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**Issue Brief**

**Spring 2009**

## ***Preventing the Spread of Infection in Faith-Based Communities***

### ***Introduction***

*Public health has as its mission and privilege the promotion of physical and mental health in populations as well as the prevention of disease, injury and disability. With the community as its client, public health is successful in forging partnerships which aid in the early identification of health risks and the minimization of their impact on populations. The faith community has been suggested as one such public health partner. As a respected facet of community life, faith-based groups provide support and resources in times of crisis which are familiar and dependable.*

*In a normal influenza season, hundreds of people become ill. Many require hospitalization and some die. With the unpredictability of viruses and the current threat of a novel influenza strain sparking a pandemic, people are at risk throughout the year, not just during the "cold and flu" season.*

*Public health is encouraging faith-based groups to adopt a policy to alter or eliminate common practices known to spread disease. This policy would be useful for congregations on a day-to-day basis as well as in the event of a public health emergency.*

### ***Common Practices Which Spread Disease***

*There are some common practices that promote the spread of disease. These include, but are not limited to: greeting members and visitors before and after services with a handshake; passing the*

*peace using a handshake; communion services where a common cup or loaf are used or where a wafer is placed on the tongue of each recipient from a single server; Sunday school rooms and toys; coffee hours and other social events, as well as visitations to nursing homes, hospitals, retirement homes and private residences.*

*Germ on the hands of individuals who cough, sneeze, wipe their mouths or even cover a yawn are easily passed on to others through a handshake or the touching of a common object or use of a common cup. Any person may harbor microorganisms that are currently harmless to them but potentially harmful to another person. Depending on the infectiousness of the germs being passed, hands or common items may remain infected for a long period of time. Handshaking and the sharing of common objects in worship services, while symbols of hospitality and spiritual bonding, are also efficient avenues for disease transmission. Frequent handwashing and the avoidance of using common objects have proven to be effective infection control measures.*

### *Recommendations*

*To help control the spread of illness in congregations, please consider some of the following strategies:*

- *Urge parishioners who are ill to refrain from attending services.*
- *Encourage members with cough/sneeze illness to avoid activities, during the service, where they come into direct contact with other members or common items.*
- *Make an announcement during the service, and in the bulletin, asking members to forego the handshake of fellowship to help prevent the unintentional spread of disease.*
- *Substitute another activity for handshaking when greeting each other before and after services and when “sharing the peace.” Nodding the head, touching the shoulder or waving the hand are a few suggestions.*

- *If unsuccessful in substituting an activity for handshaking, consider eliminating the portion of the service where “sharing the peace” or other handshaking occurs.*
- *Ask parishioners to extend hands in front of themselves, palms up, for special prayers where hands are usually held.*
- *Use individual cups for communion wine or grape juice.*
- *Have communion servers clean hands with sanitizer before distribution of the elements, then, place the communion bread or wafer into the palm of the recipient without touching his hand*
- *Have tissues and hand sanitizer gel available in each pew.*
- *Be sure classrooms and meeting rooms are stocked with Kleenex and hand sanitizer.*
- *Clean toys in nurseries and classrooms after each use.*
- *Encourage handwashing, using hot, soapy water as often as possible, particularly before handling food and after using restrooms.*

### *Conclusion*

*Healthy congregations in healthy communities are the goal of public health and its partners. The faith community is an integral part of the infection-control process. Eliminating the shaking of hands and the use of common objects before, during and after worship services, can have a significant impact on the achievement of this goal and the potential containment of serious threats to health.*