

No. 20-1280

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IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE TENTH CIRCUIT

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HIGH PLAINS HARVEST CHURCH, *et al.*,

*Plaintiffs-Appellants,*

v.

JARED POLIS, in his official capacity  
as Governor of the State of Colorado, *et al.*,

*Defendants-Appellees.*

On Appeal from the Order of the United States District Court  
for the District of Colorado

Case No. 1:20-cv-1480, Hon. Raymond P. Moore

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**BRIEF IN SUPPORT OF APPELLEES AND AFFIRMANCE OF *AMICI CURIAE*  
AMERICANS UNITED FOR SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE; ADL  
(ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE); BEND THE ARC: A JEWISH  
PARTNERSHIP FOR JUSTICE; CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN  
RABBIS; COVENANT NETWORK OF PRESBYTERIANS; DISCIPLES CENTER  
FOR PUBLIC WITNESS; DISCIPLES JUSTICE ACTION NETWORK; EQUAL  
PARTNERS IN FAITH; KANSAS-OKLAHOMA CONFERENCE, UNITED  
CHURCH OF CHRIST; MEN OF REFORM JUDAISM; METHODIST  
FEDERATION FOR SOCIAL ACTION; NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE  
CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE USA; RECONSTRUCTIONIST RABBINICAL  
ASSOCIATION; REV. DR. MARC IAN STEWART, CONFERENCE MINISTER,  
MONTANA-NORTHERN WYOMING CONFERENCE, UNITED CHURCH OF  
CHRIST; SOUTHWEST CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF  
CHRIST; UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM;  
AND WOMEN OF REFORM JUDAISM**

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## **RULE 26.1 DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

With the exception of Rev. Dr. Marc Ian Stewart, who is an individual, all the *amici* are nonprofit organizations that have no parent corporations and that are not owned, in whole or in part, by any publicly held corporation.

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## INTERESTS OF *AMICI CURIAE*<sup>1</sup>

*Amici* are religious and civil-rights organizations that share a commitment to preserving the constitutional principles of religious freedom and the separation of religion and government. They believe that the right to worship freely is precious and should never be misused to cause harm.

*Amici* include religious organizations that are recommending against holding in-person worship at this time even if allowed under state law, as many of their constituent members (including congregations and faith leaders) recognize that doing so under current conditions is dangerous. The religious organizations among *amici* know from long experience that in-person religious services inherently entail close and sustained human interactions that risk COVID-19 infection not only of congregants but also of people in the wider community. Applying to religious services religion-neutral restrictions on large gatherings both protects the public health and respects the Constitution.

The *amici* are:

- Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

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<sup>1</sup> No counsel for a party authored this brief in whole or in part, and no person other than *amici*, their members, or their counsel made a monetary contribution intended to fund the brief's preparation or submission. All parties have consented to the filing of this brief.

- ADL (Anti-Defamation League).
- Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice.
- Central Conference of American Rabbis.
- Covenant Network of Presbyterians.
- Disciples Center for Public Witness.
- Disciples Justice Action Network.
- Equal Partners in Faith.
- Kansas-Oklahoma Conference, United Church of Christ.
- Men of Reform Judaism.
- Methodist Federation for Social Action.
- National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.
- Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.
- Rev. Dr. Marc Ian Stewart, Conference Minister, Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference, United Church of Christ.
- Southwest Conference of the United Church of Christ.
- Union for Reform Judaism.
- Women of Reform Judaism.

## INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

We are in the midst of a devastating pandemic. The United States has suffered by far the most reported COVID-19-related deaths worldwide, more than 2,300 of which have occurred in Colorado. *See COVID-19 Dashboard*, CTR. FOR SYS. SCI. & ENG'G AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIV. (last visited Nov. 4, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2xR2V99>. And there is increasing evidence that a substantial proportion of people who survive the disease suffer serious, long-term health damage. *See, e.g.*, TYM Leung, et al., *Short- and Potential Long-term Adverse Health Outcomes of COVID-19: A Rapid Review*, EMERGING MICROBES & INFECTIONS (Sept. 17, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3ikjBXJ>; Lenny Bernstein, ‘*Nobody has very clear answers for them*’: Doctors search for treatments for covid-19 long-haulers, WASH. POST (Oct. 16, 2020), <https://wapo.st/2H8RPAT>.

As part of Colorado’s ongoing emergency response, Governor Polis and Director Ryan have issued a series of orders temporarily limiting business activities and in-person gatherings in the state. In the county where plaintiff High Plains Harvest Church is located (*see* Appellants’ Br. 10–11; *Covid-19 Dial Dashboard*, COLO. DEP’T OF PUB. HEALTH & ENV’T (last visited Nov. 4, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3eo9hOl>), the currently operative Public Health Order limits indoor religious services to the lower of fifty people (one hundred for large houses of worship) or fifty-percent capacity

per room (Public Health Order 20-36 COVID-19 Dial, COLO. DEP'T OF PUB. HEALTH & ENV'T, § II.D.2.j (Nov. 2, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2GqUFB1>). These kinds of restrictions have been successful in slowing the transmission of COVID-19. *See, e.g.*, Timothy Bella, *Places without social distancing have 35 times more potential coronavirus spread, study finds*, WASH. POST (May 15, 2020), <https://wapo.st/2EKDjhd>.

Plaintiffs nevertheless challenge the Order under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. But the Supreme Court has held that neutral, generally applicable laws enacted without discriminatory intent toward religion do not violate the Clause. The Order complies with this legal standard because Colorado's limitations on religious services are lesser than or similar to those on comparable nonreligious activities. Even if heightened scrutiny were called for, however, the Order is constitutional because it is narrowly tailored to advance Colorado's compelling interest in protecting its residents from a deadly disease.

