



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Winnipeg, MB

Day 1

April 13, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 8: Tobias Tissen

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[00:00:00]

Kyle Morgan

The next witness is Tobias Tissen. Can you spell and state your full name, sir?

Tobias Tissen

My name is Tobias Tissen, T-O-B-I-A-S T-I-S-S-E-N.

Kyle Morgan

Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Tobias Tissen

I do.

Kyle Morgan

Can you tell us where you're from, sir?

Tobias Tissen

I currently live in the Steinbach area. And previously, I moved to Canada from Germany, back in 2006.

Kyle Morgan

And what type of work were you doing prior to the COVID outbreak, I guess in early 2020? Do you recall?

Tobias Tissen

Prior to that, I was actually attending to my father who was on home care. He had had heart failure, and he passed away in early of 2020, April. I was on government support to take care of him and that's actually the beginning of when all the lockdowns hit and really, really affected us.

Kyle Morgan

I understand you were preaching at a church congregation during the same time, is that right?

Tobias Tissen

That's right. I was preaching, still preaching, at the Church of God.

Kyle Morgan

Are you a pastor? Would you describe— Sure.

Commissioner Drysdale

You know, our largest viewers are on the internet right now, and with all of the clapping—and I understand the emotion—but with all of the clapping and interruption, it's making that very difficult. We want to really keep this thing going, and some of the witnesses are a little nervous. So I please ask you again to restrain yourselves. At the end, absolutely, give your appreciation of the witnesses. But let's cut that down in between, please. Thank you.

Kyle Morgan

I know a lot of people refer to you as a pastor. Do you consider yourself a pastor?

Tobias Tissen

I don't really consider myself a pastor. Although I do assist, I preach, and I help in the congregation.

Kyle Morgan

Now, what do you recall once the first restrictions were put into effect in 2020? What do you remember from that time?

Tobias Tissen

So it affected us because they started capping off limits of people being able to go to church, and it went down to 50 per cent. And after that, they reduced it to 25 per cent, 10 per cent. And after that, I believe 10 individuals. And I believe, maybe even down to five.

We're a very close-knit congregation of about 160 people, and we really need each other. And there's a reason why church people gather, why they have church multiple times a week. It's because church functions like a family, and the family is there for one another.

Another way it affected us is, like I mentioned already, my father passed in April of 2020. He passed at a young age. I am only 28. I was 25 at the time. He was 48. And we were not

able to have a funeral like we wanted to. It was right at the beginning, but it was already so far locked down that only 10 people were allowed to be inside buildings. And we were forced to pretty much have an outdoor parking lot funeral service.

When it came to the burial, human is human and people flock together. And by the time my father was buried, RCMP showed up and were wondering what was going on. Thankfully, I had friends that handled all that at the time; I didn't speak to the RCMP then. But it shows how inhumane this response was.

Kyle Morgan

I believe the RCMP attended a church service you were at. Or maybe that happened more than once. Is that right?

Tobias Tissen

Definitely more than once.

Kyle Morgan

Can you tell us about that?

Tobias Tissen

I can't recall how many times they were out there monitoring, service after service, counting how many people walked into the building from the road. One instance we had on November 29th of 2020 was—

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Back at the time, it was illegal to have any indoor gatherings, as well as drive-in church services. And so, we were determined— And let me make this clear, we're not being rebellious for the sake of being rebellious. We're very peaceful, law-abiding citizens. I can speak for our church that we are. And so, we feel an obligation before God to fulfill scripture, and scripture tells us that we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. So we were determined to at least have a drive-in service and show the hypocrisy of the government because while we were forbidden to have our parking lot filled, the big-box stores had all their parking lots flooded.

So we were in for a shock that morning, though, because by the time I came to church— well over an hour before it was set to start—there was a tow truck on scene. And there was police on scene. By the time it was 45 minutes prior to service, an RCMP cruiser had blocked the entrance way to our parking lot. And there was a lot of vehicles. Word had gotten around: people knew there was going to be a church here that was going to be open. And so, people pulled in, and there was no way to get onto the yard. The whole highway ended up being blocked up. And we brought out a pickup truck close to the end of the driveway there, and I delivered a bit of a sermon. We did some singing, peacefully, and we disbanded from there.

At the same time, though, big-box stores were open; parking lots were filled. Same time, there was a car rally for the farmers of India, and people stayed in their car just like they stayed in their car at our parking lot. Nobody was fined there. Nobody was in trouble. But

the church and myself both received a fine for that instance. The church received a fine of \$5,000, and I received a fine of \$1,296.

Kyle Morgan

I believe you received a number of other tickets on other occasions. Is that right?

Tobias Tissen

Many. Many for simply being there for people. Just like we've heard other witness reports, there was a lot of loneliness, a lot of people having no one. And church was like their avenue of socializing, of getting together with somebody, and exchanging human needs, spiritual needs. And I had to be there.

Being a preacher is not a career. Being a pastor is not a career, although maybe it's viewed as such. But being a preacher is a calling, is something that someone feels responsible before God and that someone would do without pay. Pay is not what makes a pastor; it's their responsibility. I've got to help people's spiritual need.

Kyle Morgan

And I understand you were arrested also. Is that right, sir?

Tobias Tissen

That's right. I was arrested on October 18th of 2021. A warrant has been out prior to that for about six months, and I was literally hunted down. On the night of my arrest, my family and I were having a gathering at a park. My mother, who was living with us, had decided to move to Europe, and so it was her last evening, and we went out to have a little goodbye gathering. And someone saw me at the park, reported it, and as soon as I pulled off the park, there was several police cruisers that went and hauled me off.

