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# Newsom promises reopening plan for churches as Trump demands immediate action



Protesters call for the reopening of churches in Huntington Beach on May 9. (Raul Roa / Los Angeles Times )

By Raul Roa, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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Gov. Gavin Newsom vowed to provide plans Monday for reopening California churches amid mounting pressure to allow in-person religious services both from protesters and President Trump, who is demanding that governors take action immediately.

Newsom's comment comes just days after he said opening churches to congregants was "a few weeks away." The governor said he has been meeting with religious leaders for weeks to craft a plan for the safe reopening of churches for services, including efforts to sanitize pews, ensure safe distancing and other safety protocols.

"We look forward to churches reopening in a safe and responsible manner, and we have guidelines that we anticipated completing on Monday and we're on track to do just that," Newsom said during a COVID-19 briefing held at the Veterans Home of California in Yountville on Friday.

Newsom's comments came hours after Trump made an unexpected appearance in the White House briefing room to declare that he was designating churches "essential" businesses so that they can immediately reopen.

Trump, who has said he would leave decisions about easing public health guidance to states but has often criticized decisions by individual governors, threatened that he would "override" states that didn't heed his directive. It was not clear what authority he was referring to.

His comments, in tenor and tone, made clear that the announcement was largely about signaling that he continues to fight for religious conservatives, a core element of his political base where Trump's support has eroded somewhat in recent weeks amid broader questions about his response to the pandemic.

"Some governors have deemed liquor stores and abortion clinics as essential, but have left out churches and other houses of worship," Trump said. "It's not right. So, I'm correcting this injustice and calling houses of worship essential."

Speaking to the possibility that some governors might not immediately adhere to his instructions, he suggested they reach out to him directly even though the matter, he asserted, would not be open to discussion.

"If there's any question, they're going to have to call me — but they are not going to be successful in that call," he said. "The governors need to do the right thing and allow these very important essential places of faith to open right now, this weekend."

When asked about Trump's comments, Newsom sidestepped the issue, saying his administration has been working with faith leaders to allow services to resume as quickly as can be done while protecting the public health.

"We have been very aggressive in trying to put together guidelines that will do justice to people's health and their fundamental need and desire to practice their faith," Newsom said. "We are looking forward to a very positive working relationship with faith leaders, as we ma

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Disease Control and Prevention had yet to release federal guidelines detailing how churches and other religious institutions should resume services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Newsom said CDC guidelines were expected to be released on Friday and said state health officials will review them to determine if they include safeguards that should be added to those being drafted by the state.

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Newsom emphasized his own religious upbringing in the Catholic Church, saying he had deep admiration and respect for the faith of the millions of Californians and the need for them to practice that faith. The governor said the vast majority of religious leaders across the state understand the need to protect the public health and have been working with his administration to ensure services, when the resume, will be conducted in a safe manner.

Earlier this week, the U.S. Department of Justice sent a letter to the Newsom administration warning that the state's stay-at-home order may [discriminate against religious groups and violate their constitutional rights](#). The letter accused Newsom of "unequal treatment of faith communities" in restricting their ability to gather and resume services.

"Simply put, there is no pandemic exception to the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights," Eric S. Dreiband, an assistant attorney general and the head of the Justice Department's civil rights division, stated in the letter.

Shortly after that warning, more than [1,200 pastors in California vowed to hold in-person services on May 31](#), Pentecost Sunday, in defiance of the state moratorium on religious gatherings.

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Robert H. Tyler, an attorney representing a Lodi church that has challenged the governor's order in court, said pastors signed a "Declaration of Essentiality" that asserts their churches are as essential as grocery stores and hardware stores and should be allowed to reopen.

"We believe you are attempting to act in the best interests of the state," Tyler wrote to Newsom, "but the restrictions have gone too far and for too long."

Newsom, in an interview with Stephanie Ruhle of MSNBC on Thursday, said California was just a ["few weeks away from meaningful modifications that will allow just that to happen."](#)

A federal court judge in Sacramento recently issued a ruling that Newsom's stay-at-home order did not violate the constitutional rights to free assembly and religion when the Cross Culture Christian Center in Lodi was ordered to cease services.

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White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany, who took questions after the president's comments on Friday, struggled to cite any legal authority for the president to order governors to allow religious services to resume, attempting to deflect by suggesting that reporters questioning the validity of Trump's move wanted churches to remain closed.

She said the White House would "leave it to faith communities to reopen," noting the newly released CDC guidelines and acknowledging that the decision would be "up to the governors."

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