What is more, the First Amendment's Establishment Clause forbids granting an exemption from the Order for religious services. For if government imposes harms on third parties when it exempts religious exercise from the requirements of the law, it impermissibly favors the benefited religion and its adherents over the rights, interests, and beliefs of nonbeneficiaries. Holding that no size limitation may be placed on

indoor religious gatherings would do just that: A contagious person at a religious service could infect scores of fellow congregants, who may then expose family, friends, and strangers, including numerous people who did not attend the event.

For similar reasons, federal-court decisions—including rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court, this Court, and the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Circuits—have overwhelmingly rejected religion-based challenges to COVID-19-related public-health measures, most of which were much more restrictive of religious gatherings than is Colorado’s Order. This Court should likewise affirm the district court’s decision.

## **ARGUMENT**

### **I. Colorado’s Order does not violate the Free Exercise Clause.**

#### **A. Rational-basis review applies.**

The freedom to worship is a value of the highest order, and many people naturally seek the comfort and support provided by faith communities in these difficult times. But as the Supreme Court recently reaffirmed, the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom “does not mean that religious institutions enjoy a general immunity from secular laws.” *Our Lady of Guadalupe Sch. v. Morrissey-Berru*, 140 S.Ct. 2049, 2060 (2020). Yet Plaintiffs argue here that the Free Exercise Clause

entitles them to an exemption from Colorado’s emergency public-health measures. That claim is wrong as a matter of law: “The right to practice religion freely does not include liberty to expose the community . . . to communicable disease.” *Prince v. Massachusetts*, 321 U.S. 158, 166–67 (1944).

The Free Exercise Clause forbids intentional suppression of religious conduct, but it does not make “professed doctrines of religious belief superior to the law of the land,” which would “in effect . . . permit every citizen to become a law unto himself.” *Emp. Div. v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872, 879 (quoting *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145, 166–67 (1879)). The Supreme Court has therefore held that laws that burden religious conduct are constitutionally permissible—and need satisfy only rational-basis review—when they are neutral toward religion and apply generally. *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, 531, 543 (1993); *Smith*, 494 U.S. at 879.

### **1. The Order does not discriminate against religious gatherings.**

Colorado’s Order complies with this principle. It restricts religious services similarly to or less than comparable nonreligious gatherings. In the county where High Plains Harvest Church is located (*see* Appellants’ Br. 10–11; *Covid-19 Dial Dashboard*, *supra*), many kinds of indoor venues

and events—including theatres, concerts, restaurants, receptions, markets, malls, trade shows, colleges, and universities—are governed by limits identical to those applicable to houses of worship (*see* Order §§ II.D.2.h, II.D.2.j, II.D.2.k, III.R, IV.I). Certain other types of gatherings, gyms, recreation centers, camps, pools, and smoking lounges are governed by stricter limits. *Id.* §§ II.D.2.a, II.D.2.i, II.D.2.m, II.D.2.p. The Order imposes no statewide numerical limit on outdoor religious services, while other kinds of outdoor events are capped at the lesser of fifty-percent capacity or 175 people, and tighter limits apply to outdoor sports and guided activities. *See id.* §§ II.C.2.j, II.D.2.j, II.D.2.l, II.D.2.n, II.D.2.o, IV.P. Moreover, amusement parks, bounce houses, ball pits, and non-food bars are closed entirely. *Id.* § III.A.1.

Considering analogous circumstances in *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom*, 140 S.Ct. 1613 (2020), the Supreme Court refused to issue an emergency injunction against a California order that limited religious gatherings to the smaller of twenty-five percent of building capacity or one hundred people. Concurring in the denial of injunctive relief, Chief Justice Roberts explained that California’s order “appear[ed] consistent with the Free Exercise Clause” because “[s]imilar or more severe restrictions appl[ied] to comparable secular gatherings, including lectures, concerts, movie showings, spectator sports, and

theatrical performances, where large groups of people gather in close proximity for extended periods of time.” *Id.* at 1613; *see also Attorney General William P. Barr Issues Statement on Religious Practice and Social Distancing*, U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE (Apr. 14, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2RIYzHO> (urging that religious gatherings be treated like gatherings at movie theaters, restaurants, and concert halls).

Plaintiffs take issue with Colorado’s decision not to impose a numerical limit on how many people may be present at businesses such as pharmacies, grocery stores, gas stations, factories, hardware stores, banks, and laundromats. Appellants’ Br. 41–42. But Justice Kavanaugh made a similar argument in dissent in *South Bay* (140 S.Ct. at 1614), and it did not carry the day. For as the Chief Justice’s concurring opinion explained, California “exempt[ed] or treat[ed] more leniently [than religious services] only dissimilar activities, such as operating grocery stores, banks, and laundromats, in which people neither congregate in large groups nor remain in close proximity for extended periods.” *Id.* at 1613.

Plaintiffs thus mainly focus on Colorado’s lack of enforcement of the Order against outdoor protests. Appellants’ Br. 12–21, 42–45. Yet Plaintiffs seek only an injunction permitting them to exceed the Order’s limitations on *indoor* religious gatherings. Apl’t. App. Vol. II at 455. Outdoor activities are not comparable to indoor gatherings because they



pose far less risk of transmission of the virus. *See, e.g.*, Tara Parker-Pope, *How Safe Are Outdoor Gatherings?*, N.Y. TIMES (July 3, 2020), <https://nyti.ms/3j4fH6g>. Indeed, one study concluded that the odds of infection are nearly twenty times higher at indoor gatherings than outdoor ones. *See id.* And in any event, as noted above, Colorado does not impose a statewide limit on outdoor worship services. *See* Order §§ II.C.2.j, II.D.2.j.

