


3,000 Calif. churches vow to reopen on Pentecost Sunday, regardless of gov. orders

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By [Brandon Showalter](#), CP Reporter  | Wednesday, May 13, 2020



Pastor Jack Hibbs preaches at Calvary Chapel Chino Hills in California. | Calvary Chapel Chino Hills

Increasing numbers of California churches are planning to restart public services on May 31, Pentecost Sunday, regardless of what the governor of the state says.

Church United, a network of approximately 3,000 churches representing 2.5 million members in the Golden State, has announced its intentions to reopen before the state sets in motion the third phase of its reopening plan, which permits modified reopening of houses of worship.

Around the nation, a robust debate has emerged as to how much state entities can restrict certain freedoms, particularly religious worship by deeming it "nonessential" in order to prevent further spread of a disease and stem a public health crisis.

"Our fear is simply this," Governor Gavin Newsom said, as was reported by [The Center Square](#) Saturday, "Congregations of people from far and wide coming together in a closed space at a large scale remains a point of concern and anxiety for us. We are working on guidelines for physical distancing and working with faith leaders talking about unique conditions in their own facilities. Nothing is etched in stone."

Matt Brown, who pastors Sandals Church in Riverside, blasted the governor's decision to deem churches "nonessential."

"He didn't ask us. He overstepped and he's overreached," Brown said. "And he needs to step back and he needs to declare that the church is an essential part of what we do as Americans, as what we do as Californians."

Pastor Jack Hibbs of Calvary Chapel Chino Hills explained in a phone interview Tuesday with The Christian Post that it is the pastor's burden to minister to the people, particularly those in his congregation, and to continue to proclaim the Gospel.

"When we look around at this crisis, the issue of not exactly meeting the criteria of what is defined as a church — meaning our getting together, our fellowship with one another — the mandate given to us from Scripture to pray for one another even to the point where we are to lay hands on the sick and pray for them.

"The Christian ought to be the wisest, ought to be the best, the most resourceful citizen in any community. So by no means do we desire to resist the authorities that be according to Romans 13," which speaks about how followers of Jesus are to conduct themselves in relation to the governing authorities.

He added: "In fact, we have been extremely compliant for over two months, our state, when petitioned, when we asked our governor's office: 'Where are you placing the value of the church? The fact that we provide mental and spiritual health and stability at such a critical time, where do you place us in priority?'"

Thus far, the governor's office has said that the church may be in the third or fourth phases of reopening, which could begin anywhere from a few weeks to months from now. His words have left some wondering if it will ever be politically correct for churches to resume services.

Hibbs believes that many pastors are fasting and praying, doing their best to figure out how to proceed in unfamiliar territory and amid competing narratives about what is occurring, and discerning God's heart in the midst of uncertain times. As he prayed, he felt a strong impression from the Lord that he should restart services on May 31, realizing later that the date happened to be Pentecost Sunday.

When he made the video explaining his thinking, he had only mentioned that May 31 date to a few people.

"I cannot think of a more biblically-sanctioned day of the entire year ... to restart church than Pentecost Sunday," the day on which the church was born.

"I understand there is still the trauma and the drama of the COVID-19 event. The drama is that we've had one expert saying masks don't work, another expert saying masks do work. One expert saying social distancing destroys us because it eliminates herd immunity and another one saying the opposite."

"So what do we do? If we're going to be condemned for starting church and we're going to be condemned for not starting church, I cannot look to the opinions of men even if they are well-intended once God has spoken. So we move ahead safely, wisely, but we move ahead."

Christians will be misunderstood and despised and in the last days, Scripture speaks of incredibly challenging days that includes persecution, Hibbs said.

"Having said that, I do not believe that a pastor or a church being stupid or ignorant and thus persecuted is a badge of honor. That's ridiculous. We need to understand that Scripture teaches us that the church is the ground of all truth. So today, I believe that the church is suffering and this pandemic has exposed it. It is anemic to so many doctrines, where we do not see the value of the Gospel as worthy to uphold even in a difficult season as this.

"This pandemic has made us consider: Who will be the ultimate authority? Does Christ and the Word of God answer to the government? Or ultimately, does the government answer to the Lawgiver Himself?"

Similar sentiments are reverberating throughout the country.

In a [video](#) posted Friday on the YouTube channel of HIS Church in Amarillo Texas with satellite parishes in Kentucky, Pastor Brian Gibson said that now is the time in the United States for "lions to stand up and roar."

"America needs to stand up and roar for the constitution, needs some lions to stand up and roar for religious freedom, needs some lions to stand up and roar for people of worship of every type in this great nation," he said as he encouraged churches to "[peacably gather](#)" on May 17.

Amid uncertainty about the scope and severity of the coronavirus, many pastors were willing to comply with stay-at-home orders but it has gotten to be too much especially as some governors have suggested no religious assembly for a year, Gibson noted.

"People in churches, mosques, and synagogues have been told that, regardless of any social distancing or protective practices they implement, they can not gather, with threats of retribution from local governments if they don't keep their doors closed," Gibson said in a statement. "The right to exercise our religious freedoms is the definition of Essential and must not be trampled on, and every Sunday that we aren't in church we lose more freedom."

As churches fear a wave a lawsuits against them as some "cherry pick certain guidelines," hundreds of pastors, rabbis, priests, and other religious leaders wrote a [letter](#) to Congress to include "immunity for religious organizations from negligence suits resulting from their serving the public or reopening in accordance with local orders."

The legal organization First Liberty said in a written testimony addressed to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary that although "lawsuits should eventually prove meritless, the cost of defending against them would have devastating consequences."

In late April, the Department of Justice ordered federal prosecutors to be watchful for state and local orders that overly restrict and exploit religious freedom amid crises.

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