

ACC POSITION PAPER

ACC RESPONSE TO COVID VACCINATIONS

This statement is an internal document and reflects the position of the ACC. Undoubtedly there will be instances that will arise where you need to consider how to practically apply the below statement; in such instances we would encourage you to seek formal advice, specific to the situation you are considering.

The ACC does not hold an official ethical position on the use of vaccines. We encourage individuals to decide based on personal conscience, medical advice, and the common good.

OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused death and devastation across the world, has resulted in numerous challenges for the church and society, both globally and in Australia. The quest by governments and agencies to minimise the medical impact of the virus through social restrictions and other methods has led to many other challenges in our communities. Some of these public health orders have significantly reduced the potential death rate of the pandemic in Australia, unlike many other contexts overseas. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ, it is our mandate to be a light and hope to the world during these challenging times.

The Church has not been exempted from the many challenges precipitated by the current global pandemic. In many local contexts, church pastors and leaders have been required to navigate pivoting to online church services, as well as providing pastoral care, community services, and other activities in a restricted capacity. Despite this, the Church has continued to be a pillar of strength, a comfort in the storm, and to emphasise faith over fear. In fact, plagues and pandemics are not new for the Christian Church. Throughout its history, the Church has been forced to navigate disease outbreaks. However, this current situation raises various ethical and practical questions regarding public policy, vaccines, and the implications of vaccine passports within Australia.

RELEVANT INFORMATION REGARDING CURRENT ISSUES

1. Vaccine Passports

Globally, individual governments are exploring legislation regarding vaccination passports for large gatherings, including religious services. This approach to easing restrictions is not unique to Australia. The ACC would strongly object to any legislation or government restrictions that would limit in-person, weekend worship services based on vaccination status. Our churches have always been open to everyone, without discrimination.

It is possible that evidence of vaccination for COVID-19 may be required for international travel and inter-state travel, and some vocations in Australia, such as aged care. In some other nations, vaccine passports are currently required for entry, such as evidence of vaccination for yellow fever, but such requirements have not been experienced in Australia. While desirous of public safety and wellbeing, we do have strong concerns about potential temporary and permanent restrictions within Australia for

religious activities based on vaccination requirements. As noted, we will object to, and convey respectfully to governing bodies our opposition to, any such restrictions that potentially impede the life and health of the Church.

2. Conspiracy theories

Unfortunately, conspiracy theories thrive in the present environment of uncertainty and often present a mixture of both truth and untruth. The prophet Isaiah warned his community about being caught up in conspiracy theories, particularly those conspiracies that invited fear rather than faith. In Isaiah 8:12-13, the prophet encourages proper fear of God rather than a focus on fearing politically fuelled conspiracies. Instead, we recommend individuals conduct careful research, using trustworthy sources from which to base their own opinions.

THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE MOVEMENT'S POSITION

As noted above, the ACC does not hold an official ethical position on the use of vaccines. We encourage individuals to make a decision based on personal conscience, medical advice, and the common good.

Christians with a genuine desire to be faithful to Scripture hold different views on the question of vaccines. However, such differences should not undermine the unity of the Church. As a church, we are united as "one" in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Our love for one another identifies us as disciples of Christ (John 13:34-5). Therefore, we should clearly and consistently communicate the need to love others, regardless of their views on such ethical issues and public policy, and treat them with dignity and respect.

1. Love and respect one another

God intends that we reflect the divine nature by living in harmony as equals and with mutual respect. We are to love God and people (Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 13:8-10). In practice, this means that every person is to be valued and nurtured. No one should have their personhood diminished in interaction with others, nor should they be subjected to manipulation or coercion. This includes not only coercion by governing bodies, but also includes church leaders misusing their leadership and position of power to bully or coerce others to act contrary to their conscience.

2. Personal freedoms

We encourage believers to consider the instruction of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:23-32, who directs the Corinthian church to balance their personal freedoms with the good of others, and the witness of the gospel. Paul writes that we have the "right to do anything," but also reminds us that not everything is beneficial nor constructive. He clarifies this statement by saying, "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (v.24). While we should act based on our own conscience or a proper risk assessment of personal health, we must also act for the sake of the other person's conscience and not just your own. All that we do should bring glory to God.

