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COVID-19 variously impacts Sunday worship across U.S.

by Diana Chandler, posted Friday, March 13, 2020 (one month ago)

RIDGEFIELD, Wash. (BP) -- Since a Washington state school district closed its doors to external groups because of the coronavirus (COVID-19), a thriving Southern Baptist church plant of 100 has no place to worship. Instead, the church will livestream its sermon on Facebook for small groups to view in homes Sunday (March 15).

"Losing our gathering place for the foreseeable future is certainly impactful, but the issue is not our current situation as much as it is an issue of squelched growth," Go Church Pastor Mark Ford told Baptist Press after the Ridgefield School District announced the restriction Thursday (March 12). "We may not lose much of what we have now in the near future, because our people are fairly committed; however, it will be almost impossible to grow through this."

At a mega congregation across the country, onsite worship has been canceled. Instead J.D. Greear, pastor of The Summit Church in the Raleigh, N.C., area and the current president of the Southern Baptist Convention, will prerecord and livestream his sermon to worshippers who average more than 10,000 in combined attendance.

Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., has canceled worship through March 31, with no livestream option offered. And in nearby Fairfax Station, Va., Antioch Baptist Church is continuing service for an average 1,000 worshippers with safety precautions.

Those are just a few examples of the approaches being taken as churches grapple with how best to worship during the coronavirus pandemic, which has altered life for residents globally. Nearly 5,100 have died and 137,000 have been infected, according to a tracking site maintained by Johns Hopkins University.

Southern Baptist churches are variously canceling services, offering online sermons and worship, and otherwise amending practices in a rapidly changing crisis that has spurred the declaration of state and national states of emergency; closings of schools, amusement parks and other venues; bans on large gatherings, suspension of major league sports seasons and canceled games, among other measures.

Southern Baptist national leaders including SBC Executive Committee President Ronnie Floyd have called Southern Baptists to prayer Sunday in response to the pandemic.

"Over the past few days, we have seen a growing number of public gatherings and events canceled and have heard from public officials who have recommended churches suspend weekly worship services," Floyd told BP Friday. "We encourage pastors and church leaders to seek wisdom from God in prayer, assess the status of this new virus in their local community, and consider their membership context when deciding whether or not to hold weekly worship services."

The loss of meeting space "was like a kick in the gut" for Go Church, Ford told BP of the church launched in 2017. But he said the congregation will work to survive the challenge that comes only a month before Easter.

"The news was hard, but very quickly we began to think about how God might use this," Ford said. "As a church plant, we are really only just getting our small group ministry going, and I quickly thought about how this could actually help us build a small-group culture into our church.

"The idea that came to me was not just to livestream the services," Ford said, "but to host watch parties in homes, to watch/participate in the services in smaller groups. I have set a goal of at least 10 host homes, and I think we may well exceed that number of volunteers. When there is a crisis, people tend to step up."

Across the country, Greear is among the leaders calling Southern Baptists to prayer Sunday over the pandemic. Greear taped his sermon Friday to broadcast to members Sunday in preparation for canceled weekend services at all of The Summit Church's sites.



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"Canceling these services was a very difficult decision for us, but we have been guided by two principles: (1) honoring our governing officials, who have urged extreme caution, and (2) loving our neighbors, many of whom, like the elderly or those with prior medical conditions, are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19," Greear tweeted Thursday, pulling from a statement the church posted at SummitChurch.com.

The Summit Church also canceled or postponed other regularly scheduled events through March 19 and gave small group leaders discretion in holding meetings.

"While God has not given us a spirit of fear, he has called us to love our neighbors and to contribute to the welfare of our community," The Summit Church statement reads. "Exercising caution is not merely wise, but is a tangible way of expressing love toward others."

Unlike The Summit Church and Go Church, Capitol Hill Baptist Church will not offer online worship Sunday, pastor Mark Dever said Thursday in a letter to congregants. Small groups will meet at leaders' discretion, and church leaders will continue working onsite.

"During this time that our church is closed to public services, we will not be streaming services online," Dever wrote. "Let us simply receive the recommendation of DC Health [D.C. Department of Health] and heed it for our good and for the good of others. Let us use any absence of gathering as an exceptional time under the hand of God to reflect on our life, our church, our community, to pray for the sick and medical professionals, to offer whatever help we can, and to rest."

Although the D.C. health department's discouragement of mass gatherings does not include churches, Dever said, Capitol Hill Baptist will comply. The district has not made such a recommendation since the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak, Dever said.

"In times of emergency such as this, we understand that it is not sin to not meet," Dever told the congregation. "Not gathering as a congregation is not disobeying Hebrews 10:24-25."

Among churches still planning to meet Sunday, as of BP's Friday press time, was Antioch Baptist Church, whose pastor Marshal Ausberry is first vice president of the SBC and president of the National African American Fellowship of the SBC. But the church has adopted precautionary measures, reduced worship time to an hour, and reduced or rescheduled non-worship activities for the next few weeks, Ausberry told BP.

"We at Antioch are rightfully and understandably concerned about the spread of the coronavirus," Ausberry told BP Thursday. "We are normally a handshaking and hugging type of church. However, we knew that many people were very uncomfortable and leery with shaking hands and/or hugging during our welcome time. So as a show of love for one another, we have suspended handshaking and hugging for the next few weeks.

"It really feels strange not to shake hands, but knowing that for the love of those who were stressed out, it's the right thing to do," Ausberry said. "We make sacrifices for one another. So in the interim as we recognize and welcome our first-time guests we all stand and give God a hand praise."

Antioch will take precautions including frequently disinfecting high-traffic areas, providing additional hand sanitizer stations throughout the campus and reminding congregants to frequently wash hands for at least 20 seconds. The church continues its standard practices of using disposable fellowship cups for the Lord's Supper, sanitizing the baptismal pool and using a chlorine-based sanitizing solution when filling the baptism pool.

"In general we have communicated to our congregation the procedures in place," Ausberry said. "This has helped to ease concerns and reduce the stress in times like these."

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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