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St. Louis Black Churches Consider Ways To Keep Congregants Safe In Midst Of Coronavirus

By [MARISSANNE LEWIS-THOMPSON](/PEOPLE/MARISSANNE-LEWIS-THOMPSON) • MAR 18, 2020

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Black churches in the St. Louis region are grappling with whether to hold church services this Sunday as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to grow. Some have already shifted to online streaming options.

The decision could be made clearer Thursday, when St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson and St. Louis County Executive Sam Page are set to meet with the St. Louis Metropolitan Clergy Coalition to discuss coronavirus at 11 a.m.

But for Andre Alexander, pastor of the Tabernacle in north St. Louis, the decision to halt in-person services has already been made. Sunday was the last day his church had regular services, and it came with a list of restrictions.

“If you’re feeling ill already, even if it’s not COVID-19, we’re asking that you stay home,” Alexander said. “If you traveled out of the country, we automatically asked you to stay home. It didn’t matter if you’re feeling good or not. If you’ve been in contact with anyone who’s not feeling well, COVID-19 or not, we asked you to stay home.”

His congregation has a little more than 100 people in it, and Alexander said only a third of them showed up. The church has streamed services in the past, but now services will only be online.

“Part of being a Christian is modeling what it means to think and line up and follow,” Alexander said. “So if our government along with health experts are saying these are wise precautions, it made it easy for us to say, ‘OK, this is not only wise, but it makes sense; let’s do this.’”

Churches like New Northside Missionary Baptist in Jennings have opted to keep their doors open for now. The Rev. Rodrick Burton, the pastor of the church, said he held service on Sunday because he wanted people to be spiritually fed.

Burton also took the time to dispel misinformation to the congregation, including that African Americans are immune to the coronavirus.

“We just have to smack that stuff down and give people information and stand on information and reject conspiracies,” Burton said.

He said they continue to make sure the church is sanitized, and they have placed hand-sanitizer dispensers throughout the sanctuary. Church members have already changed how they greet each other.

“We limited it to just elbows or just speaking your greetings but not contacting people.” Burton said. “And also, expressing, 'Hey, look, people do not want to be touched; don't take it personally.' It's about health.”

But the constant messaging from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and local officials to take more action is leading Burton and leaders in his church to assess the future of in-person church service. He said the church is looking into offering live streams or recording services.

“We'll also be very intentional about calling and contacting a lot of these members who are not on Zoom, who may not even know what Zoom is,” Burton said. “They don't have Skype. So we're going to call and maintain contact with them.”

For some churches, like the Tabernacle, where the congregation is younger and more tech savvy, switching to online services is easy to do. That's not the case for Burton's congregation.

“My congregation has a number of people who, although they may use technology for necessity, they're not living their life online as the younger generation,” Burton said.

Burton said he will use recommendations from the meeting between the St. Louis Metropolitan Clergy Coalition and Krewson and Page to determine his church's next steps.

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