

'Drive-In' Worship Services OK'ed By Governor, Check Local Restrictions

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Several churches are looking at having 'drive-in' worship services to celebrate Easter.

The thought behind the "drive-in" worship services is that people maintain social distancing by staying in their cars, but people can hear sermons and sing together in a parking lot or field.



On March 14, 2020, the Governor of North Carolina issued Executive Order No. 117. The Executive Order prohibited mass gatherings that bring together more than 100 persons in a single room or single space at the same time. Failure to abide by this Executive Order may subject an individual to criminal prosecution for a Class 2 misdemeanor.

On March 27, 2020, the Governor of North Carolina issued Executive Order No. 121. This new Executive Order No. 121 amended Executive Order No. 117, and it now limits gatherings of more than 10 people in an indoor or outdoor confined space at the same time. Executive Order No. 121 also imposes a "stay at home" obligation on all citizens, residents, and visitors currently in the State of North Carolina.

After Executive Order No. 121 was issued, a county sheriff posed a question to the Governor specific to "drive-in" worship services by local churches. The Governor's response was as follows: "I trust law enforcement's judgment in directing people to abide by local and state health guidance. These kinds of gatherings appear to be acceptable as long as individuals remain in their vehicles and avoid contact."

After Governor Cooper's answer, churches began planning "drive-in" worship services. But churches and parishioners need to check local government restrictions.

On Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020, Buncombe County issued a Superseding Declaration of a Local State of Emergency that specifically allows for "drive-in" worship services. Buncombe County said in their declaration that "religious entities may conduct drive-in or parking lot services, however, patrons must stay inside their vehicle for the duration of their time at a point of congregation and personal interactions must be avoided." Reports indicate other counties, like Alexander and Pender Counties, also are allowing "drive-in" worship services.

But others may be taking a different approach.

On April 8, 2020, the City of Wilmington Police Department posted a press release on their website and on social media which said the following:

"With Easter Sunday just three days away, some area Pastors are asking whether or not 'drive-in' services are allowed under current Governor's Executive Orders and local Declarations. These Orders and Declarations prohibit any event or convening that brings together more than ten individuals in one place (indoor or outdoor) at one time. This prohibition includes 'drive-in' services."

It is understood that Wilmington Police officers are expected to issue citations at "drive-in" worship services. One would assume the citations would be issued against the attendees in their cars, not just the pastors.

This is one example of why churches and parishioners need to check with local authorities in advance of any "drive-in" worship service. For more information, you can contact a member of the Ward and Smith's COVID-19 Response Team.

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