

CARING FOR NEIGHBORS—FROM A DISTANCE: How Congregations Support the Community in (and after) a Pandemic

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The “new normal” in your community includes:

Healthcare systems stretched; families cooped up together at home; events cancelled, churches and businesses moved online; many unemployed; parents and kids adapting to working and schooling from home; spending more time on social media; significant financial, physical and mental health needs; high stress of social isolation; economic/racial inequalities magnified ...

Our calling to love our neighbors has not changed. How we do it is evolving.

Engage the community: How to get started

The process is the same as when starting or re-visioning any ministry—only more streamlined:

- Build a response team
 - *Helpful skill sets:* medical, organizational, pastoral, analyzing data, technology, communications/social media, nonprofit experience, community knowledge and connections—also, who has time and energy
 - Pastor probably shouldn't be leading this because their plate is already full
- Assess community resources and needs —**don't assume you already know** what help is needed
 - Check social media of community leadership: local government, community associations, charitable councils, neighborhood associations, newspaper, etc.
 - Call a few key contacts in the community to ask questions and listen
 - Participate in community-wide (virtual) meetings, e.g. by neighborhood association
- Identify assets in your congregation—[build on strengths](#)
 - Key asset questions: What do we have on hand? what do we already do well? who are we connected with? where do we have energy?
- Explore options and discern a focus — considerations in choosing your best fit:
 - Where are significant needs or gaps in service? (don't do what everyone else is doing)
 - What can we mobilize fairly quickly and flexibly?
 - What relationships / partnerships are most important to us?
 - What unusual or unique needs are being missed by others at this time?
 - How do you discern God leading you?

Safety first!

- Practice 6-foot rule; use gloves and masks when out in the community; sanitize as needed
- Respect your state and city's lockdown orders or other restrictions
- When in doubt, check with experts ([CDC site](#))

Overview: Six strategic ways congregations can care for their community

Multiple options are not intended to overwhelm you but to spark ideas! Find your focus

1. Retool existing community ministries
2. Creatively use congregational assets to serve the community
3. Partner with groups serving vulnerable populations
4. Collaborate on evolving community-wide needs
5. Support community caregivers on the front lines
6. Equip members of the congregation to connect with their neighbors

Option #1: Retool existing community ministries

Adapt current programs of the congregation to comply with new health rules and meet new needs

- If you offer a food pantry ...
 - Continue to provide food in a way that complies with health guidelines in your area
 - Donate food stock to another community food pantry
 - [Pack and deliver boxes](#) for people you know to be food insecure
 - Set out non-perishable items for people to pick up ("[Little Free Pantry](#)" model)
- If you offer a tutoring/after-school ministry ...
 - Offer [online homework help](#) to parents having to supervise their kids' education
 - Provide safe chat space, online activities and games
 - Check in personally with youth, deliver activity / craft kits for kids
- If you host support groups (e.g., Grief Share, group for single parents) ...
 - Move group meetings online— stay connected!
 - Help with referrals and cost of other counseling resources as needed
- If you have a daycare or other ministry with children that is now closed ...
 - Maintain connection with the families via online activities and check-ins
 - Donate snacks, craft items and toys to an agency serving kids (foster care, family shelter)
 - Offer "[virtual babysitting](#)" for parents working from home
 - Offer the space for [childcare for the kids of essential workers](#)
- If you have a "fix it up" ministry ...
 - Loan out tools to people to fix things around the house, and talk them through it
 - Do outdoor spruce-up work by just one person or family, e.g. pick up trash (if permitted)
- If you offer a ministry with refugees or immigrants ...
 - Connect with leaders in this community to ask how to show solidarity and offer support
 - Help with applying for assistance programs and navigating other new challenges

Option #2: Creatively use congregational assets to serve the community

Congregations are facing tough times, with many losses and uncertainties. But if you can shift your focus to *what you have to offer*, new possibilities emerge. Take stock of your assets, and consider:

- How could we repurpose these assets to meet needs within our congregation?
- How could we use these assets to help ministry partners and meet community needs?

