

FIRST-PERSON: 5 ways your church can respond to COVID-19

by Don Pucik, posted Friday, March 13, 2020 (one month ago)



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COVINGTON, La. (BP) -- As the coronavirus disease spreads around the globe, thousands of deaths have forced decision-makers to cancel sporting events, restrict international travel, and discourage common social interactions. Individuals are being asked to self quarantine. Financial markets are in disarray. Daily lives are being disrupted. For the elderly and others with weakened immune systems, the virus is more than an inconvenience: it is a deadly threat.

Churches are also affected. Meeting for worship, Bible study, and fellowship, Christian congregations often represent the largest weekly gatherings in their communities. Church members sit near one another. They shake hands. They hug. They share meals. However, those routine interactions can easily facilitate disease transmission from one person to another.

So, what should church leaders do to keep members safe? How can churches protect themselves and spread the Gospel at the same time? How can they serve the hurting ones around them without exposing them to further harm (by unintentionally spreading the disease)?

Here are five ways your church can respond to the dangers and disruptions associated with the coronavirus pandemic. Near the end, we'll get to some practical tips for churches who decide not to hold services this Sunday.

1. Rely on the Lord for His provision of guidance and power

Natural disasters and global pandemics force us to face our human frailty and mortality. Life as we know it is threatened and death becomes an imminent possibility. Priorities change. Fear becomes a constant companion.

Christians are not immune to anxiety. Apart from a genuine, vibrant relationship with the Lord of lords and King of kings, the average church member will be overwhelmed by anxiety – just like everyone else. Church leaders have a remarkable opportunity to encourage His people to seek Him during the crisis, relying on the Lord's promise: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18 NKJV). If Jesus is present, then we lack nothing. He will supply all we need to do everything He calls us to do during this coronavirus pandemic.

Lead your church to pray together before making any decision. Ask the Lord to fill His people with His mind and His heart. Wait together for His direction. Read Scriptures together that describe His infinite ability to care for His people (e.g., Psalm 91, Romans 8:31-39). Trust Him to give you the next step as you walk together through this crisis. He is faithful.

2. Gather reliable information

Misinformation and conflicting advice spread faster than the crisis. Just this morning I received an email message that went something like this: "I received this information about the coronavirus from a friend of mine who read that ... so, here's what you should do. ..." Please don't waste your time and endanger yourself (and others) with information that may be incorrect or false.

Go directly to the most reliable sources of information and read the announcements and guidance documents for yourself. In addition to the known facts about disease transmission and mortality, the best sources will provide you with guidance concerning prevention, testing, and treatment for the disease. For the coronavirus, that would include the websites for the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and your state's health department.

-- World Health Organization: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak

-- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

-- List of State health department websites

3. Cooperate with your local authorities

Local municipalities and county/parish governments are working hard to protect the people within their jurisdiction. Consider contacting them to learn what they are doing and what you might do to help as a church. Ask them how you can pray for them. Help get the word out concerning any community initiatives or protective measures being implemented. In order to prevent exposure to the virus, government officials in some parts of the country are asking churches not to meet for several weeks. Although churches have a constitutional right to meet for worship, a warm and cooperative spirit may help to spread the Gospel during the national effort to stop the spread of the disease.

4. Develop a response plan for your congregation

What is your church going to do protect your members from the coronavirus? LifeWay Christian Resources has prepared four brief videos and multiple downloads to help pastors and church leaders develop a response plan. Guidestone Financial Services has additional resources to aid you in preparing your response plan.

- Lifeway's Ministry Grid: How to Prepare for the Coronavirus at Your Church (Free, but registration is required)
- Guidestone: Coronavirus -- Preparation and Information

Consider gathering a study group composed of deacons, teachers, greeters, childcare volunteers and staff. After watching the videos and reviewing the downloaded materials, list the actions you need to incorporate into your church's response plan. Do this together and do it quickly.

Key questions your plan needs to address include:

- What changes do we need to make to our schedule and services, and when do we need to make them?
- What materials do we need to purchase and make available to our members on the church premises? (e.g. hand sanitizer "stations")
- How will we communicate this response plan to our members?

If your church is putting together an international mission trip, your response plan needs to include a timetable for continuing or postponing the trip. The International Mission Board (IMB) has a website to assist you in your decision making. You will also want to consider the latest notification from the U.S. State Department.

- IMB Coronavirus Task Force
- U.S. Department of State

5. Plan for ongoing ministry

In response to Peter's confession of faith, Jesus said, "... on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18 NKJV). When Jesus is building His church -- when His people are yielded to Him and following His direction -- nothing in heaven or hell can stop the forward advance of His church. The routine activities of the church may be disrupted by the virus, but there's no need to hit "pause" on the Spirit-led ministry of the church.

Numbers of people are having to stay at home during the active phase of the pandemic. Advised to stay home and avoid potential exposures to the virus, the elderly are especially vulnerable and do not need to be in public spaces like grocery stores or worship services. If someone has been exposed to the virus, they are voluntarily embracing a self-quarantine at home lasting up to two weeks. Colleges and schools are closing, forcing students to continue their studies at home. International students may have nowhere to go and may be financially unable to travel back to their home country.

Those forced to stay at home may need assistance picking up groceries, basic household items or prescriptions. You can encourage them with an occasional phone call to see how they are doing, offering to pray with them before concluding the call. You might also consider ways to include them in the worship services of the church with recorded options on CD, DVD or online.

Consider ways to minister to those serving on the front lines of the crisis. Healthcare professionals, first responders and government leaders could use your prayers and words of encouragement in the weeks ahead. Ask them what a group of volunteers could to help alleviate their workload. Express appreciation for their efforts in writing, sending emails or cards. Given the opportunity, pray for them in person. Prayer walk around local hospitals, fire stations, police stations and municipal buildings.

What if you have to cancel?

If the church needs to cancel Sunday services, consider putting a service online, or publicize your church's online options already available. A single instrumentalist can lead worship for a virtual crowd watching from their homes. Pastors can preach a message, delivering God's Word to His people at a pivotal moment in their journey as a church. By setting up and offering an online giving option, members can continue to contribute to support their church.

Relatively easy options for putting your service online:

-- Facebook Livestream

-- Vimeo -- video uploads

-- YouTube -- video uploads

Some options for online giving:

-- Tithe.ly

-- Kindred

-- Continue to Give

-- SecureGive

-- PushPay

-- Mogiv

-- EasyTithe

The Lord has a way forward for your church

Whenever a church faces a new crisis, the Lord always has a way through the crisis with often surprising outcomes. For example, in the book of Acts, every crisis that threatened His church actually resulted in more people coming to know Jesus. Some historians believe that part of the remarkable growth of the early church came through two deadly epidemics that struck the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries.

In his book "The Triumph of Christianity -- How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion" (HarperOne 2011), sociologist Rodney Stark describes a suspected smallpox epidemic in 165 A.D. that killed 25-30 percent of the population. People fled the cities in fear, refusing to care for ailing family members. Christians provided much-needed care for the sick when no one else would. Stark believes that was one reason the church grew from an estimated 45,000 adherents during the first epidemic to over 1.1 million believers by the time the second epidemic struck in 251 A.D.

The coronavirus pandemic is a dangerous and disruptive force in the world today. The Lord is not in a panic and He has not been taken by surprise. He has a way for you and your church not only to survive this crisis but to use you to minister encouragement and truth in a deeply troubled period of our history.