

CARING FOR NEIGHBORS—FROM A DISTANCE

Joy Skjegstad and Heidi Unruh, [Practical Resources for Churches](#) webinar presented 4/2/2020

Understand the “new normal” in your community:

Health care workers stretched to the limit; families staying home, cooped up together; events cancelled, churches, businesses and entertainment closed; parents and kids forced to adapt rapidly to working from home; everyone spending more time on social media; significant financial, physical and mental health needs; social inequalities and social isolation magnified

**The church’s calling to love our neighbors has not changed.
How we do it is evolving.**

3 general guidelines

1. Safety first! Track and follow all health guidelines. When in doubt, check with experts first ([CDC](#) site)
2. Be focused and specific in what you can do; don’t try to take on too much
3. Respond to the crisis, but also pace yourselves for long-term recovery

Where to start

- Build a response team
 - Consider 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
- Identify assets in your congregation—build on strengths
 - Not the time to learn a lot of new skills (other than doing things online) or to start something brand new
 - Key asset questions: What do we have on hand? what do we already do well? who are we connected with?
- Assess community resources and needs
 - Same process as any ministry, only more streamlined: start with listening and connecting (don’t assume you already know the needs and resources)
 - 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
 - Get input from people most directly impacted for a broader perspective
- Explore options as a team to discern your response, consider:
 - Where are significant needs or gaps in service?
 - 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?
- Be prepared to connect with people spiritually alongside other forms of care (1 Pet. 3:15)

The challenges of ministry when “new is normal”

- Stay flexible, because everything could change next week!
 - Keep it simple—focus on just one or two things at a time
 - Think in terms of “trying a ministry experiment” rather than “launching a new program”
- May lead to expanding the circle of people in ministry
 - People who used to be busy ... maybe now have free time!
 - For the safety of older volunteers, younger volunteers are needed to step up
 - Look to creative thinkers and problem-solvers
- Pivoting in approach to ministry:
 - No such thing as “the way we’ve always done things”!
 - Shake-up outdated ministry ruts
 - Develop skills in meeting adaptive challenges—essential for the long haul

These can always be priorities:

1. Pray—offer resources and coordinated times of prayer for/with the community
Examples: 4:00pm prayer for kids; driveway candlelight vigils; pastoral prayer zoom
2. Give money
 - *Raise funds for trusted partners and individuals in need*
 - *Give to important causes not getting as much support*
 - *Donate gift certificates or set up an account for grocery delivery service*
3. Share info—keep updated list of community resources and trusted sources of health info

Option #1: Retool existing community ministries

How could you adapt current programs to comply with health guidelines and meet new needs?

- If your church has 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 your church has 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 your church has a daycare or other ministry with children that is now closed ...
 - Maintain connection with the families via online activities and check-ins
 - Donate snacks and craft items to a day care, foster care agency or a family shelter
 - Offer the space for childcare for the kids of essential workers
 - Loan out toys and educational games from your daycare to neighborhood families

- If your church has 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 kits for kids
- If your church hosts support groups (e.g., Grief Share, group for single parents) ... move online
- If your church has 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: Partner with groups serving vulnerable populations

- Identify one or two partners to focus on – especially:
 - Start with current partners—organizations your church supports regularly with funds or volunteers (e.g. if your church serves every month at a nursing home)
 - Organizations where church members have a connection (e.g. staff at a nonprofit)
 - Churches in low-income neighborhoods or serving vulnerable populations
 - Businesses that employed or served low-income / immigrant residents (e.g. hotel staff)
 - Groups others may have missed—e.g., artists and staff of arts organizations
- Examples of organizations connected with vulnerable populations:
homeless shelter, elder care nonprofit, program for international students, welfare agency, foster care agency, immigrant congregation, refugee agency, mental health group, ministry with people with disabilities, community center, prison outreach, youth jobs 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
 - Ask to set up a short conversation; they are likely busy and stressed, so be patient!
 - What do the people you are connected with need most right now?
 - How can we support your work?
 - How do we help you without getting in your way?
- Ways churches might support nonprofit partners
 - Collect and deliver needed items (from your surplus first, not the store)
 - Donate sanitized iPads, tablets, phones or other devices—e.g. to nursing homes / hospitals quarantined from visitors so residents can connect with family and church
 - Donate funds or online gift cards ([New City Church](#) example)
 - Support a [struggling immigrant / inner-city church](#) (many have bi-vocational pastors)
 - 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
 - Help counter the spread of xenophobia targeting immigrant and Asian communities
- Even in a crisis, remember that we minister *with* not *to* people —avoid the “savior syndrome”; partner in a way that strengthens the resiliency and strengths of the community

Option #3: Equip church members to connect with their neighbors

Encourage church members to see that caring begins literally in their own backyard, with these six steps to good neighboring: [NOTE: Check to see what activities are permitted in your area—some suggestions may not be relevant. Always keep a safe 6ft distance.]

