Taking Holy Communion to the sick

Receiving Holy Communion in sickness

- Have you received Holy Communion at home or hospital when you have been sick?
  Or been with a close family member or friend when they have?
  If so, reflect upon the experience.
  If not consider your role as a minister in a situation where you have no direct experience
- All who receive Holy Communion at home or in hospital or in a care home are vulnerable adults.
  For all of us illness creates its own kind of vulnerability. Great sensitivity and respect is needed in the exercise of this ministry.

Presiding at this kind of service

- Leading worship in this context requires a respectful authority that confidently directs the worship, while encouraging others to take part. It also requires deep sensitivity and the ability to be flexible.
- It is important that we are able to help the person to become aware of the presence of Jesus Christ in the service that is taking place. We come as a guest into another person’s house.

Being and bringing the Body of Christ

- Bringing communion to the sick and housebound is intimately associated with the week by week parish Eucharist in that it is an extension of it. Whenever we take communion to someone who is sick we carry with us the whole of the Christian community. We are therefore ‘bearers’ of ‘the Body of Christ given for you….’ in two senses which are intimately connected: we bring both
  - the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ and
  - the ‘body of Christ’ that is the Church community.
  We both represent Christ and his Church. This link is made particularly powerfully in some Churches where ministers are sent out to the sick and housebound immediately after they have received communion on a Sunday morning with the rest of the congregation praying for them as they go.

Healing

- In addition to this, when we bring communion to the sick and housebound the Lay minister of Holy Communion becomes part of the healing dimension of the sick person’s life.
- The Eucharist itself is the primary healing sacrament, through the presence of Christ in the service and the consolation Christ brings. The approach and attitude of the minister can, however, either help or hinder a person to appropriate these healing gifts.

Intercession

- The intercessions form an important part of the Eucharist. It is, perhaps here, particularly that the whole Church exercises its calling to be a “kingdom of priests”. The work of intercession – of carrying others in their need to God - always includes prayers for the sick and housebound. This makes the intimate connection between the Eucharist and the taking of communion to the sick and housebound.
  - For reflection and prayer: Consider our unspoken obligation to commit ourselves to regular intercessory prayer for the sick and housebound with whom we share in this ministry.

The Order of Service for bringing Holy Communion to the Sick and Housebound

- The Communion of the Sick in the Prayer Book assumes a celebration of Holy Communion at home. It was designed for a time when clergy were only ministers of HC.
- Remember that people communicated much less frequently.
- A growing desire for more frequent communion and burgeoning population led to greater need for home communion.
- Debate about reservation of consecrated elements was re-kindled in C of E and Reservation is now possible with the bishop’s permission.
The order of service we use for this resembles the Eucharist both in its structure and its content, though it is much briefer.

- It includes a form of the liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the Eucharist, but it does not include the prayer of Consecration
- It uses some of the same prayers and responses that we use at the Eucharist.
- See separate sheet for details

**Practicalities**

**Where are you going to take the sacrament from?**

- **Straight from a Eucharist.** *Common Worship* specifies that the elements are to be given to the ministers at the distribution or at the end of the service.
- **Reserved Sacrament.** Many churches now have the sacrament reserved.

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<tr>
<th>The Bishop’s Regulations on Reservation</th>
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<tr>
<td>There are fairly detailed rules on how this is to be done. These stress that reserving the sacrament, in church, is the right of every priest who has the cure of souls. This means that you should not be keeping it at home.</td>
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<td>The sacrament must be in a secure place, but it must also be reserved reverently. Why do you think there is so much emphasis on security? (reverence, error and Satanism) This means it is not acceptable, in normal circumstances to use the church safe. The directions recommend that the sacrament should preferably be reserved in a special safe on the east wall of the sanctuary on a wall nearby or in a neighbouring chapel. If the place of reservation is built into an altar it is called a tabernacle. If it is in a wall it is called an aumbry. Hanging pyxs are sometimes used, but there are problems with security.</td>
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<td>The bishop’s regulations allow for the door to the receptacle containing the reserved sacrament to be decorated, a white veil to be there and suggest that the presence of the reserved sacrament is usually to be indicated by a white light.</td>
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<td>The reserved sacrament is to be renewed every week.</td>
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<td>(It has been argued that Article 28 of the <em>Prayer Book</em> rules this out along with the <em>Prayer Book</em> Communion rubric that specifies that the consecrated elements are to be consumed in church and not carried out of the building.)</td>
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<td>It has been successfully argued, however, that what the rubric in the <em>Book of Common Prayer</em> was designed to prevent was the profane or superstitious usage of consecrated elements. Reliance is placed on the Brawling Act 1553 which, until its repeal by the Criminal Law Act 1967, provided protection for the sacrament and the receptacle housing it. Arguably this evidences parliamentary recognition and approval of the practice of reservation.</td>
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The ecclesiastical courts generally require the bishop’s sanction before reservation is authorised, he being the person best placed to judge whether in any parish the treatment of the sacrament is likely to be superstitious.

