

The Miami Herald: 'Bulletin' worries church

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An emergency operations document has a Gables church wondering if the government was watching its members during the free-trade talks in November. Coral Gables Congregational Church members say a document from the county's Emergency Operations Center has them worried that they were under police surveillance in the days surrounding the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in November.

The document -- a printed memo from the "tracker" system used by the center as a sort of internal bulletin board -- notes that an unnamed Coral Gables Congregational pastor "who is very anti-FTAA, had offered to allow 100 protesters a place to stay at the church this week."

Church members say the one-page document -- dated Nov. 17, during the week of the FTAA meetings -- has prompted them to wonder whether police were watching them during what they say were constitutionally protected religious and educational activities.

The church sponsored several FTAA forums but took no position on the free-trade proposal, members said.

"This document is a source of great concern for our rights of free expression and freedom of religion," said Roy Wasson, a church member and attorney representing the church, at 3010 De Soto Blvd. "We are using this to investigate further, to ask questions."

The memo -- which Miami-Dade County officials say would have been accessible to all 25 or 30 agency representatives in the Emergency Operations Center around the time of the free-trade meetings -- appears to have been written by the representative for Coral Gables. The words "Coral Gables Divisional EOC" and "Coral Gables PD" appear on the document, along with the phone number for the police department.

Coral Gables police spokesman Sgt. Raul Pedroso said late Wednesday that he was unable to comment because he was still trying to locate the author of the memo.

'BEING OBSERVED'

For Margarita Lopez, co-chair of the Justice and Peace Committee of the church, the fact that any government agency was taking notes on church activities is worrisome.

"Churches should not be subjected to this kind of monitoring. Our work in social justice should not be subject to police surveillance," she said.

The document "means in some way we're being observed," she added. "That's a form of surveillance."

Adding to the church members' suspicions: The emergency center did not give them the document when it responded this week to a Dec. 19 public records request from the church. The request covered the time period from Sept. 1 to the present and specifically asked for any center records involving the church, its pastors, staff, members and visitors.

When the center responded this week it gave the church a handful of documents that mention the church: two "incident briefing reports" from Nov. 17, a list of FTAA-related events for Nov. 21 and an "incident action plan" from Nov. 21.

An accompanying letter from emergency center acting Assistant Director Bill Johnson says the office ``has no records that mention the pastors, staff or involved members of the church."

Johnson said Wednesday the omission was inadvertent.

"It was an oversight," he said. ``We only use the tracker when we activate the EOC, and I just forgot."

He said he is in the process of reviewing all the documents generated by the tracker to see if there are any others that mention the Coral Gables church.

According to Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, president of the American Civil Liberty Union's Miami chapter, police are justified in watching a church only if the institution is suspected of criminal activity.

"The issue here is particularly galling because it is clear they are not being surveilled because of possible criminal activity -- they're being surveilled because of a religious or educational activity at the church," she said. ``This is scary, because what they're monitoring is completely legal educational or religious activities."

WAITING FOR RESPONSES

For now, though, members of the Coral Gables church are withholding judgment about what the document means. Wasson, who is representing the church without charge, said he is waiting for three other agencies -- Miami police, Coral Gables police and Miami-Dade police -- to respond to public records requests that are identical to the one he submitted to the emergency center.

"We're going to wait until we hear back on our public records requests from the other agencies and then sit down and digest the information," he said.

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