

Church faces criminalisation for lawful Christian preaching in Colchester

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Bread of Life Community Church in Essex has been issued with a Community Protection Notice (CPN) that could criminalise its pastor and members for preaching the Christian gospel in Colchester city centre.

This is believed to be an unprecedented use of public-order powers against a whole church, rather than individual Christian street preachers and further seeking to criminalise the content of the message rather than just the manner of preaching.



The CPN, served following months of pressure from council wardens, prohibits the church's use of amplification during its weekly outreach. Breaching the notice is a criminal offence, meaning Pastor Stephen Clayden and his council could face prosecution simply for continuing their long-standing ministry.

Pastor Clayden, who establishes and oversees all outreach activity, strongly denies that he or any member of his team has acted unlawfully. He says the church intends to challenge the notice in court and resist any attempt by the authorities to silence the gospel.

The church has now formally appealed the notice, and the case will be heard at Colchester Magistrates' Court on 1 May 2026, in a hearing expected to have wide-ranging implications for freedom of religion and expression in the UK.

The appeal is supported by the Christian Legal Centre.

From volume restrictions to attempted content control

Until recently, the church's outreach in Colchester had never attracted formal complaints. The team preaches, sings hymns, hands out literature and Bibles, and speaks to members of the public, many of whom express appreciation for the support, prayer, and hope offered by the evangelists.

However, correspondence with the council reveals a steady escalation, including street wardens repeatedly demanding cessation or reduction of amplification, despite the current Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) containing no prohibition on amplified sound.

A Community Protection Warning was issued in November 2025, followed by threats of fines.

Wardens then raised concerns not only about volume, but about the content of the preaching, including theological references to judgment and hell, which the council claimed might distress some listeners.



As well as using amplification, the CPN accuses the church of using *'religious messaging'* which mentions *'hell'* that causes *'harassment, alarm and distress.'*

The notice continues by saying that wardens have 'tried to educate' the preachers, but the preaching is 'unreasonable' and having a 'detrimental effect on the community'.

The church provides a regular food bank collection to the local community and also when church members are preaching, they have in the past bought warm clothes for people who need them. The church has also purchased hot meals for the homeless.

This marks a significant shift from regulating noise to attempting to regulate Christian doctrine expressed in public.

Supported by the Christian Legal Centre, Bread of Life Community Church argues that the issue is not disturbance but discomfort with the message itself, something expressly protected under Articles 9 and 10 of the Human Rights Act.

‘The legal test for a CPN is not met’

In its formal appeal under section 46 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, Bread of Life Community Church argues that the CPN is unlawful and should be quashed in its entirety.

The church contends that the conduct alleged in the notice did not take place. It denies engaging in threatening, harassing or intimidating behaviour and says that describing biblical teaching about hell as “intimidation” is a serious mischaracterisation of routine Christian evangelism. All outreach activity is livestreamed and recorded, and the church says no evidence exists of threats or harassment.

The appeal further argues that the council has failed to demonstrate any genuine detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality, as required by law.

Preaching takes place outside a closed retail unit, not near active businesses, and no objective evidence of harm has been produced. On the contrary, the church says many members of the public respond positively.

The church also denies that its conduct was persistent, unreasonable, or something it could reasonably be expected to stop. Use of a loudspeaker for preaching, it argues, is a normal and lawful aspect of public religious expression, expressly protected by Articles 9, 10 and 11 of the Human Rights Act. The local PSPO contains no ban on amplification, despite repeated claims by wardens that it does.

Crucially, the appeal argues that the CPN is vague and disproportionate, particularly in its prohibition on undefined “intimidating behaviour”.

The church says that attempting to restrict doctrinal statements, such as warnings about judgment amounts to unlawful content-based censorship of protected religious speech.

The appeal also raises concerns about procedural and factual errors, including the absence of documented incidents, evidence, or specific complaints supporting the council’s allegations.

Essex Magistrates’ Court has confirmed that the appeal will be heard on 1 May 2026 at 2:00pm at Colchester Magistrates’ Court, where the church will ask the court to cancel the CPN in full or, alternatively, strike out requirements which unlawfully restrict protected religious expression.

Not an isolated case

Similar attempts to suppress Christian outreach are appearing elsewhere in the UK, with several cases being resolved by Christian Legal Centre lawyers. This has included in [Uxbridge, West London](#), where a church was forced to legally challenge and ultimately overturn a council ban on its outreach ministry.

Also in [Aldershot town centre](#), a council attempted to secure an injunction that could have criminalised Christian street preaching, even Christmas carols, before retreating under legal pressure.

These incidents demonstrate a growing trend of local authorities exceeding their powers to restrict peaceful Christian witness in public spaces.

Despite the CPN and threats of enforcement, Bread of Life Community Church says it will continue preaching within the law and will challenge any unlawful or discriminatory action taken against them.

Pastor Stephen Clayden, Bread of Life Community Church, said: *“We have preached the Bible lawfully and peacefully in Colchester for six years. We have harmed no one. We will not be intimidated into abandoning the Great Commission.*

“We respect the law. But we cannot and will not stop preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. No council has the authority to silence the Church.”

A dangerous national precedent

The use of a Community Protection Notice against a church for preaching raises serious concerns about mission creep in the use of local authority powers.

Andrea Williams, chief executive of the Christian Legal Centre, which is supporting Pastor Clayden, said:

“This is a deeply alarming development. Public-order powers designed to address genuine anti-social behaviour are now being used to clamp down on Christian preaching. Today it is amplification; tomorrow it is the content of the message itself. We are seeing a slippery slope from managing noise to policing theology.”

She added:

“Preaching and public witness are central to the Christian faith and protected by law. If a church can be criminalised simply for proclaiming the gospel, then freedom of religion and speech in the UK are in serious jeopardy.

This Church is at the centre of bringing Good News of Jesus Christ to the heart of this community and we will support the church as it challenges the notice.”