Moreover, Plaintiffs’ argument concerning protests amounts to a claim of selective enforcement. But enforcement decisions are “particularly ill-suited to judicial review,” and courts defer to them unless they are “deliberately based upon an unjustifiable standard such as . . . religion.” *Wayte v. United States*, 470 U.S. 598, 607–08 (1985) (quoting *Bordenkircher v. Hayes*, 434 U.S. 357, 364 (1978)). Plaintiffs cite no evidence that Colorado declined to take enforcement action against protests for any religion-related reason, as opposed to legitimate considerations such as (*see* Aplt. App. Vol. IV at 760) avoiding a spiral of violence. For that matter, Plaintiffs cite no evidence that Colorado has enforced the Order against Plaintiffs or any other houses of worship.

Further, even if Colorado’s treatment of protests were to be construed as a *de facto* categorical exemption for outdoor protests, that would not help Plaintiffs’ case. This Court has repeatedly held that the existence of a categorical exemption for secular conduct from a law is

insufficient to trigger heightened scrutiny of a decision not to exempt religious conduct. *See Axson-Flynn v. Johnson*, 356 F.3d 1277, 1298 (10th Cir. 2004); *Grace United Methodist Church v. City of Cheyenne*, 451 F.3d 643, 654 (10th Cir. 2006); *Swanson v. Guthrie Indep. Sch. Dist. No. I-L*, 135 F.3d 694, 701–02 (10th Cir. 1998). Rather, heightened scrutiny applies only when the exempted conduct is “similar enough in all material respects” to the nonexempted religious conduct—here, indoor worship services—to support a conclusion that the difference in treatment “was based on [the prohibited conduct’s] religious nature.” *Taylor v. Roswell Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 713 F.3d 25, 52 (10th Cir. 2013). Plaintiffs cannot come close to making such a showing.

For these reasons, federal courts have repeatedly rejected arguments that allowing large outdoor protests invalidates limitations on indoor religious activities. In *Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley v. Sisolak*, 140 S.Ct. 2603, 2607–08 (2020), Justice Alito made such an argument in dissent from a Supreme Court denial of injunctive relief against Nevada restrictions on religious services, but it did not prevail. Similarly, this Court denied an injunction pending appeal in a challenge to Colorado’s Order that substantially relied on allegations of nonenforcement against protests. *See Andrew Wommack Ministries v. Polis*, No. 20-1336, 2020 WL 5983978, at \*1 (10th Cir. Oct. 5, 2020) (unpublished), *denying motion for*

*injunction pending appeal* of No. 1:20-cv-2922, 2020 WL 5810525, at \*2–3 (D. Colo. Sept. 29, 2020) (unpublished).

Many federal district courts have rejected such arguments as well. *See Harvest Rock Church v. Newsom*, No. 20-cv-6414, 2020 WL 5265564, at \*2 (C.D. Cal. Sept. 2, 2020) (unpublished), *motion for injunction pending appeal denied*, \_\_ F.3d \_\_, No. 20-55907, 2020 WL 5835219 (9th Cir. Oct. 1, 2020); *Legacy Church v. Kunkel*, \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 1:20-cv-327, 2020 WL 3963764, at \*15, 84–87 (D.N.M. July 13, 2020), *appeal docketed*, No. 20-2117 (10th Cir. Aug. 12, 2020); *Ass’n of Jewish Camp Operators v. Cuomo*, \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 1:20-cv-687, 2020 WL 3766496, at \*14–16 (N.D.N.Y. July 6, 2020); *Calvary Chapel Lone Mountain v. Sisolak*, \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 2:20-cv-907, 2020 WL 3108716, at \*4 (D. Nev. June 11, 2020), *appeal docketed*, No. 20-16274 (9th Cir. June 30, 2020); *Solid Rock Baptist Church v. Murphy*, No. 1:20-cv-6805, 2020 WL 4882604, at \*10, 13 (D.N.J. Aug. 20, 2020) (unpublished). And even *Soos v. Cuomo*, on which Plaintiffs lean heavily (Appellants’ Br. 14, 61), did not require *indoor* religious services to be treated the same as *outdoor* protests; it merely required *indoor* religious services to be treated similarly to certain nonreligious *indoor* gatherings, and *outdoor* religious services to be treated similarly to *outdoor* protests. *See* \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 1:20-cv-651, 2020 WL 3488742, at \*11–13 (N.D.N.Y. June 26, 2020),

*appeals docketed*, Nos. 20-2414, 20-2418 (2d Cir. July 30, 2020); *see also Capitol Hill Baptist Church v. Bowser*, No. 1:20-cv-2710, 2020 WL 5995126, at \*1–4, 12 (D.D.C. Oct. 9, 2020) (unpublished) (granting injunction limited to requiring that *outdoor* church services be treated similarly to *outdoor* protests, based on federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000bb–2000bb-4, which imposes stricter standard of review than Free Exercise Clause does).

**2. Plaintiffs are not entitled to heightened scrutiny under the “hybrid rights” doctrine.**

Plaintiffs argue that heightened scrutiny should apply because they couple their free-exercise claim with a free-speech claim. Appellants’ Br. 48–49. But this Court has cautioned that this “controversial” “hybrid rights” doctrine “has been characterized as mere *dicta*,” “criticized as illogical,” and “dismissed as untenable.” *Grace United*, 451 F.3d at 656. The Court has thus held that it would apply the doctrine only “where the plaintiff establishes a ‘fair probability, or a likelihood,’ of success on the companion claim.” *Axson-Flynn*, 356 F.3d at 1295 (quoting *Miller v. Reed*, 176 F.3d 1202, 1207 (9th Cir. 1999)). A decision on which Plaintiffs rely (Appellants’ Br. 49), *Brown v. Buhman*, 822 F.3d 1151, 1160 n.5 (10th Cir. 2016), did not change that—the Court did not even address the merits of the free-exercise claim in that case.

