

CLAS CIRCULAR 2020/6 (10 March 2020)

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It would be very helpful if members could let us know of anything that appears to indicate developments of policy or practice on the part of Government or other matters of general concern that should be pursued.

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CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

Possibly **for action**

While we are very conscious that understanding of 'Church' and sacramental theology vary widely across the membership of CLAS, we thought it might be helpful to member Churches – particularly to those that have not yet formulated their own advice – to collate all the advice on coronavirus that we could find from reliable sources. Obviously, *we can take no responsibility for the content of the medical advice offered* and, in any event, the situation is changing literally day-by-day.

The UK Government and the devolved administrations, jointly, have published an [Action Plan](#) which was last updated on 6 March.

Non-church guidance

UK Government

The Government has published [Number of coronavirus \(COVID-19\) cases and risk in the UK](#), dated 9 March. Based on the World Health Organization's declaration that coronavirus is a public health emergency of international concern, the [UK Chief Medical Officers have raised the risk to the UK from low to moderate](#).

On 8 March, the BBC [reported](#) that, following an emergency Cobra meeting, the Government had decided that the UK would remain in the 'containment' stage of its response to the coronavirus and measures to delay the spread of the virus with 'social distancing' would not be introduced yet. Number 10 said that, following the Cobra meeting, the Prime Minister 'will be guided by the best scientific advice' but that there was no need to cancel sporting events at this stage.

Public Health England

All the current coronavirus guidance produced by HM Government for health professionals and non-clinical settings is [here](#).

Scottish Government and Health Protection Scotland

The latest coronavirus guidance from Health Protection Scotland is [here](#).

Welsh Government

The latest coronavirus guidance from the Welsh Government is [here](#).

FCO travel advice

Travel advice from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office is [here](#).

Church guidance

Baptist Union of Great Britain

The latest coronavirus guidance from the Baptist Union of Great Britain, dated 10 March, is [here](#). In brief:

- **Churches should consider following best-hygiene practices** that include advising members with coughs and sneezes to refrain from handshaking and having hand-sanitisers available for all to use.
- Best hygiene practice should continue to be observed in all pastoral contacts.
- 'When gathering around the Lord's Table to share communion, the use of individual cups should be considered. It may also be a sensible precaution to use pre-cut, individual pieces of bread rather than passing around one loaf. Churches can still use one loaf to signify our unity, whilst maintaining sensible hygiene precautions'.

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales

In its latest [guidance](#), version 3 dated 9 March, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales notes that 'At the time of writing we are not in a pandemic. Efforts in England and Wales are focused on containment of the virus and this advice is written for those circumstances. If this situation changes, detailed guidance will be produced. The guidance is kept under continuous review'. **The guidance recommends 'a stepped approach' and, as of 10 March, says that 'We are now officially at Stage 2 of the guidelines. Please implement these changes with immediate effect'.**

Stage 1: Very few cases in UK, no cases in local parishes:

- Ensure that everyone maintains good hygiene especially at Mass and parish gatherings – particularly by using (and binning) tissues and washing hands with soap and water or alcohol.
- Ask anyone with cold or flu symptoms to refrain from the physical sign of peace, taking communion from the Chalice and advise they should receive the host on the hand only.
- Ensure good regular cleaning of surfaces lots of people touch regularly, including such things as door handles.
- Ask everyone attending Mass to sanitise their hands as they come into church using sanitized gel dispensers (make these available in porches or entrances).
- Ensure that ministers of the Eucharist sanitise their hands before and after distributing communion (*we should be doing this anyway as a matter of course*).

The advice adds: '*There is no need as things stand for the Chalice to be withdrawn or the sign of peace suspended, such as was advised during the 2009 flu pandemic. This advice would only come if we had a very serious epidemic in the UK and at the time of writing this is unlikely. People with cold and flu-like symptoms should refrain from the sign of peace if they are present*'.

Stage 2: Current status. A number of cases in local communities or a case specifically linked to a parish community:

The key things for parishes in these circumstances are:

- It is likely you will need to suspend distribution under both kinds (the host to be given on the hand only).
- When giving communion in the hand, seek to ensure you place the host in the hand of the recipient in such a way that you do not touch their hands.
- Suspend the physical sign of peace.
- Remove holy water stoups.
- Public veneration of relics and the Cross on Good Friday should NOT be by kissing or physically touching them.
- Advise those most vulnerable (elderly, people with weakened immune systems and long-term conditions like cancer, diabetes and heart disease) to refrain from large parish gatherings and stay at home.
- Cease use of shared hymn books and missals which could help transmit the virus.
- Ask everyone attending Mass to sanitise their hands as they come into church using sanitized gel dispensers (make these available in porches or entrances).

