

# Churches adjust ministry as COVID-19 cases rise again

August 4, 2021

GALLATIN, Tenn. (BP)—A week ago, Pastor Travis Fleming of First Baptist Gallatin thought all-digital worship services, recommended masking and strict social distancing were a thing of the past.

But after a July 25 baptism service, reports began to trickle in of members testing positive for COVID-19. By Thursday, when several positive cases had been reported at First Baptist, a team consisting of Fleming, deacons, lay leaders and medical professionals determined that an all-virtual worship service Aug. 1 would be the best course of action.

The team had expected the case number to grow, and they were right, as the number ticked up throughout the following days.

This week's Wednesday night on Aug. 4 activities were canceled. The church hosted a funeral service Aug. 2, but masks were required. The upcoming Aug. 8 Sunday worship service also will be all-virtual, Fleming said.

"We wanted to have a 14-day stretch before getting back together in person," he said. "When we come back together, we're going to recommend masks, but not require them. We do not want to shut down again for an extended period of time, but we also didn't want to ignore the [Delta variant] surge."

## Facing difficult decisions

In the meantime, ministry continues. If churches learned anything from a

temporary shutdown, it was the importance of continued presence in the community and sharing the gospel.

The ongoing surge in cases tied to the highly contagious Delta variant, accompanied by controversy over vaccinations, has severely dampened American's optimism about emerging from COVID-19, which makes those decisions for churches no easier.

A "high percentage" of those at First Baptist have been vaccinated, Fleming said, so even out of the cases reported there were only a few hospitalizations. Pushback on decisions has been "very minimal," he added, largely due to there being several voices involved in those discussions.

"My initial reaction to hearing about the cases was 'Oh no, not again,'" he said. "But I knew we had to do what was best for the whole body of believers, not just a few."

The last time First Baptist held all-virtual services came in January, he added, as cases had spiked in the area.

## **Taking precautions**

In South Georgia, members at First Baptist Church in Waycross still enjoyed the deacon-sponsored Low Country boil on Back to Church Sunday Aug. 1, but with precautions. Disposable gloves were used through the serving line and joined individually-plated deserts, pre-filled cups and available hand sanitizer. Masks were made available prior to church services, though not required. Hand sanitation and social distancing were encouraged, and those showing symptoms were encouraged to watch from home.

"We are grateful for the fellowship opportunities that are sorely needed and have been missing from our church life," read an announcement posted

to the church's social media accounts on July 30. "We also want our members to know that we are maintaining diligence and awareness toward the safety of our gatherings. We encourage and invite each of you to do the same."

That announcement came the same day the Georgia Department of Public Health said vaccinations were more urgent than ever, as the Delta variant continues to spread throughout the state. Over the most recent 14-day period, the report said, hospitalizations had increased by 50 percent and deaths by 18 percent.

Fleming received the Moderna vaccine after consulting with his physician, whom he called "a strong Christian." Mayberry and his wife also are vaccinated. Personally, both have benefitted from the vaccine but understand it is a point of disagreement among church members, with many holding varying opinions.

These discussions take place as schools prepare to start back and concerns rise about the Delta variant's spread. Mayberry said that a report including the low vaccination rates and high case count of the surrounding area led to the precautions.

But First Baptist also wants to protect its fellowship from losing touch with one another. August was set to be the first full month of activities since COVID-19 arrived, kicked off by its Low Country boil. Though the event wasn't cancelled, deacons added the precautions would be repeated at a church-wide barbecue Aug. 4.

"We're trying to balance the tightrope between faith and risk management," Mayberry said. "We want to do the best for our church and our folks. I'm thankful we have a team here willing to talk these things over so we can make the best decisions with the information that's available."