

Pandemic and loss unite rural Missouri pastors around faith

December 9, 2020

NOEL, Mo. (AP)—Thirty miles of rural Missouri separate the two Baptist churches, and so much else. One is mostly white; the other hosts services in five languages for a flock that spans the world.

Still, every Tuesday the pastors meet midway between their houses of worship, seeking each other's counsel, sharing their joys—and, more often, their burdens. Because in these pandemic-wracked days, they are sometimes overwhelmed by the crucible of ministering.

"Whether it be the death of a member, whether it be somebody upset, whether it be losing funding, whether it be just all sorts of different things, or maybe just our own depression, just dealing with being locked up at home," said Pastor Mike Leake at Calvary of Neosho, a Southern Baptist church.

One church was staggered by COVID-19 early on. The other has not had as many infections but has seen congregational life turned upside down.

The ministers struggle. Pastor Joshua Manning of the Community Baptist Church in Noel was sickened, himself.

And still, they persevere. While they both want to keep parishioners safe, they are determined to carry on with in-person services as long as members of their congregations are eager to attend.

"Our mission to profess the gospel doesn't end because the coronavirus is here," Manning said. "And so, we have to still function. We still have to preach. We still have to meet together."

International churches affected

At the end of a recent Sunday, 11 people were immersed in a turquoise baptismal pool behind the altar of Community Baptist, thousands of miles from the islands in the Pacific Ocean where they were born.

This was the last of five services for five international congregations—in all, about 200 people—who worship at the church in Noel. The town of 1,800 in the far southwest corner of Missouri has a large immigrant population, including Pacific Islanders, Mexicans, Sudanese and refugees from Myanmar.

Most arrived here drawn by the opportunity of a job at the local Tyson Foods chicken processing plant. Many were infected with COVID-19 during the summer when McDonald County, where Noel is located, became a hot spot of the pandemic.



Pastor Luke Jesse of the First Marshallese Throne in Jouj church wears a mask as he baptizes Danny Baro on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2020, in Noel, Mo. After the coronavirus swept through the town of about 1,800 people, the First Marshallese Throne in Jouj and four other

churches that worship at the building of the Community Baptist Church experienced a faith revival with an estimated 50 baptisms in three months. (AP Photo/Jessie Wardarski)

Few places were hit as hard by the virus this summer. Though it has just 23,000 residents, in late June only four other Missouri counties and the cities of St. Louis and Kansas City had recorded more cases. So far, there have been 1,715 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 24 deaths in McDonald County, according to figures released Dec. 7 by the county's health department.

At the start of June, McDonald County, had fewer than two dozen confirmed cases. By June 23, 498 cases had been confirmed. Three days later, Tyson Foods announced 371 employees at its chicken processing plant in Noel had tested positive for COVID-19. Tyson said it is implementing a new COVID monitoring strategy but did not provide an update on confirmed cases up to December despite multiple requests.

"Just pretty close to overnight, most of our church body and the town largely had it," Manning said.

At the onset of the pandemic, Manning closed the church for two months to follow safety guidelines. When the church reopened in June, he contracted the virus and was forced to shut it down again for a month.

His wife, Lauren, and three children also were sickened, as was Lauren's grandfather, who died in October. And the church's Spanish-language pastor, Roberto Nunez, died in July. A pastor has been driving more than five hours back and forth from Nebraska to lead the Spanish service each Sunday.

Amid all of this, Manning has pushed ahead.

"I have to basically balance two different things," the 41-year-old pastor said. "I have to preach the gospel. The church has to meet together. Businesses have to run. Without the poultry industry running, people don't get paid, and people don't eat."

"You have to have school, you have to have those things. And doing any of those things causes risk. And I know because I've lost people that's close to me."

Manning worked for two decades as a Walmart manager before he chose to follow his calling and became pastor of the church in 2018.

He had lived in McDonald County for most of his life but knew little about Noel. Though the town near the Missouri-Arkansas-Oklahoma border is named for a founding family, many across the world send Christmas cards to the Noel Post Office so they can be stamped from "The Christmas City."

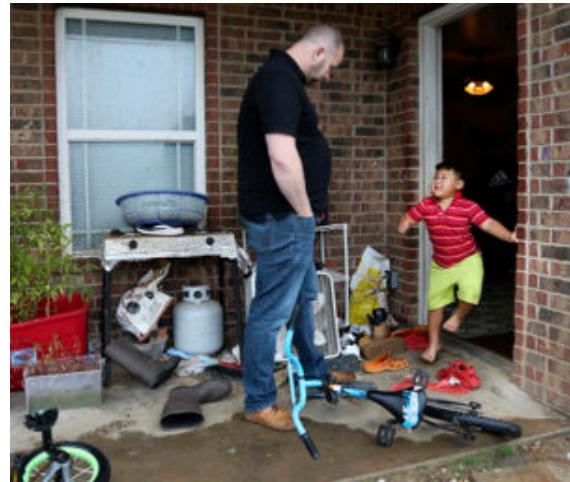
Immigrants from Mexico and Central America began to arrive here in the late '90s, drawn by the opportunity to work for Tyson. They were followed by people from Somalia and Sudan, Pacific Islanders and refugees from Myanmar.

Manning said many had lived in refugee camps in Thailand, and when they first arrived in town, they slept on concrete floors. Now many are homeowners, and their kids attend college.

"If you want to talk about the American Dream on steroids," he said, "This is it."

Increased food insecurity

The coronavirus, though, showed the extent of food insecurity in a town where many children rely on free meals at school. Manning started a food pantry at his church's community center.



