



# Supreme Court says California cannot restrict religious household gatherings

BY TORI B. POWELL  
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The Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 vote that California cannot impose COVID-19 restrictions on religious gatherings in households, citing the First Amendment's right to religious freedom.

The decision, made Friday night, follows other related orders from the high court in the state. In February, the Supreme Court said that California cannot ban indoor church services because of the pandemic.

"This is the fifth time the Court has summarily rejected the Ninth Circuit's analysis of California's COVID restrictions on religious exercise," the latest opinion states. "It is unsurprising that such litigants are entitled to relief."

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California laws currently allow members of up to three households to participate in indoor religious gatherings in homes, and participants are also required to wear face masks.

Similar to other related cases, conservative justices pointed out that the state allows establishments such as hair salons and movie theaters to operate during the pandemic, and that California treats secular activities "more favorably than at-home religious exercise." They argued that applicants would be "irreparably harmed by the loss of free exercise rights" and that California has failed to prove that public health would be "imperiled" by loosening up COVID-19 restrictions.

However, liberal justices said "the law does not require that the state equally treat apples and watermelons." They argued that social distancing and mask-wearing would less likely be practiced by individuals indoors and in private settings, and that individuals would be encouraged to interact for longer periods of time as opposed to those in commercial settings.

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The Supreme Court says the order will go into effect next week.

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