

Pro-Trump evangelicals exposed to virus flout CDC guidelines

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—At least two faith leaders, including one of President Donald Trump’s unofficial evangelical advisers, have tested positive for COVID-19 after attending a White House Rose Garden ceremony and a separate evangelical gathering in Washington, D.C.

Several other high-profile Christian leaders were also at one or both events. Some have since chosen to quarantine out of precaution, but others—including Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, and Ramiro Peña, pastor of Christ the King Baptist Church in Waco—continue to travel and even to preach in front of their congregations.

University of Notre Dame President John I. Jenkins, who was present at the Rose Garden event, announced his positive test on Oct. 2 and is quarantining.

Pastor Greg Laurie of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, Calif., also in attendance at the Rose Garden ceremony, confirmed Oct. 5 he tested positive for COVID-19. Laurie said in a video he had been quarantining since Friday, when he received the diagnosis.

The Sept. 26 ceremony, announcing Trump’s new Supreme Court nominee, Amy Coney Barrett, was convened at the White House Rose Garden, where attendees sat close together, few wore masks and many were seen shaking hands when the event concluded.

At least nine in Rose Garden ceremony tested positive

With Laurie's diagnosis, at least nine people from the Rose Garden ceremony, including Trump, have since tested positive for the novel coronavirus. And many faith leaders were photographed sitting near or next to them throughout the event.

At any given time, most were within feet of Jenkins, Laurie, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, former White House aide Kellyanne Conway and White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany—all of whom have since tested positive.

Paul Scalia, a priest at St. James Catholic Church in Falls Church, Virginia, and the son of Justice Antonin Scalia, announced to his church on Oct. 4 he tested negative over the weekend but that he would quarantine "at the recommendation of my doctor and per CDC guidelines." Scalia sat in the same row and three seats down from Conway at the Rose Garden event.

Similarly, many other faith leaders who attended the event say they have since tested negative for the virus. Not all are adhering to those Centers for Disease Control guidelines, which recommend quarantining for 14 days after spending an extended period of time (more than 15 minutes) in close proximity (within six feet) to someone who tests positive for COVID-19.

Even with a negative test, the CDC still recommends a person exposed to COVID-19 quarantine for two weeks after last known exposure to the virus, since symptoms may take anywhere from two to 14 days to appear.

Indeed, many of the pastors in attendance preached to in-person congregations Sunday.

Laurie, who sat diagonally in front of Chris Christie during the Rose Garden

event, preached during Harvest Christian Fellowship's "Harvest at Home" online services Sunday, but it was unclear when his message was recorded and if there was anyone else present.

Jack Graham insists he is 'ridiculously healthy'

Graham of Prestonwood Baptist Church sat directly in front of Chris Christie and next to Laurie at the Rose Garden event. He opened his service on Sunday by praying for the president, who was hospitalized on Friday after experiencing complications from his own COVID-19 infection, and the first lady, who also tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

Graham—speaking at one of Prestonwood's worship services—then assured his congregation: "I am ridiculously healthy, let's just put it that way. I'm not sick. I'm fine.

"I exercised every day this week ... and flew to Atlanta to speak with the vice president on Wednesday," he said. "I worked every day, preaching three times this weekend, so I don't have COVID. Let's just put it that way. I'm grateful for that, and we're grateful for God's protection always."

Graham then preached a message titled "Socialism: A Clear and Present Danger."

He did not mention being tested for COVID-19, and Prestonwood has not returned requests for comment by Religion News Service.

Skip Heitzig, pastor of Calvary Church in Albuquerque, N.M., sat in the row behind Jenkins during the Rose Garden event. A representative for Heitzig's church said Heitzig "feels great" but did get a COVID-19 test early Saturday morning.

Heitzig's team emailed RNS late Monday evening to say the pastor received a negative result from the test. But a Monday night result would mean he was still awaiting test results when he began preaching Sunday morning. He delivered his sermon in a closed studio but acknowledged other people were there, and attendees could be heard clapping as he spoke.

Paula White urges prayers for 'supernatural healing'

Paula White, head of the White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative and often regarded as President Trump's closest religious adviser, sat three seats down from Jenkins at the Rose Garden event. She preached in front of the Florida-based City of Destiny congregation on Sunday—where people were spaced apart, and many wore masks—and said she had been tested three times the previous week. All, she said, came back negative.

She called on those present to pray for “supernatural healing” for Trump and others suffering from COVID-19.

Jentezen Franklin, pastor of Free Chapel in Gainesville, Ga., who sat diagonally behind Jenkins in the Rose Garden, preached to his congregation on Sunday as well. He prayed for healing for the president and the first lady but did not mention during his introduction whether he had been tested for the novel coronavirus.

Before Sunday's services, Franklin posted a video on Twitter sharing he had tested negative for COVID-19.

Representatives for his church did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Liberty University acting President Jerry Prevo sat next to Jentezen Franklin during the event. A representative for the university said Prevo

tested negative for the virus on Friday morning. Prevo tweeted on Saturday images of himself attending a Liberty football game with other people in what appeared to be a closed room.

“Loved cheering (Liberty football) onto another win today with this beautiful lady,” he tweeted, along with images of himself standing next to other people and speaking. “We had a great time getting to know some LU students, staff, and faculty at the game. Congratulations to (Coach Hugh Freeze) and the Flames for their 3-0 record. Go Flames!”

Bishop Harry Jackson, who leads Hope Christian Church in Beltsville, Md., appeared to sit on the end of the row behind Jenkins and directly across the aisle from Kayleigh McEnany, preached to an empty church on Sunday.

Pastor Robert Morris, who appeared to be sitting next to Jentezen Franklin at the Rose Garden event, also spoke to his Dallas-based Gateway Church, which gathered in person with some restrictions to celebrate its 20th year.

Neither immediately responded to requests for comment by RNS.

Waco pastor preaches to congregation

Peña of Christ the King Baptist Church also was at the Rose Garden event and preached to his Waco congregation on Sunday, although he sat farther away from people at the ceremony who have since tested positive for COVID-19. His church did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Peña was part of a virtual call to prayer for President Trump, hosted by Trump’s daughter-in-law Lara Trump, Sunday afternoon with Franklin, White and Jackson. They were joined by Franklin Graham, head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, who sat next to Jenkins at the Rose Garden, and his daughter Cissie Graham Lynch, who sat next to her father

at the same event.

A BGEA spokesperson said both Graham and Lynch took COVID-19 tests this past week and were negative but did not specify when those tests were taken. The spokesperson said Graham is currently in a “remote area of Alaska.”

Ralph Reed, who sat two seats down from Peña, was tested on Wednesday and got a negative result. However, Reed led a Faith and Freedom Coalition conference in Atlanta, Ga., from Sept 30 to Oct 2 that featured speakers such as Vice President Pence.

Another scheduled speaker, Sen. James Lankford, was forced to leave the conference and quarantine after learning that Utah Sen. Mike Lee—another attendee at the Rose Garden event who Lankford had spent time with—had also tested positive for the coronavirus. Lankford—a Southern Baptist—has since tested negative, but remains in quarantine, citing CDC guidelines.

Reed, on the other hand, did not appear to quarantine. He closed out the indoor event on Friday evening—after news broke that both Trump and Jenkins had tested positive for COVID-19—by making a speech.

Many of these same evangelical faith leaders also joined thousands who attended a massive prayer march in Washington, D.C., the same day as the Rose Garden event.

Emily McFarlan Miller reported from Chicago.