Citing disruptions to school and town, Asbury authorities move to end 13 days of revival

by Fiona Morgan

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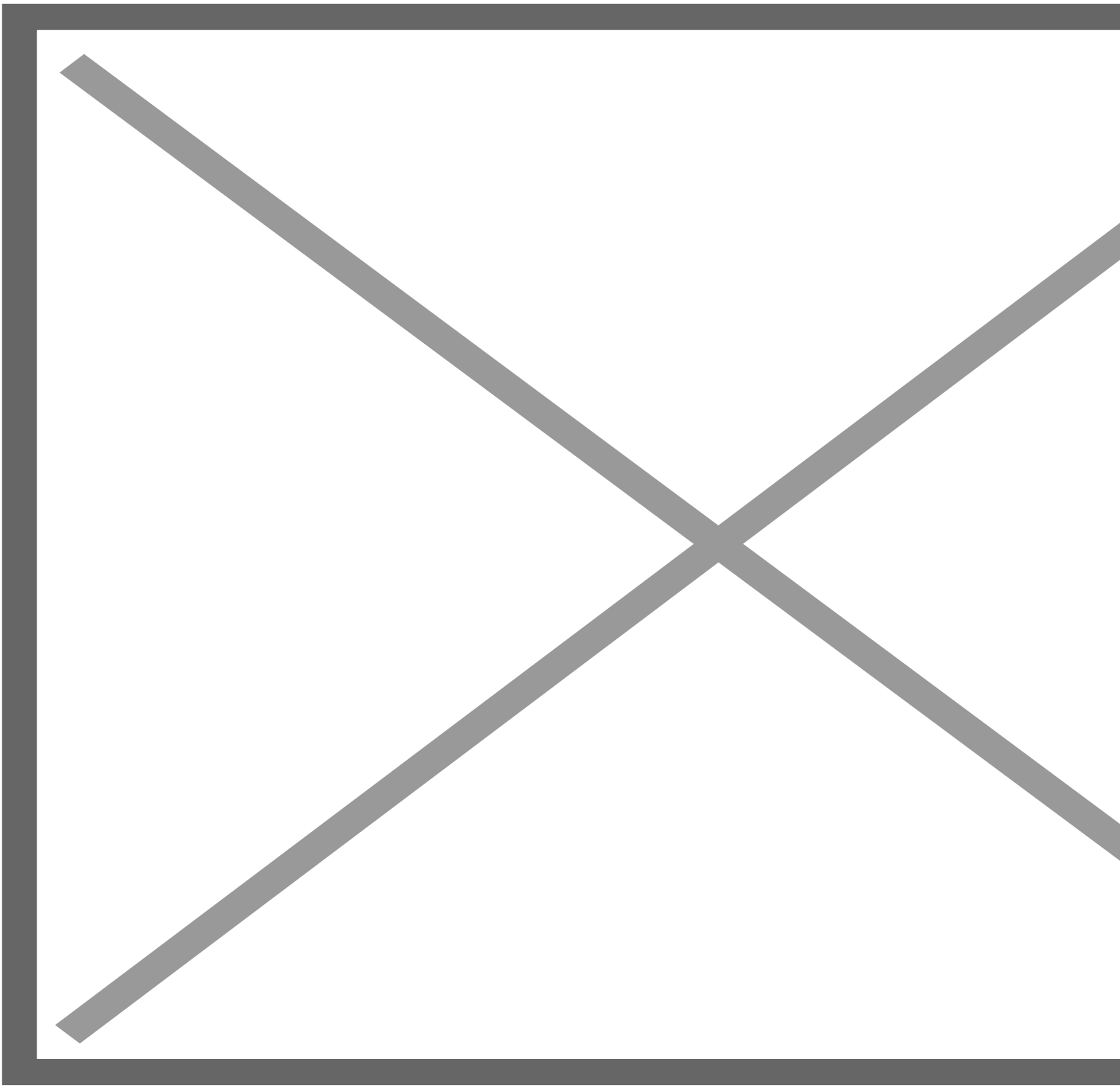

People join together to worship inside Hughes Auditorium. (Photo by Fiona Morgan)

After an estimated 50,000 Christian worshippers, celebrity pastors, and onlookers flocked to a rolling revival meeting at Asbury University over the past two weeks, the school's administration announced a new, limited schedule for prayer services in hopes of restoring order to the campus in this tiny central Kentucky town.

