

Anglican Theological Colleges Joint Response on Vaccination Status in Churches

Purpose

Theologians from the theological colleges of the Diocese convened in late September 2021 to discuss a shared theological response to inform our discussions of:

- a) the State Government's 'road map' out of lockdown towards a more 'COVID-normal' life, and in particular the requirement for churches to distinguish between vaccinated and unvaccinated worshippers, and to separate those two groups one from another; and
- b) the Diocese of Melbourne's formal response to that Government requirement, which has confirmed the need for compliance with the public health directions, and which has mandated the provision of separate services for both groups of worshippers.

Overview

COVID-19 has added a new dimension to many of the tensions that we regularly confront as a church, and the roadmap out of lockdown has resulted in many of these tensions being articulated as forceful 'either/or' views with no option of conciliation. Rather than these sharp divides, we argue that a paradoxical approach to the viewpoints may yield a more beneficial result. As a result, we present five such paradoxes to enrich our debates on the lockdown plan, vaccine requirements, and congregational density.

1. **The Place and Purpose of the Church**

Our creedal statement of the church as the 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church' contains a host of dialectics that are expressed in various forms and styles throughout history and present practice. Despite this diversity, and seeming dissonance, it is in these tensions that we often find a gift for the work that we are eager to do.

2. **The Theology of the Church Practiced**

One of the expressed tensions in the road map revolves around questions of division within the church. Here we examine historical examples of such divisions.

3. **The Mission of the Church**

The suggested road map has generated disquiet by raising the question of whether the church should be a location of universal attraction or an opportunity to equip and send forth the saints (centripetal or centrifugal mission). We conclude that the church cannot accomplish one without the other.

4. **Inclusion and Exclusion within the Church**

Similarly, questions of inclusion and exclusion abound in discussion of the roadmap, and although the church is called to inclusion, we already have several distinct examples of exclusion because of the vulnerable. We may not reduce this aspect down so simply.

5. **The Existing Mandates of the Church**

Questions have been raised about the place of the church to engage with mandates, thus we conclude on the existing mandates of the church in the world.

Finally, while much more could be said on the topic, we conclude with two brief pastoral reflections as appendixes.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to the church's life and ministry that, while not unprecedented, have not been experienced by most (Western) Christians for more than a century. Churches of all traditions, sizes, and expressions have been compelled – certainly by the necessity of tough public health responses to the coronavirus pandemic, but also sometimes against their will – to adopt forms of ministry and worship that have been uncomfortable, and that have limited Christians' ability to gather together and – in those traditions where this is central – to enjoy full eucharistic participation.¹

The way out of the current situation, however, presents new, and arguably even more difficult, challenges. For the last 20 months, churches have lived, served, and worshipped under the same restrictions. While different States have had different COVID settings, those restrictions have been experienced equally, within each jurisdiction. However, as the country slowly emerges from the pandemic into an endemic environment in which effective vaccinations are increasingly readily available, churches are faced with the prospect of having to cater for two (sharply, socially, and even legislatively) distinct groups of people – the vaccinated, and the unvaccinated. The experience of church – and more profoundly, the experience of *being* church – is thus likely, at least for a time, to become *differentiated* in a way that it has not been at any other time of this pandemic.

There are, in this context, two ecclesiological principles, both of which must be upheld and yet which exist in some tension:

- a) The church's responsibility, to love – and therefore protect – all its members. In recent months, this mandate has routinely taken the form of clear episcopal advocacy, across the Anglican Communion as well as across ecclesial boundaries, *in favour of* vaccinations;²
- b) The church's necessary existence as a visible sign in this world of the *unity* in Christ in which we now live.

Many of the considerations which are brought up in relation to this topic – such as that above – are often framed in terms of dialectical considerations. That is, each consideration is placed at opposite ends of a continuous spectrum. Furthermore, these are processed in a dualistic, or binary, fashion. This makes an “either-or”, with each position being unable to be held at the same time as the other. Therefore, an argument for one position is considered to be self-evidently an argument against the other position on the spectrum. Yet, theologically, these various dialectics do not need to be construed in this dualistic fashion. More so, often the

¹ The phrase ‘full eucharistic participation’ is not intended to denigrate the provision of spiritual communion, or to question its legitimacy as a form of spiritual practice. It is to note, however, that spiritual communion, by its very definition, happens *apart from* the gathered community.

