



COVID-19 CHURCH RESPONSE GUIDE

Mobilizing Churches to Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Low-Income Communities

23 March 2020

This guide is written for facilitators that work with local churches. It is intended to help you help churches respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by loving and serving their neighbors. You have a unique opportunity to help churches be a reliable source of accurate information in this critical time. Because good hygiene practices, sanitation management, and safe water supply play a critical role in reducing disease transmission, you are uniquely positioned to help churches calm fears, reduce risk, and demonstrate God's love in this time of crisis. We are thankful for you and are praying for you.

Note: This is Version 1.0 developed on March 23, 2020. To make sure you are accessing the latest version, and to get other helpful resources, visit <http://flourish.guide>.

What is COVID-19 (Coronavirus)?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to severe respiratory disease. COVID-19 is a new coronavirus disease that was classified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic on March 10, 2020. It is more contagious and deadly than influenza, and there currently is no vaccine or treatment. The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, tiredness, and dry cough.

COVID-19 is spread by people in close contact (less than one meter) of one another as droplets are passed mainly in coughs and sneezes. It is also passed through physical contact as people touch infected objects or one another with unwashed hands.

The WHO advises that COVID-19 can spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth which are spread when an infected person coughs or exhales. These droplets land on objects and surfaces around the person. Other people then catch COVID-19 by touching these objects or surfaces, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

The best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to¹:

1. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub.
2. Cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. Dispose of used tissues immediately after use, then wash your hands.
3. Maintain at least one-meter distance from anyone who is coughing or sneezing.
4. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
5. Stay home if you feel unwell. If you have a fever, cough, and difficulty breathing, seek medical attention and call in advance. Follow the directions of your local health authority.

If you are healthy, you only need to wear a mask if you are taking care of a person with a suspected COVID-19 infection. Due to the increased demand for masks, it is advisable that they be prioritized for health care workers. Masks are effective only when used in combination with frequent handwashing with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub².

Always consult with your national health ministry and the WHO for the latest information and advice. Go to <http://bit.ly/who-covid-19-share> on your smartphone to get information directly from the WHO in WhatsApp.

¹ Advice based on [World Health Organization \(WHO\) guidance](#) also [en Français](#) and [en Español](#).

² Advice based on the [Centers for Disease Control's](#) recommendation

Why should churches be responding to COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a new disease that is a global pandemic, and churches can play a key role in helping to reduce its spread. Churches are often the center of a community, and pastors can provide helpful guidance and encourage important behavior changes. On the other hand, if changes to worship services and other gatherings are not made, then churches can be a place in which the disease is spread, endangering church members and those in the community.

This is also an opportunity to share the love of God in word and deed. To say it another way, this is an opportunity for churches to carry out the *integral mission* to which God has called them — the inseparable proclamation and demonstration of the gospel as seen in the life and work of Jesus. This time of fear and uncertainty is an opportunity to emulate peace that surpasses understanding, which we have in Christ.

How can churches respond?

Churches should consider responding in four main ways:

1. Reduce the spread of the disease in your church.
2. Care for your church members.
3. Mobilize church members to love their neighbors.
4. Pray for an end to COVID-19.

1. REDUCE THE SPREAD OF DISEASE IN YOUR CHURCH



Churches and pastors are uniquely positioned to help reduce the spread of the disease. While the church is called not to abandon the call to worship and fellowship, they can pro-actively make modifications to how their churches do this to make sure the disease is not being spread among church members. Pastors can also use their influence to communicate correct and clear messages.

a. Make modifications to church services and gatherings

Since the disease is spread through close contact with others and shaking hands (all of which often happens at church worship services), the disease could be spread to many church members if someone is there who is infected—whether or not they are displaying symptoms.

While the spiritual and social care provided by the church is more important than ever in a time of a global pandemic, our love and concern for the whole person means we should also take action to care for the physical wellbeing of our church members and neighbors. This might mean being creative in thinking about how the church worships and fellowships in a time of limited social interactions and public gatherings.

Many governments have already or will soon be restricting public gatherings, including religious services. These instructions, and those from any church authorities, should be followed.

