

Flu Precautions November 2009

H1N1 is on the news every night and we've noticed how many of our families, especially ones with young children have been wisely keeping sick ones home rather than risking sharing germs with us all. I have been consulting with Kelly Good, our Parish Nurse, and reading advice from medical authorities, our bishop who issued a letter of advice for the diocese and others. Trying to be sure we are providing a safe environment and yet not live in fear, following are a few things we are doing for this year's flu season at Old Donation Church.

Passing the Peace

While some are concerned about receiving communion, all the studies demonstrate that there is little chance of germ transmission there, but greater during passing the Peace. Please pay attention and respect the wishes of those around you during greeting time and passing the Peace. If someone nods and greets but keeps their hands down by their side, this will indicate they do not wish to shake hands. The Peace is a liturgical action signified adequately with the words, handshake, hug or kiss, so simply saying "The Peace of the Lord be always with you" or "And also with you." is sufficient, especially since some may feel compromised.

Holy Communion

The first point is: Holy Communion has always been understood by the Church to be fully effective when you receive EITHER the bread or wine or both. The full real presence of Christ is received in either kind. That is why I advise some people who have allergies to wheat or wine that it is fine to receive just one. (To that point, we are also serving gluten-free wafers for those with wheat/gluten allergies. You merely indicate to the priest your desire at the rail.)

Second: Published medical studies (including the New England Journal of Medicine in the last decade) continue to show almost no chance of disease transmission (insignificant risk) from drinking from the common cup. The combination of alcohol in the wine and wiping the chalice dry after each sip, was proven to be safe. Less safe was intinction, when people dip their wafers into the chalice because occasionally people's fingers touch the wine and most of the time their hands touch the side of the chalice. This is counter-intuitive but has been proven in the several medical tests I have read. This is why it is safer for you to drink the wine from the common cup than to intinct... consistent with what I was taught from my childhood, that you will not get sick from the common cup.

Given what we know from medical science, we will institute a small change for distributing communion throughout the flu season. In all services there will be separate chalices for sipping and intinction. To make it easy to distinguish, the silver chalices will be always used for sipping. Ceramic chalices will always be used for intinction. (This is a reversal from our previous practice in the Gathering.) There will be two chalice bearers side-by-side going down the rail (or standing together when we are in stations in the historic church). If you are confused, the chalice bearer will help you know which to use.

Other safety notes

The best practice is frequent hand-washing. We have placed small bottles of hand sanitizer in all pews and the clergy and chalice bearers are all using it after the Peace, before distributing communion. If you believe you are sick or are sneezing regularly, it is best to stay home. We can have someone bring home communion if you call the church office before the end of the week.