



Pandemic Plan for the Church

Ministering to the Community in a Time of Crisis

Burying the Dead

During the 1918 Influenza, as illness and death exploded around the world, it is estimated up to fifty million people died worldwide, with approximately 500,000 fatalities in the United States. A fallout from this horrific fatality rate was the accumulation of dead bodies and the task of burying the dead. In crowded cities, if people had the strength, they would take their loved ones to the sidewalk and leave them there for daily “collection” wagons. If wagons and gravediggers were not part of the public services, people would put the bodies of their family members in closets or closed off rooms. Many people feared that they would get sick if they buried the bodies. Morgues were filled; pine boxes were piled up in alley ways; bodies were buried in mass graves. The horrors and the stench were unbearable.

If a pandemic of such proportion were to occur again, we would face the same quandary of how to dispose of the deceased. This section is only guidance to use if such an event were to occur. There are rules and regulations to be followed by state, province, and county. There are burial practices that are honored by different religions and ethnicities. This section is based on the World Health Organizations standards for burial. Please contact your local health department for more information if facing such a situation.

Recovery of the Deceased

A group of volunteers gathered together for search and recovery should be established. Anyone participating in this group should be made aware that a great deal of stress will be experienced with the handling of corpses. The leader of such a group should be able to recognize the signs of stress in individuals and be ready to find relief and counsel for those who are affected. Please see the chapter “Caring for the Workers” for more information.

Search and recovery teams can be set up through existing community organizations, as well as a group of willing volunteers. Organization should be established with leaders and discipline. A map of the area should be used to assign designated areas to ensure all areas are covered within a scheduled time, for example, daily, every other day, or weekly. Contact your local medical examiner and health department during the planning process. Their help could be invaluable in the setting up of such a team.

Ministry in the Community

The removal of the deceased promptly will ensure families and friends are not exposed to a decay and disease. This activity will give the Church an opportunity to minister to the public when they come in contact with bereaving families. Be prepared especially at this time to pray with the family and offer your reason for hope.

Be aware that some families with varied cultural or religious beliefs may desire a different burial method or location. Take the time to explain the need to forego such practices for the safety and benefit of others.

Keep a log with good records including the gathering information about the family's welfare will also help in determining who may need assistance in the future, or even that very day. This will be a time of great need in the community; those serving in this type of work will have great opportunities to share the story of our hope and salvation.

Identification of the Deceased

To aid in the process of record keeping and with the documentation for the burial process it is important to identify the body early on, and place a label on the body. Means of identifying the body may include:

- Have a loved one familiar with the dead person identify the body.
- Look for a credit card, driver's license, or other means of identification on the body.
- Place a card, toe tag, bracelet on the body with documentation containing the identity.
- In addition to the name of the deceased include:
 - Date of birth
 - Date of death
 - Location where body was recovered
 - If possible, include the cause of death if other than influenza
 - Name and contact information for living relative
- If there is no means of identifying a body, take a photograph to be used to help family members identify their missing loved one in the future.
 - Be sure to document the photograph in a log
- Keep a log of where the body was recovered and to where the body was taken

Handling of the Deceased

Prompt recovery and burial will help all involved, both the community and the loved ones of the deceased. personal protection equipment (PPE) should be worn not only for protection from disease, but for comfort due to exposure to corpses:

- Gloves (rubber, not necessarily disposable)
- Gowns/overalls
- Goggles
- Masks
- Respirators

- Boots
- Caps

Other supplies for comfort should be available. For instance, rubbing some Vics Vapo-Rub under your nose may help in overcoming the stench of a dead body that has been down for an extended amount of time. Plenty of soap and water with alcohol hand sanitizer should also be available.

If body bags are not available, wrap the body in a blanket, tie with rope is necessary. Bodies may be placed on stretchers, litters, wagons, or the bed of trucks. Cover the bodies with blankets or a tarp to conceal the contents, and to hide them from the view of the community.

Transporting Bodies

Transport the body to the burial site as soon as possible. Remember to keep meticulous records of where the body is being taken. Safety precautions should be exercised at all times. Take a container of 1:10 bleach solution in a spray bottle in case there is any accidental exposure to body fluids.

- If using a pickup truck to transport the bodies, use the following precautions:
 - Line the bed with a plastic tarp
 - After the bodies are removed, rinse the bed of the vehicle with 1:10 bleach solution
 - Let it soak for ten minutes
 - Rinse it well with clean water and let it air dry. Be sure to rinse well because the bleach is corrosive.

Burying the Dead

A site should be designated for burial. This should be large enough to accommodate the expected number of graves. Contact your local health officials when choosing the burial site. When choosing the area, the following should be considered:

- The size should be large enough to accommodate the expected amount of bodies
- Consider ground conditions, especially in the wintertime
- Should be a considerable distance from water sources
- Graves should be at least six feet deep
- Individual graves should be marked
- Mass graves should be identified and fenced off to avoid any uninvited visitors.

Individual graves would be preferred; however, if the mortality rate is too high, this may be too challenging and difficult. Trenches will have to be dug manually or mechanically with earth moving equipment. The bodies should be placed head to foot.

Performing Memorial or Burial Services

Having a funeral or memorial service is a part of the grieving process for a loved one. It is a means of saying goodbye, celebrating a life, and gathering with other loved ones for comfort and share in the grief. Dependent on the scope of the disaster, performing services may become a daily or weekly practice. Consider in advance how these may be addressed, it may even be necessary to eulogize several people in one service. If the government has at this time enforced social distancing and church meetings are prohibited, these type services may be forbidden.

Although funerals and memorial services are a part of doing church in our communities, the extent of tragedy will be further due to the increase of mortality in the community. As always, in all such services, sharing the gospel and the hope of life after death is a welcomed message. Be aware that many people will be blaming God for their circumstances and for the disaster. Contemplate now what words of comfort and encouragement you would offer in such times.

Burial Practices of Other Faiths

In addition to Christian burial practices, be aware that you may participate in the memorial services for other faiths. First be aware that many faiths may find it offensive that their loved one is being handled by Christians. In addition, their practices may differ from our own. Be ready to address these differences by considering the following:

- Would differing practices compromise that of a Christian burial?
- Are there customs to which you find offensive to your faith, or other convictions?
- Is the gospel prohibited from being shared?

If you must compromise your faith or convictions, determine now how these will be handled. Perhaps even reach out and network with other faiths. At such a time, many will be hurting and looking for comfort. Arguing and refusing help may only jeopardize your witness in the community. Remember, during the “Plague of Cyprian” in 250 AD, the loving acts of the Christians during this pandemic, led many Romans to convert.

The instructions in this chapter are meant to aid in these tasks. They can’t even begin to capture or address the human and emotional aspects in this scenario. In our society today so much of a person’s passing is relegated to others. It is the emergency medical services people, healthcare providers, and funeral homes that handle the bodies of our loved ones. To be exposed to this portion of life can be very difficult for some and even traumatic for others. Those who perform this work will need special care, and much time for rest. This type of ministry will wear heavy physically, emotionally and even spiritually. Be aware of the stress level of those performing this work.