



# Congregational Planning Checklist for Public Health Concerns

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With the outbreaks of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the United States, congregations and houses of worship need to be well-informed and well-prepared. According to the World Health Organization, COVID-19 is now a pandemic. A step-by-step approach to prepare for a serious outbreak can be useful.

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# Congregational Planning Checklist for Public Health Concerns

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This supplement explains how you and your congregation can plan for the impact of a public health issue in your church. Our goal at Lutheran Disaster Response is to provide suggestions should a major outbreak occur in your community. Not every measure on this list is necessary in every situation, but they're things to consider should a worst-case scenario, such as a pandemic, arise.

## Things to think about:

- Create a committee to develop and maintain an outbreak preparedness-and-response plan.

Notes:

- Determine, to the best of your ability, the outbreak's probable impact on your congregation's usual activities and worship.

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- Determine the probable impact of an outbreak on education programs.

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- Determine the probable impact of an outbreak on administrative meetings.

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- Determine the probable impact of an outbreak on mission work.

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- Determine how an outbreak would affect the outside resources on which your church depends (i.e. mailing, travel, etc.).

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- Determine what will happen if the pastor, church staff or church schoolteachers or staff are unable to perform their duties.

## **Communication, communication, communication**

- Communicate with and educate your staff and members about the outbreak.
- Distribute information to your congregation about the outbreak: symptoms, how the disease is spread, how to protect oneself, etc.
- Frequently share information about your church's response plan with the congregation.
- Participate in the activities of the community's health concern plan.
- Understand the differing roles of federal, state and local public health agencies, and know what to expect from whom in case of a pandemic.
- Work with individuals in public health and emergency response to share preparedness plans and designate a contact person to communicate with them.
- Assist local emergency responders and health care facilities to improve availability of advice and timely health care service.
- Develop tools to communicate information about the outbreak status and your church's actions.

Before a widespread outbreak occurs:

- Consider adding a conference-call line to the church's current telephone system for meetings in time of quarantine.
- Consider starting an online church group on Skype, Facebook or another social media platform.

## **Plan for worship and education activities to be provided electronically (e.g. internet, phone)**

- Create a list of possible lay worship leaders.
  
- Create a list of lay leaders to call on affected people.
  
- Create a list of individuals willing to teach church school.
  
- Provide an information session on respective duties for all interested lay individuals.
  
- Test your church's response with a simulation or drill, and then evaluate and revise your plan.  
Notes:

### **Other planning matters:**

- Check the source of your church's water supply and know when water is and isn't safe to drink.
- Be prepared to write a letter to your mayor expressing concern if your city, town or village is not preparing well enough.
- Remind staff and congregation to always follow instructions given by public health officials.
- Identify the local/state authority responsible for declaring public health emergencies.
- Make sure that, in distributing information, you're sensitive to people's language barriers, reading abilities and physical or mental disabilities.
- Plan for the impact of a major health outbreak on your staff and members.
- Encourage members and staff to practice common-sense preparedness, such as gathering important records (insurance documents, legal documents, etc.).
- Evaluate access to local mental-health and social services.
- Identify those with special needs and include them in your response plan. Establish relationships with them so they know what to do in a crisis.

### **Set up policies and protocol for staff and church**

- Set up non-penalizing policies for staff leave in case of personal or family illness during a public health concern.
- Set up mandatory sick leave policy for staff who are suspected of being ill or who become ill at the worksite.
- Make sure employees know they are to remain at home until symptom-free and ready to return to work.
- Set up flexible work-from-home hours.
- Identify regular church activities that could contribute to the spreading of the disease and teach congregation members proper etiquette that prevents disease transmission.
- Follow the travel recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Set procedures for activating your church's health emergency response.
- Allocate resources to protect your staff and members, such as extra hand sanitizer and soap.
- Promote respiratory hygiene as well as cough and hand-washing etiquette.
- Consider providing services most needed during a health crisis: mental/spiritual health counseling, social services, etc.
- Create a succession plan should pastoral or congregational leaders be unable to perform their duties for an extended period of time.

### **Coordination with external entities**

- Coordinate with external organizations to help your community.
- Contact the synod bishop's office to communicate a response.
- Contact the Lutheran Disaster Response affiliate coordinator in your state:  
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- Contact local ecumenical partners and/or VOAD or COAD partners to offer aid, ask for help or share plans.
- Consider volunteering your facility as an overflow site for local hospitals or a site for feeding vulnerable populations.
- Work together with other faith-based organizations to plan for an outbreak.

Notes:

For additional resources please see the following sites:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html)
- CDC Guidance for communities and faith-based organizations: [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html)
- World Health Organization: [who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019)
- Lutheran Disaster Response's *Congregational Disaster Preparedness Guidebook*, a useful resource for step-by-step planning: [download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Congregational\\_Disaster\\_Preparedness\\_Guide\\_Lutheran\\_Disaster\\_Response.pdf?\\_ga=2.116588161.643590776.1583259371-1225870290.1577208539](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Congregational_Disaster_Preparedness_Guide_Lutheran_Disaster_Response.pdf?_ga=2.116588161.643590776.1583259371-1225870290.1577208539)