

Press Release

# **Attorney General William P. Barr Issues Statement on Religious Practice and Social Distancing; Department of Justice Files Statement of Interest in Mississippi Church Case**

Tuesday, April 14, 2020  
**For Immediate Release**  
Office of Public Affairs

Attorney General William P. Barr issued the following statement:

"In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the President has issued guidelines calling on all Americans to do their part to slow the spread of a dangerous and highly contagious virus. Those measures are important because the virus is transmitted so easily from person to person, and because it all too often has life-threatening consequences for its victims, it has the potential to overwhelm health care systems when it surges.

To contain the virus and protect the most vulnerable among us, Americans have been asked, for a limited period of time, to practice rigorous social distancing. The President has also asked Americans to listen to and follow directions issued by state and local authorities regarding social distancing. Social distancing, while difficult and unfamiliar for a nation that has long prided itself on the strength of its voluntary associations, has the potential to save hundreds of thousands of American lives from an imminent threat. Scrupulously observing these guidelines is the best path to swiftly ending COVID-19's profound disruptions to our national life and resuming the normal economic life of our country. Citizens who seek to do otherwise are not merely assuming risk with respect to themselves, but are exposing others to danger. In exigent circumstances, when the community as a whole faces an impending harm of this magnitude, and where the measures are tailored to meeting the imminent danger, the constitution does allow some temporary restriction on our liberties that would not be tolerated in normal circumstances.

But even in times of emergency, when reasonable and temporary restrictions are placed on rights, the First Amendment and federal statutory law prohibit discrimination against religious institutions and religious believers. Thus, government may not impose special restrictions on religious activity that do not also apply to similar nonreligious activity. For example, if a government allows movie theaters, restaurants, concert halls, and other comparable places of assembly to remain open and unrestricted, it may not order houses

of worship to close, limit their congregation size, or otherwise impede religious gatherings. Religious institutions must not be singled out for special burdens.

Today, the Department filed a Statement of Interest in support of a church in Mississippi that allegedly sought to hold parking lot worship services, in which congregants listened to their pastor preach over their car radios, while sitting in their cars in the church parking lot with their windows rolled up. The City of Greenville fined congregants \$500 per person for attending these parking lot services – while permitting citizens to attend nearby drive-in restaurants, even with their windows open.[1]

The City appears to have thereby singled churches out as the only essential service (as designated by the state of Mississippi) that may not operate despite following all CDC and state recommendations regarding social distancing.

As we explain in the Statement of Interest, where a state has not acted evenhandedly, it must have a compelling reason to impose restrictions on places of worship and must ensure that those restrictions are narrowly tailored to advance its compelling interest. While we believe that during this period there is a sufficient basis for the social distancing rules that have been put in place, the scope and justification of restrictions beyond that will have to be assessed based on the circumstances as they evolve.

Religion and religious worship continue to be central to the lives of millions of Americans. This is true more so than ever during this difficult time. The pandemic has changed the ways Americans live their lives. Religious communities have rallied to the critical need to protect the community from the spread of this disease by making services available online and in ways that otherwise comply with social distancing guidelines.

The United States Department of Justice will continue to ensure that religious freedom remains protected if any state or local government, in their response to COVID-19, singles out, targets, or discriminates against any house of worship for special restrictions."

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[1] The City has since stated it will drop the fines, but will continue to enforce the order.

Updated April 21, 2020

Source: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-william-p-barr-issues-statement-religious-practice-and-social-distancing-0>

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Transcoded by Michael E. Eidenmuller

Changes: Removed active embedded hyperlinks at "Statement of Interest" and "[1]" in the body of statement

Original "Statement of Interest" Hyperlink Source: [https://www.justice.gov/d9/press-releases/attachments/2020/04/14/ecf\\_us\\_statement\\_of\\_interest\\_in\\_support\\_of\\_plaintiffs\\_0.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/d9/press-releases/attachments/2020/04/14/ecf_us_statement_of_interest_in_support_of_plaintiffs_0.pdf)