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Churches deemed 'essential services' in Texas Gov. Abbott protocols

by Diana Chandler, posted Wednesday, April 01, 2020 (26 days ago)

AUSTIN, Texas (BP) -- Church worship and ministry are considered essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic in Texas under the latest protocols issued by Gov. Greg Abbott, but several pastors said Abbott's directive likely won't change their church safety protocols.



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott is including churches and houses of worship in his list of essential services under his latest COVID-19 safety protocols.

Photo from Twitter

First Baptist Church of Vidor pastor Terry Wright said he switched to online-only services March 15 after a few church families were concerned that they might have been exposed to COVID-19 at an off-campus event not sponsored by the church. He consulted the Texas Department of State Health Services in response, and according to Wright, the person in question tested negative.

"I think (Abbott) is trying to let the church be the church and facilitate worship through whatever means we can, but also minister to people," Wright said. "You know there's a lot of other ministry out there ... people who've been laid off, who don't have money and that kind of thing. I know the governor's responded to that, but from what I can hear and find out, he's just trying to let us do our ministry and be the church, what we should be to people in the time of need."

Texas pastors Dwight McKissic, Robert Jeffress and Jared Wellman also said they planned to continue following recommended safety protocols. McKissic, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, said he has a teleconference scheduled with Arlington Mayor Jeff Williams for clarification of how federal, state and local guidelines will work in unison.

Among Abbott's guidelines, Texans are to minimize nonessential gatherings, avoid in-person contact with other households, maintain federal social distancing guidelines and avoid eating or drinking at bars and restaurants.

"This Executive Order does not prohibit people from accessing essential services or engaging in essential daily activities ... so long as the necessary precautions are maintained," the order reads. "... The order also includes exemption for religious services conducted in churches, congregations, and houses of worship." The Texas Division of Emergency Management is maintaining a list of essential services and taking requests for additions.

"If religious services cannot be conducted from home or through remote services," the list reads, "they should be conducted consistent with the Guidelines from the President and the CDC by practicing good hygiene, environmental cleanliness, and sanitation, and by implementing social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19."

Abbott issued "statewide essential services and activities protocols" in an executive order effective April 2-30 that also closes schools through May 4. Abbott's order came days after New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio warned churches that in-person gatherings during the pandemic would place churches in danger of fines and permanent closure.

Abbott's updated guidelines are consistent with the governor's guidance throughout the pandemic, Wright said.

"Maybe it had not been clarified as much early on, and maybe he's clarifying that now," Wright said. "Whatever the government tells us to do, we're going to cooperate with that. We still have a responsibility as the church to people's wellbeing. And as far as First Baptist Vidor, we have been meeting and doing it over the internet, and for the immediate future, we're going to continue with that. We will not be going back to regular worship in large numbers."

McKissic is conducting online worship, Bible study and discipleship groups, and has mobilized the church's 20-member staff to call those on the church roll to inquire of their needs and encourage them. He'll continue to respond to government safety guidelines.

"I have a conference call scheduled with our wonderful, godly mayor, Jeff Williams, who is also a Southern Baptist, this coming Friday at 3 p.m.," McKissic said. "[Williams] then will have received a clarifying, definitive response from the governor's office explaining to us what is and is not permissible in the city of Arlington, based on Tarrant County, the state of Texas and the city of Arlington's ordinances/regulations during the COVID-19 crisis.

McKissic said he would probably livestream his message Sunday. Plans for Easter, he said, would be considered next week after talking with Williams.

Also in Arlington, pastor Wellman of Tate Springs Baptist Church will continue online avenues for ministry.

"It appears that while Gov. Abbott deemed church services 'essential,' the parameters aren't really open enough to hold Easter services on campus, so we won't be changing anything," Wellman said. "I don't think the new orders change much of anything for churches beyond online services."

Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, complied with city of Dallas guidelines March 15, utilizing several on-campus buildings to hold smaller in-person worship gatherings. He transitioned to online services March 22.

"We're under county restrictions here in Dallas, and those kind of gatherings (in-person) would be restricted here in the county," Jeffress said. "I do feel like the state and the county need to get on the same page to avoid the confusion for anyone.

"The restrictions that we are under for Dallas County, it prohibits any more than 10 gathering, and I believe those guidelines are good guidelines, given the real explosion of cases we've seen in Dallas County. It would not be safe for our members, it wouldn't be safe for our community, for us to be meeting at this time."

Among 59 COVID-19 deaths in Texas, 13 have been in Dallas County. Quickly-changing numbers at the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center showed nearly 200,000 infections in the U.S., with about 4,400 deaths and nearly 8,400 recoveries. Among more than 900,000 infections globally, more than 45,000 have died and more than 180,000 have recovered.

"Our main prayer right now," Wright said, "is that the Lord will use this to draw hearts back to Him and bring about revival to our nation and our churches, and that many people will turn to the Lord in this time."

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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