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CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST, INC et al

vs.

ELDER KENNETH WATTS, et al

HEARING BEFORE THE HONORABLE
JUDGE AMY P. BRODERSEN

August 29, 2024

850-308-5507

TisaLegalMedia.com

APPEARANCES

On behalf of the Plaintiffs:

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J. Stafford

I N D E X

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**Proceedings recorded by digital sound recording;
Transcript produced by transcriptionist.**

1 P R O C E E D I N G

2 (On the record at 10:31 AM)

3 THE COURT: So we're here this morning on
4 case number 2021 CA 2561. Just for the shorter
5 recitation, it's COGIC versus Westside, and set for
6 hearing before the court today. First is
7 plaintiff's motion to lift stay filed June 14th of
8 2024. Defendant's motion to lift a stay filed on
9 February 15th of 2024, and a case management
10 conference. As counsel know, this is a matter
11 that's had significant litigation before the court
12 for going on three years now. So I'll have council
13 to state your names for the record. We'll start
14 with you, Mr. Gant, who represent the plaintiffs,
15 and then defense counsel. And then I have some
16 questions for you all. Mr. Gant, you are muted.

17 MR. GANT: Is that better?

18 THE COURT: Yes, sir. We can hear you
19 now. Thank you.

20 MR. GANT: Fred Gant for the plaintiffs,
21 judge.

22 MR. JOHNSON: And Christopher Johnson for
23 the defendants.

24 THE COURT: Okay, I think we also have Ms.
25 Regan here as well, correct?

1 MS. REGAN: That's correct, for
2 defendants.

3 THE COURT: So, looking through the court
4 file, I know there's a number of motions that are
5 pending before the court. I want to address the
6 motions to lift stay first. And as I was reviewing
7 those as well as the court file, I know the
8 plaintiffs on the same day filed motion, and then an
9 amended motion to dismiss the case for lack of
10 jurisdiction, which kind of goes -- appears to go
11 kind of hand in hand with their motion to lift stay.

12 So, Mr. Gant, I'll start with you, because
13 your motion to lift stay is just a couple pages.
14 And when I was reviewing it, I was trying to
15 determine what may have happened at that April 9th,
16 2024 meeting, mediation with the church. And then
17 when I reviewed your motion to dismiss, that sort of
18 filled me in a little bit, I think, of the basis for
19 your motion.

20 So it's my understanding the church's take
21 on the situation now is this court no long does not
22 have jurisdiction, and that they're requesting that
23 all of the claims be dismissed. Is that right?

24 MR. GANT: Yes. your honor. Motion to
25 lift the stay is based on the fact that the church

1 has made a determination eclectically about the
2 issues regarding these parties, and that the parties
3 are under church's jurisdiction. And basically,
4 your honor, we will be asking the defendants to
5 comply what they agreed to at the church mediation.

6 We all agree that the church has
7 jurisdictional matters. The church is supreme and
8 issued before themselves in the court. It's a
9 hierarchical church entity here with COGIC, and
10 therefore, we all agree -- stipulated that we will
11 abide by what COGIC renders. Then they made that
12 rendering. So then we should go by that rendering
13 and take this matter out of the court's hands.

14 But let me say this, if defendants do not
15 comply what they agreed to, but the -- would agree
16 to it April 9, and unfortunately come back here
17 again to enforce the agreement. But as to issues
18 how they resolved --

19 THE COURT: Well, no, I don't think you
20 come back to this court to enforce that agreement.
21 The church has made it very clear, and I feel like
22 it's almost been an abuse of the court system.
23 Because their position is completely 180 of what was
24 argued in front of me numerous times about
25 jurisdiction. I did an enormous amount of research

1 and I entered an order on that issue. And now
2 they're saying, oh, well, Pastor Watts wasn't really
3 out of the church, he really was in it. So this
4 court never had jurisdiction.

5 This was always an issue for the church,
6 which has never been the plaintiff's position in
7 this case, ever. They argued strenuously against
8 that from day one by asking for, just listen to me
9 for a second. For Judge Dannheisser to enter the
10 temporary injunction and then for the continued
11 litigation in this case. The way I read what's been
12 filed in the court file is that is the church's
13 position, and that it has been requested that
14 everybody sign this joint stipulation.

