

On Vaccination Status and Gathered Worship

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- [1] This paper seeks to clarify some of the issues around the church's need to decide how it will gather, in response to present governmental health directives. It relates particularly to the situation in Victoria and to the needs of the Uniting Church in that state but may be useful more widely. It outlines the principal options, seeks to clarify what is at stake in each and, more broadly, what is at stake in deciding how to gather. It concludes with a particular proposal: that churches gather for public worship only as a fully vaccinated (or exempt) community until such time that the question of vaccination ceases to be relevant to social gatherings.

The issue and some possible responses

- [2] Current health policy distinguishes between two groups of people – those fully vaccinated or exempt from vaccination, and those not vaccinated. The distinction itself is a given – a fact about the community – the handling of which affects the health of the whole population. The distinction is used to inform the calculations of risk in public gatherings and strategies to mitigate the risks of gathering. Among these strategies are restrictions on gathered worship services: much larger groups may gather if each person present is double-vaccinated or exempt but only quite small groups (too small to accommodate most church congregations) if people are not fully vaccinated.
- [3] The decision for churches in relation to current government policy on vaccination status and congregation size does not concern the distinction itself (again, a simple fact about the community) but whether the *decision* about the distinction – the strategy which dictates congregational size – can be accepted in terms of Christian convictions. Some have perceived segregation or discrimination here, particularly against the unvaccinated. Several options present themselves to the churches:
- a. gathering only fully vaccinated or vaccine-exempt people (allowing more people to attend);
 - b. gatherings with mixed vaccination status (allowing only a few to attend);
 - c. not gathering at all until vaccination status is determined to be irrelevant for social gatherings;
 - d. civil disobedience (ignoring government directives).
- [4] We will consider each of these briefly to clarify some of the issues at play in the question.

a. *Gatherings of only fully vaccinated people*

[5] A congregation of only vaccinated or vaccine-exempt people makes for the largest gatherings under the directives. It is noteworthy that there has been objection to the cap on such gatherings, presumably because it is generous enough to allow most congregations to see all their vaccinated members attend. This option has been interpreted to “exclude” unvaccinated people, but this misconstrues the problem. The directives do not in principle exclude unvaccinated people, but their presence has a significant impact on how many can gather. To gather only the fully vaccinated, then, is to decide in favour of the vaccinated majority at the expense of the unvaccinated minority. The “expense” here is not being permitted to attend public worship and being identified as unvaccinated. This has given rise to concerns about personal freedom and confidentiality.

b. *Gatherings of mixed vaccination status*

[6] The possibility – in Victoria, at least – of smaller services that include unvaccinated people shows that language of exclusion-inclusion confuses the matter. Unvaccinated people may attend gathered worship but their attendance “excludes” the vast majority of *vaccinated* people. Churches are not asked to exclude unvaccinated people but to *decide*: either prioritise the needs of the majority of people (vaccinated, meaning large congregations) or the needs of the minority (unvaccinated, meaning small congregations). More will be said about the nature of this decision later.

c. *Not gathering until the problem goes away*

[7] In one respect, this is the simplest of the various options. It places all church members in the same situation: everyone “misses out” on gathered worship. A problem, however, is that this implies a judgement that the decision of some members not to be vaccinated is equally as valid as the decision of the majority to receive the vaccination. There may be several reasons why people are not vaccinated. While the policy is that all are eligible for vaccination, some few may not have had an opportunity, for whatever reason. These are quite different from the larger number who have refused to be vaccinated, typically fearing adverse effects or sinister intentions in the vaccination program. With respect to the latter group, by not gathering until the vaccination issue goes away, the church would declare it morally appropriate that individuals might choose not to run the risks of being vaccinated while enjoying the benefits of most having immunity via vaccination. The question concerning the few who want vaccinations but haven’t had them is different and will be touched upon later.

d. *Civil disobedience*

[8] Civil disobedience – ignoring the directives – could mean holding gatherings of any size regardless of vaccination status. This overcomes any sense of discrimination but is problematic, not only in terms of its possible health risks. The implied judgement affirming a refusal to be vaccinated discussed above is also active here. Further, the logic of “excluding” un- or insufficiently vaccinated people from social gatherings has already been accepted by every Christian who complied with governmental lockdown and other movement restriction orders

over the last 18 months. We complied for our own safety and the safety of others, even if under sufferance. We also recognised as necessary the shutdown of particular suburbs, towns or states, even if some of the communities affected in this way were particularly disadvantaged or unfairly stigmatised by the need for closure. Ecclesial acceptance of “discriminating” constraints on social gatherings in lockdown phases of the pandemic is important for assessing what now confronts the churches. The difference between the lockdown situation in which all were variously disadvantaged and the developing one in which a minority looks to be disadvantaged is not the possible “discrimination” in the new situation but that *churches themselves* must now decide who will be discriminated against – the majority or the minority – and cannot hide behind government enforcement. Again, more will be said later about the nature of this decision.

The struggle for illuminating language

- [9] In churchly efforts to determine which of the above options is the most “Christian”, several categories have been to the fore. The inclusion-exclusion dynamic has been important in some discussions but, as illustrated above, this is often confused: precisely who is it who is being excluded? “Love your neighbour” also asserts itself in our reflections. It is not clear, however, whether the neighbour here is the one who might get sick because not vaccinated, or who is vaccinated but still vulnerable to infection from an unvaccinated person. Further, while it looks as if it is unloving to exclude unvaccinated people from a gathering, it is they and not the vaccinated who are particularly at risk in mixed gatherings: “excluding” may be an act of love towards the unvaccinated, despite how they experience it. Freedom is another category employed here to make a case one way or another. But what kind of freedom? Freedom *from* external (communal) constraint to come and go as we wish, to be vaccinated and at church or not vaccinated and at church, or freedom *for* the other, creating community and gifting otherwise denied security? The church-state issue also pops up here, befuddled as always. Does the Paul of Romans apply here, or the John of Revelation?
- [10] Discussions employing the above categories tend to go in circles – “on the one hand...on the other hand” – and finish with counsel to be careful in whatever we decide. The guidance when it comes to how to respond to the health directives, then, is that it’s *your* problem to work out, church council, and we (the wider church) may or may not support you in it, as we can’t establish on what basis we could judge your decision.

