



The city of Austin, Texas, is now on the front lines of the culture war between **religious freedom and LGBT rights**. Early in October, the U.S. Pastor Council (USPC) filed a federal lawsuit challenging **city ordinances that say** employers cannot refuse to hire people based on sexual orientation and gender identity. **According to Austin's KXAN News**, the ordinance the lawsuit is targeting has existed since 1992, although it has been updated in the following years.

The USPC filed the lawsuit on behalf of 25 member churches in the city of Austin, and the council **represents over 1,000 member churches** across the country. According to the USPC, the city's ordinances directly contradict Christian beliefs about sexual behavior and therefore infringe on religious freedom. Opponents of the ordinance are concerned that the law does not allow employers to refuse employment for religious reasons pertaining to gender and sexuality. **According to the Christian Post**, USPC executive director David Welch says that the ordinance contains the "stingiest religious exemptions we have ever seen in an anti-discrimination law."

The lawsuit outlines the churches' desire to refuse to hire anyone whose beliefs and lifestyles do not coincide with what they believe the Bible says about sexuality, including the right not to put **women in positions of leadership**. The lawsuit also claims that the ordinance violates the Texas Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the state constitution and the U.S. constitution. **Non-Discrimination Is One of Austin's "Core Values"**

Austin city spokesperson **David Green has in turn stated** that Austin is "prepared to vigorously defend the City against this challenge to the City's civil rights protections." Supporters of the ordinance are concerned that USPC's lawsuit will undermine the rights of **the LGBT community**. **Steve Adler, Austin's mayor, has said** that non-discrimination is a "core value" of the city of Austin and that the city is prepared to defend that value. In addition to the suit that the USPC has filed, the conservative group Texas Values **has filed a lawsuit** also aimed at the Austin laws prohibiting employers from refusing to hire people based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The situation in Austin echoes recent events in Houston, where voters "rejected an equal-rights ordinance that sought to add protections for sexual orientation and gender identity." While Houston's city council passed the ordinance in 2014, a lawsuit successfully forced the ordinance to be put to vote, and voters knocked it down **by a majority of 61 percent to 39 percent**.

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court **heard the case of baker Jack Phillips**, who refused on religious grounds to make cakes for same-sex couples. But rather than determining whether people have the right to make such a refusal, the justices instead concentrated on **the Colorado Civil Rights Commission's unfair treatment of Phillips**.

The debate over religious freedom and non-discrimination is unquestionably a trending, hot-button issue across the U.S. It remains to be seen what the nation's highest court will ultimately rule on the matter.