1. *Build connection:* This crisis gives church members an excuse to introduce themselves to neighbors they don't know, and check in with those they 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. *Share information:* Provide church members with a list of community resources like food assistance, delivery services, and utilities assistance, which they can share with their neighbors. Include mental health hotlines—see [Mental Health First Aid](#).
3. *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 to support the community together: plan a neighborhood [virtual food drive](#) or support local restaurants with a takeout night.
4. *Check in regularly* with people—calls, texts, emails, social media, doorway chats. Help church members identify and intentionally reach out to people most at risk: those struggling with physical health, mental health, finances, fragile family situations (e.g. [foster care](#)), or loneliness. Express caring, identify needs, and be a good listener—or simply have a good chat. Fight social isolation! (And keep it up—don't stop just because they say things are fine.)
5. *Find the fun!* Fight cabin fever by organizing neighborhood activities: put up Christmas lights ... have a "teddy bear hunt" to spot all the teddy bears in neighbors' windows ... make funny yard signs ... 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!
6. *Neighbor prayer:* Make it part of your routine to prayer walk around your neighborhood if you can—or simply pray for the houses you can see from your window. As you have opportunity, share a message of God's love and hope (but not platitudes).

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

Option #4: 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)
 - Those working with institutionalized populations — jails, nursing homes, mental health hospitals, home health aides, residential treatment facilities
 - Partners and children of front-line workers also struggle
- Rule #1: Don't get in their way
- Rule #2: Find out what they actually need!

- Best way to support healthcare workers: “flatten the curve” by adhering to health guidelines!
- Meet practical needs: *[check with healthcare facilities first!]*
 - Masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, bleach—don’t hoard (<https://getusppe.org/give/>)
 - Make cloth masks according to approved specs—see <https://getusppe.org/makers/fac>
 - Gift cards for grocery stores and local carry-out/delivery restaurants (bonus: support local businesses at the same time!)
 - Snack / hydration care packages
 - Offer to help with errands and expenses—e.g. order grocery staples online for them
 - Business owners in your congregation may donate items or services (e.g. [Care Cups](#))
- Advocate for healthcare workers, and others who have to interact with the public, to get needed PPE supplies! (Example [advocacy letter](#)) Stay aware and keep up the pressure
- Show support:
 - “[Park & pray](#)”—drive to hospital parking lot, flash lights to say “we’re praying for you”
 - Remind people to be patient and gracious—a smile and simple “Thanks for being out here working for us” can go a long way
- [Advice from professionals](#) on how to be personally supportive to healthcare workers:
 - 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”
 - Send an occasional mental health pick-me-up: a cute cat meme or video of a dog rolling down a hill, positive news story, photo of a peaceful landscape, encouraging passage
- Be thoughtful of other “essential workers” also are putting themselves at risk, often for low pay: grocery store clerks, truckers, sanitation workers ...

Option #5: Creatively use church assets to serve the community

- Our losses and needs come easily to mind. But how can a church look at its assets creatively? Engage in an asset inventory. Consider:
 - How could we repurpose these assets to meet needs within our congregation?
 - How could we use these assets to support our current ministry partners?
 - How could we use these assets to help meet needs in the community?

Possible ideas for sharing church assets:

- Church vehicle:
 - Use to make deliveries of food and supplies
 - Help transport supplies from centralized drop-off points (e.g. United Way collection points) to agencies around the city
 - Mobile library using books/DVDs from the church’s library
- Church tools and cleaning equipment:
 - Loan to families in need (imagine being shut in with kids without a vacuum cleaner!)

- Church facilities:
 - Meeting space large enough where people can spread out at a safe distance for essential community meetings
 - Alternative work space for essential workers who can't use their regular office
 - Parking lot—offer as a distribution site for food and other necessities
 - Can people drive into the parking lot to use the church's WiFi account?
- Church website:
 - Post links to updated sources of health info and lists of community resources
 - Live stream or post videos of events—community prayer, story hours for kids, etc.
 - Host a forum for posting needs and offers—www.watersedgechurch.net/covidcare757
 - Community building page, e.g. for people to post how-to vids on something they do well
 - Church tech team – offer free consulting to less tech-savvy churches and nonprofits
- 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 church nursery – donate to nonprofit serving new parents
 - Toys and books in church playrooms—loan/donate to low-income families with kids
- Green space:
 - Start a garden on church property, especially if people close by the church will tend it
 - Open green space for residents to use for exercise
- If your congregation includes languages other than English, offer translation services

