

**ARTICLE**

# **What can the D.C. church response to the 1918 flu pandemic teach us now?**

**BY CALEB-MORELL**

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As World War I was ending, still another enemy was making its way toward the nation's capital: the Spanish Flu. [Between October 1918 and February 1919 \(https://www.washingtonian.com/2018/10/31/the-forgotten-epidemic-a-century-ago-dc-lost-nearly-3000-residents-to-influenza/\)](https://www.washingtonian.com/2018/10/31/the-forgotten-epidemic-a-century-ago-dc-lost-nearly-3000-residents-to-influenza/), an estimated 50,000 cases were reported in the District of Columbia; 3,000 D.C. residents lost their lives. At the peak of the pandemic, the D.C. government banned all public gatherings, including churches. How Christians responded provides some lessons and principles for responding to similar dilemmas in our own day.

# The rising death toll

The first active cases in the District were reported in September 1918. Between September 21–26, six people succumbed to the flu. By Sept. 27 (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-09-27/ed-1/seq-1/>), three more people had died, and there were 42 new cases. From that point on, cases multiplied rapidly, and more deaths followed. By Oct. 4, after another spike in cases, city officials called for additional bans on public gatherings, including church services, playgrounds, theaters, dance halls, and other places of amusement.

## The response of pastors

Washington, D.C., churches responded by calling an emergency meeting of the Protestant ministers on Saturday, Oct. 5. There, they “voted unanimously (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1918-10-05/ed-1/seq-2/>) to accede to the request of the District Commissioners that churches be closed in the city.” The Evening Star reported (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-10-06/ed-1/seq-7/>) the next day that the “Pastors Federation of Washington” would comply with and support the safety measures called for by the city. Their official statement said that the churches wanted to “place ourselves on record as cheerfully complying with the request of the Commissioners, which, we understand applies to all churches alike. We furthermore recommend that our people shall conduct in their own homes some form of religious worship remembering in prayer especially the sick, [and] our allied nations at war . . .”

The churches that chose (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1918-10-06/ed-1/seq->

19/) to continue to meet did so by obtaining permits for outdoor services rather than openly defying the order, though this was eventually banned by government officials.

## **Opposition to the ban on church gatherings**

Initially, churches were willing to comply with this ban because the virus and deaths were increasing. As the numbers began to decline near the end of October, churches started to advocate the ban to be lifted. On Oct. 25, an opinion piece in the Friday edition of The Star argued that churches should be transferred from the prohibited to the regulated class of gatherings, such as war workers in factories. The author listed (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1918-10-06/ed-1/seq-19/>) two reasons:

1. Because intelligent stringent regulation can prevent absolutely the crowding of the church edifices and can eliminate or reduce to a minimum the danger of germ distribution through such assemblages; and
2. Because the purposes of church assemblages are such as to entitle them to be the very last to be absolutely forbidden by the civil authorities.

Similarly, the same group of pastors who had initially urged churches not to meet sent a letter to the health commissioner and sought, unsuccessfully, to obtain permission to gather for worship the following day. They were told by the commissioner that the government did not desire to keep the ban any longer than necessary to halt the spread of the virus. However, they indicated (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-10-26/ed-1/seq-1/>)

no move to lift the general ban on all public gatherings, including churches, theaters, and moving picture houses until the influence of the influenza had abated.

Pastors in the area continued to express their disapproval as the number of cases and deaths declined. Further, they argued (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-10-26/ed-1/seq-7/>) that the commissioner did not give adequate thought to the reality that the spiritual effects of the church (both prayer for healing and the normal rhythms of religious life) would be beneficial for the public. They argued that the continued ban in the face of the declining numbers represented (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-10-29/ed-1/seq-24/>) “interfer[ence] with the freedom of religious worship.”

## **The ban lifted**

Then, on Oct. 29 the commissioners released an order to lift the ban. According to the D.C. health officer (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-10-29/ed-1/seq-1/>), Dr. Fowler, conditions were such now that he felt assured by the fall in the death rate and the reduction in the number of new cases that “it was safe to open the churches this week [Thursday] and the opening of the theaters, schools, and other public gathering places Monday.” A few churches placed advertisements in the Wednesday, Oct. 30, edition of The Star announcing the resumption of services. For instance, Calvary Baptist Church announced (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1918-10-30/ed-1/seq-3/>) that it would be resuming its midweek prayer meeting on Thursday, Oct. 31, as well as regular services on Sunday, Nov. 3.

On that first Sunday, the Reverend J. Francis Grimke preached a powerful sermon that was later published and distributed, “Some Reflections: Growing Out of the Recent Epidemic of Influenza that Afflicted Our City.” In the sermon, Grimke acknowledges that there was “considerable grumbling” on the part of some regarding the closing of churches. However, he offered a defense (<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.010002585873&view=1up&seq=3>) of the ban on gatherings:

“The fact that the churches were places of religious gathering, and the others not, would not affect in the least the health question involved. If avoiding crowds lessens the danger of being infected, it was wise to take the precaution and not needlessly run in danger, and expect God to protect us.”

In conclusion, the influenza of 1918 provides an example of how churches in Washington, D.C., responded to a public health crisis and government orders to close churches. During one of the worst epidemics to ever hit our country, churches respected the directives of the government for a limited time out of neighborly love and in order to protect public health. Even when churches began to disagree with the commissioners’ perspective, they continued to abide by their orders. This demonstrates a place for freedom of speech and advocacy while respecting and submitting to governing authorities.

*This article was originally published at 9Marks*

*(<https://www.9marks.org/article/how-dc-churches-responded-when-the-government-banned-public-gatherings-during-the-spanish-flu-of-1918/>) and is republished with permission.*

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