

Concerning H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) and Holy Communion

23rd Jul 2009

Up to this point I have not issued a written statement about Swine Flu but I have spoken to Rural and Area Deans and to Deanery Synod to say that on the advice received from local Public Health Teams the Bishops in the West Midlands have not felt it necessary to suspend use of the common chalice at celebrations of Holy Communion. This is largely because, providing usual hygiene methods are followed, the increase in the risk of infection is thought to be negligible.

However, conscious of the rapid spread of the virus and of its more severe effects on certain categories of people, we have been keeping the situation under constant review and have been listening carefully to local and central Government advice as it responds to the changing situation. Additionally, we have been waiting for further advice from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on the basis of their access to high-level central Government Committees. Such advice from the Archbishops has now been received, which is:

‘The Department of Health have recently advised us [the Archbishops] 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”. In the light of this advice, we recommend those presiding at Holy Communion suspend the administration of the chalice during this wave of pandemic flu. For those who still wish to offer in both kinds, we recommend the practice whereby the presiding minister, whose hands should have been washed with the appropriate alcohol-based rub before handling the elements and the vessels, personally intincts all wafers before placing them in the hands of communicants. This is a practice widely observed in Anglican churches throughout Africa. Communicants receiving in this way need to be confident that the clergy and all assistant ministers follow the relevant guidance on hygiene.’

The Archbishops go on to say to Bishops:

‘We shall keep this advice under review and will ensure that the detailed guidance provided on the Church of England website is kept up-to-date. In the meantime, we wish to express our gratitude to you and those who share your ministry for the pastoral care and service offered at this time of national concern.’

In order that the Church is seen to take a responsible lead in ensuring public health, it is important that we take this advice. Hence, I am suspending the use of the common chalice until further notice and, in common with many other bishops, I strongly recommend that, unless there is an urgent pastoral need to offer communion in both kinds by your intinction of the wafer (not leavened bread), you communicate in one kind only.

No doubt you will want to assure your communicants that although it is the usual practice of the Church of England to communicate in both kinds, in cases of necessity communion may be offered in one kind only and that the fullness of the grace of the sacrament is received thereby.

Given that the virus is often spread through handshakes the Archbishops also recommend that guidance should be offered to the congregation:

‘They [those presiding at Holy Communion] should offer guidance to the congregation about appropriate precautions in receiving communion and exchanging the peace.’

My advice is that you encourage non-tactile forms of sharing the peace but you will be in the best position to judge what is pastorally most appropriate.

As the Archbishops indicate, further information can be found on the Church of England website:

www.cofe.anglican.org/info/swineflu Archdeacon Ian Watson is heading up our response team and further

advice will appear on our website.

The pastoral opportunity for us all over coming months will be to reach out into our communities to support those who contract the virus, especially those particularly vulnerable to its effects.

With my prayers for your ministry

Yours in Christ

Bishop Christopher