

PREPARING Your CHURCH for Coronavirus (COVID-19)

A Step-by-Step, Research-Informed
and Faith-Based Planning Manual



These are challenging times for the world and the church as the coronavirus spreads, forcing us to sacrifice personally, physically, and economically. As Southern Baptist churches respond to this crisis, it will require courage and leadership. This is why we partnered with the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College to prepare this guide for churches as they serve their communities.

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Introduction

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)¹

As we begin, let's start with prayer. Let's pray throughout the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak. Public health emergencies like the COVID-19 can cause fear and anxiety. Prepare, but don't panic. This passage reminds us that, in every situation, our prayers ground us in God's peace. We step forward with faith: God is with us as we seek protection and discern how best to love our neighbors.

The aim of this guide is to help churches in the United States plan and prepare for COVID-19. This church planning and preparedness guide draws on biblical wisdom and our team's research. We will share insights and best practices from our collaborative work with local, state, and federal public health agencies.² Our team's experiences with helping churches around the globe for nearly a decade have also informed this guide.

Church planning and preparedness should not be developed in a vacuum. It's important to recognize that each church has its own history, culture, and approach to ministry. Successful church planning and preparedness should also acknowledge the unique risks each community faces, as needs vary from region to region and church to church.

**A PLAN IS A TOOL.
IT DOESN'T NEED
TO BE LARGE OR
DETAILED IN ORDER
TO BE USEFUL.**

A plan is a tool. It doesn't need to be large or detailed in order to be useful. The goal of having a plan is not to turn your church into a mini-public health agency, but rather to incorporate public health preparedness into your ministry. If you are spending more time creating a plan than working on ministry, it may be too large or complicated, and it probably means it won't be feasible to implement or sustain.

Some Reasons Church Preparedness Plans Fail

- The plan is not clearly aligned with the mission or theology of your church.
- The church leadership does not model or communicate the benefit of preparedness.
- Preparedness activities are developed in isolation from the other programs or ministries of your church.
- Preparedness depends on the energy of one or a few people.
- Actions require resources (e.g., money) that may not be available or attainable.
- The church doesn't recognize, support, or encourage the people working hard to help the church prepare individually or publicly.

We want to help your church prepare for COVID-19 by showing you how to build on the knowledge, talents, gifts, and resources that already exist within your congregation and community. There are numerous benefits to using the approach we teach in this guide, including:

- Builds on your church’s existing ministry.
- Does not require a new program or large investment of resources.
- Makes it easier to maintain and sustain your plan and preparedness activities.
- Provides flexibility for adapting as needs change overtime.
- Allows you and your church to act quickly.
- Helps you counter fearful panic with faithful preparedness and planning.

In each of the following chapters, you will find a Scripture reading and reflection, easy-to-use planning instructions, concrete preparedness examples, planning templates, and prayer.

This manual will be most useful if you continue to add new ideas and adjust regularly as you learn more and respond to changing circumstances. As you implement your plan, be sure to consider how your church might help care for vulnerable and underserved individuals and communities. Also be sure to consider how to care for health, spiritual, psychological, and emotional needs in your congregation. Remember to keep it as simple as you can while responding to a complex situation.

Prayer: God, guide us into and throughout this process with your peace.

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²Portions of this guide have been adapted from the *Public Health Planning Guide for Faith Communities* that was originally developed by the Humanitarian Disaster Institute, Cook County Department of Public Health, and Chicago Department of Public Health.

STEP 1: *Get Organized*

They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh...to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.
(Genesis 41:35-36)

Joseph demonstrated wisdom in preparing for and then leading the way through a severe famine. Because of his careful preparation, Joseph could then provide what people needed. Though our focus isn't food, faithful preparation for COVID-19 involves planning ahead of time and then managing through a crisis. This planning guide is designed to help you take a faithful approach to assessing the needs, being good stewards, and witnessing to God's love for our neighbors.

Action: Start with Prayer

Prayerfully reflect on how God might use your church in light of COVID-19. Consider how your church's unique resources and current ministries might be used to help those in need. Also, pray for guidance about how the most vulnerable in your congregation and community might be helped. Ask God to open your eyes to ways you might help amidst concerns over COVID-19.