Stage 3: Many cases in local parishes

It is currently unlikely, but not impossible, that we will get to this stage. This could be at either deanery, diocesan or national level. The guidance states that, in such circumstances, *'Mass and Liturgy in public should be suspended and parish gatherings suspended. Specific and detailed guidance will be produced should we come to this stage. But at the time of writing this is not needed. Templates have been drafted for Ordinaries to use should this be needed'*.

Church in Wales

In brief, the [guidance](#) from the Church in Wales, last updated 5 March, is that:

- Pastoral visitors to homes and hospitals should observe all precautions in personal hygiene before and after such visits.
- Priests presiding at the Eucharist, communion administrators and servers should wash their hands: 'We strongly advise the use of hand sanitizers immediately before the Preparation of the Table and Eucharistic prayer'.
- Receive Holy Communion in one kind: ***public administration of the chalice should cease in the Church in Wales until further notice***. The Chalice must continue to be prepared and consecrated in the usual way, but the celebrant alone should receive from the Chalice.
- If, contrary to the above guidance, a parish continues to offer the chalice to the congregation, intinction (dipping the bread into the wine) should be prohibited.
- Sharing of the Peace: ***We are now strongly advising that physical Sharing of the Peace be discontinued until further notice***.

Church of England

The latest guidance from the Church of England, last updated 5 March, is [here](#). Guidance specific to clergy, other ministers and leadership teams is [here](#). [The Church's advice is reviewed daily, and the web page indicates when it was last updated.] In brief, in the event of increased community transmission of coronavirus, priests should take a view whether it is necessary to withdraw the Common Cup. If so they should:

- Suspend the administration of the chalice and offer Communion in one kind only i.e. the consecrated bread/wafer/host, with the priest alone taking the wine.
- Consider suspending handshaking or other direct physical contact during the sharing of the peace.
- Consider suspending direct physical contact as part of a blessing or 'laying on of hands'.

Where the priest has not suspended the administration of the chalice, communicants may nevertheless decide to receive in one kind only at their own discretion.

It is also best practice for churches to have hand-sanitisers available for parishioners to use. In addition, priests presiding at the Eucharist, communion administrators and servers should wash their hands, preferably with an alcohol-based (minimum 60%) hand-sanitiser.

Intinction is not recommended (even by celebrants or communion administrators) as this represents an infection transmission route, as well as a risk to those with certain allergies.

Best hygiene practice should continue to be observed in all pastoral contacts.

Church of Ireland

The overall [advice](#) of the Church of Ireland, issued on 28 February, is that all public health guidance provided by state authorities – [the Public Health Agency](#) in Northern Ireland and the [Health Protection Surveillance Centre](#) in the Republic of Ireland – should be followed. As to church services:

- **Physical interaction during services, including the Sign of Peace, should be suspended.**
- Parishioners should stay at home if they feel ill and display influenza-like symptoms.
- The Church's duty of care extends to members of the clergy. If you have influenza-type symptoms, do not call the clergy for pastoral visitation. Pastoral support for parishioners who are unable to attend church services should be provided by telephone or online (e.g. Skype).
- Everyone administering Holy Communion should wash their hands or use alcohol-based hand gel before beginning.
 - **Holy Communion should be administered only in one kind (bread) and placed into the hands only and not onto the tongue.**
 - **Only the celebrant should drink from the chalice.**
 - **Intinction should be avoided.**

Guidance for religious services has been provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and is available [here](#).

Church of Scotland

The [guidance](#) to congregations across the Church of Scotland is as follows:

At Communion services, churches should already be following best hygiene practices. This includes advising parishioners with coughs and sneezes to refrain from shaking hands during The Peace, if that is part of your service, and to take only the bread if your church does not use individual cups. If you need advice on Communion cups or individual glasses, [please contact Brian Auld, Safe Buildings Consultant](#). It is also best practice for churches to have hand sanitisers available for parishioners to use. Best hygiene practice should continue to be observed in all pastoral contacts. Updated advice is available from [NHS Scotland](#). Whilst in places of worship, there is no need to avoid other worshippers who are well or to change normal faith practices – this includes taking alcoholic wine from the common cup.

[Public Health Scotland](#) and [the UK Government](#) recommend that you should take usual infection prevention precautions including:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.
- Churches can underline the importance of handwashing by ensuring that hand sanitisers are not available in toilets where soap and water can be used.
- It is particularly important after taking public transport to use sanitiser on your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Carry tissues to catch coughs and sneezes and bin the tissue.
- If you feel unwell, stay at home, do not attend work or school.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces in church buildings.

