

Snake-handling pastor excused by grand jury

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [February 5, 2014](#) issue

An East Tennessee serpent-handling pastor's legal woes are over for now. After a hearing on January 8, a grand jury decided not to indict Andrew Hamblin on charges of violating a state ban on possessing venomous snakes.

In November, state officials seized 53 serpents—including rattlesnakes, copperheads and exotic breeds—from the Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tennessee, where Hamblin is pastor.

Hamblin and his church say the Bible commands them to handle the snakes in worship. They've been featured in a National Geographic television series, *Snake Salvation*.

But state law bans the possession of venomous snakes. Officials from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency cited Hamblin with 53 counts of violating the ban. Each count carried a maximum sentence of almost a year in jail.

Hamblin argued that the ban violates congregations' religious liberty. Hamblin said he was allowed to address the grand jury for half an hour at the hearing. His defense was simple. The snakes weren't his, he said. They belonged to the church, and Hamblin said the wildlife officials had no business raiding a church.

Since 1947, Tennessee law has banned venomous snakes during church services or public settings. The state supreme court upheld that ban in the 1970s.

Matt Cameron, a spokesman for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, said its officers acted correctly in raiding Hamblin's church. Most of the snakes were in ill health when they were seized, he said. More than half have died since the raid, and the rest are being cared for at a Knoxville zoo. Returning the snakes "is not an option," Cameron said.

Despite the publicity, National Geographic did not renew the reality TV show for a second season. —RNS

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