Most people are familiar with seasonal influenza, or as it is more commonly called, "the flu." The virus makes hundreds of thousands of people sick every year. Seasonal influenza can be extremely dangerous for some, particularly individuals whose immune systems have been weakened by age or illness. But for most healthy people, the flu is usually not life-threatening.

Pandemic influenza is another matter. Pandemic flu occurs when a new strain of influenza emerges that can be transmitted easily from person to person and for which humanity has little or no natural immunity. In the case of an influenza pandemic, the virus spreads rapidly through the global community, making millions sick, stressing healthcare systems and potentially killing millions of people worldwide.

While the next global pandemic hasn't materialized yet, stories of a potential "bird flu" outbreak still make the headlines. Influenza is a threat that isn't going away and one Southern Baptist needs to take seriously.

What is Influenza and Pandemic?
Influenza is an infectious disease caused by a virus. Some strains of influenza affect humans exclusively, while others occur naturally in birds or other mammal species. Some flu viruses infect multiple species. Unfortunately, new influenza viruses are constantly being produced by genetic mutation. The well publicized "bird flu", for example, is an avian influenza caused by a virus that occurs naturally in birds. In 1997, an influenza outbreak occurred in Hong Kong when a strain of bird flu infected 18 people, raising concerns about the virus's spread from birds to humans. About half the people who caught this strain of influenza died. Scientists worry about viruses like this one that could spread very quickly and have a high mortality rate. Fortunately, in the Hong Kong outbreak, the virus was not easily transmitted from human to human through something as simple as a sneeze, for example, and transmission from birds to people was rare.

In a pandemic, the virus will spread rapidly through the population, infecting millions. Three years ago, the world had a preview of the disruption an influenza pandemic could cause when a previously unknown virus called SARS appeared in rural China. When an infected doctor carried the virus out of China, it spread to Vietnam and Singapore and Canada within a month. Before long, the SARS virus had spread to nearly 30 countries on six continents. It infected more than 8,000 people and killed nearly 800. According to one estimate, the SARS outbreak cost the Asian Pacific region about $40 billion.

Historical Influenza Outbreaks
Historical records show that influenza pandemics occur with some regularity. About 30 influenza pandemics have been recorded; three of which occurred in the last century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pandemic Event</th>
<th>Estimated U.S. Fatalities</th>
<th>Estimated Worldwide Fatalities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918-1919</td>
<td>675,000+</td>
<td>50+ million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957-1958</td>
<td>70,000+</td>
<td>1-2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968-1969</td>
<td>34,000+</td>
<td>700,000+</td>
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The worst of these pandemics occurred in 1918 at the end of World War I. Sometimes referred to as the Spanish Flu, this virus strain was unusual in that it killed many young adults and otherwise healthy victims. People without symptoms were struck suddenly and, within hours, were too feeble to walk. Many died the next day. The illness was so prevalent in some areas that most everyday life activities were stopped due to illness, death, and to prevent further spread of the virus. Some communities closed all stores or required customers to place their orders outside the store for filling. Local governments in the United States held that any type of gathering of people, with "the mixing of bodies and sharing of breath in crowded rooms," was dangerous. Nonessential meetings were prohibited.
Saloons, dance halls, and cinemas were closed and public funerals prohibited since they were deemed “unnecessary.” Health care systems were overwhelmed with many communities reporting that there were no health care workers to tend the sick and insufficient able bodied grave diggers to bury the dead.

Potential Impact to Southern Baptist Churches
The impact of an influenza pandemic on Southern Baptist churches could be substantial. A serious outbreak would cause significant absenteeism among staff, challenging the church’s ability to remain open and to continue to minister within the community. Traditional church services would be dramatically altered as human contact would be limited and mass gatherings cancelled. Many “at-risk” populations which the church traditionally serves, such as children, elderly, and the homeless, may be among the hardest hit by the virus. Economically-disadvantaged and single parent households may struggle to make ends meet if they must stay home to care for a loved one or if schools and businesses are ordered closed. As local governments plan to cope with a pandemic, Southern Baptists should be engaged in planning and preparedness to support emergency response efforts.

In addressing these issues, one might consider the following:

**Human Resources**
- Establish mandatory staff leave for ill employees (or those caring for ill family members). This will reduce the possibility of spreading the infection among healthy co-workers.
- Adopt "leave" policies that do not penalize workers for absenteeism during a pandemic when it is related to personal illness or care for sick family members.
- Be prepared for heavy absenteeism in jobs that interact with "at-risk" populations, such as children, the elderly, or homeless. Workers may fear that working with these groups places them at a higher risk for exposure to infection.

**Church Services**
- Be ready to temporarily suspend physical contact, including shaking hands and hugs, as part of church services.
- Limit mass gatherings. This may include cancelling Sunday services, weekday events at the church, weddings, and funerals.
- Devise alternate methods of providing spiritual care, particularly to those who have lost loved ones due to the illness. This may include offering church services via the Internet or television and creating phone networks of prayer partners.

**Social Services**
- Develop contingency plans to care for dependent populations, including those in resident care facilities, such as homeless shelters, assisted living, and ARC facilities. Develop sanitary practices to reduce the spread of infection within these facilities and procedures to address the needs of sick individuals.
- Be prepared to provide financial aid to the poor who are unable to work and need emergency income for housing, medicine and other essential needs.

**Disaster Services**
- Plan with local emergency management and public health officials prior to an outbreak. Predetermine, as much as possible, the role and expectations for the church.
- Be prepared to support mass care efforts, particularly to the needy and home bound.
- Consult with local officials on the availability of priority vaccinations for emergency and critical needs staff.

**What Can I Do To Prepare?**
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have advised that some of the best ways to prepare for a pandemic are the same steps to prepare for other emergencies. Stay informed and build a family disaster preparedness kit with the supplies your family will need during an emergency.

As a church leader, educate others. The Bible says "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing." (1 Peter 5:2). One of the duties of a shepherd is to warn the flock under his care of danger. Educate your congregation and your community about the truth and myths of pandemic flu and encourage them to develop their own emergency plan.
Finally, remember that influenza, like many other illnesses, is primarily spread by human to human contact. Washing your hands frequently, particularly after shaking other people's hands, can significantly reduce the spread of the disease. Avoid sharing personal care items, such as a drinking straw. Cover your mouth when you sneeze, but if you use your hand, wash it immediately. Too often people won't and every surface they touch next becomes contaminated.

Following these steps will protect you not just from influenza, but a myriad of other germs and infections. It is difficult to predict when the next influenza pandemic will occur, or its severity. But wherever and whenever a pandemic does start, it places everyone around the world at risk. During an outbreak, early identification of the virus and limiting the spread of the virus will be critical to saving lives. As President George Bush said in a November 1, 2005 speech on the nation's pandemic flu strategy, "A pandemic is a lot like a forest fire: If caught early it might be extinguished with limited damage; if allowed to smolder undetected it can grow to an inferno that spreads quickly beyond our ability to control it."

Helpful Web Sites

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.cdc.gov">www.cdc.gov</a></td>
<td>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.pandemicflu.gov">www.pandemicflu.gov</a></td>
<td>U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.who.int">www.who.int</a></td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.ready.gov">www.ready.gov</a></td>
<td>Citizens Corps and Homeland Security</td>
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Sources

Thanks to The Salvation Army for permission to use much of this information.