**CONSIDER HOW
TO PIVOT WHAT
YOUR CHURCH IS
ALREADY DOING
TO HELP OTHERS.**

Action: Reflect on Scripture

The way your church prepares for COVID-19 should be built on a strong theological foundation. We have found, however, that a lot of churches have not connected the dots between their theology and how they will respond to COVID-19. Maybe your church has never preached a sermon series or hosted small group discussions about faith and public health issues. The good news is that your church probably has a robust theological foundation for grappling with common problems like fear, adversity, and helping others. Use this theological understanding to help guide your church planning and preparedness efforts.

Action: Leverage Existing Ministries and Activities

The goal is to pivot your church's ongoing ministry efforts in new ways that address the needs created by COVID-19. Rather than starting from scratch, begin with what your church is already doing to serve others.

- Identify the current ministries and activities your church is engaged in that could be used to help address the impact of the COVID-19.
- Use existing communications methods and programs to instill hope in response to concerns about COVID-19.
- Care for peoples' spiritual, emotional, physical, social, and safety needs.
- Consider ways your church helps bring calm and encouragement to stressful situations; comfort worries over COVID-19.

- Leverage ways your church is already speaking out on behalf of the marginalized and vulnerable; ensure the fair distribution of resources so that these groups don't fall through the cracks amidst the public health crisis at hand.

Questions to Help You Get Organized

- **Is your church new to this type of work?** Starting small and learning as you go is the best practice. Initially, we recommend you develop a highly focused plan that is realistic about what your church is able to do quickly and do well to address COVID-19 concerns and needs. As your church grows more prepared and you begin to see what works and doesn't work for your church, then begin to explore ways to expand your preparedness efforts.
- **Does your church have operations that can be incorporated into your COVID-19 plan?** Ministries to groups like young families, the elderly, and the medically infirm can easily be integrated into your preparedness plan. Do you have a food program (like "Meals on Wheels"), an outreach to immigrants or refugees, or an education program? These can be ideal places to start when developing a preparedness plan. Before COVID-19 directly impacts your community, you could leverage each of the example ministries just highlighted to provide education about the outbreak and share information about additional resources available. You can also ensure contact information is updated. If your community is eventually advised to avoid contact with others outside the home, you can exchange in-person visits with regular calls to check in on those you have been serving.
- **Do you have people in your church with expertise in this area?** Among your church members, are there current or previous healthcare providers, employees of local, state or county public health agencies, people who work for relief organizations, or perhaps law enforcement or other first responders? People with this sort of experience can help your church prepare. If people are too busy, consider creating special consulting or advisory roles for them.
- **Are there any special liability issues that you need to consider?** Consider reaching out to your insurance provider to see if there may be special liability issues your church should consider amidst response to COVID-19. Situations where there is a foreseeable danger can produce liability if the congregation does not make every reasonable effort to intervene or remediate the situation. Not all insurance policies are the same. Coverage amounts, deductibles, and payment caps can vary significantly. This is necessary before planning is completed, and it may protect you and your congregation from a lawsuit. Consult with your insurance professional to be sure your policy is right for you.

The bottom line is that, whenever possible, it is best to incorporate COVID-19 preparedness into things you already do. This leverages your experience, introduces some creative variety that can increase interest among people in existing programs, and allows you to avoid duplication of efforts.

STEP 1: PLANNING TEMPLATE

Actions: Start with Prayer, Reflect on Scripture, and Leverage Existing Ministries and Activities

✓	Get Organized Checklist:
	Regularly monitor coronavirus risk and impact on your church and community.
	Schedule time for your health team (in person or virtually) to go through the guide's step-by-step planning process.
	Prepare to open your meeting in a word of prayer to seek God's comfort and guidance and pray for those in need.
	Share a Scripture reading and reflection to draw out biblical wisdom that can help your team plan effectively. Verses and reflections are provided at the beginning of each step in the planning guide.
	Share the manual with church staff, health team, and potential health team members. Step 1 (Get Organized) and Step 2 (Creating a Health Team) will likely overlap.
	Other:

Prayer: God, help us listen intently for what you're asking us to do and plan realistically for what we can accomplish.

STEP 2: *Create a Health Team*

But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be...there are many parts, but one body. (1 Corinthians 12:18, 20)

As we prepare for a potential crisis, we're reminded in Scripture that God gives us each unique gifts and opportunities to help the whole body as we respond to the circumstances at hand. Crises can cause fracture, but we also know they can—and should—reveal unity as we serve each other effectively. We pray God will guide us into the right roles for this moment.

