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State conventions gather virtually to pray

by Tess Schoonhoven, posted Friday, March 27, 2020 (one month ago)

NASHVILLE (BP) -- In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, prayer is still the overarching theme for the continued ministry of church leaders to their communities.

Several state Baptist conventions held online prayer gatherings this week. Those and more are making future plans to continue to engage in persistent, specific, group prayer.

"We believe fundamentally that we are a people of prayer," said Willie McLaurin, vice president for great commission relations and mobilization at the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee. "There's something special about the Spirit of God that unifies people who have a common purpose and a common passion, gathering together."

McLaurin said it is now the new normal, going forward to utilize creative and innovative ways to lift high the power of prayer.

Prayer is the foundation of the church, McLaurin said. Without it, the church would fall apart.

"When we work, we work, but when we pray, God works," McLaurin said. "We realize that there's only so much that we can do, but there is encouragement that happens when people from different parts of the state gather together."

Jordan Easley, pastor of First Baptist Cleveland in Cleveland, Tenn., led a portion of a virtual prayer meeting held Thursday (March 26) by the Tennessee Baptist Convention. Easley said the leaders of the meeting, using Facebook live, hoped to bring unity to the body of Christ during a confusing season.

"Much like the believers that gathered in the upper room after the ascension of Christ -- they waited and prayed and we are doing the same thing today -- we are anticipating what God is going to do next," Easley said.

Easley led the portion of prayer focused on praying for families in the church.

"Our families are scared and confused in this season of uncertainty, so we cried out to God and asked Him to show us His power and grace as we navigate these days," Easley said.

McLaurin noted that people are realizing how deeply they need the encouragement from other believers.

"People realize that we need one another, we need each other, we need community," McLaurin noted. "Anytime that we can find opportunities to get together is going to add value to the local church."

Jay Hardwick, associate executive director for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, helped host a statewide prayer meeting Wednesday (March 25). The meeting was held using Zoom and primarily focused on bringing together pastors and church leaders.

"Pastors are missing their congregations, and they are missing one another, which is why we wanted to try using Zoom instead of Facebook Live or other platforms," Hardwick explained. "We wanted pastors to see us and we wanted them to see each other. It was powerful just to scroll through the screens and see all the faces of the guys joining the call."

Hardwick said they wanted to see what would happen through prayer when leaders all across the state joined in intercession together.

Approximately 115 people participated in the call, and Hardwick said they plan to host another one in the coming weeks.



Leaders of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions and more than 450 pastors and laypeople joined in an online call to prayer March 25, lifting prayers for our nation, state and all those affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

Submitted photo

"Everyone is hungry for connection," Hardwick said. "Our number one hope was to simply join with whomever joined the call to cry out to God together and for them to see each other as a reminder they are not alone."

Hardwick said there was some uncertainty in how technology would hold up with such a large group on one call, but is glad they took the risk.

Other calls however, faced some challenges in utilizing online platforms.

Nathan Lorick, executive director for the Colorado Baptist General Convention, said their gathering Wednesday (March 25) was interrupted twice by hackers, who posted inappropriate content on the screen and used degrading language and slurs.

"We shut the meeting off twice in order to stop the hackers," Lorick said. "However, on the third time we signed on, before we started praying, we shared the Gospel with the hope that the hackers would hear and know God could forgive them, and they could have the hope of Jesus. After this, there were no more attacks!"

Lorick said it was encouraging to see people keep logging back on despite the disruptions.

"We had 190 at the peak of our time together," Lorick said. "These were pastors and lay people on our call. It was phenomenal to have so many from across Colorado and some from other parts across the nation join us."

The topics during the prayer call included prayer for leaders, the economy, health in the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental sense, prayer for pastors, churches and conventions, revival and the advancement of the Gospel through the crisis.

"We wanted to seek the face of the Lord together," Lorick said. "We are believing God is going to do something great through this crisis and we want to rally together to ask Him for that."

Colorado Baptists plan to gather online for prayer again April 1 and April 8. Many other state conventions have plans to host virtual prayer gatherings in the weeks to come.

Rick Lance, executive director for Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, said a statewide prayer gathering also held Wednesday (March 25) provided encouragement. He said they plan to hold more, to be led by leaders from across the state.

"For most who participated -- maybe all -- it was the first time to meet online for prayer with so many fellow believers," Lance said. "Many have expressed to me that the time was a blessing to them, and it was for me as well."

Hardwick said that this season of virtual prayer is also not just a short-term vision.

"We're learning new, creative ways to connect with pastors and the value those connections hold for our pastors," Hardwick said. "My growing sense is what we learn in this season will not just be for the short-term, but will become part of our ministry strategy once we're on the other side of this crisis."

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