—like in civil law—which is a little different than you, and yet you were in jail, and they're not. Could you comment to me about that a little bit?

James Coates

Yeah. Let me just try and get into my headspace on that. Because I had a thought, even as I was thinking about the content of the testimony of the previous dentist. There's a couple of things that I could say about that. One is that when it comes to— Yeah, you know what? I'm thinking through this. So I want to say that the government was telling me that I can't do exactly what I'm supposed to do. And so if you're telling me that I can't do the thing that I'm on God's green earth to do, and that I'm commanded to do, then we have a problem. And I'm going to have to take a stand at that particular point.

Whereas I want to say that, in the context of the medical profession, there is room for more pragmatism. There's room for more, you know, trying to stickhandle through that whole situation and try and sort of protect yourself, while still, maybe, doing what you're supposed to be doing. And maybe there isn't. I don't know.

I mean, the stand that we took is directly connected to why we exist. Maybe the doctor's in the same boat, and that's the point that the previous witness was trying to make: that they were violating their responsibility at the most fundamental level. At which point, if that's the case, if they were in the same boat that I was in but just failed to take the stand, then they may lack—

You have to realize that I'm laying my life down for Christ and He's worthy to lose it all for. If you don't have Christ then you might not navigate the situation the same way that I did. Now, I realize that that brings the whole other issue into play, as far as other pastors keeping their churches closed. But, yeah, I don't know what to say except that we wanted to obey Christ, and it was all for Him, and it would have been disobedience to capitulate, and so we just couldn't.

Commissioner Drysdale

One last thing, I just want to get a better picture in my mind. When you were arraigned—I guess that's what they call it—you were brought in with handcuffs? When you came into court, I believe you said you were shackled and handcuffed.

[00:50:00]

James Coates

Well, yeah, I mean, definitely when I was transferred from the RCMP headquarters to the courthouse Wednesday morning, after having turned myself in and having been with the justice of the peace. Yes, I was cuffed and shackled. We have video footage of it. It's made it into a documentary.

Commissioner Drysdale

Can you describe what shackles are? I think most people know what handcuffs are, but I'm not sure everyone knows what shackles are.

James Coates

Yeah, shackles, it's like cuffing your ankles. So you know, you've got to take baby steps, because you can't take a full stride, because your ankles are cuffed. It's what you put on criminals who are a flight risk. And so yeah, to shackle me and even cuff me— Yeah, it was significant. I remember sharing with my wife they did that to me, over the phone, and it got to me. It affected me significantly, that they shackled me, for sure.

Commissioner Drysdale

Were you humiliated by that?

James Coates

Oh, that's a good question. Is it humiliation? There were tears, for sure. I wept. Could I call it humiliation? Maybe. I'm not sure.

Commissioner Drysdale

Thank you, sir. That's all my questions.

Wayne Lenhardt

Are there any more questions from the commissioners?

Pastor Coates, if you wouldn't mind providing us a copy of that sermon that was requested by one of the commissioners, I think it was called "The Time Has Come," and maybe email it in. We'll enter it in on the record for your testimony and we'll make sure that it's accurate that way.

So on behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, thank you very, very much for your testimony today.

James Coates

Thank you for having me. Appreciate it.

[00:52:27]

Final Review and Approval: Anna Cairns, August 30, 2023.

The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an “intelligent verbatim” transcription method.

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