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## Drive-in worship services lead to new opportunities

by Tobin Perry, posted Monday, March 23, 2020 (one month ago)

HARRISBURG, Ark. (BP) -- Facing the inability to gather for worship, Southern Baptist churches got creative yesterday (March 22). One young couple in Arkansas is heaven-bound thanks to that creativity.

A mom helped lead her son and his girlfriend to faith in Christ as they sat in her car, listening to Jason Goad, the pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Harrisburg, Ark., share the Gospel during a "drive-in" worship service.

Goad said the mom's ability to talk with the couple during the service and answer questions helped facilitate their decisions. It's something he doesn't believe could have happened in a typical service where talking could distract other worshippers.

"That would never have happened if we had a regular service," Goad said. "She never would have gotten that chance. I thought to myself 'There are a lot of things that I need to rethink even after all of this gets back to normal.' We may need to do some things similar to this. It was a different dynamic being able to sit and talk in the car like that as they listened. It allowed God to work in a way that couldn't happen in a normal situation, even in a small group or Sunday School session."

Those two were among six people who came to faith in Christ yesterday at Cornerstone Baptist Church.

As the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic prevented most congregations from meeting inside buildings with more than 10 people, many churches used various forms of technology to help them share the good news about Jesus. Many, like Cornerstone Baptist, used radio technology that drive-in movie theaters made popular more than half a century ago.

Goad said the idea to use radio technology came to him last Sunday as it became clear that the church wouldn't be able to meet like normal in upcoming weeks. He heard that many movie theaters would be closing soon, as well as speculation that more people might flock to drive-in movie theaters. He remembered Christmas light shows and nativity scenes he had visited that used short-range radio transmitters to broadcast music or narration.

Goad researched what he would need to make it work in his setting. Last Tuesday, he ordered the equipment on Amazon. The equipment was delivered on Thursday, and by Sunday morning, Cornerstone Baptist was ready for a "drive-in church" experience.

The idea was relatively simple. When attendees parked, they turned their radio to a predetermined station where they listened to the service inside their cars. Goad said they may add worship music next week, but they wanted to keep it simple on their first try. Since the church didn't open their restrooms, it was important to keep the service short. The church also live-streamed the service on Facebook so people could watch from home.

Goad said the service went smoothly. He estimated there were 250-300 people in attendance, which doubled his expectation. In addition to the six people who came to faith in Christ, Goad said dozens recommitted their lives. He also noted that the church tripled its typical Sunday morning offering.



Six people came to faith in Christ Sunday (March 22) during the drive-in church service at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Harrisburg, Ark. Submitted photo



Jason Goad, who has pastored Cornerstone Baptist Church in Harrisburg, Ark., for 14 years, preaches in front of the church building as the congregation listens on their car radios in the parking lot.



A couple who owns a local drive-in movie theater let Calvary Baptist Church in Elizabethton, Tenn., use it for a Sunday morning worship service. Approximately 250 people attended the service. An estimated 80 percent of that attendance came from people not previously connected with the church.

Submitted photo

"I'm just embracing this," he said. "It's like, 'God, you knew this was going to happen.

Maybe you're shaking the church up to get us out of our comfort zones and out of our complacency, and this will awaken us."

Taylor Quinley, who pastors Oolitic Baptist Church in Oolitic, Ind., started looking earlier in the week for ways his church could gather despite being unable to use the building.

Because Oolitic Baptist, which usually averages 45-50 on Sunday mornings, is older, Quinley didn't believe live-streaming the worship service on Facebook would be a great fit.

Like Goad, Quinley also remembered Christmas light shows where the narration or music is broadcast to car radios. At first, he bought a transmitter online and planned to use it on Sunday, but then he asked a local radio station for advice. They offered to rent a transmitter to the church for \$35 a week and even offered to set it up for them.

Quinley said the effort was a significant success. The church's worship leader led a few songs. Quinley preached and gave an invitation. The church also had a tithes and offering box set up where people could give as they left the parking lot. A total of 36 carloads of people attended the worship service, including many visitors. Quinley estimated that 50-60 people attended.

Though he doesn't normally get feedback on Sunday morning services, Quinley noted many people texted him or rolled down their windows to tell him how much they enjoyed the service. For a few participants who had been traveling when the virus hit

and had been in self-quarantine, this was the first time they had been able to leave the house since their return.

"I thought it was fantastic," said church member Kelsey Colson, who attended with her husband. "I thought it was really good that we all got together to fellowship. We could wave at each other with our windows down and still be able to be compliant with the social distancing. We gathered to hear Taylor's sermon and to hear a word from the Lord. That was really encouraging."

Calvary Baptist Church in Elizabethton, Tenn., took another tactic with the drive-in approach. On Thursday, church members who own a local drive-in movie theater offered to let the church use their theater for services.

Jacob Guinn, the church's pastor, said the church recorded a full worship service on Saturday to broadcast on Facebook for people who couldn't attend in person. They used the recorded worship music for the Sunday morning service at the drive-in theater.

Approximately 250 people attended the worship service at the drive-in, 80 percent of whom aren't connected to the church, Guinn said.

The church also offered a simple invitation and encouraged people who prayed to receive Christ to talk with Guinn at the drive-in or call or email the church to connect with him later.

"We're already looking forward to next Sunday and toward Palm Sunday and Easter," Guinn said. "We're talking about doing services at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. on Easter."

When asked on Facebook, a number of Southern Baptist pastors noted that they expected to utilize "drive-in church" technologies for Easter Sunday.

"This is just an obstacle that we as Christians -- that the whole world -- is facing right now," said Delbert Wray, the worship leader at Oolitic Baptist Church. "We have to overcome this and prove that God's church is still vibrant. It's still alive. It's still forceful, and God is still in the business of saving souls, no matter what's going on."

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