Here, Plaintiffs have not established a “fair probability, or a likelihood” (*Axson-Flynn*, 356 F.3d at 1295) of success on their claim (Appellants’ Br. 45–48) that Colorado violated their free-speech rights by engaging in content-based discrimination. “[R]egulation of speech is content based if a law applies to particular speech because of the topic discussed or the idea or message expressed.” *Reed v. Town of Gilbert*, 576 U.S. 155, 163 (2015). Colorado has set no statewide limitations on outdoor religious services (giving discretion to local officials to set any such limits, *see* Order §§ II.C.2.j, II.D.2.j) and has not enforced the Order against outdoor protests (likewise without interfering with the discretion of local officials on the matter, *see* Aplt. App. Vol. IV at 759–60). Plaintiffs do not allege that there have been any indoor protests that Colorado treated differently from indoor religious services. In addition, Colorado has declined to stop outdoor protests regardless of the protesters’ views, tolerating both racial-justice protests and demonstrations against stay-at-home orders. *See Groups protest stay at home order in Denver*, KRDO NEWS (Apr. 19, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2E1hI4t>. Thus, “the justifications for regulation” are based on the physical effects of the conduct at issue and “have nothing to do with content.” *See Boos v. Barry*, 485 U.S. 312, 320 (1988).

**B. The Order would satisfy even a compelling-interest test.**

Even if a compelling-interest test did apply here, more than a century of constitutional jurisprudence demonstrates that restrictions on religious exercise tailored to containing contagious diseases withstand it.

Before its decision in *Smith*, the Supreme Court interpreted the Free Exercise Clause to require application of a compelling-interest test whenever religious exercise was substantially burdened by governmental action. *See, e.g., Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, 215 (1972); *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398, 407 (1963). Those pre-*Smith* decisions repeatedly acknowledged that there is no right to religious exemptions from laws that, like Colorado’s Order, shield the public from illness. For government has an undeniably compelling interest in protecting the public from the spread of deadly communicable diseases. *See Sherbert*, 374 U.S. at 402–03; *accord Yoder*, 406 U.S. at 230 & n.20.

“[P]owers on the subject of health and quarantine [have been] exercised by the states from the beginning.” *Compagnie Francaise de Navigation a Vapeur v. La. Bd. of Health*, 186 U.S. 380, 396–97 (1902). On that basis, the Supreme Court more than a century ago upheld a mandatory-vaccination law aimed at stopping the spread of smallpox. *See Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, 197 U.S. 11, 25 (1905). The Court straightforwardly rejected the idea that the Constitution bars compulsory

measures to protect health, citing the “fundamental principle” that personal liberty is subject to restraint “in order to secure the . . . health . . . of the state.” *Id.* at 26 (quoting *Hannibal & St. Joseph R.R. Co. v. Husen*, 95 U.S. 465, 471 (1877)).

Following incorporation of the Free Exercise Clause against the states in *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296, 303 (1940), the Supreme Court relied on *Jacobson* to reaffirm that reasonable public-health measures burdening religious exercise withstand a compelling-interest inquiry. *See Sherbert*, 374 U.S. at 402–03; *Yoder*, 406 U.S. at 230; *see also Prince*, 321 U.S. at 166–67. And lower federal courts have consistently recognized that government has a compelling interest in preventing the spread of communicable diseases. *See, e.g., McCormick v. Stalder*, 105 F.3d 1059, 1061 (5th Cir. 1997); *Workman v. Mingo Cty. Bd. of Educ.*, 419 F.App’x 348, 353–54 (4th Cir. 2011); *Whitlow v. California*, 203 F.Supp.3d 1079, 1089–90 (S.D. Cal. 2016) (collecting cases).

There can thus be no doubt that Colorado has a compelling interest in stanching the spread of COVID-19. Yet Plaintiffs argue that Colorado’s allowance of outdoor gatherings negates its interest in regulating indoor gatherings more strictly. Appellants’ Br. 51. But policymakers’ assertions of a compelling interest are not defeated by a decision to “focus on their most pressing concerns”—here, large indoor gatherings—rather than

impose broader restrictions. *See Williams-Yulee v. Fla. Bar*, 575 U.S. 433, 449 (2015).

A compelling-interest test, if it applied, would also ask whether the Order is narrowly tailored to the governmental interest at stake. *E.g.*, *Globe Newspaper Co. v. Super. Ct.*, 457 U.S. 596, 607 (1982). Even “[a] complete ban can be narrowly tailored . . . if each activity within the proscription’s scope is . . . appropriately targeted.” *Frisby v. Schultz*, 487 U.S. 474, 487 (1988). Accordingly, the Supreme Court (*see Sherbert*, 374 U.S. at 403 (citing *Jacobson*, 197 U.S. at 26–27)) and many other federal and state courts (*see, e.g., Whitlow*, 203 F.Supp.3d at 1089–90 (collecting cases)) have concluded that blanket prohibitions on refusing immunizations satisfy a compelling-interest test.

Colorado’s Order is far less restrictive than a blanket ban and thus satisfies the narrow-tailoring standard more easily. No accepted cure or vaccine for COVID-19 yet exists, and asymptomatic carriers may unwittingly infect people in close proximity. *See, e.g., S. Bay*, 140 S.Ct. at 1613 (Roberts, C.J., concurring). So temporarily limiting the size of gatherings is the best way for Colorado to advance its compelling objective of slowing community spread and saving lives. At the same time, the Order is no broader than necessary to ensure that the targeted activities—



indoor gatherings that create significant risks of contagion—occur more safely.

