Celebrations and Seasons:
Ash Wednesday 2021

Introduction

As we are writing these materials (in January 2021), the coronavirus pandemic has continued to increase to its highest daily case and death rates to date in the United States.

We continue to rely on sound public health guidance to call Christians to responsible decisions about gathering and safe practices when they gather.

We always recommend that state, local, and denominational guidance be considered.

However, recent guidance from the CDC about mutations in the coronavirus lead us to call for increased caution:

Indoor Gatherings

Based on previous criteria we have published, we have concluded that indoor gatherings with persons outside one’s own household are not safe at this time.

We see no likelihood that conditions will have improved significantly before Ash Wednesday (February 17, 2021), and so we cannot recommend any indoor gatherings between now and that time.

Outdoor Gatherings

Outdoor gatherings may be reasonably safe if proper protocols are followed. However, if any one of the following conditions is true for your area, or the areas where your people regularly travel, we recommend no in-person outdoor gatherings:

- More than 10% of the people in your county who are tested test positive as reported on https://www.covidactnow.org
- The likelihood of at least one person being positive for COVID-19 for the anticipated group size exceeds 40% as reported at https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/
- ICU beds are filled to >80% of capacity in your region as reported on state department of health websites.
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All guidance we provide assumes that all participants:

- Wear a mask fully covering their mouth and nose at all times
- Maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from all persons not living in their households
- Have no symptoms of COVID-19, and
- Have not knowingly been exposed to persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 or have had any symptoms of COVID-19 within the past two weeks.

Principles

The core purposes of Ash Wednesday include:

- To call the congregation to personal and corporate repentance
- To face our mortality
- To begin final, intensive preparation for baptism
- To call the baptized to take up spiritual disciplines to reaffirm their baptismal commitments

Practices

1. The core actions of this day listed above can all be practiced within households, provided that adequate resources are provided for home use and that persons or households commit to use them during Ash Wednesday.

2. If local conditions permit in-person gatherings outdoors, one or more brief services (no longer than 30 minutes total) may be offered over the course of the day.

3. The use of ashes is optional in nearly all Ash Wednesday rites. However, ashes are a vivid sign of mortality and commitment to repent. The biblical precedent for the use of ashes usually involves people putting ashes on themselves.

4. The sign of the cross, which has become the typical form in which ashes are imposed, is an important sign of Christian commitment. The imposition of ashes ordinarily involves a presider or assistant placing ashes on the forehead of a
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recipient. However, having another person imposing ashes this close to the eyes and nose poses an unacceptable risk to all involved.

5. If ashes are to be imposed by anyone other than oneself, we commend the model provided by the Vatican: See http://www.cultodivino.va/content/cultodivino/it/documenti/note/nota-mercoledi-delle-ceneri/english.html.

6. If congregations provide ashes for persons to use in their own households, we recommend congregations do so outdoors; that the person receiving the container of ashes use hand sanitizer immediately before picking up the container; and that the wearing of masks and distancing between households be strictly maintained at all times.

7. If ashes are distributed in a drive-through, we recommend taking all actions to avoid creating traffic jams that could impede emergency vehicles.

8. We also commend alternative uses of ashes and alternative acts to remember our mortality, such as those described by Bishop Brian Cole of the East Tennessee Diocese of The Episcopal Church: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CuhfQMyy5_VnOUuu-wOqEiyEuoU-FFbV/view?usp=sharing.

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