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“God directed
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Waymarks Addresses COVID-19 Impact on Religious Liberty

The new coronavirus dominates national and world news. It also dominates religious liberty news. This issue explores its impact — from local churches to around the world. First, though, we bring you this message from Amireh Al-Haddad, director of the Southern Union Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty.

While the world has been turned on its head over the current pandemic, many are concerned over issues of religious freedom. The Southern Union Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL) has been monitoring this very fluid situation. Our concern over the closures of churches, whether voluntarily or by order, is to evaluate the motivation and method.

Many, not just Adventists, have questioned the authority of the government to prohibit churches from meeting. Is this constitutional? Is this infringing upon free exercise of religion? Through prayerful study, and review of

both history and the few court cases since the start of the pandemic, we offer the following assessment.

The term “unprecedented times” seems to be the catchphrase of the year. However, it is not true on the issue of a contagion spreading around the world. A hundred years ago, the world faced a similar pandemic with the Spanish flu from 1918 to 1920. The Church was faced with similar issues to today's — except this time we count ourselves lucky! We still worship together through live streaming, video chats, and social media platforms. We return our tithes and offerings using the Church's secure AdventistGiving app. These tools were not available a century ago, and allow us to safely shelter for the good of the whole while we continue to go about our Father's business. A hundred years ago, protective quarantining was not utilized early or con-

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Local Churches Face Discrimination Due to Pandemic, U.S. Churches May Benefit

Sadly, there are churches which have been facing harassment, even though they have been striving to use recommended guidelines for meeting.

One such is the Our Savior Lutheran Church in Raleigh, NC. Kevin Martin, pastor, reported they received more than 100 hate calls, including threats of violence, because they were holding services. This happened despite the sanctuary being sanitized after each service, attendees keeping a social distance of 6 feet or more, and attendance limited to 10 or less.

Conversely, On Fire Christian Church in Louisville, KY, was able to reclaim their right

to conduct CDC-compliant drive-in services. Numerous other churches nationwide have also found creative and safe ways to meet.

Nationally, church organizations were included in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress. They determined that non-profit organizations, including churches, could acquire funds for payroll, rent, mortgage interest, or utilities.

Some have questioned whether this violates the Establishment Clause. The North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists is discouraging churches and schools from participating.

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- Pope Francis had called for a world-wide education summit to be held on May 14, 2020, at the Vatican. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, that event has been rescheduled for October 2020. Waymarks will be following this even and tracking the agenda items for future updates.

- Half of Americans say the Bible should influence U.S. laws, including 28% who favor it over the will of the people, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center. About 19% say the Bible should have at least some influence but that the will of the people should prevail. “The U.S. Constitution does not mention the Bible, God, Jesus or Christianity, and the First Amendment clarifies that ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.’ Still, some scholars have argued that the Bible heavily influenced America’s founders.”

- Washington state Rep. Matt Shea has been billed \$4,700, for damages to the Capitol building’s historic masonry steps after he poured olive oil on them. His actions were an apparent counter-protest following a demonstration by Satanists. He has refused to resign, but has been removed from the Republican Caucus for this and past actions.

NEWS OF THE WORLD

Freedom of Religion Affected Worldwide by New Coronavirus

The U.S. Department of State and Sam Brownback, ambassador for international religious freedom, reported on worldwide circumstances of COVID-19 and religious liberty in mid-May.

Positively, **Burma**, **Cuba**, **Iran**, and **Russia** have released religious prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

Burma’s government isn’t allowing health care to the **Rohingya** religious minority.

In **China**, **Tibetan Bud-**

dhists are experiencing religious discrimination, and the **Uighur Muslims** are being forced to work.

In **India**, **Muslims** were attacked for allegedly spreading the disease. The prime minister has recently urged unity, though.

Malaysia has had hate speech reported against the **Rohingya**, and in **Pakistan** the primarily **Christian** sanitation workers are not receiving personal protection

equipment.

Muslims in **Sri Lanka** who died were forced to undergo cremation against their families’ will.

Despite cases of persecution around the world, **Sikh**, **Muslim**, **Christian**, **Jewish**, **Baha’i**, and **Hindu** groups, as well as other religious communities, have rallied to help out during the health crisis, even reaching out to government authorities to try to contain the spread.