15 And that if Pastor Watts and the other
16 defendants don't do it, then they will handle any
17 repercussions, including essentially kicking him out
18 of the church or banning him from the church. And
19 that would be how it would be handled if he doesn't
20 sign the agreements to address the deed issues. And
21 that would not be something that I'm not in it. I
22 don't see how this court would ever be in a position
23 to enforce a directive from the church about that.

24 I mean, that's completely outside of this
25 court's jurisdiction, in my opinion, Mr. Gant and we

1 may just agree to disagree on that, but I mean, they
2 can't have it both ways.

3 MR. GANT: If I may --

4 THE COURT: That's what they tried to do,
5 is do that when it benefited them, have the court
6 involved, but when it didn't, then, oh, we have
7 jurisdiction, the court shouldn't be involved. And
8 I feel like it's like been batting the court back
9 around, back and forth in this -- I think it's been
10 very unfair and how this has been tried to be
11 presented to the court, again, in a way, it's
12 advantageous for their position at the time. So you
13 know their position and it's in writing, this court
14 has jurisdiction.

15 MR. GANT: If I may judge, if I may judge.
16 What the court just articulated in my view, and I
17 could be wrong, exactly what the defendants have
18 been doing throughout this proceedings, in my
19 opinion. Number one, Judge Dannheisser, on issue of
20 the church property, issue of real property in the
21 State of Florida. Ownership of property rules in
22 our favor on that issue.

23 THE COURT: Right. In all candor, I would
24 not have granted that temporary injunction at the
25 time. I don't think there was sufficient basis to.

1 But he, he entered that order and that order was in
2 place when I was assigned to this division.

3 MR. GANT: It's the law of -- the law of
4 the case., your honor. Law of the case. They never
5 did that at the time. Based on the real property
6 she -- it's there -- you know, the case.

7 THE COURT: He hasn't decided -- made any
8 determinations. He just entered a temporary
9 injunction. He's made no determinations about who
10 owns the property. That, that's just not correct.
11 Mr. Gant.

12 MR. GANT: If I may your honor. If we
13 have to, we have to go through all of the pleadings.
14 I could be wrong. And then this doesn't matter how
15 the defendants go back and forth during the course
16 of litigation. Adopted both view points. But this
17 point is not irrelevant. But it's not my view
18 point. They've done that not, not the plaintiff,
19 but nonetheless one thing that is short.

20 They agree to the church requests
21 jurisdiction over the parties and the issues. I
22 said to point blank, we're not backing up in that
23 -- at all. At all. Okay. And they can, they can,
24 church COGIC can maintain and regulate and run and
25 manage things that involve the church, period. I'm

1 good with that. As they said in my motion to
2 dismiss. Okay. And we stand by the motion, judge,
3 then we're not working for the motion. We're not
4 doing that. You know, that's the main thing here.

5 So on that issue, we find, judge, we think
6 that is the case. But it all gets conscious and I
7 must make my judge aware. A judge may disagree, but
8 if someone has your property that they should not
9 have, I think that type of issue is something the
10 court can address at some point in time when the
11 facts are. But just simply put, my motion is as it
12 stands, to look, to lift the stay certified by
13 motion. This can be heard by the court.

14 That's our position. Everybody agreed
15 upon it. All parties said April 9th mediation
16 should be -- binding on all parties. And that's in
17 writing for all the parties. So beyond that, with
18 that being said, Mr. Johnson, the other issues in
19 his motion to stay moot. The only issue is to lift
20 the stay, allow my motion to be heard by the court
21 and then the case should be resolved your honor.

22 THE COURT: But if am I understanding the
23 church's position correctly is, yes they believe
24 both the claims and counterclaims should be
25 dismissed. The court here in Escambia county does

1 not have jurisdiction to address the issues that are
2 at play at this time. But that this agreement that
3 was reached on April 9th, if the parties don't
4 comply with it, then they will address it through
5 the church. And that appears to be the way it's
6 written in that Mr. Watts, I guess, can be removed
7 from the church through their procedures and their
8 process that they have in place. That's the way it
9 reads. And so the court has no jurisdiction to
10 enforce some agreement.

