

# Pastor in Oklahoma pursues suit against 'pagan' license plate

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A Methodist pastor of a suburban Oklahoma City church is suing the state, claiming its license plate image of a Native American shooting an arrow into the sky violates his religious liberty.

The pastor, Keith Cressman of St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Bethany, contends the image of the Native American compels him to be a "mobile billboard" for a pagan religion. Methodist leaders termed the suit frivolous and said it was stirring ill will in the denomination.

A trial judge threw out the suit. But on June 11, the Denver-based Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the suit can proceed, saying Judge Joe Heaton should have recognized that Cressman's suit contained a "plausible compelled speech claim."

Cressman's lawyer, Nathan Kellum of the Center for Religious Expression in Memphis, said the First Amendment not only guarantees freedom of expression and religion, but also guarantees that people cannot be forced to say things with which they do not agree.

"My client does not believe he should be compelled to display an image that communicates a pagan practice, that of shooting an arrow into the sky to draw rain from a 'rain god,'" Kellum said.

The image is of a work by master sculptor Allan Houser, a version of which is owned by the Smithsonian Institution.

Titled *Sacred Rain Arrow*, the piece is based on an ancient Chiricahua Apache legend about a warrior who had his bow and arrow blessed by a medicine man for the purpose of ending a drought. The piece is very well known in Oklahoma and sits in front of Tulsa's Thomas Gilcrease Museum.

“The *Rain Arrow* sculpture to my understanding is the artist’s attempt to show an aspect of Apache life,” David Wilson, district superintendent of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, told United Methodist News Service. “It reminds me of the artist’s connection to God and the people’s desire to connect with God.”

Of the two UMC regional conferences, the missionary conference includes 6,000 members of 84 churches in ministry with Native American people. The 2012 quadrennial meeting of the global United Methodist Church dedicated significant time in acts of repentance “toward healing relationships with indigenous peoples.”

“I find it troubling and disturbing that one of the pastors would find this symbol offensive,” said Bishop Robert Hayes Jr., who oversees both conferences. “I view it as a distraction to the ongoing healing relationships.”

The appeals court ruled that Cressman had presented enough evidence to establish that the message of the state’s standard license plate in 2009 is a “particularized claim” that others would recognize. The pastor “frequently encounters people who cling to these beliefs, and he tries to convince them to cast off myths and accept the truth of the gospel,” said Kellum in online comments

Diane Clay, a spokeswoman for the Oklahoma Attorney General’s Office, said the state could allow the trial to return to the lower court, file a petition for rehearing before the entire appellate court or petition for the case to be heard before the U.S. Supreme Court. —RNS, added sources