

## Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. Prepare your church for a human flu pandemic

Issue 1<sup>st</sup> may 2009

**The following guidelines are based on those issued by the Church of England and the government. They will be revised in detail as further information becomes available, this situation is developing rapidly. Please ensure that clergy and lay officers are familiar with them so that you can act appropriately when and if a pandemic occurs. Below is information on the following:**

- **Why be prepared**
- **What scenarios to expect**
- **What medical response will be available**
- **How clergy and church members can respond**
- **The additional impact of funerals and bereavement**
- **Diocesan major emergency plans**

### Why be prepared

An epidemic of seasonal flu is statistically overdue in the UK. So too is a world wide “pandemic” where a fresh strain of flu breaks out in one country, and spreads through various means to others. They have occurred (with devastating effects) in the past, including 1918 and 1957. In the 1918 “Spanish flu” outbreak, an estimated 100 million people died directly or indirectly from it.

Either event could have a major impact on local churches and church members:

- Key personnel will become ill and may act as carriers, limiting their pastoral availability;
- Services may be cancelled at short notice because of lack of personnel or as a precaution against spreading the virus;
- There will be a major strain on medical services and hospital facilities;
- There will be a higher than normal number of deaths (and hence of funerals);
- Many people will be off work because of their own illness or by caring for ill dependants;
- There will be severe disruption to normal social and commercial activities, causing considerable inconvenience, and probably frustration, anger and even violence.

### What scenarios to expect

1. At least 25% of the population is expected to be infected, including people of every age.
2. Between 15% and 30% of any given group of people (company, shop, service agency, hospital, school, church) could be absent through illness at the peak time; the figure could be up to 50% in small businesses. (This will be catastrophic for farmers who have few or no support staff; livestock may suffer through reduced care.)
3. An unknown additional number will be absent while they care for sick children or other relatives.

4. School closures are extremely likely, adding to the pressure on working parents who have to take unscheduled leave to care for well children. Public gatherings will be curtailed.
5. Most people who fall ill will be off work for about a week or ten days. However, the after-effects of flu can last for several weeks, leaving people feeling drained and sluggish, and unable to return to “full speed” for some time. This will add to the general disruption.
6. Government estimates suggest that anywhere between 54,000 and 350,000 more deaths than normal for the time of year will occur. This will put added strain on funeral directors, cemeteries, crematoria and clergy of all faiths who themselves may be under strength through illness. Although the elderly and the very young are the most vulnerable, deaths are likely to occur across the age range.
7. The government will consider banning gatherings of people over a certain number in a worse-case scenario, in order to limit the spread of infection. This might include some larger church services.

## What medical response will be available

### **Vaccines**

Until the exact strain of flu is identified, no vaccine will be available. It will take 4-6 months to develop and begin to manufacture a vaccine in the event of a world wide pandemic of a mutant form of avian flu. Until a vaccine is available, the only counter-measure will be anti-viral drugs, which mitigate the effects of flu but do not prevent it or cure it. The UK government is currently stockpiling 14.6m courses of anti-viral drugs.

### **Key worker protection**

The plan at present is that anti-viral drugs will be given only to front-line medical workers, members of the emergency services and other key workers, and then, if available, to those members of the public who are most at risk for medical reasons.

The Church of England is currently in discussion with government officials about including clergy (of all faiths) in this category as their pastoral ministry will be an important part of the national response to people’s needs. The government does plan to vaccinate the entire population if a vaccine is produced and there is time for it to become effective before a pandemic elsewhere spreads to the UK.

## How clergy and church members can respond

### **Take sensible precautions**

During an outbreak, everyone should take sensible precautions to avoid infection, and to avoid passing the virus to others unwittingly (you can be a carrier without being ill). The virus spreads in minute water droplets in the air. Precautions include:

- Avoid unnecessary contact with people who are ill. This may require clergy to weigh up the benefits of “sick visiting” against the possibility of becoming ill or unwittingly acting as a carrier.
- People who become ill are asked by government to “take social responsibility to lessen the spread and thus protect others”. This suggests that anyone “under the weather” should not work or attend meetings. Clergy especially will need to resist the temptation to work until they drop.
- Anyone who becomes ill is advised to stay at home, keep warm, and drink plenty of fluids.
- Don’t rush back to work too soon.