Plaintiffs argue that the Order is not narrowly tailored because Colorado could impose laxer restrictions on religious services, such as physical-distancing and sanitation requirements. (Appellants’ Br. 23, 52.) But under the compelling-interest test, a law is narrowly tailored if “proposed alternatives will not be as effective” in achieving the government’s goal. *See Ashcroft v. ACLU*, 542 U.S. 656, 665 (2004). It is obvious that a ceiling on the size of gatherings is more likely to reduce transmission of COVID-19 than is permitting the gatherings to proceed under looser rules.

Indeed, airborne transmission of COVID-19 can render physical-distancing and cleaning measures ineffective. *See, e.g.,* Dyani Lewis, *Mounting evidence suggests coronavirus is airborne—but health advice has not caught up*, NATURE (updated July 23, 2020), <https://go.nature.com/3k68T8L>; Kimberly A. Prather, et al., *Airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2*, SCIENCE (Oct. 16, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3iYMGZ7>. Outbreaks of the virus have thus resulted from religious gatherings in spite of physical-distancing and other safety precautions. *See, e.g.,* Shelly Bradbury, *Fatal COVID-19 outbreak linked to Colorado religious group suing state over limits on gatherings*, DENVER

POST (Oct. 6, 2020), <https://dpo.st/3k5nHVI>; Kate Conger, et al., *Churches Were Eager to Reopen; Now They Are Confronting Coronavirus Cases*, N.Y. TIMES (July 10, 2020), <https://nyti.ms/30BOhgq>; Lateshia Beachum, *Two churches reclose after faith leaders and congregants get coronavirus*, WASH. POST (May 19, 2020), <https://wapo.st/2WQgW0x>; Alex Acquisto, *This Central Kentucky church reopened on May 10 and became a COVID-19 hot spot*, LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER (June 6, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3dDbQdq>; Richard Read, *A choir decided to go ahead with rehearsal; Now dozens of members have COVID-19 and two are dead*, L.A. TIMES (Mar. 29, 2020), <https://lat.ms/2yiLbU6>; Chris Epp, *‘I would do anything for a do-over’: Calgary church hopes others learn from their tragic COVID-19 experience*, CTV NEWS (May 11, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3dLUv2l>.

In addition, as the Chief Justice explained in his concurrence in *South Bay*, state officials’ decisions about “when restrictions on particular social activities should be lifted during the pandemic . . . should not be subject to second-guessing by an ‘unelected federal judiciary,’ which lacks the background, competence, and expertise to assess public health and is not accountable to the people.” 140 S.Ct. at 1613–14 (quoting *Garcia v. San Antonio Metro. Transit Auth.*, 469 U.S. 528, 545 (1985)). For “[o]ur Constitution principally entrusts ‘[t]he safety and the health of the people’

to the politically accountable officials of the States ‘to guard and protect.’”

*Id.* (quoting *Jacobson*, 197 U.S. at 38 (alteration in original)).

**C. The vast majority of courts to consider similar challenges to COVID-19-related orders have rejected them.**

In addition to the cases cited above, numerous decisions—including rulings by the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Circuits—have rejected challenges like this one by religious organizations to in-person-gathering restrictions. And the vast majority of the public-health orders in those cases limited worship services substantially more than Colorado’s Order does.

For example, in *Elim Romanian Pentecostal Church v. Pritzker*, the Seventh Circuit upheld an Illinois order that capped religious gatherings at ten people, explaining that religious services are “most like other congregate functions that occur in auditoriums, such as concerts and movies,” which Illinois had banned completely. 962 F.3d 341, 342, 347 (7th Cir. 2020) (Easterbrook, J.), *petition for cert. docketed*, No. 20-569 (Oct. 22, 2020). Likewise, the Ninth Circuit, in its opinion in *South Bay*, denied a motion for injunction pending appeal at a time when the challenged state and local orders prohibited *all* in-person gatherings, explaining that “where state action does not ‘infringe upon or restrict practices because of their religious motivation’ and does not ‘in a selective manner impose

burdens only on conduct motivated by religious belief,’ it does not violate the First Amendment.” 959 F.3d 938, 939 (9th Cir. 2020) (quoting *Lukumi*, 508 U.S. at 543).

Many other federal courts have reached similar conclusions. *See, e.g., Bullock v. Carney*, 806 F.App’x 157, 157 (3d Cir. 2020) (unpublished), *denying motion for injunction pending appeal of* \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 1:20-cv-674, 2020 WL 2813316, at \*1 (D. Del. May 29, 2020) (thirty-percent-capacity limit); *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*, No. 20-3590, ECF No. 29 (2d Cir. Oct. 22, 2020) (unpublished), *denying request for administrative stay of decision denying preliminary injunction in* \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 1:20-cv-4844, 2020 WL 6120167, at \*2 (E.D.N.Y. Oct. 16, 2020) (limit of lesser of ten people or twenty-five percent of capacity); *Agudath Israel of America v. Cuomo*, No. 20-3572, ECF No. 30 (2d Cir. Oct. 22, 2020) (unpublished), *denying request for administrative stay of decision denying preliminary injunction in* No. 1:20-cv-4834 (E.D.N.Y. Oct. 9, 2020) (unpublished) (same); *Calvary Chapel of Bangor v. Mills*, No. 20-1507, 2020 WL 3067488, at \*1 (1st Cir. June 2, 2020) (unpublished), *denying motion for injunction pending appeal of* 459 F.Supp.3d 273, 280 (D. Me. 2020) (ten-person limit); *Gish v. Newsom*, No. 20-55445, ECF No. 21 (9th Cir. May 7, 2020) (unpublished), *denying motion for injunction pending appeal of* No. 5:20-cv-755, 2020 WL 1979970, at \*2, 5–6 (C.D. Cal.

