

When a Health Emergency Affects Your Ministry

Health Emergency in the Faith Community

SARS, Avian Flu, COVID 19, Measles Outbreak. For over 20 years, health emergencies have been in the news. Even the more common cold and flu season has an impact on our worshipping communities and ministries. How do we support these communities while protecting them? How do we do ministry without putting leaders and participants at risk?

Why This Topic at This Time?

The most recent health emergency to emerge has been the resurgence of measles. As of November 8th, 5208 cases have been reported according to Health Canada (<https://health-infobase.canada.ca/measles-rubella/>) in Canada. How would your ministry respond if there was an outbreak within your community? While we all hope that we never have to face such a situation, it helps to be prepared and have a plan.

Congregational Risks

Measles is one of the most highly communicable infectious diseases. The virus is transmitted by the airborne route, respiratory droplets, or direct contact with nasal or throat secretions of infected persons. Persons may be contagious before they show any symptoms of the virus themselves. So, if an outbreak does occur within your community, following good hygiene practices is a good first step. But what might that look like.

The following are some common practices that make transmitting infections easier:

- ❖ shaking hands—with greeters, and after a service
- ❖ passing the peace
- ❖ communion services, especially if a common cup and loaf are used
- ❖ nursery and toddler room toys
- ❖ Sunday school rooms
- ❖ coffee hour and other social times
- ❖ visitation to hospitals, retirement homes, nursing homes, and shut-ins
- ❖ gathering in enclosed spaces

What Can My Congregation Do?

- ❖ Develop a Response Plan for your ministry. Think in broad terms rather than specifics such as measles. How would you respond if it was winter and there was a higher number than usual of individuals affected by the cold and flu season. While not as severe as a measles outbreak, there are members of our ministries who are at higher risk if they contracted a severe cold. How do we protect them?
- ❖ Have a team to develop a plan. This team will be the leaders should the plan need to be implemented.
- ❖ Contact your local public health unit for resources to assist in developing the plan.
 1. How is health information communicated to the wider community from the Public Health Unit?
 2. Who is the contact person at Public Health who can provide reliable information?
 3. What can your ministry do before an emergency, during an emergency and after the emergency passes.
- ❖ Work with your local Public Health team

- ❖ Communicate your plan to the congregation before you need to implement the plan. Include how you will communicate that an outbreak has occurred and how activities will be affected.

Managing the Risk

A key element of worship and the church in general is the “community.” How can we reduce the risk without sacrificing what we know as community?

❖ General Guidelines

- ▶ Focus on keeping your community healthy.
- ▶ Contact your local Public Health for guidelines that you can share with your faith community.
- ▶ Encourage members and participants to get vaccinated if they are able. The United Church of Canada does not have any theological rationale that opposes vaccination.
- ▶ Ask those who have not been feeling well to stay home and provide support to them at home
- ▶ Practice good hygiene in all areas of your community. Your Public Health Unit may have resources and posters that you can use to assist with this.

❖ Congregation and Worship

- ▶ Have alcohol-based sanitizer available for use by greeters, the minister, and members of the congregation. Offer alternative means for practicing traditions that involve people having direct contact with each other.
- ▶ Use individual cups and bread cubes for communion services, with one or two people administering the elements.

❖ Sunday school

- ▶ Stock Sunday school rooms with a box of tissues and a wastepaper basket; clean tables after each class using soap and water.
- ▶ Sanitize toys each week. Your local public health office can provide tips on this, or put the toys through a dishwasher cycle.

❖ Food-related activities

- ▶ Wash hands before handling food.
- ▶ Practise good food-handling techniques.
 - ▶ Use a dishwasher or hot, soapy water and hot-water rinsing to clean communion elements, coffee mugs, etc.

❖ When the Worst Happens

There is an outbreak within your community. What do you do now?

- ▶ Don't panic. Your local public health unit will be providing information for the wider community. Listen to what they say. If you have specific questions re: activities of your ministry, reach out to them directly. They are there to help.
- ▶ If there is a chance that an exposure may have occurred within your ministry, you need to advise Public Health. Ask them for direction on communicating with those who may have been exposed.