11 MR. GANT: Judge. If I may. I'm sorry,
12 judge. When it comes to once the motion to lift is
13 heard, the court rest in motion. It'll be as per
14 the motion. I cannot go verse to verse at this
15 point in time to, I mean, prepare to litigate all
16 the issue nuances of the motion itself, but judging
17 the motion, then we will go with the motion
18 indicates, judge. Yes.

19 THE COURT: Well, it says in the bottom,
20 and it's page 25 of your filing from June 14th, the
21 amended motion to dismiss. The bottom of that page
22 says, should the parties one or both refuse or
23 neglect to fully comply with the recommendation of
24 the committee as approved by the General assembly,
25 the executive branch of the Church of God in Christ

1 Incorporated, since the name of Church of -- since
2 the name Church of God in Christ, Inc. is listed as
3 plaintiff and the principles operate under the
4 authority of the Church of God in Christ
5 Incorporated, will have -- leave to exercise its
6 legal authority to include, but not limited to,
7 relieving the principals of their office and
8 instruct the general counsel for the church of God
9 in Christ to take over the case and dismiss it.

10 Executive branch may take over other
11 appropriate action against the parties who neglect
12 to comply with the orders that are binding orders of
13 the General assembly, which are binding. I mean,
14 again, I will tell you, most of the things that have
15 been filed from the General assembly have made very
16 little sense at all. They have not been clear.
17 They have, you know, most of them -- it's not been
18 easy to determine when they were written, who wrote
19 them, you know, and this case has been challenging
20 for a lot of reasons, because of the documentation
21 that we've been provided from the General assembly.

22 And again, it contradicts, oftentimes what
23 is argued in this court. So I understand, I think
24 your position. Mr. Gant, anything else you need to
25 tell me regarding your motion?

1 MR. GANT: Yes, your honor, the court
2 reporter here. I'm sorry, Mr. Diaz. The court
3 reporter is here for the TLM. Recording the
4 hearing. He's been there all the time -- he was
5 into the hearing. He's a court reporter, I think is
6 -- I think Brandon Diaz. I think it is his name.
7 According to the screen, he should be let in judge.

8 THE COURT: Okay, well, I don't normally
9 announce that, but yes, he's been here. I asked him
10 if he could hear me at the very beginning of the
11 hearing, so I knew he was there.

12 MR. GANT: Okay, thanks.

13 THE COURT: Yeah, I don't think has any
14 determination on the court's ruling, but thank you.
15 Yes. To announce on the record, we have a court
16 reporter. I think everybody knew that.

17 MR. GANT: Okay.

18 THE COURT: All right. Mr. Johnson or Ms.
19 Regan, any comment from you regarding your motion to
20 lift stay? Because yours is more -- it appears to
21 address the pending motions, discovery, and this
22 idea of mediation that took place within the church
23 being different than the mediation that's ordered by
24 the court in our initial case management orders or
25 trial orders.

1 I certainly agree. There's a very big
2 difference. I don't think this court has any
3 ability to enforce anything that occurs within the
4 church. And it seemed like from the way it was
5 written, that it was only the parties and council
6 weren't permitted to be there at that meeting. Or,
7 I mean, I don't think it was a formal mediation in
8 the sense that we think of mediation the way it was
9 written in your motion, and in the documentation
10 provided by Mr. Gant in his filing. So, if you all
11 could maybe clarify that for me, which one of you is
12 going to be -- okay Mr. Johnson?

13 MR. JOHNSON: Yes, ma'am. Your honor, we
14 of course, oppose the motion relative to the
15 jurisdictional issues. We do -- I mean, we
16 stipulate that the court does not have jurisdiction
17 over the church governance issues. Our position is
18 the court does have jurisdiction over the property
19 issues.

20 THE COURT: Okay. And that's very
21 different than what you've argued in front of me.

22 MR. JOHNSON: Yeah --

23 THE COURT: -- and briefed extensively. I
24 mean, it is Mr. Johnson. That's very different,
25 because the church's position is that this isn't a

1 property issue, it's -- there was a misunderstanding
2 or mistake initially with how things were handled
3 with Mr. Watts, is the way I read it, and that this
4 court has nothing to decide. I mean, you had talked
5 at the very beginning of the case, or at least when
6 I first was assigned the case, that y'all were gonna
7 redo the language in those deeds and fix everything.
8 I thought that had been addressed a couple years
9 ago. I guess it has not still been addressed.