Apr. 23, 2020) (unpublished) (no gatherings of any size); *Tolle v. Northam*, \_\_ F.App'x \_\_, No. 20-1419, 2020 WL 6267786 (4th Cir. Oct. 26, 2020) (unpublished), *dismissing appeal of* No. 1:20-cv-363, 2020 WL 1955281, at \*1–2 (E.D. Va. Apr. 8, 2020) (unpublished) (ten-person limit); *Hawse v. Page*, No. 20-1960, ECF No. 4914708 (8th Cir. May 19, 2020) (unpublished), *denying motion for injunction pending appeal of* No. 4:20-cv-588, 2020 WL 2322999, at \*1, 3 (E.D. Mo. May 11, 2020) (unpublished) (standing-based dismissal of challenge to ten-person limit); *Spell v. Edwards*, 962 F.3d 175, 180 (5th Cir. 2020), *denying as moot motion for injunction pending appeal, dismissing appeal as moot, and vacating* 460 F.Supp.3d 671, 673, 675–77 (M.D. La. 2020) (ten-person limit); *Cassell v. Snyders*, 458 F.Supp.3d 981, 988 (N.D. Ill. 2020) (ten-person limit), *appeal docketed*, No. 20-1757 (7th Cir. May 6, 2020); *Cross Culture Christian Ctr. v. Newsom*, 445 F.Supp.3d 758, 763, 768–71 (E.D. Cal. 2020) (no gatherings of any size permitted), *appeal dismissed*, No. 20-15977, ECF No. 14 (9th Cir. May 29, 2020); *Antietam Battlefield KOA v. Hogan*, 461 F.Supp.3d 214, 224 (D. Md. 2020) (ten-person limit), *appeal dismissed*, No. 20-1579, ECF No. 35 (4th Cir. July 2, 2020); *Lighthouse Fellowship Church v. Northam*, 458 F.Supp.3d 418, 428–32 (E.D. Va. 2020) (ten-person limit), *appeal dismissed*, No. 20-1515 (4th Cir. Oct. 13, 2020); *Soos v. Cuomo*, \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 1:20-cv-651, 2020 WL 6384683, at \*2, 4–7

(N.D.N.Y. Oct. 30, 2020) (limit of lesser of ten people or twenty-five percent of capacity), *appeal docketed*, No. 20-3737 (2d Cir. Nov. 2, 2020); *Abiding Place Ministries v. Newsom*, \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 3:20-cv-683, 2020 WL 2991467, at \*1–2 (S.D. Cal. June 4, 2020) (noting prior denial of TRO against order prohibiting gatherings of any size); *Elkhorn Baptist Church v. Brown*, 466 P.3d 30, 51–52 & n.16 (Or. 2020) (twenty-five-person limit); *DiMartile v. Cuomo*, 820 F.App’x 62 (2d Cir. 2020) (unpublished), *staying injunction pending appeal of* \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 1:20-cv-859, 2020 WL 4558711, at \*1 (N.D.N.Y. Aug. 7, 2020) (fifty-person limit on weddings); *Tigges v. Northam*, \_\_ F.Supp.3d \_\_, No. 3:20-cv-410, 2020 WL 4197610, at \*8 (E.D. Va. July 21, 2020) (restrictions on weddings).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See also *Robinson v. Murphy*, No. 2:20-cv-5420, 2020 WL 5884801 (D.N.J. Oct. 2, 2020) (unpublished), *appeal docketed*, No. 20-3048 (3d Cir. Oct. 8, 2020); *Whitsitt v. Newsom*, No. 2:20-cv-691, 2020 WL 4818780 (E.D. Cal. Aug. 19, 2020) (unpublished), *report and recommendation adopted*, 2020 WL 5944195 (E.D. Cal. Oct. 7, 2020) (unpublished); *Williams v. Trump*, No. 1:20-cv-2495, 2020 WL 6118560, at \*3–5 (N.D. Ill. Oct. 16, 2020) (unpublished); *Murphy v. Lamont*, No. 3:20-cv-694, 2020 WL 4435167, at \*14–15 (D. Conn. Aug. 3, 2020) (unpublished); *County of Los Angeles v. Superior Court*, No. B307056, 2020 WL 4876658 (Cal. Ct. App. Aug. 15, 2020) (unpublished); *Christian Cathedral v. Pan*, No. 3:20-cv-3554, 2020 WL 3078072 (N.D. Cal. June 10, 2020) (unpublished); *Nigen v. New York*, No. 1:20-cv-1576, 2020 WL 1950775 (E.D.N.Y. Mar. 29, 2020) (unpublished); *Davis v. Berke*, No. 1:20-cv-98, 2020 WL 1970712 (E.D. Tenn. Apr. 17, 2020) (unpublished); *MacEwen v. Inslee*, No. 3:20-cv-5423,

In only a few jurisdictions—principally the Sixth Circuit and courts within it—have courts granted injunctive relief based on freedom-of-religion arguments in challenges to COVID-19-related health orders. All but three of these cases were decided before the Supreme Court’s decision in *South Bay* and considered restrictions far tighter than Colorado’s Order. See *Roberts v. Neace*, 958 F.3d 409, 412, 416 (6th Cir. 2020) (Kentucky order prohibiting gatherings of any size); *Maryville Baptist Church v. Beshear*, 957 F.3d 610, 613 (6th Cir. 2020) (purported ban on drive-in services); *First Pentecostal Church of Holly Springs v. City of Holly Springs*, 959 F.3d 669, 670 (5th Cir. 2020) (order prohibiting all in-person worship services); *Berean Baptist Church v. Cooper*, 460 F.Supp.3d 651,