**Practicalities**

**You need**

- An appropriate container for the sacrament – e.g. a pyx, and a phial
- Possibly a small chalice
- A small white cloth - a corporal – a sort of ‘table cloth’
- A small purificator (smaller white cloth to wipe the chalice with)
- order of service x 2
- sheet for readings (x 2 ) or Bible
- pew leaflet/ notices, if appropriate
- Possibly small bottle of water if you are communicating in both kinds
- Possibly small candles and cross

But what you take depends on the tradition in the parish and you need to follow guidance from your incumbent
What to wear

- There is no specific dress for this ministry. Go as you are, but not in your decorating clothes!

Collecting the Reserved Sacrament

- If you are going straight from your own Church service, you’ll be given the consecrated elements. If not you need to know how to access the aumbry, or sacristy or wherever the sacrament is reserved.
- Normally you’d go directly to take Holy Communion to the person – with in reason. You can travel by bus or whatever if you need to. But it’s not really appropriate to go to the supermarket to do your weekly shop on the way! You need to operate in a way that reflects the significance of the ministry you are engaged in – appropriate and natural reverence, as you’d expect from someone in the Church building, but you don’t need to be falsely silent

When you arrive

- In reality you will have to work with all sorts of unsuitable conditions. In an ideal scenario you will have a clear table to space on which to put the Communion vessels, but you may have to clear your own space, or cope with whatever you find. Normally you would put the things you need on a small white cloth (see above) but it depends on circumstance and may not always be possible. (Canon F 4 specifies that at the time of a celebration of Holy Communion a fair white cloth should be provided to cover the Communion Table).
- Aim to give Communion first and save extensive chatting till later.

Leading the service

- Whether you go for a traditional or modern version depends upon pastoral expediency and parish norm. Whichever version you use needs to be on a card or in a booklet.
- You need to be calm and quietly confident and not flustered.
- Encourage the sick person to join in with responses/ read readings / lead prayers as seems appropriate.
- Use the Collect and readings of the previous Sunday (or the current one if you go on a Sunday) or those for the specific day if appropriate.
- If there is only one Bible reading it should be the Gospel.
- Include a time of silence, the Lord’s prayer before the invitation to receive Holy Communion.
- Leave space after the person has received for quiet prayer, too.
- Pray for the person you are visiting, either silently or aloud, as appropriate.
- Common Worship specifies that Communion should normally be received in both kinds, but may be received in one only when medically expedient or other circumstances make this necessary. If you are honouring the expectation you need to have the consecrated bread intincted or to take the consecrated wine in a suitable flask
- Those who cannot physically receive the sacrament are to be assured that they are partakers by faith of the body and blood of Christ and of the benefits He conveys to us by them.
- You can either receive communion with the sick person of administer to them alone. If you have come straight from the Eucharist you would not receive with them as you will just have done so. However, if you have already communicated during the day (e.g. earlier on) Common Worship allows you to receive again.
- End with the Grace using the ‘us’ form. Same for absolution – authorised but in form appropriate to lay person.
- Posture: there are no rules. Do what seems natural and pastorally appropriate.
- It’s fine for others – e.g. family or friend to be present.

If someone rejects the sacrament

- Simply take it back and either consume yourself, or destroy by burial or burning. You can’t just throw it away.
- Any left over consecrated elements should be returned either to the place of reservation in church or consumed by you.
Hospitals/ residential homes etc
- Check with Chaplain of hospital / hospice / home. They may already have taken communion and will want to know that a communicant is in hospital.
- Pre-arrange visit with charge nurse/ person in charge
- Avoid ward rounds
- Check it is OK for others to be present is applicable
- You don’t have to draw the curtains round but you may if it seems appropriate for some privacy – depends on circumstances.
- Watch out for ‘nil by mouth’ signs. They are there for a purpose. But this doesn’t stop you praying with someone.

After
- Return things to Church as arranged

Pastoral Issues
a) Choose an appropriate opening gambit. “Hello, are you well?” is probably not the best start
b) Listening Skills
- Listen, don’t talk
- Don’t advise
- Don’t be judgemental (That’s terrible… How could he…)
- Focus on them not you “(I know exactly how you feel. When I was…”
- Watch your Body language (and that of the person you are with)
- Time: what is too much/too little?
- Be prepared to cope with possible emotion without being embarrassed by it.
- Be able to cope with repetition
- Pass on news of what is happening locally/ in Church etc

b) Confidentiality
- Be sure you understand what confidentiality means.
- You may need to pass something onto the nurse or Parish Priest but only with permission unless what you are told is life threatening.
- Don’t put someone on prayer and intercession lists without their permission (and make sure that there is no chance that this could be used as a news bulletin)

c) Coping with impossible questions
- Questions like “What have I done to deserve this?” “Why did this have to happen to me?” “Is God punishing me?” “Sometimes I wonder whether there really is a God…” etc are possible in this ministry. Remember you are not there to provide answers or to be an expert, still less to preach a sermon. Avoid the usual unhelpful comments like
  - Maybe this is God’s way of testing you
  - You will get better (you don’t know that)
  - You’ll be a stronger person for it etc etc
- Remember you are there to journey with the person and to listen – no more. And it’s OK to say “I don’t know, or “I don’t understand either”.