

Spread the Word, not the flu

While we aren't experiencing a pandemic flu outbreak just yet, many public facilities like hospitals, nursing homes, and other care facilities have either altered their care procedures or closed their doors to visitors in order to protect their clients and the public. Short of canceling worship services or asking everyone to wear face masks, how do we respond?

The first step is so obvious: If you are sick, stay home! The second is just like it: Wash your hands regularly. Pastors who have symptoms may want to let others distribute the communion bread on Sunday. As leaders, our actions should be for the best interests and health of the congregation.

One practice that requires some thought is the "passing of the peace" during worship. Here at St. Peter the flu has been extremely bad, so we decided to suspend shaking hands during January. Here is what we have in our bulletin: "because we value gathering as a community to worship and our health too, we will for the time being no longer pass the peace during worship services."

Another alternative to passing the peace is to place travel-size hand sanitizers in every pew. After shaking hands, can come the passing of the sanitizer bottle — a fun addition to a worship! Other options lean toward the "camp worship" style: bump a rump, pound a fist, nod your head, touch elbows, point fingers ET style, etc. Get creative!

Another practice is the shaking of hands after worship. It is custom-

ary that I stand at the back of the sanctuary and shake hands as people leave. In support of the worship decision to not shake hands during the passing of the peace, I currently greet people without shaking hands.



Another major gathering time is the fellowship hour before or after worship. We haven't been able to crack that code here at St. Peter, but people now know they don't have to engage in forced interaction with others — they can even make a beeline for the door, if they choose.

The bottom line points to a truth that we must wrestle with: We gather as a community. This means people will still hug each other and I will still shake a lot of people's hands on Sunday mornings, both before and after worship services. So what else can we do in this time to promote healthy behavior?

A good resource for ideas is the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. They are a part of the Department of Health and Human Services USA. One of their publications, *A Guide for Community and Faith-Based Organizations and Leaders*, offers insights on how to be a community that helps prevent the spread of flu and other germs when groups of people gather. This and other resources can be found on their website at www.flu.gov/planning-preparedness/community/index.html.

— Pastor Ron Mathews
Disaster Response Network

Everyday Steps to Protect Your Health

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it. If a tissue is unavailable, cough or sneeze into your shoulder or elbow instead of your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds, especially after you cough or sneeze. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you have flu-like symptoms, stay home for at least 24 hours after you are free of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications like acetaminophen, aspirin or ibuprofen. This step is to help stop the spread of the virus to others.

Source: *A Guide for Community and Faith-Based Organizations and Leaders*

For more disaster response resources, visit the Northeastern Iowa Synod Disaster Response web page at www.neiasynod.org/disaster-response.