Pastor Joshua Manning, of the Community Baptist Church, visits Gideon and the boy's family after hosting a weekly church food pantry, Saturday, Nov. 21, 2020, in Noel, Mo. This family is one of nine living and working in Noel as refugees from Myanmar. (AP Photo/Jessie Wardarski)

On a recent Saturday, he drove his van around town and picked up three young congregants from Myanmar's ethnic Karen minority who were excited to volunteer. He later treated them to pizza and lowered the rim of the basketball court at the community center so they could dunk.

The next day, he delivered a sermon at his church that was translated a couple of sentences at a time.

“We are separate—from different tribes,” Manning told the congregation. “But we’re all part of God’s kingdom. This kingdom, we call the church.”

Speaking in his second-floor office after a day of back-to-back services, Manning said the church was still “affected by COVID, but … the effect isn’t largely negative.”

The pandemic, he said, also brought a revival of faith. He estimated that in the past three months, a record 50 people have been baptized in the church.

“The spiritual hunger of people is very different than what it was before,” he said. “This is an extraordinary revival because people have a passionate interest when times are tough to what is the important stuff in life, and they go back to their faith.”

Melody Binejal, 27, a Hawaiian of Marshallese parents who moved to Noel this year, sat in one of the front pews, her hair still wet after being baptized. Her father-in-law died after contracting the virus.

It’s a struggle, she said, but “it’s the perfect time to just give your life to Jesus, because you never know when or what time he’s going to arrive and just take everything away from us.”

Neosho church feels COVID disruptions

A 30-mile drive north from Noel is the town of Neosho, nicknamed the Flower Box City. Its population of 12,000 is far less diverse than Noel’s—roughly 85 percent white, with relatively few immigrants and no meat processing plants.

Those differences have not spared Neosho, and its 20 churches, from

heartbreak and disruption as the coronavirus arrived in force in June and continues to take a heavy toll.



Angela Tucker hugs her 5-year-old granddaughter, Charley Jones, as they pray with their fellow congregants at Calvary of Neosho, a Southern Baptist church, Sunday, Nov. 22, 2020, in Neosho, Mo. Newton County, population 58,000, was recently hit by a surge of the coronavirus, with about 3,000 cases and 40 deaths in late November. (AP Photo/Jessie Wardarski)

Back in March, the coronavirus seemed to pose no threat to southwest Missouri as its toll mounted overseas and in a few distant parts of the U.S.

But even then, the outbreak caused the first of many disruptions for Calvary of Neosho.

Late on March 9, Leake learned the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board had urged the denomination's churches to cancel any foreign mission trips scheduled over the next six weeks.

The very next day, Leake and three members of his congregation had planned to depart on a mission trip to Mexico. But he heeded the IMB warning and called Ashley Jones, one of the would-be travelers who'd been making the arrangements. She scrambled to cancel their flights.

The months that followed have been challenging for the congregation, as initial hopes that Neosho was spared gave way to realization that the pandemic was on its doorstep.

"We've had a lot of ups and downs," Jones said. "But we have a good core group of people who've been super faithful and know God is in control. A lot of us have grown in unity through this."

Leake held an in-person service the Sunday after the mission was canceled and then, following state and local restrictions, halted such services for seven weeks while resorting to online worship.

At that time, with few COVID-19 cases in the area, some residents were furious at city officials who ordered restrictions.

On May 10, as the restrictions on indoor gatherings eased, Leake resumed services at the church, but only after sending his congregation a detailed notice outlining new safety measures.

Worshippers were asked to maintain 6 feet of social distance and no longer gather in prayer circles. The offering plate was no longer passed through the congregation; instead, donation baskets were placed at exits.

When the church reopened, drawing a congregation about half the normal size, Neosho's Newton County had recorded only 19 cases, but soon—like much of the Midwest—the county of 58,000 people was hit by a surge. By July 1, there had been 427 cases, and by late November about 3,000. The county's COVID-19 death toll stood at one in early June; it's now approaching 40.

Wrestling with difficult decisions

Like other Neosho pastors, Leake has wrestled with whether Calvary should again halt in-person services. Instead, he's encouraging congregation members to attend if they and their families are healthy, and stay away if they're sick or at risk.

As of late November, no one in the congregation had died of COVID-19, Leake said. But several contracted the disease or had friends or relatives who died.

Before the outbreak, Sunday attendance was averaging around 200. Only 98 people attended on May 10, Leake said, but recently attendance has been around 120 to 150. Revenue from weekly offerings has ranged from a below-average \$3,000 one Sunday to an above-average \$9,000 the next week.

Throughout the pandemic, Leake has encouraged Calvary worshippers to wear masks at services, but has not mandated it. Scott Tucker, who works at a local golf course, is in the majority that does not.

"I'm not going to live in fear," he said. "Whatever happens here on this Earth isn't going to affect my eternity. ... If I die from COVID, then I'm better off anyway, because I know where I'm going."

Leake, 39, said the issue has troubled many local pastors.

"A lot of them say, 'I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't,'" he said. "If you had a mask mandate, you'd have people leave your church. By the same token, you'd have some people leaving if you don't mandate masks."

It's hard being a minister these days, he said. "Some weeks I don't know a single pastor who wants to be pastoring right now."

Leake became Calvary's pastor in April 2019. Within a year, he found himself ministering to congregants beleaguered by coronavirus-related woes.

The pandemic's disruptions strained some marriages; Leake offered counseling but said two or three couples broke up. He helped organize delivery of care packages to shut-ins who couldn't leave home.

Through it all, he has remained adamant: There is value in coming together, in body and spirit.

He wrote an impassioned note to the congregation in July, explaining why he would attend in person even if he weren't the pastor.

"There is something which the generations preceding me understood that I believe has been lost upon my generation," he wrote. "And that is the power of showing up. ... There is something powerful about you being there."

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