Action: Frame Preparedness Efforts in Terms of Health

Form a health team to help lead and execute church planning and preparedness activities to address the COVID-19 outbreak. We recommend the terminology of health team because some churches already have health teams. Though not all churches have existing health teams, most churches have significant experience navigating and supporting others going through health issues.

Action: Recruit Lay Leaders to Support Staff

In addition to involving staff, focus on recruiting lay leaders who have health, leadership, and/or preparedness-related expertise from within your church. When forming your health team, define the leadership structure and each person's responsibilities. This will create accountability and lighten the burden of those involved. In your community, identify who might be willing to be accountable for the tasks. Who are the members with a vested interest in the success of the plan for how your church is addressing COVID-19?

One benefit of forming a health team is that questions and concerns of the congregation can be tackled as a team effort, which relieves pastors and ministry staff from fielding all the questions and answering medical-related questions outside their expertise. It also promotes a sense of confidence and care to those in the church who are feeling anxious.

**PROMOTES
A SENSE OF
CONFIDENCE
AND CARE.**

Action: Define Roles and Responsibilities

Define the roles and responsibilities of each position on the health team. Explain what should happen, when, and at whose direction. In case someone on your team might get ill, be sure to assign a backup person who could step in for each person on the team. Assignments could be made within the team or include backups not part of the initial leadership team.

Action: Monitor COVID-19 Risk and Impact

Monitoring and assessing COVID-19 risk is an important role the health team should assist with performing. In addition to considering how viable of a threat COVID-19 may be to your church and community, the health team needs to also identify individuals and communities where you are located that could be hit the hardest and struggle the most (e.g., medically frail, elderly). (See STEP 4: Focus on Church and Community Outreach for more on helping underserved groups).

How to Form a Health Team for Your Church

Your COVID-19 preparedness ministry team (a.k.a. your health team) will need a champion—a health team coordinator—someone who is passionate about how your church can prepare and care amidst the outbreak.

Successful church preparedness begins (and ends) with leadership. This involves getting key church leadership on board with your vision for how to help your church get ready for and respond to this public health emergency. It also encompasses identifying and developing the right leaders to help you carry out your preparedness activities.

The average senior church leader is already overwhelmed with a wide range of responsibilities. It can be hard for senior leadership to take on yet another role and ministry. In some cases, it may actually be easier (and better) for a lay leader with a heart for serving others in times of crisis to take the lead in getting your church prepared. Here are steps for engaging church leaders in a COVID-19 preparedness ministry:

- Choose team members who will be calm and informed, such as health care professionals.
- Identify a health team coordinator.
- Ensure this team represents, or is able to lead and communicate effectively with, the different parts of your membership, ministries, and community.
- Ensure at least one staff member is either on the health team or is the designated liaison to the health team.

STEP 2: PLANNING TEMPLATE

Actions: Frame Preparedness Efforts in Terms of Health, Recruit Lay Leaders, and Define Roles and Responsibilities.

Add as many people who are necessary to prepare and respond well, while remembering this team will likely need to be nimble and make quick, informed decisions. Depending on the size of your church and community, most teams will be able to perform well with sizes ranging from 5 to 12 people. Additional individuals may be added to help each of the 5-12 leaders carry out their responsibilities as needed. You want to find a balance in numbers that will provide enough people power to do the work at hand while being cautious of having “too many cooks in the kitchen.”

Health Team Coordinator (HTC) and Back-Up HTC Contact Information

The HTC for our congregation	<input type="text"/>
Key responsibilities	<input type="text"/>
Phone	<input type="text"/>
Email	<input type="text"/>
First alternate HTC	<input type="text"/>
Key responsibilities	<input type="text"/>
Phone	<input type="text"/>
Email	<input type="text"/>
Authorized emergency spokesperson (if different from HTC)	<input type="text"/>
Key responsibilities	<input type="text"/>
Phone	<input type="text"/>
Email	<input type="text"/>

Health Team Member Contact and Skill Information Form
(to be completed by each team member)

Name	<input type="text"/>
Position (vocational role at church, home, or company)	<input type="text"/>
Key responsibilities on health team	<input type="text"/>
Home address	<input type="text"/>
Phone	<input type="text"/>
Social media	<input type="text"/>
Email address	<input type="text"/>
Emergency contact	<input type="text"/>
Relationship	<input type="text"/>
Emergency contact phone	<input type="text"/>

Ensure this information is collected from each team member and distributed to the rest of the team and to the church staff.