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2020 WL 4261323 (W.D. Wash. July 24, 2020) (unpublished); *Maxwell v. Lee*, No. 1:20-cv-1093, 2020 WL 5670115 (W.D. Tenn. June 29, 2020) (unpublished), *report and recommendation adopted*, 2020 WL 4220123 (W.D. Tenn. July 23, 2020) (unpublished); *Harborview Fellowship v. Inslee*, No. 3:20-cv-5518, ECF No. 42 (W.D. Wash. June 18, 2020) (unpublished); *Dwelling Place Network v. Murphy*, No. 1:20-cv-6281, ECF No. 35 (D.N.J. June 15, 2020) (unpublished); *Diaz-Bonilla v. Northam*, No. 1:20-cv-377, ECF No. 25 (E.D. Va. June 5, 2020) (unpublished); *Our Lady of Sorrows Church v. Mohammad*, No. 3:20-cv-674, ECF No. 14 (D. Conn. May 18, 2020) (unpublished); *Crowl v. Inslee*, No. 3:20-cv-5352, ECF No. 30 (W.D. Wash. May 8, 2020) (unpublished); *Hughes v. Northam*, No. CL 20-415 (Va. Cir. Ct. Russell Cty. Apr. 14, 2020) (unpublished); *Hotze v. Hidalgo*, No. 2020-22609 (Tex. 281st Dist. Ct. Apr. 13, 2020) (unpublished); *Binford v. Sununu*, No. 217-2020-cv-152 (N.H. Super. Ct. Mar. 25, 2020) (unpublished); *County of Ventura v. Godspeak Calvary Chapel*, No. 56-2020-544086 (Cal. Super. Ct. Ventura Cty. Aug. 7, 2020) (unpublished).



653–54 (E.D.N.C. 2020) (ten-person limit); *Tabernacle Baptist Church v. Beshear*, 459 F.Supp.3d 847, 851 (E.D. Ky. 2020) (order prohibiting gatherings of any size); *First Baptist Church v. Kelly*, 455 F.Supp.3d 1078, 1082 (D. Kan. 2020) (ten-person limit); *On Fire Christian Ctr. v. Fischer*, 453 F.Supp.3d 901, 907 (W.D. Ky. 2020) (purported ban on drive-in services). Contrary to the Chief Justice’s analysis in *South Bay*, most of these earlier decisions treated religious services as comparable to grocery shopping and office work, and they second-guessed state officials’ judgments on what means were necessary to render religious services safe. *See, e.g., Neace*, 958 F.3d at 414–15. (The exception is *Holly Springs*, which did not set forth its reasoning or even explain whether it was based on constitutional grounds, state statutory grounds, or preemption by a state order of the city ban at issue. *Compare* 959 F.3d at 670 *with id.*, No. 20-60399, ECF No. 515418914, at 7–14 (May 16, 2020) (motion for injunction pending appeal).)

Of the three post-*South Bay* decisions granting injunctions, two—*Soos*, 2020 WL 3488742, and *Capitol Hill Baptist*, 2020 WL 5995126—are addressed above. *See supra* at pp. 11–12. The other utilized reasoning inconsistent with *South Bay* and has been temporarily stayed by this Court. *See Denver Bible Church v. Azar*, No. 20-1377, ECF No. 10110427952 (10th Cir. Oct. 22, 2020) (unpublished), *temporarily staying*



*injunction pending appeal but cautioning that Court was not expressing view on merits of No. 1:20-cv-2362, 2020 WL 6128994, at \*9–13 (D. Colo. Oct. 15, 2020) (unpublished).*

## **II. Granting a religious exemption would violate the Establishment Clause.**

The Establishment Clause “mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary County v. ACLU of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005) (quoting *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968)). Granting Plaintiffs a religious exemption from Colorado’s Order would violate this principle. For the neutrality requirement of the First Amendment’s Religion Clauses forbids government not just to target religion for worse treatment but also to grant religious exemptions that would detrimentally affect nonbeneficiaries. When government purports to accommodate the religious exercise of some by shifting costs or burdens to others, it improperly prefers the religion of the benefited over the rights, beliefs, and interests of nonbeneficiaries.

In *Estate of Thornton v. Caldor, Inc.*, for example, the Supreme Court invalidated a law requiring employers to accommodate Sabbatarians in all instances, because “the statute t[ook] no account of the convenience or interests of the employer or those of other employees who

do not observe a Sabbath.” 472 U.S. 703, 709–10 (1985). The Court held that “unyielding weighting in favor of Sabbath observers over all other interests” has “a primary effect that impermissibly advances a particular religious practice,” violating the Establishment Clause. *Id.* at 710.

Similarly, in *Texas Monthly, Inc. v. Bullock*, the Court invalidated a sales-tax exemption for religious periodicals because, among other defects, it unconstitutionally “burden[ed] nonbeneficiaries” by making them pay “to offset the benefit bestowed on subscribers to religious publications.” 489 U.S. 1, 18 n.8 (1989) (plurality opinion).

