



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Saskatoon, SK

Day 2

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EVIDENCE

Witness 9: Steven Flippin

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Dellene Church

Welcome back to the National Citizens Inquiry. Our next witness is Steven Flippin. Steven, can you please state your name and spell your first and last name for the record?

Steven Flippin

Sure. My name is Steven Flippin, S-T-E-V-E-N. Last name Flippin, F-L-I-P-P-I-N.

Dellene Church

Thank you. Steven Flippin, in your testimony here today, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?

Steven Flippin

I do.

Dellene Church

Thank you. Steven, you're a pastor who was faced with several government restrictions and mandates that affected your church body as well as your congregation. How did your church react to the initial period of lockdowns and restrictions?

Steven Flippin

Sure. So two weeks to flatten the curve is what we were told. Fellowship Baptist Church here in Saskatoon were completely willing to follow the guidance of Saskatchewan Health, giving them the benefit of the doubt that they had some science to support the idea that a short-term shutdown would be beneficial to helping maintain our healthcare system. We closed our doors in March of 2020—moved our services, our teaching, to online.

We quickly realized that two weeks was going to be a significantly longer period of time. A two-and-a-half-year nightmare, really, of this COVID disaster. And there was very little, if any, science involved in any of it. And this was our biggest problem.

We found that people were falling prey to the repercussions of isolation: anxiety, depression, loneliness, uncertainty, distress, hopelessness. We soon began questioning the wisdom behind these decisions of our government and mandates. Our services remained limited to less than 10 people in-person until June of 2020, when we finally decided that we could no longer impose such limits.

We did try to meet other requirements as we could. We've got big wooden heavy pews. We moved pews out of our facility to accommodate social distancing. We provided masks and signage and hand sanitizer and arrows on the floor to control the flow of traffic—and everything else that we now know is absolute and utter nonsense. We cancelled our children's ministry. We did everything we could to try to comply. We segregated families as best we could. We cancelled social events like potlucks and weekly in-person studies and nursery. But what we could no longer do was limit our service to 10 people. And frankly, what we found was that our people's mental and spiritual health were being far more threatened—as was everyone in society—by the COVID lockdowns than they were by COVID itself.

To our delight, in June of 2020 the restrictions eased, giving us more capacity for in-person attendance. This would be enough to accommodate, at that time, the people who wanted to attend in person. We breathed a sigh of relief at the time, but we knew: come the next flu season, those restrictions would be returning. And so our membership met and discussed the issues. We decided that, should those restrictions return, we would not be imposing capacity limits. At all.

The problem for us is that the King of the Church is not Scott Moe, and it is not Dr. Shahab, and it is not Justin Trudeau. The King of the Church is Jesus Christ and Him alone. And so, Christ orders us to regularly gather together as a local assembly. Christ orders us, over 30 times in the New Testament, to practice what we call “The One Anothers.” And you cannot practice those commands of Christ apart from gathering together.

Christ's commands were far more important to us. Christ's commands are non-negotiable. Christ's commands are not subservient to public health, nor will they ever be. And so—

Dellene Church

And also, your concerns over the well-being of your congregation's mental state.

Steven Flippin

Absolutely! Absolutely, so one of the other restrictions that was placed on churches was the prohibition of singing.

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The problem is, Christ commands us to sing. I probably don't need to tell you where we landed on that command. In the fall of 2020 restrictions did tighten again, back to 30 people in person—and of course that was plus staff and volunteers.

The interesting thing for us at that time was that the local Costco here in Saskatoon was permitted to have 818 people in their store at that point. At one time. And they were able to rotate new people in and out of the store all day long, while our church was permitted to have 30 people.

We simply did not have room in our mandate from Christ to accommodate such limits. Because Christ welcomes all who come to Him, and as His ambassadors in this world, we are expected to do the same.

Our church was not in any way flaunting our choice of disobedience. We were simply going about our business quietly, peacefully, and allowing any who chose to come in person and worship with us a space to worship.

Dellene Church

Steven, can you give a little bit more information on the process that your church went through to reach that decision? Was it a board? Was it a congregation meeting?

Steven Flippin

Yeah, we have elders of our church who make all spiritual decisions for the church. We did consult with our members of the church, and we came to an agreement—yeah, fairly unanimously.

Dellene Church

Okay.

