

A church in Pennsylvania has regained the right to serve and minister at a local government-run housing project after initially being booted simply because the entity was considered to be “religious.”

Rachael Groll, the Children’s Ministry Director at Living Waters Church in Meadville, began reaching out to families at the Gill Village housing project last year after she noticed a group of children eating pancake mix right out of the box.

She began visiting the project several times a week as the church provided free food and clothing, and offered after school mentorship to help the children with their studies. The church also offered free rides to community events as well as to their church. Soon, Groll began leading a “Sidewalk Sunday School” program that consisted of Bibles stories, music and games for the children and their families.

She told Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), which provided a report on Groll’s story on Friday, that she witnessed the outreach making an impact on the lives that it touched.

*“We saw major transformation and life-change in the community,” Groll stated.*

But in September of last year, Living Waters Church received a voicemail message from the government housing agency informing them that they were not welcome back—simply because they were a religious entity.

*“I’ve never been up against anything like this, and when I got the call, honestly, I just wept,” Groll stated. “I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. I’ve built relationships with these kids and their families.”*

She contacted housing project officials, who admitted that Groll’s efforts were making a difference, but reiterated that she could no longer serve the project because the assistance was coming from a church.

*“They never mentioned any actual rules, they kept saying, ‘You just can’t,’” she said.*

Some time later, officials agreed to allow the church to return—but on one condition: they could not talk about Christianity in any manner and had to change the Sunday School program into a secular activity.

*“The gospel is the source of the hope and life-change they saw in the community,” Groll said. “Basically they told us, ‘You can pour into the community as long as you want; just don’t tell them why you’re doing it.’”*

She said that during this time, the church struggled with being stifled in their speech. One day, as Groll was handing out sandwiches, she approached an elderly man that had been watching from a distance and asked him if he would like a sandwich as well. As the two talked, the man stated that he had walked away from God, and as Groll shared the gospel with him, he repented and believed. Days later, the man died.

*“[On] Monday we found out he had passed away. What if we had stopped going?” she asked.*

Groll knew that she couldn’t go on in silence any longer. The church contacted ADF for assistance, which sent a demand letter to the housing authorities to cease engaging in religious discrimination.

*“Religious speech receives full and robust protection under the First Amendment and cannot lawfully be excluded from government property simply because of its religious nature and viewpoint,” the letter read.*

*“Government censorship of religious speech is the most invidious form of speech discrimination known to First Amendment jurisprudence, and is presumptively unconstitutional.”*

Officials with the housing authority then agreed to fully remove the restrictions from the church, acknowledging that it had misunderstood the Establishment Clause in the U.S. Constitution.

*“Sometimes the government and government officials throw around these laws or ideas of separation of church and state that have no real grounding,” Groll said. “We need to challenge these laws. It could be a matter of life or death.”*