

Oregon strips faith-healing parents of legal defenses

by [Steve Mayes](#)

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PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) Gov. John Kitzhaber has signed a new law that removes the remnants of Oregon's legal protection for parents who rely solely on faith healing instead of traditional medical care for their children.

Kitzhaber signed the bill without comment on June 9, two days after jurors found Timothy and Rebecca Wyland guilty of criminal mistreatment for not seeking medical treatment for a massive growth that left their infant daughter nearly blind.

The Wylands are members of the Followers of Christ, an Oregon City church with a long history of children dying from treatable medical conditions. They are the third couple from the church to face prosecution in the last two years.

The bill, which passed with overwhelming support in the legislature, eliminates spiritual treatment as a defense against all homicide charges, and subjects parents to mandatory sentencing if convicted.

"This is as far as the state can go," said Rita Swan of Children's Healthcare Is a Legal Duty, a group focused on child abuse and neglect among faith healers. "It's not a perfect solution. Prosecution is our last resort."

Followers of Christ representatives declined to comment on the changes to the law. The church has no pastor or leader, and church members rarely speak to the media.

In 1999, lawmakers eliminated the spiritual healing defense against lesser charges of second-degree manslaughter and first- and

second-degree criminal mistreatment.

"We appreciate the legislature's support. This will help us continue to protect children from medical neglect," said Clackamas County District Attorney John Foote, who lobbied for the bill. "This is good for kids in Oregon."