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The River Church is shown Monday, March 30, 2020, in Tampa, Fla. The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office has warned the megachurch about violating a safer-at-home order in place to limit the spread of coronavirus. The church is continuing to hold Sunday church services despite warnings for social distancing in order. (AP/Chris O'Meara)

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Tampa, Fla. — March 30, 2020

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Florida officials have arrested the pastor of a megachurch after detectives say he held two Sunday services with hundreds of people and violated a safer-at-home order in place to limit the spread of the [coronavirus](#).

According to jail records, Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne turned himself in to authorities March 30 afternoon in Hernando County, where he lives. He was charged with unlawful assembly and violation of a public health emergency order. Bail was set at \$500, according to the jail's website.

Hillsborough Sheriff Chad Chronister said in a news conference March 30 that he negotiated with the attorney of Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne to turn himself in to authorities in Hernando County. His church is located in Tampa.

Chronister said his command staff met with The River at Tampa Bay Church leaders about the danger they are putting themselves — and their congregation — in by not maintaining appropriate social distancing, but Howard-Browne held the services. The Sheriff's Office also placed a digital sign on the road near the church driveway that said “practice social distancing.”

“Shame on this pastor, their legal staff and the leaders of this staff for forcing us to do our job. That's not what we wanted to do during a declared state of emergency,” Chronister said. “We are hopeful that this will be a wakeup call.”

The church has said it sanitized the building, and the pastor said on Twitter that the church is an essential business. He also attacked the media for “religious bigotry and hate.”

The county and governor's orders require gatherings, including those held by faith-based groups, be fewer than 10 people to limit the spread of COVID-19. A live stream of the March 29 three-and-a-half-hour church service showed scores of congregants. In a Facebook post, Howard-Browne said coronavirus “is blown totally way out of proportion.”

On March 18, the church called its ministry an essential service, just like police and firefighters, and said it would keep its doors open.

In a Facebook video March 29, Howard-Browne said “it looks like we're going to have to go to court over this because the church is encroached from every side.”

“This is really about your voice. The voice of the body of Christ,” he said.

As recently as last year, Howard-Browne's church hosted an event with Paula White Cain, who was named an advisor leading President Donald Trump’s Faith and Opportunity Initiative. She's also an unofficial spiritual advisor to the president.

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