

Errick D. Simmons
Mayor



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**Mayor Errick D. Simmons' Statement
Regarding Greenville City Council April 7, 2020 Order on Church Services**

Delivered on Monday, April 13, 2020
Press Conference on Council Order Regarding Church Services
11:00 a.m.

Thank you all for coming to this press conference. I would like to first begin by saying our hearts and prayers go out to the families of those who lost their lives during yesterday's storms that swept across this state and the South. In addition, our prayers and thoughts continue to be with the families of individuals who lost their lives due to this current pandemic of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus).

We are indeed living in unprecedented times. For the first time in modern history, we have seen our businesses, restaurants, colleges, schools, churches, weddings, funerals, graduations, and other events either closed, postponed, cancelled, or affected in some way due to COVID-19. As we know, this is not just local, but it is happening across the world. Americans are adjusting and adapting to what has become a strange new normal, where every day presents a new challenge for local, state, and federal governments to respond.

Throughout the daily changes to local, state, and federal mandates to address this pandemic, the constant are those on the front lines-healthcare workers and first responders. Thank you does not convey the depth of gratitude we have for what you are doing every day.

As elected officials, we, too, are on the front lines responding to new circumstances and conditions to this pandemic in real time. What may be sufficient in one day, may not be sufficient for another day. What we do know is limiting contact, we can maintain a flattened curve throughout this community. And that depends on the actions of each and every one of us.

As a father, husband, and devote Christian, I understand the need we have to reassure our children, minimize anxiety that comes with uncertainty, and to strengthen our faith.

Faith continues to be the center of this administration.

Our very first initiative was an interfaith, interracial racial reconciliation initiative called Worship on the Water, where residents come to the waterfront to exalt God and participate in corporate

worship every 5th Sunday of the month, an initiative that has received national recognition. Our churches are a cornerstone of our communities. Our faith leaders have been creative and innovative in their practice of social distancing through the use of electronic, social media, and other platforms in this pandemic.

There has been much public dialogue about the Greenville City Council Order Regarding Church Services entered with a vote of 4-1 on April 7, 2020.

Recently, a smear campaign against me and this City I love has begun. These lies about my beliefs and actions are unsubstantiated and riddled with false narratives and unnecessary attacks. To suggest that I would take any action unlawfully denying someone the practice of his or her faith is ridiculous. To publicly state on media outlets and press conferences that this mayor targeted any church in this community is unacceptable and reprehensible. Let's review the facts.

On March 17, 2020, the Greenville City Council entered its first order adopting CDC and Department of Health social distancing guidelines and mandated that there should be no gatherings more than ten (10). After that, some churches still had in person services and others had drive-in services but still congregated outside their cars.

Between March 17th the date of the Council's original order and April 2, 2020, the date of the Governor's Shelter-In Place Order, the mayor and council were actively engaged with clergy and faith-based leaders in support of all of the social distancing measures they were taking, which included drive in services and electronic broadcasts and meetings. During this period, some churches continued in-person services that exceeded 10 people. And, we began to receive calls from around the community and state about violations, while some faith leaders publicly refuse to comply with the Council's March 17th Order.

In the meantime, the number of confirmed cases in Washington County increased from 1 confirmed case on March 20, 2020 to 31 confirmed cases on April 2, 2020.

On April 2, 2020, the Governor enters Mississippi's Shelter-In Place Order.

The next morning on Friday, April 3, 2020, the Mississippi Department of Health issued its guideline, stating, quote: "Because of recent COVID-19 cases specifically linked to church gatherings, it is vital that Mississippians not attend in-person church services at any church or other type of facility", closed quote.

Up to this point, despite the known violations and in light of the increase of confirmed cases, no citations were issued.

I continued conversations with clergy and faith-based leaders to ensure there was clarity around the original Council order, the Governor's Shelter In Place Order, and the Mississippi

Department of Health guideline about church gatherings. Those conversations included several discussions specifically about drive-in services. Moreover, on a call with the Governor with Mississippi mayors, the question of drive-in services came up and the Governor stated that drive-in services will not work because people of faith like to fellowship.