² See, e.g. the Church of England's ‘COVID-19: The Ethics of Vaccine Certificate (‘Vaccine Passports’)', 5-6; statements from Bp. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church; and Pope Francis I.

reduction of a dialectic to a binary outcome produces anaemic theological implementations, especially in the public sphere.³

Rather, a form of theological engagement that values both aspects of a dialectic may be pursued to enrich our public theological engagement. One approach may be to consider the dialectic within a paradox, where there is a ‘both/and’ approach to the nature of the problem.⁴ Although this will not always work, we would suggest that a paradoxical approach to the considerations we currently face would helpfully honour different impulses and priorities within our church. For example, as we will examine, a paradoxical approach to the church's mission will not enshrine open welcome (centripetal mission) against the equipping of the saints (centrifugal mission), or the obverse.

Precisely how these paradoxical engagements are to be honoured is both difficult and theologically important. Recognising that across the Diocese as much as across the broader society there will be various opinions on this, the undersigned faculty from the two theological colleges offer this paper as our response.

The Place and Purpose of the Church

The Creeds declare that we believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Each of these identifiers contains its own dialectic or tension.

For example, there is the tension around the oneness of the Church. We're alerted to this tension when we find ourselves confessing it in diverse congregations. Each particular church community is distinct in a variety of ways from others. Nevertheless, we must confess that it is one with those others. To belong together with those others to the one church means we are united in an essential sense that presses for expression – and requires maintenance (see Ephesians 4:1-6). And yet differences – of geography, etc. – do not in themselves impair that oneness. Our unity as Christians is across time and space, and is grounded in our union with Christ, as members of the one body of Christ. We are united with other congregations across the diocese, and the world, and with all the saints, past, present and future. Before COVID, we allowed, and even, encouraged separate services, some based simply on Sunday times, others on age differences, others for the convenience of certain groups, e.g., midweek services. We have seldom worshipped “all together”, rather there is a psychological impetus towards the homogenous unit that is expressed within our churches.

Likewise, within a congregation, there are different modes within which the oneness of the particular congregation is expressed. Public worship is one of these modes, and perhaps the most amenable to displaying the oneness of the church visibly. But there are others: parish councils and other governing bodies (in early church history the Bishop was regarded as the

³ Douglas Estes, “Dualism or Paradox? A New ‘Light’ on the Gospel of John,” *J. Theol. Stud.* 71.1 (2020): 90–118.

⁴ Marianne W. Lewis, Constantine Andriopoulos, and Wendy K. Smith, “Paradoxical Leadership to Enable Strategic Agility,” *Calif. Manage. Rev.* 56.3 (2014): 58–77.

locus of oneness or unity), groups for fellowship and other ministries, etc. Tragically, these can all become threats to the unity of the church. But they do not have to be so. Indeed, they can often be the very ways in which unity is expressed and experienced, often with particular attention and effectiveness that public worship of the whole church gathered struggles to enable. While there will be things to mourn if churches cannot gather all from their communities into a single service for worship and eucharistic participation, there may be other pastorally legitimate modes that enable participation in the oneness of the church, as larger churches with multiple congregations or services already recognise.

Equally, the tension concerning the holiness of the Church may also bear upon the response churches make. The sanctified identity of the Church involves a tension between the fact that church owes its existence to God's special action – its creation is part of the purpose of God's saving action in Christ – and the fact that the church a thoroughly human and creaturely entity, subject to all the usual dynamics, limitations, and potentialities of human communities. Churches give expression to this in legislating about their own life; and yet this legislation is not entirely exempt or separate from the law of the land in which these churches find themselves. One thinks of the way in Australia, churches are rightly beholden to a wider legal framework and set of expectations around ensuring the safety of children in their midst. One consequence of this is that churches like the Anglican Church of Australia have developed policies and procedures, as well as training and reporting protocols around this, not simply to satisfy the State's legal requirements but to enact and safeguard the holiness of their identity. Consequently, although government mandates around the vaccination status of those allowed to gather for worship may be experienced as an imposition or intrusion upon the distinct identity of the Church, it is also possible to receive them in a similar manner to legislation around the safety of children – that is, as a gift and summons to engage with the very work we already find ourselves eager to do.

