

# **U.S. Christian Camp Loses Tax-Exempt Status over Same-Sex Civil-Union Ceremony**

**By John Jalsevac**

OCEAN GROVE, N.J., September 19, 2007 (LifeSiteNews.com) - The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) announced on Monday that it was stripping the Methodist Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association of its tax-exempt status for part of its property. The Methodist camp made the news earlier this year after it refused, for religious reasons, to allow a lesbian couple to hold a "civil-union" ceremony at a pavilion on the camp's property.

The pavilion, said Scott Hoffman, the camp's chief administrative officer to LifeSiteNews, "is a facility we have used exclusively for our camp meeting mission and worship celebrations since 1869."

Until recently the camp held tax-exempt status on its entire boardwalk property under a New Jersey program that gives tax-breaks to organizations that open up their property to the general public.

In June, however, Harriet Bernstein and Luisa Pester, a lesbian, filed a complaint with the state attorney general's office on the basis of sexual orientation discrimination, after Ocean Grove refused to allow them to hold their "civil-union" ceremony at the camp's pavilion. A second lesbian couple has also sued Ocean Grove. New Jersey's anti-discrimination laws currently forbid those who "offer goods, services, and facilities to the general public" from "directly or indirectly denying or withholding any accommodation, service, benefit, or privilege to an individual" on the basis of sexual orientation.

"It is clear that the pavilion is not open to all persons on an equal basis," DEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson, wrote to the camp on Monday, in announcing the DEP's decision to revoke the camp's tax-exempt status.

"When people hear the words 'open space,' we want them to think not just of open air and land, but that it is open to all people," Jackson continued. "And when the public subsidizes it with tax breaks, it goes with the expectation that it is not going to be parsed out, whether it be by activity or any particular beliefs."

Currently, however, there is some confusion over just how much of the camp's property no longer has tax-exempt status. As such, one homosexual advocacy group is threatening to appeal the DEP's decision, saying that it doesn't go far enough, reports the AP. "We're looking for a bigger victory here," said Steve Goldstein, the chairman of Garden State Equality. "We have the symbolic victory of the state telling Ocean Grove they're wrong, but there is a bigger

victory to be had by having the entire tax-exemption removed. We're happy, but there's a lot more happiness to be had."

According to the Neptune Township tax assessor, the revocation of the tax-exempt status on the pavilion will only cost Ocean Grove about \$175/year, although Scott Hoffman has reportedly issued a statement claiming that the DEP's decision in fact appears to revoke tax-exempt status for "over 99 percent of the land." Hoffman said that Ocean Grove's lawyers are currently reviewing the decision.

In August, the Christian camp preempted the complaints currently pending against it by itself suing New Jersey state officials. According to the Alliance Defense fund, which is representing the camp, the attorney general's office is violating First Amendment protections by investigating Ocean Grove. "Religious groups have the right to make their own decisions without government interference," said Brian Raum, senior legal counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund. "The government can't force a private Christian organization to use its property in a way that would violate its own religious beliefs."

SOURCE: <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/archive/ldn/2007/sep/07091902>

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