

Churches go back to the future with drive-in worship services

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Pathway Baptist Church holds a worship service at the Calvert Drive In Theater on March 22 in Calvert City, Kentucky. (Studio 270/Nathan Brandon)

When it came time to pass the peace at Pathway Baptist Church, senior pastor Mike Donald didn't hesitate.

"Everybody, wave to the right," Donald said.

In response, the hundreds of people at the Calvert Drive In Theatre in Calvert City, Kentucky, turned to their right and waved to the people sitting in the cars next to them.

There was a smattering of honks in place of applause between songs like "Power in the Blood" and "Victory in Jesus" and some prolonged blasts to express appreciation for Kentucky governor Andy Beshear and the owners of the theater. Worship leaders bundled in winter coats stood six feet apart from each other beneath the blue awning, and a deacon in a yellow safety vest led prayers.

"What a sight!" Donald said as he looked out across the cars parked at the theater. The church later counted 134 in aerial photos. "The church has left the building."

The Calvert Drive In Theatre has hosted two weddings and a number of concerts, Donald said. But it hadn't hosted a church service until March 22, when Pathway Baptist Church—like so many others across the United States—was forced to get creative amid social

distancing precautions put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

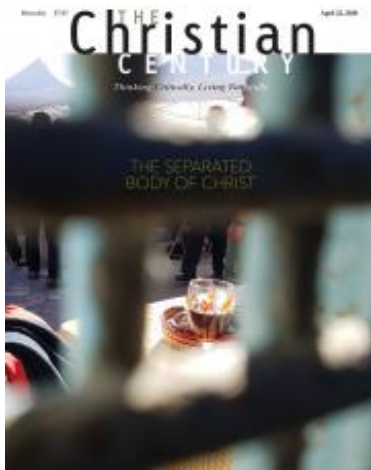
Congregations from a variety of denominations in Kentucky, Texas, Washington, and Minnesota are among those taking the drive-in approach at their churches, encouraging members to park their cars on church property and tune in to the service—broadcast on a low-frequency transmitter—on their radios.

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And at least one Roman Catholic priest in Maryland has even set up a drive-through to hear parishioners' confessions—what some on Twitter have jokingly labeled a “dashboard confessional.”

Donald admits drive-in church isn't a new idea. He grew up in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and remembers churches meeting at drive-ins in the 1970s, he said. He's familiar with drive-in churches like Kemp-Baird's in Florida and Robert Schuller's drive-in church, now closed, in Southern California, which once boasted the tagline, “Come as you are in the family car.”

That gave Donald the idea to reach out to the Calvert Drive In Theatre.

Calvert City is a small town, and Donald says that “everybody knows everybody around here,” including the owners of the popular theater, where Pathway was already planning a family night for the fall.

Historically, churches never have run away in fear but have found ways to gather, Donald said.

Like many pastors across the country, he had live streamed a service the weekend before for congregants to watch safely at home.

But, he said, “there’s still something to be said about being in the vicinity, in the presence of another believer, and we experienced that. . . . Even though there were car windows that separated us, we were gathered as a body of Christ.”

During the service at the Calvert Drive In Theatre, Donald said he was asked if Pathway would still be collecting an offering.

“I said, ‘Are we going to have a Baptist meeting?’” he said.

The church set out buckets for people to drop off their tithes, as well as a specially marked bucket for people to drop off donations for restaurant workers in Calvert City.

Donald preached on the life of Joshua, who led the people of Israel through uncertain times into the promised land after the death of Moses.

“Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go,” God tells Joshua in the Bible.

Donald ended his message with what normally would be an altar call.

“COVID-19 is real, but the sin in your heart is real also,” Donald said. “And the only remedy for the sin in your heart is Jesus Christ. I encourage you to trust him.”

Instead of calling people to the altar to express that trust, though, he encouraged them to call the church office on the phone. Someone would return their call and pray with them, he said.

It may have been at a drive-in theater, but as Donald noted, it was still a Baptist meeting.
—Religion News Service