Decision-making: managing moral risk

- [11] The theological and so ethical problem here is that *true decisions* are risky. If the facts *dictate* what will happen next – rare in social matters – then we have no decision to make but simply live with the necessity. The workings of a virus in a community, however, are not static “facts” within a simple system of cause and effect but are a matter of statistics. Statistics tell us what will happen in general and but not in particular. Statistics tell us that, in any church gathering, the virus might be present, and that it might not. Statistics also indicate that there is a heightened risk of viral transmission when unvaccinated people are present.

- [12] This is uncontroversial. There is, however, a possibility of controversy in that we must *decide* what to do with the statistics or, more specifically, how to manage the risk indicated by the statistics. Because risks are not yet realised and may not be realised, managing a risk – deciding in relation to it – means taking a risk in the light of a risk. That is, we must choose between risky options and live with the consequences, not knowing what another choice might have led to. That the decision itself is a risk means that it may be *wrong*.
- [13] We must, however, be clear about where and in what way we would be wrong here. In another realm, we balance the risk of getting expensively sick or our church burning down over against the expense of insurance. Our decision to take insurance can be tested – unfairly – in retrospect. If we have insurance and it comes to pass that we need it, we tell ourselves that we made the right decision to pay our premiums. The unfairness in this assessment is that we have hindsight. How to gather as a congregation is about living forwards, not backwards. The gathering question, however, is also not the same kind of risk as taking insurance. It is a “moral” risk – in particular, a risk that we might not choose “what God wants”. Small mixed gatherings are not riskier than larger vaccinated-only gatherings; the risk is evened out by the different group sizes. The risk churches must navigate is whether vaccinated-only gatherings are *morally* better than smaller mixed gatherings, or not. The difference between insurance risk and moral risk is that we will eventually know whether we gambled rightly concerning insurance but can’t *know* whether we have acted rightly before God. The risk here is not about health but before God: will we offend God with segregated gatherings? Does God *judge* us here?
- [14] We never know God’s judgement, of course, apart from the commands we hear and seek to live. This judgement, however, has a shadow in the judgement others might make on our decision: kickback within or outside of the church. Such kickback is unsettling because it reminds us, painfully, of the risk in our decision-making.
- [15] Our situation is that the government health strategy *tempts* the church to decide. This is not a “bad” temptation, in the sense of being challenged to do the wrong thing. As is always the case, we have the gospel, and we must act one way or another in our particular circumstances. There is nothing new about *this*! There is also nothing new about the fact that, in the throes of making a moral decision, we focus on the law (our obligations to each other) rather than the gospel (God’s promises to us). That is, the *accountability* of those who will be judged is given more weight than the *freedom* of the children of God.
- [16] We set this freedom in the light of judgement by identifying *who* it is who, finally, judges us. What do we know about this one? It is enough for present purposes to invoke the category of “grace” as it attends the gospel, and to interpret grace to mean that the freedom of the children of God is a freedom to be *wrong*. Whatever calculations we might make to determine the best decision in view of the facts, we do not fear judgement because we are not motivated by fear but by the gospel. This does not tell us *what* to choose but only that we can. More than this, it becomes justifiable that denominational leadership *direct* congregations as to how to respond –

something which the Uniting Church, at least, seems hesitant to do. The freedom to be wrong frees the church to be clear and specific about what will be done, and why, and then to do it, uttering Kyries under its breath.

Conclusion: a specific proposal

- [17] In view of all the above, it is proposed that the best option for churches at this time is that churches should decide in favour of vaccinated-only gatherings. This is not because this is a safer option; the difference in group sizes makes the risk the same. This is also a not utilitarian solution (in that more can attend) but makes a statement about the nature and purpose of vaccination itself which accords with Christian understandings of the social nature of human existence and our dependence upon each other for our well-being. This is a matter in which we should “discern the body”, and act bodily. This is to say that the church should declare that, where it is necessary and possible, vaccination is good discipleship, and the church should act as if this were the case by limiting attendance to vaccinated/exempt only until vaccination ceases to impinge on social gatherings.
- [18] There a number of attendant issues which deserve comment.
- a. “Policing” this policy has its own challenges. This will be simplified by clear and well-understood policy. No one should turn up at church and be surprised by the policy which is in place. Designating people to explain the policy would be better than leaving it to the rostered door steward.
 - b. The issue of confidentiality should be acknowledged: people are required to be public about something they consider to be personal (interpreting vaccination status in terms of medical history). The application of a sharp separation between personal and public here needs to be challenged. Part of our personal being is our social being – you are part of me – and a virus weaponises human sociality against us. Duty of care towards myself and each other will sometimes include knowing whether the other person might be a heightened infection risk to me. In addition, a policy of gathering the vaccinated only will not identify who is not vaccinated (as some vaccinated will also not attend). This policy requires only that those who *attend* are vaccinated.
 - c. Some people may have been unable to be vaccinated. What is important here is that no judgement is made of such people, that this policy has only a limited duration, and the church is willing and able to offer other ministry to them (and to the unvaccinated) until such time as they are able to attend gathered public worship.