Original language from Bloomington Public Health. L. Brodsky, M. Drews, K. Henslee, N. Kafumbe and M. Schweizer, "Ready, Set, Go! Faith Community Emergency Preparedness Toolkit." Produced by the City of Bloomington (MN) Public Health Division with the support of the Minneapolis - St. Paul Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS), 1800 West Old Shakopee Road, Bloomington, MN 55431, www.bloomingtonmn.gov

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Monitor Coronavirus Risk and Impact:

The health team should work together to determine and update each category at least weekly (or more frequently if warranted due to possible rapid changes in the outbreak). In the table below, rate the possible risk and impact using the following scale:

High=3 Moderate=2 Low=1 None=0

PROBABILITY	HUMAN IMPACT	MINISTRY IMPACT
Likelihood coronavirus will directly impact your church and community	Possibility of illness (from mild to life threatening) among staff, members, or community	Likelihood to interrupt or cause modifications to existing services or ministries

Based on our current risk and impact assessment, we need to take these actions:

Based on our current risk and impact assessment, we may need to make these decisions soon:

Prayer: God, may we identify the right people for the right roles, and may we support each other along the way.

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STEP 3: *Develop a Communications Strategy*

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7)

We're reminded in this passage not to cower in the face of a potential emergency. Nor are we to panic. By faith, we can act with the power, love, and self-discipline that comes from God. With this as our guide for crisis communications, we can rise to the occasion to provide steady and supportive information. Your church should open the channels of communication regarding COVID-19. Provide church staff, leaders, and congregants with access to the plan so they can understand its components and how to act. They need to know what to do in advance, not only to get them through an incident, but also to help alleviate panic and anxiety.

Action: Leverage Familiar Communication Platforms

As noted throughout this guide, the best place to begin is with how your church already communicates with leadership and with congregants. If you don't already have it, collect emergency contact information from church members and leadership. If you do, make sure this information is up to date. Determine how the congregation will communicate with all of the individuals who are directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. In some cases, you may find a gap and, for example, need to set up new group texts or messaging services to make sure everyone gets reached.

Action: Be Intentional in Communicating with Vulnerable Groups

Remember that some in your community may lack access to certain forms of technology, so be sure to discuss how you will stay in touch and support potentially vulnerable members of your church and community. Also keep in mind that your communications strategy may also need to be tailored to the unique needs and questions of vulnerable individuals and groups, such as conveying information to parents on developmentally appropriate ways to talk with their children about COVID-19. The same holds true when communicating with your community.

Action: Prewrite Messages

Consider writing template letters in advance so you are not composing messages during the confusion and chaos of crisis. For example, you can pre-write an email about canceling services, though you don't know if you will need it. This will give you time to think through the tone and the message you hope to send. Also, think through the logistics of the tools you would use to live-stream, send a video or reflection, or however you plan to respond.

AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

should involve sharing how you plan to communicate about COVID-19. Decide when, where, and how you will maintain ongoing information-sharing with your church and community and let others know.

Communications Strategy Examples

- **Text Messaging:** This service uses less bandwidth than cell phone calls, and many text messaging servers will continuously attempt to send the message until the cellular signal is restored.
- **Text Broadcasting:** Now is the time to implement group messaging services so you can broadcast text messaging alerts during crisis situations.
- **Social Media Networking Communications:** Examples of how social media can be used before or during public health crises include posting communications, sharing information, downloading resources, updating news, sharing geographical location, and taking or sharing pictures of developing events. To stay consistent and current in an emergency, follow your state-certified local public health department on social media and use their messages during an emergency.
- **Call-Down Procedure (Phone Tree):** Clergy calls assigned congregational leaders, congregational leaders call assigned congregation members, congregation members call assigned congregation members, and so on. This system should include everyone who needs information, but especially individuals at risk.
- **Prepare for Media Engagement:** It would also be wise to decide in advance if and how you might work with media if they contact you about how your church is navigating COVID-19.

How to Help Anxious and Worried Members of Your Church

A quick skim of headlines reveals that panic has already been triggered, as evidenced by the buying up of protective equipment that isn't needed or useful against COVID-19. Not surprisingly, many pastors and church leaders have begun sharing about members of their church who are struggling with high levels of anxiety and worry about the outbreak.

