

**The Bishop of Blackburn**  
*The Rt Revd Julian T Henderson*

13<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

None of us will have escaped the news stories about the spread of Coronavirus Covid-19 in recent weeks. I am sure that, like me, you have prayed for those who have suffered with the virus themselves and we particularly hold in our prayers those around the world who have lost someone to the disease.

The World Health Organisation has declared this to be a 'public health emergency of international importance' and our government has called it a 'serious and imminent threat to public health'. These terms have been chosen as they trigger specific legal and procedural responses however, they do also challenge us as to how the Diocese of Blackburn responds; remembering we are told that the risk to the UK population remains moderate.

So much of what we do as church is based around the gathering of people and that is a source of much joy for Christians. It is also our responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in our communities from the possible spread of disease when we do come together. It is in this context that I am writing to prompt your thinking on certain matters.

As the president at the Eucharist the priest is the person most likely to pass on any pathogens that are present as it is a means of grace which is physically administered. Please wash your hands thoroughly before touching any of the elements and use anti-bacterial gel if possible. This should be common practice for all Eucharistic ministers and servers before distribution.

There is no need to cease offering the chalice at present and intinction is not considered any safer in this context. In fact, as hands and fingers are such effective transmitters of this virus this is not a preferred practice and I advise against it strongly. This builds on previous advice that intinction is potentially dangerous for people who suffer from immune diseases and intolerances like celiac disease.

Should a communicant feel ill or not wish to receive from the chalice then it is better for them to receive the consecrated bread only.

The sharing of the peace is a wonderful part of the service and a clear opportunity for the spread of disease. The shaking of hands is a clear tradition in most churches, and I do not wish to stop this practice whilst there is no clear advice to do so. I would instead like to encourage you to allow space for some to choose the option of sharing the peace without touching if that is their preference.

There will be other parts of church life which you might be able to identify as opportunity for the spread of disease, but I hope that this letter prompts you to consider these things which are suggestions for now. In general I wish to encourage us all to look at our practices and think what might limit and what might assist in the spread of pathogens such as that which is spreading across the world at present.

Should the threat level be raised, Bishop's House will be in touch with clearer instructions and you may wish to start to plan for the worst but pray for the best. You can do this by looking at what a serious outbreak of the Coronavirus might look like in your parish and who would be most seriously affected.

Churches have always combined an ability to speak hope into troubling situations with a realistic desire to help people stay healthy. I pray that you are able to find ways to do both in your specific settings and want to assure you of my prayers as you do so.

As ever

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+Julian". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning. Below the signature is a long, horizontal blue line that tapers at both ends, serving as a decorative underline.