

Coronavirus Issues

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The coronavirus is reported to have been spawned in Hubei Province in China. The number of infected persons grows daily and the death toll has already surpassed the 2003 SARs epidemic. Coronavirus has spread to other countries, including the United States. 11 U.S. airports that receive passengers who traveled from or through China are screening passengers for coronavirus. And all of hit as the flu season ramped up in the U.S.

Airlines have stopped all flights to China. The U.S. State Department has issued a Level 4: Do Not Travel advisory for China. Businesses in China are temporarily closed. There are reported cases in the U.S. involving folks who visited Hubei Province, where the first outbreaks of coronavirus were documented.

Symptoms

Coronavirus is spread person-to-person, much like other forms of flu. Although there are still lots of questions about how it spreads, it appears that a person who is infected can be contagious before they show symptoms and they can be infectious for up to 14 days. Symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and breathing issues. No known vaccine is yet available.

Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommend regular handwashing with soap and water for 20 seconds (ex. sing “Happy Birthday” while washing your hands), use of hand sanitizer, and avoiding people who might be infected. None of this is new; this is the same type of advice you get during the annual flu season. Also, employees who may be sick with coronavirus, or any type of flu, should be encouraged to stay home to avoid infecting co-workers. However, with the coronavirus, such an absence might have to last 14 days. For more information on the coronavirus go to the CDC website: <https://www.cdc.gov/>

Councils as Employers

If you learn that one of your employees is or might be infected with coronavirus, the best advice is to tell the employee to go seek medical treatment and stay home until they are healthy. Suggest they check in with you when the diagnosis of coronavirus (or any flu) is confirmed and when they are released to return to work. If you are subject to state or federal leave laws, such as the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, make sure you help your employee through the process.to apply for leave.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act has an exemption for religious employees, but not for employees who perform secular duties such as maintenance or secretarial work. OSHA has a general duty clause that requires employers to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards or likely to cause death or physical harm. To fulfill this obligation, councils can encourage sick employees to stay home, offer hand sanitizer in the church offices, and encourage maintenance

staff to give extra cleaning attention to commonly used surfaces and restrooms. Councils can also encourage staff to get the annual flu vaccine. CDC information for employers:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/guidance-business-response.html>

Finally, if staff think they have been exposed to the flu or coronavirus, encourage them to work at home and seek medical treatment. If they have no symptoms help them find ways to participate in work meetings such as phone or online platforms like Zoom or What's App.

Councils and Members

Another reason to support staff to be healthy and safe is so that congregation members and guests and council visitors can visit your premises and remain healthy and safe. If you know that staff or members or visitors have recently visited China, especially Hubei Province, encourage them to seek medical treatment before visiting your premises.

A suggestion made for all flu seasons: encourage members not to shake hands or hug, especially during the passing of the peace or after worship. Instead, say peace be with you while bowing, nodding or bumping elbows. Have a good supply of tissues in the sanctuary and meeting places as well as containers of hand sanitizer. Place posters in restrooms that encourage users to thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water.

If you are planning to conduct communion by intinction or if that is a common practice, remember that this is a way that infected hands can come into contact with bread and wine shared with others. Consider discontinuing intinction during a pandemic like coronavirus or during flu season. For the same reason, if an outbreak is especially severe in your area, you may want to consider inviting folks to come to the collection plates rather than passing them down the pews.

If you allow outside groups to use your facilities, make them aware of your health and safety plans and ask them to comply with them. Finally, keep track of what your local health department is reporting about the seasonal flu and the coronavirus in your area.