News



In this April 11, 2020, file photo, a person films pastor Nicolas Sanchez, center left, celebrating Easter Vigil Mass at his church decorated with candles and pictures sent by his parishioners attached to their pews at St. Patrick Church in North Hollywood, Calif. The Friday, May 22 anticipated release of new federal guidance on resuming in-person religious services during the pandemic comes ahead of a week that was already poised to rattle what's been a weeks-long national balancing act – pitting the call to worship against the risk of the coronavirus.(AP/Damian Dovarganes)

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The anticipated release of new federal guidance on in-person religious services comes at a precarious point in the national balancing act that pits the call of worship against the risk of coronavirus.

Even before President Donald Trump said May 22 that he considered religious institutions "essential" and vowed that guidance would be coming from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Christian leaders in several states made plans to welcome back congregants on the week of Pentecost, May 31.

The new advice could energize houses of worship that might want to reopen their doors, despite evidence of ongoing risk of the virus spreading through communal gatherings.

Tension over when and how to reopen houses of worship has varied depending on the state, as different areas set their own pace for easing pandemic stay-at-home orders. Trump called for the resumption of in-person religious services repeatedly this week, saying May 22 that "we want our churches and our places of faith and worship, we want them to open."

While Trump said delayed CDC guidance for faith organizations could come as soon as May 22, the timetable for release remained unclear.

The president suggested on May 21 that friction over the issue was more common in states run by Democrats because "churches are not being treated with respect" by many their governors.

One of those Democrats, California Gov. Gavin Newsom, was warned this week by Trump's Justice Department that the state's phased-in plan to restart economic activity puts an "unfair burden" on worship by not permitting churches to open earlier in the process. More than 1,200 California pastors are planning to restart worship on May 31 despite Newsom's stay-at-home orders, which he has said would likely allow for religious gatherings within weeks.

Among the California pastors leading the call for resuming in-person gathering is Danny Carroll of Water of Life Community Church in Fontana. State officials "don't understand that people of faith need contact, that they need to worship together," Carroll said in an interview. "We're trying to close the gap – thoughtfully, humbly, nicely."

Carroll described the California church leaders' effort as disconnected from politics: "We don't deal with how people vote. We deal with how people live."

But another pastor involved, Ron Hill of Love and Unity Christian Fellowship, said that he finds "some merit" in Republicans' claims that blue states have a less keen understanding of religion's importance in public life.

"I really find it difficult to understand why they're placing a different rule on the church than on the supermarket, café or restaurant," said Hill, who added that he had not yet definitively decided whether May 31 would mark the reopening of his church in Compton, Calif.

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Pastors in other states, however, have already begun outlining plans to welcome back worshippers in person before the month's end. Florida's Rodney Howard-Browne – arrested in March for holding a large in-person service at his church, charges that were later dropped – is preparing to reopen with an outdoor service on Pentecost. Catholic and Lutheran churches in Minnesota have notified that state's Democratic governor that they plan to resume Mass this week in advance of the

holiday, in defiance of his order.

An evangelical pastor who's been a key Trump backer, Jack Graham, plans to reopen his Texas megachurch on Pentecost weekend. Attendees of those services will be required to make reservations, but masks will not be mandated, according to the church's website.

Graham told the Faithwire website this week that Pentecost, considered holy by Christians as the birthday of the church, was a fitting moment for "a kind of rebirth of the church" this year.

The momentum toward restarting in-person worship comes amid new reports of church gatherings spreading COVID-19. A CDC report released this week traced the spread of the virus to 35 out of 92 attendees at two March church events in Arkansas that were attended by two symptomatic people.

"Reopening faith communities, let alone reopening any other faith institutions, is unsafe" given the ongoing threat of spreading illness, said Maggie Siddiqi, director of the faith initiative at the liberal Center for American Progress. "My fear is we will learn the hard way and have to close again."

While Pentecost promises to escalate the number of churches seeking to reopen, many other houses of worship are still expecting to wait until June or beyond to resume in-person services with restrictions aimed at protecting public health. Another prominent conservative evangelical ally of Trump, Pastor Robert Jeffress, said he is eyeing local metrics and could reopen sometime next month.

Jeffress said his Dallas-area megachurch would be "data-driven, instead of date-driven, when it comes to reopening."

A spokeswoman for the ministry of Paula White-Cain, the pastor who leads Trump's White House faith initiative, said this week that Pentecost services at her Florida church are slated to be online-only.

Trump, however, continued to project eagerness to restart religious services. The president and other senior administration officials held a May 21 conference call with 1,600 "pastors and faith leaders" to tout the importance of reopening in-person worship, according to the White House.

Some governors designated faith gatherings as essential services in their states' pandemic stay-at-home orders, although others restricted them as the virus began to spread.

Ralph Reed, chief of the Faith & Freedom Coalition and another conservative evangelical ally of Trump, said that while Pentecost is "an important marker for the church," he doesn't expect most Christian leaders would be "guided particularly by that date" in deciding when to reopen.

But Reed lauded the growing push in that direction. "Churches are doing a good job" adapting to necessary public health constraints, he said, "but I do think it's time for the country to reopen."

This story appears in the **Reopening post pandemic** feature series. View the full series.