**Safely celebrating Holy Communion**

In response to a few people asking recently how best to deal with Communion at this stage of the pandemic, here is some general guidance, recognising that each church needs to respond according to local risks and their own customs. There is no “one size fits all” solution.

**Government Guidance as at 17 May, 2021**

**In England**, food and drink (which includes Holy Communion) can be served to congregants where they are, “essential to the act of worship.” The Government guidance also requires attention to hand hygiene and general cleanliness, and says that “when consuming food and drink people should remain seated and take steps to minimise any risk of infection. People should not touch communal or shared objects, or handle items other than their own.”

**In Wales**, the Government advise that food and drink “should be avoided except where they are integral to the worship or religious or belief ceremony.” Utensils must not be shared between people and where possible a distance of 2m should be maintained. In circumstances when it is not possible to maintain a 2-metre distance, the person distributing the consumable should release it into the hand only,” and that if accidental touch occurs, both the person distributing and the person receiving should cleanse their hands immediately. They also suggest that other mitigations should be considered, such as having “pre-wrapped foodstuffs.”

**In Scotland**, the general principles also apply, in that strict hand hygiene must be followed, 2m social distancing should be maintained wherever possible, the use of communal vessels is to be avoided, and that face coverings may be removed to allow eating and drinking. They also suggest considering pre-wrapping food items and that face coverings must be word when preparing and handling food.

**In all three jurisdictions,** speaking across the elements must be avoided and the bread and wine must remain covered until the time comes for the Communion.

**Applying the Government Guidance**

* Prepare the elements with careful hygiene measures in place. Wash hands, wear gloves and a face covering, make sure the Communion vessels (cups, chalice, plate) are clean before use.
* Consider using pre-wrapped individual “servings,” but also consider the amount of single-use plastic this will produce (even if some of it is recyclable) – single use plastics are to be avoided where possible. Factory-prepared Communion elements are not required by the three governments, but may be appropriate in your context, especially if you have a number of people who are very vulnerable to infection.
* All those involved in presiding and distributing the Communion must (ideally) wash their hands with soap and water or sanitise them IMMEDIATELY before the Communion (as well as when they arrive at the building.)
* Some churches, especially but not only LEPs, have a practice of asking people to come forwards to receive Communion. In general, this should be avoided because of people standing within 2m of others whilst queuing, the possibility of multiple touches of Communion rails, etc. In England and Wales, the guidance is that food and drink (Communion elements) should be consumed when sitting down – standing or kneeling at a Communion rail does not make this possible, so even if served “at the front,” communicants must return to their seats before consuming the elements.
* Better would be to make sure there are gaps between rows where people are seated, so that the people serving Communion can easily pass amongst the congregation carry trays of bread and wine. Trays must not be passed hand-to-hand along the rows – one person should hold the tray and move amongst the people. Arrange the bread/wine so that a person picking up the elements for themselves will not accidentally touch those for another person. Bread could be distributed into the hand of the person receiving Communion, without physical contact.
* Some have adopted the practice of using small sugar tongs to pick up the bread and drop into the hand – perhaps not the most beautiful aesthetic, but a practical solution. Should the tongs accidentally touch the Communicant’s hand, both the hand and the tongs will need to be cleaned immediately before continuing. The person serving Communion might also wish to wear food-safe gloves which can be changed if any accidental contact is made.
* Congregants (unless in the exempt groups) should continue to wear their face covering whilst the elements are distributed, only removing them in order to actually eat and drink.
* In any case, no-one may use the Common Cup, and a single roll/loaf from which people break off their own piece of bread. There is nothing to stop one person presiding breaking bread and eating from that provided it is not shared with others, and nothing to stop them lifting the cup and then drinking from it if that is normal practice. But only that one person may eat/drink those particular elements. If we do not visually “re-enact” the breaking of bread in front of the congregation, it will not invalidate the Communion. (For more on this, see John Bradbury’s personal reflections at <https://urc.org.uk/images/15-theses-united-and-reformed-john-bradbury.pdf>)
* Whilst appreciating a range of theological sensitivities around the “disposal” of elements not consumed by the congregation, the need for continued and scrupulous hygiene remains. Gone forever are the days of dispensing wine/juice from tarnished or dirty teapots into cups and then pouring what’s left over after the service back into the bottle, and for that at least we should be grateful. Similarly, it is not appropriate to gather the bread that has been passed around the congregation and for the President then to consume it.

**Conclusion**

With fairly straightforward precautions and small adjustments to protocol/practice it is safe and reasonable to resume celebrating Communion in gathered worship services. It should always have been the case that the elements should have been prepared with proper attention to good hygiene; sadly, this has not always been the case.

It is worth noting that whenever we reach the final stage of unlocking the end of Covid restrictions, Coronavirus will be endemic (along with many other diseases) and continuing to practise careful hygiene will be essential.

Steve Faber
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