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CONTACT: Mark D. Weinstein
Executive Director of Public Relations
[937-766-8800](tel:937-766-8800) (o)
[937-532-6885](tel:937-532-6885) (m)
Mweinstein@cedarville.edu
[@cedarvilleneews](https://www.facebook.com/cedarvilleneews)

Coronavirus Sparks a Search for Hope this Easter

CEDARVILLE, OHIO -- The coronavirus has been the cause of much searching: searching for food and common household goods, searching for ways to limit its spread, searching for treatments. But of all the searching taking place, the search for hope may be one of the pandemic's greatest outcomes.

"A crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic creates an urgent need for people to ask important questions about how they handle uncertainty, what they trust in, where their source of strength lies, and what they believe about life after death," noted Mark Vroegop, lead pastor at College Park Church in Indianapolis, and a 1993 graduate of Cedarville University. He also serves on the board of trustees.

"I'm hearing story after story of people asking our church members these kinds of questions and searching for answers. I've seen pictures of streaming church services from the homes of people who are not yet Christians. And I know non-Christians who are starting to read the Bible for the first time."

Even before the coronavirus, the Easter season typically sparks a search for hope. And that's in a society where religious faith is declining.

In 2019, 65% of American adults identified as "Christians," down 12% from 2009, according to the [Pew Research Center](#). Meanwhile, those who are religiously unaffiliated — this includes atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular"— has risen 9 percentage points to 26% in the past 10 years.

Despite the sagging numbers of people who claim the Christian faith, 93% of 1,000 Protestant pastors recognize Easter as one of their highest-attended services, according to [LifeWay Research](#). Christmas is a close second. Google Trends data between 2004-2013 validates this point, as searches for "church" peaks at Easter, then Christmas.

Those searching for Easter services on the internet, especially this coming weekend, will find many options. According to the Barna Group, a national polling and research company that specializes in matters related to the church and religious faith, 58% of pastors plan to offer a digital service, while 10% intend to offer something outdoors.

College Park Church will offer an online service this Easter at 9:30 and 10:45 a.m. at yourchurch.com/live. So far in this pandemic season of church, College Park's social media engagement is up more than 500%, and one recent online service had more than 20,000 views on Facebook.

“We are also finding creative ways to connect with people via text messages, online meetings and phone calls,” said Vroegop. “This Sunday we are launching a free community counseling ministry, making our staff, pastors and volunteers available to people who need counsel.

“But even more, our church people are working hard to be good neighbors — to check in on at-risk friends, bringing groceries to people who are unemployed and finding other ways to meet needs.”

Bobby Hile, pastor of Southgate Baptist Church in Springfield, Ohio, and a 1990 Cedarville alumnus, said his church has launched a 30-second television commercial and a 15-second web-based commercial to connect with people who are looking for hope. They’ve also posted the message on their Facebook page.

“The goal of these commercial spots is to point people to our online Easter weekend services,” said Hile. “We have a Good Friday service at 7 p.m. and our Easter Sunday service is at 9:30 a.m. at southgatechurch.org. During our Good Friday service, we’re going to partake of communion collectively but individually in our own homes. It will be unique, for sure.

“We created a Health Response Team prior to the stay-at-home mandates to address the situation. We have an active volunteer list put together to dispatch people to meet needs. We’re allocating financial resources to help with the crisis too.”

In spite of the limitations of an online experience, Easter is a great time to search, and find, hope.

“If there is someone who is not coming to church regularly, the Sunday service I would want them to come is at Easter, even more so than Christmas,” said Dr. Matthew Bennett, Cedarville University assistant professor of missions and theology. “Easter is what sets Christianity apart from any other world faith.”

“We believe in a holy and transcendent God who made himself intimately immanent by taking on flesh,” Bennett continued. “He manifested his own faithfulness to be both just and merciful all at once in the cross and is vindicated in his resurrection on Easter day. This is something that separates Christian thought from every other faith, so if people who are not in the Christian faith are going to make an appearance on any day, I would want it to be Easter.”

Many Americans who don’t identify as religious still believe in God, noted Dr. Dan DeWitt, director of Cedarville’s Center for Biblical Apologetics and Public Christianity.

“We have known for a long time that mainline denominations are decreasing,” said DeWitt. “But within Christianity, there are pockets of growth that aren’t reflected in the broader data, and these pockets are almost always associated with movements that believe in the Gospel, hold a high view of Scripture and are planting churches.”

Another reason for a decline of Christianity in American culture is the shifting values of Generation Z, comprised of people born since 1999. According to a [study](#) conducted by Barna, in partnership with the Impact 360 Institute, 13% of Americans ages 13-18 identify as atheist, double the 6% of the general population.

“There is a heavy influence of information they are accessing online that is challenging the Christian faith,” said DeWitt. “Then the fact that young people are in households who don’t attend church is converging to make a culture that is less religious and more secular.”

If American culture in general is moving further away from Christianity, then why do people still search out church at Easter?

“No matter what happens with church attendance, people are still human,” said DeWitt. “The Bible tells us that to be made human is to be made in God’s image, to know that there is a God and to have a sense of loss that comes from us no longer having a relationship with the Creator.”

“I believe that people still show up on Easter Sunday because we can’t forever deny that there is a God,” he added. “We have a longing for something more than what this world can satisfy, wondering what it means to be human and where we find our purpose.”

“For that reason, God will never go out of style. Perhaps the most history-altering event at the heart of the Christian faith — the resurrection — will never go out of style because it speaks to that deep need for meaning and purpose.”

The coronavirus has opened eyes and hearts to realize this intense longing, at a time when this yearning is satisfied by the single-greatest answer: a Savior who has defeated death and who offers hope and victorious new life.

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 4,380 undergraduate, graduate and online students in more than 150 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, including its Master of Divinity program, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings and high student engagement ranking. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.