The Theology of the Church Practiced

Some have suggested that the announcement of distinctions on the basis of vaccination status proposes a similar scenario to that which St Paul encountered in the congregations in Rome and Galatia. Most commentators would agree that the first readers of Paul's letter to the Romans were a group of house-churches divided along ethnic lines – a majority ethnically non-Jewish and a minority ethnically Jewish. These divisions were deepened when Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome (49 CE – the so-called “Edict of Claudius” [see Acts 18:2]) and continued even after its reversal by Nero (r. 54-68), who reigned as emperor when Paul wrote Romans. Throughout the Epistle to the Romans, Paul draws out the limitations of a Jewish framework of religious practice, highlighting that the law itself only reveals sin (7:7-12) and brings about one not doing good, but evil through the sin that dwells within (7:20). Yet, within the same letter Paul also upholds some Jewish religious structures, declaring that to Israel “belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever” (9:4-5). While these two aspects sound antithetical, they must be held in paradoxical tension within the letter.

In Galatians, the situation is similar, with the Christians in Galatia being divided along the lines of whether one followed, or eschewed, the Jewish Law on the basis of circumcision, calendar and diet. Paul condemns these divisions, and specifically condemns those who were compelling Gentiles to observe these particular aspects of Torah. In fact, he calls such a practice “a different gospel” (1:6), a “contrary gospel” that is a “perversion” of the gospel proclaimed by Paul (1:7-8). Paul then describes how he confronted Peter in Antioch for his “hypocrisy” in “withdrawing” from his earlier practice of sharing table fellowship with Gentiles (2:11-14), a practice that reflected this “different gospel.” Yet, Paul himself can also claim to the Corinthians that “to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews” (1 Cor 9:19), a practice that undoubtedly meant following certain aspects of Torah in order to have table fellowship with fellow Jews. Nevertheless, Paul is able to follow these aspects of Torah, while also eschewing the same in other settings, such that “[t]o those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law” (1 Cor 9:21). While these may appear antithetical, Paul held them in paradoxical tension for the benefit of the church.⁵

In his letters, St Paul has serious problems with such divisions within communities of Jesus-followers, for these seriously undermine “the gospel” for all people – “the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who has faith” (Rom 1:16). Still, Paul upholds individual and cultural distinctives within the church for the purpose of mission. Ultimately, Paul urges his readers to “welcome one another [regardless of ethnic status]...as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom 15:7).

The Mission of the Church

Welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed us spurs the church towards missional dimensions that include both centrifugal (going out) and centripetal (gathering in) elements. This pattern is evident in Acts, in both the sending out of the apostles, other missional workers (e.g., the 70/72), and in the focus on Jerusalem and the return to the centre. The two elements might also be described as the way in which the church goes out to bring others into relationship with, and faith in, the Risen Lord.

The combination of these two elements is also seen in the Gospels. Luke, in short, demands that the church continues the model of ministry which Jesus enjoins on the disciples (Luke 9:1-6, 10; 10:1-20). When the dominical example is included, not least to those considered to be afflicted in such ways as to be potential threats to society (e.g., Luke 5:12-16); it is a reminder these missional elements have a particular focus on the going to and gathering in of those who are most vulnerable within our society.

In a world shaped by COVID, these two missional elements must be practised in such a way that they do not risk the exclusion of those who are unvaccinated from the mission of the church. For that to be done fully, a pattern of mission which might be satisfied only to go

⁵ Christopher A. Porter and Brian S. Rosner, “‘All Things to All People’: 1 Corinthians, Ethnic Flexibility, and Social Identity Theory,” *Curr. Biblic. Res.* 19.2 (2021).

out and spread the good news, without attempting to bring in, will be an inadequate model of mission.

Inclusion and Exclusion within the Church

Indeed, this question of exclusion and inclusion is one of vital importance for the life of the church. We all have a vision of an inclusive church which follows the pattern of Jesus' own ministry in the Gospels and the theology of St Paul, with his passion for the inclusion of the Gentiles. In our understanding of the church, we know that there are no grounds for excluding people, particularly on the basis of biological or social differences such as gender, race or class (Gal 3:27-29).

Yet we all know there are limits to inclusion, just as there are limits to diversity, and over the years the church has had to struggle with the question of boundaries. Christians have not always agreed, and continue to disagree, on this question. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to welcome most of all those who are sinners, outcast, poor, vulnerable, needy. But who exactly are they?

