

Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plan

October 10, 2009

Proposed

Why would a Church need a Pandemic Preparedness Plan?

The church needs to consider the potential pandemic for two reasons:

- The Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918 killed as many Canadians as the preceding World War (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties#Casualties_by_1914_borders, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1918_flu_pandemic). Globally the 1918 Pandemic killed many more people than World War 1 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_influenza, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_and_disasters_by_death_toll#Wars_and_armed_conflicts). That represents a worst case scenario of a pandemic, one that is both highly infectious and frequently fatal. If we are hit with a pandemic like that then no organization will be able to maintain "Business as Usual"
- Church Services can provide a specific & unfortunate role in the spread of an infection. A Church service brings together a group of people, in our case about 100, who don't interact with each other frequently during the week. For a couple of hours we breath same air, shake hands and generally interact. Then we leave and go to our families, workspaces & schools for the following week. One person can come to a service infected, and infect other people at the service, those other people then spread the infection to their families, workplaces & schools. This process happened during the SARS outbreak in Toronto and significantly extended the breadth & length of the outbreak.
(http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/updates/archives/hu_03/sars/exposure_sites_070703.pdf)

What is the Goal of our Pandemic Preparedness Plan

Our primary goal is to maintain the church as a functioning community, serving the spiritual needs of our congregation and our wider community, while minimizing the risk of infection to our congregation and through our congregation to the wider community.

A secondary goal is that, as a part of civil society, we can help educate our church body on appropriate ways to behave in their daily lives and hence reduce infection & sickness rates in the wider community.

The purpose of having a plan is so that we know what we will do ahead of time, and so that we don't have to make complex decisions under time pressure and in the heat of an emotional crisis.

Where do these ideas come from?

There is a lot of information available via the web on what is recommended and what other organizations are doing.

These are web sites we regard as authoritative. If the advice on these web sites changes we need to change accordingly.

- Canadian Federal Government: <http://www.fightflu.ca> and <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/index-eng.php>
- US Government: <http://www.cdc.gov/H1N1FLU/>
- World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/>

There are also many web sites which indicate what other organizations are doing. For example:

<http://www.ontario.anglican.ca/docs/Faith%20Group%20Planning%20Template.pdf>

<http://www.flu.gov/professional/business/index.html>

These are less authoritative. Just because someone else is doing something doesn't mean it's necessarily a good idea.

In addition this information includes input from Pastor Dan, who recently attended a seminar on pandemic preparedness for clergy, Linda Moore as a registered nurse and Robin Thurlow as a medical administrator.

Steps to avoid Infection during a Service

Hand Washing

Thorough hand washing is better than using hand cleansers, but it is impractical to ask the whole congregation to wash their hands when they arrive at church. Instead we will ask them to wash their hands thoroughly before they come to church.

Hand Cleanser

We will provide hand cleanser pump dispensers at the front door & lobby. We will encourage all attendees to use it if they have not recently washed their hands when entering the building and especially before shaking hands. The current government recommendation is to use sanitizers with no fragrance and 40 – 60% alcohol. See <http://www.cdc.gov/cleanhands/>

Communion

It is our tradition to tear bread from a communal loaf & dip it into a communal cup. To reduce the possibility of hand to bread to hand infection we will switch to using individual wafers, but we still plan to dip them into a communal cup.

We will remind the congregation that when dipping the wafer into the cup they should avoid dipping their fingers into the liquid.

Those preparing the plate of wafers & serving the communion will be asked to specifically clean their hands immediately beforehand.

This goes beyond current government advice, but seems a practical step we can take that could reduce risk without any significant costs or risks.

Hand shaking

Hand to hand transmission is a significant concern. Hand to cloth to hand transmission is less frequent. So we will recommend hugging as an alternative to hand shaking. However we do not plan to ban or forbid hand shaking. We will be emphasizing hand cleanliness instead.

This goes beyond current government advice, but seems a practical step we can take that could reduce risk without any significant costs or risks

Cleaning surfaces

Another frequent transmission route is from a hand to a surface to another hand. We will make a specific effort to keep frequently touched surfaces within the church building clean. This would include door knobs, light switches. lectern, musical Instruments & mixing board, altars, basement tables....

This can be done in two steps:

- Before the service and through the week we will make a specific cleaning pass at these surfaces.

- Make disinfectant wipes available at various places around the church (especially Sunday School & youth areas) and encourage volunteers to use them to clean as they go.

Coughing & Sneezing

Firstly, as part of our education process we will be asking people not to sneeze into their hands. Instead they should sneeze into a tissue or their sleeve. We will recommend that anyone who uses a tissue discards it and cleans their hands as soon as possible.

Attendees who are coughing will be actively offered tissues by the ushers.

Collecting Tissues

The information available indicates that tissues can be disposed of in the normal methods. The flu virus is disposed of by droplets, not by aerosol. That means that a tissue cannot “infect” the air around it, so there is no need to treat tissues as “toxic”.

People emptying wastebaskets should try to avoid hand contact with tissues, and should wash their hands afterwards, but this is normal behavior.

Nursery & Sunday school

There are a number of recommendations here, but mostly they reiterate the general points made elsewhere in this plan:

- Workers in the Nursery or Sunday school should clean their hands before the service
- Workers in the Nursery or Sunday school should stay home if they are unwell. It is better to be short handed or even to have to cancel the program for a week than risk infecting the children.
- Parents will be reminded to keep their children at home if they are sick.

One specific goal is to keep the toys very clean. We will remove any toys that cannot be easily cleaned and we will wash the toys each week. We believe we can use the dishwasher to clean the toys thoroughly. We may reduce the amount of toys in use so that they can fit into the dishwasher.