10 MR. JOHNSON: That is correct. And in all
11 candor, we thought it had been addressed and was
12 taking care of itself. Just as a matter of follow
13 up on your perception and comments. We made the
14 argument that we did because at that time, we
15 thought that the general assembly had made its
16 decision relative to the defendants membership, if
17 you will, within the church. And so then they
18 recanted it. And so that it was really convoluted
19 at that point, because there was a resolution and
20 then a recantation, if you will, of that
21 determination.

22 Which is really the subject of the motion
23 for leave to amend is we wanted to clarify all of
24 that with the court. And that would be our
25 intention if we move forward on it. But I guess to

1 kind of cut to the chase, your honor, is we believe
2 that what the court ordered when the jurisdictional
3 issue was first addressed is pretty clear. Is that
4 the court certainly acknowledged that do not have
5 jurisdiction over the church governance issues. But
6 the bottom line is, is that the court ordered that
7 you did have jurisdiction over the property issues,
8 applying the neutral principles of law argument, if
9 you will, or position.

10 And so we of course, agree with that. We
11 think that directly applies to the counterclaim.
12 Because, and I think this is just important to note,
13 the nature of the counterclaim is simply to quiet
14 title and for ejectment. And ejectment, of course,
15 is because presently COGIC is occupying or otherwise
16 possessing two out of those three properties. And
17 so what we were simply asking the court to do is to
18 quiet title to the properties, give the defendants
19 possession of the properties.

20 And if the plaintiffs don't have any
21 problem with that, then it seems to me that things
22 could be resolved. But those things are still at
23 issue before the court, quieting title, possession
24 of the property. And we think it's pretty clear
25 under the case law, and of course, the court's prior

1 ruling that you do have jurisdiction to address
2 those. And that's the heart of it, of why we
3 believe the stay should be lifted, so those issues
4 can be flushed out in the pending motions.

5 THE COURT: Mr. Gant, anything else from
6 you regarding that, sir?

7 MR. GANT: Yes, your honor. This -- Mr.
8 Johnson has been trying to -- the court the last
9 couple years, your honor. The all issues involved
10 in this matter, should the church property part of
11 church constitution. They dictated by the church's
12 directives, would they agree to do at the mediation
13 before the general assembly. They agreed to be part
14 of that process. They moved, one second officer,
15 they moved to be a state -- church. Mr. Watts and
16 his colleagues did.

17 But nonetheless, in issue two The essence
18 of the case is just what Mr. Johnson indicated. The
19 whole matter of all the pleadings talks about the
20 church jurisdiction to regulate, demand his own
21 property, your honor. And that's as clear as --
22 glass. The case law is clear. Mr. Johnson is not
23 being disingenuous. (inaudible) is that to the
24 contrary around the State of Florida. COGIC church
25 has a right to maintain its property as -- church

1 according to -- constitutions.

2 There's no -- I've haven't seen one case
3 of Florida that contrary to that position. So we
4 don't talk about case law. That's fine with me,
5 your honor. Mr. Johnson knows he's not been
6 disingenuous, your honor. And they've been trying
7 to get that thing back and forth the whole couple of
8 years. If my motion to dismiss would flush out
9 issue. What Johnson is trying to and Johnson is
10 given the court now. It would cover all basic terms
11 of the issue of the church of hierarchical authority
12 in this matter, but also indicate that church
13 property is part of the church's mandate, your
14 honor.

15 And lastly, they stipulate that the church
16 would make the call on these issues in their
17 pleadings, your honor. Now they want to back out
18 from that. They trying the back out from their --
19 as of this year, your honor. This is -- Regan
20 motion to look to state appropriate proceedings.
21 Indicate just that, your honor. Look at it clearly.
22 That's what she said. The church has the authority
23 to make these decisions before them. Then now
24 they're turning the other way. Contrary to what
25 they planned, your honor, previously. So it is

1 confusing because they keep going. I think they
2 keep going back and forth to what they want.

