

June 24, 2021

Chair Nadine Maenza
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
732 N. Capitol Street, N.W., Suite A714
Washington, DC 20401

Dear Chair Maenza:

One of the most fundamental human rights is the freedom to practice one's faith according to the dictates of one's conscience. Last year, I urged the Department of Justice to bring federal lawsuits to uphold the rights of houses of worship burdened by unjust restrictions. Now I am writing to express my deep concern that this freedom is in peril across our nation's northern border.

In recent months, there have been numerous instances of Canadian pastors being arrested and jailed for holding worship services that do not comply with COVID-19 restrictions. On June 14, Pastor Tim Stephens of Fairview Baptist Church in Calgary, who was previously arrested in May, was arrested again at home in front of his wife and children. Media outlets captured heartbreaking video of the pastor's children sobbing as they held their father's hand through the barred window of a police car. Pastor Stephens' alleged violation was holding an outdoor worship service in a park, which was apparently discovered by a police helicopter flying overhead.

Other Canadian pastors, such as Pastor James Coates of GraceLife Church in Spruce Grove, have similarly faced arrests and enforcement actions. Authorities reportedly seized and fenced off the GraceLife Church building in April, which sparked a protest of hundreds of people in opposition to the move.

I am troubled that our Canadian neighbors are effectively being forced to gather in secret, undisclosed locations to exercise their basic freedom to worship. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that "[e]veryone has the following fundamental freedoms," which include the "freedom of conscience and religion." The arrests and actions taken to enforce overly burdensome and unjustified orders, however, do not seem to live up to this praiseworthy statement. Frankly, I would expect this sort of religious crackdown in Communist China, not in a prominent Western nation like Canada.

Canadian authorities' arrest of faith leaders and seizure of church property, among other enforcement actions, appear to constitute systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. I urge the Commission on International Religious

Freedom to take whatever action is necessary to address and rectify this situation, and consider adding Canada to the Commission's Watch List.

Thank you for your attention to this pressing matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Josh Hawley
United States Senator

CC:

The Honorable Kirsten Hillman
Ambassador of Canada to the United States
501 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20001