

H1N1 Flu Reminders and Precautions

October 2009

H1N1 flu is on our minds particularly with the advent of the “flu season” in the United States, and there have been several school closures due to illness associated with the virus. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) analyzes and publishes findings of key flu indicators in a report called “FluView” (<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/>). The end of September 2009 report found “that influenza activity remained elevated in the United States.” The CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>) has published recommendations for H1N1 flu vaccination in addition to vaccination for other seasonal flu (see local news for information about availability and initial target groups to receive H1N1 vaccinations). Episcopal Relief and Development is providing resources and information to help people prepare in the event of a public health emergency. Links to the ERD and CDC sites can also be found at <http://etdiocese.net>.

In situations such as this, a balance between under- and over-reaction is most desirable and thoughtful, informed leadership is one of our greatest resources.

This is intended as a refresher about precautions to be taken for avoiding H1N1 flu and also as a reminder of the recommendation for every parish to be prepared should the flu break out in your area and disrupt the life of your parish.

A bulletin insert prepared from current information on the CDC web site titled “H1N1 Flu and You,” is available at: <http://etdiocese.net/pages/H1N1FluInsert-Update.pdf>. (Note that an earlier insert published in April used the term, “Swine flu,” instead of the more accurate “H1N1 flu.”)

Below is information sent out to clergy and lay leaders in April noting resources and items to think about regarding the H1N1 flu.

From Leadership News
April 29, 2009

There has been much in the news in the past several days regarding the outbreak of swine influenza. On Sunday, the Department of Health and Human Services issued a nationwide public health emergency declaration in response to recent human infections with a newly discovered swine influenza A (swine flu) virus.

The CDC and the White House have assured the public that there is no cause for alarm, but it is a good idea to read through available resources, take precautions now, and check your plan for responding should the swine flu break out in your area. If you have not reviewed your preparedness and response plan recently, this might also be a good time to look through your plan and make sure you are prepared for this or for another emergency that might arise. “In God’s Hands – and Ours,” the diocesan disaster preparedness and response manual, is available at etdiocese.net/policy/disastermanualSMALL.pdf.

The State of Tennessee has a link to a checklist for faith-based & community organizations pandemic influenza preparedness that you might find useful:
www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/community/faithcomchecklist.html.

Episcopal Relief and Development is monitoring needs and remaining in contact with health officials as well as reaching out to potential collaborative responders. The ERD has established a web site, www.er-d.org/PlanningforPandemicInfluenza, which contains links to

several resources with information about swine influenza and for preparing to deal with it. One of the resources available is an extensive policy document relating to planning for pandemic influenza from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Davenport, Iowa. Some of the items noted in this document to think about now in preparing for a possible flu outbreak in your area are outlined below:

General

- Review existing parish policies for dealing with infection control and preparations for a possible pandemic. It may be helpful to form a specific committee or group (including health professionals) to do this work.
- Remind all that if they are sick with fever or flu-like symptoms, they should stay home.
- Post signs in washrooms reminding individuals of proper hand-washing techniques, "cough etiquette," and proper disposal of used tissues. Use bulletin boards, bulletin inserts, newsletters, and e-mail to remind all of proper hygiene and its importance. Let parishioners know what will happen in the case of a flu outbreak in your area.
- Have bottles of alcohol-based hand sanitizer (minimum 62% alcohol) available for classrooms, church, office, and fellowship halls.
- Remind those taking communion to the sick, visiting the homebound or caring for a sick individual, to wash their hands before and after visits – Eucharistic visitors should carry a small bottle of alcohol-based sanitizer.
- Plan for what to do in the absence of a priest – administratively and liturgically – for Sunday services, for funerals or extreme situations.
- Also plan for what to do in the absence of administrators, secretaries, teachers, servers, or support staff.
- Review housekeeping practices. Ensure that door handles and flat surfaces in all common areas are washed every day – including the water fountain.
- Review lines of communication.

Liturgical

- Encourage "Passing the Peace" with a pat on the back or light hug as opposed to a handshake.
- Anyone responsible for preparing for communion (touching Hosts or pouring wine) should carefully wash hands beforehand. If ill, a substitute should be found.
- Alcohol-based sanitizers should be made available for Eucharistic ministers, perhaps under their chairs, for use should someone touch, sneeze or cough on their hands.
- Consider communion practices – let parishioners know that if they feel ill, they should refrain from the cup, and that self-intinction will not be practiced; if there is contact with a parishioner's hands, the contact should be brief and not with the fingers distributing the Host.
- Consider teaching the doctrine that communion in one kind is full communion, in anticipation that the common cup might be problematic for some people.
- After communion, patens and chalices should be washed thoroughly with hot, soapy water.

Other measures to consider:

- Turn off water fountains; have bottled water available instead.
- Temporarily empty baptismal fonts of standing holy water.
- Plan for innovative ways of "doing church."
- Store necessary supplies (water, non-perishable food, medical supplies) for use in the event the parish is quarantined.

- Have sufficient cash on hand to cover necessary expenses. Prepare for reduction in anticipated income.
- Plan for an expanded but very different form of pastoral role in the community. Consider that those in quarantine or otherwise homebound will need particular care, ranging from phone or e-mail contact to the provision of meals or other supplies. The poor will be the hardest hit – how will we respond to those in need in the middle of a pandemic?
- Make sure lines of communication are known and open with local public health authorities.
- Be prepared that church buildings or parish houses may be needed by public health authorities if local hospital resources become overwhelmed.
- Assume potential reduction in staff; priests, other leadership, including the bishop, may not be available due quarantine, illness or even death.

The Tennessee Dept. of Health Communicable and Environmental Disease Services has information from www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/states/tennessee.html.

The link to the CDC Swine Flu web site is: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>. It has several informative subsections including a section about what's new.

Preparedness resources regarding pandemic flu prepared by the Red Cross are available from the Rev. Canon Stephen Askew at Diocesan House. He may be contacted at askew@etdiocese.net or 865-966-2110.