

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**:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/transmission/variant.html>.

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-cenere/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/1CuhfQMy5_VnOUuu-wOqEiyEuoU-FFbV/view?usp=sharing.

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The Consultation includes:

CONVENERS

The Rev. Taylor W. Burton Edwards, Pastor and Consultant, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Larry Goodpaster, Bishop-in-Residence, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

The Rev. Dr. L. Edward Phillips, Associate Professor of Worship and Liturgical Theology, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

Dr. Amos Nascimento, Director of Global Education and New Initiatives, The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church

CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

Deacon Jennifer Baker-Trinity, Program Director for Resource Development, Augsburg Fortress and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Linda Bell, Retired Pastor; Former President, African Descent Lutheran Association of the Metropolitan New York Synod; D.Min student, United Lutheran Seminary

John Blevins, Associate Research Professor, Director of the Interfaith Health Program and Director of Social-Behavioral Sciences, Child Health and Mortality Prevention Surveillance Network, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University

Dr. Mary Jane Burton, Medical Director, Viral Hepatitis Clinics, G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery Medical Center, VA Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi

The Rev. April Casperson, Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the West Ohio Conference of The United Methodist Church

The Rt. Rev. Brian Cole, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of East Tennessee

The Rev. Lisa Garvin, Associate Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life, Emory University; United Methodist Board of Church and Society, Advocacy Chair

Melanie C. Gordon, Director of Diversity and Inclusion and Religion and Ethics Instructor, Christ Church Episcopal School, Greenville, South Carolina; Executive Director, Do-LOVE-Walk Children's Ministry Consultants

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The Rev. Dr. David Gambrell, Director of the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church, USA.

The Rev. Ben Gosden, Senior Pastor, Trinity United Methodist Church, Savannah, Georgia

Brian Hehn, Director of The Center for Congregational Song, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada

Dr. Mimi Kiser, Assistant Professor Research Track, Interfaith Health Program, Hubert Department of Global Health and Exec. Committee Religion and Public Health Collaborative, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University

Dr. Mary Love, Administrative Secretary to the Pan Methodist Commission, and Adjunct Professor of Christian Education, Hood Theological Seminary

The Rev. Chris McAlilly, Pastor, Oxford University United Methodist Church, Oxford, Mississippi

Dr. Marcia McFee, Worship Design Studio and Professor of Worship, San Francisco Theological Seminary

The Rev. Dr. W. Douglas Mills, Pastor, Mountainside UMC, Cedar Crest, New Mexico, former Ecumenical Staff Officer, The United Methodist Church

The Rev. Dr. Bruce T. Morrill, SJ, Edward A. Malloy Chair of Catholic Studies in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University

The Rev. Hyemin Na, Ph.D. candidate, Emory University

Dr. Richard A. "Ran" Nisbett, MSPH (retired), Moderator, Iona Community Common Concern Network for the Whole Creation

Dr. Diana Sanchez-Bushong, Director of Music Ministries, Discipleship Ministries, The United Methodist Church

The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Stamm, Professor of Christian Worship, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

The Rev. Kevin L. Strickland, Bishop of the Southeastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Jonathan Trapp, Pastor, Church of the Redeemer, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Special Advisor for Emergency Management, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Dr. Christian Weaver, Infectious Diseases Physician, G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery Medical Center, VA Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi

The Rev. Dr. Lisa Weaver, Assistant Professor of Worship, Columbia

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Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia.

Deacon John Weit, Assistant to the Presiding Bishop, Executive for Worship, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Dr. Karen Westerfield Tucker, Boston University School of Theology

The Rt. Rev. Robert Wright, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

The Rev. Dr. Ruth Meyers, Dean of Academic Affairs and Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California

The Rev. Dr. Thomas H. Schattauer, Professor of Liturgics and Dean of the Chapel, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa

EDITORIAL AND PRODUCTION STAFF

Gordon Boice, Graphic Designer, Decatur, Georgia

Ulrike R. M. Guthrie, Editor, Orland, Maine

SUPPORT STAFF

Rachel Haines, Research and Administrative Assistant