

# **Surge prompts some churches to return to online-only worship**

November 9, 2020

MESQUITE (BP)—A surge in new COVID-19 cases has some churches returning to online-only worship as many churches continue meeting onsite.

“This Sunday we will be online. We’ll be totally online,” said Terry Turner, senior pastor of Mesquite Friendship Baptist Church in Mesquite. “We’ve actually had a few weeks of indoor service, where we actually come together and we social distance. ... Now that we’re back in the red zone (of COVID-19 case numbers) here in Texas, we have suspended our services, and we’re doing strictly online.”

A one-day rise of 121,890 new COVID-19 cases nationwide on Nov. 6 is the highest to date in the United States since the pandemic began, the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center reported.

At 969,605 cases, Texas has surpassed California as the state with the highest number of cumulative cases. Texas’ cumulative COVID-19 death toll of 18,909 is second only to New York’s 33,657, Johns Hopkins reported.

## **El Paso a hot spot for virus**

In the COVID-19 hotspot of El Paso, Immanuel Church has closed its school for a couple of weeks but continues onsite worship, Pastor J.C. Rico said.

“I would say here in the city, it’s about 50/50,” Rico said of El Paso Baptist Association’s 100 or so churches. “There are some that just have continued online. There are some that did go back to live, and a small percentage

have just gone online again. ... I would say about 40 percent of the churches here in El Paso are going live" in person.

El Paso reported 1,049 COVID-19 patients hospitalized Nov. 6, with 311 in intensive care units and 177 on ventilators, the City of El Paso reported.

Cielo Vista Baptist Church in El Paso returned to online-only worship Oct. 25, Lead Pastor Larry Lamb said in a video posted to Facebook.

"[I]f you live in El Paso you know the COVID cases have gone extremely high, a lot of COVID cases. So, out of protection for our community, our church community, we're going to suspend our live weekend services until further notice," he said in an Oct. 25 video.

"But we will be on Cielo Vista Church online every week. ... We just pray for the pandemic to stop, we pray for healing, and we pray for the lives of people to be nourished also by truth but also in great health. So that's why we want to protect our church family as much as we can. Stay safe, and do all the things we're required to do."

## **African American community hit hard**

Mesquite Friendship Baptist Church is a member of Dallas Baptist Association of about 500 churches. Dallas County lists the COVID-19 risk level in the red zone, advising people to "Stay Home, Stay Safe." The county has a cumulative total of at least 99,761 cases and 1,127 cumulative deaths, with 868 new cases reported Nov. 5.

Turner said his church has had deaths among its membership and among its extended church family including relatives and friends, but declined to provide a specific number.

"Among African Americans, the COVID-19 has had its highest impact, and we've seen a lot of that within our membership and their families," Turner

said. “We’ve had members who have passed from it, and then we’ve had members who have had family members that have passed from it.”

He referenced the church’s first member to die of the virus, a participant in the church’s health care ministry who died after contracting the virus in her professional work as a nurse.

“She was very, very committed to our ministry and our church,” he said. “And yet, at the same time, she was a nurse. and contracted it as a nurse.

“Our sensitivity to what COVID is doing is really at a high alert within our church and within our ministry, because we’ve seen so much of it. ... Our members are as committed to supporting the church and to the ministry as they were before COVID-19 hit us,” both financially and spiritually.

Turner said he is monitoring the virus to determine when to resume onsite worship, but has no definite plans at this point.

Dallas Baptist Association Associate Director Scott Coleman said much of what he knows of churches’ current worship plans is anecdotal. An online survey conducted three weeks ago, Coleman said, drew responses from 50 churches, about 10 percent of the congregations in the association. One church was meeting in a parking lot.

“Exactly two-thirds were meeting in person, observing social distancing rules,” Coleman said. “We had ... right at a quarter that were meeting virtually. ... Only a few, about 7 percent, were still not meeting at all.”