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Brainstorming ideas for sharing assets of the congregation:

- Vehicle:
 - Use to make [deliveries of food and supplies](#)
 - [Mobile library](#) using books/DVDs from the church library
- Facilities:
 - Large meeting space to accommodate essential community meetings while distancing
 - Alternative work space for essential workers who can't use their regular office
 - Parking lot—offer as a [distribution site for food](#) and necessities, or [WiFi hotspots](#)
- Website:
 - Post links to updated sources of health info and lists of community resources
 - Live stream or post videos of open to the community—story hours for kids, etc.
 - [Host a forum](#) for posting needs and offers, and share a list of [volunteer opportunities](#)
 - Community building page, e.g. for people to post how-to vids on something they do well
- Tools and cleaning equipment:
 - Loan to families in need (imagine being shut in with kids without a vacuum cleaner!)
- Other items
 - Stocks of food and condiments in the church kitchen—offer to households or childcare providers, before it expires and goes to waste.
 - Disposable plates, cups, tableware, etc.—needed by homeless shelters and other sites providing take-out meals
 - Extra diapers and wipes in nursery – donate to nonprofit serving new parents
 - Toys and books in playrooms—loan/donate to low-income families with kids
- Expertise in the congregation
 - Tech team – offer free consulting to less tech-savvy congregations and nonprofits
 - Financial planners — help households revise their budgets
 - Speakers of English as a second language — offer translation services
 - Elementary teachers — tips on educating kids at home while staying sane
 - Gardeners — walk people through planting their own kitchen garden

Option #3: Partner with groups serving vulnerable populations

- Identify one or two partners to focus on – especially:
 - Start with current partners your congregation supports with funds or volunteers
 - Organizations where congregation members have a connection (e.g. staff at a nonprofit)
 - [Congregations](#) serving aging and vulnerable populations, or in high-need neighborhoods
 - Hard-hit businesses and employees (e.g. entertainment, [restaurants](#), [service industry](#))
 - Agencies addressing intensified emotional/relational concerns (e.g. [domestic violence](#))
 - Groups others may have missed (e.g., [artists and cultural organizations](#))
- Examples of organizations connected with vulnerable populations:
homeless shelter, welfare agency, international student program, autism support group, pregnancy center, refugee nonprofit, mental health nonprofit, disability advocates, foster care agency, community center, prison outreach, senior care, addiction recovery program ...

- Find out what the organization needs to keep serving well
 - Check if they have already posted requests for items or volunteers
 - Don't try to duplicate what other coordinated efforts are doing
 - Set up a short conversation—they may be busy and stressed, so be patient! Ask:
 - *What do the people you are connected with need most right now?*
 - *How do we help you without getting in your way?*
- Best, most direct way to help: Give money
 - Use congregational network to raise funds for a partner ([New City Church](#) example)
 - Cover costs for specific needs referred by a trusted partner (e.g. medical/funeral costs)
 - Donate gift certificates, set up an account for grocery delivery or host a [virtual food drive](#)
- Other ways to support partners
 - Collect and deliver needed items (from your surplus first—don't clear store shelves)
 - Food pantries may need help with stocking, delivery or specialty items (e.g. gluten free)
 - Donate [iPads, tablets, phones or other devices](#)—e.g. to nursing homes / hospitals quarantined from visitors so residents can connect with family and friends
 - Collaborate with local business to provide goods or services (e.g. [restaurant partnership](#))
 - Set up pen pals / [prayer partners](#) with people isolated in institutions
 - Work with agencies serving [children](#) to offer online youth activities and connectivity
 - Connect with a local school: offer to [help with meal programs](#), or to work with families on tech set-up and homework assistance for [at-home learning](#)
 - Financially support bi-vocational pastors leading [smaller, aging congregations](#) or congregations in [hard-hit African American and Latino communities](#)
 - Stand with groups led by [immigrants](#) and [Asian-Americans](#) against harassment

Option #4: Collaborate on evolving neighborhood and city-wide needs

This crisis calls for a coordinated response—do more together than what any group can do alone.