Following is a handout that you can give to members of your church who are struggling.

COVID-19 HANDOUT: CHOICES YOU CAN MAKE TO STAY EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY

Pay Attention to Your Body and Your Emotions

It's natural to experience stress and anxiety in the face of a threat we cannot control. Because every person reacts differently, notice what your body and emotions are telling you:

- Listen to your emotions, noticing any anxiety, sadness, anger, or detachment;
- Listen to your body, noticing any change in appetite, new aches and pains, or feeling particularly hot or cool; and,
- When you notice troubling symptoms, pause to care for your body and mind. If you become unable to manage or function well, seek the assistance of a professional.

Embrace Best Health Practices

Though there's much about the COVID-19 outbreak over which you have no control, you can choose to embrace the kinds of practices that will keep you and your loved ones safe. The Center for Disease Control suggests:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Follow CDC's recommendations for using a facemask.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

Access Reliable Resources

You can choose how you will receive and consume information about the outbreak. If you rely on panicked phone calls from your anxious loved ones, you're likely to suffer more than if you choose to rely on credible sources. Two reliable sources for health news include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and World Health Organization. Also, if you become consumed by breaking news about the spread of COVID-19, you can also choose to step away from media reports for a time.

Share Reliable Information

Another way to care for yourself is to care for others by sharing the best information you've discovered. When you find a reputable resource that's particularly helpful, share it with a loved one. When you learn about practices that keep people safe, let a relative who is vulnerable to illness know. In a culture where people are feeling anxious, you can be a gift to others.

Continued on next page

Practice Self-Care

In the midst of a stressful season or situation, many self-care practices are the same ones that prove helpful in everyday living:

- Maintain your normal routines.
- Connect with family and friends.
- Eat well.
- Stay active.
- Get adequate rest.
- Do enjoyable activities.
- Employ coping skills that nurture your spirit, like mindfulness exercises or prayer.

Support Each Other

We aren't created to go through extreme stress alone, so this is also a time as part of God's family to care for each other. Here are two questions to keep asking yourself:

- What opportunities do I have to help others?
- What is overwhelming right now that I should ask someone for help with?

While it feels like there is a lot we can't control amidst concerns over COVID-19, every one of us can make choices to stay emotionally healthy.

³This section adapted with permission from M. Starbuck. (2020, March 3). How to Stay Emotionally Healthy During the Coronavirus Outbreak [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/202003/how-stay-emotionally-healthy-during-the-COVID-19-outbreak>

STEP 3: PLANNING TEMPLATE

Actions: Leverage Familiar Communication Platforms, Be Intentional in Communicating with Vulnerable Groups, and Prewrite Messages

What should you communicate?	Who are you communicating to? (Ex: congregation, staff, local government)	Who should communicate the message? (Ex: Health Team Coordinator, Pastor)	How should it be communicated? (Ex: electronically, phone call/tree, mail)	Preparatory Actions (Ex: talking points, key messages, training)
Impact on church to date				
COVID-19 Impact				
Church services or gatherings (e.g., Bible studies) offered or changed				
Funds or supplies needed				
Volunteers needed				
Other				

Directions for updating the church voicemail, including remotely:

Person responsible:

Alternate:

Directions for sending churchwide emails and texts, including remotely:

Person responsible:

Alternate:

Ensure you are clear with the church how you will use these different channels of communication. For example, how will they learn if the Sunday morning service is canceled? And also consider that different people may have different tools available (e.g., if some don't have a computer or email address).

Additional communication directions:

Original language from Bloomington Public Health. L. Brodsky, M. Drews, K. Henslee, N. Kafumbe and M. Schweizer, "Ready, Set, Go! Faith Community Emergency Preparedness Toolkit." Produced by the City of Bloomington (MN) Public Health Division with the support of the Minneapolis - St. Paul Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS), 1800 West Old Shakopee Road, Bloomington, MN 55431, www.bloomingtonmn.gov

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Sample Calling Tree (Note that some churches may have a prayer chain that can be adapted for this purpose):



Instead of using a “prayer chain” model, some churches may decide to divide a list of vulnerable people who need to be checked in with regularly among staff and laypeople. For example, each person would get a list of several people who they are committed to check in with daily or every other day. In these circumstances it can be as simple as:

Check-in List

Person Responsible name and number:	Check-in recipient name and number:	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	Check-in recipient name and number:	<input type="text"/>
	Check-in recipient name and number:	<input type="text"/>

Prayer: God, free us to lead our communication not with fear, but with power, love, and self-discipline.