### **Create contingency plans for church service provision**

A proportion of clergy and licensed lay ministers will fall ill and be unable to take scheduled services, perhaps with little notice. To mitigate the effects of this deaneries, benefices and individual churches could consider such things as:

- Providing suitable training *now* for church wardens or other responsible lay people so that they could lead a simple Service of the Word in the event of the last-minute illness of the minister;
- Creating an “emergency service pack” with a suitable liturgy, a selection of prayers, and perhaps two or three brief homilies, which could be used in the event of a scheduled minister falling ill;
- Creating a telephone or email “chain” (much as some prayer chains operate) so that information about services available or cancelled in the area can be passed down the line quickly. This may help people discover alternatives if “their” service is cancelled, and avoid wasted journeys.
- Discuss in the PCC the balance of risks between holding services (where coughs and sneezes can spread diseases) and cancelling them, especially if your congregation is quite large.
- When a service is cancelled and no-one is able to lead an alternative service, ensuring that a clear notice is put on the door, or (preferably) that someone is available to give worshippers information and keep the church open for private prayer for a while.
- **NOTE THE ABOVE IS OVERRIDDEN IN THE EVENT OF CURTAILED PUBLIC GATHERINGS. THE BISHOP’S OFFICE WILL ADVISE.**

### **Be open to offer support to the community**

While we may ourselves be stretched, others in our communities may be too. If Christian love means anything, it means not walking by on the other side. The list is of possibilities is almost endless:

- Farmers working on their own with little assistance may need volunteer help to feed livestock.
- Small shops may need voluntary assistance to remain open.
- Elderly people may need drivers or shoppers when their normal helpers are unable to attend.
- Care homes may be short staffed and welcome volunteers.
- Neighbours without friends or family close by may need assistance.

### **Be patient with “central services”**

It is likely that bishops, archdeacons, and national and diocesan officers and staff will also fall ill. This could create delays in dealing with administrative and financial matters, and in responding to letters, emails and telephone calls. Please be patient, and encourage patience in others as the whole community grapples with “circumstances beyond our control”.

## **The additional impact of funerals and bereavement**

In even a moderate outbreak, funeral directors, cemeteries and crematoria will suffer staff shortages at a time of increased demand, and the system could become quickly over-loaded. Families will have to wait longer for funerals, adding to the strain and stress they are already under.

Clergy, licensed lay ministers and other volunteers who engage in bereavement support may need to be prepared to deal with increased anger and hurt caused by such delays.

In addition, clergy are likely to find that an unusually high number of funerals (and the visits and preparation associated with them) will lead to disruption of their normal every-day ministry. This may need to be explained to the PCC and congregation who may not realise how much time can be involved in this part of clerical ministry.

And finally, is there room to bury the dead in *your* churchyard? All churches should have a clear plan of the available, or possible additional, space so that if the need arises the bereaved are not subjected to added stress while we search for plots.

**NOTE: If the pandemic escalates the County Council may issue a notice of public closure of Crematoria, meaning just a private Committal takes place. In this case it would be important to offer a Memorial Service at a later date. The Bishop's Office will advise.**

## Diocesan major emergency plan

A flu pandemic is only one of a number of potential "incidents" that cause widespread disruption. Major emergencies (such as floods, train or plane crashes, chemical, biochemical or nuclear accidents or terrorist attacks) can occur anywhere, anytime. The Diocese works closely with local authorities and the emergency services in planning appropriate and swift responses should such incidents occur. The key points to note are:

- The police assume full command of the incident;
- Clergy will not normally be allowed at the scene unless by the express request of the police;
- Local clergy will not be allowed into emergency evacuation centres unless they have been previously accredited, for security reasons;
- A number of clergy across the diocese are trained and accredited to offer appropriate pastoral support at emergency evacuation centres and will be called on by a system co-ordinated by Revd Anthony Giles, Diocesan Emergency Planning Officer. Contact details: [ant.di@btinternet.com](mailto:ant.di@btinternet.com) 07766 525620.