

News Watch Article: DH091

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT: THE HOUSE OF PRAYER, CORPORAL DISCIPLINE, AND THE STATE

This article first appeared in the News Watch column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 24, number 3 (2002). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Graphic video images of what looked like the violent, forcible removal of dozens of screaming children from their crying parents by government officials turned a small-time church's controversial parenting principles into national controversy a year ago. The video footage showed children biting, kicking, and striking police officers, who tried to remove their siblings from their homes. It also showed officers wrestling with and handcuffing a 14-year-old girl and her 12-year-old brother in the driveway of their home. Charges were filed against the two children for resisting the officers, but the charges were dropped. The controversy centered around the 130-member, nondenominational House of Prayer near Atlanta, Georgia, and its pastor, the Rev. Arthur Allen, 68.

At the height of the investigation, nearly 50 children ranging in ages from a few months to late teens were removed from their parents' custody, dozens of parents were charged with child abuse violations, and the Rev. Allen himself was briefly arrested and then released. Charges ranged from simple neglect to cruelty and other forms of felony child abuse, including whipping and beating children who were forcibly held down in front of the congregation for their discipline. Authorities accused Allen and his parishioners of executing corporal punishment against children for a wide variety of infractions, which included resistance by some teenage girls in the congregation to "arranged" marriages.

At one point, government officials predicted that most of the children would never be reunited with their parents, that the parents would be convicted of many charges of child abuse, and that Allen would himself be convicted as an accessory to the felony actions and lose his freedom and his church.

Congregation members refused to compromise with authorities, who offered to return some children to their families as long as the parents agreed to a set of restrictions and conditions. The parents, however, vowed to lose their children altogether rather than bow to the "ungodly" principles of state-run parenting. The presiding judge acknowledged that he found much to admire in the parents' dedication to raising good-mannered, well-behaved children, but he ordered the conditions, commenting, "I regret we got to this point....I hate to see these children jeopardized by what I consider to be a cult."

Officials eventually disclosed that injuries were found on only two of the more than 40 children taken into custody. D'Anna Liber, chief of the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS), said the other children were taken because their families refused to cooperate with investigators or comply with DFCS regulations regarding discipline. Some children were taken into custody after their parents refused to agree that the whippings of two boys during a 25 February church service, which had sparked the investigation, had been excessive. Liber admitted that "law does not prohibit corporal punishment." She cited the DFCS manual: "If pain and bruising are not excessive or unduly severe and result only in short-term discomfort, this is not considered maltreatment."

A significant element in the unusual story was that the congregation was composed primarily of lower income African-American families. Some defenders of the House of Prayer argued that the government intervention was, in effect, discrimination against African-American Christians who had different philosophies of child rearing and were doing their best to help their children rise above the economic and educational disadvantages of their backgrounds. Georgia State Representative Billy McKinney said, "This

fight was not about the House of Prayer....This fight was about how black people discipline their children. I know how my grandmama disciplined me. It was not out of Dr. Spock's book. White folks cannot tell us how to discipline our children." Rep. Tyrone Brooks said, "These charges are invalid. They must be dismissed. And they're going to be dismissed." Pastor Frederick J. Zak of Reaching for Christ Ministries in Atlanta noted,

It would be difficult to find an African-American over 40 years old — and younger in many instances — who has not received what most child advocates today would classify as child abuse....Some of the most prominent, well-educated and influential African-Americans in this country have this social experience in their historical diary. If this occurred today, all of the adults would be in jail and the child would be in a shelter....Removing children from their homes and arresting parents and their pastor for administering corporal punishment only exacerbates the issue. The solution is cultural sensitivity training for social workers and counseling for the parents.

Allen consistently contended that he was not attempting to break the law or encourage others to do so, but was merely proclaiming what the Bible said about good parenting. He pointed to various Bible passages, such as Proverbs 23:13, which state that correction of children "with the rod" is necessary and godly. Parent David Duncan testified, "I did nothing more than chastise my child in a reasonable fashion."

In 1993, Allen had been convicted of charges that he had ordered members of his church to beat a 16-year-old girl with belts and then taunted the bleeding girl when she cried. Allen admitted in court that he had ordered the August 1992 beating, "lasting 20 to 30 minutes," because she had been caught having sex in a church room while a Bible study was going on elsewhere in the building. Prosecutor Debra M. Sullivan said the teenager received "serious" injuries, including cuts and welts on her legs. Two other church members were convicted with Allen in the 1993 case and were also accused in the 2001 incident.

Throughout the storm of events, the congregation remained united in its support of Allen and the accused parents and against what they saw as the intrusion of a godless government in the private affairs of family and church. The congregation turned up *en masse* at a number of rallies in front of government offices and repeatedly petitioned state and local government officials to intervene.

Parishioners admitted that Allen's leadership would be viewed by many as autocratic and extreme, but said such a system was welcome in a community where crime, unemployment, illiteracy, and fragmented families were the norm. Ordained as a Baptist pastor, Allen founded his own nondenominational church in 1966, focusing on the worst public housing projects in the Atlanta area.

Allen's control extends to granting permission for everything from choosing a spouse, accepting a job offer, and planning a family to submitting to Allen's presence at any interviews with "outsiders," including press and social services personnel. Loyal followers pointed out that Allen has always bent over backward to help members, including giving them funds to get back on their feet, providing them with low-cost housing, and loaning them the money to renovate their homes. Allen's first wife, Mary, died in 2000 of liver cancer, and shortly thereafter he married a church member with five young children who had been deserted by her husband. Allen and his second wife have one child together.

The reported incidents initially seemed abusive. One 10-year-old boy told police that an adult beat him at the church in front of the congregation as three other members held him. He said Allen was watching and telling them when to stop. According to a police report, the boy and his seven-year-old companion had welts and bruises on their bodies. Parents testified that the beatings were so common at the church that they "lost count" of how many they had witnessed. They said children being punished were suspended in the air by their hands and arms and beaten with switches, sticks, or belts. Photographs were entered into evidence showing bruising and welts, one in the shape of a belt buckle.

Allen has long been known in the African-American community near Atlanta for his outspoken opposition to birth control, homosexual activity, and out-of-wedlock sexual relations.

Defending his order for girls as young as 14 to marry, Allen said, "If you can't contain, it's best to marry rather than burn." He also said,

Teenagers today, you can't force them to do anything they don't want to do....You have girls having babies at eight years old. We have young girls in here who have come up in the church. When they are of legal age, if they want to (get married), at their request, I approve that...I do not force anyone into marriage. I do tell them this: "You're not going to whore in this church. If you want to whore, get out there in the streets." If they stay in the church, I suggest marriage. There are girls in here who have gotten married at 14. But they were not forced.

The case dragged on for four months, and despite the sensational nature of the initial charges, by the end of July the children had been returned to their parents without restriction. The charges, including those against Allen, were dropped. Two of the children were treated for bruises suffered at the hands of two social workers (later fired) while they were in a youth shelter.

-- *Gretchen Passantino*