Steven Flippin

We had cancelled a ton of services for our people, but we could not compromise the Sunday morning worship. And we began to grow as a church, as a result of people finding out that we were allowing all who would choose to worship to come and join us. They were being neglected by their churches and we gave them a place to find teaching and fellowship. We would not turn them away because for us, to turn people away from worshipping our Christ is for us to flagrantly disobey our King—and we couldn't do that.

So we quietly continued peacefully gathering. And by the way our COVID numbers, as far as spread within the church, weren't any worse than the world around us. In fact I would say, because we left masking decisions up to the individual— After all, each individual in Canada has the right to personal bodily autonomy guaranteed them in the Charter. And so we left those decisions to the individuals. And because most of our people chose not to wear masks, not to place a “COVID-collector” over in their respiratory path, I would guess that actually our sickness in the church was far less than the world around us. That's science, of course.

I believe it was in early December 2021—sorry, 2020—that I received a complaint from Sask Health that someone had levied against us. We responded truthfully, letting Sask Health know that we were doing everything we could to accommodate the mandates. And we were. Everything we could.

We heard nothing further until mid-January of 2021, when we received a second complaint. The following Sunday, we had a member—a constable from the Saskatoon Police Service—

visit. He had received a complaint regarding the number of cars in the parking lot, wanted to give us a warning, but his supervisor insisted that he come in and do an investigation and report to Sask Health.

He arrived after our service had concluded. We proceeded to allow him into our facility. He looked around, made his observations. The following week we were visited covertly by a health inspector with Sask Health. He arrived as our service was already underway. As he tried to enter he didn't identify himself as a representative of Sask Health, but it was fairly easy to spot. We informed him at that time that *The Criminal Code of Canada*,

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section 176, prohibits the disruption of worship services or disturbance to the solemnity of worship services in Canada.

Allow me, if you would, to read from Section 176 of the Criminal Code. It says this:

Every person is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term of not more than 2 years or is guilty of an offence punishable on summary conviction who (a) by threats or force, unlawfully obstructs or prevents or endeavors to obstruct or prevent an officiant from celebrating a religious or spiritual service or performing any other function in connection with their calling, or (b) knowing that an officiant is about to perform, or is on their way to perform or is returning from a performance of any of the duties or functions mentioned in paragraph (a) assaults or offers any violence to them, or arrests them on a civil process, or under the pretence of executing a civil process. (2) Everyone who willfully disturbs or interrupts an assemblage of persons met for religious worship or for moral, social or benevolent purpose is guilty of an offence punishable on summary conviction. (3) Everyone who, at or near a meeting referred to in subsection (2) willfully does anything that disturbs the order or solemnity of the meeting is guilty of an offence punishable on summary conviction.

I read those words because I think it's very important that those words be entered into the public record. Those words have meaning. They're not difficult to understand. You do not need a law degree in order to recognize what it is that statute prohibits. Yes, it does apply to law enforcement. In fact, that statute was put in *The Criminal Code of Canada* specifically to protect the church from the state. It is statutes like this that separate Canada—or are supposed to separate Canada—from communist and totalitarian states.

We have the freedom to worship in this country. And yes, section 176 does apply to public health. They are not to disrupt, obstruct, prevent, interrupt, interfere, prohibit, disturb— In any way. Bringing police officers into the service to check for social distancing and masking and capacity limits and hand sanitizing? Yes, most definitely, that does qualify as a disruption to the solemnity of the worship service. It moves people's focus from our worship of God to the happenings of the world around us as imposed by the state.

We could also think of: what other aspects of the Criminal Code of Canada were absolutely set aside for public health? I can think of none.

Dellene Church

So Steven, what was the outcome of these investigations by the police and public health?

Steven Flippin

Yeah, so SHA did— They weren't allowed in our building, which they tried a number of times. We would allow them in after our services concluded, but not during our worship service. A number of times they tried gaining access. Eventually, we were given a number of tickets. Three tickets: two given to individual elders of our church, and one to the church as an entity for obstructing a lawful investigation.

Frankly, that's laughable because a lawful investigation does not violate the law in order to investigate. That's number one. So, three obstruction charges, one ticket for \$14,000 for a mass gathering and three charges to individuals in the church for failure to wear a face covering as per the SHA requirements. [START HERE]

Dellene Church

And what were the amount of these fines?

