

DIOCESE IN EUROPE

THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

The Bishop in Europe:
The Right Reverend Dr. Robert Innes



The Suffragan Bishop in Europe
The Right Reverend David Hamid

13 March 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We wrote to you a week ago with guidance about our response to the Coronavirus, and we promised to keep you up to date. First of all, we want to thank you our clergy and lay officers for all you are doing to support and encourage your congregations in these difficult times. Thank you!

Sadly, the virus shows no sign of abating at present, and in many of our countries more severe measures are being put in place to try to stop it spreading. We express our prayerful concern for all those suffering at this time from anxiety, illness and grief. The economic effects of the virus are also highly damaging, and we are very mindful of those, often the weakest and poorest, who bear real financial anxiety.

Our recommendations regarding the conduct of church services and liturgical matters last week went a little beyond what was then being said by the National Church in England. The Archbishops have now written with similar guidance. Their letter can be found here: <http://bit.ly/33jFMrs>

The Archbishops write:

'It is our view, in light of the continued increase of Covid-19 cases in the United Kingdom, that it is now necessary to suspend the administration of the chalice as well as physical contact during the sharing of the peace, blessing or "laying on of hands". We therefore advise that all priests should:-

- *Offer Communion in one kind only to all communicants i.e. the consecrated bread/wafer/host, with the priest alone taking the wine;*
- *suspend handshaking or other direct physical contact during the sharing of the peace;*
- *suspend direct physical contact as part of a blessing or 'laying on of hands'.'*

This guidance is both prudent and lawful. Wider Church of England advice (which is updated regularly) is here. <http://bit.ly/39O5fvt>

There are some other points to keep in mind that relate to questions we have received from around the Diocese:

1. Intinction (dipping wafers in the cup) should not be practised. It is a route to infection and also presents risks to anyone with allergies to gluten.
2. Distribution of communion by individual cups is not lawful practice in the Church of England.
3. The risk of transmission by the passing of a collection plate is to be avoided, as the virus can live on hard surfaces for two days. Consider instead staging a retiring collection that does not require the plate to move from hand to hand.
4. We advise offertory processions should be discontinued, with the elements remaining in the sanctuary.
5. Think hard about the distribution of tea, coffee and other refreshments after a service where many hands may pass cups and plates with food.
6. Consider using alternative ways of sharing the peace with your neighbour: Namaste, bowing to one another, sign language or simply by saying "peace be with you".
7. We encourage 'social distancing' to keep some space between people where possible.

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Public worship in an increasing number of countries is suspended because of local regulation. (In such cases, funerals will likely be restricted to the graveside or crematorium with only the smallest number of immediate family). In other countries, until any such restriction is mandated by local regulation, regular public worship should continue as at present with the extra hygiene precautions outlined above. Local meetings can continue where they can be managed carefully with good hygiene and space.

We are working closely with the Episcopal Church whose approach to these issues is in line with ours. The Bishop of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe, Mark Edington writes:

“I am so thankful to be working collegially with Bishop Robert and Bishop David as together we seek to respond in the best and most appropriate ways to the unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic. We are sharing ideas and best practices, and we for our part are grateful for the opportunity to make sure the guidelines we send to our communities reflect our collaboration. Most importantly I am thankful for their support in prayer for all the people and clergy of our congregations, and I give my assurance of my own as well as we walk through these next weeks. Lent invites us to the ancient practice of fasting, and we are now invited to a fast in some of our practices of public worship in order to show and make real the love Christ commands us to give to our neighbours. May God sustain us in the keeping of this fast, and bring us to the joys that will surely come”.

The virus does not mean that our pastoral work should be curtailed and with due precautions and protections pastoral visiting should continue. Indeed, there may be more call for this than ever. We are considering what digital resources we may be able to supply in the future particularly for those unable to hold or attend services. This is a good opportunity for chaplaincies to experiment with digital content such as recorded sermons.

A number of areas of our shared diocesan life are sadly feeling the impact of the virus. The public installation of our new Dean in Gibraltar has been cancelled. The Synod in Hamburg was cancelled this week, and a number of training events have been postponed. The standing committee of the Archdeaconry of France has decided to postpone their Synod scheduled for the end of April. Following medical advice, **we are now advising you that all the Holy Week Chrism Eucharists are cancelled.** Some other bigger celebrations have also been postponed. In general, many of us are having to curtail travel plans.

We realise that many chaplaincies intend Annual Meetings to be held in the coming weeks. We will have guidance on these from the Registrar next week as we seek what provision we may be able to make should postponement be necessary. These are important events and it is essential that Archdeaconry/Deanery Synod elections are held in order to ensure that we have electors for the General Synod elections due this Summer.

The provisions laid out in this letter are to be observed until further notice from the bishops. If you need advice on any of these issues please contact your archdeacon or our offices. Our Chief Operating Officer is also on hand to advise on governance and other issues.

These are troubling times. We are sincerely grateful to our clergy and lay officers for sustaining church life and bearing their parishioners' anxieties as well as their own. We are aware of the plight of those who have to self-isolate and those facing restrictions on movement. We are greatly encouraged by clergy who are responding to the virus in imaginative ways and working constructively with their church councils in planning for an uncertain context over the coming weeks. The pastoral work and community leadership of you our beloved clergy is especially needed in difficult times.

It was times of hardship and exile that gave rise to the Psalter among the ancient People of Israel. You may wish to commend these ancient hymns as daily support for our faithful as we seek to put our trust in God.

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We close with a prayer (with thanks to Exeter Diocese):

Keep us, Good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us
from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Yours in Christ

+ Robert Gibraltar in Europe

+ David

+Robert Innes

+David Hamid

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