

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2025

## Tenants sue their church over 'uninhabitable' homes

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Two families sued their landlord over what they called the nauseating condition of their homes. They say that their homes on South Figueroa Street in downtown Los Angeles are infested with cockroaches, bedbugs and rodents, and chronic water leaks have led to a significant amount of mold. But not only did the landlord fail to fix these issues, it tried to pressure one of the families to sign a non-disclosure agreement, the tenants said in a lawsuit filed Tuesday.

The broad outlines of the story would be familiar to anybody who has worked on housing habitability claims. But the landlord here is not hiding behind a faceless corporation, just out of reach of the law. The landlord is Greater Cornerstone Baptist Church, and the plaintiffs are its congregants. The lawsuit also names the pastor.

The Ross household and Sunun household claim 10 causes of action, including negligence, tortious breach of implied warranty of habitability and constructive eviction.

Their complaint, filed by Riley Ersoff LLP and Friedman & Chapman LLP,



Victoria L. Ersoff

reads like a horror movie. It claimed: There are cockroaches everywhere; bedbugs continuously bite and feed on the adults and children; rats and mice urinate and defecate on the tenants' food. The complaint says that the defendants repeatedly lied to the plaintiffs that they would make repairs and failed to do so. It also says that the defendants harassed and intimidated the plaintiffs so that they don't speak up.

One of the plaintiffs is a deaf and blind woman who said she donated a lot of money to the church during her membership, which goes back 60 years, according to Riley Ersoff partner Victoria L. Ersoff.

"There are lot of landlords who put profits before the health and safety of their tenants and their children," Ersoff said. "It's particularly egregious when a church engages in this type of behavior, especially against their low-income congregants who include a 95-year-old deaf and handicapped woman, her severely diabetic daughter and 6-year-old son."

The totality of the alleged conduct constitutes a constructive eviction of the Ross family, which moved out in February 2024, according to the the complaint. They will seek a court order allowing an amended pleading that includes a claim for punitive and exemplary damages pursuant to C.C.P. Section 425.14 against the church. *Emelda Lynn Ross et al., v. Greater Cornerstone Baptist Church et al.*, 25STCV01530 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Jan. 21, 2025).

Church officials did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

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