



November 2006

Dear Friends

### **Preparing for a Pandemic or Similar Emergency**

Churches have been alerted by the Government to the need to take steps to prepare for the possibility of an influenza pandemic. While it is not certain there will be a 'flu pandemic, we should be prepared in case. This letter is an encouragement to think about the issues and to prepare as effectively as we can. We are undertaking this in consultation with several other churches.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) considers it likely that at some point there will be a worldwide pandemic caused by a bird flu virus mutating into a form that can be transmitted from human to human. WHO is encouraging governments to prepare accordingly. The New Zealand Government has accepted this advice and planning is being co-ordinated by the Ministry of Health.

Based on what happened in New Zealand during the 1918 Spanish Flu, the Ministry of Health estimates that:

1. 40 percent of all New Zealanders could be infected with the virus. Up to 50 percent of people could be off work and 2 percent of those affected could die.
2. The 'flu would probably move through the country in three waves, of up to eight weeks each, with eight-week intervals between waves. The Ministry of Health suggests that up to 1.6 million people could become ill, and up to 33,000 people could die.
3. The virus would be spread by small droplets of body fluid, sneezed into the air, and most likely transmitted by hands through person-to-person touch, sharing towels, door handles, computer keyboards, telephones etc. For at least part of the period, the country or significant areas of it would be operating under emergency conditions, which would discourage people meeting together, so there could be no public meetings, including church services or funeral services.



4. Private travel could be restricted. Schools will be closed and parents will need to be at home caring for children or other dependent family. Key services such as hospitals, emergency services, police and military will also be affected and will need to be staffed by people who are not sick and not needing to be with their own families as the primary care givers. Some people working may have to stay at work throughout the period of the pandemic, or the isolation phases, so they may be separated from their families for a lengthy period.
5. Much dislocation can be expected. Each day there are 6,000 people travelling internationally towards New Zealand as their intended destination. This means that out breaks of flu in countries overseas may lead to New Zealanders being stranded temporarily if the authorities close New Zealand's borders.
6. The main means of safe person-to-person communication outside of immediate family is likely to be by telephone, email and the internet.

Despite this information, we do not need to panic. In the event of a pandemic reaching New Zealand, the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand wants synods, presbyteries, UDCs, parishes, and participants to be thoughtful about what they might do. The aim for parishes will be to be prepared to provide advice, care and support to members before, during and after an influenza pandemic, and, where possible, to assist others looking for spiritual, emotional and pastoral support. The local church will be one of the key support networks in each community.

#### **So what can we do?**

##### *We can educate*

Regional Public Health in Wellington has developed information packs that communicate the risks, and provide advice on what we can do to prepare.

##### *We can assure*

The Ministry of Civil Defence have indicated there is a possibility communities could breakdown in the event of an outbreak. Parishes have an opportunity to be a calm voice and encourage their local communities to work together peacefully in a time of difficulty.

##### *We can care for each other and our communities*

There will be a need for pastoral care during a pandemic – we need to think of how we are going to support and resource our ministers and elders.

**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND**  
**Office of the General Assembly**



There will also be a need for parishioners to help – both Civil Defence and Regional Public Health are advocating strategies such as:

- Telephone/email trees – people willing to call on those who live alone or are less able to look after themselves to make sure they are okay and to alert authorities where the person requires medical care, as they will be most at risk.
- Food banks – many parishes will be able to provide food.
- Checking on neighbours – Civil Defence and Regional Public Health have highlighted the value of checking on neighbours.
- Get involved locally. Find out what your Civil Defence plan is for your area – are there any ways your parish could assist?

This letter is just a start and we are grateful for the input of the Human Resources team and past Moderator Garry Marquand in taking us this far. Information on planning for a pandemic is available on the Presbyterian Church website at [www.presbyterian.org.nz](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz). Information packs can be requested by emailing the Human Resources team at [juliette@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:juliette@presbyterian.org.nz) or by calling (04) 801-6000.

We suggest you watch for messages from Government and other relevant agencies, to note the effect of avian flu on persons and families in various parts of the world, and to keep such people in our prayers.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pamela Tankersley".

Pamela Tankersley  
**Moderator**

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Martin Baker".

Martin Baker  
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