

COVID-19 Advice on the Administration of Holy Communion

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The Recovery Group has been set up to support the Church of England as government guidance changes through the COVID-19 pandemic. This document has been prepared with information available by the issue date and is for planning purposes only until present restrictions are lifted. It will be kept under review and updated as the situation develops, with each update issued as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).

This advice note seeks to enable Holy Communion to be celebrated in a safe and appropriate way. It includes practical steps in the administration of Holy Communion, as well as guidance on the practice of Holy Communion provided by members of the Liturgical Commission and the Faith & Order Commission.

Where either priests or parishioners have concerns about participating in a service of Holy Communion, it is important that no pressure is placed on priests to celebrate Holy Communion or on parishioners to receive it.

General advice on cleaning church buildings and on the conduct of public worship should also be observed.

Q. When can we celebrate Holy Communion with our congregations in church buildings?

A. This will only be possible once our church buildings are re-opened for public worship.

Q. Are we able to share the Peace?

A. Unfortunately, in order to minimise risk, there should be no sharing of the Peace physically.

Q. What hygiene measures should the priest follow when preparing the elements?

A. The president (and anyone who prepares the elements) must sanitise their hands before touching the elements, and again after the president has administered them to him/herself and before offering the bread to communicants.

If others assist in preparing the elements, then hand hygiene and physical distancing precautions should apply.

Q. What elements can be offered to communicants?

A. At present, Communion should be administered in one kind only with no sharing of the common cup. The president alone should always take the wine, consuming all that has been consecrated; other communicants should receive the bread only, in the hand. As the Liturgical and Faith and Order Commissions have made clear, this is still ‘complete communion’.

In order to minimise overall risk, intinction (dipping the bread into the wine) should not be practised.

Q. When should the priest and communicants sanitize their hands?

A. The priest should sanitise his/her hands before administering the bread.

Each communicant should also be encouraged to sanitise their hands before receiving the bread.

Q. Should the altar rails be used?

A. We suggest that in order to avoid touching it and to maintain physical distancing communicants should not come to kneel at the altar rail, but instead they should form a line maintaining two-metres distance to receive the bread from the priest. The details of how this will be enacted will depend on the local situation, particularly the layout of the building.

Q. How can the priest maintain physical distancing when administering the bread?

A. We recognise that it will not be possible to maintain the normal two-metres distancing for the brief time that the priest administers the sacrament. However, the risk associated with this is relatively low. Some benefit might be gained, if face-coverings are worn or a form of separation such as a perspex screen is used (though as noted below, the evidence on face coverings is not strong).

Q. What about face coverings?

A. The evidence on face coverings is not strong and suggests that the benefit is not to the wearer but to others for any potential infection by the wearer. However, it is very possible that Government will advise that, as a precautionary measure, face coverings should be worn by both communicants and the priest when administering the sacrament.

Q. How can we clean the chalice and paten?

A. If the priest is the only person who will touch the chalice and paten both during the service and after, then they can be cleaned in the normal way.

If others may touch the chalice and/or paten, either during the service or after, then they should either be washed in warm water with liquid soap, or if this is not possible, stored safely on their own for at least 72 hours before using again, in case they have been infected with the virus. Further advice on cleaning historic items is available from Historic England:- <https://historicengland.org.uk/coronavirus/historic-places/cleaning-historic-surfaces/>

Q. Can we reserve the Sacrament?

A. Churches which reserve the Sacrament may do so. The priest should place the hosts in the vessel for reservation. They should not be consumed or distributed for 72 hours by anyone other than the priest who reserved them.

Some Guidance on the Celebration of Holy Communion

God's presence is always with us, in ways that often escape explanation. In the long history of God's people, the divine presence has been with us in troubled times as well as in moments of comfort: in exile as well as at homecoming, in haste on the journey as well as in moments of contemplation, in gathered congregations as well as in domestic settings, and in the mysterious One who reveals himself in the daily breaking of bread as much as in the vision of the heavenly Temple. The dominical sacraments, as the Church of England has understood them, both signify and convey the realities to which they refer. It is in this understanding that we offer the present advice, to encourage ministers and congregations to reflect on the sacrament of Holy Communion at a time when the worshipping life of the Church (which normally fulfils the command 'do this in remembrance of me') has been disrupted. In so doing, we consider how we may continue to give thanks to God for the saving gift of Jesus Christ in the present time, but also (like Israel in exile) look forward to the future when we will be able to return home with joyful hearts.