Asbury University President Kevin Brown made the announcement on February 19, telling those attending the revival, "We had authorities that had to redirect traffic away from Wilmore. Our town's institutions and our town's infrastructure is just not in a place to absorb the influx of the blessed guests that we have had."

This unprecedented number of people coming to Wilmore, a town of about 6,000, has caused safety concerns. Asbury administration said it had no other option but to enforce more regulations.

Some 7,000 people arrived the previous day alone, according to authorities. More than 3,000 of them waited outside in line in 30 to 40 degree weather watching a simulcast on outdoor screens of the proceedings inside Asbury's Hughes Auditorium.

"This is unprecedented for our university," said Mark Whitworth, Asbury's vice president for intercollegiate athletics and university communications. "It is obvious that God's hand is on this; we've seen that in just how he's met our needs spiritually and even logistically," he added, pointing to the state police and deputies from sheriff's departments from neighboring counties who came to assist the overwhelmed Wilmore police force.

Monday was the last day that revival services in Hughes were open to the public. Tuesday and Wednesday, only those age 25 and younger are allowed in Hughes for services at 7:30 p.m. The public may watch services from other simulcast venues or from a livestream on Asbury's website. Services in Hughes will end on Thursday, which is National Collegiate Day of Prayer, with a service for anyone 25 and younger.

Out of respect for people still traveling to Kentucky, Brown said continued services will be held at other venues in Central Kentucky, yet to be announced.

University officials hoped that those who have attended will bring revival into their own communities.

"Jesus calls us to go out, so now that we have come in and received amazing filling up, it's truly time to go out and share the gospel, and carry the light and fire into our local communities, our local homes, our local churches, schools, and workplaces," said Asbury Vice President of Enrollment and Marketing Jennifer McChord.

The revival broke out spontaneously on February 8 after a routine chapel service, which Asbury students attend three times a week.

Campus pastor Zach Meerkreebs spoke that day about what it means to love one another. "If you want to love others the way Jesus wants us to, we need to experience his love; we can't do it on our own," Meerkreebs said. "Become the love of God by experiencing the love of God."

After the chapel service, a few dozen students stayed to continue worshipping and praying. Word spread throughout the day that students were still in Hughes, and more and more students returned.

Sitting and standing, some with hands raised in prayer, others jumping, dancing, or kneeling, prayer has been constant inside the room. Groups of people gather in circles around the room to pray, often offering to pray for strangers they have just met. Lines form at the front of the room, as some seek prayer at the altar. A small group of musicians on stage plays worship songs.

On February 12, Asbury Seminary, a sister institution across the street, opened an overflow location in its Estes Chapel. By the evening of February 14, two more overflow locations were opened and filled, and a long line formed outside of Hughes. For eight days, worship continued 24 hours a day. Early in the morning on February 16, the auditorium was closed for the first time, but as soon as it reopened, more people flooded in and services continued.

Hundreds of staff, faculty, students, alumni, community members, and nearby church members have volunteered their time to keep the revival going, with staff from Asbury's enrollment office leading volunteer efforts. Administrators and faculty stayed in Hughes late into the night to work behind the scenes, keep things organized, and to speak on stage.

McChord said everything shared on stage is planned the day-of, and some even in the moment. "There is not a planned sermon; it is truly led by prayer and led by what Jesus wants to share," she said.

Throughout the day, students have gone on stage to share testimonies of how God changed their hearts during revival. They shared how God set them free from addictions, repaired relationships, and showed love to them.

A group of students from the University of Cincinnati, 100 miles away, said they saw the buzz on social media and came to witness the Holy Spirit. "We wanted to spend time with the community and worship God," Cincinnati student Zane Ramsey said.

Gianni Cotteta and his family drove from Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, on February 18. He said they made the 10-hour drive because of prompting from his sister-in-law, Genevieve, and because of Jesus.

"I didn't necessarily want to drive 10 hours, because I travel a lot and I like relaxing during the weekends. But I had a conviction when I heard what it was for, and I immediately put what I wanted to do aside and said, 'For you, Jesus, I'll go,'" Gianni said. "It's not about believing in Jesus, it's about following him."

McChord said she and other volunteers have talked to people from Finland, Portugal, the Philippines, California, Oregon, Florida, Hawaii, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Texas, and Canada, among other states and countries.

Despite the attempts to bring the Asbury revival to an end, said McChord, "I believe that this will absolutely grow, and I believe where it will grow from is our college students and our high school-age students. That generation is truly leading this. I believe God has something super special for Generation Z, and I believe he's moving them into a place to be leaders." —Religion News Service