



1 October, 2009

Loving Our Neighbor: The Impending Flu Season

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

The Flu season will soon be upon us, complicated this year by a potential outbreak of the H1N1 virus. We do not want to blow this flu season out of proportion or foster an attitude of fear and panic. Simply as a general rule, it is incumbent on all of us in the family of faith to consider some basic practices that would minimize the transmission of viruses to one another within our church facilities and at our worship services.

I am writing to you at this time to share some common sense, preventative steps which we can all take to physically protect ourselves, each other, and all who make use of our facilities. To follow these simple steps will be an expression of our willingness to honor Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Please consider these suggestions for your congregations as on-going preventative healthcare practices.

1. Hand Hygiene

Keeping hands clean is a crucial step in preventing spread of all viruses. Hands can be cleaned by washing with soap and warm water or by using alcohol based antiseptic hand sanitizers. Hands that are visibly dirty should be washed and if not visibly dirty, hand sanitizer is adequate. There should be signage with clear instructions in church washrooms and kitchens instructing people about how to wash their hands. All involved in preparing and serving food should develop the habit of first cleaning their hands before they begin handling food and beverage. Sinks used for food preparation should not be used for hand washing. Altar Guild members should clean their hands before they begin the work of preparing the altar. Ensure that soap, water, and paper towels are available in washrooms and hand sanitizer is available in the church building.

Our churches and halls are open to the public. Making an antiseptic hand-sanitizer available at the entrances to the building, the sanctuary, and meeting rooms with a sign asking people to make use of it is a positive preventative act. This is already common practice in many of our congregations.

2. Respiratory Etiquette/Hygiene

Using tissues to cover coughs and sneezes followed by hand hygiene stops viruses from spreading. Making tissues available in public spaces close to a waste basket and hand sanitizer will encourage people to perform respiratory etiquette. If a tissue is not available, coughing or sneezing into your sleeve is helpful. Signs to help explain respiratory etiquette can be found on the Alberta Health Services website:

<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/influenza.asp>.

3. Distributing Holy Communion

Everyone who will be touching the bread and wine in the preparation of the altar during the service and in the distribution of the consecrated elements should use a hand-sanitizer immediately prior to assisting with the preparation and distribution.

4. Receiving Holy Communion

It is recommended that hand-sanitizer be available for people to use as they come forward to receive Holy Communion.

Intinction (dipping the bread into the chalice) should **not** be allowed since it is a significant health hazard. It is too easy to pass germs from the hand holding the bread into the common cup. Research, though limited, has indicated **the use of the common cup generally poses less risk of transferring bacteria** than the practice of intinction.

Individual glasses are in use in many of our congregations; in many parishes it is the preferred (or only) manner for receiving the wine. The use of disposable plastic individual glasses is discouraged because of the negative environmental impact. Properly washing individual glasses with dish soap and hot water should be a sufficient regimen to eliminate viruses and germs.

If a person is concerned about receiving the common cup they are to be assured that communion in one kind, receiving the bread only, is an acceptable tradition within the Lutheran Church. Luther argued that receiving the Sacrament in both kinds was the privilege of all Christians, but also allowed that receiving the bread only was in fact to receive both our Lord's Body and his Blood.

The use of a silver chalice, wine with an alcohol content of at least 12% or higher, and a clean purificator provide some protection to the less virulent bacteria that are constantly with us.

5. Exchange of the Peace

Much as we may desire (and commonly practice) greeting each other with a handshake or a hug, we need to allow – and be prepared to respond to - alternate forms of greeting. Simply greeting each other with the usual words and making eye-contact, offering a smile, a bow, or an open-handed gesture will not disrupt the meaning of this symbolic action. .

6. Church Attendance

If you are not feeling well or have cold-like or flu-like symptoms, the loving thing to do is to stay home and take care of yourself. Be sure to let your pastor and church office know so that your church family can be supportive.

7. Pastoral Visits

Clergy and laity who make home visits on behalf of the parish should carry a hand-sanitizer with them and use it at the beginning and at the end of a visit. If you are visiting a person who is under the care of a health practitioner or in a healthcare facility, you will of course follow their instructions in order to protect both the patient and yourself.

Much of what I have written is common sense and you are already doing it. Some of the items may be new and I ask that you begin to put them into practice. Our Lord's command is that we be neighbor to one another. This is a simple way to honor his will. May you be healthy and may you guard the health of your neighbor.

Blessings!

+Ronald B. Mayan, Bishop
Synod of Alberta and the Territories,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada