

Jentezen Franklin: How the Coronavirus Is Bringing Us Back to 'Raw Gospel'

When Pastor Jentezen Franklin preached to the empty sanctuary of Free Chapel, an independent evangelical megachurch in Gainesville, Georgia, on Sunday (March 15), he knew President Donald Trump was watching online.

On the day the president proclaimed as the “National Day of Prayer for all Americans Affected by the Coronavirus Pandemic and for our National Response Efforts,” Trump tweeted his thanks to Franklin for “a great and beautiful service.”

Franklin, 57, a member of Trump’s group of unofficial evangelical advisers, estimated he has met with the president on 15-20 occasions. Besides overseeing Free Chapel, which draws some 25,000 to its eight locations from South Carolina to California, Franklin is the host of *Kingdom Connection*, a weekly television broadcast. On Sunday, he played “Amazing Grace” on his alto saxophone before he preached.

Franklin talked to Religion News Service on Tuesday about preaching during a pandemic, advising administration officials on how faith leaders can be among “first responders,” and supporting Trump amid criticism of his handling of the crisis.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Did you know before the president tweeted that he was going to watch your church service on Sunday?

I didn’t know until Saturday morning. I did get a phone call from the White House and they said that he was looking to do it and were we open to it. And I said, absolutely, we’d be honored. I had to catch a flight from Los Angeles to Atlanta.

So when I landed that night, he had tweeted in between and the flight didn't have any Wi-Fi. So when I turned my phone on, it was crazy. My phone lit up.

You preached on the theme "Choose faith over fear." What can people of faith do to reduce anxiety?

The point is, you're either going to live a fear-based life or a faith life, especially in times like these. The Bible was written in times like these, for times like these. If we feed our fears, it's going to win the fight. But if we choose to feed our faith, this is a time for families to go back to the Bible. It's prayer time in America. It's time, as we're quarantined basically with our families, maybe parents need to have old-fashioned devotions again. Maybe people need to open up and tell Bible stories of how David faced a giant in his life too, just like we're facing.

How would you describe your relationship with the president? How long have you known him?

I have known the president for four years now, and our relationship has grown closer and closer. I met him through Paula White-Cain and I was there in the original group of about 20 ministers that went to Trump Tower. And we have just watched this president do everything that he promised the faith leader group that he would do, from pro-life issues, Supreme Court justices, pro-Israel stance and moving the embassy (to Jerusalem) to, especially, religious freedom issues and then the jobs that he created. He wants the voice of faith and he wants the church represented in the decisions of this government.

Lots of clergy are finding new ways to continue worship services in light of the coronavirus. Have you ever preached to an empty sanctuary before?

This Sunday was the first time that I've done that in that fashion. We had our live praise team, our band was there and

me and the media team that does the actual recording. And that was it. And so our main campus—we have eight campuses, but the one that I was speaking from seats 3,200 people and they're theater seats and it was a weird feeling. You look out and it's just thousands of empty seats. And you've got some cameras in front of you. But you know, once we started singing and praising and worshipping God, and then I went up to preach, it just felt very intimate. I was talking with several other minister friends and they had record attendance online. Like Easter numbers or better. So I can't help but think that God can use this for the furtherance of the gospel.

How has your work changed in light of the coronavirus—besides preaching to an empty sanctuary?

We're doing our very best to adhere to what our health officials and our government and our president have asked us to do and we've shut down everything for the next 15 days. We've asked our employees to work from their homes and take care of their families and, of course, we will not be having any church activities at all, other than online. This is a great kind of wake-up call. It's back to the basics. If you go to the New Testament, the church didn't start in a temple or church. The New Testament church started in people's homes. And so it's time to have a little church in your home again and not just do something on one day a week and then go about your business. But since you're there in that home, you need to open up a little church in your home.

Are you going to be preaching again at your church with the small team of people again on Sunday or are you doing it in a different way?

I guess we'll get it down to 10 people. (laughs) It'll be interesting. But yes, we're going to do our very best. It's kind of refreshing because the church is not the buildings and the lights and the big budgets and all this. The church is the people. And, so, I kind of like it. It's almost like we're

unplugging everything. We're going back to just the raw gospel, the raw worship that is not produced as much. It's just, get up there and sing from your heart, get up there and talk from your heart and comfort people.

Are you and the other evangelical advisers keeping in touch with the president since you likely can't visit the White House?

We do have phone calls with either him or his administration. We were supposed to be on the phone with him actually (Monday). I think there was about 30 or 40 on the phone, but his press conference ran over. But he had one of his official people yesterday and he asked our help. He asked for all the pastors, like Jack Graham and Greg Laurie and James Dobson, to use our social media, to use our voices to please, please, please get the word out to people that this is serious, but we can beat it if we can, in these 15 days, stop the escalation and turn a mountain into a molehill.

This was a White House official?

Jenny Korn. Jenny Korn is one of the president's assistants in the area of faith and also Paula White-Cain. We just exchanged ideas on how we would best minister to people. Some pastors have large, large parking lots and so they're ideal for people to be tested with the swabs and all of that. A lot of us are mobilizing for our elders to help them get prescriptions filled and meals, leave it on the door, knock and stand back 10 feet, just say hello, check up on people and not touching.

Was this solely evangelicals or was it a wider faith representation?

This call was solely evangelicals, but I do know that there are multiple groupings and conversations that are going on.

President Trump has said his administration rates a 10 on its handling of the coronavirus. But last week CBN's David Brody

called the president's statement that "Anyone that needs a test gets a test" wrong and a "major failure." How do you think the president and his administration are doing regarding the crisis?

I would give him a 10. This is a moving target and it's easy to sit back and criticize. But I'm so glad that he took the decisive action of banning certain nations and people from coming in when he did. It absolutely slowed that virus down inside of our nation and it was the right move. Just like everything that the president does, there's some people that are going to attack. Certainly, I wish that we could've got testing out quicker, and that probably was something that we'll look back on and learn a lot from.

I feel like he's doing his very best and I feel like his administration is doing the very best in every way. They're working as hard as they can. And we need to be praying for him. That's why I appreciated his National Day of Prayer declaration that was so important. And we don't just need to do it on one day, but every day. {eo}

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