

What are church rights under the laws? Following the [disruption](#) of [worship](#) at a Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) church in St. Paul, Minnesota, yesterday (Jan. 18), experts are advising pastors and lay leaders about the legal rights of churches. With protesters claiming the right to free speech, churches should understand their own protections under federal and state law.

On Sunday, a group of people protesting recent operations by U.S. [Immigrations and Custom Enforcement](#) (ICE) entered the sanctuary of [Cities Church](#) and disrupted worship. According to reports, the group claimed that one of the church pastors has links to ICE.

Some protesters chanted the name of Renee Good, the motorist who was shot and killed by ICE officer Jonathan Ross on Jan. 7. Videos from Sunday's incident at Cities Church show some worshipers leaving the area, while others comforted frightened [children](#).

On Monday, Jan. 19, the North American Mission Board (NAMB) released a [statement](#) calling the anti-ICE protest that disrupted [Cities Church](#) worship service in St. Paul, Minnesota, on Sunday morning "lawless harassment."

[Cities Church](#) is a church plant supported by the SBC's [Send Network](#). According to the Send Network's website, the SBC has planted more than 11,000 churches across North America since 2010.

A group of [protesters](#), accompanied by former CNN journalist Don Lemon, barged into the church as lead pastor Jonathan Parnell was leading worship.

"Protesters forcibly disrupted worship," NAMB's statement said, "barging into the church building and violating the sanctuary by shouting, blowing whistles, and intentionally interrupting ongoing services."

"This group trespassed on private property and willfully obstructed Christian worship," NAMB continued. "No cause—political or otherwise—justifies the desecration of a sacred space or the intimidation and trauma inflicted on families gathered peacefully in the house of God."

[NAMB](#) stated that what took place Sunday morning was not a "protest" but instead was "lawless harassment."

"We are grateful that the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice has already indicated that an investigation is underway to determine whether federal laws were violated when protesters interfered with worship and desecrated this sacred space," NAMB said. "We appreciate the swift and decisive response from law enforcement and call on local and state leaders in Minnesota to ensure that order is restored and that egregious events of this nature are not permitted to happen again."

The statement describes Parnell's role as a Send Network "city missionary" who "serves dozens of Southern Baptist church plants throughout the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul

area.” [NAMB](#) added that Parnell is a “faithful servant with a deep love for the Gospel and for his city, having devoted his life to sharing the love of Jesus with all who call the Twin Cities home.”

“He was doing exactly what he has been called to do—leading worship and caring for God’s people—when this disruption occurred,” NAMB said.

The SBC’s domestic missions agency said it will “unequivocally stand with and defend our missionaries and churches,” stating that it will “do whatever is necessary to protect those who serve faithfully and to uphold the right of churches to worship without fear or interference.”

“We fully support Jonathan Parnell and the leadership of Cities Church,” NAMB’s statement concluded.