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Resurrection Sunday, virtual egg hunt, drive-in worship among COVID-19 Easter plans

by Diana Chandler, posted Monday, March 30, 2020 (28 days ago)

NEW ORLEANS (BP) -- Like many other churches, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church plans to livestream its Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter services. But pastor Fred Luter has an innovative plan to make up for the void created by the inability to gather as a church body for those cherished events.



A virtual Easter egg hunt using the Minecraft video game is just one way some churches are trying to foster interaction among members during social distancing. Submitted photo

He'll compensate with an onsite "Resurrection Sunday" celebration after social distancing ends.

"We will use the first Sunday, for whatever month that we're back, and we're going to name that 'Resurrection Sunday' service in tribute of our missing the Easter service together," Luter said. "We're going to designate that Sunday, and promote it to our members and congregation that this Sunday is Resurrection Sunday where we have as a church body, as a city, as a state, as a nation, we have been resurrected from this COVID-19 virus."

As they comply with guidelines for social distancing and sheltering in place during the pandemic -- on Sunday, President Donald Trump announced an extension of those guidelines through April 30 -- Southern Baptists across the U.S. are finding creative ways to celebrate the Easter season. Among the ideas that have been hatched since churches stopped meeting in person:

A virtual choir including 20 churches embracing college students across the U.S. and in Taiwan; a virtual Easter egg hunt; a drive-in service; a widespread rebroadcast of a passion play produced in 2019; and Lord's Supper observances with congregants supplying their own elements are among ways churches are augmenting livestreamed worship during the

Easter season.

"We're trying to keep things as normal as possible, even though it's not normal," Luter said. "We'll livestream (Good Friday), because it's such a popular service. A lot of people love coming to hear about those last seven sayings of Christ on the cross."

Luter is convinced the COVID-19 pandemic is more difficult for New Orleans churches than the woeful devastation of Hurricane Katrina 15 years ago. Orleans Parish ranks highest in the nation in per capita COVID-19 deaths, with 73 deaths (or 18.7 deaths per 100,000 in a city of 391,000), according to figures from The Times Picayune and the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

Luter, who lost his former sanctuary in New Orleans' Ninth Ward to Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters, said he never thought he'd see anything worse than the storm that was the costliest hurricane on record until Hurricane Harvey tied the record \$125 billion in damage in 2017, 12 years after Katrina.

"But this is worse, because the churches have not been able to come together with their memberships," Luter said of COVID-19. "At least even after Katrina we were able to worship together at First Baptist Church (of New Orleans), and people from around the country where they were



United Believers Community Church in Kansas City, Mo., will host Palm Sunday and Easter drive-in services at its parking lot, broadcasting pastor Darron LaMonte Edwards'

scattered, they were able to go to worship at different places. I was doing services in New Orleans, and Baton Rouge and Houston, Texas. ... You can't do that now."

message on FM radio while simultaneously livestreaming on the church's website and Facebook page.
Submitted photo

Until Franklin Avenue's Resurrection Sunday, whenever that is, Luter plans to livestream services from the church's new 3,500-seat sanctuary in New Orleans East. He plans to send weekly letters of encouragement to members and post updates on social media.



The pandemic forced Southview Baptist Church in Lincoln, Neb., to cancel its annual passion play, but writer and director Sylvana Airan hopes online and television broadcasts of the 2019 production will reap Gospel fruit.
Submitted photo

On Palm Sunday, April 5, Luter plans to conduct the Lord's Supper by asking members to provide their own elements of grape juice and crackers, or even bread and water, in their own homes. On Good Friday, April 10, he'll livestream the Seven Last Sayings on the Cross, a popular service for the congregation, utilizing the church's associate pastors.

Elsewhere, Gracepoint church of Berkeley, Calif., with 19 sites serving college students across the U.S., plans to produce a virtual joint service and virtual joint choir for Easter.

Virtual Choir

Launched in 1981, a block away from the University of California at Berkeley, the Gracepoint network of predominantly pan-Asian churches now has 19 campuses near colleges and universities from California to Maryland, with an international church in Taiwan.

