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Guidelines for Congregations Concerning COVID-19

Amid escalating concerns about the outbreak of Coronavirus, congregations can play an important role as communities prepare and respond. These practices and resources will help churches to be proactive in both the short and long term; while also preparing for other kinds of emergencies.

In the short term

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.

Take Precautions:

- *Ask ill members to stay home. Provide alternative spiritual care for those who cannot attend worship or other functions due to these precautions.*
- *Have alcohol-based hand sanitizer (minimum 60% alcohol) in the restrooms for use after hand washing, and throughout the sanctuary for use before communion.*
- *Prepare elements wearing gloves and masks, and keep elements covered until used.*
- *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.*
- *During passing of the peace, simply smile and say the words, without hugs or handshakes. Some churches are adopting an 'elbow bump' option as well.*
- *Ensure that those handling food (for any church functions or volunteer opportunities) 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.

Use Trusted Resources:

Monitor the following sites for up to date information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/covid19

The World Health Organization: www.who.int/coronavirus

Local and State Health Departments (find yours at the links below):

- State Health Departments: <https://www.cste.org/page/EpiOnCall>
- Local Health Departments: <https://www.naccho.org/membership/lhd-directory>

Visit <https://disciples.org/dns/disciples-and-covid-19/> and www.weekofcompassion.org for up to date information and tools for planning and responding to needs.

For the long term

Plan for Ministry Continuation

In a [Stage 6 Pandemic](#), the method for containing the spread of 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. In this event, churches would be encouraged to cancel worship services and other gatherings and activities, while sharing in discernment about those mission and service commitments that may need to continue.

- *The church should have a plan for governance and decision-making in such a scenario, such as using conference calls to conduct critical business.*
- *Encourage congregants to make their pledges online or by automatic withdrawal.*
- *Talk to vendors and utility companies about reduced operations at the church due to closures.*
- *Plan for continuing office operations, and consider how to prepare the facilities for prolonged closures. Can some employees work from home? Are you able to communicate with congregants and access congregational information remotely? How will you ensure payroll and necessary administrative tasks continue?*

Some options for worship when the congregation cannot gather:

- *Contact local radio and TV stations to explore broadcasting options.*
- *Use social media or podcasts to livestream worship activities or to hold virtual Sunday school classes or other events.*

Ensure congregational care and support for ongoing community ministry:

- *Determine what ministries are critical and should continue without interruption, keeping in mind emergency management and health department recommendations.*
- *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 - explore how to provide palliative care and nutrition support to those unable to care for themselves.*

Plan to respond as new needs 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 ecumenical and interfaith partners work together to provide support to those affected?*
- *How will the church coordinate with local emergency management and health department officials when providing support to members and the community?*

If cases are confirmed in your community, especially if individuals connected to your church become ill, please contact Week of Compassion by email info@weekofcompassion.org or phone/text 203-772-8597. With respect for patient confidentiality, as well as pastoral boundaries, we ask that you do not share names or other personal information.

By taking these precautions--and by having important conversations ahead of the need-- your congregation can serve a critical role in keeping members of the wider community safe and well.

Special thanks to our partners at Presbyterian Disaster Assistance for providing the template for these guidelines.