




Congregational Planning for

Pandemics

Basic preparations for communication, worship, pastoral care, leadership and community outreach. 



▶ **Although pandemics occur infrequently, it's important for every congregation to have a plan in place in the event of an emergency.** This resource is a guide to assist your congregation in preparing for a potential flu pandemic. All of the elements described in this resource should be implemented as soon as possible.

There may be factors unique to your community that this resource can't foresee, but it will help you in making basic preparations for communication, worship, pastoral care, leadership and community outreach.

Communication

In the event of a pandemic, it's important to be able to communicate rapidly with all members of your congregation, especially those who are at high risk. These include anyone living alone, such as the elderly, single parents and those with small children. Congregations, districts and circuits should also have a plan in place to check on pastors, especially those in remote areas.

Public health officials may discourage people from gathering in groups, such as at church. In addition, many of the usual ways we communicate (e.g., telephone, email) may be over-taxed and unreliable. Therefore, the best way to guarantee the fullest communication possible is to set up and practice many different ways of communication.

You may wish to identify members of your congregation who have particular expertise in information technology. These people may be helpful in preparing your congregation to use different methods of communication. At a minimum, it's important to be able to communicate by telephone, email, website and social media.

This may mean that you have to develop a few new ways of communicating as you prepare for a possible pandemic. You may find that these new methods can be applied right away to enhance your congregational life.

Telephone

Start out by researching your options for teleconferencing. Conference calls permit large groups of people to communicate at the same time from their homes and/or businesses. Your local phone provider may offer options for conference lines and group calls.

You may also be able to find free conference call services online or through local or national companies. Usually you only pay for the services when you actually use them. But if you wish to pursue this option, you should arrange for an account ahead of time. They will be swamped with new requests if a pandemic happens.



Automated calling services are available as well. Do an online search for "voice broadcasting service," and you'll find a number of commercial vendors.

Text messaging services often remain operational during times of crisis or tragedy, even when it's not possible to make regular calls. Encourage members to learn how to text.

Many congregations have prayer chains that are passed along over the phone. You can expand this concept to create a congregational calling tree to use for inquiring after the well-being of your members and for sharing information.

Email

Today, email is one of the most popular forms of communication. Request that congregational members provide an email address, and ask for their permission to use it to share important information. Encourage any members who don't have an email address to set up a free account and learn how to use it.

Create email lists of all your members so that you can send messages to everyone simultaneously. Many congregations send a version of their newsletters electronically to save on postage costs.

Assure members that you will only use their email addresses as specified in the permission statement to which they have agreed. Remember that the "polite" way of addressing group emails is to include the list of recipients in the "blind copy" or "bcc" field, so that the list of addresses is kept private and isn't longer than the content of your message. Your information



technology savvy members can assist the congregation in drafting a privacy policy.

Church Website and Social Media

If your church has a website and is also present on social media platforms, be sure to take full advantage of those tools as well.

Place any notices in a prominent, immediately visible location on the home page of your website with a link to a blog article or webpage that lays out the full details of your plan and contingencies.

These announcements should also be sent out on any official church social media platforms, such as your Facebook page, Twitter account or Instagram account. In those posts, link people back to your webpage, mentioned above, for more information. After email and texting, social media will be the fastest way to spread the news. It also allows your members to easily spread the word using their own personal networks.

Worship and Prayer

In the event of a pandemic, people may be asked to stay in their homes and public gatherings may be discouraged. Even so, the members of Christ's Body, the Church, yearn for the solace and comfort of the Divine Service — both to hear the Word of God together and simply to be strengthened by the presence of their fellow Christians. The need for this mutual Christian consolation is all the greater in times of fear and crisis. As such, effort should be made to continue holding regular services whenever possible, only cancelling as a matter of last resort. Leaders should take suitable precautions and encourage sound hygiene behaviors to limit the spread of infection (see Links for Pandemic Preparedness Planning below).

No remote or electronic means can ever provide a satisfactory substitute for this; they can, however, be your next best resort in times of necessity. All major social media platforms offer live-streaming services. Look into Facebook or YouTube specifically, as they offer the most robust, yet easy-to-use tools for this. In addition, recorded videos or video streams can be uploaded to many of the same social media and communication channels you will already be putting in place. Even posting the lectionary readings and prayers for that Sunday on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter can be a significant contribution to the spiritual lives of your homebound members.

For some congregations, existing channels of communication for homebound members can be adapted to serve the wider membership. For others, where “gathering” the congregation into a single electronic format is not possible, efforts should be made to reach as many as possible with whatever can most closely imitate a live, physical gathering. Note: Holy Communion by electronic means is neither necessary nor advisable (see the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations' *Opinion on DVD Consecration*: lcms.org/dvd-consecration).

The Lord has commanded that we all “call upon” His name “in every trouble” (Small Catechism, Second Commandment: catechism.cph.org/en/10-commandmentssecond.html). The

simple prayer “Lord, have mercy” is the most fitting touchstone for every Christian. In particular, the Litany is the church's prayer when calamity strikes and we do not know what else to say (“The Litany” can be found on Page 288 in *Lutheran Service Book*: lcms.org/litany). It is ideal for families and other small gatherings and is time-tested. Finally, it is for just such occasions that Christians have learned to pray “Our Father,” even when alone, knowing that the whole communion of saints prays together as one body joined together in Christ, who has promised to remain among us (Matt. 18:20; 28:20). LCMS Worship has other resources for times of calamity that can be found here:

- **Propers in Time of Pestilence**
lcms.org/propers-in-pestilence
- **Worship resources for times of disaster**
lcms.org/disaster-worship-resources
- **Hymns in times of disaster**
lcms.org/disaster-hymn-resources

Pastoral Care

As with corporate worship, it is difficult to envision any satisfactory substitute for face-to-face pastoral care. Pastoral letters, however, are as old as the New Testament. Emails, podcasts and videos can be efficient ways for the pastor to speak comfort to the congregation generally and individually, with speed and without violating quarantines or direct physical contact.