Although Easter plans were still being finalized, Gracepoint will send music tracks to members across the U.S., collect videos of the members performing, and mix the sound and videos to produce a virtual choir, said Kevan Ho, an executive pastor of Gracepoint Berkeley.

"Passion Week is such a beautiful time of the year to revisit the Gospel and everything from Good Friday to Easter Sunday," Ho said. "We are not going to let coronavirus prevent us from celebrating what Christ has done. We've been planning and talking together a lot about what that worship service will look like and what we're going to do."

In addition, Gracepoint plans to livestream a virtual passion play April 5-12 and a virtual Good Friday service April 10.

"We refuse to just sit around and hope to weather through the coronavirus," Ho said. "Every single one of our members and believers, from the youngest to the oldest, we're going to celebrate Christ."

In addition to Berkeley, Gracepoint has eight churches in California and churches in Seattle, Wash.; Austin, Texas; Minneapolis, Minn.; Chicago; Chapel Hill, N.C.; Pittsburgh, Pa.; Washington, D.C.; Fairfax, Va.; New Brunswick, N.J. and College Park, Md.

Virtual Easter egg hunt

Tate Springs Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, hopes to engage its elementary students by designing a virtual Easter egg hunt on the Minecraft sandbox video game. The church will release the game to students Monday (March 30) as part of a weekly Bible study, according to Curtis James, the church's family pastor.

"What we wanted to do was build a place where our kids could come and they could actually play together and build stuff together ... and interact with one another and kind of be together in some way when they can't actually be together physically," James said. "Because we've achieved that in our adults and in our youth, but we haven't achieved it in our children."

Tate Springs built its own server that disables features inappropriate for children. James said only church members and trusted friends will be able to participate, and parents are urged to be present when their children engage.

James said any church can use Minecraft to minister inexpensively to youth and recommended the Church Media Hacks Facebook group as a resource.

"It allows our kids to go in and build something that other people see," James said. "We're going to do some sort of digital Easter egg hunt, put things around the Minecraft world and kids have to go find them. We're not real sure what we're going to do yet, but we've got some people with some ideas."

Since about 85 percent of children have played the game, James said, the church will utilize input from children in the outreach.

Drive-in worship

United Believers Community Church in Kansas City, Mo., will host Palm Sunday and Easter drive-in services at its parking lot, broadcasting pastor Darron LaMonte Edwards' message on FM radio while simultaneously livestreaming on UBCCTV.org and Facebook Live.

"Our goal in hosting drive-in services is to not allow social distancing to turn into social isolation," Edwards said. "John Donne coined the phrase 'no man is an island.' We were built for connectedness and fellowship."

Edwards said the service complies with coronavirus pandemic guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and is "a creative way for people to see each other from their cars, tune into an FM frequency and enjoy worship, and honk your horn for a Hallelujah." The church will use a geo-mapped FM frequency, he said, and will text blast in the event of inclement weather.

The church is collecting food items on Palm Sunday and Easter, and providing free hot meals and snacks April 6-24 to students whose food source has been disrupted by school closings. To donate items, drivers are instructed to pop their trunks to allow church volunteers to retrieve donations. To receive food, residents are asked to drive to a pick-up location, indicate the number of meals desired and pop their trunks for meals to be placed there.

"This is the season to creatively curate for Christ as we watch a culture become a bit more cold and callous due to this crisis. This is our light," Edwards said of the church. "We want to let it shine!"

Passion play

The pandemic forced Southview Baptist Church in Lincoln, Neb., to cancel its annual passion play, but writer and director Sylvana Airan hopes online and television broadcasts of the 2019 production will reap Gospel fruit.

"It's humbling as to how God uses these circumstances as long as we also put an effort into it," Airan said. "Every year, God brings unbelievers to us. God has really blessed and anointed this play."

The play, The Day of Resurrection, would have marked its 29th production in 2020. It is available at southviewbaptist.org, on various Facebook pages including the International Student Fellowship, and will be broadcast on a local Lincoln, Neb., television station through April.

The production involves the Southview congregation from babies to the elderly and features live animals. It is already being viewed in Rwanda, India and China, said Airan, who became a Christian during her childhood in Pakistan.

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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