



ASH WEDNESDAY in A PANDEMIC

Collected wisdom from many sources by Bishop Chilton Knudsen

Ash Wednesday is nearly upon us as we continue to deal with the challenges of the pandemic and rising cases and deaths. As you prepare for Ash Wednesday observances, I encourage you to keep the following possibilities in mind to keep our people safe while enacting those practices that will help our people observe a Holy Lent. The imposition of ashes will be for many at this time a particularly profound experience.

Where to observe Ash Wednesday

The Ash Wednesday liturgy can be held anywhere--indoors, outdoors, in churches and and at home. Here are a few options:

1. Host a few brief services at specified times outdoors on the parish lawn, parking lot, courtyard or sidewalk on Ash Wednesday (or subsequent days that week). This year, outdoors is safer than indoors. Think of it like a parochial Ashes-to-Go. But please know that **Ashes to Go for the general public is absolutely not recommended this year.** This outdoor liturgy could even take the form of a drive-through imposition of ashes.
2. Equip households to hold Ash Wednesday liturgies from the safety of their homes. The *Book of Common Prayer* (page 269) specifically allows the Ash Wednesday special liturgy to be led by a deacon or lay person, who substitutes “us” for “you” in pronouncing Absolution or pronouncing a Blessing. This [Ash Wednesday Liturgy for Households with Children](#) by the Rev. Shivaun Wilkinson would be helpful for families. Or format the [Ash Wednesday liturgy found here](#) from pages 264-69 of the *Book of Common Prayer* with modification appropriate for lay leadership. This liturgy is very powerful. Use it! I often commend the Litany of Penitence to people preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If you choose this option, simply send ashes home in a plastic bag or other portable container for self-administration of ashes.
3. Host a Ash Wednesday liturgy on Zoom, Facebook or YouTube, or record one that people can access when their timing permits. If you do this, include a meditation or reflection for your people as well as ashes for self-imposition.
4. Host Ash Wednesday services on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and/or Saturday. This year, it is acceptable to hold Ash Wednesday services on other days besides Wednesday.
5. Host a liturgy indoors. If you do in-person worship, consider shortening the liturgy. The entire liturgy is very long. Do include blessing of the ashes you’ll be making available.

How to Impose Ashes

Here are some considerations about how to impose ashes. The guiding principle is to minimize physical contact across people who are not in the same household.

1. Send ashes to the homes of your members with the Ash Wednesday liturgy with the assurance that ashes can be imposed by laypeople. Imposing ashes on oneself and others in a household is the safest practice next to not imposing ashes at all. The *Book of Common Prayer* does not require that ashes be imposed by clergy.
2. Sprinkle the person's head with the ashes (no sign of the cross on foreheads).
3. Give people a packet of ashes and invite them to impose ashes on themselves. Consider having a mirror available.
4. Use single-use long-stemmed cotton swabs (not Q-tips) to administer ashes onto foreheads in the sign of the cross. Discard swabs after each use. (Tip: It helps ashes to adhere to the cotton tip if you agitate the cotton tip in the ashes or do as the Orthodox do -- add a drop of olive oil to your ashes.)

About Words Said at Imposition

As ashes are administered, the *Book of Common Prayer* formula is "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." You can adapt that formula in conformance to other Anglican Communion usage: "Remember that you are mortal, and to dust you shall return," or "Remember, O mortal one, that you were formed of the dust in creation and will to dust return."

For additional resources about how to observe Ash Wednesday and a Holy Lent in 2021, consider these resources from [Building Faith](#), the [EDOW website](#), and this by [Bishop Neil Alexander](#).

I'm happy to talk through other safe options relevant to your particular context. Feel free to contact me at cknudsen@edow.org

Faithfully,

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