

Greetings!



Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

This edition of Presbyterian People looks at the recent outbreak of Swine Flu and the possible implications that it may have for Presbyterian parishes.

Juliette

Dealing with a Pandemic

In 2006, the then-Moderator, the Very Rev Pamela Tankersley, wrote to parishes encouraging them to develop their own plans for coping with an outbreak of disease or natural disaster. In particular, parishes were asked to look at how they could:

- *Educate* (being a source of information for their congregations and communities)
- *Assure* (being a calm voice promoting peace during a time of fear)
- *Care* (providing pastoral care for communities and also supporting ministers and elders providing that care)

The letter is available on the Presbyterian Church's website: www.presbyterian.org.nz

Back then the world was concerned with the appearance of a new illness in Hong Kong, namely Bird Flu. However as time went on it became apparent that the authorities in the countries affected had the situation under control and the disease did not spread to New Zealand.

This time it has been confirmed—New Zealanders have been exposed to Swine Flu. If any parishes still need a reason for developing a contingency plan, this would be it.

So what can you do? Over the next couple of pages will be information and advice for you to consider when planning how you and your parish could respond to this situation.

Educate

One of the most effective things your parish can do is be a source of factual information for your congregation, your employees and ministry staff, and your community.

The Ministry of Health has devoted an entire section of its website to assist community groups to deal with pandemics. Paste the following link into your address bar to view: www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/nz-influenza-pandemic-action-plan-2006.

There is a lot of information on this website, but one thing your parish can do right now

Educate (cont.)

is click on the link to Pandemic Influenza and download the posters and brochures in the resources section.

And don't forget your employees! Make sure they are aware of the steps they can take to reduce the possibility of infection such as good hygiene practices and staying home when they are sick. If you are a manager, now is a good time to check the amount of sick leave owing to your employees as well as ensuring your sick leave policy gives you the flexibility to deal with extreme circumstances.

Finally, keep an eye out for regular updates from the Government on Swine Flu and take note of any warnings that are put in place. It is important that parishes comply with any public health notices as to ignore them can put people's lives at risk.

Assure

Thankfully the response to Swine Flu has been much more measured compared to the initial responses to Bird Flu . However some people will still be scared and may need extra care at this time.

Some employees already fear catching a cold or 'flu from their colleagues during the winter months and it is important that managers monitor this to prevent bullying and harassment. Employees have a right to be treated with dignity. In the event one of your employees does contract Swine Flu, your local Public Health Service will assess your other employees and volunteers to determine whether they have been infected and arrange treatment if required. As an employer or an employee your responsibility is to co-operate with the Public Health Service and any instructions they may give you.

Care

In the event of a nationwide outbreak the need for pastoral care will increase. This will also increase the chances of ministers, elders and other pastoral workers contracting the disease. As a parish you need to be thinking now about how you can meet the pastoral needs of your community whilst minimising the risks to your people.

A good idea is to encourage the use of the influenza vaccines available to reduce the possibility of contracting the 'flu and Buccaline Berna packs to reduce the chance of developing bacterial complications. Please seek advice from your General Practitioner.

Again, do not forget your employees. If they work alongside people providing pastoral care to the sick then they will also be at increased risk of catching the disease.

Care (cont.)

A better idea is to look at ways of reducing exposure to the disease entirely. One possibility is that ministers and elders provide support to quarantined families via telephone or email, with face-to-face contact being limited to the most seriously ill. And, where pastoral workers have been exposed, look at ways that you can prevent them from spreading the disease to others. It might be that they stay in parish facilities to prevent them taking it home to their families.

You also need to make decisions around which employees could feasibly work from home during an outbreak and which ones would need to be placed on leave due to health and safety reasons. The Department of Labour's website has helpful resources for workforce planning during a pandemic. Their address is www.dol.govt.nz.

Finally, you need to be vigilant—if you suspect someone has contracted Swine Flu or has recently traveled to areas affected and is now showing flu-like symptoms you must refer them to a doctor immediately. They should remain on leave until a doctor has confirmed it is safe for them to return to work. This is for their wellbeing as well as the health and safety of your other employees, volunteers and ministry staff.

Other Ideas

Other ways your parish can assist your community during an outbreak include:

- 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 – it is possible that some families or individuals may find themselves suddenly quarantined. Parishes can help by providing food.
- Checking on neighbours – Civil Defence and the Public Health authorities have highlighted the value of checking on neighbours in any emergency.
- Get involved locally. Find out what your Civil Defence plan is for your area and how you can help.

This edition of Presbyterian People has dealt with a challenging subject. If you have concerns about how your parish will cope during an outbreak please do not hesitate to contact the personnel advisor, Juliette Bowater, at juliette@presbyterian.org.nz or at (04) 801-6000.