

Baptist blogger sues police, prosecutors for outing him

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP)—A formerly anonymous blogger who criticized his prominent Southern Baptist pastor has sued police and state prosecutors for revealing his identity to the church even though an investigation showed he had done nothing illegal.

Tom Rich and his wife, Yvette, until recently members of [First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.](#), for about 20 years, filed a lawsuit claiming involvement by government officials violated his rights under the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Rich started his blog after noticing differences in preaching style, fundraising and church administration between Mac Brunson, former pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, and his predecessor at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Jerry Vines, who retired in 2005.

Rich created the blog anonymously, he said, to encourage open and honest dialogue without getting into personalities.

Last fall Robert Hinson, a police officer and First Baptist member who also serves as a member of Brunson's security detail, opened a criminal investigation into the blog at the request of church leaders. He subpoenaed Google and Comcast to find out who owned the blog.

After closing the investigation, Hinson told the church Rich was the author.

The church then issued trespass warnings against the Riches. Not allowed on church premises, the couple sought out a new church.

Rich claims the Jacksonville sheriff's office investigation and subpoena

issued by Assistant State's Attorney Steven Siegel violated his right to free speech, which includes the right to speak anonymously.

He also alleges that the investigation violated the First Amendment clauses that prohibit the establishment of religion and guarantee free exercise of religious beliefs.

The lawsuit alleges the criminal investigation was "fabricated to create the illusion of legitimacy" but really was "a mere pretext for the discovery and disclosure" of Rich's identity to the church.

By investigating the blog, the lawsuit says, Hinson, "acting under color of state law, spent taxpayer money and government time prosecuting an errand of the church and in so doing acted as an extension and enforcer for a particular religious entity."

The lawsuit claims the actions were "deliberate and malicious" and served "no governmental interest." It seeks damages in excess of \$15,000.

Earlier the Jacksonville sheriff's office defended the investigation, saying it would follow the same procedure if concerns about security involved a synagogue or mosque.

The investigation also reportedly included allegations that mail had been stolen from Brunson's home and that someone took photos of Brunson's wife.

Police reports were not filed because the incidents were viewed as isolated, officials noted, but church leaders wondered if they were connected to the blog.

The church released a statement saying: "First Baptist Church of Jacksonville appreciates the difficult responsibilities of the Jacksonville sheriff's office and the state attorney's office as they diligently keep the

people of public and private institutions in Jacksonville safe from serious and potential harm. Officer Robert Hinson, who serves on our security detail that is responsible for the safety of 8,000 people each week, is a man of great character, integrity and ability. We continue, as always, to strongly support each of them.”