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It's Hard to Close Black Churches amid COVID-19

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American clergy respond to pandemic with unique considerations of culture, history, and faith values.

HOWARD ECKLUND AND DEIDRA CARROLL COLEMAN MARCH 24, 2020



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When deciding to close the doors of black churches, congregational leaders across the US wrestle with unique considerations. Paul J. James, pastor of CareView Community

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black church... where we're just glad to get together because of how hard life has been historically for us here in America. Church has been a safe place for us. It's been a safe harbor. Now here we are faced with the inability to come together."

Last week, the federal government strongly urged Americans not to gather in groups of more than 10, and restrictions keep coming. We suspect that many churches will close in the near future, but the decision will not be easy.

In St. Louis, the mayor hosted a teleconference with 300 clergy, including many of black churches, to [urge](#) them not to hold services. While some chose to stop meetings and modify their ministries, others struggled to make the change.

Michigan, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer banned gatherings of more than 50 but [empted churches](#) from penalties. This will give some churches more freedom, though many are choosing to modify in some way. [Triumph Church](#), which has seven locations in the Detroit area, will continue to gather in person, for now, though it expanded the number of services to reduce congregation size and is asking members to register ahead of time so it can maintain at least six feet between worshippers. It is also providing an online service and a drive-in service.

A lot of things inform these responses to the coronavirus outbreak: culture, histories of discrimination, and marginalization, as well as faith-based values. People experience events like COVID-19 not only as individuals but also in communities and in the social locations we inhabit. As social scientists—Deidra as a black woman doing research on HPV and Elaine as a white woman who studies how religious organizations respond to science—we offer some observations based on our research for the past 10 years at the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University. We have been gathering upwards of 150 religious and civic leaders regularly to talk about how we can use social science research on religion to build common ground for the common good.

Among the congregations we have checked in with during the past two weeks, it seems to us that in our city of Houston, Texas, black churches, in particular, have continued to gather in person. In our city, Windsor Village United Methodist Church, which has about 16,000 members, and Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church, which has more than 2,500, both initially responded with statements informing members that while they would be exercising precautions, they would still be holding corporate worship services. They have since modified their approaches: Windsor Village transitioned to all virtual services last Sunday; Good Hope [met for corporate worship](#) while requiring adjusted practices, such as liberal hand washing and greeting by waving instead of hand shaking.



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faith, not fear, in the midst of this pandemic.

But pastors are now being forced to exercise a different kind of faith—trusting God as provider in the midst of financial and other kinds of threats, as they are having to make the difficult decision of closing church doors in order to protect the flock within communities that deeply prioritize collective strength and uplift.

Social scientist of religion Cleve V. Tinsley IV says that “There are multiple reasons these large mega-churches may keep their doors open, reasons that relate to a complex web of fear of paying large mortgages and staff salaries, smaller black churches collapsing because of lack of institutional and financial support; they also may not have the kind of larger structural resources to maintain their buildings that some mainline churches have

their doors close and giving inevitably drops off.

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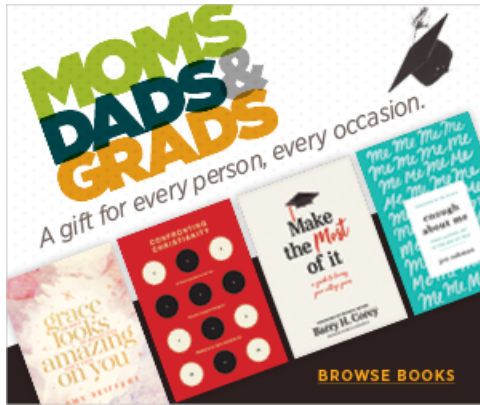
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“There also may be differences between older and younger generations of black Americans. Those who have been through Jim Crow may go to church no matter what. We need to be considering the structural, economic, and generational divides that shape responses to COVID-19,” said Tinsley.

Public health scholars also offer the Health Belief Model to explain why some might continue to meet despite public health warnings. The model suggests that people engage in health-promoting behaviors, such as social distancing, when perceived threat of a disease is high (meaning preventive action is the product of one’s perceived susceptibility of contracting a disease as well as their beliefs about the severity of it). For some black

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[19](#) coupled with WHO reports that 80 percent of the cases are “mild” might factor into the equation.

Another reason may be that some black Christians have more pressing problems. Poverty and race are deeply connected in cities like Houston. For example, black families are twice as likely as white and Asian families to be living in poverty.

When I (Elaine) recently surveyed congregations about how they are responding to new scientific technologies, one pastor of a predominantly black church in an impoverished metropolitan area told me with a laugh, “I think for most people within my congregation they are just dealing with the routine of living. If I started talking to them about science they might say, ‘Pastor, what the hell is wrong with you?’”

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e ways, then, intense fear of the virus may be a preserve of the aged. Those who barely have enough food and are living paycheck to paycheck may not have capacity to worry about virus spread. Those who are not paid may also be the most likely to have to go to work when sick, not given extensive sick time, or to suffer in other ways.

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ling to sociologist Jason Shelton, black churches have filled an important social role for black Americans who have been kept out of other social institutions, which may lead to mistrust in those institutions. For example, according to a new Pew Research [study](#), nearly 80 percent of black Protestants are not confident that President Donald Trump is doing a good job to address the outbreak.

Further, we do not see many scientists and physicians of color talking about COVID-19 in the media. We have Jerome Adams, the US surgeon general and a member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, but we need many more public black voices to amplify the voices of the black scientists and epidemiologists that we do have. And long term, we simply need more black Americans in science and technology professions. Black Americans, who comprise 12 to 14 percent of the US population, make up just over 1 percent of all those who have careers in science, medicine, or technology. One black pastor said to Elaine during a recent research interview that for many African Americans, science seems like “a no-trespassing zone,” where they feel marginalized because of both their race and their faith.

What can we do? Churches can play a role in alleviating this public health crisis by [partnering with health experts](#) to inform people of actions they can take to reduce risk. Practicing extensive hand washing, avoiding social gatherings, and staying home if we or others in our households are sick is the best way to love our neighbors. In this way, we can gracefully push back on the notion that science is at war with Christianity, a myth we’ve uncovered in our work interviewing [scientists](#) and congregants. To overcome COVID-



In the [words](#) of theologian and writer Candice Marie Benbow, “as a Sunday kind of people, we bear witness to our faith and resilience every day. And, on the day we consider most holy, we have an incredible opportunity to reimagine the ways we honor that truth.”

Back in Pennsylvania, James emphasized the black church’s unique history of activity in meeting—be it during slavery to strategizing during the civil era to combatting racism today. When “church” already feels defined, it is clear that the black church—and all churches—can find a fuller expression of church as it started in the first-century. Further, he [told](#) The Undefeated, “I will go to church,” where the first-century person would not have had an idea of a concept of going to a place for church. Church was wherever relationships were—where the people were. The coronavirus may be a challenge, but it can help us get back to] the most authentic expression of church.”

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Elaine Howard Ecklund is Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences and Director of the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University. She is, most recently, author of Why Science and Faith Need Each Other: Eight Shared Values that Move Us Beyond Fear.

Deidra Carroll Coleman is a DrPH candidate at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston studying human papillomavirus vaccine initiation for black and Hispanic youth. She is also a research project manager with the Religion and Public Life Program at Rice University.



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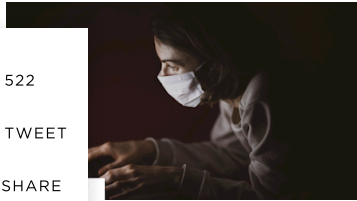
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