

Churches stress clean hands in wake of swine flu

Religious groups worry about flu

By Bob Smietana
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People who come to worship ought to have clean hands and pure hearts, says the book of Psalms.

That's especially true in the current swine flu scare.

Religious groups are urging clergy and parishioners to be vigilant about hygiene as worries over outbreaks of the flu mount.

The U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops reminded deacons and lay people who help with Communion to wash their hands ahead of time and even use alcohol-based sanitizers during services. Sick parishioners are reminded to stay home.

"We want to practice prudent, common sense," said Rick Musacchio, spokesman for the Catholic diocese of Nashville.

Concerns over flu are heightened this weekend. Protestant groups like Methodists and Presbyterians, who celebrate Communion once a month, often do so on the first Sunday.

The United Methodist General Board of Discipleship has asked churches to make hand-washing part of the Communion liturgy. That can mean having soap and towels on the Communion table.

The Rev. Susan Spieth, associate pastor at Calvary United Methodist Church in Nashville, said washing hands before Communion is routine. This Sunday, pastors and other servers will also have hand sanitizers in church.

"There's a lot of concern out there, so we want to be sensitive to that," she said.

Nashville's Muslims and Jews are also taking common-sense approach to the flu scare. The Salahadeen Center of Nashville has posted tips about hand washing and avoiding exposure to the swine flu on its Web site, scntn.org. It has no plans yet to cancel events but is reminding people to stay home if they are sick.

Rabbi Yitzchok Tiechtel of the Center for Jewish Awareness is also stressing hand washing. He plans to speak about the spiritual benefits of hand washing at a Shabbat service.

"When you wash your hands," he said, "you remember that God is involved in every part of life."

Concerns for Communion

Concerns about spreading disease in worship services, especially when it comes to Communion, have a long history. In the late 1890s, churches began using individual cups, rather than a common chalice, because of health concerns.

In recent years, some churches have moved to prepackaged Communion elements, such as the celebration cup from the Compak Companies in Florida. In those cases, the Communion wafer and

grape juice are in mass produced, sealed containers.

Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Nashville uses plastic wrapped Communion elements, said Kim Barton, a church spokesperson. Servers also traditionally wear gloves when handling the elements.

"We don't have any concerns about spreading flu at this time," Barton said.

Other churches use individual plastic cups. But those cups have fallen out of favor among some church leaders.

"The use of plastic cups is highly problematic, not only from an ecological perspective, but also from a health perspective," said Taylor Burton-Edwards, the Methodist board's director of worship resources. Because the trays holding the cups are passed from person to person, and worshipers often touch several cups, Burton-Edward believes the cups are easily contaminated.

Instead, Burton-Edwards hopes Methodists will use a common cup, which he says is safer.

Anne La Grange Loving, chairman of the science department at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, N.J., agrees.

Loving has done one of the few studies on infection and Holy Communion. She says there's little risk of getting sick from Communion. She believes that "flu phobia" is making people overreact.

"I go to church every Sunday, and every Sunday I sip from a common cup," said Loving, an Episcopalian. "I believe there is no need to panic about this."

Loving's study found no link between illness and Communion. That was true even for people who drink daily from a common cup. She said that good hygiene from ministers is more important than the type of Communion cup.

"Certainly, a minister should not be up there picking his nose or whatever before he prepares the Communion," she said. "But you can't control an individual's bad behavior. If you have a priest or minister who is ill, they shouldn't be coming to church regardless of swine flu."

Still, Loving thinks that going to church is no more dangerous than any other public activity.

"Standing in line at the movies or at the grocery store or any of the myriad activities that put you in touch with other people is just as risky," she said.