

The Flu Outbreak and Our Worship Service

Public Worship and Public Health

As the body of Christ in holy communion, we welcome people to the Lord's table to share in God's *shalom*—peace, justice, health, and well-being for all people. Around this table we serve one another with the love and care that the Lord extends to us. We should always be attentive to one another's health and safety; during any possible pandemic, we must especially careful. To that end, we offer these guidelines for the celebration of the Lord's Supper and other aspects of public worship.

Consider Wisdom

Although we strongly encourage the frequent celebration of communion, in the extraordinary event of a flu outbreak that risks public health in your community, you may wish to forego communion temporarily. If concerns over public health have escalated, it may be necessary or mandated by civil authority (as has been the case at other times in history) to suspend public worship services altogether until danger is past. You will need to use pastoral wisdom and discretion on this matter. In the event of such a situation, consider making resources available for people to worship in their homes.

Preparation of the Elements

Anyone with cold or flu symptoms (including cough or fever) or any communicable illness should not participate in preparing the elements. Encourage those individuals to stay home and take care of themselves until at least two days after symptoms have ceased.

All persons preparing Communion should wash their hands thoroughly before beginning the preparations.

All persons preparing Communion should wear protective gloves and masks whenever they are in contact with or near the elements. It is recommended that only those persons preparing the Communion wine or juice and bread be in the vicinity of the preparations while the elements are uncovered.

When using a loaf of bread for intinction, take care to use bread that is able to hold together well enough so as not to crumble, drop, or fall off when saturated in the cup.

You may wish to minimize the amount of bread exposed to an airborne pathogen by having the presider break the bread at table. Those serving can tear off large pieces

to hand to each communicant, ensuring that only the server's clean hands touch the bread.

The pieces of bread need to be large enough to allow them to be dipped into the cup without the communicant's fingers needing to touch the wine/juice.

If you are preparing trays, bread should be pre-cut into large pieces with a sanitized electric knife so that communicants only touch the piece of bread they will consume. (This will require more trays than usual.) Bread should be spread out on the plate one row deep so that people do not have to touch any other piece.

Wine or juice should be served in single cups or in a chalice used for intinction. Make sure all the elements are covered and safe from being handled by anyone else until the communion service itself.

Serving Communion

In the interest of hygiene, the fewer people who handle the communion elements during the worship service, the better.

Hand sanitizer is a quick and effective way to make sure that those who are serving or presiding at table have clean hands. At the point in the service where the presider(s) and server(s) have touched everything they need to before serving communion (offering plates, hymnbooks, etc.), the presider(s) and server(s) should cleanse their hands before approaching the table. With practice and preparation, this can be done quickly and efficiently.

On one hand, the presider and communion servers may wish to use discretion in sanitizing their hands, screening this act from the view of the congregation. Passing a bottle of hand sanitizer around is not a good symbolic action, since part of the meaning of communion is the notion that the Lord welcomes sinners, those who are unclean, into the divine presence. Saying you have to be sanitized to partake of the Lord's Supper can undermine the symbolism of God's grace.

On the other hand, in the event of serious health concerns, you may want such hand washing to be done publicly and visibly to reassure the congregation. (There is, in fact, a historic liturgical practice in many traditions associated with preparation for the table—the "lavabo," from the Latin, "I will wash.") This cleansing should be done at some distance from the table. An empty bowl, a pitcher full of water, and some towels can be placed on a small table off to the side where the presider may "wash up" before approaching the table; a pump bottle of hand sanitizer may be hidden discretely among these items. You may ask an assistant to pour water over the hands of those serving and presiding. Each person will need to dry their hands on their own clean white towel after washing them. The pouring of water into the bowl could remind people of the connection between Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

While washing, say a prayer for those taking communion that their eyes be opened and they see the presence of the risen Lord.

Do not uncover the elements until the beginning of the communion liturgy, and do not handle them until the words of institution said at the end of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.