Option #6: Respond to evolving neighborhood and city-wide needs

- Stay connected and collaborative! Plug into 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 (e.g. www.RallyReno.com), your denomination
- Work collaboratively with other churches, local government, businesses and nonprofits to develop community-wide responses—bigger than what one church can do alone
 - Coordinate food security—e.g. food network for school kids and elderly
 - Coordinated plan for assistance with utility bills, other financial needs
 - Ex. of churches partnering: [Corona Help Sioux Falls](#), [Indianapolis Joint Christian Response](#)
- Promote mutual aid forums — “bite sized ways of responding that make a world of difference”
 - Develop “I need” / “I have/I can do” forums or hotline
 - Example: [“Pandemic Partners”](#) mutual aid site started by a church
 - Example: Minnehaha UMC webpage for connecting [people who need assistance](#) (phone call, grocery shopping, rides to the doctor) with [people who can help](#).

- Tips for collaborative mutual aid projects:
 - Clearly state the aim of the project—have a specific goal or set of activities
 - Have a way of redirecting people to other sites / resources as needed
 - Have volunteers and a process in place for ongoing monitoring, vetting, updating
 - Stay nimble—recognize and adapt when the needs or landscape changes
- Collaborate on arts and culture projects
 - Coordinate public art, online poetry slams, reader’s theater, etc. in your community
 - Find creative ways to support and encourage local artists ([example](#))
- Look to young social entrepreneurs to solve problems and promote their work
 - Ex. [“Invisible Hands” food and medicine delivery service](#) started by 20-somethings
- Keep learning—resource guides/examples: [Coronavirus and the Church](#); [Covid-19 Collective Care](#); tips for [Ministering in a Time of COVID-19](#); stories of [collaborative mutual aid](#)

Teach the congregation self-care while caring for others

Staying healthy (physically, emotionally) and preventing the spread of the virus is priority

“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](#))

Five self-care practices:

- **Attend to your own needs:** rest, hydration, stress reduction, spiritual care
 - Maintain routine so you have time set aside for recovery and recharge
 - Build and a personal support network so people can support one another
- **Set boundaries:** what is your work, what is others’ work?
 - Respect others’ boundaries (don’t guilt people into helping)
 - Stay rooted in prayer and Scripture—not “saving the world” in your own strength
- **Be kind:** show grace to yourself and others
 - Set realistic expectations for current situation, including having less energy
 - “Perfectionism and the coronavirus don’t mix. ... Remember you’re doing your best during a very difficult time. Cut yourself some slack.” [Self-Care in the Time of Coronavirus](#)
- **Recognize signs of burnout, anxiousness or entanglement:** can you recognize your own needs?
 - Take a break, reduce stress, get help if needed
 - Pause in the bad news to focus on “whatever is pure, lovely, admirable ...” (Phil. 4:8)
- **Think long-term:** What will sustain you and your congregation to go the distance?
 - Be strategic—don’t waste time and energy on what is not really needed
 - Keep supportive, spiritually uplifting relationships at the heart of ministry!

Inform and organize the congregation for your community care ministry

2 key organizational tasks for new/retooled ministry:

- Plan action steps (What tasks needs to get done, by what date, by whom)
 - “Tasks” include learning and listening
 - Roll out new/adapted ministry in stages—start small
- Engage and equip people
 - Build on people’s gifts, passions and connections
 - Help people grow spiritually through ministry

3 organizational levels for planning: Is the ministry focused on ...

- Congregation-wide effort (e.g. food and fund drive, care for caregivers)
- Key leaders or a small group (e.g. retool current program, manage mutual aid website)
- Individual members (e.g. equip to reach out to neighbors)

4 vital arenas for communication:

- Who should we listen to for helpful input into planning this ministry?
- What people / organizations in the community can we invite into collaboration?
- Who can we inform about this ministry to enlist their involvement and support?
- How do we let people in the community know about the availability of this ministry?

5 strategies to consider for ministry communication:

- One-to-one (calls, emails, texts, zoom, etc.)
- Small group video meeting
- Group blast email / text list
- Social media site (closed group, or open to the public)
- Print media distribution (door knockers, flyers, mailing)

Joy Skjegstad and Heidi Unruh offer individualized coaching for staff and lay leaders, as well as training for churches on a variety of topics, including:

- *Community listening*
- *Building collaborations*
- *Designing and launching new ministry programs*
- *Engaging ministry volunteers*

Short-term group coaching deal with Joy and Heidi:

- Three months of group coaching for \$250 per church
- Cohorts of 4 or 5 churches
- Monthly 90-minute calls

Coaching provides: encouragement, insight, and ideas for community connections, collaboration, and re-purposing ministries.

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