



California Couple Fined for Home Bible Study

Once again California has demonstrated why it is called the “Land Where Nothing Is Permitted.” A couple in San Juan Capistrano, a community in southern Orange County celebrated in song as the place to which the swallows return each March, has been fined \$300 by the city for holding Bible studies and Christian get-togethers in their home. Ironically, the community was founded as a Christian mission in the 1700s, and is home to the oldest building still in use in California (pictured at left) — a Catholic chapel where the mission’s founder, Father Junipero Serra, celebrated Mass.



According to the conservative news site [The Blaze](#), city officials determined that Chuck and Stephanie Fromm were “in violation of municipal code 9-3.301, which prohibits ‘religious, fraternal or non-profit’ organizations in residential neighborhoods without a permit. Stephanie hosts a Wednesday Bible study that draws about 20 attendees, and Chuck holds a Sunday service that gets about 50.”

Included in the institutions that need the special permit, according to the city’s code, are “churches, temples, synagogues, monasteries, religious retreats, and other places of religious worship and other fraternal and community service organizations.”

According to the [Pacific Justice Institute](#) (PJI), the legal advocacy group that is representing the couple in the case, when Chuck Fromm appealed the fine to the city, he was told that meetings of more than three people require a conditional use permit. Furthermore, officials “also stated that further religious gatherings in the home would be subject to a \$500 fine per meeting,” a PJI press release stated.

The [Capistrano Dispatch](#) reported that “in the neighborhood of large homes on even larger lots — the Fromms live in a 4,700-square-foot home on a parcel that also has a corral, barn, pool, and huge back lawn — Stephanie Fromm said parking was never a problem. Neither was noise, she said. ‘There’s no singing or music,’ she said. ‘It’s meditative.’”

Nonetheless, officials gave the Fromms a verbal warning about the violation in May, followed by the fines in June. “Capistrano’s code-enforcement department is reactive, meaning officers only respond to complaints,” reported the *Dispatch*. “Stephanie Fromm said most residents in the neighborhood ... are supportive of them, although at least one neighbor has voiced concerns.”

She said that while she and her husband are not keen on a lawsuit, “we have to stand up for what’s right. It’s not just a personal issue. Can you imagine anybody in any neighborhood, that one person can call and make it a living hell for someone else? That’s wrong ... and it’s just sad.”

Brad Dacus, PJI’s president, said it was outrageous for the city to react in such an oppressive manner to a simple home Bible study. “In a city so rich with religious history and tradition, this is particularly egregious. An informal gathering in a home cannot be treated with suspicion by the government, or worse than any other gathering of friends, just because it is religious.”



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 22, 2011

Dacus told [Focus on the Family](#) that it is interesting the city “would choose to enforce this against this couple having people over to their house for prayer and Bible study. We’ve heard no reports of them enforcing it against men who get together to watch football games on Sunday or couples playing bridge.”

The PJI attorney warned that should the city “succeed in shutting this home group down, we could see similar acts of persecution executed at the whim of any city, anywhere in America. We read about how China, Iran, and the other countries around the world invade homes and shut them down when they’re caught reading the Bible or praying, but this is not some foreign country. This is San Juan Capistrano, California.”

Concluded Dacus: “We cannot allow this to happen in America, and we will fight as long and as hard as it takes to restore this group’s religious freedom.”

Photo: The historic Mission San Juan Capistrano



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