

This week Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear said in a **press conference** that churches, as early as this weekend, should consider suspending services in light of the threat of the coronavirus (COVID-19). That threat, as all of us know by now, is very real. Yesterday the World Health Organization **stated** that the coronavirus “now qualifies as a pandemic.” And Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, **warned this week** that we must “assume it is going to get worse and worse and worse.”

Gov. Beshear is not the only governor urging caution. Tuesday, Gov. Mike Dewine of Ohio **urged** religious institutions to “consider limiting practices that could cause spread of germs” and that those in at-risk groups should “please think about staying home.” Likewise Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington announced a **ban** on gatherings of 250 people or larger in the Seattle area aimed primarily at sporting events and cultural gatherings.

Virtually every church leadership team is having conversations right now about when and whether to cancel future worship services. Most churches will not be closing this weekend, including many in Kentucky, though those decisions will be made differently in different areas based upon how widespread the manifestations of the virus are in those areas. But worshipping together isn’t something that is dispensable or ancillary for Christians, and most churches are rightfully more reluctant to cancel worship services than, say, a city government would be to cancel a Saint Patrick’s Day parade. After all, the corporate worship of the people of God is both a vital and fundamental aspect of the Christian life, which is commanded in Scripture (**Heb. 10:25**). Every congregation I have spoken to recognizes that there are indeed circumstances that would warrant cancelling services and they are **preparing for such circumstances** should they arise.

Many churches are right now taking several measures. Most congregations are reconsidering the timing of short-term **mission trips** until the threat has substantially subsided. Even if the threat to the mission team is low, they would not want to jeopardize others if the team members themselves are carriers of the virus. Churches that have nursing home ministries or prison ministries will want to understand if those facilities attempt to halt such activities given the high risk nature of the population therein.

Several steps seem to be immediately prudent. Churches that have a time of shaking hands to greet one another are often opting to temporarily do away with that practice. Even those churches that have not changed that practice are making hand sanitizer readily available. Churches are also thinking through their setup for Sunday School, particularly children’s **Sunday School** where many people each week are touching screens or writing on clipboards to sign

children into their classes. And most churches are thinking through how to ensure that facilities are even more thoroughly cleaned or sanitized between uses.

As Dr. Fauci warned, all Americans should be prepared for the worst case scenario. This means that even if events never necessitate the cancellation of services, churches should take steps right now to prepare not only their leadership teams but also their congregations for such a possibility.

The Great Commission Must Continue

Some churches have the ability to **livestream** their services for at-risk populations. Not every church is equipped to do this. But for those churches that do possess this capability, now would be the time to remind members of the congregation how to access those. This may mean telling the less tech savvy members step-by-step how to do so, or encouraging those who do know to set that up for them or to tell them how.

Now would also be the time for pastors and church leaders to tell their congregations how to continue giving if worship services are cancelled for a time. Many people, especially younger people, already give to their churches online. But the reality is that many people simply forget to give if they are not gathered together in worship. Church leaders can, again, walk people step by step through how to continue giving to the mission of their church. Perhaps even reminders such as "Don't let coronavirus quarantine the Great Commission" might be in order in some churches.

Again, we should all hope for the best case scenario, even as we prepare for the worst case. Prudence and precaution is not a sign of panic or fearfulness, but, as the Bible commands us, of bearing one another's burdens (**Gal. 6:2**) and thinking more highly of others than ourselves (**Phil 2:3**). And, above all, we should pray. We should pray for the doctors and medical researchers who are working to create a **vaccine** for this virus and care for those affected. We should pray for our leaders in office, including the President, Vice President, governors, and local officials as they guide us through this moment. And we should pray especially for those who are **elderly** or infirm, for whom this virus could be a matter of life and death.