



## **Worship planning and Vaccination Status**

### **Reflections to support a Church Council conversation**

Rachel Kronberger

UCA Regulation 3.1.2 **a)** The Church Council shall give priority in its life to building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining members in hope, and leading the Congregation to a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world...

**b)** The responsibilities of the Church Council include:

i) sharing with the Minister in the mission and in the pastoral care and spiritual oversight of the Congregation; v) determining the time and place of services of public worship

1. As Australia moves into a post-lockdown season, Church Councils may be faced with a decision about whether to ask worshippers if they have been vaccinated against COVID-19. We may not be able to hold our communities together perfectly in this transition season. **The following reflection is intended to resource the beginning of an ongoing conversation within a Church Council.** It does not suggest that congregations seek to influence members to accept or reject vaccination for themselves or their families. The issue for this reflection is *the basis on which congregations hold face-to-face gatherings.*
2. It is important for a Church Council to be clear about the current and anticipated public health restrictions which apply to their congregation. A Church Council should also be familiar with directions and guidance given by its Synod leadership.
3. Christian frameworks to consider include:

#### 3.1 The Biblical Principle of *love of neighbour*

- a) Jesus said that the law could be summed up in two commandments: to love God and to love our neighbour (Matthew 22: 37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). *Neighbour* in both the Jewish and Christian tradition can mean 'fellow humans', and 'members of my community' as well as 'closest neighbours'. Proverbs 3:29 describes *neighbour* as one who lives beside you in trust.
- b) When we speak of *neighbour* in this conversation, who do we mean? And, is love of neighbour best expressed in welcoming whoever seeks Christ in worship? Or is love of neighbour best expressed by limiting the participation of unvaccinated people to make worship safer for people who are vulnerable to COVID-19?

#### 3.2 Biblical Principle of *hospitality*

- a) Jesus' parables of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22), the mustard seed (Mark 4, Matthew 13, Luke 13) and even the lost sheep (Luke 15) reveal that in the Realm of God there is a place for everyone and a welcome for all, and when one is missing, they are lovingly searched out and brought back to the fold. These images of hospitality are reinforced by Jesus' own



actions in interacting with those with leprosy and others understood to carry infectious diseases. Christ is the *host* in our churches, the one who welcomes each of us. When someone seeks Christ in worship can we exclude them because of their vaccination status?

- b) Hospitality was a significant principle for the church during previous pandemics and plagues. In his letter to the Synod of NSW/ACT, Moderator Simon Hansford wrote, *The Antonine Plague caused the death of around 10% of the population of the Roman Empire during the 2nd century. As the wealthy retreated to their estates, Christians were known to have stayed in towns and cities to care for the sick because they believed all people were made in the image of God. The Black Death pandemic tested the Christian communities of Europe in the mid-15th century. During the 16th century, there were times when Martin Luther and John Calvin were known to have fostered worship and Bible study at home because smaller gatherings mitigated against the spread of plague. (29/9/21)* In those historical pandemics many were moved by the church's care and courage and church membership grew. How can our response to this issue amplify our witness to Christ's welcome for all?
- c) During the pandemic we have learned much about the imperfect nature of our hospitality. Some have been able to participate in worship because it has moved online; others have been unable to participate because worship has moved online. Some have withdrawn from face-to-face worship because they cannot wear a mask, and some because they have felt vulnerable. How can we use what we have learned over the past two years to reflect on the decisions we now face?
- d) If we are to include in worship those who are unvaccinated, or refuse to ask whether people have been vaccinated, we may exclude some who feel too vulnerable to participate in worship in those circumstances. How can we find ways to include them? Are there ways of making our worship safer for them?

### 3.3 Biblical Principle of *the integrity of the Body of Christ*

- a) The imperative for Christians to gather in person, to make the Body of Christ a physical reality, is a central expression of our faith in Christ. To impose divisions on the Body goes against central teachings of the New Testament, in which we learn that 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). Can we presume to create a division between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated? If we exclude unvaccinated people from face-to-face worship, how might we extend the communion table to them?
- b) The physical integrity and safety of the individual bodies which gather to form the Body of Christ are also significant – and inform other worship



practices such as child safety and hygiene. Can we knowingly put vulnerable people at risk of illness when we gather for worship?

### 3.4 The Biblical Principle of *hope*

- a) There is much fear in our community in the present time. The Psalmist wrote 'I will fear no danger' (Psalm 23: 4 NET); the prophet Isaiah heard God say to the people 'Do not be afraid' (Isaiah 43: 1); Jesus said 'I am with you always' (Matthew 28:20); St Paul wrote to the church in Rome that '[nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8: 39). Although Christian hope can enable courage in the face of danger or death, it is also true that the possibility of illness and death from COVID-19 is not evenly shared – some among us are more vulnerable than others.
- b) In previous pandemics, while understanding the threat and taking appropriate precautions, Christians worked to counter fear and express their hope through gatherings, through loving care of those who were sick and through refusing to scapegoat groups within the community.
- c) The rapid development of vaccines has been a sign of hope to many around the world; some people remain fearful of accessing the vaccine for themselves.
- d) How might hope and fear inform our pastoral conversations within our congregation? How is hope expressed in worship that is open to everyone? How is hope expressed in worship that is, for now, restricted to people who are vaccinated?

### 3.5 The Biblical Principle of *Unity*

- a) The Psalmist delighted in 'how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' (Ps 133); Jesus prayed 'that they will all be one' (John 17:21) and Paul pleaded with the Corinthians to 'have no divisions' (1 Cor 1:10).
- b) The Basis of Union begins with the claim that the three churches forming the Uniting Church seek 'to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church'. (Basis of Union, paragraph 1)
- c) Great controversies in ancient and modern church history have produced some of Christianity's most powerful confessions of faith. When we respond to conflict within the church, we can choose to identify common ground in search of unity.
- d) In her letter to the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania Moderator Denise Liersch wrote, *Jesus calls us into community, to live with and for each other, deeply in tune with the life of God. In these times, we are aware of the need to delve deep into*



*spiritual practices that connect us with the source of life and peace, deepening our connections into our wider communities. (8/10/21)*

- e) How might your congregation prepare for potential conflict on this issue? What discernment process will enable deep listening to people with differing views? On what common ground of faith and spiritual practice might you draw as part of this conversation?

#### 4 Other Considerations

When we consider rights and obligations which are being discussed by government and the wider community, there are implications for churches in:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 18  
*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes... freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*
- Our duty of care, including to those who, though vaccinated, remain vulnerable in the event of infection, and to those who choose not to be vaccinated.

#### 5 Conclusion

The Church is not responsible for designing public health measures – it is responsible for being the Body of Christ. Just as public health measures have changed dramatically over the past two years, decisions we make now may need to change in the future. Congregations will be most able to respond to changing needs if they are clear about the reasons for their decisions.

Despite our best efforts at planning, some of the path ahead of us will be found only by walking that path. We trust that Christ walks the path before us and beside us.