March 17, 2020

How We Can Be the Church in our Communities

Conference Disaster Response & Mission Coordinator, Barbara Burnside, has been reflecting on the types of helpful things for a proper and thorough, but safe and responsible, ministry response (while following the hand-washing, social-distancing and other personal protective advice to slow the spread of the new Coronavirus). In the communities that we serve during this pandemic, she offered the following summary of tips gleaned from the UMCOR Connecting Neighbors training that she conducts to help churches prepare to be the church after disasters. We realize that churches may already have some of these protocols in place, but it may be important to review them:

1) Identify the most vulnerable persons within your church membership and extended church community. This includes persons with physical limitations or disabilities, emotional needs, family members who are caring for vulnerable persons, persons with limited access to transportation, etc.

2) Establish a "Care Team." Reach out by phone to contact the individuals or families of your congregation(s) to determine their needs and maintain a database of information. The Care Team should maintain regular contact not only for emergency needs but to provide a "caring presence." If your church has a food pantry, you can use your Care Team to provide emergency provisions on a rationed basis.

3) Identify experienced, caregivers within your congregations. These would include parish nurses, trained nurse practitioners, other medical professionals, and persons trained in "pastoral-care" type ministries, such as Stephen Ministers. If needs are identified by the Care Team — for example, if someone says that they are not feeling well, a nurse may be able to provide an early assessment, direct them to an appropriate call number or website, walk them through the process, and provide a caring Christian presence. If need be, and appropriate, a home visit might be made.

4) Identify people with resources and the ability to provide transportation to build a corps of volunteers who can transport persons to medical appointments, pick up prescriptions, or provide other reasonable emergency-type services will be invaluable in times like these.

5) Establish a connection with local officials. Pastors or other qualified persons (those with disaster-response or emergency experience) should reach out to their local Office of Emergency Management (OEM) or whatever organization in your town has responsibility for disaster preparedness and response. This is the place where information, needs, and resources are shared. The church needs to be a part of this group.

6) Establish or renew connections with local officials in your area (mayor, police & fire chiefs, media professionals), to create a common platform for response and involvement.

7) Family-focused considerations
As schools are closed, families are struggling with such things as childcare. Your church may have persons committed to helping fill this gap. Your church can also provide resources for home activities
for children and families, the creation of resources for home Vacation Bible Schools, and other creative ideas that will help persons build and maintain the relationships needed due to longer periods of isolation.

Beyond that, please keep in mind those severe situations where families are completely dependent upon free school breakfast and lunch programs to feed their children. Using your church as a "response station" for the distribution of needed meals can be a creative way to collaborate with other entities in your community to be out in front of your care for the world around you, especially our children.

8) Make use of our staff. Contact our [NEAC Missions Office](#) for more information or assistance.

No matter whether you are clergy or lay, all of us must draw deep within our spiritual selves to lead in ways that convey a non-anxious, hopeful and unflappable presence to our congregants, teams inside our churches and our communities at large.