



THE BISHOP OF WAKEFIELD

Ad Clerum

21st July, 2009



To all clergy,

Important Information about Swine Flu

Last week the Department of Health announced that the management of the Swine Flu pandemic has formally changed from the 'Containment' to 'Treatment' phase. This means that intensive efforts to contain the virus will end as resources are diverted to treat the increasing number of people contracting the illness. Naturally, this has implications for our response to the pandemic – especially as clergy are often in close contact with the vulnerable or to be found in communal settings in which the virus can easily spread.

The following directions suggest best practice. Above all, our response should be one that is *informed, guided by common sense and prepared*. At present, the diocese has been in contact with emergency planning departments and with the Primary Care Trusts and we will pass on relevant information as it is made available. Please see below for links to other information sources but please do continue to check the diocesan website (www.wakefield.anglican.org/swineflu). Any changes will be placed there in the first instance. We are putting together contingency plans for worse case scenarios but what follows are some directions which should enable you to respond to present needs:

1. Churches should continue to take services as usual and other groups should meet as normal.

2. After liaising with local Primary Care Trusts and the Public Health Directorate, the advice we are now receiving is to issue guidelines suggesting that people do not to use the **chalice** or common cup (*The Book of Common Prayer, Common Worship* and the Canons make no provision for the use of individual cups). Obviously, you should continue to celebrate the eucharist in the same way but only the priest should receive from the cup. As the management of the pandemic has moved from containment to treatment, actual numbers of those infected are not known. However, there is an increasing spread of the disease in this area. (Please continue to seek local advice about the situation in your area.)

Intinction (the dipping of the bread in the wine) and giving communion directly onto the tongue are not advisable as alternatives. The reason for the former is that hands are more likely to harbour the virus than mouths and lips. Thus if several people are dipping into the same cup then it is likely that at least one will make contact with the wine. For further information on intinction please refer to: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/swineflu/communion.doc> (Annex B)

3. We have also been advised that the sharing of **the peace** is able to transmit infection and so it is advisable to forego this for the time being. Similarly, touching people's heads when giving blessings is not encouraged – especially at the altar rail where you will also be handling the host. As the previous advice suggested, antibacterial gel should be used by those administering communion.

4. Please advise (in the notices or parish magazines etc) members of your congregation who may be showing flu-like symptoms not to attend church services or other meetings (symptoms do not normally last for more than 7-10 days). Of course, hygiene should continue to be taken seriously in churches and make sure you provide bins for used tissues (closed top, pedal or swing top bins are most effective).

5. The NHS is recommending a **Flu Friend** (or Flu Buddy) system. Parishes are in a good position to be able to offer help for members of the congregation and parishioners. Think about appointing a suitable person as a Flu Friend Co-ordinator in the parish. Hopefully they will not be needed but it would be sensible to make plans now. Their details could be posted in parish magazines, pewslips, or on notice boards etc.

The idea is that if someone receives a positive diagnosis for Swine Flu, they could contact that Flu Friend Co-ordinator who could put them in touch with a local Flu Friend who would be able to pick up prescribed medication on their behalf (a voucher or individual code is given when a positive diagnosis is made) and deliver it to them. In some cases, where people live on their own, they may also need some help with shopping. Clear guidance is available for Flu Friends, but they should be advised not to enter the house, or to have direct contact with the infected person. This might be more complicated than it seems and so it is advisable to start thinking about it now.

6. Non-essential **Pastoral visits** and **Home Communion services** for infected people are generally discouraged. Contact by telephone or other means is best. The risk of infection is high and a priest could spread infection to the vulnerable, as well as being susceptible to becoming infected. In **Residential Homes** where someone in the community has flu-like symptoms, it may be prudent to give communion in only one kind – especially as the residents are likely to be vulnerable to the virus. Only the priest should drink from the chalice. Do, of course, reassure congregations that in receiving Holy Communion in one kind they are still receiving the fullness of Christ's presence in the Sacrament!

7. When a pastoral visit is absolutely necessary then care should be taken to prevent exposure to the virus. The virus is currently perceived as relatively mild. For most people the symptoms will not be life-threatening. People who are at high risk because of a compromised immune system, or other health conditions, may be more vulnerable. Such people are likely to remain at home as hospitals will not have the capacity to isolate and care for large numbers of people who are infected with the virus. If the situation worsens then clergy visiting infected people should wear personal protection equipment, including sterile gloves, apron, and face mask. If a priest anoints a sick person, or gives communion (host only) without wearing sterile gloves, they should wash carefully with hot water and antibacterial soap *immediately* afterwards. When **anointing** someone with flu-like symptoms then it is advisable to take special precautions. Don't dip your finger back into the oil after anointing. It may be best to use cotton wool for anointing which can be easily disposed of afterwards and won't harbour the virus like linen.

8. If you have a stoup for holy water then it should be noted that they can easily become a source of infection and a means of rapidly spreading the virus. It is unfortunately advisable to temporarily suspend the practice whilst there is a pandemic warning. Holy water stoups should be emptied and thoroughly cleaned and not used until the pandemic alert is over.

These guidelines are neither intended to cause panic nor to exaggerate the seriousness of the situation. God willing, the situation will not worsen. However, sensible precautions and forward planning will be invaluable should the level of seriousness increase. Indeed, measures taken now may be helpful even for other outbreaks in the future. The guidelines outlined above will assist our churches in offering appropriate support in our congregations and parishes whilst we also attempt to reduce the spread of infection.

With thanks for taking time to read this letter and my prayers for you all,

+ Stephen Wakefield.

Further Information

For updates, please visit:

- www.cofe.anglican.org/info/swineflu

This site includes prayers, further information about the common cup and also a link to the government's advice to faith communities

- www.direct.gov.uk/en/Swineflu
- www.nhs.uk/news/2009/04April/Pages/Swineflulatest.aspx
- Swine Flu Information Line: **0800 1 513 513**
- If you believe you are showing symptoms, please do not visit the doctor but ring NHS Direct on **0845 46 47**

Pandemic Flu Check List

- 1. Receiving Communion**
 - Advice received from health professional is not to encourage the use of the Common Cup at present.
 - Intinction and giving communion directly onto the tongue are not advisable as alternatives.
 - Physical contact for blessing or at the peace is also not advisable.
- 2. Congregation Members with Symptoms**
 - Advise congregation members who have flu-like symptoms to stay at home (verbal notices, newsletters, parish magazines, etc).
 - Provide bins in churches (with lids) for people to dispose of soiled tissues
 - Place posters in toilet facilities ("Catch it, Bin it, Kill it"). Posters in A3 and A4 formats can be downloaded from the Department of Health website: http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_080839
- 3. Holy Water Stoups**
 - Empty and thoroughly clean Holy Water stoups, and do not use until the alert has passed.
- 4. Flu Friend**
 - Appoint a Flu Friend Co-ordinator and ask people to choose Flu Friends.
- 5. Ministry to the Sick**
 - Ensure cotton wool is available if anointing is needed.
 - Carry bottles of antibacterial gel for personal use.
 - Provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in case this is needed for ministry to the sick. Gloves, facemasks, aprons are available from internet suppliers.