

Amendment to HB 542

1 Amend the title of the bill by replacing it with the following:

2
3 AN ACT relative to the protection of religious liberty.
4

5 Amend the bill by replacing all after the enacting clause with the following:
6

7 1 Title. This act may be known and cited as the New Hampshire religious liberty act.

8 2 Legislative Findings. The general court finds that:

9 I. The framers of our federal and state constitutions made the value judgment that religion
10 warrants distinct protections. "In matters of Religion, no mans right is abridged by the institution of
11 Civil Society... Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance." James Madison, Memorial and
12 Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments.

13 II. The right to the free exercise of religion, in both the federal and New Hampshire
14 constitutions, was not meant to be a vague sentiment. Nor was it meant to protect mere private
15 opinion or thought. It was intended to be just as concrete as the right of free speech, the right to be
16 free from unreasonable searches, or any other enumerated right. It is "held by the same tenure with
17 all our other rights... it is enumerated with equal solemnity, or rather studied emphasis." Id.

18 III. The general court understands the protections afforded to religious exercise under the
19 New Hampshire Bill of Rights to be even stronger than those provided by the federal Bill of Rights.
20 New Hampshire Constitution, Part 1, Articles 5; 6.

21 IV. Governments have trampled on religious exercise by crafting generally applicable laws
22 which do not explicitly target a religion or religious activity. The fact that a law is generally
23 applicable does not mean that it complies with the federal or state free exercise clauses. As the
24 United States Supreme Court has said, the "constitutional rights of those spreading their religious
25 beliefs through the spoken and printed word are not to be gauged by standards governing retailers or
26 wholesalers of books." *Murdock v. Com. of Pennsylvania*, 319 U.S. 105, 111 (1943).

27 V. Protecting free exercise rights is especially important when it comes to the exercise of
28 controversial or unpopular religious beliefs. "[M]any people hold beliefs alien to the majority of our
29 society -- beliefs that are protected by the First Amendment but which could easily be trod upon
30 under the guise of 'police' or 'health' regulations reflecting the majority's views." *Sherbert v. Verner*,
31 374 U.S. 398 at 411 (Douglas, J., concurring in the judgment).

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1 VI. The United States Supreme Court has observed that forcing people to abandon the
2 precepts of their religion “puts the same kind of burden upon the free exercise of religion as would a
3 fine imposed” for a worship service. *Sherbert*, 374 U.S. 398 at 404 (1963).

4 VII. Although the state may legitimately burden religious exercise, it may only do so if there
5 exists “some compelling state interest... [which] justifies the substantial infringement of [a person’s]
6 First Amendment right.” *Sherbert*, 374 U.S. 398 at 406. The government must have a “paramount
7 interest” in burdening free exercise. *Id.*

8 VIII. In response to the common argument that religious liberty protections will result in
9 confusion and anarchy, allowing individuals to capriciously nullify ordinary laws, the Supreme Court
10 in 1963 found that “there is no proof whatever to warrant such fears of malingering or deceit... it is
11 highly doubtful whether such evidence would be sufficient to warrant a substantial infringement of
12 religious liberties.” *Sherbert*, 374 U.S. 398 at 407.

13 IX. The free exercise of religion is currently under threat from many sides. As four justices
14 of the United States Supreme Court have observed, the Court’s 1990 decision in *Employment*
15 *Division v. Smith* has “drastically cut back on the protection provided by the Free Exercise Clause.”
16 *Kennedy v. Bremerton Sch. Dist.*, cert. denied, 139 S. Ct. 634, 635 (2019) (Alito, J., concurring.). In
17 the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, many governors’ emergency orders have treated churches far
18 more restrictively than comparable secular entities. *Maryville Baptist Church, Inc. v. Beshear*, 957
19 F.3d 610, 614, (2020) (“The [Governor of Kentucky’s] orders also likely ‘prohibit[] the free exercise’ of
20 ‘religion’ in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments... Discriminatory laws come in many
21 forms.”). At the same time, federal politicians are currently introducing bills intended to roll back
22 statutory protections for the free exercise of religion.

23 X. *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal*, 546 U.S. 418 (2006),
24 indicates that legislative bodies may enact statutory law requiring that laws and other state action
25 burdening the free exercise of religion be justified by a compelling governmental interest. Many
26 states have done so, passing laws similar to this act.

27 XI. The compelling interest test, set forth in pre-1990 Supreme Court rulings and this act, is
28 a workable test for striking sensible balances between religious liberty and competing governmental
29 interests.

30 3 Purpose. The purposes of this act are:

31 I. To adopt the compelling interest test as articulated in *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398
32 (1963) and to guarantee its application in all cases where the free exercise of religion is substantially
33 burdened by state action;

34 II. To provide a claim or defense to a person or persons whose exercise of religion is
35 substantially burdened by state action;

36 III. To provide a claim or defense to any religious organization whose religious services are,
37 in a state of emergency, treated more restrictively than any other essential service; and

IV. To adopt this act as the general court's construction of the relevant provisions in the New Hampshire Bill of Rights, so that New Hampshire courts may consider as persuasive this act, including the general court's legislative findings, in any future cases interpreting the New Hampshire Bill of Rights.