We recognise that the present circumstances have raised in a new way many questions about the celebration of Holy Communion in the Church of England. It is our hope that the Faith and Order Commission and the Liturgical Commission will be able to give more extended theological consideration to these than is possible within the constraints of this short guidance document. While God's people are seeking to discern how to live as a eucharistic community under the current restrictions, we believe that there is much we can learn from the present situation about the celebration of Holy Communion at any time. We encourage deep reflection on our practices, as all members of the Church seek to respond to changing circumstances and the spiritual needs that emerge from them.

Different approaches and their implications

Holy Communion is, both in form and substance, a shared sacramental meal, and any exceptions to this principle fall short of what would be expected in any normal circumstances.¹ This is reflected in the rubric in the Book of Common Prayer, which states that 'there shall be no celebration of the Lord's Supper, except there be a convenient number to communicate with the priest...'. Clergy, mindful of the centrality of Holy Communion to the life of the Church, are approaching the present situation in different ways.

1. Some bishops and priests may choose to continue to celebrate Holy Communion, even though they cannot do so with their congregations. Those who do so should make clear that the intention is for this to be an expression of praise and thanksgiving within the shared life of the Body of Christ (pointing forward to the time when we can share in Holy Communion together again), not the offering of an individual.²

¹ Legally, such exceptions would have to be covered by what is sometimes called 'the doctrine of necessity', which allows for exceptional actions to preserve a greater principle.

² Although the text of the rite should essentially be the same as if a congregation were physically present, the president should not say the responses of the people who are not present (for example, at the Greeting and Peace;), but rather say the words of the president or other minister (such as the Collect, Prayer after Communion, and Blessing), and the texts that the president and people say together (for example, the Gloria in Excelsis and Lord's Prayer). However, at the dialogue at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, the president may choose to say or omit 'We lift them to the Lord' and 'It is right to give thanks and praise'.

- a. Those who take this option may be able to do so in their churches, if these can be accessed safely, and nothing would preclude members of the president's own household from participating in the service or receiving Holy Communion.
 - b. Equally, in the present restrictions, clergy are to be assured that their homes are also proper places for the celebration of Holy Communion, and that the same reverence should naturally be accorded to the sacrament in the home as in church.
 - c. If such services of Holy Communion are recorded or live-streamed to others, it will be important that those watching can see the president receive the bread and wine, emphasising the Anglican principle that the sacramental meal is always to be consumed.
 - d. If the sacrament is reserved in a priest's home for ministry to the sick, it should be stored in a 'seemly and reverent' manner in a suitable and secure place.
2. Some bishops and priests may choose to abstain from presiding at the celebration of Holy Communion for as long as the sacrament is not available to their congregations. Some are choosing to follow this course of action intentionally for the duration of the present restrictions as a sign of solidarity with congregations who cannot receive communion.

'One bread and one cup'

3. Anglican theologies of the sacrament of Holy Communion, whatever their differences of opinion in other matters, embrace the classic formulation that
[Christ made] by his one oblation of himself once offered... a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again... [and the faithful,] receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ's holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion, [are] partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood.

The action of the community gathered for the Eucharist must necessarily be related to the mystery the Eucharist commemorates. Whilst there can be no repetition of the once-offered sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the members of the Body of Christ continue, in the Eucharistic Prayer, to plead with confidence his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross, to offer through him, our great high priest, our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and to anticipate our welcome at the feast in heaven where all creation worships the Trinity.

4. The physical handling and sharing of the elements by participants in the same celebration is traditionally seen as essential to the sacramental action of Holy Communion. The inherent material nature of the sacraments is not simply about material substance being provided from some source that each participant then accesses individually if simultaneously. Instead it is about participants sharing in matter which is rendered as 'holy things' by the Church's action in the sacrament. The material nature of sacraments and associated rites, therefore, is also bound up with their inherent social nature, their constituting those who gather as one body, one society, one church. Common Worship describes this action when it says that 'In Holy Communion the Church, following the example of the Lord, takes, gives thanks, breaks and gives'.³ The bread and wine that are given and received at the Eucharistic celebration are the same bread and wine which have been involved in this fourfold action of the Church.

