

How to respond as the lockdown eases

1. This analysis was last revised in June 2020 and may be overtaken by events. I have no medical knowledge and perforce assume the wisdom of official advice. Even if much of it is mistaken, there is no point in upsetting other people, so we should comply unless it is clearly harmful.
2. It is obvious that anybody who is infected (or who with good reason believes that he or she may be) should take the steps necessary to protect others as advised. A natural consequence is avoiding public worship even if it is available, and also not visiting churches even if they are open for private prayer. Unfortunately, we may be infectious but not know it.
3. However, many of us will be taking some precautions as advised and yet having greater discretion, so that meeting for worship may be possible.
4. Our case as continuing Anglicans is somewhat different from that of Roman Catholics or large evangelical congregations, where public worship means a large gathering in a confined space. We do not have large gatherings. Many of us rarely see a congregation in double figures. We do have the physical contact known as the “kiss of peace”. In general, it would be possible for us to worship where we usually do and to maintain a considerable degree of physical separation. This would incidentally be harder in a domestic setting.
5. The reception of Holy Communion is the matter about which we need to take most care. Most of us regard weekly Communion as normal, though our limited circumstances may have made this difficult before the pandemic. It is not required by the Prayer Book, though our canon law says the priest must provide it, but it is an ancient and now common practice. We would naturally resume it as soon and as much as possible.
6. Some notes on practicality follow. Of course in so far as we use hired premises we will comply with the owner's requirements. Therefore initial resumption may have to be in a domestic setting, if and to the extent that this is allowed. Ironically, if we are using a hired building which is only open for worship once a week, it is unlikely that the virus can survive that long on surfaces in the building. So disinfecting between uses may not be necessary.
7. The most difficult situations to manage are arrival, departure and receipt of the Sacrament. For arrival and departure, people should not crowd but give each other time to move. Available seating should be so ordered and marked off as to maximise spatial separation.
8. It might be prudent to refrain from singing (the more so if space is limited), as this is more capable of spreading droplet-borne infection than quiet speech.
9. I do not recommend the wearing of masks as they would have to be removed for reception of the Sacrament, and handling them is itself a hazard unless hygienic precautions can immediately be taken.
10. It is obvious that the priest (and laity) must wash their hands carefully. This may be difficult in a church, in which case other disinfectant procedures should be followed. The priest's formal washing of hands at the “lavabo” (not in the Book of Common Prayer) is not sufficient alone.
11. The priest will minimise the handling of peoples' wafers and endeavour not to exhale over the uncovered elements. Nevertheless, Anglican practice as clearly stated in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer makes some gestures with the uncovered bread and wine obligatory. It is wise to cover the elements at all times except when it is necessary for such gestures.
12. Anglican practice rightly insists that normally communion must be received in both kinds, and that there should be a common cup. But we must accept that this is not a normal situation. It is accepted that special arrangements are right at all times for coeliacs and alcoholics, for example. At present, no objection should be made if somebody chooses only to receive the Bread. No objection should be made to intinction (dipping the Bread in the Wine), and it may be right to make this the temporary general practice if both kinds are to be administered.
13. It may be better for the priest (and deacon if available) to take the Sacrament to the communicants in their places, perhaps individually, rather than for the communicants to go to the altar rail or any other places where they are likely to crowd.

14. While the priest should supervise the delivery of the elements, it may be consistent with this rule for the communicant to take the Bread from the paten or ciborium rather than for the priest to use his hand to give it to the communicant. If the Sacrament is administered in both kinds, the communicant can then dip the Bread into the Wine.
15. Whatever solutions are adopted for the reception of communion, there is no alternative to the priest consuming the remainder of the consecrated elements and cleansing the communion vessels (the Book of Common Prayer allows others to help him, but the basic task is his).
16. It is sometimes alleged that the common cup will not convey infection, either because God would not allow it or because the alcohol in the wine and metal of the chalice combine to work as disinfectant. I do not endorse either of these views; since we cannot be certain of either, we ought to take reasonable precautions as outlined above consistent with our primary duty to receive Holy Communion if possible.
17. If an individual cannot attend public worship, he or she should at least make an act of spiritual communion and might choose to do so at normal service time when the priest will be celebrating alone, if this is the case, or when others are meeting for worship. The validity of the act does not depend on the timing, of course. Spiritual communion is envisaged in the Book of Common Prayer (visitation of the sick).
18. The priest has a duty to visit the sick as may be needed and allowed by public authority . There remains a duty to minimise the risk of spreading infection.
19. The priest has a duty to assist in the burial of the dead as may be needed and allowed by public authority. There remains a duty to minimise the risk of spreading infection.
20. The priest will as a matter of course continue to say Morning and Evening Prayer, and to add such prayers as are appropriate to the situation. The 1928 Prayer Book includes prayers “In the time of any common Plague or Sickness”, “For the Sick and Suffering” and “For Hospitals and Infirmaries” which can all be used. It would be wise also to study the 1552 version of the first of these, which is much more explicit that the plague is an act of God (which is completely consistent with it being a natural event). I should explain that the 1662 form for the first of these is less good than 1552, in as much as it insinuates that the visitation is connected with the sin of rebellion agaainst authority, which may have seemed prescient in 1665 but is not very plausible in modern circumstances. The 1928 form is useable, but only faintly expresses the possibility that the visitation is an act of God rather than a mere accident. 1552 reads: “*O ALMIGHTY God, which in thy wrath, in the time of king David, did slea with the plague of pestilence lx and ten thousande, and yet remembryng thy mercye dydest save the rest: have pietie upon us miserable synners, that nowe are visited with great sicknes and mortalitie, that like as thou diddest then command thy angel to cease from punishing: So it maye now please thee to withdrawe from us thys plague and greuous sicknesse, throughe . . .*” I have not updated the spelling to the nineteenth century standardisation of 1662 with which we are familiar. You should be able to understand it if you read it aloud. I am not commending the 1552 form for use, but for study because it envisages possibilities which the modern mind prefers to ignore.