
PUBLIC WORSHIP AND THE H1N1 FLU CHALLENGE

A Statement from the President of Lutheran Church-Canada

The President of Lutheran Church-Canada, with input from the Committee on Music and Worship and encouraged by the church's Council of Presidents, issues the following pastoral message on the H1N1 flu challenge which is causing unrest in various countries and churches, including our own.

Treasured pastors and people:

God be merciful to you, and strengthen your faith. The news is filled with daily stories of the threat from the H1N1 flu virus, and concerns are being sounded in our member congregations also. Many focus specifically on the celebration of Holy Communion at this critical time, as well as other issues that arise in the regular worship gatherings of God's people.

The world around us will see these matters purely in medical and natural terms, as though our lives – and even our worship practices – are only subject to natural forces. As Christ's people, rooted in God's Word, we confess that He is our ultimate Helper and Protector. With regard to Holy Communion services, and especially the use of the common cup, it is vital to remember that this is not natural, but supernatural eating and drinking where the Lord Christ comes to us in His crucified and risen flesh for the forgiveness of sins. We eat and drink His body and blood, hidden beneath the forms of bread and wine. We eat and drink at His invitation, and with the promise that He will benefit and bless us. For this reason, I do not warn God's people to discontinue their use of the common cup as though the Lord would withdraw help and blessing from His table because of the presence of influenza in our land.

To be sure, congregations need to exercise wisdom in dealing with the H1N1 flu threat. They may wish to offer hand sanitizers throughout the church building for members and visitors to use. They may discourage worshippers from extensive physical contact, especially during the "sharing of the peace." Pastors who exhibit the symptoms of cold and flu will do well to take time away from services until they have recovered. Communicants who feel ill may choose to receive the sacrament from individual cups so as not to upset others nearby. Ushers and greeters ought to practice good hygiene, and if one feels the need to cough or sneeze, it is helpful to do it into a tissue or one's upper sleeve, rather than into the hands. Altar guilds are encouraged to take proper care of elements and vessels after the celebration of Holy Communion, washing the vessels thoroughly in hot, soapy water, and then fully towel drying them before putting them in a secure and clean place of storage.

I encourage all pastors and people to take comfort in the way the Risen Lord keeps coming to us with forgiveness, life and help, both as His Good News is sounded in our services and as He feeds us at His sacred table. Made strong by His constant love, we do well to pray continually for our neighbours now struggling with the H1N1 flu, and to ask God's blessing on public health leaders and workers labouring to protect the people of Canada. I commend this need to your regular public and private prayers.

Robert Bugbee, President
November 2009