3. Common Good

The Bible regularly exhorts believers to act for the benefit of others and not just for themselves. Jesus taught people to love their neighbour as themselves (Mark 12:30-31, also Matt 7:12). Paul exhorted the church in Philippi to not be selfish in ambition but rather "in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Phil 2:4). To follow Christ means to care for others (as well as oneself), and to seek the good of others—even those who have rejected Christ (John 1:11). In seeking the common good, we seek what is best for the community, prioritising the most vulnerable or weak. Our Christian faith seeks to mend the world. Our lives and actions should point others to Christ as our Saviour, Healer, Spirit-baptiser, and Lord.

4. Honour government authorities

In 1 Peter 2:13-17 we are reminded to submit to government authorities (see also Romans 13:1-7). That is, we are to live according to the governmental order. Peter writes, "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor" (v.17). Peter wrote these words amid persecution by the Roman emperor. Clearly, this assumes that obedience of governing authorities does not directly contravene the commands of God (see for example, the civil disobedience of Daniel's friends in Dan. 3:13-18 when required to practice idolatry). While Christians are to live as free people (v.16), we do not use this liberty to create social chaos or moral irresponsibility. Instead, we are called to obey governing authorities as part of our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and our service to the world. This includes following public health orders.

PASTORAL QUESTIONS

1. Practice Self-Care

The effects of public health order restrictions and isolation are felt across the general community and the Church in several ways, including emotionally, economically, socially, and spiritually. Pastors and leaders are at the front-line in caring for others. It can be easy for pastors and leaders to neglect their own care. Some basic self-care practices include a healthy diet, adequate sleep, as well as regular exercise. We would also emphasise a regular and robust prayer life and daily Bible reading habit.

Some key resources produced by the ACC to encourage self-care are:

- Ps Alun Davies' message on 'Living Water' at the ACC21 National Conference:
<https://vimeo.com/551260944/d4ea6e25e2>
- Recent webinar with Ps Wayne Alcorn and Dr Robi Sonderegger:
<https://vimeo.com/591289684/b9db97f044>
- Other Dr Robi Sonderegger resources available:
<https://empower.peoplecare.global>
- AC webinar with Ps Alun Davies and Dr Bec Louder: 'Resilience in Leadership':
<https://youtu.be/yU55LBfwnQI>

2. Provide Positive Pastoral Care

The focus of believers, and the Church, during this time, should remain on Christ as the centre of our faith. Core to our beliefs is Jesus Christ as Saviour, Healer, Spirit-baptiser, and soon coming King. Our responsibility as pastors is to keep people focused on Christ.

3. Stay up to date on relevant information

The ACC website contains helpful links and resources regarding COVID-19. It is accessed via the pastor's login, and includes resources for church, safety, and other webinars.

<http://access.acc.org.au/RESOURCES/COVID19Resources/tabid/2257/language/en-AU/Default.aspx>

4. Caution on Providing Medical Advice on Vaccines

Generally, ACC pastors and leaders tend not to have training or formal education in the medical or scientific field. We strongly recommend that those without such expertise in medical or scientific fields should not offer advice in these areas, but direct people to their medical practitioner. There

may be valid medical reasons for a person not to receive a Covid vaccination, so each person must consider any risk under advice. However, as we trust and receive medical advice from medical practitioners for other health concerns, so should we trust and receive advice from them in a consistent manner. We should seek to act on such advice for our personal benefit and the benefit of those in our families and community.

We strongly encourage leaders to consider the implications of public arguments regarding the vaccine, either for or against. One key example is the use of the slogan 'my body my choice' argument. This slogan originates in promoting the argument for women and girls for reproductive choices regarding their bodies, particularly the pro-choice pro-abortion argument (see, for example, the 'My Body, My Rights' campaign by Amnesty International <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/my-body-my-rights/>). Again, abortion is a difficult ethical issue. However, there is a risk in conflating the argument for these ethical positions (of vaccine choice and pro-choice for abortion) by using this common argument for bodily autonomy. This argument prioritises the personal autonomy and right of an individual over others, including the unborn. Therefore we ask that arguments on this issue are carefully considered.

In the meantime, we continue to pray for our nation at this challenging time.

