

Thousands of churches raise alarm about scope of new Canadian 'conversion therapy' ban

More than 4,000 pastors protested against Canadian law that describes biblical morality as a 'myth.'

Thousands of clergy in North America devoted their sermons on Sunday to affirming biblical sexual morality in response to a new Canadian law some warn could effectively criminalize such teachings.

An initiative begun by Liberty Coalition Canada and promulgated in the United States by Pastor John MacArthur of Los Angeles secured the support of more than 4,000 Christian pastors who publicly expressed their willingness to protest from the pulpit regarding Bill C-4, Fox News Digital has confirmed.

The controversial legislation, which went into effect Jan. 8 after being fast-tracked through the Canadian Parliament in December without extensive debate, describes as a "myth" the belief that heterosexuality and cisgender identity are preferable. Counseling that does not align with such a worldview now carries a potential five-year jail sentence.

Critics claim the language of the bill is overly broad and could even encompass private conversations. Several pastors, including some who have recently been imprisoned in Canada for keeping their churches open in defiance of government health orders, explained to Fox News that they believe the scope of the new law could open the door to religious persecution.

'Just going to escalate'

Leading the protest against the bill in the United States is Pastor John MacArthur, whose Grace Community Church in Los Angeles won an \$800,000 settlement in September after tussling with state and county authorities for continuing to congregate in defiance of the government.

MacArthur told Fox News that he believes widespread sexual immorality is evidence of divine judgment on a culture and predicted increased efforts to

silence those who speak out against it.

“Ultimately, the dissenters, the ones who will not cave in, are going to be those who are faithful to the Bible,” he said. “And that’s what’s already leading to laws made against doing what we are commanded to do in Scripture, which is to confront that sin. And that’s just going to escalate.”

“The fact that they identified it as a criminal conduct that could give you as much as five years in prison takes it to a completely different level, because Canadian pastors have been put in jail for just having church services,” he continued.

Pointing out similar legislation that has already been passed in various states, MacArthur sees Canada as a portent of trends already manifesting in the United States.

“I think it’s reached a level there in Canada that it hasn’t yet reached here, but it’s coming,” he said. “It’s coming fast.”

Feeding the beast

MacArthur’s involvement in the initiative was in part because of an email he received from Pastor James Coates, who was the first Canadian clergyman to be imprisoned in the name of public health.

When he refused to shutter his church in Edmonton last year, Coates spent more than a month in a maximum-security prison. Federal law enforcement later raided his church at dawn, locked it and barricaded it behind three layers of fencing.

Echoing MacArthur, Coates told Fox News he believes that Bill C-4 is “anything but loving” if it intends to “shut the LGBT community off from the saving and transforming message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“I believe our government is capitalizing on a politically expedient segment of its constituency in an effort to further dismantle Western civilization as we know it. To do this, it must outlaw its very foundation, which is rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview. Bill C-4 is another brick laid in this effort and is evidence that our government is under the judgment of God,” he said.

Coates warned that “as governments seek totalitarian authority over every aspect of society, it’s inevitable that they will persecute any and all who refuse to declare

allegiance to the state. As such, unless the tide of totalitarianism is stemmed, Christians can expect persecution to increase.”

Pastor Tim Stephens, who was imprisoned twice last year for keeping his Calgary church open, also told Fox News that he believes persecution is going to increase in Canada and other Western countries.

Stephens’ second arrest, which happened after a police helicopter found his church gathering outside, prompted Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., to send a letter to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urging it to consider adding Canada to its watch list.

“We’ve seen that the new prevailing worldview is totalitarian, seeking to define marriage, sexuality, and control health choices,” Stephens said. “It is absolutely intolerant to opposing beliefs. All socialistic and communistic movements hate the authority and law of God that Christianity promotes.

“Much of the church in Canada believes that compliance and compromise will promote peace and freedom, but this attitude only feeds the beast and will increase persecution and eliminate freedom,” he added.

Stephens said he and his church intend to speak with clarity regarding what they believe the Bible teaches about sexuality and gender regardless of Bill C-4. “This will test the new law and put the ball into the court of our government,” he said.

Pastor Artur Pawlowski, a Polish Canadian pastor from Calgary who has faced repeated dramatic arrests after refusing to limit church attendance, described Bill C-4 as “straight from Soviet Russia.”

“Nothing new under the sun,” said Pawlowski, who was ordered by a federal judge in October to recite a script denouncing his own opinions regarding COVID-19 and vaccines, even when he speaks in church. An appeals court later blocked the compelled speech ruling pending further litigation.

“I lived in a country that implemented laws like that,” said Pawlowski, who met with U.S. lawmakers and warned large audiences last summer that Western governments increasingly resemble the communist regime in Poland he fled as a young man. “The government was telling you what you can and cannot say.”

“I will always preach the whole Bible,” he continued. “And if someone comes to

me asking for help, for therapy, I want the government and everybody else to know I'll never turn that individual away. And if it costs me, so be it. But every hurting person who is asking me for help, I'll not turn away."

'A dark wave of hostility'

Pastor Andrew Brunson, a missionary whose unjust imprisonment in 2016 plunged Turkey into a diplomatic feud with the United States, has been warning since his dramatic, high-stakes release in 2018 that he believes religious persecution is swiftly approaching in Western countries.

Brunson, who now serves as special adviser for religious freedom at Family Research Council, told Fox News that he sees the issues around the Canadian law as part of "a dark wave of hostility" that he believes is going to crash onto the church.

"The commanding heights of our culture — most of our institutions — are dominated by people who are not serious God-followers, and therefore have little sympathy, understanding or tolerance for those who are," said Brunson, who emphasized that his statement was not a political one.

Brunson predicted that Christians will increasingly draw hostility for claiming salvation can only be obtained through Jesus, as well as for affirming that God demands obedience in hotly contested areas such as sexual morality, identity, life, marriage and biblical justice.

"I think those who hold to the standards of Jesus will be thought of as hateful, and will face varying degrees of social and financial pressure," he said.

Pastor Michael Thiessen, who is president of Liberty Coalition Canada, which began the initiative, told Fox News that he believes the government response to COVID-19 has helped prepare the way for such hostility.

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"Social engineering is reaching new levels here in Canada," said Thiessen, who explained that Canadian politicians "are less subtle with intolerance to nonconformity" than their American counterparts. "Whether COVID protocols, religious liberty, compelled speech — they are imposing a new social order devoid of our legal, religious or cultural heritage."

“A regime and agenda based on lies has to be coercive in order to maintain its power. It can’t rely on persuasion, truth, or beauty. So I anticipate further exile and punishment for non-conformists and those who will still stand and preach truth and reality in our time,” he added.

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