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STEP 4: *Focus on Church and Community Outreach*

The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12:18)

When it comes to potential public health emergencies, thoughtful, true, and timely communication is key. Proverbs reminds us that quick and reckless words can damage. As we inform our congregations and communities, both before and during potential crisis, we ask God to give us the wisdom and resources we need to communicate well.

Action: Provide Vetted Information from Trusted Resources

Make prevention education and outreach part of your everyday ministry. Share up-to-date, trusted, and vetted information on COVID-19—information that fosters preparedness rather than stoking fear. Look for ways to share helpful updates and information. Programs such as health education can be a service your ministry offers. Other examples of things your church can do to reduce risk and impact of COVID-19 include:

- Provide information from local, state, and federal public health agencies on the signs and symptoms of COVID-19.
- Educate others on infection prevention habits, like proper handwashing techniques and other common practices frequently taught to combat influenza.
- Teach infection control strategies at meetings and events, like reminding others to stay home if they feel ill or are starting to feel ill.
- Post fliers and reminders of healthful habits, including “cover your cough” and “stop the spread of germs.”
- Disseminate information regarding healthful infection prevention habits through emails, phone messages, text messages, handouts, social media platforms, and your website.
- Partner with local, state, or federal agencies or trusted nonprofits with public health expertise to provide training on COVID-19 for members of your church and community. This could be conducted in person or online through webinars, for example.

**MAKE PREVENTION
EDUCATION
AND OUTREACH
PART OF YOUR
EVERYDAY
MINISTRY.**

Action: Focus on Underserved Individuals and Communities

COVID-19 is likely to disproportionately impact the socially and economically vulnerable. Though public health crises may reveal inconsistencies in our thoughts and injustices in the communities we call home, preparedness ministries reveal God’s love, mercy, and grace. God has called for us to care for those in need.

In this season when we’re facing COVID-19, there is an immediate and pressing need. God’s commandment to bring good news and healing to those who suffer is clear. As Christians, we are created in the image of a loving, merciful, and gracious God, a God whose son taught us to open our hearts and use our talents in service of the kingdom. Thinking about preparedness differently is an opportunity to help your church more effectively reduce potential harm to the most vulnerable.

Here are some examples of vulnerable people in your church and community whom you should keep in mind as you plan:

- Older people are especially vulnerable to this virus. We can focus on reducing their risk of exposure and also plan, for example, to provide extra social support (by phone, computer) if your community moves into a phase of significantly reduced social contact.
- Children and families with limited resources may rely on school meal programs as a significant source of food security. If schools close, it will be important to help ensure these children and families get enough food.
- People whose health is already compromised in ways such as respiratory illness are especially vulnerable, so we can work to support them in holistic ways.
- People whose income will or already has dropped quickly (for example, service jobs, travel industry) is another group for whom the church should be paying special attention as you plan.
- People of Asian descent have faced stigmatization and discrimination because the COVID-19 outbreak has its origins in China. Your church has an important role in promoting faithful preparedness, and also in reducing fearful panic and prejudice.

Outreach Examples

- Include inserts in the worship bulletin that encourage preparedness and/or provide steps for developing and implementing a preparedness plan.
- Include preparedness messaging with other congregational announcements.
- Regularly set aside a segment of time during meetings or worship services for updates by congregational leadership on COVID-19.
- Post informational flyers in your building or on your website and social media.
- Have the pastors and other church leaders publicly show their support of planning and preparedness.
- Develop a sermon or sermon series focusing on theological issues related to preparedness-related topics.
- Encourage church small groups and your other ministries to study biblical examples of preparedness together (this could be done in person if safe to do so or via virtual small group meetings).

Prayer: God, help us to reach the people who need our help the most.

