

# CONGREGATIONAL PREPARATION FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

*Pandemic influenza is a potential “crisis.” In Chinese, the two characters that create this word represent “danger” and “opportunity.” It is easy to see the dangers of a pandemic; it is much harder to see the possible positive outcomes. As people of faith, we are called to see all of life as an opportunity to serve and comfort our brothers and sisters, no matter what the circumstances are.*

## **BACKGROUND**

The reality is that in a “normal” flu season there are:

- 200,000 people who are hospitalized
- 36,000 people who will die from complications of the flu

Every year, the seasonal flu gives us the opportunity to prepare for the possibility of Pandemic Influenza. It is possible that these preparations will save lives during the “normal” flu season – and we will be prepared for the possibility of pandemic when it arrives.

## **THE OPPORTUNITY TO LIVE**

In Jeremiah we read about God’s hope and a plan for us:

*“For I know the plan I have for you” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

What we often forget are the words from the same chapter that introduce us to these words of comfort spoken to an enslaved people in exile:

*“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”*

We are called to live in the face of that which may distress us deeply. God’s people were not called to sit on the sidelines and simply wait for God to remove the bondage of slavery. God called them to live – to enjoy life – to find things to celebrate and to take the risk that their slavery might go on for a long time.

In the same way, we are also called to live in the face of the possibility of a pandemic influenza. We should not put our heads in the sand and assume that it will pass us by. We are called to live, to prepare, to serve and to comfort – to risk facing our fears and trusting God with our lives.

## **Checklist:**

- \_\_\_ Gather a group – members of your congregation to work together
- \_\_\_ Invite your pastor to participate

## THE OPPORTUNITY TO PREPARE

In the Old Testament, we read the story about Noah, building an ark with not a cloud in the sky. It is not hard to imagine the comments from his neighbors, who were undoubtedly talking behind his back about the crazy idea he had. Then it started to rain, and gradually it dawned on everyone that Noah wasn't as crazy as they thought.

The story of the wise virgins in the New Testament also illustrates this idea of being prepared. Five women brought extra oil so that when the bridegroom was late, they still had enough. The other five had to go out to buy oil when he appeared, because they were not prepared – and they missed the whole party.

Being prepared does not mean that we don't trust God. Noah trusted God **and** he built a boat. We are called to do the same thing – get ready for flu season and by doing so, prepare for the possibility of pandemic influenza – **and** trust God through it all.

### Checklist:

Personal Preparedness: What does your family need in order to be prepared?

- \_\_\_ Visit [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov) for general suggestions for taking care of your family.
- \_\_\_ Visit [www.providentliving.org](http://www.providentliving.org) for ideas about food storage.
- \_\_\_ Prepare to shelter in place for a period of 3 to 6 weeks
- \_\_\_ If schools close, prepare to provide educational and entertainment opportunities for your children

### Congregational Preparedness

- \_\_\_ Start a discussion about issues related to seasonal flu and pandemic flu
  - What can the congregation do to minimize the spread of illness?
    - “Passing the Peace” and hand shaking
    - Rituals of faith such as communion
  - How can you encourage people to stay home when they are sick?
  - How will you communicate this information to the congregation?
  - Who are the people who are most vulnerable to flu?
  - What plans do you have for helping these vulnerable individuals meet their needs?
  - How will you provide spiritual care for persons who have the flu?
  - How will you provide spiritual care for the families of those who have the flu?
- \_\_\_ Invite a resource person to join your discussion
  - Local Public Health Departments and Hospitals are looking for opportunities to provide education.
  - Local Public Health Departments and Hospitals have materials regarding both seasonal flu and pandemic influenza that they will provide to you.

- Address rumors, misinformation, fear and anxiety by distributing accurate information and by being prepared.
- Make plans to communicate with people of cultures, languages and reading levels that are different than your own.

— Consider the impact of Pandemic

- Prepare for the possibility that public gatherings may be discouraged, including worship services
- In the event of a pandemic, it is estimated that possibly 40% of the workforce may be ill or not able to work:
  - Schools and day care centers may have to close
  - Hospitals probably will not have the capacity to care for everyone who is sick
  - Grocery stores may have limited supplies – generally only a 3 day supply at any given time
  - Water departments may not be operational
  - There are many possibilities – there is no absolute knowledge of what might happen
- Congregations need to encourage **personal preparedness** for their members **and** they need to **make plans** for their ministries.