3 They want something else here and there.
4 We can, anyway. So we think that the church has
5 jurisdiction on all issues in this matter. And we
6 want to get my motion dismissed. It was filed
7 procedures, your honor. It was filed so we could.
8 And motion dismiss could get heard. That's why I
9 filed motion to lift the stay. But that very point.
10 And we're confident once that motion's heard, it
11 will elucidate --

12 THE COURT: Well, I'm prepared to address
13 that motion today because I have --

14 MR. GANT: It's not -- this is that motion
15 to dismiss --

16 THE COURT: If I feel it's appropriate to
17 rule on it, then I will with on the papers. I can
18 do that, Mr. Gant. Because it's become abundantly
19 clear to me that this court absolutely does not have
20 jurisdiction to address any of these matters that
21 have been raised for the last three years. I mean,
22 the statement from the church clearly says that.
23 That this case arose out of a dispute with a local
24 pastor and a bishop without exhausting all the
25 remedies in the ecclesiastia and without leave of

1 the church to do so.

2 And upon being made aware that the parties
3 petitioned the church, through the bishop and the
4 other parties, to bring resolution, and this matter
5 was presented to the assembly and there was a vote
6 and there was an order entered addressing all of the
7 issues that are before the court. So I do not
8 believe that I have jurisdiction at this point in
9 time. The church has made their decision that they
10 have jurisdiction to address all of these issues,
11 that this is not a property matter, this is a matter
12 within the jurisdiction, in control of the church.

13 It was presented to me in a very narrow
14 issue of the deeds to the properties, but that has
15 changed since that was first argued in front of me.
16 And as I said to you, the church has done what's
17 convenient for them, and they have wanted the church
18 to have control at certain points in time, and
19 they've wanted the court to. And I feel like it
20 has, in a lot of ways, been disingenuous on how it's
21 been handled. And so I understand the motions that
22 are before me today, but based on all of the
23 information provided to me and what's in the court
24 file, I do not believe this, this court has
25 jurisdiction any further.

1 And I'm inclined to dismiss the entire
2 case, including the counterclaims. And it can be
3 addressed through the church, because that is
4 certainly their position on it and how they believe
5 it should be handled. And if the parties don't sign
6 this joint agreement that apparently was discussed
7 at a meeting or mediation of some form, then the
8 church has the ability to take whatever action they
9 feel is appropriate under their laws and their
10 jurisdiction. That is what they have said in these
11 documents that are in the court file.

12 And I had a hearing the other day on
13 another unrelated case in some respects, and I ruled
14 that this court didn't have jurisdiction to address
15 it and I dismissed it. So, you know, and the other
16 thing, I know that you filed a motion to
17 consolidate. I mean, the, this isn't family law,
18 Mr. Johnson I'm talking right now, Mr. Gant. So
19 it's not the same thing as far as there's no formal
20 notice of related cases in civil jurisdiction.

21 And, you know, I've been addressing a very
22 narrow issue within this case. I mean, there's a
23 number of motions that are outstanding that quite
24 honestly, I don't believe this court needs to
25 address based on this jurisdictional issue that has

1 certainly been brought to the court in a very
2 different fashion than it was argued previously.
3 But I mean, that's sort of where I think this case
4 has taken us at this point. And I felt --

5 MR. GANT: We agree judge.

6 THE COURT: Well, I understand the defense
7 has a different position. They have counterclaims,
8 but they're all related to what this church document
9 here has said that they have control and are in
10 charge of. Not this court. I mean, Mr. Johnson,
11 I'll certainly hear anything else. -- anything else,
12 sorry, that you have to say, but that's the way I
13 read these documents.

14 MR. JOHNSON: Yeah, I understood, your
15 honor. Yeah, I mean, I won't belabor it or test
16 court's patience with it. It just -- we were under
17 the impression that the court's initial order, of
18 course, reserved jurisdiction over the property
19 issues. And at the end of the day, if the court
20 dismisses both the underlying complaint and the
21 counterclaim, then we're going to be left in a
22 position where the deeded owners of the properties
23 in this county don't even possess two out of the
24 three properties. Because of Judge Dannheisser's
25 early order is COGIC, the plaintiff in the case, now

1 possesses two out of those -- out of those three
2 properties. And that's why we're simply asking this
3 court to just quiet title and put the parties back
4 into their proper place relative to ownership and
5 control of the properties.