³ *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (2000), p333, note 17.

5. In circumstances where there is a reasonable chance of contagion, the canonical doctrine of necessity permits the reception of Holy Communion in one kind.⁴ Other such situations of necessity might include the inability to consume solids or, in the case of alcoholics, any quantity of alcohol.⁵ The *Notes to the Celebration of Holy Communion at Home or in Hospital* indicate that ‘Communion should normally be received in both kinds separately, but where necessary may be received in one kind whether of bread or, where the communicant cannot receive solid food, wine.’⁶

Participating in the paschal mystery

6. Celebrating the Eucharist is literally synonymous with giving thanks for the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ and the benefits that the Cross has afforded us. Many will grieve the physical absence of the sacrament from their lives. Yet this time may be an opportunity to re-discover and recognise some of the other ways in which we participate in the paschal mystery: in the practice of reading and learning the Scriptures, in joining in the Daily Office as an expression of the prayer of the Church universal, in praying for the transformation of the world, in living out the Great Commission Jesus gave us, and in our own lives continually dying to sin and rising to new life.⁷
7. When services of Holy Communion are broadcast live (whether live-streamed or through videoconferencing), those who tune in are participating in a real Eucharistic assembly.⁸ Those who participate remotely in this way, but who are unable to be present physically, can practise a form of Spiritual Communion. *The term ‘Spiritual Communion’ has been used historically to describe the means of grace by which a person, prevented for some serious reason from sharing physically in a celebration of the Eucharist, nonetheless shares in the communion of Jesus Christ. An [Act of Spiritual Communion is available on the Church of England website](#).*
8. As the introduction to that liturgical material explains:

The Book of Common Prayer instructs us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly ‘eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ’, although we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves. Making a Spiritual Communion is particularly fitting for those who cannot receive the sacrament at the great feasts of the Church, and it fulfils the duty of receiving Holy Communion ‘regularly, and

⁴ See Section VIII of the *Sacrament Act 1547*: both bread and wine are to be administered, ‘except necessity otherwise require’ (text modernised).

⁵ Legal Advisory Commission, *Holy Communion: Administration of the Sacrament*, art. 6, and see Legal Advisory Commission, *The Use of Non-Alcoholic Wine and Gluten-Free Bread*, arts 12-13.

⁶ *Common Worship: Pastoral Services*. Note that the doctrine of necessity does not, however, extend to situations where an insufficient amount of bread or wine are consecrated. See *Non-Alcoholic Wine*, arts 6 and 8.

⁷ As an example of the opportunity for sustained learning and engagement with Scripture, we observe that when following the Lectionary the main (or only) streamed service on Sunday should use the readings appointed for the Principal Service.

⁸ Whilst services may be pre-recorded for practical reasons, we see the practice of making recordings of services of Holy Communion as distinct from live broadcasts, and as affording different opportunities for participation.

especially at the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun or Pentecost' (Canon B 15).

The act of Spiritual Communion can take place at the point in the service when the participant would normally receive the bread and wine – perhaps after having seen the president consume them.

Other kinds of table-fellowship within the Body of Christ

9. In some churches an *agape* meal (sometimes called a Lovefeast) is sometimes shared, to recall the meals shared by Jesus with his disciples and to express the fellowship afforded within the body of Christ. Such meals, whether conducted online or in the home, are not a celebration of Holy Communion, which must be presided over by a bishop or priest. Ministers of the Church of England may be interested in the guidance of the Methodist Church on [how to hold such a meal](#), which may be accompanied by a time of testimony.
10. After a live-streamed celebration of Holy Communion has ended, participants who wish may choose (in the time after the service which would often be devoted to fellowship and hospitality in a church context) to eat and drink as if sharing a meal together. As the Methodist Church puts it, 'there is no question of action towards the food/drink that is shared, other than being thankful for it and consuming it [...] a Love Feast is not a sacrament.'

Appendix

11. *We recognise a real desire of many for some physical engagement during the online celebration of Holy Communion. In some cases, participants in online services have consumed bread and wine in their own homes during the service. Whilst we recognize that this practice may have spiritual value for some, participants should not be encouraged to believe that any bread and wine brought before screens during online Holy Communion has been 'remotely consecrated'. However, we commend the questions raised by this practice for further theological reflection.*

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