

California pastor faces \$1,000 fine and jail time for holding Easter service

By [Zack Budryk](#) - 04/15/20 02:09 PM EDT



© Getty Images

Authorities in California have issued a citation to a local pastor, alleging he hid dozens of worshippers in his church during an Easter Sunday service despite strict rules against public gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Merced County, Calif., Sheriff's Office said it received a tip claiming dozens of people were gathered inside Iglesia De Jesucristo Palabra Miel. Its doors were allegedly locked and worshippers' cars were hidden from sight.

Sheriff Vernon Warnke wrote ahead of Easter in a Facebook post that while he too would prefer to be able to attend Easter services, everyone would be required to stay home, [KTVU in Oakland, Calif., reported](#).

"It wasn't fair what [Warnke] did," Pastor Fernando Aguas told KTVU. "When he quoted the Constitution, he was wrong. We have the right to assemble."

Aguas also told the TV station he believed churches should be exempt from the order and said he mistook it for a suggestion.

"We weren't hiding," he said. "There were kids running around everywhere. We just had people park in back because we didn't want problems."

Aguas told the TV station that parishioners were maintaining 6 feet of distance between one another but acknowledged not all of them were wearing masks. The pastor, whose court date is scheduled for August, said the citation includes a maximum penalty of \$1,000 and six months in jail.

"He put his entire congregation in jeopardy," Warnke told KFSN-TV in Fresno. "By putting them in jeopardy, one person could have showed up, not known they're infected and infected the entire congregation. This congregation now goes out and gets with their family because they think they're okay, and then it continues to go."

Health officials in Sacramento, Calif., said in early April that about a third of confirmed cases in the county were linked to religious gatherings.

Cases of religious leaders defying social distancing orders have also been reported in [Louisiana](#) and [Florida](#).

<https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/492966-california-pastor-faces-1000-fine-and-jail-time-for-holding>