Churches should also pro-actively consider what they can do to modify church services temporarily to reduce the spread of the disease. This can include:

- Meet in smaller groups of fewer than 10 people rather than your normal worship services.
- Ask everyone to stand at least one meter away from others.
- Meet outside in the open air.
- Limit physical contact: no shaking hands, hugs, or kisses.
- Avoid sharing of communal items such as cups, plates, and offertory plates/baskets.
- Discourage kissing or touching of objects.
- Suspend baptism by immersion and foot washing.
- Record messages that are sent out via WhatsApp if you are not able to meet as normal.

In addition, make sure to regularly **clean and sanitize** the church facilities and equipment, especially areas frequently touched, including surfaces, handles, lecterns, and microphones.

Finally, make sure there are **handwashing stations** at the entrance to the church, outside of sanitation facilities, and in other appropriate areas. Encourage members to wash their hands frequently while at a church service. If a handwashing facility is not available, consider using a jerry can fitted with taps, or have volunteers with clean hands pour water out of a jug. If that is unavailable, then consider using handsfree tippy taps activated by a foot pedal.

b. Communicate correct and clear messages

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." - 3 John 1:4

Pastors can use their positions of influence to communicate the following messages:

- COVID-19 is a serious disease that we need to prevent from spreading to others.
- Symptoms of COVID-19 are fever and tiredness, coughing, and breathing difficulties.
- If someone gets the disease, that does not mean they have a spiritual ailment.
- Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Use a tissue for coughs or sneezes, and then immediately place it in a waste bin.
- Avoid touching your face.
- If you have a fever or are coughing or sneezing, stay home.
- Pray for the sick without physical contact or coming within one meter.
- Someone with COVID-19 symptoms should follow the established procedures within the country.
- Report COVID-19 cases to relevant health authorities.

This communication can come through sermons, phone messages (SMS, WhatsApp), social media, and mass media (radio, TV). Churches should make sure they have the correct contact information for their church members so they can communicate during this time.

In addition, there will be many false rumors and myths being communicated about why people have the disease and what can be done to prevent or treat it. It is important for churches and church leaders to clearly dismiss these claims and to speak the truth.

Always refer to what national authorities and the WHO are encouraging you to communicate. The WHO also provides “myth busters” on their WhatsApp channel.

c. Provide an example of right living

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” -Matthew 5:16

Church leaders should model behaviors that have the potential to save lives by:

- Showing that they are washing hands regularly.
- Following guidance on greetings and gatherings (not shaking hands or giving hugs).
- If asked to pray for church members who have COVID-19 symptoms, doing it while maintaining proper distance and following the health guidance (not laying on of hands while praying).
- Modelling positive attitudes, sincere action, and faith in God regarding the pandemic.

2. CARE FOR CHURCH MEMBERS



Make plans and take action to care for your church members spiritually, socially, and physically during this time.

a. Prepare church members for a time of isolation

During a COVID-19 outbreak, or in an attempt to prevent it, church members may become physically isolated, worried, and fearful. They will miss a central part of church life which is gathering for fellowship, prayer, and worship. Prepare church members for a potential time of isolation. Find ways for members to keep in touch and provide spiritual support to one another. Some helpful ideas include:

- Encourage families to grow in their own spiritual life of prayer, Bible reading, meditation, reflection, and other spiritual practices and disciplines.
- Distribute Bible study materials to each family in your church.
- Provide school-aged children with workbooks if they are out of school to help them keep their learning and minimize roaming in the streets.
- Establish “virtual groups” that pray every day at the same time.

Provide guidance on how church members can stay physically and emotionally healthy during times of isolation, such as eating healthy foods, exercising, and spending time together as a family doing activities they enjoy.

b. Prepare ways to stay in touch with church members to provide care

Ensure you have contact information for all church members (where possible) so that you can stay in touch through phone calls or messages if there are times of isolation. You can also make a list of all church members and prioritize contacting the most vulnerable (the sick or elderly), ensuring they have food, water, soap, and other basic needs met.

Do not visit COVID-19 infected church or community members unless the hospital or health care facility can ensure quarantine protection. If patients do not have access to telephones and have requested to speak with a church leader, provide your telephone number to members of the staff so the patient can call you.

c. Address your church members' spiritual or theological questions

During times of crisis, panic, and suffering, many people want to know 'Why?' There must be a reason why God has allowed this sickness. The question of "why does a loving God allow suffering?" remains the toughest question across all time and cultures. One thing the Bible teaches is that there is not a direct link between a sickness like coronavirus and a specific sin. Jesus, however, understands our suffering and accompanies us through it, having suffered more than any other human. Jesus also understands our fears and worries and asks us to bring them to him in prayer.