- Get connected with city-wide/ regional coalitions

Examples: [VOAD](#) (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster), United Way, Council on Aging, mental health coalitions, community foundations / leadership foundations, neighborhood Facebook pages, Chamber of Commerce, your denomination
- Update/share a guide to community resources (food assistance, delivery services, utilities assistance) and links to health info (church website [example](#)). Include mental health hotlines—see [Mental Health First Aid](#). Provide to the congregation to share with their neighbors.
- Promote mutual aid forums — “[bite sized ways of responding](#) that make a world of difference”
 - “I need ...” / “I have ...” / “I can help with ...” websites, Facebook pages, hotline (have volunteers and a process in place for ongoing monitoring and updating)
 - Examples launched by churches: [Pandemic Partners](#), [volunteer network](#), [Uptown Church](#)
- Work with other congregations, local government, businesses and nonprofits to develop strategic community-wide responses (see more stories of [collaborative action](#))
 - Food security networks—[food pantries cooperating](#), partnerships to [feed seniors](#)
 - Coordinated plan for [assistance with financial needs](#)
 - Ex. of churches partnering: [Corona Help Sioux Falls](#), [Indianapolis Joint Christian Response](#)

- Chamber of commerce strategy to support local business / nonprofits (ex. [Rally Reno](#))
- Coalition of mental health organizations (ex. [UCC Mental Health Network](#))
- Collaborate to support local artists ([example](#)) and promote virtual artistic/cultural events
- Coordinated effort to expose and overcome [racial](#) and [income-based](#) disparities in impact
- Look to young social entrepreneurs to solve problems and promote their work (e.g.. [“Invisible Hands” food and medicine delivery service](#) started by 20-somethings)
- Coordinate on prayer for and with the community
 - Offer resources for prayer (example, [praying for different professions](#))
 - Coordinate times for community-wide prayer — examples: [Unite 7:14](#); school district-wide prayer time for kids; driveway candlelight vigils; pastoral prayer zoom

Option #5: Support community caregivers on the front lines

- Community caregivers – working high-risk, high stress environment, crazy hours – includes:
 - Healthcare providers and supporting staff (e.g. hospital janitors, cafeteria workers)
 - Home health aides, and those working with institutionalized populations (*prison, nursing home, mental health hospital, residential treatment facility, immigrant detention center*)
 - Partners and children of front-line workers also struggle
- Rules for supporting caregivers:
 - #1: Don’t get in their way
 - #2: Find out what they actually need!
- Best way to support healthcare workers: “flatten the curve” by adhering to health guidelines!
- Ensure healthcare providers have [medical supplies](#) (gloves, hand sanitizer, bleach, face guards)
 - Make medical grade masks (find approved specs online)—sewing circle project?
 - Advocate for healthcare workers and other public servants to get needed supplies! (Sample advocacy [letter](#))
- Meet other practical needs: [*check with healthcare facilities first!*]
 - Offer to help with errands and expenses—e.g. [groceries](#), gift cards for [carry-out/delivery restaurants](#), [childcare costs](#)
 - Provide [care packages](#) with snack / hydration / de-stress items
 - Business owners can donate items or services (e.g. [Care Cups](#))
 - Promote [blood drives](#) (blood supply is at critical levels)
- Show community support:
 - [“Park & pray”](#)—drive to hospital parking lot, flash lights to say “we’re praying for you”
 - Be patient and gracious— “Thanks for being out there working for us” can go a long way
 - Send short messages, e.g., “I’m thinking of you and praying for you today. Thanks for all you are doing. I’m here for you if you need anything or just want to talk!”
 - [Don’t go to them with your health questions](#). “Their life is dominated by the virus, questions and concerns. Make it a coronavirus-free friendship, unless they lead it”
- Be thoughtful of other “essential workers” also are putting themselves at risk, often for [low pay](#): *grocery store clerks, truckers, sanitation workers, warehouse stockers, food factory workers ...*

Option #6: Equip the congregation to connect with their neighbors

Encourage members to see that community impact begins literally in their own backyard, with these five keys to good neighboring. [NOTE: Check to see what is permitted in your area—some suggestions may not be relevant. Always keep a safe 6ft distance and follow other health guidelines]

1. **Build connection:** This crisis gives us all an excuse to introduce ourselves to neighbors we don't know, and check in with those we rarely see, with a note (see [example](#)), call or safe knock. (BUT be prudent when giving out personal info.)

