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# California to issue reopening rules for religious gatherings by Monday

Alexei Koseff | May 22, 2020 | Updated: May 22, 2020 6:14 p.m.



Lisa Reece (left) and Deacon Robert Lacy (center) during the virtual church service at Cornerstone Missionary Church in the Bayview district on Sunday, May 10, 2020 in San Francisco, California. One of the congregants, Tessie Henry, contracted coronavirus from a funeral at the church and later died.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

**SACRAMENTO** — California will issue coronavirus safety guidelines for religious gatherings by Monday, Gov. Gavin Newsom said hours after President Trump declared houses of worship “essential” and called on states to allow them to reopen this weekend.

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groups have not yet been granted permission to accept congregants back for worship.

Religious services are still prohibited in California this weekend, part of a broader limitation on mass gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic. Newsom indicated Friday that a blanket ban for in-person worship might be eased soon, though he did not specify when.

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“We deeply respect and admire the faith, the devotion and the cause that unites millions and millions of Californians,” Newsom said at a news conference in Yountville. “At a time of so much anxiety and uncertainty, faith and that devotion to something higher, better and bigger than yourself becomes even more pronounced and more profound and more important.”

The governor has expressed concern about the potential spread of the virus among “congregations of people mixing from far and wide, coming together proximate in closed space at large scales.”

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Butte County officials said last week that more than 180 people were exposed to the coronavirus after they attended an unauthorized Mother's Day church service with an asymptomatic carrier. An early outbreak in Sacramento County was linked to fellowship meetings held by dozens of members of a church.

Even as many counties have received permission to start welcoming diners back to restaurants and shoppers back to stores, churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship are barred from holding services. Earlier this week, Newsom said it could be several weeks before the ban is lifted.

But California is under increasing pressure to let services resume. While federal courts have blocked several lawsuits seeking to end the ban immediately, the U.S. Justice Department warned the state this week that its policy amounted to religious discrimination and it must ease restrictions to enable services to take place with proper safety

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A group of Christian pastors, known as Church United, has also promised to defy Newsom to hold services on May 31, the feast of the Pentecost. The group said it expects thousands of churches across the state to join.

Trump ramped up the stakes Friday when he told reporters that he was declaring religious institutions as “essential places that provide essential services.”

He said he would “override” any governors who did not abide by his request to let houses of worship reopen. The White House did not explain what authority Trump would invoke to issue any such order.

“Some governors have deemed liquor stores and abortion clinics as essential,” but not churches, Trump said. “It’s not right. So I’m correcting this injustice and calling houses of worship essential.”

At his news conference, Newsom gave no indication when religious services could actually resume.

“We’ve been engaging the faith community. We look forward to churches reopening in a safe and responsible manner,” Newsom said.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released new guidelines for religious institutions Friday that include taking steps to limit the size of gatherings and considering holding services outdoors or in large, well-ventilated areas.

Newsom said he would review those recommendations as the state

people’s health and their fundamental need and desire to practice their faith.”

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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