

Congregational Planning for Flu Pandemic

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Mercy forever.

This resource is a guide for your congregation in preparing for a potential pandemic. We believe that every congregation should make at least basic preparation for this potential emergency as soon as possible. All of the elements of preparation described in this resource should be implemented as soon as possible.

There may be factors unique to your community that this resource can't foresee, but it will help you in making preparations focused on communication, worship, pastoral care, leadership and community outreach.

Communication

In the event of a pandemic, it would be important to be able to communicate rapidly with your congregation. It may be that people could be discouraged by public health officials from gathering in groups, such as at church. Many of the usual ways we communicate, for example the telephone and e-mail, may be over-taxed and unreliable. Therefore, the best way to guarantee the fullest communication is to identify and practice as many different ways to communicate as possible.

Even though you may develop many different means of communicating in order to prepare for a pandemic, you will find that they can be applied now to enhance your congregational life in many ways.

You may wish to identify members of your congregation who have particular expertise in information technology. They could be helpful in preparing your congregation to use many different ways of communicating. Enhanced means of communication should minimally involve telephone, e-mail, Web page, Internet groups, and podcasting.

Telephone & Cell Phone

Discuss with a representative of your phone provider what the available options are in your community for teleconferencing. Conference calls permit large groups of people to communicate at the same time from their homes and businesses. Your local phone provider may offer options you can consider for conference lines and group calls.

Additionally, you may make a search of the World Wide Web to identify free conference call facilities. There are also local and national companies that provide conference calling services. Usually, you only pay for the services when you actually use them, but if you wish to pursue this option you should arrange for an account with such companies ahead of time because they will be swamped with new requests if a pandemic happens.

Automated calling services are also available. To find some of the options available commercially, just enter "voice broadcasting service" in a Web search engine and you will find a number of vendors.

Text messaging services are often operational during times of crisis or tragedy when regular cell phone calling may not be possible. Encourage members to learn how to text in the event of an emergency.

Many congregations have prayer chains over the phone. You can expand this concept to create a congregational calling tree to be used for inquiring after the well-being of your members and sharing information.

E-mail

While there are still people without an e-mail address, most people today have one. E-mail is the most popular form of communication after the telephone. Request that congregational members provide an e-mail address and ask their permission to use it to share important information.

Create e-mail lists of all your members so that you can send messages to everyone simultaneously. Many congregations send a version of church newsletters electronically and save postage costs.

Assure members that you will use their e-mail addresses only according to the ways they agree for them to be used. Remember that the “polite” way of addressing group e-mail is to include the list of recipients in the “blind copy” field, so that the list of addresses doesn’t print out to be longer than the content of your message. Your members who are savvy in information technology can assist the congregation in drafting a privacy policy.

Web Page

If your congregation doesn’t already have a Web page, you really should! People increasingly turn to the Web for information. You can provide up-to-date information through the Web, which people can access from anywhere. You can also update the information from anywhere.

For tips on starting or enhancing your congregation Web presence, check out free Web hosting (see www.lutheransonline.com) and get timely information you can include on your site. Through Lutherans Online, you can create a free Web page. The site also contains elements of another useful communication tool, the Internet Group.

Internet Groups & Social Networking Sites

Internet groups and social networking sites (Facebook, My Space, etc.) are similar to Web pages, but have many more capabilities. An Internet Group goes beyond a Web page by not merely sharing information but also permitting a group of people to communicate with each other in important ways, including live-time electronic chatting, file sharing, and messaging.

If you have a commercial Web page, your current Internet service provider may offer elements of Internet Groups that could enhance your current Web page to include these functions. Again, the Lutherans Online Web pages include many of the same functions that Internet Groups can serve.

Congregations should have all of the above communication channels identified and frequently practiced so that in an emergency, you can reach as many people as possible as quickly as possible. Even without an emergency, it is still a good idea to create the capability to communicate your congregation’s programs in numerous ways.

Podcasting

Podcasting is a method of publishing files to the Internet, allowing users to subscribe to a feed and receive new files automatically by subscription, usually at no cost. Your congregation should be equipped to podcast worship and Bible studies as necessary.

Worship

In the event of a pandemic, some communities may face periods of quarantine. People may be asked to stay in their homes. Public health officials may discourage public gatherings, such as worship services. Your members, however, will yearn for the solace and comfort that worship provides in times of fear and crisis. Therefore, you may need to identify and practice ways to provide people with an experience of communal worship that can be done remotely and electronically. All of the channels of communication created for the pandemic can be used to communicate an experience of worship.

Perhaps you could plan for people to attend the worship service over a conference call. Perhaps you can videotape a copy and provide it over your Web site. People can gather in live-time Internet chat rooms created for your congregation to provide each other support. Copies of worship bulletins can be e-mailed or downloaded from your Web site or Internet Group so people can feel connected to the congregation. You can envision the channels of communication most suited to enable your congregation to have an experience of worship if they couldn’t gather publicly during a period of quarantine.

