

COVID-19 And Your Congregation

Churches are places where people gather. We gather for worship, for faith formation activities throughout the week, and for community outreach. As such, our Christian Reformed congregations have a special role to play in the face of COVID-19.

First, it is important to note that while new cases of COVID-19 are being found - almost daily - across the United States and Canada, this is partly due to increased awareness and testing. Many people are being identified as infected with COVID-19 despite having minimal symptoms.

Second, it is important to remember that this virus is not unlike a common cold or flu in terms of its symptoms. COVID-19 causes a lower respiratory tract infection. Many people who are infected will have no or only minor symptoms. In fact, most people will be able to manage the symptoms at home and will recover without complications.

Before you decide, however, that this means that there really is no need for your congregation to take precautionary measures, please remember that there are members in our congregations who are more vulnerable to infections like these. Those over the age of 60, and people with compromised immune systems may pick up the virus from someone who isn't showing any symptoms. Once they contract it, they can face serious complications.

What's more, our congregations have a responsibility to the broader communities of which we are a part. We need to pay attention to the threat of this illness and to how we might play a role in its spread to others.

The CRCNA offices in Burlington and Grand Rapids have instituted some strong recommendations for its employees. This includes encouraging staff to work from home, limiting staff and volunteer travel, increasing sanitation in the offices, canceling events, and urging meetings to be done virtually.

Congregations are encouraged to make similar decisions for yourselves about what you can do to help prevent the spread of Covid-19 and protect the most vulnerable among us. Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Have a Plan.** If you haven't already done so, identify a few leaders from your congregation and form a disaster preparedness team and plan in case an outbreak comes to your community. Ask the team members to become familiar with your public health offices, to outline a plan for how/when decisions will be made to cancel services or programs, and to identify specific activities that might need to be adapted to help prevent the spread of the virus. Consider what you will do if your pastor or leadership team get sick, how you will manage finances if you can't take collections, and how you will care for infected people in your community. Do this BEFORE an outbreak occurs.
2. **Don't Reinvent the Wheel.** The [U.S. Center for Disease Control](#) and the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) have a lot of great and current information available. [Wheaton College](#) has a page dedicated to coronavirus resources for churches, and the [Wisconsin Council of](#)

[Churches](#) has also put together many great suggestions. In addition, the CRCNA's [Chaplaincy and Care ministry](#) and [BTGMI's Church Juice](#) shared a lot of helpful tips. Get familiar with where to find these valuable tools and make use of their advice.

3. **Communicate.** Communicate clearly and often. Remind people that there is no need to panic, and disseminate accurate information. Post signs in your fellowship hall and a message in your church bulletin explaining that you won't be shaking hands before, during, or after the service. Let people know that if they are feeling unwell or are immune system-compromised, they should stay home. Post information about who your disaster preparedness team members are, and who people can connect with if they are sick.
4. **Make remote participation possible.** If you don't already do so, consider live-streaming your services or making recordings available to those who can't attend in person. Worship Ministries has [shared several ideas](#) about how to hold an online service. As you plan for remote services, remember to also think about how you can stay connected with members even if you can't get together physically.
5. **Utilize volunteers.** Limit the number of people at risk, by making use of volunteers. For example, ask greeters to hold doors open so that multiple people aren't touching door handles.
6. **Sanitize.** Step up your regular cleaning and sanitization practices to hold everyone to a higher standard. Encourage everyone to wash their hands frequently. Daily clean bathrooms and all high-touch surfaces such as door handles, elevator buttons, and railings. Do this even more frequently if you have multiple groups using your site on one day. Make hand sanitizer available in several places throughout the sanctuary, lobby, and fellowship hall.
7. **Adapt Your Practices.** Be willing to adapt your regular practices for the sake of safety. For example, if you regularly practice communion from a shared cup, or through intinction, consider changing this practice during the COVID-19 outbreak. Have the serving elders disinfect their hands and distribute elements using tongs. Have people come forward to receive elements rather than passing trays around.
8. **Limit Travel.** If your church has been planning to send a mission team to other states, provinces, or countries, contact the coordinating mission agency and discuss what changes or precautions might be necessary in light of the COVID-19 outbreak.
9. **Self Quarantine.** Ask any members who have just returned from travel to a high risk location (see [CDC](#) and [Public Health Canada](#)) to not come to worship services or other programs for 14 days after they return. If members have visitors at their homes who have come from these high risk locations, or if they have come in contact with an infected person (e.g. health professionals, family members of infected person), ask these members to also stay home for 14 days. In addition, the Government of Canada has recommended that Canadians avoid all cruise ship travel. Ask anyone who goes on a cruise, or lives with someone who is going on a cruise, to refrain from attending church and church programming for 14 days after they return.

If you have additional ideas, please add them to the comments below.