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." -1 Peter 5:7

The Christian's role during this testing time remains that of bringing healing to a broken world, revealing God's love and glory, and pointing people to the fullness of life (Jn 10:10) that is more than physical health.

3. MOBILIZE CHURCH MEMBERS TO LOVE THEIR NEIGHBORS



“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” - John 15:12

The Church does not exist for itself but to love God and to love our neighbor. Christians should witness during this pandemic by speaking and living lives of hope and love. If your church already has a Church Mobilization Group or a group of volunteers, consider how they (particularly the young and healthy) can serve³. Examples include:

- Ensure the whole community has access to accurate information (put up posters) and handwashing facilities.
- Volunteer to ensure the local water collection point is not a source of disease transmission; encourage social distancing (at least one meter apart) and regular cleaning of pump handles and/or spigots.
- Check that vulnerable and isolated people have enough food, and that their other basic needs are met without exposing oneself to any risk of becoming infected. Take special care of the elderly remain safe, as they are especially vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Respond to loneliness and fear by setting up a phone or online community chat or support group.
- If you are using social media or other media to stay connected as a church, include voices from the community in passing on positive messages of hope. Feature stories of what others are doing to make isolation less difficult, and let people know they are not alone in their fears.
- Provide food and supplies to healthcare workers who will likely become overburdened.
- Work with health officials to help identify cases of COVID-19 in the community.
- Share stories from the Bible and discuss what they mean in your context and during this time. A great example is the story of Jesus calming the storm found in Mark 4:35–41.
 - See the Flourish guide for more details about Bible storytelling.

4. PRAY FOR AN END TO COVID-19



“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” -Philippians 4:6

The Church believes that God is active in the affairs of humankind, so it is important to remind yourself and others in your church that we need to pray for an end to COVID-19. Below is a prayer that can be prayed.

³ For more information about how to mobilize volunteers and make plans to act, read about Stages 2 and 3 in the Flourish Facilitators' Guide.

A Coronavirus Prayer (Kerry Weber)

Jesus Christ, you traveled through towns and villages “curing every disease and illness.” At your command, the sick were made well. Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of the coronavirus, that we may experience your healing love.

Heal those who are sick with the virus. May they regain their strength and health through quality medical care. Heal us from our fear, which prevents nations from working together and neighbors from helping one another. Heal us from our pride, which can make us claim invulnerability to a disease that knows no borders.

Jesus Christ, healer of all, stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow. Be with the families of those who are sick or have died. As they worry and grieve, defend them from illness and despair. May they know your peace. Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers, and all medical professionals who seek to heal. Help those affected, and all who put themselves at risk in the process. May they know your protection and peace. Be with the leaders of all nations. Give them the foresight to act with charity and true concern for the well-being of the people they are meant to serve. Give them the wisdom to invest in long-term solutions that will help prepare for, or prevent, future outbreaks. May they know your peace, as they work together to achieve it on earth.

Whether we are home or abroad, surrounded by many people suffering from this illness or only a few, Jesus Christ, stay with us as we endure and mourn, persist and prepare. In place of our anxiety, give us your peace. Jesus Christ, heal us.

Amen.

TIPS FOR BEING A GOOD FACILITATOR

If you are engaging with local churches in low-income communities on how to respond to COVID-19, you will have to address sensitive issues around theology, beliefs, and practices. It's best to do this by having the attitude of a facilitator. Facilitation is not teaching or preaching, and it requires being flexible rather than rigidly following instructions.

Facilitators are patient and encouraging. They listen to other people, believe in them, value them, and involve those who may normally feel ignored.

The following tips can help you effectively engage with churches:

- Ask open-ended questions instead of yes or no questions.
- Recognize that it is usually more effective to help church leaders and members come to the right conclusions themselves, rather than only providing instruction.
- Be encouraging and offer to pray for the church leaders.
- Be patient, realizing that different churches will be at different points in processing how they should respond.
- Be gentle but firm in correcting false rumors about COVID-19, recognizing that some local actors (or even government authorities) may have competing agendas.

For more guidance on good facilitation, see “Your Role as Facilitator” in the Flourish Facilitator’s Guide, available here: <http://flourish.guide>.



Although it can be used as a standalone tool, this COVID-19 response guide was designed as a supplement to the Flourish Facilitator’s Guide, which can be found at <http://flourish.guide>.

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