The threat posed by COVID-19 has been assessed by the Chief Medical Officer as “moderate”. This permits the Scottish Government to plan for all eventualities. The risk to individuals remains low. NHS Scotland have [prepared a poster](#) which could be displayed at your building entrance to give advice to visitors. The purpose of this poster is to protect the visitor and those within the building.

The Church of Scotland also highlights the FCO's travel advice.

Methodist Church

In its [guidance](#) dated 4 March, the Methodist Church notes that the UK Chief Medical Officers consider the current risk to individuals from Coronavirus as moderate and its overall advice is for ‘good hygiene with regular hand washing and for particular care to be taken in the preparation of sharing the elements at Holy Communion’. Specifically, it recommends as follows:

- Wash hands with soap and water often, or use hand sanitiser gel. This is particularly important for servers at Holy Communion.
- Churches may wish to use the traditional small glasses for communion to reduce the chances of infection.

- Where a common cup or chalice is used, attendees with coughs and sneezes should be encouraged to receive Communion in one kind only. That is the bread only. The practice of 'intinction', dipping the bread into the wine, should be avoided as this may spread the virus.
- Ministers or Worship Leaders should use alternatives to sharing the peace with handshakes. For instance using the British Sign Language version of the peace. [Watch a video that shows how to do this.](#)
- Similarly they should refrain from shaking hands with members of the congregation as they leave.
- It is probably a good time to remind Communion Stewards that communion wine once poured out should never be returned to the bottle to be reused later. Any remaining elements should be reverently consumed or *put to ground*.

Scottish Episcopal Church

The [guidance](#) from the College of Bishops, updated on 6 March, is as follows:

- Continue to follow all public health guidance provided by NHS Scotland, in particular the need for good hand hygiene, and take precautions when coughing or sneezing, which are the main cause of infection.
- Cease physical contact on arrival at church and departure until further notice, as well as during the Peace, which should be limited to a nod or a smile and a verbal 'and also with you' while members remain in their pew or chair.
- **Presiding priests should wash their hands thoroughly before the service, and use hand sanitiser when available during ablutions and before touching any wafers.** Sanitiser should also be made available, if possible, to servers and anyone assisting with the distribution of communion, to be used as discreetly as possible without interrupting the flow of worship.
- Small altar linens should be fresh for each celebration of communion.
- Communicants should remain a respectful distance from the next person on their way to the communion rail, and at the rail.
- **The sharing of the Chalice is suspended until further notice, and communion should be offered in one kind** i.e. taking the bread only, placed into the hand.
- Church members should stay at home and not attend church services if they feel unwell and display influenza symptoms such as a cough, breathing difficulty, and fever. Pastoral support to those who believe they could have the virus should not involve personal visits, and can instead be offered by telephone call until such time as a medical test clarifies the person's condition.
- Pastoral visitors to homes and hospitals should observe all precautions in personal hygiene before and after such visits.

It concludes: 'To avoid confusion within the SEC, it will be helpful if a consistent approach is adopted across the church, by following the above guidelines'.

United Reformed Church

In [guidance](#) dated 20 February, the URC states that 'long-standing government advice has been that 'In a pandemic, it makes good sense to take precautions to limit the spread of disease by not sharing common vessels for food and drink'. COVID-19 has **NOT** been declared a pandemic, so at this time there is no need to change worshipping practices, including sharing the bread and the cup during communion'.

Further:

- Churches **should already be following best-hygiene practices**, which includes advising members who are unwell to stay at home, or those with coughs and sneezes to refrain from handshaking. It is also best practice for churches to have hand-sanitisers available for members and visitors to use. Particular hygiene care should be taken by those serving drinks and food.
- In addition, ministers and all those involved in serving communion should wash their hands, preferably with an alcohol-based (minimum 60%) hand-sanitiser. In the situation where a loaf is passed round, we suggest that you ask the congregation to be particularly careful with hand hygiene.
- Best hygiene practice should continue to be observed in all pastoral contacts.
- Whilst in places of worship there is no need to avoid other worshippers who are well. Take usual infection prevention precautions including washing your hands or using hand sanitiser (containing at least 60% alcohol) after using the toilet facilities or before eating food or snacks or if you are in close contact with someone who is unwell.
- For other church activities, including toddler groups, children's groups and other community events, there is no advice or reason to stop hosting these. The above advice applies, particularly reminding people to be careful with handwashing and to stay at home if they are unwell.