STEP 4: PLANNING TEMPLATE

Actions: Provide Vetted Information from Trusted Resources and Focus on Underserved Individuals and Communities

Select a few of these services from examples below that you will provide to underserved church members and communities and describe how each will be carried out:

✓	Sample Outreach Actions	How Action Will be Achieved
	Church staff and lay leaders model preparedness	
	Promote faithful preparedness (e.g., in Sunday school, sermons, Bible studies)	
	Disseminate vetted information from trusted resources to reduce panic	
	Pastoral services (spiritual care)	
	Outreach & support to vulnerable populations	
	Advocacy	
	Health services	
	Home visits/or calls if advised against meeting in person	
	Language translation	
	Legal assistance	
	Listening	
	Managing volunteers	
	Managing donations	
	Food services (cooking, feeding & distribution including home delivery)	
	Improve access to community healthcare services	
	Special or alternative (e.G., Streaming) worship services	
	Encourage individual/family preparedness:	
	Other:	

STEP 5: *Strengthen Preparedness Through Collaborations*

But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (I Corinthians 12:24-26)

As Christians, and as a church, you are part of one body with different gifts and roles. This metaphor also identifies the strength of collaboration. As the passage says, the “parts should have equal concern for each other.” We know we need each other. A crisis is a time both to help and be helped.

Action: Work with Other Churches

Working with other churches allows you to make connections locally, regionally, and even perhaps nationally or globally. These connections allow you to share knowledge and resources and to learn from others. Talk with other pastors from churches in your area to discuss the possibility of working together. Consider the following topics:

- Discuss how COVID-19 could affect your community.
- Explore ways you might collaborate with other churches. This could include national, regional, and local denominational bodies to which you're connected.
- Identify the special resources that each house of worship possesses (and potential gaps in knowledge, skills, resources, and capacity). Discuss ways to share, and avoid duplicating, your efforts.
- Create a simple plan for coordinating and sharing resources and for filling potential gaps.
- Consider partnering with public health, emergency response, government, or nonprofit groups; many groups around the U.S. are offering virtual planning meetings.
- Describe the role of each participating group based on its unique resources.
- Arrange a mutual-support agreement with churches located in a different area so support is available in the event your church is significantly impacted by COVID-19.
- Identify the contact person for each church, plus a backup person, in case the main contact is unavailable. Include multiple ways to contact this person.
- Include a schedule for updating information such as contacts, organizational needs, and resource availability.
- Assign a coordinator for the plan, someone who will ensure the plan is current and follow and update the schedule.
- Work together to modify the plan and address any challenges or problems.

WHY YOU SHOULD COLLABORATE WITH OTHER CHURCHES AND PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCIES

Working with other churches and public health agencies can greatly improve your ability to respond in a public health crisis. It allows churches to focus on things they do well while being supported by other churches in aspects they find more difficult.

Preparing as the Full Body of Christ

Look for ways to partner with other churches and to leverage the strengths of multiple churches in order to enhance capacity. Your church may have an incredible ministry and people who know how to work well and care for children. Another church may have a heart for working with the elderly. When we come together as the full body of Christ, we make even a larger impact than if we try to respond by ourselves.

STEP 5: PLANNING TEMPLATE

Actions: Work with Other Churches and Consult with Local Public Health Agencies

Use the following checklist to consider ways your church might plan to build collaborations to help better prepare:

✓	Sample Collaborative Actions	How Action Will Be Achieved
	Connect with a network with other churches that shares preparedness ideas and resources.	
	Identify other churches or agencies in your community who are working on preparedness to learn from, consult, and network.	
	Host a webinar or seminar on how to prepare for the coronavirus for your church and community members (or consider joining one of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute's limited run of weekly webinars on preparing churches for coronavirus; visit wheaton.edu/hdi-covid19 to learn more).	
	Other:	

Prayer: God, help us recognize and lean into our need for each other.

STEP 6: *Adapt to Changing Needs*

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (James 1:22)

In this verse, James reiterates one of his central points: that faith without action is incomplete. In a similar way when preparing for a potential crisis, we need to listen well when creating a plan. We need to pray without ceasing. We need to do the work of putting our preparedness plan into action. Implementing our plan is a practical way to ensure that our faith, love, and actions line up.

Action: Stay Informed

Staying informed by following updates disseminated by local, state, and federal public health agencies is key to putting preparedness into action. Seek out and listen to trusted sources that have been monitoring COVID-19 and issuing updated information, resources, and recommendations. Though not meant to serve as an exhaustive list, here are a few agencies that you might consider looking to for information (in alphabetical order):

- [Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
- [Healthcare Ready](#)
- [Johns Hopkins University CSSSE Interactive Web-Based COVID-19 Dashboard](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)

As noted earlier, churches are also encouraged to reach out to local public health agencies and establish relationships. Research shows that partnerships between faith-based organizations and public health agencies can help save lives.

