

New York City to change rules to allow churches to rent schools

by [David Gibson](#)

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NEW YORK (RNS) Congregations in New York City that rent space in public schools will be able to hold Easter services this Sunday despite a ruling on Monday by the U.S. Supreme Court rejecting an appeal from an evangelical church in the Bronx that sought to overturn a ban on after-hours worship services at public schools.

A spokesman for Mayor Bill de Blasio also said that the mayor would work to ensure that houses of worship could continue to rent space like any other group.

“Now that litigation has concluded, the city will develop rules of the road that respect the rights of both religious groups and nonparticipants,” Wiley Norvell said in response to the ruling. “While we review and revise the rules, groups currently permitted to use schools for worship will continue to be able to worship on school premises.”

Pastor Robert Hall of the Bronx Household of Faith, which was the plaintiff in the case, said he was cautiously optimistic after the administration’s response.

“We are gratified that he is allowing the churches to stay,” Hall told *The New York Times*. “It remains to be seen what the long-term policy is going to be, however.”

Monday’s decision, issued without comment, was the third time that the high court rejected an appeal by the Bronx Household of Faith, which for years held Sunday services at a local public school. The church last year finished work on its own building near P.S. 15, but said it still needs extra space for events that include religious services.

The city’s Board of Education said it wanted to maintain a policy against allowing houses of worship from renting space in city-owned buildings to prevent a blurring of church-state lines.

The mayor supports that policy in principle, but in a marked change from his predecessor, Michael Bloomberg, de Blasio has also said he wants to allow congregations the same access as any other group.

“I stand by my belief that a faith organization playing by the same rules as any community non-profit deserves access,” de Blasio said a year ago after a federal appeals court upheld the city’s ban, which the Supreme Court essentially affirmed on Monday.

“You know, they have to go through the same application process, wait their turn for space, pay the same rent—but I think they deserve access,” de Blasio said.

Earlier this year, as part of the mayor’s push to provide universal pre-K for the city’s children, the de Blasio administration announced that starting in September, pre-K classes will be permitted to break in the middle of the day for “non-program” activities such as prayer or religious instruction.

The policy has pleased faith-based schools, most of which operate under Jewish or Catholic auspices and many of which receive city funding for pre-K classes. But it has alarmed some civil liberties advocates.

Supporters of the Bronx Household of Faith and some 60 other groups that had been allowed to worship in public buildings pushed de Blasio to take action in the wake of the Supreme Court decision.

“This policy is clearly nothing more than religious segregation—the kind of segregation the mayor has said he opposes,” said Jordan Lorence, senior counsel with Alliance Defending Freedom, which has represented Bronx Household of Faith in its legal battle against the city’s policy.