

Trump supporters Jeffress and Falwell change tune on COVID-19 threat

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President Trump talks with Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr. (right) during commencement ceremonies at the school in Lynchburg, Virginia, on May 13, 2017. (AP Photo/Steve Helber)

As religious groups nationwide began taking dramatic steps to halt COVID-19, even canceling Sunday services, the initial response from some evangelical leaders who advise President Donald Trump was less “batten down the hatches” and more “business as usual.”

But as new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention emerged and the stock market continued to free-fall, they soon changed course.

On March 15, after many churches decided to take a break from worship services and church meetings, First Baptist Dallas, where Trump stalwart Robert Jeffress is senior pastor, held its regularly scheduled Sunday services.

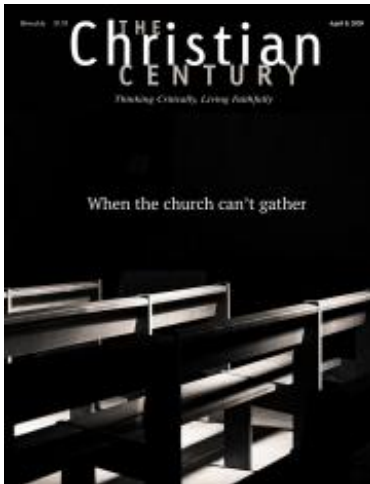
The church, at which more than 3,000 people worship each week, did implement policies to comply with a recent ban on gatherings of 500 people or more in Dallas County by having people meet in smaller groups at satellite locations. Not until the following week did Jeffress announce that the church would begin meeting virtually, citing “rapidly changing circumstances and recommendations.”

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At Liberty University, President Jerry Falwell Jr., who has strongly defended Trump, refused to cancel in-person classes.

“Unless everything changes in the next week, I don’t see us doing what other schools have done,” Falwell said during a virtual convocation on March 13.

It wasn’t until Virginia governor Ralph Northam placed an emergency ban on gatherings of more than 100 people on March 15 that the university said it was “left with no practical choice” but to transition to online classes. The campus, however, remains open.

Falwell has sought to downplay the severity of the health crisis overall. He said he is “hopeful” that the situation is “overhyped” and wondered aloud whether there is “a political motivation” behind widespread media coverage of COVID-19.

The convocation followed Falwell’s appearance on the *Fox and Friends* television program Friday morning, where he discussed the coronavirus disease and suggested—without evidence—that the pathogen is actually a bioweapon.

“The owner of a restaurant asked me last night—he said, ‘Do you remember the North Korean leader promised a Christmas present for America back in December? Could it be they got together with China and this is that present?’ I don’t know, but it really is something strange going on,” Falwell said.

Falwell later tweeted out a clip of himself making the suggestion.

After taking strong measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 early in the outbreak, including restricting entry into the US from China, Trump increasingly dismissed the need for extreme action, downplaying the seriousness of the situation and framing criticism of his response to it as a “hoax.” He seemed to change his tone in a speech from the Oval Office on March 11 but refused to cancel planned rallies in Nevada and Tampa, Florida, until March 12.

By March 13, Trump had declared the crisis a national emergency.

Not all of Trump’s evangelical supporters are maintaining the status quo. Pastor Jentezen Franklin, a longtime adviser to Trump, announced that his Free Chapel, based in Gainesville, Georgia, will conduct services entirely online, canceling in-person gatherings at all of the megachurch’s campuses.

“Please pray for those affected by this virus,” the announcement reads. “Prayer is powerful, and God is our perfect source of comfort and care.”

One prominent conservative Christian voice that has been critical of the Trump administration’s response to the virus is David Brody. The Christian Broadcasting Network political analyst, who coauthored a book on Trump’s faith, lambasted the president’s suggestion that “anybody” in the US can get tested for COVID-19 if they require it.

“That is 100% FALSE. Full stop,” Brody tweeted. “He was wrong then and it’s wrong today too. Many American citizens want a #coronavirus test right now but can’t get access to one. This is a MAJOR FAILURE.” —Religion News Service, and *Christian Century* staff