In light of this statement, the Governor's Shelter In Place Order, CDC guidelines, the MS Department of Health guideline on church gatherings, known violators, the capacity of our police force to monitor over 100 churches, the limited number of hospital beds, and the looming date in which PPEs, medical supplies, and healthcare resources will run out, the Council had a lengthy discussion at the City Council meeting.

In this context, on Tuesday, April 7, 2020, the Greenville City Council, with a vote of 4 to 1, issued a stricter order on church services to address the influx of calls that churches were violating the first order and CDC guidelines. This order allowed for pastors, musicians, and production/media teams in the churches so long as there were no more than 10 people and banned drive-in services. This order was put in place for the sole purpose to save lives and prevent the spread of COVID-19 specifically linked to church gatherings. On that date, the number of confirmed cases stood at 40, with 1 confirmed death. Still no citations were issued.

On the following day, April 8, 2020, officers arrived at Temple Baptist Church after several calls that it was having drive-in services. Parishioners were kindly asked by law enforcement to leave. Most members immediately left. Only those members who refused to leave were issued citations. These were the first citations issued over three weeks of defiance. At no point in time have our officers raided or staked out any place of worship.

In a separate incident, on Thursday, April 9, 2020, officers were called to King James Baptist Church under provocation of its pastor regarding the April 7th Order. Many of you have seen this incident captioned on Facebook Live, which did not result in any citations to the pastor or parishioners as they were in compliance with the Order. There were less than 5 people present including the pastor at this particular church.

These incidents have been taken out of context. It is a misrepresentation of our officers, a misrepresentation of the Council, and a misrepresentation of this mayor.

Like many of you, my family and I were saddened that we were unable to celebrate this Easter weekend in a traditional way by worshipping and gathering together. We, like the President, like the Governor, and the majority of the rest of the world, sheltered in place and watched services online due to this pandemic.

This is not a time to play politics. This is not a time inflame unprecedented and challenging times with unnecessary attacks and false narratives. The recent threats on my life, the members of my family, and law enforcement are incomprehensible, hateful, and divisive in a time where we should be united.

In an effort to move forward in an united front, the City will not require anyone to pay the fines issued on April 7th for the violations of the city council order. Although I am accused of seeking national attention by a political leader, my record is clear on my intent and love for this City. My record is clear on my unselfish concern and selfless sacrifice to serving others. My record is clear on my support of the faith-based community and my personal walk with Jesus. My true aim is to boldly lead in this time of crisis and follow the prudent guidelines enacted by our city council, state, and federal government and make difficult, data driven decisions based in sound public health policy for the purpose of saving lives. People are dying.

African Americans are dying at a higher rate than any others in the United States and in Mississippi. African Americans make up more than 50% of COVID-19 cases in Mississippi and represent over 70% of the deaths, but only make up 38% of the state's population. Here in Greenville, African Americans make up more than 70% of our population. In order to protect our residents and flatten the curve of COVID-19 cases specifically linked to church gatherings, the Greenville City Council April 7th Order stands at this time. We need bold state leadership and partnership during this time. Thus, we ask our Governor for definitive guidance on drive-in/parking lot church services in light of CDC social distancing guidelines and Mississippi's Shelter in Place Order.

To assist churches in their practice of social distancing, WBAD's sister station, WESY 1580AM is offering churches airtime to reach their parishioners. Please call the Station for details at 662-335-9265.

As Greenville's elected mayor, I solicit your prayers for me, my family, the Greenville City Council, and their families as we make very difficult decisions to save and protect lives and to keep us all healthy.

People are dying. As your mayor and city council, we are required to protect all citizens of our beautiful city. You have our commitment that we will do just that. Here, we know we are One People, with One Goal, for One Greenville. Our greatest strength lies in our ability to work together. We are a resilient people. From the Floods of 2016 and 2019, to the EF 2 tornado months ago, to this current pandemic, we are stronger together. Hug your family a little tighter. Let's continue our prayers for our folks on the front lines. Let's show love for each other.

Let's stay home, stay safe, stay healthy. SAVE LIVES.

Thank You.