2 Albuquerque churches fined $5K for virus safety violations

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Health officials in New Mexico have fined two churches in Albuquerque for violating public health orders aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19 after both venues held large Christmas gatherings.

The state Health Department fined Legacy Church and Calvary Church $5,000 each on Monday after photos and video showed violations of mandates that call for capacity limits, mask wearing and social distancing.

Legacy Church officials accused the state of trampling on their constitutional rights.

"We have taken the pandemic seriously from the start and have prudent measures in place. But when governments exceed their constitutional authority and contradict what we are called on by God to do, we answer first to His authority," the church said in a statement.

Calvary Church's Chief Pastoral Officer Neil Oritz said the church "experienced a significant attendance on one of the most celebrated and sacred days of our Christian faith." In response, the church "chose not to break fellowship with any worshiper by requiring them to leave the gathering of their church family."

Ortiz said the church continued to urge people to follow guidelines, blocked every other row to practice social distancing, provided outdoor seating and gave masks to guests who were not wearing one.

Tripp Stelnicki, a spokesman for Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, said the leaders and church congregations endangered the health of fellow parishioners and the entire community given the speed at which the virus can spread.

Health officials on Tuesday reported an additional 1,221 confirmed infections, bringing the statewide total to nearly 140,000 since the pandemic began. Another 23 deaths also were reported, pushing that tally to more than 2,400.

The number of infections is thought to be far higher because many people have not been tested, and studies suggest people can be infected with the virus without feeling sick.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some — especially older adults and people with existing health problems — it can cause more severe illness and death.