

The *Covenant Weddings* Case

Case Name: *Covenant Weddings, LLC v. Cuyahoga County*

Case Action: Case filed in federal court on July 22, 2020.

Significance: Whether the government should be able to force a business owner to celebrate ceremonies that violate her core convictions.



Background:

Kristi Stokes is a wedding officiant and creative writer who opened her business, Covenant Weddings LLC, in August of 2019. She operates Covenant Weddings as a means of pursuing her spiritual calling to share her faith, celebrate marriage, and glorify God. To do that, Kristi both officiates weddings and writes custom homilies, vows, and prayers for wedding ceremonies. Kristi's religious beliefs about marriage are central to her role as a wedding officiant and writer. Kristi always incorporates scriptural references in the homilies, vows, and prayers she writes and delivers. And for her officiant duties, she performs and celebrates each marriage as a sacred union before God. So it is essential that all weddings she performs are consistent with her religious beliefs. But Cuyahoga County, Ohio, recently passed a law that requires Kristi to offer and perform same-sex weddings, even though she believes marriage is a union between one man and one woman. Because of this, Kristi has to operate her business in constant fear of being investigated, prosecuted, and fined thousands of dollars. Kristi has challenged the law to ensure she can continue to operate her business in accord with her faith and core values.

Key Points

- Ministers should not be forced to officiate ceremonies that conflict with their religious beliefs.
- Creative professionals should be able to operate their business consistent with their faith and core values without fear of government punishment.
- Business owners should not be forced out of business simply for disagreeing with the government's preferred views.
- True tolerance is a two-way street. When the government can force religious business owners to operate against their convictions, it can force others to violate their convictions as well. When the government controls speech, we do not live in a free America.

Key Facts

- Kristi offers two types of services: officiating weddings and writing custom homilies, vows, and prayers.
- The Cuyahoga County law could use court orders to force Kristi to officiate weddings she disagrees with, assess a civil penalty starting at \$1000, and force her to pay attorneys' fees and other costs that could rise to hundreds of thousands of dollars.
- Kristi has dedicated her life to God—she has volunteered at homeless shelters, taught in youth ministries, worked as a missionary bringing medicine and AIDS education in Africa, and obtained a Biblical Studies degree.

The Bottom Line: No one should be forced to celebrate events that conflict with their deeply held religious beliefs.