Kyle Morgan

And how long were you in jail for?

Tobias Tissen

I was in jail for 45 hours—two nights—and it was a horrible experience. I've never had a run-in with the law before, never been to jail before. And I was placed in a cell facing away from the clock. I had no idea what time it was, basically ever.

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For one night, I was in custody; the next day, I was moved to remand. And in there, I had to stay. I had half an hour within a 24-hour period to get out of my cell.

Kyle Morgan

And then you would have been released on bail with conditions, is that right?

Tobias Tissen

That's right, I was released on bail. I could have been released sooner, but I didn't agree to the conditions at the time because the conditions prohibited me from going to church. And I could not, I could not in conscience, in good conscience, sign that. And so, the lawyers worked for me to amend those conditions so that I was able to still go to church.

Kyle Morgan

Is it true that your children would have witnessed your arrest? Is that right?

Tobias Tissen

That's correct. My children are still traumatized. I have two boys and a little girl. The oldest is seven, the second is four, the baby is 10 months. My wife was actually just a few weeks pregnant when I was arrested. And my boys witnessed not just the arrest but multiple times of officers coming to our door. Not just one officer, but two, three, sometimes five coming and handing tickets. To this day, like we live in Steinbach, when I talk of going to Winnipeg, they're like, "I wanna stay home." It'll be something that at their young age, they won't ever forget. The night of my arrest, the whole congregation went out to the police station, and they were singing and walking around the building. I have a little picture of my two little boys peering into the station, hoping to catch a glimpse of me. And it's, it's heart wrenching.

Kyle Morgan

We know that there's been a lot of controversy and division in a lot of areas over what's happened. Was there any division in your church or that you experienced?

Tobias Tissen

There was none. We're a family. Everyone had my back. I'm part of the most amazing church. And not just in Steinbach, we're a global church. Worldwide, messages were pouring into my family of support and prayers.

Kyle Morgan

Within the wider community, did you experience a lot of support?

Tobias Tissen

There was a lot of friends, absolutely. But there was also a lot of hate going on. It is something that I feel was part of the government's tactic to put something out there to divide humanity. The saying goes "divide and conquer," and that was their motive.

Kyle Morgan

Do you remember if there was much transmission of COVID in your church congregation, COVID-19?

Tobias Tissen

Probably someone had it. But we're all old enough to know to stay home when we're sick. And when someone felt ill, they stayed home. We had, not that I know of any outbreaks, no COVID deaths, no reactions, and everyone is still there.

Kyle Morgan

Were there any other effects on the people of your church congregation? Did any of the government restrictions affect your congregation in any way?

Tobias Tissen

Absolutely. When the restrictions came in, in the beginning, we were like, "What is this? This is so new." We didn't know exactly what this was, so we stayed home for a bit. And then we went to drive-in. And pretty soon, we found out it's not the same. People were struggling spiritually that needed support and couldn't get the support as freely. So we felt like, rather have the fines, rather have all that, but we've got to be there for each other.

Kyle Morgan

Was there also a school associated to your church? Was that affected in any way?

Tobias Tissen

We have a private school, and every year we have a graduation ceremony, a little bit of a presentation and a school picnic. And of course, those years when those gatherings were limited, we couldn't, which was really sad for the children,

[00:15:00]

really, the whole congregation because it was a fun day for everybody to get together.

Kyle Morgan

I'll ask you one last question that I've asked all the witnesses: What do you think should have been done differently in the government's response to COVID-19? Does anything come to mind?

Tobias Tissen

There should have been more of a feeling out of, "How are people handling this," instead of a crackdown of a "dictative" approach. There should have been a— "How are you treating this?" I mean, if they have the resources to send all those officers to one little church, why not come out and see: "How are you all doing? What are you doing about this? Are you protecting yourself? Are the sick ones staying home?" And allow us to use our common sense.

Kyle Morgan

I think those are all the questions I have. I don't know if the commissioners have any questions for you. Let's go ahead, Dr. Bernard.

Commissioner Massie

Yeah, I'm wondering if the oppression or the restriction that was put on the practice of religion is not triggering some sort of questioning from people that were not particularly inclined to do religious practice, to wonder whether this shouldn't be something they might consider in the future. A sort of, why is it that this was targeted as something that needed to be crushed?

Tobias Tissen

Definitely. Well, there were a number of people that came out to church that normally wouldn't have. And I'm sure the question was raised in many people, how come big-box stores stayed open? How come liquor stores stayed open? But why was the target on the church? And I believe many were awakened.

Kyle Morgan

Any other questions? Go ahead, Janice?

Commissioner Kaikkonen

I actually have a lot of questions, but I don't think we have time. I'm just wondering, when you went to court, did you have an opportunity to ask about the discrepancy between the box stores and the churches being open or closed?

Tobias Tissen

By the time we got to court, they took our rights to use the Charter, based on a previous court ruling that the Justice Centre [JCCF] with several churches challenged the Province. And all of those concerns were raised by those lawyers—I was a part of that lawsuit—and the Chief Justice Joyal found that our Charter of Rights were not violated.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you.

Kyle Morgan

No more questions? Okay. Thank you very much, Tobias.

Tobias Tissen

Thank you, sir.

[00:18:46]

Final Review and Approval: Margaret Phillips, August 10, 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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