

California's New Guidelines for Churches Reopening During COVID-19

Religious services in California will look much different under rules unveiled Monday that limit attendance to 100 people and recommend worshippers wear masks, limit singing and refrain from shaking hands or hugging.

The state released guidance under which county health departments can approve the reopening of churches, mosques, synagogues and other houses of worship. They have been closed since Gov. Gavin Newsom issued a stay-at-home order in March to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

It's not immediately known how soon in-person services will resume. Counties that are having success controlling the virus are likely to move quickly. Others with outbreaks—such as Los Angeles County, which has about 60% of California's roughly 3,800 deaths—may choose to delay.

The guidelines ask worshippers to wear masks, avoid sharing prayer books or prayer rugs and skip the collection plate. They also say to avoid large gatherings for holidays, weddings and funerals and warn that activities such as singing or group recitation “negate” the benefits of social distancing.

The guidelines say even with physical distancing, in-person worship carries a higher risk of transmitting the virus and increasing the numbers of hospitalizations and deaths and recommend houses of worship shorten services.

Each county will have to adopt rules for services to resume within its jurisdiction, and then the guidelines will be reviewed by state health officials after 21 days. The guidelines include limiting gatherings to 25% of building

capacity or 100 people, whichever is lower.

In Los Angeles County, Rabbi Shalom Rubanowitz of the Shul on the Beach in Venice Beach said he hopes his congregation can meet for this week's Shavuot holiday, to celebrate when Jews received the Torah.

The congregation will have to figure out how to provide temperature checks and provide a place for individual prayer books and shawls. Orthodox Jews do not use technology during the Sabbath and may not carry most personal items.

Some church leaders aren't eager to reopen. The Rev. Amos Brown, pastor of Third Baptist Church in San Francisco and head of the local NAACP chapter, led a protest Monday against reopening.

"We are not going to be rushing back to church," he said by phone, noting that many leaders of his denomination have been sickened or died nationwide. Freedom of religion is "not the freedom to kill folks, not the freedom to put people in harm's way. That's insane," he said.

Many have been eagerly waiting an announcement on religious services after Newsom began relaxing constraints on stores and other secular outlets as part of a four-phase plan to reopen the economy.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange announced last week that it is phasing in public Masses beginning June 14, starting with restricted numbers of worshippers. At first, choirs will be banned, fonts won't contain holy water and parishioners won't perform rituals where they must touch each other.

"We know that God is with us, but at the same time we have to be careful and make sure that we protect each other in this challenging time," Bishop Kevin Vann said Friday.

Some 47 of the state's 58 counties have received permission to

move deeper into the reopening by meeting standards for controlling the virus. The state on Monday cleared the way for in-store shopping to resume statewide with social distancing restrictions, although counties get to decide whether to permit it.

Some places of worship around the country opened over the weekend after President Donald Trump declared them essential and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released guidelines for reopening faith organizations.

In California, most houses of worship have complied with social distancing, making do with online, remote and a few drive-in services.

In the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Archbishop Jose Gomez called on parishes to celebrate Pentecost—a major religious day for many Christians—next Sunday by holding food and blood drives.

“I think it is important for all us of to be aware that this is a very dangerous illness, and we are making sure that everything is OK when we come back and celebrate the Eucharist together,” he said.

But several thousand churches have vowed to defy the current stay-at-home order on Pentecost, arguing they can do so safely.

Two church services that already were held without authorization have been sources of outbreaks: one in Mendocino County and the other in Butte County.

Newsom’s cautious approach to reopening has angered opponents who claim the rules violate religious freedoms.

A Pentecostal church in San Diego County lost a federal appeal Friday in its quest to reopen immediately. The South Bay United Pentecostal Church of Chula Vista immediately filed an

appeal with the U.S. Supreme Court.

The nonprofit Center for American Liberty, which has filed several lawsuits over church restrictions, said the guidelines don't go far enough.

Newsom "lacks authority to dictate to California's faithful, how they may worship," said Harmeet Dhillon, a San Francisco lawyer and the group's CEO. "Let people who wish to worship safely and together, do so."

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death. As of Monday, California had at least 94,558 confirmed cases of COVID-19, more than 3,000 hospitalizations and 3,795 deaths.

The state is still seeing troubling COVID-19 flare-ups. More than 150 employees at a Farmer John meatpacking plant in Vernon, an industrial city south of Los Angeles, contracted the coronavirus. Imperial County, across the border from Mexico, has seen a surge. Two inmates from the California Institution for Men in San Bernardino County died Sunday from what appear to be complications related to COVID-19. {eo}

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