Advice on celebrating Ash Wednesday during the COVID-19 Pandemic

*This advice is an amended form of the advice on the Imposition of Ashes provided within the LCA Worship Resources, adapted to reflect the particular challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission on Worship recommends that all congregations contemplating the imposition of ashes check the current regulations in their state/territory and nation.*

As the name implies, Ash Wednesday is the day on which Christians are marked with the sign of the cross in ashes. This ceremony is **optional**.

* It is acceptable to mark Ash Wednesday without the imposition of ashes, and the simplest course for congregations may be to omit the rite from Ash Wednesday services altogether.

For those congregations wishing to continue this tradition, the following options are recommended:

* Using the existing rite, the pastor could administer ashes to each person’s forehead or the back of their hand using individual cotton buds (or individual makeup applicators) for each person. The pastor must take care not to make contact with people’s skin and to ensure that applicators are single use only. These must be disposed of following COVID hygiene protocols. Applying the ashes to the back of the hand would allow for better social distancing. OR
* Using the existing rite, a portion of ash may be placed in individual cups (communion cups could be used) so that people can self-administer the ash as the pastor speaks the familiar words. OR
* An alternative to the imposition of ashes onto the skin would be the sprinkling of ashes on each person’s head. This is in keeping with the original sackcloth and ashes practice of mourning, and minimises the purchase of extra materials as well as the risk of contact OR
* Another option would be to replace the physical ashes with a card printed with an ashen cross and the words “Repent and believe in the good news. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” This could either be handed out during the rite at the point at which the imposition would take place, or handed to the congregation as they arrive so that they can remain seated during the rite and read their cards as the pastor speaks. GROW Ministries has prepared a printable resource to support this option OR
* A simple option would be for the congregation to remain seated during the rite, and when the minister proclaims the words, simply make the sign of the cross on their foreheads with their fingers.

The imposition of ashes is a personal reminder of our mortal nature (Genesis 2:7, ‘The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground’) and of our need to repent and die to sin. Since the ashes are imposed in the sign of the cross, the imposition is also a reminder that Christ became dust and ashes like us, taking on our mortal nature and bearing our sin, so that we might be redeemed. Some people object to the ceremony on the basis of the gospel for the day (‘Some disfigure their faces . . . but when you fast, wash your face’) but imposition of ashes is not intended to be a public sign to others of our piety.

The ashes are prepared by burning dry leaves and, when the ashes are cool, passing them through a sieve to produce a fine powder. Traditionally, the ashes come from the leaves of the branches used at the procession with palms on Palm Sunday of the previous year.

If the imposition of ashes is used in the service, the rite takes place after the sermon. This is to enable the sermon to serve as a call to repentance. It also enables the minister/leader to explain the rite during the sermon if the imposition of ashes is new to the congregation’s experience.

The text of the rite can be found in the service orders, and below. The responses (from the funeral service) are said. During the final collect, the minister/leader may touch the bowl of ashes, or make the sign of the cross over them, to indicate the ashes referred to in the prayer.

Prior to COVID-19, the usual practice was to place the ashes in a small bowl about two inches across. The bowl should comfortably sit in the palm of the left hand, leaving the right hand free to apply the ashes. Before the Ash Wednesday service begins, the bowl of ashes is placed on a side table or on the corner of the altar ready for use. Depending on the option selected, these practical arrangements will need to be adapted.

The minister/leader then asks the worshippers to come forward (if they wish) and receive the imposition. Children also may be encouraged to participate. The worshippers may approach the altar as for continuous communion, or they may simply come forward in single file. The minister/leader (with the help of an assistant if the congregation is large) imposes the ashes by rubbing some of the ash between his thumb and forefinger of his right hand and then, with his thumb (using the other fingers of his hand to brush aside hair etc) he marks the forehead of the worshippers with a small cross. **Note: this method does not meet COVID guidelines. Please refer to the alternatives above.**

The minister/leader will say:  Remember that you are dust, and that to dust you shall return.

Having received the ashes, the worshipper returns to his or her place. After all who wish to have received the ashes, either the minister/leader marks himself with the ashes, or this may be done by his assistant. A period of silence may be observed, and then the service continues with the prayers.

# Imposition of Ashes Rite

Either this rite could be explained in the sermon or a brief explanation such as the following could be given, particularly if the rite has not been regularly used in the congregation. If it is an established custom, an explanation could still be printed in the bulletin.

'The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 6:23). Since ancient times Lent has been a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter, a season of spiritual spring-cleaning. During the 40 days of Lent, Christians battled against the powers of darkness and their sinful self by the practice of fasting and self-examination, meditation and prayer. Since it was a time of repentance, they often wore sackcloth and covered themselves with ashes.

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. This day gets its name from the custom of marking a cross with ashes on the forehead as a sign of mortality, repentance, and faith in Christ. **[This is a good point at which to explain how the imposition will differ this year – for example:**

* **“This year, due to COVID restrictions, each person will receive an individual container of ashes and mark the cross on their own foreheads while pastor speak the traditional words.” OR**
* **“This year, due to COVID restrictions, pastor will apply the ashes with a separate cotton bud for each person.” OR**
* **“This year, due to COVID restrictions, pastor will sprinkle the ashes on each person’s head rather than touching their skin.” OR**
* **“This year, due to COVID restrictions, you may like to use this card in place of the traditional practice. When you would normally come forward to receive the ashes on your forehead, you can instead read this card/make the sign of the cross on your forehead with your finger.”]**

We invite you to join in repeating this ancient custom today as a mark of your acceptance of God's just sentence of death on you as a sinner and your reliance on Jesus for the gift of eternal life.

The following responses may be said by minister and congregation, or the minister may read the responses. During the final collect, the minister may make the sign of the cross over the ashes:

We are all born weak and helpless.

**All lead the same short, troubled life.**

We grow and wither as quickly as flowers; we disappear like shadows.

**In the midst of life we are in death.**

To whom can we go for help, but to you, Lord God,

**though you are rightly displeased because of our sins?**

And yet, Lord God Almighty, most holy and most merciful Saviour,

**deliver us from the bitterness of eternal death.**

You know the secrets of our hearts;

**mercifully hear us, most worthy judge eternal;**

keep us, at our last hour, in the consolation of your love.

**Amen.**

Dust we are and to dust we shall return.

**Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.**

May these ashes be for us a sign of our mortality and penitence, and a reminder that we receive eternal life by God's gift alone, through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

**Amen.**

Those who desire to receive ashes may come forward. Be sure to encourage children as well as adults to participate. **The minister makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of each person with ashes with an applicator saying OR the congregation member makes a cross on their forehead while the pastor says OR the pastor sprinkles the ashes on the person’s head saying OR the congregation hold their cards or make the sign of the cross on their own foreheads while the ministers says:**

*EITHER*

N, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

*OR*

N, repent, and believe in the gospel.