6 THE COURT: Well, control is different
7 than ownership.

8 MR. JOHNSON: Correct.

9 THE COURT: Because he didn't, through
10 that temporary injunction, to my recollection,
11 decide ownership. It was a possession issue on a
12 temporary basis.

13 MR. JOHNSON: Right.

14 THE COURT: So -- but it appears the
15 church has formulated a plan on to effectuate what
16 you're talking about. Now, I understand your
17 clients, maybe, even though I guess they were there
18 and agreed to all of this and agreed to sign this,
19 and now they're not. I don't know exactly, because
20 it's a little bit unclear on how everything played
21 out. I mean, were you and Ms. Regan and Mr. Gant at
22 these meetings?

23 MR. JOHNSON: No, ma'am.

24 THE COURT: Again, showing completely that
25 the church is in control of the issues that are

1 before this court.

2 MR. JOHNSON: I agree that that appears to
3 be their position. I guess our position on that
4 would be that the church itself cannot divest the
5 court of the court's jurisdiction just because --

6 THE COURT: I don't think they can. But
7 it's clear to me that this should have never been
8 brought before the court based on their position.
9 It should never have been brought before the court
10 hearing. This should have been addressed in the
11 church from the beginning. Now, to some degree, I
12 think that was attempted to be done several years
13 ago. And I've told you before, that issue regarding
14 jurisdiction in this particular case was a very
15 challenging, complicated decision to make.

16 And I spent a lot of time on it reading a
17 lot of case law, because a lot of these issues are
18 very distinguishable depending on the specific facts
19 of these situations. But that is, I believe, where
20 I am at this point, based on how everything has
21 played out in this case and the church's continued
22 involvement and their position that they have the
23 ability to address all issues that have been raised
24 in this case. And so, because of that, I'm inclined
25 at this point to dismiss this case.

1 So the motions before the court, I don't
2 think, need to be, be addressed any further, as well
3 as the other pending motions that I know that we
4 were going to talk about getting some hearing,
5 hearing dates set. And, you know, I certainly hope
6 that through the control and direction of the
7 church, these issues can be resolved between the
8 parties. It looks like there is a plan for that to
9 happen. According to the documents that they have
10 filed with the court that are in the court file.

11 MR. GANT: Yes, your honor. We agree.

12 THE COURT: I'll prepare an order.

13 MR. GANT: Thank you, judge.

14 THE COURT: Thank you. Y'all have a good
15 day.

16 MR. JOHNSON: Thank you.

17 MS. Regan : Thank you for your time.

18 (Off the record at 10:59 AM)

CERTIFICATE OF DIGITAL REPORTER

I, BRANDON DIAZ, a Digital Reporter and Notary
public within the State of Georgia, do hereby certify:

That on August 29th, 2024, I digitally reported the
proceedings had and the evidence given, together with the
objections of counsel thereto, and that said testimony
was accurately captured with annotations by me during the
proceeding, taken at said time and place.

I further certify that I am not related to any of
the parties to this action by blood or marriage and that
I am in no way interested in the outcome of this matter.

IN WITNESS THEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand the
30th day of August 2024.

Brandon Diaz

Brandon M. Diaz
Notary Commission Georgia/W-00605668
Commission Expires: May 3rd, 2027

CERTIFICATE OF TRANSCRIPTIONIST

I, Mario Barredo, a Legal Transcriptionist do hereby
certify:

That the foregoing is a complete and true
transcription of the original digital audio recording
of the testimony and proceedings captured in the
above-entitled matter. As the transcriptionist, I
have reviewed and transcribed the entirety of the
original digital audio recording of the proceeding to
ensure a verbatim record to the best of my ability.

I further certify that I am neither attorney
for nor a relative or employee of any of the parties
to the action; further, that I am not a relative or
employee of any attorney employed by the parties
hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the
outcome of this matter.

IN WITNESS THEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand
this 4th day of September, 2024.

Mario Barredo

Mario Barredo

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