Through painful experience, for example, we know that not all can be included within the church gathered. Already, children can only be cared for by authorised workers with adequate documentation. We do not recognise a human right to work with children apart from required vetting and authorisation. Our inclusion has had to be balanced by our protection of the vulnerable. Precisely in order to be genuinely inclusive we have had at some points, to be exclusive.

When it comes to COVID 19 and vaccinations, the issue is acutely difficult. On the one hand, we do not wish to cast out the unvaccinated. On the other hand, we need to ask: Who are the needy in this context? Is it those who are unvaccinated on principle (as opposed to those who have no access to vaccinations or who have medical exemption)? Or is it the young, the old and the immune-compromised who might become infected by mixing with the unvaccinated? Wherein lies the balance between inclusion and protection? Can this balance be mandated for the church?

The Existing Mandates of the Church

Theologically, the concept of divine mandates requires that the ethical form *of* a community fulfils the divine purpose *for* that community. Ecclesiologically, this means that a church – whether in its local or universal expression – must be ordered, and live, by two commands: the command to love, and the command to unity.

I.

Jesus summarised the Law within two commands: Love God, and love of neighbour (Matt 22:37-39). The church cannot fulfil its purpose in the world if does not live lovingly towards those within, and those without. As Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) makes clear, the 'neighbour' cannot be restricted to only those who belong to our own community of faith, nor only to those with whom we agree. On the contrary, the 'neighbour' – whom we are called to love, and without the love for whom it is impossible to love God – is not only the one with whom we are in close communion, but also the one who lives outside our Christian community, and the one with whom we disagree.

In the context of the present COVID-19 pandemic, the command to love one's neighbour has increasingly taken the form of clear episcopal advocacy *in favour of* vaccinations. Representative of this advocacy are the Church of England, in its formal submission to the Johnson Government's consultation on vaccine passports,⁶ as well as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church⁷ and Pope Francis I.⁸ Bishop Curry, Pope Francis, and Archbishop Freier⁹ have all explicitly associated the willingness to be vaccinated as a contemporary expression of the love of neighbour. In none of these instances has episcopal urging been extended to an episcopal directive, but many agree that where vaccinations are available a willingness to receive them is expressive of Jesus' command to love.

Of course, this commandment to love encompasses also the command to love those with whom we are in even profound disagreement. Thus, if getting vaccinated is an expression of neighbourly love, that same love must also be extended to those who refuse the vaccine, regardless of their reasons for doing so.

II.

The church cannot fulfil its purpose in the world if it denies by its actions and attitudes that unity that has been effected for us in and by Christ Jesus. The church is a 'living sacrament', called to bear witness in its life to the oneness of him whose body it is, to the demolition of all dividing walls of hostility between peoples, and to the peace that has been wrought by Christ 'in his flesh' (Eph 2:13-14). In view of this unity, the church cannot erect barriers between its members that Christ has himself torn down. The requirement of the State that any person's vaccination status should determine their way of living in and worshipping with the church is, in this respect, *prima facie* a cause for concern and would, were it to be a permanent requirement, would be cause for further negotiation.

⁶ The Church of England, 'COVID-19: The Ethics of Vaccine Certificate ('Vaccine Passports')', 5-6. See <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/COVID-19%20The%20Ethics%20of%20Vaccine%20Certification%20%28Vaccine%20Passports%29.pdf>

⁷ M. Curry, 'Do this one for the children', 10 August 2021. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-curry-encourages-americans-to-get-vaccinated-do-this-one-for-the-children/>

⁸ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-08/pope-francis-appeal-covid-19-vaccines-act-of-love.html>

⁹ Ad Clerum, September 2021.

Nevertheless, the unity of the Church does not take the form of uniformity. In the present context, this means two things. First, that vaccination status is irrelevant to one's membership of the body of Christ. The church can neither require nor expect its members to have any particular vaccination status as a condition of membership, because Christ himself does not require it. Second, however, that uniformity is unnecessary means that, in the present context, there is no inherent requirement for all members of a church community to meet in the same way, at the same time. The church can in good conscience choose to enact different ways, times and places for worship, for members whose vaccination statuses differ, without any necessary damage to its mandated unity. As implied above, to do so may well in fact be an expression of neighbourly love.