It will probably not be possible to gather everyone in a congregation in one single electronic format. By using all of the channels of communication available, you can reach as many people as possible with the sense of hope and comfort worship can bring.

LCMS World Relief and Human has prepared worship materials that will address the fears and anxieties people would experience in a crisis such as a pandemic. These materials will be downloadable from the LCMS home page in time of emergency.

Pastoral Care

Along with worship, pastoral care provides a great sense of hope and comfort when facing a difficult time. A time of pandemic could unfortunately bring significant illness and death into our lives. People would need pastoral care more than ever.

Obviously, the best way to provide pastoral care is through quiet and comforting personal presence. However, it is possible to provide pastoral care through the same electronic channels of communication that you would need to use to provide worship. It may be necessary to provide pastoral care through these electronic communication channels both because of the need to stay in quarantine and also because of the greater numbers of people who will need the care at that time. It may be impractical or even impossible to attend to the pastoral care needs of the entire congregation in person.

LCMS World Relief and Human Care has prepared pastoral care guides that will assist pastoral caregivers in caring for people under the specific circumstances of quarantine, mass illness, and death that pandemic could generate. To request these please go to our Web site at www.lcms.org/ca/worldrelief/dnews

Leadership

The potential of pandemic requires certain contingencies be considered in leadership issues. Congregations and districts together should prepare succession plans for leadership on the congregational and Synod levels in the event that leaders succumb to flu or are unavailable for lengthy periods of time. This may involve clarifying who is to function in certain roles if the people in those roles cannot do so. Some form of succession should be determined for every ordained or commissioned leader.

The shape of these succession plans can be different from place to place. They minimally detail:

- The conditions under which succession occurs, or does not occur. (One example would be a leader's incapacitation.)
- The method of notification
- The level of authority assumed by successors

Succession plans should also be three deep; that is, they should detail not just one person who succeeds another, but someone to succeed that individual as well. On a congregational level, this may include which area pastors assume responsibility for which congregations if a pastor is incapacitated.

Basic decision should be made about which congregational services are essential and should be maintained throughout a time of emergency and which congregational services can be suspended until after the emergency has passed.

On the congregational level, lay leaders should be identified to assume responsibility over various functions in the event that professional staff was unavailable. Office, maintenance, computer, and communication functions should each have lay leaders designated to assume responsibility in an emergency.

Community Outreach

While a pandemic may require that members of the congregation stay in their homes for a period of quarantine, the congregation and its facilities may also be of great benefit to the wider community. Hospitals, clinics, public health agencies, and disaster response organizations may be able to benefit by being able to use your facility to serve the community. Your church may be able to serve as an immunization site for your community. Or it may serve as a spill-over facility for a hospital or as a disaster service center.

Prepare a description of your facilities, such as a list of rooms, offices, kitchens, bathrooms, and other details of your building. Communicate with local emergency management officials in your community and offer your facility to be of use in a time of emergency.

Links for Pandemic Preparedness Planning

www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic

The above site contains up- to-date information on planning for many sectors, including government, business, and home. Additionally, the site provides planning information and checklists for faith-based organizations at:

www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/faithcomchecklist.html

Executive Summary:

- A pandemic is inevitable.
- With historic recurrence rates of 30 to 50 years, it is prudent to assume that a pandemic will occur at some point. The severity of such events is highly variable. Some estimates suggest the most severe pandemic to date, in 1918, killed up to 100 million people. Many pandemics affect the old and young; but some (including the 1918 event) can, perversely, affect the healthiest people.
- 1918 may not be a worst case.
- It is certainly true that the 1918 event was extreme relative to other pandemics in history. However, many published “worst case” scenarios take 1918 as a base. There is a danger that we over optimize to this one scenario. There are other forms of pandemic besides influenza, and some have higher case mortality. Pandemic preparedness should consider a range of scenarios to ensure plans are appropriately flexible.
- Economic impacts may be significant.
- A repeat of the 1918 event is expected to cause a global recession, with estimated impacts ranging from 1 percent to 10 percent of global Gross Domestic Product. Most industries will be affected; some more than others. In particular, industries with significant face to face contact will be impacted significantly. Insurers’ investment assets may be affected, depending on the mix held. Wider economic and social effects may lead to secondary forms of loss for insurers.
- Many insurance losses are possible.
- For some classes of business, such as life and health, it is clear that the impact will be adverse. For other classes of business, it is less clear; but many forms of liability covers -- including general liability, D&O, and medical malpractice as well as specific products offering business interruption and event cancellation -- could be triggered. Inner limits for pandemic losses (vertical and sideways) may help to contain exposure.
- Secondary impacts may occur.
- Events causing significant global and societal turmoil can give rise to considerable secondary impacts. It is far from clear which of these, if any, would occur; but for resilience planning purposes, it is worth considering them.
- For example, the lawlessness experienced in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina could be repeated if police services are affected. Traditional claims such as fire loss may be exacerbated if fire emergency services have depleted efficiency and if tradesmen are in short supply.