

COMMONWEALTH ★ ★ ★ POLICY CENTER ★ ★ ★

*From the desk of Executive Director
Richard Nelson*

April 9, 2020

An Open Letter to the Church

I just got off the phone with a pastor friend in Eastern Kentucky who shared some sad and disappointing news. A person in his community traveled out of state, contracted COVID-19, and attended a church service shortly thereafter where other congregants contracted it. I just learned that one of them died.

This happened before the travel ban and large meeting prohibitions were put in place. This person spread it unknowingly, but in light of the seriousness of the disease, it's disappointing to learn that some leaders in the Christian community are resisting the government's stay at home orders as if this is a direct attack on the church and a violation of their First Amendment rights. It is not. The order applies to all large gatherings including sporting events, concerts, and schools. The intention is to slow the spread of COVID-19 until a vaccination has been developed.

Another pastor in North Christian County called me the other day and told me that he was being pressured to hold church services by some of his members. Shortly after, it was reported that a church in nearby Dawson Springs held a revival service where an infected member exposed worshippers. Twenty four have since contracted COVID-19.

Some may be tempted to look at the relatively low numbers in Kentucky (Less than 1500 cases and 65 deaths) and criticize the authorities for being overly aggressive. However, public health experts project between 100,000 to 240,000 deaths in this nation alone. There will be plenty of time for post-COVID 19 analysis when the disease has passed. However, when health experts uniformly advise that a crisis is coming, it's wise to heed their counsel and to take certain precautions to stem catastrophe.

How many families during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic would have gladly lived with daily inconvenience and economic slowdown only to have their family members spared? One of my board member's great aunts lost four children to the Spanish flu in 1918. They all died within nine days in the tiny Western Kentucky community of Cunningham. Altogether, 675,000 Americans died from that pandemic. Fifty-million died worldwide.

During that 1918 flu outbreak, several Kentucky churches shut their doors, including Simpsonville Baptist Church which closed for four months. They did this out of concern for their membership and community at large. And they didn't even have social media outlets to carry virtual services.

Many have been critical of the EMW abortion center in Louisville from being allowed to remain open. I agree that this is inconsistent with closing all other elective medical centers. However, please don't use this as an excuse to pick a fight with the government and to resist social distancing guidelines. Please work alongside the government where they are doing good. Cooperate with the authorities as they lead and work to slow the spread. This is a pro-life position that will positively impact thousands in this moment.

Are you praying for the health of your community and for the disease to slow? Then do something to help effectuate that prayer. Are you asking God to give our leaders wisdom? Then please know the same Bible that tells us to pray for our leaders in I Timothy 2:1 tells us also to submit to those same leaders in Romans 13:1-2 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Do you believe that God is at work in times of crisis? Then be an agent of hope and encouragement to those who need help (Rom. 15:13, Eph. 2:8-10, Psalm 46:1-3).

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Jesus reminds us that the two great commandments are to love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). Submitting to our government honors God. Following the stay at home order and practicing social distancing to help slow the spread is loving our neighbor.

The church isn't being forced to stop preaching. It is being asked to temporarily cease meeting in person. Enterprising ministry leaders will see this as a new opportunity for the church to join a corner of society and share a message in a new arena. The internet and social media platforms such as Facebook Live and YouTube are great ways to connect and meet people who wouldn't normally step inside a church. In many cases, I've been told that attendance and viewership of online services far exceed the usual Sunday morning attendance.

So should you hold in-person church services this Easter Sunday? Simply ask yourself this: Do you want to be remembered as being the conduit that possibly spread a deadly disease throughout a region? Or do you want to be remembered as being a force for good that aided your community in a time of great need?

Very sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Nelson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Richard Nelson
Executive Director,
Commonwealth Policy Center