

# Influenza Pandemic Arrangements for Churches

## Influenza pandemic arrangements

The government has issued guidance to churches with regard to how to conduct themselves in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak.

The current expectation of virology experts is that a swine 'flu pandemic will strike Britain in September or October this year, following the holiday season, and that between 25% and 50% of the population will be affected. In the vast majority of cases, this will be a mild attack, but in a small minority of cases it will be serious or fatal. The infection will spread easily and rapidly throughout the population. Even so, measures to slow down its spread are extremely important, since the fewer the overall number of people who catch the virus, the smaller the size of the minority for whom it will be fatal.

It is not possible to be certain exactly how many people will catch the virus, nor when it will strike, nor how pernicious it will prove to be, nor of its duration as a dominant national experience, nor who will be most at risk. One puzzling aspect of the current more limited swine 'flu outbreak in different parts of the world is that a high proportion of the most serious cases have been among otherwise healthy younger people, rather than the vulnerable elderly with a range of other health problems, as would normally be expected to be the case with the more usual types of 'flu.

The government has given general advice regarding the conduct of individuals during a 'flu pandemic:

- Everyone with any symptoms should stay at home
- Use tissues when coughing or sneezing. Use each tissue once and dispose of it after use
- Wash hands frequently
- Minimise touching of eyes, nose and mouth

The following particular advice to churches has come from government publications and other sources:

## Medical matters

- Adopt robust policies which advise and encourage people with symptoms to remain at home
- The government will be providing antiviral medicines for those displaying symptoms, and churches will want to consider how they can most effectively be involved in informing their affected members of how to obtain these drugs. Churches may also want to consider forming a "flu' friend' network which will enable fit people to collect drugs on behalf of those displaying symptoms
- As the government's promotional information will not reach everyone, consider how the church can best keep its own congregation fully informed of health advice and information. Be willing to explain and support the reasons behind emergency public health policies and practices in order to reduce anxieties and tensions.
- Adopt procedures for dealing with anyone who is discovered to be, or falls, ill in church or during a church activity;
- Be aware that any emergency public services provided by central or local government will only be for the duration of a pandemic, and will cease immediately afterwards.

## Possible curtailment of activities

- Although the government advises churches to assume that all meetings should continue to be held as normal, churches need to be open to advice from the relevant local public authorities and agencies to suspend gatherings should particular circumstances locally make this desirable

- The government is likely to advise against overseas travel during a pandemic. This could affect international conferences as well as planned holidays or tours by churches, groups or individuals.
- The government, or its local agencies, may advise schools, including faith schools, to close for certain periods during a pandemic, where it is calculated that this step would significantly help to reduce the duration of the pandemic. Churches may need to apply this same advice to their own pre-school, children's or youth activities.
- Consider what non-personal ways of keeping in touch with people may need to be devised or developed – e.g. newsletters, CDs and web sites.

### **Hygiene on church premises**

- Ensure that adequate supplies of cleaning materials are readily available;
- Ensure regular cleaning of all hard surfaces;
- Consider installing automatic or foot-operated taps, dryers and waste bins;
- Provide hand-cleansers (e.g. alcohol-based gel in pump-action containers<sup>1</sup>) at the entrances to churches and to rooms and sites where there are no hand-washing facilities: this is a rapid-dry cleansing fluid similar to those used in hospitals;
- Avoid all unnecessary physical contact;
- Keep church buildings well-ventilated.

### **Communion services**

- Suspend the use of the “common cup” at Communion services. In doing so, churches do not need to buy permanent individual cups, as disposable individual cups are available inexpensively<sup>2</sup>.
- Although permanent individual cups carry less risk than a “common cup,” churches which already use permanent individual cups may wish to consider using disposable individual cups during the period of a pandemic, as this will reduce risk still further;
- Churches should suspend the practice of using a common loaf and instead use bread which has been hygienically pre-cut into small pieces;

### **Catering arrangements**

- Issue guidance to church members advising them not to hold or move cups by the rim when setting out crockery in preparation for serving refreshments after services. Cups should be held by the base or by the handles, so that there is no hand contact with the area of the cup which is in contact with the lips of the consumer.
- At the height of any pandemic, it may be wise for churches to suspend the provision of refreshments altogether

### **Staffing the church programme**

- Quite apart from the fact that those who stay at home with symptoms will be unavailable, be aware that other individuals may decide voluntarily to restrict their own movements, attendances and activities, which may make it difficult to continue to staff a normal programme of activities.
- No pastor or other key workers should “struggle on” out of a misguided sense of duty. Instead, churches should put in place contingency plans in the event of the absence through illness of staff and other core workers.

### **Pastoral**

- Consider what increased pastoral needs a pandemic will generate, and how these can be met. What additional support will it be necessary or desirable to provide for members and congregation, outside of the normal routine gatherings?

## Increased number of deaths

In the event of a higher than usual number of deaths:-

- churches will need to balance the sensitivities and needs of the bereaved with the need to bolster “civil resilience.” More information about this is contained in documents entitled *The Needs of Faith Communities in Major Emergencies: Some Guidelines and Key Communities, Key Resources*, available from the government web site indicated on page 3.
- churches will want to consider what additional support and help they can offer to their own bereaved families distressed by the fact that their normal expectations cannot be fulfilled.
- In the event of the “worst scenario” which the government is envisaging – double the usual number of deaths over a 15-week period – the normal burial and cremation services will be overwhelmed. In those circumstances, churches may be asked to consider whether they can assist by helping to sustain essential services, including the provision of funeral services, and by offering other support to a wider constituency than their own immediate congregation. The national and local situation at the time will determine the nature and extent of any extra help needed.
- if burial and cremation services are overwhelmed, leading to delays and disruption, the government urges churches to co-operate by not themselves placing unnecessary strain on essential services. One suggestion is that instead of holding immediate large funeral services, later memorial services might be arranged.

There is a helpful check list for faith communities available as Appendix A to *Faith Communities and Pandemic Flu: Guidance for faith communities and local influenza pandemic committees*

**In the light of all the above, churches are strongly advised to set up immediately a group of people to consider all the implications of a potential Autumn pandemic, and to put in place the contingency plans required to address the needs which will arise.**

<sup>1</sup> For example, Bioguard Surgical Hand Gel (500ml pump-action) @ £4.25 per container plus VAT (carriage free, but minimum order £10) from Bound Tree Medical Europe Limited, of Telford, T: 0800 0112 999 or 01952 565656. W: [www.boundtree.co.uk](http://www.boundtree.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Available, for instance, from Christian Bits, tel. 01428 653853. W: [www.christianbits.co.uk](http://www.christianbits.co.uk) @ £25.99 for 1,000 (inc. VAT), plus postage of £2.35. Postage free on orders over £40. ([www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/influenzapandemic](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/influenzapandemic))

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