Pastors have an obligation and duty to their flock, in ordinary times of sickness and death, to visit, commend, bury and comfort the bereaved; the demands in a pandemic may greatly increase, as may the personal danger to those who give aid in every form. Pastors, leaders, medical workers and every Christian will benefit from reading Martin Luther's letter to Pastor John Hess¹ on questions about serving during a plague outbreak — including when to stay or flee. Though 500 years old, in many ways Luther's observations and advice retain their value, since he experienced frequently what we have come to consider rare.

LCMS World Relief and Human Care Disaster Response has prepared pastoral guides that will assist spiritual caregivers to show mercy in the specific circumstances of quarantine, mass illness and death that a pandemic could generate:

- **Spiritual Care Companion for Time of Disaster**
(also in Spanish)
This thorough companion is for any spiritual caregiver who spends more than a few minutes talking with victims. Are you looking for disaster-appropriate and extensive Scripture readings, hymns, prayers or blessings all in

¹ Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” in *Devotional Writings II*, vol. 43 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 119–38.

one place? Look no further. *The quick reference guide at the beginning helps direct you to exactly what you need.* (Softcover, 48 pages)

- **Mercy in Action: A Guide for Pastors in the Midst of Disaster** (also in Spanish)
When a natural or man-made disaster occurs, how should the church respond? This resource assists pastors in considering what to do before, during and after a disaster in their community. It also makes the case for why the church should respond and offers suggestions for doing just that.
- **Trusting in His Love** (also in Spanish)
Tough times and difficult situations often drive us to question why things happen or whether God is good. This devotional booklet helps readers instead turn to God's Word, where we find His love through our Savior, Jesus Christ.
- **Mercy Booklet Series**
In a variety of timely yet timeless essays, Lutheran theologians look at Christ's mercy and the way in which He showers healing, compassion and forgiveness on His people. Readers will learn about mercy's roots in the Old Testament, how to make the case for showing mercy in the world, and much more.
- **Bringing God's Comfort and Peace in Tragedy**
This easy reference guide is intended for volunteers or others who may be looking for a few appropriate Scripture passages, blessings and prayers. It can be quickly unfolded by a team leader for devotions or for that helpful guidance on keeping the right mindset while responding to a disaster.
- **The Lord's Mercy Endures Forever** (also in Spanish)
This book offers 40 devotions — each of which includes a Scripture passage, a meditation, a prayer and a hymn — that are focused on bringing God's comfort to those who are struggling after a disaster or crisis. Although this resource is distinctly Christian, it is intended for anyone who is suffering from the brokenness of this world.

To obtain a copy of these resources, email disaster@lcms.org or call the LCMS Church Information Center at 888-930-4438.

Leadership

Preparing for a pandemic also means creating contingency plans for leadership roles. Congregations and districts should work together to prepare succession plans for leadership on the congregational and Synod levels in the event that leaders succumb to the flu or are unavailable for lengthy periods of time. This may involve clarifying who is to function in certain roles if the people in those roles cannot do so. Some form of succession should be determined for every ordained or commissioned leader.

The shape of these succession plans can be different from place to place. At a minimum, they should include:

- The conditions under which succession occurs (e.g., incapacitation of a leader);
- The method of notification; and
- The level of authority assumed by successors.

Succession plans should also be three deep — that is, they should detail not just one person who succeeds another, but someone to succeed that individual as well. On a congregational level, this may include designating other area pastors to assume responsibility for a congregation if its pastor is incapacitated. This may also include preparing sermons ahead of time in case another pastor or elder has to fill in if the congregation's pastor becomes ill.

You should also make basic decisions about which congregational services are essential and should be maintained throughout a time of emergency, and which congregational services can be suspended until the emergency has passed.

On the congregational level, lay leaders should be identified to assume responsibility over various functions in the event that professional staff members are unavailable. Lay leaders should be designated to assume responsibility for office, maintenance, computer and communication functions in an emergency.

Congregations should also provide products to help contain the spread of illness, such as hand sanitizer, tissues in the pews, cleaning of pews and other surfaces after services, and so on. Consider providing latex gloves to protect the volunteers who will be doing the cleaning. These are just some examples of the precautionary measures you can take. More can be found on the CDC website.

Community Outreach

While a pandemic may require members of the congregation to quarantine themselves in their homes for a period of time, the congregation and its facilities may also be of great benefit to the wider community. Hospitals, clinics, public health agencies and disaster-response organizations may be able to use your facility to serve the community. Your church may be able to serve as an immunization site, a spillover facility for a hospital or a disaster service center.

Prepare a description of your facilities (i.e., a list of rooms, offices, kitchens, bathrooms and other details of your building). Reach out to emergency-management officials in your community and offer to let your facility be used during a crisis.

Links for Pandemic Preparedness Planning

- cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources — Basic information and resources on influenza pandemics.
- cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/archived/community-planning.html — Resources specifically for faith-based organizations.