

Guidance for Congregations

In response to H1N1 virus (swine flue) outbreak, spring 2009

As the media generates interest in the current outbreak of swine flu originating in Mexico, presbyteries and congregations have an opportunity for a ‘teachable moment’ about how to prepare for and respond to widespread contagious diseases. As you begin to plan, two items to address are what can/should be done NOW, and what may be necessary LATER.

WHAT TO DO NOW.....

Create a task force to coordinate the church’s response within the congregation and in the community. Name one person the primary contact for all messages related to the response.

Precautions

Take common sense precautions to slow or prevent the spread of the flu among members:

- Ask ill members to stay home. Provide alternative spiritual care for those who cannot attend worship or other functions due to these precautions.
- Ask members to sit in alternate rows, to provide the recommended 3’ social distance during an outbreak.
- Have facemasks available in the sanctuary for those who want them.
- Train ushers to assist those who may be affected. Tissues, small bottles of sanitizer, and masks can help.
- Have alcohol-based hand sanitizer in the restrooms for use after hand washing.
- Increase diligence when cleaning kitchens, restrooms, and classrooms. Use disinfectant spray on all hard surfaces, including door handles.
- Clean children’s toys in Sunday school classes and day care facilities after each class. Mix one part household bleach to ten

parts water (make fresh solution for the day of use), or use Clorox® surface spray with bleach.

- Turn off and mark all water fountains “do not use”.
- Increase the supervision of small children in hygiene habits (day care and Sunday school.)
- Consider changing communion practices (i.e. intinction rather than common plate and cups.) Prepare and serve elements wearing gloves and masks. Keep elements covered until used. Communicants can be brought forward by rows.
- During passing of the peace, simply smile and say the words, without hugs or handshakes.
- Ensure that those handling food (for any church functions including Meals on Wheels, food pantry or in-house food service) follow enhanced precautions for safe food handling, including the use of gloves, masks, and hair coverings.

Be aware of needs

Develop a list of individuals from the congregation and the community who may have special needs in the event of a medical emergency, and define how the church can be involved in their support.

Training

- Ask local hospital or health care agencies to provide training to members on palliative care and using infectious disease precautions when in the home of affected members.
- Those who will provide ongoing pastoral and spiritual care in homes during an outbreak should be REQUIRED to have infectious disease precaution training NOW.

Resources

Provide educational resources in simple, easily understood form.

- SIGNS – Make or ask children to make signs reminding people to wash their hands with soap and water frequently.
- BULLETIN INSERT – Create a bulletin insert encouraging best health practices. Inform members about “social distancing” so others will not be offended by a lack of hugs or handshakes, including during passing of the peace.
- HANDOUTS – prepare information (in the languages of the congregation and community) about caring for someone who has the flu. Include information about what services the church has available to help with home care.
- Order *Light Our Way – A Guide to Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster* online at www.pcusa.org/pda/tools/resources.htm. Provide copies for staff, church leadership, and those who may be engaged in spiritual and pastoral care.

PREPARING FOR LATER.....

Community

In a Stage 6 Pandemic, the method for containing the spread of the disease is to require social isolation of infected people; and to reduce opportunities for social contacts among the non-affected. Businesses could close; schools and day care centers would close; travel would be restricted.

Many governmental planners assume that churches will be the principle providers of palliative care and food distribution. There will be differing responses, depending on the state response plan and the perceived severity of the outbreak.

In order to know what your local plan will be, it is important to connect NOW with local

emergency management systems, either through the Emergency Operations Center or the local organization that responds in disaster. Many communities have a coordinating group called a VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) or a disaster committee that is part of the American Red Cross. Someone from the congregation should register with at least one of these groups as a point of contact for the church.

Clergy and other staff should consider taking Red Cross training and registering with the Red Cross. Knowing the community plan ahead of time will make it possible for church leadership to effectively address issues and problems with less frustration.

Current Status

As of April 29, 2009, the World Health Organization lists the current level of influenza pandemic alert (for swine flu) at stage 5. Please monitor the CDC web site for current information, www.cdc.gov/swineflu.

If the outbreak moves to a Stage 6 Pandemic, state and local authorities may initiate mandatory closures of public events and gatherings. Churches would be impacted if worship and meetings are prohibited.

Plan for Ministry Continuation

Before a Stage 6 Pandemic is declared, the church should have a plan for governance and decision-making, considering the inability to meet face to face. Conference calls might be used to conduct Session business; actions would need to be confirmed at a regular meeting following the lifting of restrictions.

Congregations and presbyteries can write specific guidelines in their standing rules concerning electronic meetings. In 2004, the GA considered a question from the ACC about email voting, and their reflections provide a good context for thinking through these issues. Reference – 2004 GA, item 4-14 or get a copy at:

[http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll?fn=default.htm\\$fn=templates\\$vid=GA216:10.1048/Enu\\$3.0](http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll?fn=default.htm$fn=templates$vid=GA216:10.1048/Enu$3.0) (search for ACC email)

Develop a means for worship when the congregation cannot gather. Some options:

- Contact local radio stations to explore remote feeds or taped worship.
- Contact the local Cable TV network about broadcasting videotape of worship services, church messages, or other events.
- Ask your computer internet service provider about podcasts and live internet feeds of worship, Sunday school classes, or other events. While the initial investment may be costly, this could open up a whole new ministry for those unable to attend - at a very reasonable continuing cost. Web based conferencing video/audio services such as skype.com or gotomeeting.com might be helpful.

Develop a continuation of business plan.

- Plan ways to encourage congregants to make their pledges. Give simple, clear instructions about the options open to members.
- Talk to vendors and utility companies about reduced operations at the church due to closures.
- Plan for continuing office operations and whether increased security will be warranted during closures. Can some employees work from home?

Ensure congregational care and support for ongoing community ministry.

- Food pantry ministry – discuss a plan to continue operations within the guidelines for public gatherings and with precautions not to spread the flu. Is home delivery viable?
- Member care group - explore how to provide palliative care and nutrition support to those unable to care for themselves (because of prior conditions or the flu.)

Meals on wheels or other home feeding programs may be expanded to accommodate additional needs.

Develop plans for responding to new needs as they arise.

- How can the church provide support to families if businesses, schools and manufacturing plants close? How will the church care for the homeless and the displaced due to economic disruptions in the community?
- How can churches work together to provide support to those affected? Can churches share Parish Nurses and Stephen Ministers?



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