California Churches Open in Controversy

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, on May 24, upheld the ban on houses of worship opening. They had reopened retail shops and restaurants as part of phase 2, but had placed churches in phase 3, along with sporting events, nail salons, and movie venues.

In this case, "constitutional standards that would normally govern our review of a Free Exercise claim should not be applied," the two judges in the majority wrote in their order. Though the state may have been within

constitutional rights to uphold the ban, assuming that similar types of institutions or businesses were also to remain closed, the decision was not well received.

Following the President declaring churches "essential," the U. S. Department of Justice contacted Newsom, saying that his phased reopening of church "facially discriminates against religious exercise." California's governor, on May 25, issued guidelines to reopen churches, mosques, and synagogues.

"In this case [churches reopening], 'constitutional standards that would normally govern our review of a Free Exercise claim should not be applied.'"

- *The Supreme Court has refused to hear the Catholic Church's challenge to a local ban on religious advertising. The case was brought against the District of Columbia region's mass transit system after they refused religious advertising at Christmas.*
- *Religious liberty topics waiting for decisions from the Supreme Court include the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) and mandated contraceptive coverage, ministerial exceptions for teachers at religious schools, claimants under RFRA and monetary damage entitlement, Catholic Social Services and child placement funding in Pennsylvania, tax credit scholarship and religious schools in Montana,*

COVID-19 Impact... *continued from cover*

sistently enough to prevent more than 50 million people from dying. There are certainly lessons to be learned from history.

There have already been a few court cases that were decided very rapidly in regards to church closings and the rights to free exercise of religion. All of those cases were decided in favor of the quarantine. We should evaluate this issue in light of reason and understanding.

Limits on public gatherings were not implemented with the specific purpose of denying the right to worship. On the contrary, governments are encouraging churches to share their faith in a safe manner. To date, the closures have not sin-

gled out religion in general nor even a particular religion. The state has shown a compelling interest in issuing stay-at-home orders. Church members should understand our own moral imperative. With no vaccine, no medical cure, limited testing, and asymptomatic spread of the virus, we must act with Christian charity in temporarily sacrificing our in-person worship services.

God directed the children of Israel, in Leviticus 13, on what to do with those in our midst who may be infected. Leprosy had no treatment or cure in biblical times, and, like COVID-19, could be passed through contact and droplets. God's directive was to quarantine, and to continue to quarantine

the infected until cured. Today we do not know who is infected, so all must act judicially for the sake of our loved ones.

Some will say, as was said of leprosy, that COVID-19 is a curse from God on this world for its wickedness. Please reject this claim for what it is: satanic. Pestilence is brought about by the architect of sin and suffering, Satan, and is another way to get people to turn away from a loving and caring God by accusing Him of cruelty. Instead, we should use this time to get closer to God, realizing that, even as His protection is being slowly withdrawn from the world, we will continue to abide in Him and He in us.

The God of our faith asks

us to use discernment. We use discernment to understand a threat to real religious freedom versus simply to our preferred method of worship. Circumstances are fluid and changing, and our assessment weeks from now may be totally different. God expects us to use proper discernment as times progress.

PARL welcomes comments and discussion on this topic. We offer town hall meetings via Zoom for your church during distancing. Reach out with your religious liberty needs. We are here for our church members, even during the pandemic.

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President Trump, U.S. Attorney General Barr Make Statements Regarding Church Restrictions

In response to the city of Greenville, Miss., fining participants at a drive-in church service \$500 in mid-April 2020, U.S. Attorney General William Barr issued a statement. He pointed out that even in times of emergency, “the First Amendment and federal statutory law prohibit discrimination against religious institutions and religious believers.”

The city had allowed drive-in restaurants in town to remain open and draw

customers whose windows were kept down. The church service in question had maintained closed windows for all vehicles. Barr reiterated that “government may not impose special restrictions on religious activity that do not also apply to similar nonreligious activity.”

One month later, President Donald Trump declared churches “essential,” and called on all governors to reopen them.

“Governors need to do the

right thing and allow these very important essential places of faith to open right now — for this weekend,” Trump said on May 23.

Following his announcement, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidelines (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html>) for how faith communities could most safely reopen, including limiting numbers and holding outdoor services.

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