### **‘Demonic spirit:’ Miami pastor rejects coronavirus warning**

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* [Read more here: https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article241209151.html#storylink=cpy](https://twitter.com/share?text=%E2%80%98Demonic+spirit%3A%E2%80%99+Miami+pastor+rejects+coronavirus+warning&url=https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article241209151.html)

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The pastor of a megachurch in South Florida warned his parishioners Sunday that fears of exposure to COVID-19 was a “demonic spirit,” and he encouraged his parishioners to show up to worship and not heed warnings from officials to avoid crowded spaces.

“Do you believe God would bring his people to his house to be contagious with the virus? Of course not,” said pastor Guillermo Maldonado, who goes by the term of “apostle,” at a service on Sunday morning at the King Jesus International Ministry in Kendall.

“This service is usually packed. So now they’re home in a cave afraid of the virus, that you want to transmit the virus,” Maldonado said to a venue that appeared half empty, as some churchgoers left seats between them. “If we die, we die for Christ. If we live, we live for Christ, so what do you lose?”

Officials at the local and federal levels have largely encouraged residents to avoid mass gatherings of over 250 people to curb community spread of COVID-19. While religious institutions grapple with changes to the way they pray and gather in the times of coronavirus, many have already opted to limit large-scale services, with some switching to live-streams on social media for Sunday services.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Miami put out a memo last week saying in-person worshipping was not an obligation during the pandemic. Holy Rosary St. Richard Catholic Church in Palmetto Bay has removed its holy water, and the crowds were slimmer than usual Sunday.

Pastor Dennis Andrews at the Miami Shores Presbyterian Church devoted his sermon to the idea of worshipping without necessarily being in a house of worship. The service did away with all aspects of touching and hand holding, including the passing of the tithing plate.

Other congregations have gone further. St. Paul’s Episcopal Church on Duval Street in Key West has closed its doors, but kept the garden open for prayer. The rabbi of Shul of Bal Harbour, one of the largest Orthodox Jewish synagogues in Miami-Dade county, [has tested presumptive positive for the novel coronavirus](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article241208661.html). The synagogue is now shuttered.

On the day President Donald Trump designated as the National Day of Prayer, few seemed to take the extreme lengths to get his flock to the pews as Maldonado, who has previously expressed his admiration for Trump’s approach to the religious community and has served as a religious adviser to the president.

The King Jesus International Ministry did not respond to a request for comment from the Miami Herald. The church did publish a list of measures on its website assuring its members the building is being disinfected and cleaned between services, as well as toys and classrooms for bible study.

The pastor’s comments on Sunday morning also follow statements in a now-deleted Facebook video that was broadcast to millions of Maldonado’s followers, downplaying fears of exposure and advising parishioners who were thinking of skipping the Sunday service who might feel sick. “You have two choices. Come in and receive your healing, or stay home and miss out” on it, Maldonado warned.

“Fear is a demonic spirit,” Maldonado said Sunday. “That’s what the bible says.”

Maldonado’s lofty promises during religious services, which can usually fill up most of the 7,000 seats in the main sanctuary, have previously made headlines for [telling non-citizens that they would be safe](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article238811458.html) if they came to support Trump at an “Evangelicals for Trump” event at his megachurch.

At the Sunday service, other pastors at Maldonado’s church also told followers that now was the most important time to donate to the church for “protection in the days ahead,” amid bleak economic forecasts.

“Now is not the time to hold back your giving, now is not the time to hold back you tithe, because if you do that, you could be like one of those who one day had, and now a few weeks later, a few days later, have nothing,” said Pastor Frank Hechevarria. “Your economy is not the economy of the world. You operate in a higher economy and the economy of the kingdom of God.”

Carlos Espinal, director of the Global Health Consortium at Florida International University, said now was an important time to heed the advice of experts asking people to avoid public spaces to curb infecting the elderly and those with compromised immune systems.

“At present time the community should avoid all potential mass events or even events that congregate groups and have the potential to spread the” COVID-19, Espinal said in a statement to the Herald. In response to questions about whether cleaning procedures were enough, Espinal said, “I do not think so. The best recommendation is social distance and self-isolation.”

In a final word to his congregation during the two-and-a-half hour service, Maldonado said regular influenza had a higher rate of infection than that of the coronavirus, even if [experts have pointed out](https://www.propublica.org/article/this-coronavirus-is-unlike-anything-in-our-lifetime-and-we-have-to-stop-comparing-it-to-the-flu) the [comparisons are not legitimate](https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/3/13/21176735/covid-19-coronavirus-worse-than-flu-comparison).

“Do you mean you call me irresponsible for bringing the people of God to the House of God where the power and the presence of God is?” Maldonado said.“Coronavirus, 5,984 people infected in the world and there’s 2 percent death. See what fear makes you see? I think Mr. President is watching right now. Mr. President, Donald Trump is watching the service. Can you put your hands together, please?”

The audience clapped.

*Miami Herald reporters Jay Weaver, David Goodhue, Gwen Filosa and Aaron Leibowitz contributed to this report.*

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