

Everything we know about the eastern Oregon church at the center of state's largest coronavirus outbreak

By [Celina Tebor | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

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The Lighthouse Pentecostal Church in Union County is connected to the state's largest COVID-19 outbreak, public health officials have said. (Ronald Bond/The Observer via AP)AP

A church in a small eastern Oregon county linked to the state's [largest coronavirus outbreak](#) held worship services in the weeks before hundreds fell ill.

At least 236 coronavirus cases are tied to Lighthouse Pentecostal Church, near La Grande in Union County. The number of cases in Union County increased tenfold, from 22 to 240, in three days after the outbreak came to light. The outbreak led Union County to [voluntarily return to Phase 1](#) of Gov. Kate Brown's [phased reopening plan](#) — the county had been at Phase 2 when the outbreak happened. There are now 258 coronavirus cases in the county of 27,000 people.

Leaders of Lighthouse Pentecostal Church have remained silent for the most part about the outbreak. Yet social media posts and interviews with other faith leaders shed light on how the church came to be at the center of Oregon's largest coronavirus outbreak, and how it has responded since:

The church held a graduation and religious services before the outbreak.

The church, which operates in Island City near La Grande, has held several gatherings since May that appear to have violated Brown's restrictions to limit the spread of coronavirus.

In a May 22 [Instagram post](#), Lighthouse Pentecostal Church said it would begin in-person services Memorial Day weekend "in accordance" with [President Donald Trump's demands](#) that states allow churches to open. At the time, Union County was still in Phase 1 of reopening, in which religious groups are not allowed to convene in large groups. The governor allowed faith groups to meet in gatherings of 25 people if congregants stayed a certain distance apart.

A Facebook video uploaded May 24 by the church showed hundreds of worshipers in the church dancing, singing and moving around in close proximity. The video was later deleted.

A faith leader at the church wrote in a Memorial Day Facebook post that he was proud to be an American, listing one of the reasons as being “able to attend church in our building.”

One day later, May 26, the church held a graduation ceremony for some Lighthouse Academy students. Facebook photos posted by church members show the front row seats of the church filled as the church’s leader, Bishop Jesse Parker, shakes hands with graduates as they walk across the stage. The school is a part of the church and uses [Abeka](#) curriculum, a Christian educational program for Pre-K through 12th grade students, according to a video on the church’s website. The school’s principal, Robin Parker, said the school has between 100 students and 120 students in the video.

There’s a larger organization behind the Union County church.

Lighthouse Pentecostal Church is part of a larger organization called the [Worldwide Pentecostal Fellowship](#), based in Oklahoma. The fellowship is linked to [six other churches](#) in Oregon, including in Pendleton and The Dalles.

Parker, the head pastor of the Island City church, is listed as the fellowship’s regional director for Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Alaska.

Ministers must apply to be part the organization by answering questions such as "Do you have a television?" and "Do you allow women to cut, trim or shorten their hair in any way?"

The church's articles of faith require tithing and modesty by women and insist on maintaining distinctions between males and females. According to the articles of faith, one way this can be accomplished is by only allowing sexual relations between men and women.

The Worldwide Pentecostal Fellowship emphasizes these beliefs should be viewed as modern.

"These guidelines clearly cannot be dismissed as local cultural biases of days gone by. Nor can they be classified as parochial issues germane only to a certain day or time. They are, instead, connected to the permanent ground and order of Creation and should not be abrogated due to whim and fancy of a worldly society," the articles of faith read.

The church's theological beliefs may also have influenced the decision to hold services in spite of the governor's restrictions.

Pastor James Parker, the son of Jesse Parker, explained key parts of the church's doctrine in a welcome video on the [church's website](#). The church is Pentecostal, meaning its

members believe in what was preached on the day of Pentecost, and apostolic, meaning it follows what Jesus' apostles preached.

"We believe that Jesus Christ gave (the apostles) the commission, he gave them the keys, he told them what he wanted them to preach," Parker said in the video. "And so that's what we preach, that's what we believe, that's what we try to live, that's what we promote — that's what the Lighthouse Church is all about."

Pastor Dan Satterwhite, who leads an affiliated Lighthouse Church in Pendleton, pointed to a Bible verse that he said may have guided the decision to hold services in Union County: Hebrews 10:25.

The verse instructs Christians to have personal contact with each other in order to live out the faith they proclaim, Satterwhite said. It tells believers how to help each other move toward love and good deeds, "Not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Satterwhite also said his peers in Union County exercised their First Amendment rights when they decided to reopen, citing the freedom of religion.

Another pastor associated with the Worldwide Pentecostal Fellowship drew nationwide attention for [refusing to stop](#) holding church services.

A San Diego church in the Worldwide Pentecostal Fellowship has also [faced scrutiny](#) for a video in which its members seem not to be social distancing.

The leaders of the church are father and son.

Bishop Jesse Parker, 65, leads Lighthouse Pentecostal Church with help from his son Pastor James Parker, 30. Both preach often during weekly services and in daily devotional messages posted to Facebook.

Court documents show James Parker served two years of probation that ended in April 2018 after he was arrested in late 2015 with the possession of methamphetamine. A note in the Union County Circuit Court files said he was uncooperative at the jail and under the influence.

Parker pleaded to guilty to resisting arrest and unlawful possession, but court records show the latter count was discharged after he completed the conditions of the county's drug treatment court. He has also been convicted of second-degree criminal mischief, driving uninsured twice and driving with a suspended license twice.

The Oregonian/OregonLive was told James Parker was

unavailable for an interview.

The church is becoming increasingly secretive and leaders have not responded to any communication from The Oregonian/OregonLive.

Before the outbreak, the [church's Facebook page](#) published updates nearly every day. The posts included videos of preachers delivering daily devotionals, livestreams of church services and advertisements of free supplies the church offered to people in need earlier in the pandemic.

The church stopped posting on its public Facebook page Wednesday and has deleted all posts from after June 12. On June 17, it created a [private Facebook page](#).

A person who answered the phone at the church June 15 hung up when The Oregonian/OregonLive asked about the Union County coronavirus outbreak. Every day since, the church has not answered the phone or responded to emails.

Three different leaders of the church declined interviews with The Oregonian/OregonLive.

In a now-deleted [daily devotional video](#) published June 16 on Facebook, Pastor James Parker appeared to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I appreciate everybody being cooperative with what was

decided and doing your best to help," Parker said. "In the end, our fruit will show that what we're doing is the right thing, and more people need to do what we did. The more people that do the right thing, the easier it's going to be for the rest of the world to combat this pandemic that we're going through."

Parker did not further explain what "the right thing" is, and the church did not respond to a request for clarification.

State officials have so far said church leaders are cooperating with the efforts to track how far the coronavirus might have spread outside the church.

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