

## **CONGREGATIONAL MUTUAL AID RESPONSES DURING A PANDEMIC**

Assisting and restoring people and families towards wholeness; spiritual, emotional and physical, is always the highest goal of mutual aid. Two scripture passages which are frequently and commonly used to under-gird the Anabaptist emphasis on mutual aid are:

- *“Bear one another’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Galatians 6:2*
- *“I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.” 2 Corinthians 8: 13-14*

By definition, healthy communities practice such mutual aid admirably well. People live with the knowledge that whatever happens, their community will be there for them and surround them with practical assistance and care. People live with the commitment that if their sisters and brothers in the faith are hurting, they will be available to help carry the burden.

Such care is natural and second nature in our church communities. However, during a time of a flu pandemic, normal mechanisms of support may well break down due to the severity and scope of the pandemic. Human, energy and time resources may become scarce. Unfortunately this may occur precisely at a time when people most need support and assistance.

While it is impossible to anticipate all the scenarios that may occur during a flu pandemic, having certain precautionary systems in place and having given thought to coping in the difficult circumstances of possible scarce human resources will go a long way in avoiding both despair and panic. In light of this, congregations are encouraged to give some thought and consideration to the following anticipatory and precautionary measures:

1. Consider appointing an Emergency Management Team with the responsibility to develop a Disaster Recovery and Continuity plan for the congregation. It would be this team’s responsibility to coordinate efforts due to a flu pandemic or any other disaster.
2. If not already in place, be sure that your congregation has a care fund, deacon’s fund or other named fund to assist when there are financial needs. Ensure that clearly defined policies are in place outlining in what circumstances this fund will be used and who has the authority to authorize expenditures from the fund.
3. Designate a mutual aid call centre, preferably in the church or if necessary some other public space, where personnel can be available to stay in touch with all families in the congregation. Have several people appointed to operate this call centre in case some are ill. The purpose of the call centre would be two-fold:
  - a. It is a place where people can call for assistance and support.
  - b. Alternatively the person(s) at the centre can call on all households to determine how they are coping and determine if emergencies exist.
4. A variation of # 2 in congregations where most or all people have access, might be a form of internet or email communication, accessible to all people in the congregation. Here people can post information and needs and others can respond. It would provide a form of congregational networking during a time when people may be forbidden to meet together, are housebound and become discouraged or overwhelmed by circumstances.

5. A third alternative given the sophistication of current telephone technology is have a system which allows messages to automatically be sent by telephone to all households in the congregation. This is an excellent way to inform all congregational households of an emergency or in the case of a pandemic let people know of restrictions imposed by authorities, etc.
6. Ensure there is a current listing of all congregational households that is up-to-date with names of all household members, ages and the phone number and email address.
7. Develop and maintain a skills or gift inventory within the congregation so the call centre leadership know who to call if specific skill sets are required. Consider such skills as child care (if both parents are ill), nursing skills, drivers willing to do grocery shopping or taking people to appointments, persons who can provide pastoral care in case pastoral staff is ill or overloaded.
8. Consider what would happen if your pastor or pastors were ill and unavailable. Is there a roster of people available for pastoral care or even to do funerals, given that in a pandemic the likelihood of funerals may be higher than normal.
9. Consider planning jointly with other sister congregations or congregations in the community to look after crises in each other's congregations. In some areas this could occur in community ministerials or regional clusters of Mennonite congregations. Be sure any understandings are in writing and available to people in the mutual aid call centre so it is known who to contact.
10. Congregational families within a neighbourhood or smaller community may wish to create their own mutual assistance network to care for each other and children if needed during a pandemic. The congregation may wish to provide a structure or guidelines for this to occur.
11. Give consideration and do some planning in how your congregation can assist the larger community around the church to cope with a pandemic, through personnel, or through possible use of facilities.
12. Give thought to emergency supplies that might become part of a pandemic response such as surgical masks for those who must intervene in cases where people are ill. Be sure such supplies are purchased and stored in advance of the event.

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February 12, 2008