

Staying connected: Church communications in times of public health concerns

by Andy Lang

As congregations prepare for the potential impact of the H1N1 virus (swine flu) in their communities, the UCC's Local Church Ministries recommends the creation of a communication plan to keep members connected during this and other times of public health concerns.

Why? Federal and state plans for a serious outbreak of illness in any community include the option of closing churches as well as shopping malls, schools and other public gathering places to reduce the risk of infection.

In Mexico, most churches plan to cancel services this Sunday, and similar measures could be enforced in this country if the virus continues to spread.

It may not happen, but members of congregations don't need to be cut off from each other if a health crisis keeps them isolated in their homes.

Here are some suggestions

1. Clergy and lay leaders should keep a copy of the congregation's membership directory with email addresses at home in case a quarantine prevents them from reaching the parish office.
2. Organize a phone tree so that all members can be reached by phone or email to assure them of the congregation's support.
3. Use myUCC -- the church's social-networking site -- to help members stay in touch and share information. Any congregation can create its own "group" where members can post messages, news, blogs and photos.
4. Organize a real-time prayer service for your congregation using the simple chat-room feature on i.UCC -- the church's prayer site.
5. Consider joining the regularly-scheduled online prayer service at i.UCC at these times:

Hawai'i	Pacific	Mountain	Central	Eastern
6 a.m.	9 a.m.	10 a.m.	11 a.m.	12 noon (Monday-Friday)
3 p.m.	6 p.m.	7 p.m.	8 p.m.	9 p.m. (every day)

A simple "how-to" guide is posted below.

How to create a Group on myUCC

1. Register or login at community.ucc.org. Note that there is no "www" in this address.
2. Click on "My Home." This is your personal control panel as a registered member of myUCC.
3. At the lower left of this page, find "My Group" and click "Create New."
4. The next page is titled "Create New." Type in the group name and description. Example: "St. Peter's Church, Anytown, KS". You may also type in the URL of your congregation's website. Then, click on "SAVE."

5. The next page is titled "Group Settings." Choose these options:

Access level:	Public
New members:	Allow new members to automatically join the group
Do comments require my approval:	Choose "no" if you don't want to delay posting comments
Can members upload photos?:	Yes
Can members upload videos?:	Yes
Can members upload blog posts?:	Yes

By choosing "Yes" for the last three questions, you can easily enable members of the congregation to post news or messages on the group blog, and anyone can post a photo or video. The blog is the best location for posting sermons, newsletters, and other information.

6. The next page is the control panel for your group. You can create a new blog entry from this page ("Edit Group Blog") or from the group page itself. The "View Group" link on the left will take you directly to the new group. Before you do this, though, note the website address (or "URL") under the group name at the top of the page. For our hypothetical church, the URL will be "community.ucc.org/Groups/St_Peters_Church_Anytown_KS". Keep a record of this address, post it on your website, and send it in an email to members of your congregation.

How to join the Prayer Chapel on i.UCC

1. Go to i.UCC.org. Note that there is no "www" in this address.
2. Registration is not required for participation in the Prayer Chapel.
3. Click on "GATHER in our real-time Prayer Chapel" on the right of the page.
4. It may take a minute for the page to load. (If you do not have "Java" uploaded to your web browser, you may need to do this before you can proceed. A message will appear with a link to the Java site. The download is free. Once you've installed Java, return to i.UCC.)
5. A "Connect" box will appear. Type in your name (or a nickname if you prefer).
6. Click on "Connect".
7. You will then be able to see the names of other users if a prayer service is in progress. You may want to wait a minute to get oriented to the service.
8. In addition to the regular times of worship listed above, a congregation can gather on i.UCC to worship at other times. Information for technical support is provided below.

Here are important addresses to remember

www.ucc.org	latest news from the United Church of Christ
community.ucc.org	myUCC social-networking site
www.ucc.org/myucc	myUCC Frequently Asked Questions
i.UCC.org	the church's prayer site

For technical support on myUCC, or if you are unable to register and login, please write webmaster@ucc.org or call 216-736-2186. For support on the i.UCC prayer site, please contact langa@ucc.org or call 216-736-3789. After business hours and on weekends, please call 216-926-6262.

An extensive list of resources related to the outbreak of the H1N1 virus, commonly known as virulent swine flu, has been provided by the UCC's National Disaster Ministries. The most up-to-date information on the spread of the virus is available at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website.