

COVID-19 and the common cup — draft message for congregations

Bishop Shane has announced that churches in our diocese can resume use of the common cup in Holy Communion. This change, after 16 months of pandemic hygiene measures, may be worrying for many of us. Please be assured this step is only being taken because it is known to be very low risk. What follows is a summary of a paper by Bishop Shane's public health advisor, Rev. Michael Garner. Michael is the associate incumbent of St. Thomas the Apostle church in Ottawa, but before joining the priesthood, he worked in public health and epidemiology for more than 20 years, including 13 years as an infectious disease epidemiologist at the Public Health Agency of Canada. The full-length paper was written for the national House of Bishops.

People have questioned the hygiene of sharing chalices during communion for more than 100 years, but during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, research showed the risk of transmitting HIV by using a common cup was very low. Since then, research on infection risks at communion has focused on whether viruses or bacteria can be found in the common cup after the service, and so far there is no documented evidence of diseases being spread by sharing the cup.

People also worry that during a regular communion service, the chalice will be contaminated by the saliva of the participants. While it's true a shared cup could transmit infection through saliva, the risk is extremely low, with no documented cases of any disease ever being spread that way. In the case of COVID-19 the risk is even lower because it's spread by aerosols and droplets: the fact is, the risk of catching COVID is far greater from breathing air exhaled by an infectious person next to you than from sharing a common cup.

It's essential, however, that in addition to wiping the chalice carefully after each participant drinks from it, we maintain the practices that have kept us safe so far: keep screening people to ensure no one who has symptoms, or who has recently travelled (or who has been exposed to others who have) do not attend services in person. Keep everyone physically distant during Holy Communion.

However, the most important thing is that you do what you feel is best for yourself and your loved ones. In the Anglican church, communicating in either kind, just bread or just wine, is considered full communion. You need not share the cup if the idea makes you uneasy. Simply fold your hands across your chest when it is offered.