

Influenza 'A' (H1N1) update 22 July (TO REPLACE DOC OF 3 JULY)

The UK Department of Health has announced that the management of the H1N1 Pandemic has changed from the 'containment' to 'treatment' phase.

With the number of cases on the rise, we are increasingly being asked for advice on how best the Church should respond. We are in regular contact with the local health authority and our advice is as follows.

Please keep checking this website for the most up-to-date information.

1. The best way to stop the spread of infection is through good personal hygiene.

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and hot water regularly, or when available use antibacterial alcohol gel. Wash regularly, especially when entering or leaving a building, and at regular intervals, around every 90 minutes.
- Coughs and sneezes spread infection rapidly. It is essential that you cover your mouth if you cough or sneeze. Make sure that tissues are available, as well as bins for the safe disposal of used tissues.
- If you have flu symptoms, stay at home. Make sure someone knows where you are. You can find out more here: www.direct.gov.uk/en/Swineflu/DG_177831 and www.nhs.uk/AlertsEmergencies/Pages/Pandemicflualert.aspx
- If you are *not* showing symptoms but someone in your household is, you do not need to stay at home. *You are not infectious if you are not showing symptoms.* However, if you are a priest or other church worker, you may need to consider arrangements for covering your duties if you catch the virus from your family.

2. It is important that churches work on their flu pandemic plans as soon as possible, in case the situation worsens.

- See here our **flu pandemic plan** document. There is also an example, **St Agatha-in-the-Mud**, to help you get started.

3. The Church is well placed to help the community during this pandemic.

- The Government is recommending that people identify 'flu friends' to help in the event of the pandemic worsening. Flu friends are people who will collect medicines, food and other supplies for you if you get swine flu, so that you don't have to leave home. Very often it will be a good idea not to choose people you have a lot of close contact with (e.g. other members of a Home Group) as you may all succumb at the same time.
- You can find out more about flu friends in the **NHS documents: Flu Friend and Prepare your home for a flu pandemic.**
- There will be some vulnerable people in our communities who do not have people they can call on to help in this way. This is where the church can help by setting up a flu friend scheme. It does not need to

be complicated – and may simply involve building on a network you already have in place, such as street wardens or good neighbours scheme.

- We recommend you look at www.holyredeemerstreatham.org.uk/flu-friends for an example of good practice.

4. As in any crisis, the Church should remain open for business as usual.

- There are **prayers here** for people who are ill or anxious about this flu.
- There is currently some confusion nationally about the best practices for receiving Holy Communion, and we have discussed this with a number of healthcare professionals. At present we believe it would be premature to issue a blanket request for people to dispense with the wine altogether. Indeed, sharing the peace and shaking hands at the church door are more likely to spread the virus and we feel that to stop these would take us well beyond the Government's advice to keep things as normal as possible at present. We will inform you if the situation changes.
- In the meantime it is very important that you use stringent hygiene measures for use with the chalice: the use of antibacterial gel is recommended before handling the bread and chalices, as well as wiping the chalice with a clean, dry purificator between communicants. It is also much safer to use fermented wine rather than non-alcoholic and a silver chalice rather than a pottery one
- Communicants may, of course, choose not to receive the wine if they prefer. They should be reassured that receiving Holy Communion in one kind in no way suggests that they are not receiving the fullness of Christ's presence in the Sacrament.
- Please note that the practice of intinction and giving Communion directly on to the tongue are strongly discouraged. *These practices increase the possibility of spreading the virus.*
- Clergy are asked to give clear advice (in Sunday Notices, parish magazines etc) to members of their congregation who may be showing flu-like symptoms *not* to attend church services or other meetings while their symptoms persist.
- Some churches have a stoup for holy water near the entrance to the church door, and people are invited to dip a finger in this, and to make the sign of the cross as a reminder of their baptism. The water contained in stoups can easily become a source of infection, so stoups should be emptied and cleaned thoroughly, and not used until the pandemic alert is over.
- Pastoral visits and Home Communion for people with the virus is discouraged. Please consider telephone or other means of contact. The risk of infection is very high, and a priest making a series of pastoral visits could spread infection, as well as being susceptible to becoming infected.
- Please take special precautions when taking Holy Communion to Residential Homes. If anyone in the community has flu-like symptoms,

it may be prudent to give communion in only one kind to the congregation, or those receiving communion in their own rooms. The priest alone should drink wine from the chalice.

- When a pastoral visit is said to be 'absolutely necessary' then priests should make up their own minds about the pastoral care they feel it is appropriate to offer. Clearly such a visit will expose them to catching the virus themselves, and they must decide whether this is a risk worth taking in the circumstances. The rules of basic hygiene following such a visit must be adhered to strictly.

We don't want to cause panic, or to exaggerate the seriousness of the situation. At the moment H1N1 is proving less fatal than seasonal winter flu. We hope the measures above will help churches to provide appropriate support in our congregations and parishes, whilst doing what we can to combat the spread of the infection.

Please keep checking this website for the most up-to-date information.

The Rt Revd Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester, Chair of the Diocese of Oxford Planning Group
21 July 2009