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Texas church switches to 'drive-in movie style' service

by Shawn Hendricks/Southern Baptist TEXAN, posted Friday, March 20, 2020 (one month ago)

MONTGOMERY, Texas (BP) -- As pastors across the country wrestle with how to handle services during the COVID-19 crisis, Texas pastor Chris Gober wanted to strike the balance between keeping his congregation safe and bringing them together as a unified family.



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For First Montgomery Baptist Church, this meant switching the regular March 22 Sunday service plans to an outdoor "drive-in movie style" approach. The church, which draws about 300 people each week, is inviting members to pull their cars onto the church's property for their 10:45 a.m. service and listen to the sermon on their radio with the help of an FM transmitter. The idea is similar to the service held March 15 by David Fork Baptist Church in Lexington, Ky., reported by WKYT.

"I was just asking God how in the world can we keep our church unified and maintain the family feel of our church in the middle of all of this, and this is what came to mind," Gober told the TEXAN as he was planning that week's Sunday service.

Using a five-acre field owned by the church and adjacent to the church building, the plan is to set up a few well-spaced chairs in the front for those who might feel comfortable getting out of their vehicles. Others could park their cars behind the chairs and listen to the sermon while remaining more isolated.

The service will allow people to "participate at the level they feel comfortable in," he said. While Gober acknowledges there is value to watching services on live stream, he noted that an online service doesn't involve the same family feel.

"With livestream you don't get the same sense of community as you do when you're in proximity," he said. "And if this is going to last for two months, we need a better solution."

According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center today (March 20) Texas has confirmed 307 cases. And Montgomery County, Gober said, has requested that groups stay to less than 50.

"We feel like this is within those guidelines if you can maintain the isolation within your car," he said, "Because you won't actually come into contact with anyone except the people in your car, which were in your home to begin with."

Gober said he looked forward to delivering the message that will focus on how God, not man, is in control.

"What's amazing is we plan our sermons for the year in January," he said. "And it is the perfect sermon for this week."

Most people live "under the illusion of control," the pastor said.

"We feel like we're in control of our lives and often that results in us drifting from God," he said. "But times like this are often the times where we see the reality that we're not in control. And it's the perfect time to lean into God, not to lean away from God."

The pastor hopes the drive-in movie style service will help spark more creative ideas for other churches as they navigate the coronavirus crisis.

"I feel like this is a real opportunity for the church," Gober said. "We can do great ministry within the body and with the community if we can help those who choose to isolate, who are at risk, by serving them, running errands for them, dropping things off for them without making contact.

"We can help keep our at-risk people safe by serving them ... the way the church has done throughout history," he added. "The Christians are the ones who rush in and help, and I think we can do that again today."