Stay connected through “hyperlocal” online groups such as a neighborhood Facebook page (example: [Neighbors Caring for Neighbors](#)) or apps such as [Nextdoor](#) or [WhatsApp neighborhood pod](#). See “[How to Be a Good Neighbor Right Now](#)” for a list of ideas and tools for building neighborhood connection.

2. **Practice mutual aid:** Offer to run essential errands, walk pets or do yardwork for frail or at-risk neighbors, or help tech-insecure neighbors set up their online shopping (see [Neighbors Helping Neighbors](#) for ideas). Share what you have, ask for what you need! (NOTE: Only share items that can be washed, sanitized or cooked.)

Organize neighbors to support the community together: plan a neighborhood [virtual food drive](#) or support local restaurants with a takeout night.

3. **Check in with people**—calls, texts, emails, social media, doorway chats. Reach out to specific individuals at risk: those struggling with physical health, [mental health](#), finances, fragile family situations (e.g. [foster care](#)), loss, or [loneliness](#). Ask about their needs and help them connect with resources and helpers. (And keep it up—don't stop just because they say things are fine.)

[Fight social isolation!](#) Express caring, ask questions, be a good listener. Do activities virtually together, such as online games. Send occasional mental health pick-ups: positive news story, cute cat video, peaceful landscape, encouraging quote. [Connection makes a difference.](#)

4. **Neighbor prayer:** Regularly [prayer walk](#) around your neighborhood if you can, or pray for the homes you can see from your front porch. Coordinate [prayer candles in windows](#) in your block. Simply let your neighbors know, “I'm praying for you!” Look for ways to connect with people for uplifting spiritual care.

5. **Find the fun!** Fight cabin fever and promote mental health by organizing neighborhood activities: *spot [all the teddy bears](#) in neighbors' windows ... [window art festival](#) ... scavenger hunt ... neighborhood watch party ... make funny yard signs ... put up Christmas lights ... play music and have a doorway dance-off ... hang a backdrop and show a movie in your yard ... hold a joke-yelling contest ... fly kites ... door decorating contest ... group exercise times ...*

[Neighboring Movement](#)—Good resource on helping congregation members be good neighbors

Caring well in a crisis: summary guidelines

Keep these best practices in mind for engaging the community—most apply to *any* context!

- KISS (Keep It Simple & Specific)
 - Ministry plans don't need to be elaborate or all-encompassing to make a difference
- Be flexible in a changing ministry context — new is normal!
 - Show yourselves grace ... no such thing now as “the way we've always done things”!
- Expand the circle of involvement, beyond regular (often older) volunteers
 - Consider inviting: people who used to be busy, but now are not able to work; [youth](#) and young adults; creative thinkers and problem-solvers
- Respond to crisis needs, but also pace yourselves for long-term impact
 - Anticipate impact on [economy](#) and [poverty](#), [mental health](#), [family stability](#), [arts & culture](#)
 - Look beyond our communities to the rest of the world ...
- Keep building connections, affirming that we minister *with* not *to* people
 - Address needs in a way that builds on community strengths and resiliency
 - Authentic relationships—even at a distance—are always at the heart of community care

Practice self-care

- Rest, healthy routines, stress reduction, support network, spiritual care
- Set boundaries and realistic expectations—saving the world is not on your shoulders
- Recognize signs of burnout, anxiousness or entanglement—pause, recharge, get help

“When you're running on fumes, caring for others can tax your already depleted resources to breaking point. But when you prioritize your needs, you're filling the tank, emotionally and physically, and that means you'll be in a position to offer comfort and care to others when they need it most.” ([Self-Care in the Time of Coronavirus](#))

Other pandemic community ministry resources:

[Living Missionally amidst Covid-19](#); [Covid-19 Collective Care](#); [Ministering in a Time of COVID-19](#) ; [Responding to Hunger in a Pandemic](#); [Keeping youth engaged in mission during Covid-19](#); ERD [webinars](#) and [resources](#)

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