7 CHAPTER 546-C
8 PROTECTION OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

I. "Person" means any individual, association, partnership, corporation, church, religious institution, estate, trust, foundation, or other legal entity.

15 III. “Religious organization” means:

(b) A religious group, corporation, association, educational institution, ministry, order, society, or similar entity, regardless of whether it is integrated or affiliated with a church or other house of worship; or

IV. "Religious service" means a meeting, gathering, or assembly of 2 or more persons organized by a religious organization for the purpose of worship, teaching, training, providing educational services, conducting religious rituals, or other activities that are deemed necessary by the religious organization for the exercise of religion.

32 VI. “State government” means:

(b) Any agency of the state or of a political subdivision of the state, including a department, bureau, board, commission, council, court, or public institution of higher education;

36 (c) Any person acting under color of state law; and

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(d) Any private person suing under or attempting to enforce a law, rule, or regulation adopted by the state or a political subdivision of the state.

VII. "Substantial burden" means any action that directly or indirectly constrains, inhibits, curtails, or denies the exercise of religion by any person or compels any action contrary to a person's exercise of religion. It includes, but is not limited to, withholding benefits, assessing criminal, civil, or administrative penalties or damages, or exclusion from governmental programs or access to governmental facilities.

546-C:2 Free Exercise of Religion Protected.

I. State action shall not substantially burden a person's right to exercise of religion, even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability, unless it is demonstrated that applying the burden to that person's exercise of religion in this particular instance:

(a) Is essential to further a compelling governmental interest; and

(b) Is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.

II. A person whose exercise of religion has been burdened, or is likely to be burdened, in violation of this section may assert such violation or impending violation as a claim or defense in a judicial or administrative proceeding, regardless of whether the state or one of its political subdivisions is a party to the proceeding. The person asserting such a claim or defense may obtain appropriate relief, including relief against the state or its political subdivisions. Appropriate relief includes, but is not limited to, injunctive relief, declaratory relief, compensatory damages, and costs and attorney fees.

III. This section applies to all laws, and the implementation of laws, whether statutory or otherwise, and whether adopted before or after the effective date of this chapter.

546-C:3 State of Emergency Protections.

I. To guarantee the free exercise of religion and right of the people to peaceably assemble, as required by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and Part I, Article 5 of the New Hampshire constitution, any powers activated pursuant to a state of emergency, as defined in RSA 21-P:35, VIII, shall not prohibit in-person gatherings at established houses of worship, such as churches, monasteries, mosques, shrines, synagogues, or temples.

II. Notwithstanding RSA 4:45 or any other provision of law to the contrary, during a state of emergency, the state government shall permit a religious organization to continue operating and to engage in religious services to the same or greater extent that other organizations or businesses that provide essential services that are necessary and vital to the health and welfare of the public are permitted to operate.

III. Nothing in this section shall prohibit the state government from requiring religious organizations to comply with neutral health, safety, or occupancy requirements issued by the state or federal government that are applicable to all organizations and businesses that provide essential services. Provided, however, that the state government shall not enforce any health, safety, or

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1 occupancy requirement that imposes a substantial burden on a religious service unless the state
2 government demonstrates that applying the burden to the religious service in this particular
3 instance is essential to further a compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive means
4 of furthering that compelling governmental interest.

5 IV. A religious organization may assert a violation of this section as a claim against the
6 state government in any judicial or administrative proceeding or as a defense in any judicial or
7 administrative proceeding without regard to whether the proceeding is brought by or in the name of
8 the state government, any private person, or any other party.

9 V. Any religious organization that successfully asserts a claim or defense under this section
10 may recover appropriate relief including, but not limited to, injunctive relief, declaratory relief,
11 compensatory damages, and costs and attorney fees.

12 546-C:4 Immunity Waived. Sovereign, governmental, and qualified immunities to suit and from
13 liability are waived and abolished to the extent of liability created by this chapter.

14 546-C:5 Rules of Construction.

15 I. This chapter shall be construed in favor of substantive and broad protections for the free
16 exercise of religion.

17 II. The protection of free exercise of religion afforded by this chapter are in addition to any
18 further protections provided under federal law, state law, and the state and federal constitutions.

19 III. Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to preempt or invalidate any state law or
20 local ordinance that is equally or more protective of free exercise of religion. Nothing in this chapter
21 shall be construed to narrow the meaning or application of any state or local law protecting free
22 exercise of religion.

23 IV. This chapter applies to, and in cases of conflict supersedes, each statute that impinges
24 upon the free exercise of religion protected by this chapter, unless a conflicting state statute is
25 expressly made exempt from the application of this chapter. This chapter also applies to, and in
26 cases of conflict supersedes, any ordinance, rule, regulation, order, opinion, decision, practice, or
27 other law that impinges upon the free exercise of religion protected by this chapter.

28 V. If any provision of this chapter or any application of such provision to any particular
29 person or circumstance is held to be invalid under law, the remainder of this chapter and the
30 application of its provisions to any other person or circumstance shall not be affected.

31 5 Effective Date. This act shall take effect 60 days after its passage.

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AMENDED ANALYSIS

This bill provides that any prohibition on in-person gatherings during a declared state of emergency shall not apply to houses of worship and provides that the state shall not substantially burden a person's right to the free exercise of religion unless doing so is essential to further a compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.