

## Sharing the Communion Cup

The Church of England guidance (1), published in July 2021, on Holy Communion advises that 'the Common Cup can now be shared, but the Bishops wish to make clear that, given continued potential risks to health it remains permissible for the president to be the only person who receives Holy communion in the form of wine, and recommends a consistent policy is worked out in a parish and carefully communicated'.

A further paragraph includes the following guidance for administration:

- Bread alone, with the president still receiving both kinds;
- In both kinds with a shared cup or chalice used to administer the consecrated wine.
- In both kinds by simultaneous administration
- Intinction by individuals should not be practised.

It is important that each individual member of the congregation knows that they have a choice, and if they prefer, may decide to receive the Communion in the form of bread alone.

Published literature on the subject of Covid 19 and the sharing of the Communion Cup is limited. Past studies, notably by Loving and Wolf in 1997 reviewed in February 2020 (2) in a search to answer the question 'Is sharing a cup in Holy Communion an infection risk?' involved 681 volunteers who either attended church and received communion 45%, attended and did not receive communion, 7.8%, sometimes attended and did not receive 4% and did not attend church 31%. Over the ten weeks of the study there were no differences in the reported illness across the cohorts. **The conclusion was that no evidence exists that sharing a Communion Cup caused any infections.** The risk is believed to be very low as long as appropriate safeguards, wiping the interior and exterior rim and rotating the cloth during use between communicants, further diminishes the risk. Participants with active respiratory symptoms or active cold sores are to be discouraged from sharing the cup.

A collaborative research paper between Northwick Park hospital, Athens speech Language and swallowing Institute and the University of Athens (3) again found no current research data, only past data on bacterial contamination of the Common Cup. They also discuss the work of Loving and Wolf. They add that in accordance with Christian practice, the priest has to drink all the remaining sacramental wine from the chalice, whether at home or in a hospital setting. It may well be expected that increased incidence of infectious disease would be expected among officiating clergy, however there has been no observed prevalence.

A further review paper on the subject by Greek authors (4) takes a broader view of published studies including scientific, theological and historical views. They cite the case of a priest who shared Holy Communion with patients on the leper colony of Spinalonga for ten years and did not become infected. Leprosy, a bacterial infection, is spread through aerosols, via coughs and sneezes. (Covid 19 is spread through aerosols via coughs, sneezes and breathing and is inhaled by the recipient.) They also reviewed evidence of research studies involving volunteers sharing 14.5% alcoholic wine from a shared silver Communion Cup. They concluded that risk of transmission of infection through the Common Cup was negligible. Rotation of the Communion Cup was ineffective in reducing the microbial load, which was found to be minimal, but wiping the rim of the chalice with a cloth reduced the bacterial counts by 90%. A further study of potential transmission concluded that if transmission were to occur, this does not imply that infection will result and that the Communion Cup has never been associated with a pandemic. They conclude that while the subject has divided Greek society and there is a risk from sharing the Communion Cup, the risk is considerably lower compared to other conditions of social gathering, and transmission of disease has never been documented; living with spirituality and prayer relieves stress and suffering and respect should be given for the spiritual needs of believers.

A paper in Nature early this year (5) concludes that Covid 19 spread via surface contamination is very unlikely and that ventilation to reduce aerosol levels is far more important. Scientific studies directly relating to the Communion Cup are limited. However, a consideration of the increasing knowledge of how the virus is spread between individuals and careful risk management does on balance favour a resumption of Holy Communion in both kinds. This is also in line with the Church of England's recent guidelines, provided the individual is given a choice. The majority of our congregations are double vaccinated and any individual who is immune-compromised would make an informed decision. From the evidence of past studies it is clearly important to rotate the Common Cup and even more important to carefully wipe the chalice between recipients using a clean cloth that is also rotated after each use.

#### References.

1. The church of England. Opening and managing church buildings in step 4 of the roadmap out of Lockdown. 19<sup>th</sup> July 2021.
2. Dr Peter Hulme. Is sharing a cup in Holy Communion an infection risk? Best evidence topics. 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020 . Manchester
3. Spantideas N, Drosou E, Barsoum M, Bougea A. Covid 19 and Holy Communion. Public Health October 2020.
4. Anyfantakis D, Holy Communion and Infection Transmission: a literature review. Cureus June 2020.
5. Lewis D, Covid 19 rarely spreads through surfaces, so why are we still deep cleaning? Nature 590. January 2021

Myra Wilkinson MSc, MA, CSci, FIBMS

August 2021