It is preferable to have people to come forward to receive communion than to have the open elements exposed to various people as they are passed around the pews.

Ushers can bring communicants forward one row at a time or by family groups (those who are already going to be in proximity to one another). Each church can develop a means of providing communion for anyone who is reluctant to come forward.

Those serving the bread can either place a single large piece of bread in the communicant's hand or hold a plate of bread with the bread mostly covered exposing a few pieces of bread at a time for the communicants to take.

Those serving the wine/juice can either hand a single cup of wine/juice to the communicants or present the cup for intinction ensuring that the communicants' fingers or hands do not touch either the cup or the wine/juice.

When presenting the cup for intinction, servers should tilt the cup slightly toward the communicant to enable the juice to flow toward the bread. This should help avoid fingers accidentally touching the wine/juice.

Other Issues and Ideas

Talk to those who regularly serve as greeters, ushers, or servers. Urge them to recruit substitutes if they are experiencing any cold or flu symptoms. This may mean having a larger pool of volunteers to draw from than usual.

In a public health crisis, invite worshipers to use a wider "envelope" of personal space, perhaps skipping rows between church pews and spreading out across the sanctuary.

When passing the peace, instead of shaking hands, you may encourage people to consider other gestures of peace and reconciliation: a smile, a nod, a bow, or even the "peace sign," as appropriate in your context.

In times of widespread illness, suspend the "greeting line" at the end of worship. This is especially important anytime the pastor has any cold or flu symptoms!

You might consider placing bottles of hand sanitizer or alcohol-based hand wipes in

the church restrooms, gathering areas, and at the entrance(s) of the church building for anyone to use.

Use your church newsletter and/or electronic communications to reassure your community that you are taking necessary precautions. Instruct people in the newsletter and bulletin on how to take communion carefully. In certain situations, you may decide to hold meetings by conference call or in some other electronic manner.

Above all, pray for one another! Pray for Christ's healing power and grace, not only for your own community, but for people around the world.

Christ, Our Healer

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a long history of a wide range of practices surrounding the serving of communion, accommodating variations in procedure when such situations arise. We give thanks that this is the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, who devoted so much of his public ministry to the healing of the sick. Therefore, we continue to put our trust in Christ, who gave his own life for our eternal health and salvation.

Guidance to Congregations on the H1N1 Flu Outbreak

As the media generates interest in the current outbreak of H1N1 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.

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.

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

- Asking those who are ill 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.
- Depending on the availability of space, worshippers may 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.
- 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.
- Consider changing communion practices to limit the possibility of transmitting the virus. i.e. intinction rather than a common passed plate and cups. Those preparing elements should use gloves and masks. Elements

should remain covered until used and served by those wearing masks and gloves. Communicants can be brought forward by rows.

- 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.

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 could be done by foreign language students in the congregation.
- Order copies of "Light Our Way, A Guide to the Provision of Spiritual Care in times of Disaster" from PDA. Provide copies to: staff, church leadership and all those who may be engaged in spiritual and pastoral care.

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 would be closed. Travel will be restricted. Many governmental

planners already assume that Churches will be the principle provider of palliate 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 (we are at Stage 4 as of Apr 27, 2009, please monitor the CDC web site for current status: www.cdc.gov/swineflu), 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 ACC about email voting, and their reflections provide a good context for thinking through any of these issues. Reference – 2004 GA, item 4-14 or get a copy at:

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

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.
 - Talk to the local Cable TV network and find out if they are willing to broadcast videotape of worship services, church messages and other events.
 - Find out from your computer internet service provider about providing podcasts and live internet feeds of worship, Sunday School classes and

other events. While the initial investment may be costly, in the long term this could open up a whole new ministry of the church to those unable to attend at a very reasonable continuing cost. Consider using other web based conferencing video and audio services such as skype.com or gotomeeting.com as alternatives.

❖ **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?