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# Latest: Federal Judge Rules Maine School Board Discriminated Against The Pines Church Over Beliefs

*A true story of faith under pressure. Read the first half below, then continue online.*

**KEY SPIRITUAL TAKEAWAY**

*"That their stated practical concerns were"*

*(Transliterated from the original Hindi.)*

They had gathered only to pray. When prayer itself becomes the target, faith is proved not by words but by staying.

## The Story - Part One

A federal judge has ruled that a Maine school board violated a church's First Amendment rights when it refused the congregation a year-long lease of a public high school - and then awarded the church exactly $1. Chief U.S. District Judge Lance E. Walker issued the 37-page ruling on Friday 13 November 2026, finding that the Hermon School Department discriminated against The Pines Church of Bangor after quizzing its leaders about their beliefs on same-sex marriage and abortion.

One dollar. That is what three and a half years of litigation came down to. The Pines Church had dropped its claim for compensatory damages in order to get a bench trial, so the judge's award was nominal by design. But the words around that dollar were anything but small. Walker found that a majority of the school committee acted with "bad motive," that their stated practical concerns were "pretextual" and "threadbare," and that the month-to-month arrangement they offered instead was an offer "designed to be rejected."

The story began with a growing church and nowhere to meet. Pastor Matt Gioia founded The Pines Church after moving his family back to Maine in 2020. The congregation started in his home, then rented space month-to-month at a movie theatre in Orono. By late 2022 it had outgrown that too, and Gioia asked the Hermon School Committee for a year-long Sunday-morning lease of the high school theatre, cafeteria and a couple of classrooms. The church would bring its own equipment, handle its own setup and teardown, and pay up to $1,000 a month.

What happened next is the heart of the case. Committee member Christopher McLaughlin questioned the church's positions on same-sex marriage, abortion, gender-affirming care and other cultural issues. The committee then voted 4-1 to offer a month-to-month arrangement instead of the year-long lease - an arrangement that, the judge noted, does not even require committee approval. A motion for a six-month lease died without a second. Gioia declined the month-to-month offer, and the church sued in May 2023.

Judge Walker, who heard a two-day bench trial in February, was unsparing about what he found. He concluded that the church's religious identity was a substantial factor in the committee's decision, and that McLaughlin, Stephanie Oiler and Kristen Shorey acted with discriminatory animus toward the church's religious identity and beliefs. "If a public school's facilities are available for public use," he wrote, "a religious organization cannot be denied access to those facilities because it is a religious organization." He added a line that will be quoted in religious-liberty cases for years: "novelty is not a basis to discriminate against religious organizations."

## The Turning Point - What Happens Next

The story reaches a life-changing moment that changes everything -- and what seemed like the end is only the middle. Two reports disagree on the numbers, and one question is left unanswered: will the CCTV footage ever come out? Read the full story to find out what happens next.

### PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When gathering to pray carries a real cost, what keeps a community coming together anyway -- and what would keep you coming?

2. The pastor's sister shielded him with her own body and fainted under the blows. What does costly, self-giving love look like in your own family or church?

3. When justice is delayed and a complaint is withdrawn under threat, how do believers hold on to truth without giving in to fear -- or to hatred?

## READ THE FULL STORY

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