Keeping Your Congregation’s Kitchen Ministry Safe and Continuous during COVID-19

Congregational kitchen ministry takes many forms. You may be cooking for daycare or children in need, families who used to come for meals in person and now need to pick up food to-go, individuals who are housing-insecure, or other vulnerable populations. And you know that if you close your kitchen, you may be closing the only meals our neighbors eat that day.

Church Health offers these suggestions to help you confidently make adjustments to how you run your kitchens and food ministries. Creativity, collaboration, and communication are key to retooling for a ministry that remains healthy while observing CDC recommendations for safety to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

1 | Set an example for caution with COVID-19. This is a respiratory illness that spreads easily from person to person and can cause serious illness in about 20 percent of people who are infected, including pneumonia in both lungs, organ failure and death in a small but significant percentage of people. The best prevention is staying six feet away from others, avoiding contact with anyone who is sick, washing hands frequently, and avoiding touching your face with unwashed hands. Cough or sneeze into your elbow, and clean and disinfect anything you touch often.

2 | Follow CDC guidelines at all times. The virus spreads primarily through person-to-person contact or respiratory droplets from a cough or sneeze within six feet of someone who is infected. As you apply CDC guidelines for stopping the spread to food preparation, you will need more space, more time, more volunteers, and more equipment.

3 | Practice separation in cooking. You can separate by distance by keeping workers six feet apart. You can also separate with time, by working on stages of meal preparation in smaller shifts of one or two people a time. Finally, you can separate with food packaging by wrapping meals to be distributed to individuals who come through one at a time, rather than serving from a common pot to a group.

4 | Inventory everything that workers touch. You might be surprised how it all adds up, from salt shakers to sink handles to drawer pulls to ladles to bowls to everything in between. When a crew is cooking and serving, multiple people may touch all these items. What can you do to reduce the touches and the number of people touching? Five gallons of water with one cup of household bleach is an effective sanitizer to use on all surfaces—frequently.

5 | Build on what you have. You may not be able to find the items you’re used to when you shop. Use up what is in your pantry. Share brain power and community knowledge for recipes that still support nutrition and health. Farm your congregation—perhaps there is a chef whose restaurant is not very busy right now or gardeners itching to plant extra greens. You might know someone with fruit trees that are not normally harvested.

6 | Simplify volunteer labor. Look for ways to simplify shopping, prepping, cooking, packaging, and distributing so these tasks can be done alone or in pairs rather than the groups you may be used to. It’s key not wear out volunteers.

7 | Make one meal for now and one for later. You may not be able to serve two meals a day as you have in the past, or some people you serve may have lost one of their other meals. Consider packaging a second meal they can take with them. You won’t know if everyone has the ability to reheat food, so focus on room temperature foods or healthy snacks for that second meal. Make a point to communicate that this package is meant to be a second meal for later.

Church Health hosted a webinar called “Guidelines for Reshaping Food Ministries during COVID-19: A Conversation with Mid-South Food Bank and Church Health,” which included these tips and more. It is available for viewing on our website, https://churchhealth.org/fce/.