

Ash Wednesday COVID-safe alternatives

Key theological elements of the ritual/tradition to celebrate:

- Ash Wednesday is an opportunity for individual commitment to enter into the season of Lent and the season of penitence leading to Resurrection Sunday.
- The connection to ash/dirt is a biblical symbol of preparation for the season of Lent, and the reminder that ‘from dust we have come and to dust we will return’.

Key COVID-safe restrictions to hold in tension:

- No physical touch
- Keep appropriate physical distance
- If absolutely necessary to be close, all participants must use a mask and sanitizer
- Restrict movement in large groups, particularly when there is a ticketed seating arrangement

Options to consider – *continue/re-imagine/refrain*

1. **Continue with the tradition within COVID limits** - if keeping the ritual/tradition the same as it’s always been (ie: leader marking cross on participants’ foreheads or hands), is enough to outweigh the efforts to make it ‘COVID-safe’ as it is, then here are some practicalities:
 - a. Use separate, individual cotton buds or charcoal sticks to mark ashes on foreheads
 - b. Leader AND participants to be masked.
2. **Re-imagine the tradition** - Can the meaning behind the original ritual be kept while doing something different that doesn’t involve touch or physical proximity? In other words, can these restrictions be an opportunity to re-imagine the tradition, and focus on the purpose of the imposition of ashes being more about the individual’s call to commitment, than the leader ‘imposing’ the ashes on the individual? All suggestions below can be done in person and/or virtually.
 - a. **Self-marking of ashes suggestions:**
 - i. Provide individual sticks of charcoal as people enter the worship space, to use to mark on foreheads later. DO NOT dip fingers (either the leader or the participant) into a common bowl of ashes/dirt
 - ii. Provide a temporary tattoo for people to wear:
https://www.etsy.com/au/listing/211724110/temporary-tattoo-set-of-15-cross-set-of?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=cross+tattoo&ref=sr_gallery-1-3&bes=1&variation0=623488691
 - b. **Embrace the individual physicality of the experience more** – not just a mark on the forehead, but an extended time during the worship service of drawing and reflecting with charcoal on paper, or ‘playing’ in dirt.
 - i. Provide individual sticks of charcoal and paper as people enter the worship space.
 - ii. Invite people to bring a bowl of dirt from their own garden or local area – include drawing in the dirt in the service, meaning getting our hands dirty/returning to the earth from which we were formed. Could even have individuals bring a bottle of water and add to the dirt to turn into mud to mark on forehead.
 - c. **Provide worship resources to participate at home** – eg: <https://buildfaith.org/lent-in-a-bag/>
 - d. **Other ideas** - <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/tips-for-ash-wednesday-during-covid-19>
3. **Refrain from using** ash or dirt at all, and focus instead on prayer and reflection only.