

**STATE OF MICHIGAN**  
**COURT OF APPEALS**

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SIKH SOCIETY OF MICHIGAN, INC.,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

v

KANWARDEEP SINGH, PARDEEP KAUR  
GILL, MANJIT SINGH NARULA, INDERPAL  
SINGH, SURINDERJIT SINGH KAHLON, BIBI  
JASMEL KAUR CHABIL, BIBI DALJIT KAUR  
BHUGRA, S. MUKHTIAR SINGH  
KHANGURA, S. MANJIT SINGH, and S.  
HARPREET SINGH,

Defendants-Appellees.

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UNPUBLISHED  
February 19, 2004

No. 244311  
Oakland Circuit Court  
LC No. 02-042119-CZ

Before: Schuette, P.J., and Meter and Owens, JJ.

PER CURIAM.

Plaintiff (hereinafter “the Society”) appeals as of right the trial court’s order dismissing the case for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction. We affirm. This appeal is being decided without oral argument pursuant to MCR 7.214(E).

The Society is a non-profit corporation organized for the purpose of promoting the Sikh religion and fostering relationships among followers of the faith. The Society is governed by a Constitution, and its day-to-day activities are directed by a Working Committee and an Executive Committee. A controversy arose regarding committee membership when certain members of the Society held a no confidence vote, dissolved a newly elected Working Committee, and selected an Interim Committee to direct the affairs of the Society.

The Society filed a verified complaint alleging that defendants, who consist of some members of the Working Committee and members of the Interim Committee, violated the Constitution by holding a no confidence vote and selecting an Interim Committee in contravention of procedures set out therein. The Society sought: a declaration that its actions complied with the Constitution, specific enforcement of the Constitution, and an accounting of the financial books and records. The trial court dismissed the case on the ground that the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine divested it of subject-matter jurisdiction because resolution of the dispute would necessarily require an examination of Society polity.

Whether subject-matter jurisdiction exists is a question of law for the court. We review the issue de novo. *Dep't of Natural Resources v Holloway Construction Co*, 191 Mich App 704, 705; 478 NW2d 677 (1991).

Under the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine, a civil court loses jurisdiction when it must venture into questions of religious doctrine or ecclesiastical polity. *Smith v Calvary Christian Church*, 462 Mich 679, 684; 614 NW2d 590 (2000). Religious doctrine refers to rituals, liturgies of worship, and tenets of the faith. Polity refers to the organization and form of government of the church. *Maciejewski v Breitenbeck*, 162 Mich App 410, 414; 413 NW2d 65 (1987). A civil court's jurisdiction to resolve property disputes involving a church or church members is limited to property rights that can be adjudicated by application of civil law. *First Protestant Reformed Church v DeWolf*, 344 Mich 624, 633; 75 NW2d 19 (1956); *Maciejewski, supra*.

The Society couches the instant matter in terms of an election and property dispute; however, this case involves the manner in which the Society seeks to fulfill its mission of promoting the Sikh faith. The Society's form of government is set out in its Constitution. The election of members to the Working Committee and the Executive Committee is governed by procedures set out in the Constitution. Such an election implicates religious doctrine in that members of these committees are required to be individuals who have a "deep conviction" in the Sikh faith, and polity in that the committees direct the day-to-day activities of the Society, which include the providing of religious instruction and the conduct of worship services. The approval of persons selected to serve on the committees necessarily involves a judgment by the membership as to whether those persons have the religious conviction necessary to guide the activities of the Society. The trial court correctly determined that it lacked subject-matter jurisdiction to adjudicate this matter. *Smith, supra*.

Affirmed.

/s/ Bill Schuette  
/s/ Patrick M. Meter  
/s/ Donald S. Owens