The Supreme Court’s pre-*Smith* Free Exercise Clause jurisprudence is consistent, demonstrating that religious exemptions that harm others cannot be required even under a compelling-interest test. In *United States v. Lee*, for instance, the Court rejected an Amish employer’s request for an exemption from paying social-security taxes because the exemption would have “operate[d] to impose the employer’s religious faith on the employees.” 455 U.S. 252, 261 (1982). In *Braunfeld v. Brown*, the Court declined to grant an exemption from Sunday-closing laws because it would have provided Jewish businesses with “an economic advantage over their competitors who must remain closed on that day.” 366 U.S. 599, 608–09 (1961) (plurality opinion). And in *Prince*, the Court denied a request for an exemption from child-labor laws barring distribution of religious literature

by minors, because of the danger that the exemption would have posed to children's welfare. 321 U.S. at 170. These holdings all embody the fundamental precept that "[r]eal liberty for all could not exist under the operation of a principle which recognizes the right of each individual person to use his own [liberty] . . . regardless of the injury that may be done to others." *Jacobson*, 197 U.S. at 26.

In short, a religious accommodation "must be measured so that it does not override other significant interests" (*Cutter v. Wilkinson*, 544 U.S. 709, 722 (2005)) or "impose substantial burdens on nonbeneficiaries" (*Texas Monthly*, 489 U.S. at 18 n.8 (plurality opinion)). When nonbeneficiaries would be unduly harmed, religious exemptions are forbidden. *Cutter*, 544 U.S. at 720; *Estate of Thornton*, 472 U.S. at 709–10.

To be sure, the Supreme Court held in *Hosanna-Tabor Lutheran Evangelical Church & School v. EEOC*, 565 U.S. 171, 194–95 (2012), and *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 140 S.Ct. at 2055, that employment-discrimination laws cannot be enforced in a way that would interfere with a church's selection of its ministers. But those cases concerned core decisions of houses of worship that affect only their own members and internal structures. This case presents a far different question: whether there is a constitutional right to put countless people *outside* the church at greater risk of exposure to deadly disease.

Granting Plaintiffs an exemption here would elevate their religious preferences over the health of the entire community. Not only would Plaintiffs' congregants face greater danger, but so would everyone with whom they come into contact, including the elderly and others at heightened risk of severe illness.

Religious gatherings are just as likely as other gatherings to lead to COVID-19 outbreaks, and the examples have sadly piled up across the country. *See, e.g.*, Nakia McNabb, *At least 18 West Virginia Covid-19 outbreaks linked to church services, governor says*, CNN (Oct. 19, 2020), <https://cnn.it/31CLODY>; Minyvonne Burke, *More than 100 coronavirus cases and 3 deaths linked to North Carolina church event*, NBC NEWS (Oct. 23, 2020), <https://nbcnews.to/3kyjNEN>; Bill Bostock, *Nearly 100 people in Ohio got sick after one man infected with the coronavirus attended a church service*, BUSINESS INSIDER (Aug. 6, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2Qi2eeF>; Hilda Flores, *One-third of COVID-19 cases in Sac County tied to church gatherings, officials say*, KCRA (Apr. 1, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2XlCpPu>; Sara Cline, *Church tied to Oregon's largest coronavirus outbreak*, AP (June 16, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2YWFlT1>; Ryan Burns, *A Redding Megachurch Leader Came to Humboldt and Flouted Mask Rules; Her Ministry is Now the Source of a Major COVID Outbreak*, LOST COAST OUTPOST (Oct. 13, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3m86USh>; Stephanie Becker, *At least 70 people infected with*

*coronavirus linked to a single church in California, health officials say*, CNN (Apr. 4, 2020), <https://cnn.it/2NgYN6l>; Lee Roop, *A small Alabama church had a revival and now 40 people have coronavirus*, AL.COM (July 27, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2Ekzsav>; Eric Grossarth, *Idaho Falls church revival leads to 30 confirmed or probable cases of coronavirus*, IDAHO STATESMAN (June 4, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3hZQnyI>; John Raby, *Virus outbreak grows to 28 cases at West Virginia church*, AP (June 15, 2020), <https://bit.ly/30WTqBm>; Rachel Needham, *Anatomy of an outbreak: New documents reveal a significant number of the county's COVID-19 cases can be traced to Castleton church*, RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS (Sept. 1, 2020), <https://bit.ly/33hLAlG>; Wyatt Massey, *Church of God denomination facing significant COVID-19 outbreak; leaders won't say how many infected*, CHATTANOOGA TIMES FREE PRESS (July 7, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3bTiWLl>; Allison James, et al., *High COVID-19 Attack Rate Among Attendees at Events at a Church—Arkansas, March 2020*, MORBIDITY & MORTALITY WEEKLY REPORT (May 22, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3f6MYM2>; Bailey Loosemore & Mandy McLaren, *How a church revival in a small Kentucky town led to a deadly coronavirus outbreak*, LOUISVILLE COURIER-JOURNAL (Apr. 3, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2V1Jjrs>; Trudy Balcom, *COVID-19 outbreak on the Navajo Nation linked to church rally*, WHITE MOUNTAIN INDEP. (Mar. 24, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2YSR6di>; Joe Severino, *COVID-19 tore through a*

*black Baptist church community in WV; Nobody said a word about it*, CHARLESTON GAZETTE-MAIL (May 2, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2SFVYyX>; see *also supra* at pp. 17–18.

As these examples show, a single unwitting carrier at a large worship service could cause a ripple effect throughout an entire community: That one infected person might pass the virus to his neighbors in the pews, who might then return home and pass it to their family members, including people at high risk of severe illness. If those infected family members then go to the doctor’s office or the grocery store, they may potentially expose others, who may then do the same to their families—and so on. And the more people who get sick, the more strain is placed on the hospital system, and the greater the chance that people die due to lack of healthcare resources.

The Establishment Clause forbids government to grant religious exemptions for conduct that threatens so much harm to so many.

## CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the Court should affirm the district court's decision.

Respectfully submitted,

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