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Kentucky governor asks churches to close Sunday to deter COVID-19

by Diana Chandler, posted Wednesday, March 11, 2020 (one month ago)

FRANKFORT, Ky. (BP) -- It appears unlikely many Southern Baptist churches will comply with Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear's request that houses of worship cancel services at least through Sunday (March 15) to deter spread of the new coronavirus, Kentucky Southern Baptists told Baptist Press.

Kentucky congregations, while autonomous, will likely take seriously Beshear's request, Kentucky Baptist Convention (KBC) Executive Director-Treasurer Todd Gray told BP. But congregations probably will consult with their leadership on how to respond, Gray said.

"It appears that most Kentucky Baptist church leaders are planning to carry on with their regularly scheduled services unless things change between now and Sunday," Gray said after Gov. Beshear announced the request Wednesday (March 11) morning. "Several Kentucky Baptist pastors will urge additional precautions by asking those who are sick to please stay home and those who are concerned to feel free to also stay home."

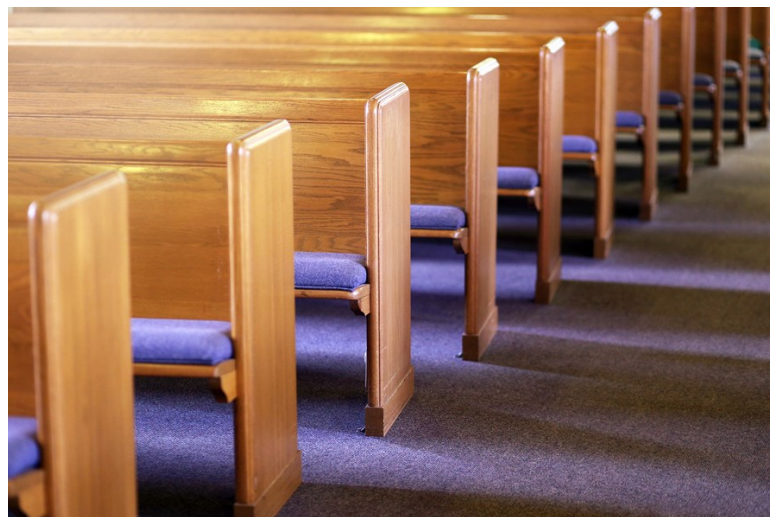
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is monitoring the spread of the virus, COVID-19, to determine a response after Gov. Beshear asked school systems to develop a plan to close on short notice if needed, SBTS President R. Albert Mohler told BP.

"Southern Seminary is reviewing the governor's request and other information from medical and government authorities," Mohler said, "and we're making determinations by the hour as how best to respond. We have a comprehensive plan in place if indeed we need to suspend on-campus instruction, but the governor has not yet called for the state's colleges and universities to suspend classes."

Kentucky Southern Baptist churches numbered 2,360 and comprised about 602,000 members in 2018, LifeWay Christian Resources reported.

"Several of our churches offer livestreaming of their services and will encourage concerned or sick members to watch from home," Gray said. "Most Kentucky Baptist church leaders respect our governor and his office and will take his request to consider canceling services seriously. However, most will likely consult their leadership and opt to continue on with the services as planned."

Beshear, reportedly a member of a Disciples of Christ church, made the request as part of the state's "aggressive" handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight people have tested positive for COVID-19 in Kentucky, Beshear said, with four hospitalized and four isolated at home.



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Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear requested today (March 11) that houses of worship cancel services at least through Sunday (March 15) to deter spread of the new coronavirus.

Todd Robertson, associational mission strategist of the Louisville Regional Baptist Association (LRBA), said he'll likely advise churches to be wise and discerning in responding to Beshear's request.

"My initial reaction is I'm going to advise churches to make a wise and discerning decision, especially based on the number of at-risk folk they may have in their congregation," Robertson told BP. "Obviously we've got some of our congregations that the majority of people are over 80 and may have health issues, and are at greater risk. And then we've got other congregations where that's not at all the case and it's probably pretty low risk."

With more than 150 member churches, the LRBA is the largest association in the KBC. Robertson is advising churches to consider necessary precautions, including sanitizing areas as needed, keeping hand sanitizer accessible and avoiding handshaking.

"I think there's probably some intermediate steps that I would hope churches would take first," Robertson told BP, "before maybe stepping into the extreme of canceling services."

Gray also offered several recommendations for churches to consider.

Canceling worship was one of several recommendations Beshear offered in response to the disease the World Health Organization now considers a global pandemic. Beshear also canceled a statewide prayer breakfast.

"I'm going to recommend that our churches across Kentucky cancel their services for this weekend," he said. In response to a reporter's question about midweek services, Beshear said, "I would recommend that people right now start avoiding large gatherings, and that would include those services."

Beshear expects pushback on his request regarding churches in particular, he said at the press conference.

"I know that that's a big step. I know that some won't agree with it," he said. "But I believe that it's our job to offer those protections, that we have a lot of opportunity for virtual services. I know those out there that would otherwise go have an opportunity to get out that Bible, or whatever it is of their faith that gives them guidance and ensure that they have that time with their family this weekend, where in their own home they can practice their faith and worship."

Mohler found it questionable as to why Beshear asked churches to close while leaving schools in session.

"He singled out churches," Mohler said of Beshear, "and that is a glaring issue that has also prompted much conversation. The governor has not adequately explained why he singled out churches, asking churches not to hold services. ... There are a lot of questions in Kentucky about exactly what this means, especially for local churches."

Beshear did not say how many weeks he would ask churches to suspend services, but said the situation regarding the virus is changing rapidly.

Nationwide, at least 1,135 COVID-19 cases and 32 deaths have been reported. Globally, the virus has killed about 4,400 people and sickened nearly 125,000, according to a tracking site maintained by Johns Hopkins University.

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' general assignment writer/editor. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists'... [Expand Bio]

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