Steven Flippin

Well, there was the \$14,000 public, the mass gathering. The obstruction charges written to the two individual elders of the church could potentially be as high as \$75,000 a piece. I believe it was. And the obstruction charge written to the church

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as an entity could have been as high as \$250,000. So, yeah.

The other thing that's interesting is: We were the only corporate entity in Saskatchewan that I'm aware of that was ticketed by Sask Health and not reported to the media. And I think that's very interesting. Why would they not fully disclose the fact that Saskatchewan Health was targeting churches, was targeting worshippers for simply coming to worship and practice their faith? My guess is they didn't want the public to know. And we'll leave it at that. They were probably ashamed. They should be ashamed.

Dellene Church

So, what happened with these tickets?

Steven Flippin

Well, I would say— our government spied on churches, threatened churches, imposed huge financial penalties on churches for worshipping. We, of course, were fully aware that there were pastors in Canada— Like, this is Canada. This isn't China. Pastors in Canada went to jail for worshipping.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which is supposed to be the supreme law of our land, recognizes—and that's an important word, "recognizes"—that the Government of Canada does not give us our rights. If we read the preamble to the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, we recognize that our rights are granted us by God Himself, by the sovereign God. That's very important for us to understand.

In order for the government to limit our rights in Canada, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* requires them to demonstrably demonstrate that the things that they're putting into place are needed and reasonable for limiting such freedoms. They hadn't even tried.

They just assumed that, “because we say so, that means it is what it is.” And the problem is, the courts of our land gave them *carte blanche* access to do that.

There was no accountability whatsoever.

Our day in court finally did arrive: September of 2022. The prosecution extended to us a deal at that time, which our lawyers urged us to accept based mainly on the obstruction charges. We were told that no court would ever read section 176 of *The Criminal Code* the way we did.

Now it's important that I read that for you. It's not difficult to understand. If a court can't read that document the way we did, then the court is not capable of reading. It's that simple. That statute is clear—exceptionally so.

The government sought to amend the charges from the church as an entity to myself as its pastor. Which they did. And again, seeking to limit the government's exposure to the public, knowing that they were targeting and financially penalizing a church. In the end, our church—or our pastor, which is the same thing—we were fined a total of \$19,600 for obstruction, a mass gathering. And those were both given to myself. And then two face mask violations, which were given to individuals of the church. So in total, \$19,600. For worshipping. In Canada.

By the way, this—today—is the first time that those fines are being exposed publicly. The Government of Saskatchewan never exposed the fact that they charged our church. It was reported in the newspaper, the “mass gathering” at one point about a month after it happened but other than that—

Dellene Church

And, Steven, another thing I wanted to bring up is, as well as you being forced to take responsibility,

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personally, for these charges in the deal, you also had a very unusual quarantine experience when you and your family contracted COVID.

Steven Flippin

Yeah. In March of 2021, my wife— We had three foster children in our home at the time, along with our two sons. And one of the foster children contracted COVID from school. And we know that because of the contact tracing and all of that. And of course, it made its rounds through the whole house. We were all contacted by SHA [Saskatchewan Health Authority], ordered to quarantine and all of that, which we did. Every day throughout our quarantine, we were contacted by Sask Health. And on the last day we were called—each of us individually—by Sask Health to release us from quarantine.

It was about three or four days later that I got a call from the public health inspector who had been harassing our church. I would ask, one, how did he have my personal health record? Because legally, he had no right to my personal health record; he's a health inspector. So that's number one. He called me and informed me that he was, of his own authority, rescinding my release from quarantine because there was a new variant of concern and there was a new protocol put in place. The problem was, he didn't rescind any

other member of my family's quarantine. The kids were all back in school. My wife was back at work. Everything was fine for them. But I was to remain in quarantine for another—I think it was seven days.

Dellene Church

And what was happening during those seven days coming up?

