



## Guidance for Congregations on Contagious Disease Outbreaks

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As the media generates interest in the current outbreak of the Ebola virus originating in West Africa, Presbyteries and Congregations have an opportunity for a 'teachable moment' about how to prepare for and respond to widespread contagious diseases.

There are two distinct sets of concerns as congregations begin to plan how to respond the present situation: what can and should be done **now** and what may be necessary **later**.

### **What to do NOW:**

Create a TASK FORCE to coordinate the response of the church both within the congregation and in the community. Within this group ONE PERSON should be named the Information Contact for all messages related to the response. It is vitally important that information shared with the community and the congregation be accurate, current and shared calmly. The TASK FORCE can work together to be sure that communications are simple and clear before they are sent.

**Take common sense precautions** to slow or even prevent the spread of contagious diseases within the congregation by:

- Get a FLU SHOT. Remaining healthy during the flu season enables members to be able to assist with the needs of others should the opportunity arise. Remaining healthy also eliminates the possibility of having ones flu mistaken for infection from Ebola, and avoids the testing and containment that may be required.
- Call the Emergency Manager in your community and find out how planning for a response to any contagious disease outbreak may impact the ministry of the church. Is there a point at which churches may be asked to suspend some services (i.e. worship, children's programs, day care centers)?
- Require those who have traveled in affected areas or been in close contact with those who have been in the affected area to report to the nearest medical facility should they become ill.
- Ask those who are ill with any contagious disease (flu, cold) to stay at home rather than attending worship, committee meetings or any other church functions. Provide alternative spiritual care for those who are unable to attend such meetings as a result of these precautions.
- Should the presence of flu or other contagious disease be reported in the community, worshippers could be seated in alternating rows to provide for the recommended 3' social distance between persons during the outbreak.
- Have face masks available in the sanctuary for those who might want them.
- Train ushers to assist those who may be affected. Having tissues, small bottles of sanitizer and masks can help.

- Remind congregants of the importance of basic hygiene practices during the flu season. Have hand sanitizer in the restrooms for use after hand washing.
- Increase the diligence with which kitchens, restrooms and classrooms are cleaned. Use disinfectant spray on all surfaces including door handles. Children's toys in Sunday School classes and day care facilities should be cleaned after each class. Churches can premix their own sanitizing cleaner with a 1:10 ratio of household bleach to water (one part bleach to ten parts water) or use Clorox surface spray with bleach.
- Turn off and mark all water fountains as not to be used.
- Increase the supervision of small children in their hygiene habits in day care programs and Sunday School.
- PDA is developing guidance for communion during a contagious disease outbreak that will address theological, pastoral and practical concerns that may arise during a contagious disease outbreak.
- Develop a list of those from the congregation and the community may have special needs in the event of a medical emergency and how the church can be involved in their support.
- Local hospital and health care agencies may be able to train members of the congregation ahead of time in providing palliative care and using infectious disease precautions when in the home of affected members.
- ALL of those providing ongoing pastoral and spiritual care in homes during the outbreak should be REQUIRED to have infectious disease precaution training NOW.
- Ensure that all those handling food (for any church functions including Meals on Wheels, Food Pantry or in-house food service) follow closely enhanced precautions for safe food handling including the use of gloves, masks and hair coverings. In addition, limit the transmission of the virus by those serving themselves by offering foods in pre-plated single servings. Avoid putting foods in containers that those serving themselves can reach their hand directly into the food.

**Provide educational resources** in simple, easily understood form.

- Have a bulletin insert on best health practices including 'social distancing' so that people are not offended by the lack of hugs or shaking hands. Rather than hugging or shaking hands during the Passing of the Peace, worshippers can simply smile and say the words.
- Make signs to go up around the church to remind people to wash their hands with soap and water frequently. This could be a Sunday School project that would have the dual function of teaching children important hygiene practices and remind the congregation how to wash their hands.
- Have information about care for someone with the flu in the languages of the congregation and the community. These quick handouts could have the church information including what services may be available to help with home care. Translations of these posters could be done by foreign language students in the congregation.
- Download "*Light Our Way, A Guide Spiritual Care in times of Disaster* to share with staff, church leadership and those who may be engaged in spiritual and pastoral care. Find the resource or order information at <http://pda.pcusa.org/pda/resource/light-our-way/>.

Gather leadership to plan what to do **NEXT:**

### **Plan for Ministry Continuation:**

In a Stage 6 Pandemic the methodology for containing the spread of the disease is to require social isolation of the infected people and reduce the opportunities for social contacts among the non-affected. Factories could be closed; schools and day care centers could also be closed. Travel will be restricted. Many governmental planners already assume that Churches will be the principle provider of palliative care and food distribution. There will be differing responses depending on the state response plan and the perceived severity of the outbreak.

If the outbreak moves to a Stage 6 Pandemic state and local authorities may initiate mandatory closures of public events and gatherings. This would impact churches directly if worship and other meetings such as committees and Session are prohibited.

In advance of this declaration, the Church should provide for a means of governance and decision making that takes into account the inability to meet face to face. Conference calls might be used to conduct Session business, though the actions would need to be confirmed at the next 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 Advisory Committee on the Constitution about email voting, and their reflections provide a good context for thinking through many of these issues.

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 register with the Red Cross. Knowing what the community plan is ahead of time will make it possible for the church leadership to effectively address issues and problems with less frustration.

**What you can do now to prepare for that eventuality is develop a means for worship when the congregation cannot gather. Here are some options:**

- Contact local radio stations to find out what might be involved in either live remote feeds or taped worship.
- Look into web-based video/audio options such as skype.com, gotomeeting.com, or pod-casting worship services or educational events.

**❖ Develop a Continuation of Business Plan**

- Plan for ways to encourage congregants make their pledge in the absence of being in worship. Give simple clear instructions about the options open to members.
- Talk to vendors and utility companies about what might happen in case operations are reduced at the church due to closures.
- Plan for continuing operations of the office and whether increased security will be warranted during closures. Can some employees work from home?

**❖ Ensure congregational care and support for ongoing community ministry operations.**

- If the church has a food pantry, discuss with those who do that ministry how they can plan to continue operations within the guidelines for public gatherings and at the same time take precautions not to spread the flu. Is home delivery viable?
- A member care group should explore how to provide palliative care and nutrition support to persons who are unable to care for themselves either because of prior conditions or the flu. Meals on wheels or other home feeding programs may be expanded to accommodate the need for home delivered meals.

**❖ 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?