

Inside the outbreak: Church in a time of coronavirus

CDC recommends canceling gatherings of 50 or more people for eight weeks

by [Jamie Dean](#)

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Editor's Note: This is an update to a story that originally published March 13, 2020.

On Sunday morning, churches across the nation went virtual: Many congregations livestreamed worship services in the wake of the coronavirus crisis that has jolted daily life in the U.S. to an unprecedented halt.

By Sunday evening, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) delivered another jolt: The government agency urged canceling in-person gatherings of more than 50 people for the next eight weeks. The recommended timespan sweeps through Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, and into the second half of May.

Many large congregations already had suspended in-person gatherings for worship, but the CDC's new recommendation was the first indication of how long those cancellations might continue.

In some states, government recommendations turned into mandatory requirements: North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper's request to halt gatherings of more than 100 people morphed into an executive order on Saturday afternoon. The governor said he thought the order was necessary to ensure that groups complied.

Some smaller churches continued to meet, with leaders working on plans to ensure more than 100 people wouldn't be in the same building at the same time. But the CDC's request to cancel gatherings of 50 or more will challenge even small churches to consider how to face the next two months. A survey by Lifeway earlier this year reported that some 57 percent of Protestant churches in America have less than 100 people attending services each Sunday.

Joining the livestream of churches already transitioning to online services may be an important option for some congregations. Even low-tech churches have options for online gatherings to hear from their pastors or form prayer groups, with livestream and networking options easily accessible on social media, including Facebook.

In Matthews, N.C., pastor Kevin DeYoung led an online worship service from the pulpit of Christ Covenant Church. The church's website included a full bulletin for families or individuals to follow the liturgy and sing worship songs. The opening hymn offered a steady hope in uncertain times: "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing."

Original report from March 13, 2020.

On Thursday, leaders of Capitol Hill Baptist Church announced the suspension of Sunday worship for the first time in 102 years. Pastor Mark Dever said the last time the D.C. congregation canceled worship was during the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918.

“Let’s pray for God’s mercy and grace on us and our community in these days,” he wrote. “And for it soon to be safe for us to meet again.”

It’s a stirring example of a sobering dilemma facing churches across the country (and the world) as authorities try to mitigate the spread of coronavirus: To meet or not to meet?

For now, many will meet, including some megachurches. First Baptist Church of Dallas averages more than 3,100 attendees a week, and pastor Robert Jeffress said the church would go forward with services this weekend.

Others will cancel: In Houston, pastor Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church—with its 17,000-seat capacity in a former sporting arena—will suspend gathering this weekend, but livestream a service online.

Advice and directives from state authorities differed: In Washington state—a hotspot for coronavirus—Gov. Jay Inslee announced a ban on gatherings of more than 250 people through March in three counties.

In Ohio, Gov. Mike DeWine said gatherings of 100 or more were prohibited, but religious gatherings were exempt from the ban. In Kentucky, Gov. Andy Beshear urged canceling public events, including church services across the state.

The legal weight of such pronouncements varies.

For example, in North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper discouraged groups of more than 100 from gathering, including churches. James Hodge, of the Center for Public Health Law and Policy at Arizona State University, told a local newspaper that governors could have flexibility to legally enforce such measures under a state of emergency.

Cooper didn’t indicate the state would take that step immediately.

In Matthews, N.C. (a suburb of Charlotte), pastor Kevin DeYoung said Christ Covenant Church—a congregation of several hundred—wouldn’t meet for worship in its building on Sunday. DeYoung plans to preach from the church’s pulpit, and leaders will livestream the services online Sunday morning and evening.

Smaller churches may not have as wide a slate of high-tech options, but could join congregations already livestreaming, or explore ways to conduct sermons or services on Facebook or other online platforms. (This might be particularly helpful for high-risk members who decide to stay home, even if the church remains open.)

For churches trying to decide how to respond, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention published an online article with suggestions and guidelines to consider.

The ERLC said local churches should consult closely with local officials to make decisions based on the relevant information and conditions in their areas. For those continuing to hold worship services, some basic advice includes:

- Don't shake hands.
- Provide hand sanitizer throughout the building.
- Thoroughly clean before and after the service.
- Refrain from passing an offering plate. (Online giving is an alternative.)
- Consider how to mitigate health risks when handling the Lord's Supper (including the possibility of postponing it for a time).
- Cancel church-wide meals, and consider canceling or postponing other non-essential meetings.

(To see the full list of recommendations click [here](#).)

Churches should consider urging members at high risk of becoming seriously ill (including older people and those with underlying health conditions) to stay home. But one thing not to refrain from: ministry. That's especially important for those members who might stay away from gatherings, or who become sick at home and need help.

Church leaders should stay in contact with vulnerable members, and make plans for how to help meet their needs if they grow ill or homebound. (Dropping off meals at doorsteps or consulting with family members about care plans are helpful steps to consider.)

In neighborhoods, church members should be aware of those perhaps unconnected to a church or other family members and consider ways to make sure they have the help they might need.

And Christians should pray.

As pastor Mark Dever of Capitol Hill Baptist noted, it's good to pray for God's mercy, and that churchgoers will soon be able to meet again without the specter of unintentionally harming one another.

We have good Biblical ground to pray God will soon make that possible: The Scriptures teach He delights when His people gather, and that He's made gathering a central part of our Christian growth and life. For many churchgoers, that's what makes this mysterious virus particularly difficult.

But even for those separated from the church for a time, other Scriptures remind us: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."