Steven Flippin

Yeah, that was the interesting part. It happened to be the Easter weekend of 2021. And we had three worship services planned that weekend. And this health inspector was trying to shut down the worship of our church during what is one of the most important weekends of our year as we celebrate the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

So why does all of this matter? The church in Western culture has always been seen as of benefit to society. And for very good reason. Where the Christian gospel flourishes, crime and poverty are reduced. The gospel message is that man is sinful, that man is answerable to a holy God who must, by nature of His character and righteousness, punish sin and sinner. And of course, our problem is that we are sinners who can expect nothing from God but wrath and punishment. But God, being rich in mercy, with great love that He had for us, gave His son. He sent His one and only son. That whoever would believe on Him and His payment on our behalf, to cover the cost of our sinfulness that we would be saved from that vengeance of God. Those saved are given a new heart, a new direction, to love God and to keep his commands.

I mention all of that because our Canadian law is actually based on the moral law of God—or at least historically it has been. Therefore, where the gospel impacts men and women, society is bettered. Allow me if you would to quote from the first president of the United States, who said this: “We are persuaded that good Christians will always be good citizens, and that where righteousness prevails among individuals, the nation will be great and happy.”

Now, sadly, a pastor here in Canada—Pastor Steve Long, a Canadian Baptist minister—met three times with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Our Prime Minister, instead, referred to evangelical Christians in Canada as the “worst part of Canadian society.” Hopefully, as I read those two quotes, you can spot the difference between a great leader and someone that history should wish passes quickly and is forgotten just as quickly.

Dellene Church

One more thing I wanted to ask you, Steven: You mentioned that your congregation grew over this time. How much did your congregation grow?

[00:25:00]

Steven Flippin

Pre-COVID, we were running about 90 people per week in in-person attendance and we lost a few during COVID. By the way, we didn't lose any that I'm aware of because of fear of COVID. We lost a few out of fear of losing their jobs if their employers were to find out they attended that church. We lost some because they didn't feel like they could bear the

financial penalties that could come upon them should they continue to attend our church. Well, today, we're running probably an average of about 220 people at Fellowship Baptist.

Dellene Church

Okay.

Steven Flippin

So, God has blessed us a great deal.

Dellene Church

I'd like to turn it to the commissioners to see if they have any questions for you.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you for your testimony.

Steven Flippin

You're very welcome.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

I just would like some clarity. You made a comment about disobedience, and I'm just wondering, is it peaceful civil disobedience, or as you allude, obedience to a different king?

Steven Flippin

Well, I would say both. So, number one, within the church, we have a responsibility to be obedient to our Lord. That's what matters in the church. But we are also citizens of Canada, and as our government infringed upon rights that are guaranteed to us in the Charter, unless they are demonstrably demonstrated to be needed to be curtailed, we have the right in Canada to submit to our conscience and uphold those rights.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

In 2015, the P.M. also said that Christians need not apply; that was, I think, before he was P.M.

Do you remember that comment, and did you see the writing on the wall for his personal bias towards Christian churches?

Steven Flippin

Yeah. I think the writing on the wall has been clear for some time, certainly.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And in Ontario, where I am from, one of the questions we often asked is, "Why it was only the Jesus-believing churches that were being targeted and the police were surrounding? So in other words, what we found in Ontario—and it might be just because it's a greater

metropolis in the City of Toronto—is that the other churches were not being targeted: the non-Christian churches, so that would be the atheists, the mosques, et cetera. And you may not have had it because of population here, but it was something that was happening there. Do you have any reference points to their thoughts on that?

Steven Flippin

Yeah, I don't know why that is. I think that we believe fervently that obedience to our King is necessary and that, should we be placed in a situation where we are forced to choose between obedience to Christ and obedience to our government, we must choose obedience to Christ. And I think we're unique in that fashion.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

My next question is: you alluded to having moved all the furniture and tried to implement all the mandate measures within the church building. And I'm just wondering if you were to turn the tables a little bit with the government or the health authorities, would they allow you to go to their bulletin board and put a sign up that said Jesus loves you?

Steven Flippin

Yeah, my guess is not. Yeah.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And you refer to the court; the lawyers had advised you not to pursue this in one way. I'm just wondering what that legal precedent will do going forward if you chose to go the other way or the fact that you made that decision.

Steven Flippin

Well, it's interesting because, I believe it was in 2017, the Prime Minister and the Liberal Party of Canada sought to remove Section 176 from the Criminal Code. That's interesting to me. What we found in the last few years is that the reason that statute was not removed from the Criminal Code is because there was an outcry from Canadians saying, "No, that's important that it remain in our Criminal Code." So rather than remove it from the Criminal Code, we just ignored it.

