

North Carolina pastor who led peaceful march to polls charged with felony assault

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Three weeks after police in North Carolina assaulted a peaceful march of approximately 400 workers, youth and community members with chemical agents as they were walking to the courthouse to register to vote, the Alamance County Sheriff's Department announced additional charges against march organizer Reverend Greg Drumwright.

Police are alleging that Drumwright, an African American pastor in nearby Greensboro, committed felony assault and "obstructed justice" during the peaceful rally that was mostly populated with churchgoers and their families. Police announced the charges 21 days after supposedly reviewing a video of the October 31 rally which they have had in their possession since the day of the march.

Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Elizabeth Haddiz, an attorney with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law representing Drumwright, labeled the charges "retaliatory." She added, "We're looking forward to seeing the video the sheriff referenced. The videos we have seen dispute his statement." Drumwright is currently being represented by Haddiz in lawsuits against Alamance County Sheriff Terry Johnson and Graham Police Chief Kristy Cole, which predate the latest charges against the pastor.

In response to the charges announced against him, Drumwright announced a "peaceful protest for police and criminal justice reform in Alamance County" scheduled for November 29. Drumwright called for the arrests of police who attacked the marchers and accused police of "voter obstruction," saying their actions "kept people from registering and voting."

The lawsuits against Johnson and Cole accuse the two police agencies of intimidating voters and keeping them from the polls on the last day of early voting and same-day registration, in violation of the 1871 Ku Klux Klan

Act.

Leading up to the election and in the weeks after its conclusion, President Donald Trump and Republican Party officials have spearheaded efforts to disenfranchise millions of voters. They have particularly targeted minority and low income voters through mass robocalls, "poll watchers" and challengers and anti-democratic lawsuits to throw out votes that have been cast.

Drumwright was one of 23 people who had previously been charged with a misdemeanor for failing to disperse. The October 31 march was declared an "unlawful assembly" following an 8-minute 46-second kneel down by demonstrators and prospective voters in remembrance of George Floyd. The murder of Floyd by Minneapolis police at the end of May touched off a summer of protests against police violence in the US and internationally.

Drumwright and the police both agree that a permit to march through the city had been approved. However, police contend that the use of a gas-powered generator for the public address system, as well as stopping outside the Alamance County Courthouse for the vigil honoring Floyd, violated the permit's rules.

Despite police statements to the contrary, video and on-the-ground reporting from the march show police initiating the violence against protesters. Less than a minute after the moment of silence for George Floyd ended, police began pepper spraying the crowd.

Among those doused with burning chemical agents were children as young as five and grandparents as old as 86. One disturbing video shows police pepper spraying a woman in a mobility chair, causing her to have a seizure, with police continuing to spray those attempting to help the distressed woman.

The police stated that as they were clearing the area,

Drumwright was involved in an “altercation” that left a deputy injured. No injuries were reported by police the day of the rally, and no video has been released by state authorities corroborating the alleged assault.

Graham, North Carolina was the site of several protests throughout the summer against police violence and racism, which has prompted Graham Mayor Jerry Peterman to declare five “states of emergencies” so far this year. One of Peterman’s declarations came in response to a July 11 protest outside the Alamance County Courthouse, which saw hundreds of Black Lives Matter protesters and supporters face off against a much smaller group of pro-Trump, Confederate flag-waving counterprotesters in front of the Alamance County Confederate Monument.

After George Floyd’s murder, the Alamance sheriff’s office banned protests in the immediate vicinity of the monument and courthouse.

During the July 11 protest, four people were arrested, including Barrett Brown, the Alamance branch area president of the NAACP, for violating the previously demarcated “legal protest zone.” Even though Brown was simply standing in front of the monument with a sign, he was charged with impeding traffic and resisting arrest.

Despite their best efforts, police and Graham city officials have been unable to contain seething community anger directed at the police. At the latest Alamance County Commissioners meeting on November 16, five protesters were arrested after the public comments portion of the meeting was cut short early, ending the meeting before comments could be submitted.

Alamance County Sheriff Johnson has been charged for nearly two decades of accusations of civil rights violations and racial bias since he was elected sheriff in 2002.

In a 2007 interview for the *Raleigh News & Observer*, Johnson accused immigrants of committing more crimes, declaring: “In Mexico, there’s nothing wrong with having sex with a 12-, 13-year-old girl.” In 2012, the US Justice Department sued Johnson alleging his office specifically targeted Latino residents. Johnson allegedly told his deputies to “get me some of those taco eaters.”

In September 2019, Johnson was one of 191 county sheriffs to participate in the annual “Hold Their Feet to

the Fire” event organized by the far-right, anti-immigrant organization Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). FAIR was founded by the late John Tanton, a proponent of eugenics and white supremacy. The event included Capitol Hill press conferences, briefings with administration officials, meetings with members of Congress and even visits and photo opportunities at the White House.



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