



Notes on the Role of Worshipping Communities amid Pandemic

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What is the role of congregations when a community faces possible epidemic?
Contemplating a potential flu pandemic makes us all aware of the remarkable range and depth of community assets that protect the health of the population and provide comfort and care to those may fall ill. The United States has a particularly rich array of churches, mosques, temples and places of worship that represent nearly every faith tradition in the human experience. They have particular strengths that are especially valuable when trust, caring, comfort and confidence may be as important as our medical technologies in the face of epidemic disease. The particular strengths of congregations are certainly part of the community's capacity to respond in crisis.

We never know when a new flu virus may emerge that creates new threats and challenges. Congregations develop the webs of trusted relationships all the time that turn out to be extremely useful in a crisis. Congregations have unique strengths which, when linked, the complementary strengths of healthcare and public health organizations can create a strong, resilient community capable of confronting many challenges.

Congregations in Memphis that are associated with the Congregational Health Network or the United Methodist Conferences are already linked to a broad set of connections that help you and your members find out what to do and where to go in crisis. Your Liaisons know the Methodist LeBonheur Healthcare navigators. They are always a good "first call" when confused. But your congregation has important strengths on its own that are important upon which to build in a time of community need.

The strength to accompany. Faith entities commonly are welcomed into the lives of those who would otherwise be isolated. They tend to know which of their own members and neighbors may be likely to be confined at home or in institutions. They can often move across barriers of family, race, ethnicity, class and other distinctions to create the bonds of relationship across which valid information and help about pandemic flu might flow. Key questions to ask:

- 1 What likely-to-be overlooked people do we accompany already, such as the homebound elderly or adolescents estranged from school or family?
- 2 How might we form appropriate relationships of trust with others who may need us in crisis?
- 3 Do we have outreach or inreach committees that could be prepared to play an explicit role around a possible pandemic, such as prayer groups who may be tuned to care for others easily overlooked?

- 4 How might we act to ensure the public authorities know about these isolated people that might otherwise be bypassed by the community?

The Strength to Convene. Faith entities often gather in very small and very large groups that cross many lines in order to care for people, or to discuss important moral issues. Sometimes faith leaders work together to form coalitions that are the building block of larger community efforts, such as we've seen recently in the wake of Katrina.

- 4 What groups is our congregation already part of that might help convene people in the context of pandemic flu?
- 5 How might we work with other faith leaders to help create a network of trust and confidence that can extend the capacity of public agencies?
- 6 Are there particular groups in the community that might need special attention or preparation, such as recent immigrants? Could we help convene to ensure they are included in community planning?

The Strength to Connect. Worshipping communities gather people from many backgrounds, ages and interests. These relationships build significant networks of trust that are crucial in the context of emergencies, which often face breakdowns in normal lines of coordination. These complex relationships often extend into neighborhoods and groups that may not even be visible to high level formal authorities. Thus faith groups can be crucial connectors in pandemic conditions and prevent the instinct to work alone.

- 7 Let your members know about the numerous connections members already have to multiple agencies and institutions in your community.
- 8 Notice to what agencies your members work in and provide some level of leadership. These may be especially useful when formal lines of relationship are damaged or stressed by crisis.
- 9 Personal relationship augments the formal lines of collaboration among institutions. Consider having different members become familiar with the kinds of paperwork or policies that might govern access to services in a time of crisis so they can help others who may need assistance.

Strength to Frame or Story. Worshipping communities often are trusted to get the story correct, to place disturbing or difficult information in the context of a hopeful and compassionate framework. A pandemic may create swirls of rumor and fear that make effective community response difficult. From crucial "simple" information such as where to access vaccine, to potentially complex and controversial instructions for quarantine, faith groups will be expected to get the story correct. Public sources of information are not trusted by some groups, who may look instead to faith leaders and congregations.

- 10 Do we know where to get timely and accurate information about flu and health challenges?
- 11 Have we considered what kind of theological or ethical issues may need to be addressed around pandemic flu? If needed, where would we seek trusted advice from other faith leaders facing similar challenges?
- 12 Have we considered how we will communicate to all age groups and their caregivers, including children, parents and those that may be isolated?

Strength to give Sanctuary. From ancient times houses of worship have been considered to be sanctuaries in times of crisis. Faith groups extend that meaning to include the idea of providing safe space for for making available vaccine and health services, care and comfort for those that are ill and to those that may care for them.

- 13 How might our building be useful to the community as a safe space amid flu?
- 14 Are there things we should prepare for to make sure our building is as safe and accessible as neighbors may expect it to be? Do we need to consider having masks and other sanitary aids on hand?
- 15 Should we plan on ensuring that we are able to secure resources and material that may be needed to provide safe shelter in crisis?
- 16 Should we think about how our pattern of public gatherings may need to be altered in light of the potential risks of infectious spread? Should we prepare policies in advance so that people will know whether our public gatherings are proceeding as planned or in an altered form?

Strength to Bless. While public institutions have legal authority to enforce public policies, worshipping groups have a special power to offer blessing, comfort and encouragement. Pandemic flu has the potential to make people fearful, inflaming old prejudices and divisions. Faith leaders should focus on holding up community values of trust, inclusion, fairness and compassion, on which all public policies rest.

- 17 How might we form open relationships now with groups most likely to face exclusion or isolation in the context of pandemic?
- 18 How can we anticipate the pattern of fears most likely to arise in pandemic and practice messages aimed at alleviating those fears in advance?

Strength to pray and offer ritual. Worshipping communities worship. In a time of pandemic faith groups will face challenges to continue to offer up prayer, rituals of many kinds that undergird the hope, trust and compassion of their members and the community.

- 19 How can we plan to offer worship and participation in key rituals even when faced by pandemic?
- 20 Can we anticipate the need for new kinds of ceremonies or, perhaps those less commonly used in non-pandemic times?
- 21 Should we consider meeting with other faith leaders to think about interfaith services that may be appropriate amid pandemic?

Strength to Endure. All of our faith traditions have seen many other pandemics and catastrophes before. This historical perspective is a great strength. While we prepare to protect the community and its vulnerable members, our faith leaders can be confident that this potential pandemic will be endured and survived as have many others.

- 22 Are we familiar with how our faith tradition has responded to other pandemics and large scale challenges?
- 23 Are there particular revered leaders whose memory may offer relevant guidance to us amid another pandemic season?
- 24 In what way can we learn from other generations who have faced difficult times? How did they do it? What sustained and encouraged them?

By focusing on the strengths of our worshipping communities, our preparations for pandemic conditions build on the foundations that have stood against fear and panic many times before, offering our community reality-based encouragement that lets us go about the work of prevention and care that honors God's hope for us all.