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And what precedent is set when the courts ignore the fact that it's in the Criminal Code? I think that's very dangerous. What other sections of *The Criminal Code of Canada* will our courts decide they can impose if they choose to? That's dangerous.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And that comment segues into my final question. What recommendations do you have for the courts when it comes to dealing with our Charter rights and freedoms; our ability to have the right to worship; or to have a conscience to believe, thought; all of those freedoms and rights that we have? What recommendations would you give to the courts and the institutions that are in this country, that might facilitate less—maybe facilitate more understanding of freedom of religion?

Steven Flippin

Yeah, I'm not a lawyer, but I will say: reading the Charter and watching how the Charter has been manipulated and ignored, number one, get rid of section 1. When the government is allowed to determine how we should limit freedoms willy-nilly, which is exactly what happened here—

There has been no evidence given, whatsoever, that masks work. So why are masks imposed? What's the evidence showing that Costco should have 800 people and the church should have 30 people? There's no evidence for that. It's all arbitrary. What's the evidence for two meters of social distancing? All of this. None of it was needed. None of it was helpful.

So, number one, get rid of the section 1 of the Charter. I don't know. There's a lot we could say, I think.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you very much.

Commissioner Drysdale

Good afternoon, Pastor Flippin. You said that prior to COVID, your congregation was around 90 and now it's around 210 people, something like that, attending Sunday service?

Steven Flippin

That's right.

Commissioner Drysdale

Some people would say that Canada is becoming more secular and, as such, some people in this country might not understand exactly who your congregation is made up of. Can you comment on what kind of people go to your church?

Steven Flippin

Well, we have a very broad spectrum of folks at our church. We have a lot of young families and our congregation spreads the entire age gamut. We have a number of people who have, in the last 10 years, immigrated to Canada. We've got— You name it, we've got it in our church.

Commissioner Drysdale

So, you would say that it's a broad spectrum of everyday Canadians—

Steven Flippin

Absolutely.

Commissioner Drysdale

From all walks of life, all backgrounds—

Steven Flippin

Absolutely.

Commissioner Drysdale

Ages?

Steven Flippin

Yep.

Commissioner Drysdale

So, kind of a representative slice of Canada.

Steven Flippin

Certainly.

Commissioner Drysdale

Can you describe the nature of the relationship between your congregation and its pastor?

Steven Flippin

And it's pastor?

Commissioner Drysdale

And it's pastor, yourself.

Steven Flippin

Well, I would say the relationship between the church and myself is a very close relationship. The church relies on the service that I provide in teaching and counselling and just being there for them. I'm not sure what else you—

Commissioner Drysdale

Well, what I'm trying to get at is that you serve a community support.

Steven Flippin

Absolutely.

Commissioner Drysdale

So you've created community, you're supporting community. You're trying to, if you will, provide a social fabric in which your congregation can live and prosper.

Steven Flippin

For sure.

Commissioner Drysdale

During the lockdowns and during the times of isolation, was the government doing anything to promote that same social environment, that sense of community amongst people,

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to give them hope, that you were trying to do?

Steven Flippin

No. Not only were they not doing that, but they were pressing further; they were threatening. I mean, we as a church, my family, our congregation—we believed sincerely that I was going to be going to jail for keeping our church open. So not only was our government not filling that void, they were threatening to jail those who were.

Commissioner Drysdale

I'm not from Saskatchewan, but I did hear you say that, during the time that you were under lockdowns and that you were restricted, Costco was open. And were liquor stores open?

Steven Flippin

Yes.

Commissioner Drysdale

Were marijuana stores open?

Steven Flippin

Yes.

Commissioner Drysdale

But churches were under restriction, were under inspection.

Steven Flippin

Yeah.

Commissioner Drysdale

How many people in your congregation died from COVID-19 to your knowledge?

Steven Flippin

To my knowledge, we had one individual who died with COVID. And I would question whether it was COVID that killed them.

Commissioner Drysdale

Thank you, sir.

Dellene Church

On behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, I'd like to thank you very much for your testimony today, pastor.

Steven Flippin

Thank you.

[00:36:44]



Final Review and Approval: Jodi Bruhn, August 21, 2023.

The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an “intelligent verbatim” transcription method.

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