

OCEAN GROVE CAMP MEETING ASSOCIATION
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Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association Sues to prevent State of New Jersey from Forcing Church to Violate its Religious Beliefs

OCEAN GROVE, N.J. — The Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association of the United Methodist Church filed a federal lawsuit Saturday against New Jersey officials. The New Jersey Division on Civil Rights has threatened to prosecute the Camp Meeting Association for adhering to its deeply held religious beliefs. State officials launched an investigation after the Christian organization refused to allow a same-sex civil union ceremony at one of its worship facilities.

“Religious groups have the right to make their own decisions without government interference. The government can’t force a private Christian organization to use its property in a way that would violate its own religious beliefs,” said Brian Raum, senior legal counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, which is representing the Camp Meeting Association. “This action by the state of New Jersey is a gross violation of the First Amendment.”

Civil union ceremonies are specifically prohibited by the doctrines and beliefs of the United Methodist Church. The lawsuit claims that the state prosecution violates the Camp Meeting Association’s First Amendment rights to free speech, freedom of expressive association, and free exercise of religion.

The initial action taken by the state of New Jersey involves a worship facility known as the Boardwalk Pavilion. This building and others on the same site have hosted church and worship services for more than 100 years. It is currently used for Sunday worship services, a weekday middle-school and high school Bible program, a weekly summer band program, evening association meetings, and two to three Gospel music ministry programs each day during the summer season.

Despite this historic use and the Camp Meeting Association’s ownership of the property since 1869, the state has indicated it may declare the facility a place of public accommodation simply because it is located on a boardwalk. The boardwalk and the beach are also owned by the Camp Meeting Association.

“This is the kind of state interference Thomas Jefferson warned against when he referred to the ‘separation of church and state’ in his letter to the Danbury Baptists,” Raum noted.

The Camp Meeting’s mission is to provide opportunities for spiritual birth, growth, and renewal in a Christian seaside setting. “We appreciate the tremendous support and encouragement we have received from the community and others who participate in our ministry,” said Scott Hoffman, the association’s chief administrative officer.

A copy of the lawsuit, *Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association v. Vespa-Papaleo*, filed at the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey can be read at www.telladf.org/UserDocs/OceanGroveComplaint.pdf.

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