

Copyright (c) 2020 Baptist Press. Reprinted from Baptist Press (www.baptistpress.com), news service of the Southern Baptist Convention. The original story can be found at <http://www.bpnews.net/54657/with-average-attendance-under-10-nevada-church-gathers-amid-pandemic>

With average attendance under 10, Nevada church gathers amid pandemic

by Diana Chandler, posted Thursday, April 16, 2020 (11 days ago)

KINGSTON, Nev. (BP) -- Mule deer outnumbered the handful of Kingston Village Baptist Church members at a recent open-air Easter sunrise service. Worshipping during the COVID-19 pandemic is no bother for the church where attendance has been less than 10 for years.



Kingston Village Baptist Church in Kingston, Nev., is so small it has continued to meet during the COVID-19 pandemic without breaking state guidelines that limit meetings to 10 people.

Submitted photo

"We meet on Sunday mornings, a very small group of us, anywhere from three to five, for Bible study at 9:30," pastor Jim Fitch said. "And then our worship service is at 11 o'clock. We follow that with a fellowship meal."

"Geographically quarantined" is how Fitch describes the unincorporated town of Kingston, where the U.S. Census counted 113 people in 2010, and the nearest Walmart is hours away. The nearest Southern Baptist churches are two congregations in Austin, Nev., about 65 miles north.

Of the 113 people in town, about a dozen consider Kingston Village Baptist their church home, although the church doesn't have a formal count. Members range in age from late 40s-80s.

"The guidelines are to protect us," Fitch said, "and we're within those guidelines."

Worship never exceeds 10 people, the gathering guidelines mandated by Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak.

Fitch recalls the 2019 Easter service in the fresh canyon air.

"The town park is right adjacent to the church," he said, "so we had an old 55-gallon oil drum out there with fire in it for warmth, because it was cold."

We met and we were singing hymns, and in the middle of that, 20 mule deer walked up and some of them walked right into our circle with us. We had a total attendance I think that morning of 29. Nine people and 20 deer."

The church repeated its Easter tradition in 2020, but he doesn't want others to think he takes the coronavirus lightly. He said he's closely monitoring the pandemic.

"Well, we've got to be responsible. We've got to do two or three things. One is, we're responsible for each other, so we don't do anything that risks us," Fitch has told his congregation. "And the second is that we don't want to appear to the community as though we're disregarding, and that we're something special, and that we're immune, because we're not."

Fitch heard "third-hand," he said, that someone in the valley tested positive for COVID-19 and is self-quarantined, but he can't be certain. The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center lists two cases of coronavirus in an "unassigned area" of Nevada, but no details are given to pinpoint the location in the vast state.

Statewide, Nevada had confirmed 3,214 cases of the virus and 137 deaths as of Thursday (April 16), with 115 of the deaths occurring in Clark County, home to Las Vegas -- and 300 miles from Kingston (which is also 200 miles from Reno, the state's other large metro area).

"Ninety percent of our state is public land. Most people very much enjoy, one way or the other, getting out into the valleys and the canyons of the mountains," Fitch said. "Even though we are desert, when you get back up in the canyons it's beautiful -- flowing streams, trees, flowers, wildlife."

His congregation has seen no reason to halt services.

"The first time we talked about whether we needed to continue to meet or not, they were pretty adamant we did," he said. "And I said, 'Well look, here's the deal. I'm going to be here. I will come. If you feel safe, you make your own choice, and without exception, I'm going to be here.' Everyone looks very much forward to coming together, to worship, to fellowship. There's just a closeness there; it's family."

The retired school principal serving in his first pastorate lives with his wife Valerie about 45 miles away in the mining town of Round Mountain, Nev.

"If you live in Round Mountain and you want to go to a Walmart store, it's a 170-mile drive," he said. "You cross five mountain ranges and two dry lakebeds on the way. So when I tell you we're remote, I mean remote. The nearest McDonald's is beside the Walmart."

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]

SIGNED UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER? Get Baptist Press in your email by subscribing to our daily newsletter at bpnews.net/SubscribeBP.



A member of Kingston Village Baptist Church feeds one of the mule deer that frequents the church grounds.

Submitted photo