

Are You Ready for a Health Emergency?

Congregational Ministry Guidelines for Worship



Health Emergency in the Faith Community

With the widespread talk of avian flu and a possible pandemic outbreak becoming part of the daily

news, taking the time to consider how you would see to the day-to-day needs of your community is just good planning. During times of crisis, the faith community is where many turn for support, particularly during a widespread health crisis. The very nature of community adds a level of risk to the spread of respiratory infections. How do we continue to offer our ministry, both on Sunday mornings and throughout the week, without putting our ministry personnel, lay leaders, and participants at risk? The following are some tips to consider in planning with your congregation.

Why This Topic at This Time?

In the last century, three influenza pandemics occurred in 1918, 1957, and 1968. While we don't know when a pandemic may hit, we do know it is a real possibility, and we need to be prepared.

Congregational Risks

Respiratory infections are generally passed through direct contact or airborne droplets spread from coughing and sneezing. The following are some common practices that make transmitting infections easier:

- ❖ shaking hands—with greeters, and after a service
- ❖ passing the peace
- ❖ communion services, especially if a common cup and loaf are used



- ❖ nursery and toddler room toys
- ❖ Sunday school rooms
- ❖ coffee hour and other social times
- ❖ visitation to hospitals, retirement homes, nursing homes, and shut-ins

What Can My Congregation Do?

- ❖ Establish an Emergency Planning Team or similar group to develop an Emergency Plan for the congregation. Think in terms of the broader context of an emergency—not just an epidemic. Aspects of the plan may be useful when you need to do a major phoning project.
- ❖ Delegate responsibility. One person cannot do it all and may not be available at the time of the emergency.
- ❖ Identify coordinators to be responsible for implementing the plan should the need arise.
- ❖ Communicate your plan to the congregation.
- ❖ Review current activities and identify the risks.
- ❖ Develop alternatives for practices that pose a health risk.
- ❖ Establish a fan-out communication list:
 1. Make a list of current members/adherents with phone numbers and e-mail addresses.
 2. Establish contact groups—try for 8 to 10 per list.
 3. Test for accuracy and completeness.
 4. Keep the list current by using it for other communication purposes.
- ❖ Practise your plan.



Managing the Risk

A key element of worship and the church in general is the “community.” How can we reduce the “risk” without sacrificing what we know as community?

- ❖ Congregation and Worship
 - Have alcohol-based sanitizer available for use by greeters, the minister, and members of the congregation.
 - An alternative for passing the peace may be to bow with hands together.
 - Use individual cups and bread cubes for communion services, with one or two people administering the elements.
- ❖ Sunday school
 - Stock Sunday school rooms with a box of tissues and a wastepaper basket; clean tables after each class using soap and water.
 - Sanitize toys each week. Your local public health office can provide tips on this, or put the toys through a dishwasher cycle.
- ❖ Food-related activities
 - Wash hands before handling food.
 - Practise good food-handling techniques.
 - Use a dishwasher or hot, soapy water and hot-water rinsing to clean communion elements, coffee mugs, etc.
 - Consider using disposable items where possible. Individual communion cups (available through United Church Resource Distribution).
- ❖ Alternatives to visitation
 - Abide by restrictions put in place for hospitals and nursing homes.
 - Establish a pastoral visitation team or increase the size of your existing team.
 - Provide pastoral visitation training.
 - Assign families to a visitation/contact list.
 - Develop a protocol for visitation by phone.



Prevention—the First Line of Defence

- ❖ Stay well:
 - Drink plenty of water/fluids.
 - Exercise regularly.
 - Eat a healthy diet.
 - Decrease stress.
 - Get enough rest.
- ❖ Get the annual flu shot.
- ❖ Wash your hands often using soap and warm running water, particularly after coughing or touching your nose.
- ❖ Keep an alcohol-based hand sanitizer handy.
- ❖ Stay at home if you are sick.

Need More Information?

- ❖ Local public health offices
 - Information on influenza including signs and symptoms
 - Information on proper hand washing techniques
 - Information on food handling techniques
- ❖ Provinces/territories
 - Look for information on their pandemic plan.
- ❖ Federal government
 - Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html
 - Influenza: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dc-ma/influenza/index_e.html
 - Avian influenza: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dc-ma/avia/index_e.html
- ❖ World Health Organization
 - Epidemic and Pandemic Alert and Response: www.who.int/csr/en

