



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 16, 2020

U.K. Church Leaders Take Government to Court Over Church-closure Orders

Over 100 Christian leaders in the United Kingdom are taking the U.K. and Welsh governments to court over their bans on worship services during coronavirus lockdowns.

Houses of worship throughout the U.K. were ordered to close in March but were gradually allowed to reopen by June. However, Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently imposed a new lockdown in which he demanded that churches cease all in-person activities except for small funerals, individual prayer, and various social services. According to [Christian Concern](#), whose legal-aid arm is assisting the pastors in their court battle, “These restrictions have once again made it a criminal offense for Christians to gather for worship or prayer, or to go to church for worship on a Sunday.”



Stephen Barnes/iStock/Getty Images Plus

The Welsh government, meanwhile, imposed its own three-week lockdown that shuttered churches. That lockdown ended November 9 but “could be in place again in the New Year,” noted Christian Concern.

The group says that 122 church leaders are seeking judicial review of these closure orders on various grounds. They claim that the orders violate the Human Rights Act and the Public Health 1984 Act; that officials failed to determine whether worship services were contributing to the spread of COVID-19 before issuing their edicts; and that “the state has unreasonably privileged the use of religious premises for secular purposes whilst prohibiting their use for religious purposes.”

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“Never in our history have our churches closed — not during wars, plagues or famines. Instead we have been places of respite and hope,” said Pastor Ade Omooba, who is leading the legal challenge.

“Churches provide many essential services to their members, local communities, and the nation as a whole,” he added. “But we can’t be relegated to a social service. The motivation and key to our service is our love for Jesus Christ and our care for the whole person, body, mind and soul. The very last thing that should be closed is churches, and then only with their agreement in times of dire emergency for a very short time.”

Christians made their objections known to Johnson well in advance of his lockdown decree. Hundreds of church leaders signed open letters to the prime minister in September and again in early November, urging him not to close churches again.



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Moreover, according to the [Independent](#), “The government’s own places-of-worship taskforce, which has been consulted through the pandemic, has also written to Boris Johnson, arguing that there was no scientific justification for shutting down services again given the great lengths taken to make them Covid-secure.”

Indeed, Johnson’s own science advisor, Professor Chris Whitty, [told a parliamentary committee](#) on November 3, “We haven’t got good evidence” to justify shutting down places of worship.

Despite this, the government proceeded to order church closures as part of its latest lockdown, claiming that doing so was “vital in tackling the spread of the virus” — never mind the fact that lockdowns have [utterly failed to prevent COVID-19 transmission](#) but have [caused a host of other serious problems](#).

“The government seems not to understand the very important and long held constitutional position of the independence of church and civil government,” said Omooba.

“We call on the government to recognize the vital importance of church ministry and the principle of church autonomy from the state.”

Dr. Gavin Ashenden, former honorary chaplain to the queen, took a broader view of the situation, citing “the last 1,000 years of our nation”:

This period has been punctuated by attempts by the government to control, restrict and prohibit the actions of Christian worshippers. From the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1170 through to the execution of both Protestant and Catholic dissenters in the 16th century, Christians have fought and died for the right to worship and order their spiritual and civic affairs according to their consciences.

Church leaders as their successors have a duty both to ensure we are faithful to their memory and sacrifices and in our generation to be faithful to our God and our consciences. Such fidelity sets us in polite but determined opposition to any government that closes the doors of Churches, prohibiting access to the sacraments and our corporate responsibilities to God and to one another.

And all God’s people said, “Amen!”



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