— Practical Suggestions

- Post hand washing and cough etiquette signs in restrooms and kitchen areas
- Develop calling trees or e-mail lists to provide information and support to congregation members
- Know who will be responsible for key congregation functions and how decisions regarding these issues will be made and communicated
- Additional web resources for gathering factual information:

[www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

[www.bioprep.org](http://www.bioprep.org)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

[www.hhs.state.ne.us/pandemic/](http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/pandemic/)

### THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE

There are many scripture passages that encourage us to find ways of serving our brothers and sisters, neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. This passage from Matthew is just one example.

*“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; I needed clothes and you clothed me; I was sick and you looked after me; I was in prison and you came to visit me . . . whatever you did to one of the least of these my brothers of mine, you did it for me.”*

*Matthew 25:35-40*

In responding to the “call to serve” we must combine the “willingness to take a risk” with “trusting God” in order to reach out to others. Thinking of others and making plans for

meeting their needs gives us a solid foundation from which to serve. There will be multiple opportunities for serving people, if we have considered a few basics.

**Checklist:**

- \_\_\_ Who has special needs (such as restricted mobility, need for service animal, substance abuse) in your congregation or community?
- \_\_\_ Can you identify all the people who are homebound in your congregation/community? What are their special needs?
- \_\_\_ Are there people who may not understand information that is being distributed because they do not speak the language or because they cannot comprehend the information? How can you help in these situations?
- \_\_\_ How will your congregation help address the special needs that might arise for any of these individuals during either the “flu season” or during a pandemic influenza outbreak?
- \_\_\_ Is the congregation willing to become a supply center for those who are unable to stockpile personal supplies for themselves, primarily because they cannot afford to do so?
- \_\_\_ Is the congregation willing to provide for the food and/or other needs of those who loose their employment because of business losses that may happen during a pandemic?
- \_\_\_ Is your congregation willing to communicate accurate information to your members and the community? How will they do this?
- \_\_\_ Share what you are learning and your preparedness plans with other congregations and organizations in the community to serve as many needs as possible. You don’t have to do everything, but your congregation can be the hub of a network of resources for meeting needs.

**THE OPPORTUNITY TO COMFORT**

We know that people will die from “seasonal flu” this winter. In the event of a pandemic, there will be many deaths – and we will undoubtedly know people who die – and certainly will know families who experience the loss of loved ones. We will be called upon to provide comfort in the face of great loss. We must remember, for ourselves and for others that

*“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear . . .”*  
*Psalm 46:1-3*

**Checklist:**

For the individual:

- \_\_\_ Intentional care of one’s spirit so that when called upon, you are centered in a way that allows you to care for others.
- \_\_\_ Know that you are only there to help; you do not need to assume any responsibility for what has happened.
- \_\_\_ You don’t have to have answers. Your role is to listen to the stories and the questions – and allow people the opportunity to figure out their own answers.

For the Congregation:

- How will we provide care for the families who have deaths? How will funerals be handled?
- Hospitals may close to the public. How will the congregation provide a spiritual presence to those who are hospitalized?
- How can the congregation support care givers in the family? Is there any possibility for respite? Who will provide this care?
- Plan for intentional communication with those who are ill or who experience death in their families: phone trees, card showers, e-mail lists.
- Plan to keep those who are home bound aware of what is happening so that their isolation does not create feelings of anxiety, fear or panic.

### **WHY DO WE THINK ABOUT THIS NOW?**

#### **The function of the brain**

In the face of an overwhelming situation, the brain's primary responsibility is to ensure our survival. This means that the instinctual brain takes over, and we generally either fight or run away. In either case, instinct is in charge – but, if we have a plan, our rational brain can go to the plan and override our “fight or flight” reaction. So, we need to think ahead, because if and when a pandemic becomes a reality, we will not be able to plan well – probably not even think well. Thinking about these things now, when we can be very rational, will insure that we will take better care of ourselves, our families and our communities.

#### **To save lives from the seasonal flu**

Everything that we learn to do to prepare for a pandemic holds the possibility of saving someone's life by keeping them from getting the seasonal flu. Every practice that we use to save a life during this year's flu season means that we are better prepared to cope with pandemic influenza.

#### **To provide accurate information which reduces anxiety is good spiritual care**

Spiritual care comes in a variety of forms. Reducing anxiety by being prepared and by knowing the facts is one way to attend to spiritual health. When people's anxiety is reduced, they are better able to see signs of hope, know that their life has meaning and feel connected to one another and experience spiritual centeredness.

**“Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark.”**

∞ George Iles

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