

Easter Church Services Update: Mississippi City Threatens Fines Over Drive-in Gatherings

Controversy over church services for Easter in the mist of the coronavirus pandemic have begun only hours prior to Resurrection Sunday, *Fox News* is reporting.

reported Saturday night that “Drive-in church services that attempt to adhere to social distancing guidelines by keeping worshipers physically apart from one another in their own cars will not be allowed this Easter Sunday in at least one Mississippi community, as the coronavirus crisis has left wide swaths of the country shut down.”

Meanwhile, also reported that the U.S. Justice Department (DOJ) “may take action next week against local governments that have cracked down on religious services.”

“While social distancing policies are appropriate during this emergency, they must be applied evenhandedly and not single out religious organizations,” DOJ Director of Communications Kerri Kupec tweeted.

The report says that the “mayor and city council of Greenville, Miss., banned all in-person church services and implemented a citywide 10 p.m. curfew from April 7 until whenever Gov. Tate Reeves’ statewide shelter-in-place order is lifted.”

The mayor’s office in Greenville issued the following statement: “Churches are strongly encouraged to hold services via Facebook Live, Zoom, Free Conference Call, and any and all other social media, streaming and telephonic platforms.”

But, the report said, “the governor’s shelter-in-place order did not place a specific ban on drive-in services, and some pastors are trying to hold them in defiance of the city’s order. reported that “the Rev. James Hamilton of the King James Baptist Church in Greenville tried to hold a drive-in service anyway—and police arrived to shut it down, as seen in cellphone video he recorded.”

During an appearance on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* on Friday, Hamilton said, “We were abiding by the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines. Members of the church were inside their cars, had their windows up, and I was preaching the Word of God. So no one was outside, and also we had cars at a distance.”

The *Fox News* report said that Kelly Shackelford, president of the First Liberty Institute, argued that the city’s order “is just massively unconstitutional.”

“It targets churches in a way that it targets no other group,” Shackelford told *Fox News*. “Cars in parking lots are fine. It’s only a crime if the cars in the parking lot are at the church parking lot.”

Fox News reported that attorneys with the Alliance Defending Freedom filed a lawsuit Friday on behalf of the Temple Baptist Church, challenging Greenville Mayor Errick Simmons’ April 7 executive order. Parishioners at both churches were ordered to leave their drive-in services or face a \$500 fine, *Magnolia State Live* reported.

In Kentucky, *Fox News* also reported, the mayor of Louisville had also blocked drive-in services, prompting the First Liberty Institute to send a letter on behalf of a local church there asking for the ban to be lifted. But a federal district court granted a temporary restraining order blocking the city from enforcing that order.

“The Mayor’s decision is stunning,” District Judge Justin

Walker wrote in an attached memorandum. "And it is, 'beyond all reason,' unconstitutional."

Several news outlets reported Friday that Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear on Friday warned his state's residents that they will be forced to self-quarantine for 14 days should they decide to attend any mass gathering this weekend—including Easter Sunday church services—as the coronavirus continues to ravage the country.

"I think we're down to seven churches statewide that are thinking about having an in-person service," Beshear told reporters Friday.

The governor decreed that his state's churches should switch to virtual or drive-in services to accommodate worshippers to protect the public health. The warning is not exclusive to churches.

reported that Kentucky's death toll has reached 90 due to COVID-19, and that the state's total cases of the virus now stands at 1,693.

also reported that the governor said license plates at churches with in-person gatherings will be recorded and sent to health departments for enforcement.

"This is the only way we can make sure that your decision doesn't kill someone else," Beshear said.