

Pursuit NW church to Health District, “We ain’t cancelling church!”

By KIENAN BRISCOE

Snohomish, Wash. – The Pursuit NW, located in the city of Snohomish, received a 14-page letter from the Snohomish Health District on February 22 warning the church of potential prosecution by the Washington State Attorney General’s Office for complaints that it was violating the Governor’s Healthy Washington – Roadmap to Recovery proclamation orders.

In the letter, the Snohomish Health District stated that, “The Pursuit NW continues to neglect following Governor Inslee’s Proclamation 20-25.4 and associated COVID-19 requirements for safe operation of religious and faith-based services.”

The letter did not specify what requirements were allegedly violated but did provide in detail the requirements for what it defined as a safe operation of religious and faith-based services.

At the time of the letter, the city of Snohomish, including the county of Snohomish was under Phase 2 restrictions that limit indoor services to 25% capacity or 200 persons. Penalties for violating the order include fines and criminal prosecution.

The Pursuit NW Response

Pastor Russell Johnson of The Pursuit NW responded with a YouTube video, published March 7, defiantly challenging the warning stating, “We ain’t cancelling church!”

In the video he declares that the first amendment protects the right to assemble for worship and practice faith.

“How can we go from a county that values religious freedom to having a government that now micromanages religious gatherings,” asked Pastor Johnson in video.

He stated that he trusts the science but not politicians as they tend to lust for power, control, and authority. Pastor Johnson then defiantly proclaimed in the video, “This coordinated campaign of intimidation and harassment against this church will not work.”

As of April 22, the video has over 10,000 views, 527 likes, and 76 dislikes.

Pastor Johnson founded The Pursuit NW church six years ago as part of a fellowship Christian assembly. Johnson stated he received multiple letters from the Department of Health threatening the following: the loss of the building’s liability insurance, fines, lawsuits, and criminal penalties to include time in the county jail.

There has been no correspondence from any state agency since the release of the YouTube video.

“I sensed that they were waging a campaign of intimidation against the church and my reaction was that we weren’t going to shut down,” Johnson told the Lynnwood Times. “We weren’t going to give in.”

Pastor Russell Johnson

Pastor Russell Johnson standing with his congregation. Source: We Ain’t Cancelling Church YouTube video.



Congregation at The Pursuit NW church in the city of Snohomish. Source: The Pursuit NW.



Pastor Russell Johnson standing with his congregation. Source: We Ain’t Cancelling Church YouTube video.

Johnson, born and raised in Seattle before moving to the city of Snohomish about ten years ago with his family. He has ministered for about the same number of years and has an undergraduate degree from Seattle Bible College and currently undergoing a Ph.D. at Northwest University.

Although Johnson has been on the staff of other churches, The Pursuit NW is the first he has ministered as senior pastor. The church is located in a refurbished J.C. Penny building at 265 Pine Avenue in Snohomish.

“I think it’s time for free people to act as if they are free people... We’re hoping this act of courage will spur on other people,” Johnson said.

The Pursuit NW COVID-19 Precautions

Johnson is unaware of any COVID-19 outbreaks within Pursuit Church and according to the Snohomish Health District’s letter there hasn’t been any reported cases.

However, in September 2020 there were two confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus 2019 (SARS-CoV2) detected among staff of The Pursuit NW Child Care/Pre-school. The childcare services were ended voluntarily by the church and both of the confirmed cases have since recovered.

Currently the church provides hand sanitizer and continues to cleanse its facilities to mitigate against COVID-19 transmission. Masks remain optional yet these are provided for attendees.

“I’m not anti-mask but I’m anti big government mandating adult health decisions...It’s not the government’s

role to determine what is and what is not essential,” Johnson said.

The Pursuit NW continues to host about 1,200 churchgoers every Sunday morning. Over the last year, Johnson speculates the church has grown 30-40%. Letters of support from other places of worship around the country as well as some hate mail and death threats have been received but he remains undeterred.

“Every church will have to make their own decision. This is not about me trying to tell people how to live their lives. But for me, in order to be true to my values and my conscious, this is a decision I had to make for my community,” Johnson told the Lynnwood Times.

The Pursuit NW church offers three services, nine, ten-thirty, and noon with the ten-thirty service offered as an online streaming service for those who want to remotely participate. Communion, baptisms, and choir all continue to be carried out.

Snohomish Mayor John Kartak

“I really appreciate Pastor Russell Johnson’s words when he says if a percentage of a church is allowed to gather, a church is not allowed to gather,” Snohomish Mayor John Kartak told the Lynnwood Times.

He continued, “When it comes to emergencies, I understand that the governor, and his or her agencies, have broad powers for safety purposes and I respect that. But after a year has gone by and the state legislature has had ample opportunity to hold emergency meetings to critique the governor’s orders,

which suspend civil liberties, I find that appalling and I find that a dereliction of duty on behalf of the legislative branch.”

Mayor Kartak has attended the church personally and describes it as “amazingly wonderful.” Aside from the service, The Pursuit NW, according to Mayor Kartak, continues to be an asset to the community holding community events at its expense, engaging in social help, and even paying off the student lunch debt for Emerson Elementary which is a school known for its low-income, high Latino immigrant enrollment.

According to Mayor Kartak, Pastor Johnson continually asks what he and his church can do for the community of Snohomish.

“The state constitution is very clear. Right after the preamble...it explains in article one, section one, the purpose for why Government exists. And that is to protect individual liberty. That’s what I’ve sworn an oath to uphold. I’m a man of my word. When I make an oath, I keep it,” Mayor Kartak said.

Washington State Attorney General

As of right now, the Attorney General’s Office and local prosecutors have no intention to pursue any charges. The Attorney General’s Office provided the following statement to the Lynnwood Times regarding any further action against The Pursuit NW.

“We have received complaints and have sent letters to the church, as well [as] notifications to the state. Our focus throughout the pandemic has been on education and knowledge sharing, unless there are cases confirmed and more measures are needed.

“Given that we have no evidence of ongoing transmission in the building, such measures beyond education and outreach are not warranted at this time.

“Most businesses, organizations and faith-based groups in Snohomish County are taking the right steps to protect their patrons and employees. It is our hope that with the case numbers rising and the emergence of more transmissible variants, that these groups who haven’t been following all the regulations come together so we can put COVID behind us.”

Snohomish County braces for the May 3 evaluation which may result in the county reverting back to Phase 2 restrictions by Friday, May 7.

Currently, Snohomish County is in Phase 3 which restricts religious services to an indoor maximum of 50% capacity or 400 persons. Governor Jay Inslee on April 9 updated and clarified the criteria for counties to stay in Phase 3 of the state’s Healthy Washington pandemic reopening plan. Counties now must fail both metrics for case counts and hospitalizations to be downgraded a phase level.

The current data point for new COVID cases as of April 24 is 223 per 100,000 population over 14 days which exceeds the 200 per 100,000 population threshold. The new hospitalizations per 100,000 population for the week ending April 24 is 5.3.