This is not to suggest that the maintenance of two different groups of worshippers within the one church should be permitted to become normalised. On the contrary, it should be allowed only as a loving response to a specific situation that will end. To put it otherwise, the existence of two such worshipping groups might be tolerated by analogous reference to the concept of 'separated brethren.'¹⁰ Of this concept, Hans Küng has noted that 'We should not justify these divisions, any more than we justify sin, but "suffer" them as a dark enigma, an absurd, ridiculous, tolerable yet intolerable facet of life...'¹¹ Yet we must still recognise that we have been running separate congregations—even as a missional endeavour—and recognising this tension for centuries.

¹⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §3.

¹¹ H. Küng, *The Church*, 283.

Further to our theological concerns we offer two additional appendixes for consideration:

Appendix A: Pastoral Concerns

Another dialectic being played out is between individual rights and care for others. Those who choose to be unvaccinated (without a medical reason) cannot assume a right to attend church, just as we request congregants with infectious diseases such as flu to stay away, to protect the vulnerable, especially the elderly. Pregnant women are particularly susceptible to covid, and children under 12 cannot yet receive the vaccine.

Some cannot receive alcoholic wine and many churches provide non-alcoholic options, or the congregant may choose to abstain. We often offer gluten free options, another distinction, not literally all sharing in one bread.

Those with fragile health or other vulnerabilities who are not prepared to risk a crowd setting with unvaccinated people may stay away - thereby dividing the congregation and perhaps excluding the most vulnerable - the elderly and infirm, pregnant, and children. People caring for the fragile, whether family members or in other settings, may also be reluctant to attend a service where there are unknown numbers of unvaccinated people (i.e. when public access is eventually restored).

Alongside concerns for parishioner and visitor health, we may be concerned about the health and workload of clergy (a) if there are not already two services in their parish, so that the unvaccinated can be directed to one of them (b) if their own health is vulnerable, so prolonged contact with the unvaccinated (over the 15 mins tolerated medically) will be risky for them. Many of our clergy are old, some are pregnant, some have underlying health issues or are cancer survivors etc. Given these various factors, it may well be that in some parishes there are insufficient clerical resources for the provision of two in-person services

Furthermore, we would highlight that the distinction set out in the restrictions roadmap is not a permanent situation, and does not obviate other pastoral care engagements that occur throughout our churches. Rather it should thrust the church deeper into the pastoral work that it is engaged with.

Appendix B: Conspiracy theories and Revelation

The Book of Revelation has long granted asylum to those who wish to give their political and social grievances an air of respectability, usually by identifying their opponents with the forces of evil and chaos which it describes. This may involve the creation of long and complicated timelines, and distorted symbolic readings of events described.

But Revelation is neither a cryptic timeline to be deciphered, nor a convenient touchstone for problematic doctrines that have merged in various corners of Christianity hundreds of years later (like the Tribulation and the Rapture). Nor was it written like a time capsule solely for the benefit of some future generation.

Revelation was written to describe the times in which its readers lived. Its immediate translators made that manifestly clear by the care that the number of the Beast (Rev 13:18) referred to Nero, who was most likely dead by the time of writing, but whose memory persisted as the ultimate threat to civilised life. Revelation was to inform the choices they needed to make between God and the World. It compared the Age to Come with the Present Age (Heaven with Earth) in a kaleidoscope of images which revealed the basic truths of both in a variety of ways: the ghastliness of the world left to its own devices versus the Kingdom of God.

This is not to say that we are not to discern the marks of the Beast in our modern society, as Emmanuel Obeng once wrote.¹² Every Christian generation needs to choose between God and the world. But we are never to assume that Revelation was written to be the last work about our own obsessions. To this end we would suggest that interpreting vaccination requirements as 'the mark of the beast,' is to project our own context onto that of Revelation, especially given the temporally limited nature of the roadmap requirements. Rather we should be discerning in the information—and misinformation—that is promulgated regarding the present situation, speaking the truth in love, and advocating for the needy.

¹² Emmanuel A. Obeng, "The Use of Biblical Critical Methods in Rooting The Scriptures In Africa" *The Bible in African Christianity* (ed. H.W. Kinoti and J.M. Waliggo; Nairobi: Acton, 1997), 8-24, 19.