Absence from Church

Choosing to stay home

Members of the congregation who fell unwell will be encouraged to stay home. The symptoms of H1N1 are essentially the same as other flu strains

- Almost always: Cough and fever
- Common: Fatigue, Muscle aches, Sore throat, Headache, Decreased appetite, Runny nose
- Sometimes: Nausea, Vomiting, Diarrhea

(source: http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/fs-fr_h1n1-eng.php)

Although they will miss their friends and maybe feel a duty to come to church, we need to explain that the risk of infecting other people is too high.

We will also advise family members of people who are unwell, or more specifically those who share a house with someone who is unwell, to stay home.

The current recommendations are that people should remain isolated until they are symptom-free and specifically free of fever (without the use of fever reducing medication) for 24 hours. (see <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance/exclusion.htm>)

Remote Church Experience

Is there something we can do to provide those who are unwell with a church experience? Can we record & distribute our series by web? If not can we find a TV or web service that we would recommend?

We will ask the Senior Pastor as our spiritual leader to consider this and make appropriate decisions.

Visiting the Sick

We will encourage people to contact those who are unwell and not attending church so they feel less abandoned.

We will encourage visitation by phone as the first and safest step.

Delivering food and leaving it at the door may seem impersonal, but it is a very practical approach to providing a very useful service, especially if the main homemaker is the family member who is sick.

Those who feel they need to visit in person, or family members & caregivers who cannot avoid close contact, will be encouraged to review sources such as http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance_homecare.htm for up to date guidance.

The current recommendation is to remain 2 meters from the patient if possible, or to wear a surgical mask if closer. Plus of course hand washing after the visit.

Educating the Church Family

We need to educate the church family on appropriate ways to act that minimize infection rates while within the church building. We can go an extra step and also educate them on appropriate ways to act in their daily lives that minimize the risk of infection to themselves and to others.

We propose to use one service to present this information early in the flu season. Linda Moore (as a qualified nurse) has access to a video and has volunteered to present the information. The key points will be:

- Hand Washing & Hand Cleansers
- Coughing & Sneezing into a sleeve or tissue
- Staying at home when sick

The Church Building during the rest of the week

Members of staff and volunteers also need to stay home if they feel unwell. "Soldiering on" in this case is counterproductive.

If Dan and Suzy are both sick, or have family members who are sick, we will be forced to close the office.

For legal liability reasons we cannot provide detailed advice to non-church groups who use the building for other purposes during the week. However we can:

- Provide them with a clean environment
- Provide them with free access to hand sanitizer & tissues
- Ask them to make a point of keeping frequently touched surfaces clean
- Recommend that they read the authoritative web information sources such as <http://www.fightflu.ca>

Alternate use of the Building

Hospitals are being asked to plan for ways to accommodate increased numbers of patients, and to isolate flu patients from other patients, especially in the Emergency & Admitting process. We are located next to the local hospital and we do have an accessible facility with several large spaces separated by doors.

If this becomes a Public Health issue and our building is commandeered then we will comply and cooperate. In this scenario the community clearly needs our building badly.

However we do not plan to proactively approach the Hospital about this. All Hospitals are building extensive H1N1 preparedness plans and we can be confident they know where to find us if they need us.

Outreach Activities

What can we do to serve the needs to our community beyond our congregation?

- We should pray for the sick individually and communally.
- Those who feel called to give comfort to the sick should do so, using the same precautions described elsewhere in this document. This is a delicate balance. We do not intend to push people into actions which could cause infection to them or to others, but people should go where the Lord calls them.

When would this plan take effect?

For the 2009/2010 Flu season we propose that the steps proposed in this plan are put into action before the end of 2009. They would remain in effect until the flu season is judged to have passed, perhaps the end of March.

This plan would then remain on file and would be used again if future flu seasons threaten to be unusually widespread or virulent. There is nothing in this plan which is unique to the H1N1 strain of influenza.

Ideas considered and rejected

Individual Communion Cups

We considered moving from a shared communion cup to individual mini-cups. The current government recommendations indicate that the risk of infection through this route is very slight. We believe that this would change the feel of the communion, making it less of a shared experience.

Sitting apart

Should families be encouraged to sit together & leave 1 empty chair between each family group? We considered this idea and rejected it. It would be against to our goals of community, impossible to enforce and unlikely to make any difference since a sneeze could travel forward to the next row or further than one chair space.

What to do if the pastor is sick?

Should we plan to cancel services or to attend a different church if our pastor is sick and we are unable to provide a service?

We have situations from time to time where the senior pastor is absent for one reason or another. We have always managed to provide a service.

- We have Cory as a junior pastor who can lead a service
- We have some lay people in our congregation who can lead a service
- We are part of the greater FMCC who can provide guest speakers from other churches in our area.

We believe that the existing systems for providing a service when the senior pastor is absent are sufficient to mitigate this risk.

Outreach Activities

Should we visit the sick in the Kemptville Hospital?

Should we provide specific worship services where families of those already sick are encouraged to come, to receive some comfort?

These ideas were rejected as likely to add to, rather than reduce, the risk of transmitting the infection.

Masks

Should church members wear masks to the service?

No. The church service is intended to be a gathering of people who are well, so there is no need to wear masks.

North Grenville Community Church

We are strongly recommending that people who are sick do not come to church, to avoid infecting others.

It is recommended for people who must be in close contact with those who are sick to wear masks when close to the patient. This would apply to people visiting the sick, but mostly to caregivers.