Action: Consider Modifying Practices

Churches offer significant social support that enhances resilience, yet when it comes to public health emergencies like COVID-19, this can actually put churches in a high-density outbreak region at greater risk. As central gathering places, churches need to think through how typical patterns of coming together put people at risk. For example, think about how worship practices and greeting times may need to be modified to limit exposure.

Take the practice of communion. Different churches will be less or more hesitant to adapt practices. What is important is to be asking questions like: How can we make communion more hygienic while spiritually ministering to people now? How can we both encourage those who don't feel well to stay home, while also continuing to minister to them? At what point do we make more radical changes or suspend communion?

EVEN WITH YOUR BEST PREPAREDNESS

there is almost always an element of surprise and accompanying confusion when it's time to roll out the plan and take action. The good news is that there are steps your church can take to help navigate the unexpected.

For example, if you use a “common cup,” this could be the time to start preparing communion in individual disposable cups. Perhaps your congregation already does this. However, if you are passing the cups via communion trays from person to person down the pew, it increases risk. The same holds true for similar practices that require passing objects from one person to the next, such as collection plates.

Explore modifications to practices that could reduce the number of “touches.” If you are a faith leader who decides to implement some changes to typical practices, make sure you take time to communicate the reasoning and process that went into the conclusion.

Action: Adapt Services if Needed

Many churches are asking if they should continue to meet and gather together in public. In many communities, canceling church services would be premature if they’ve not yet been directly impacted by the outbreak. However, in other U.S. communities with documented cases of COVID-19, church closures are warranted.

Regardless, now is the time for church leadership and members to put plans in place to inform attendance and closure decisions should they be needed at some point. Church leaders should begin talking about possible ways to adapt to COVID-19, which includes alternative meeting approaches if the church body is unable to gather. For example, some churches already stream services or communicate with each other over social media, and that may be an option for fostering community if meeting in person is not possible.

In these cases, however, don’t forget those in your church who may be homebound, unable to afford technology or lack access to it, and those who are not as tech-savvy. Also, some in your church might struggle if your church doesn’t gather because they lack a strong social network outside the church. In such cases, it could be helpful to bring back the “prayer chain” call approach and have people check in regularly by phone. Though there aren’t any perfect solutions, and although these discussions can be difficult, it’s better to have them now versus later.

If you anticipate that alternative meeting and worship approaches might be needed, be sure to talk with your staff how they might work remotely. Similarly, you should talk with your staff about how your church will navigate potential employee absences.

Should your local, state, or a federal agency warn against public gatherings or advise congregations (or your church specifically) not meet, take the advice seriously. Follow the guidelines and instructions provided.

A Review: Preparing Your Church Checklist

- Get organized
- Create a health team
- Develop a communication strategy
- Focus on church and community outreach
- Strengthen preparedness through collaborations
- Adapt to changing needs

STEP 6: PLANNING TEMPLATE

Actions: Stay Informed, Consider Modifying Practices, and Adapt Services if Needed

✓	Implementation Checklist
	Regularly monitor coronavirus risk and impact on your church and community.
	Assess your church's activity and progress toward helping your church and community prepare.
	Make gaps in your plan and preparedness known to other leadership so that you can work toward solutions.
	Revisit your plan regularly and update the plan so it remains viable.
	Continue to communicate your plan as it changes to church members and partnering churches and agencies.
	Other:

Prayer: God, lead us to be do-ers, loving our neighbors out of gratitude for your love for us.



About the Humanitarian Disaster Institute

Founded in 2011, Wheaton College's Humanitarian Disaster Institute (HDI) is the country's first faith-based academic disaster research center. Our mission is to help the church prepare and care in a disaster-filled world. HDI carries out our mission through research, training, convening, and resourcing.

HDI offers an M.A. in Humanitarian & Disaster Leadership at Wheaton College Graduate School that can be completed in one year on campus or two years online (which includes a week of on-campus coursework at the beginning and end of the program). We have also partnered with the School of Psychology, Counseling, and Family Therapy at Wheaton College Graduate School to offer a new Trauma Certificate in a specialized track specifically tailored to humanitarian and disaster responders. Learn more at wheaton.edu/HDL.

Contributors

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Contact Us

Our website and social media accounts provide ongoing updates and resources for preparing your church for COVID-19.

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