

Louisiana pastor Tony Spell arrested for backing church bus toward COVID-19 protester

by [Stacey Plaisance](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue



Tony Spell, pastor of the Life Tabernacle Church, leaves East Baton Rouge Parish jail after posting bond on April 21. Louisiana authorities arrested the pastor on an assault charge after he admitted that he drove his church bus toward a man who has been protesting his decision to hold mass gatherings in defiance of public health orders during the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

Louisiana authorities arrested a pastor on an assault charge on April 21 after he admitted that he drove his church bus toward a man who has been protesting his decision to continue holding mass gatherings at church in defiance of public health orders during the coronavirus pandemic.

The police department in Central, a suburb of Baton Rouge, said in a posting to its Facebook page that Tony Spell, the pastor of Life Tabernacle Church, turned himself

in to the department and was arrested on charges of aggravated assault and improper backing. Officials said Spell also had outstanding traffic tickets.

Spell already faces misdemeanor charges for holding in-person church services despite the ban on gatherings. Authorities have said they did not book him into jail previously because they did not want to add to the jail population at a time when the highly infectious disease is running rampant. They have not taken any action to close his church.

Parishioner Nathan Boyce Thomas also faces charges of aggravated assault and reckless operation of a vehicle after being seen on video driving his white pickup truck to within about a foot of where protester Trey Bennett was standing at the roadside. Police said Thomas drove at a high rate of speed, then braked just before turning into the church parking lot.

Bennett has kept up a one-man demonstration in front of the church since Easter Sunday, when he noticed hundreds of parishioners still attending services after the state's stay-at-home mandate went into effect. The mandate bans gatherings of more than ten people. Houses of worship across the state have turned to online services instead.

Bennett, whose signs say "Close this Church" and "Danger—Coronavirus Incubator," said he was used to getting scowls and verbal jabs from parishioners but was "shocked" to see vehicles being driven at him. —Associated Press