

14 December 2021

Pastoral Letter:

Life in the Time of COVID-19

To All Members and Friends of the Lutheran Church of Australia Queensland District

Dear Friends in Christ,

In this time of uncertainty as we face changes to Queensland's border restrictions and public health and social measures, I'm writing to you about our ongoing journey with COVID-19.

As we approach the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, we also approach the commencement of the third year living amid a global health pandemic. COVID-19 is not only a health crisis, but to use Martin Luther's word, it is a collective *anfechtung*, a dark night of the soul. A dark night of the soul always involves a dying of the old self and the entering into a space of ambiguity before a new narrative emerges and God creates new life from death. That is what God does! He raises the dead, he creates new life, he turns the wilderness into streams of living water. COVID-19 does not take God by surprise.

Much has changed in society over the last two years. We have been blessed in Queensland that our infection rates have been low. That, however, is likely to change with the opening of our borders. New public health and social measures are also being introduced, which will have an effect especially on those who have not been vaccinated. The health directives in relation to participation in church services and events are complicated and multifaceted. I encourage you to carefully read the advice and information that is sent to you from Church House, Milton.

Personally, I chose to be vaccinated against COVID-19 earlier this year after consulting my GP and other health care professionals, including a medical scientist from the University of Queensland. After listening and reading, I felt confident that the medical advice given to me was sound and the safety and efficacy of the vaccine was high. I am now waiting to receive my booster dose early in the New Year. I chose to be vaccinated for my own health and wellbeing, as well as the health and wellbeing of others around me. My wife Minna works in the disability sector, amongst the most vulnerable in our society. My Melbourne-based parents are elderly and frail. I regularly visit our aged-care facilities and interact with older Australians. By being vaccinated, I seek to love and care for myself, my friends and family and all people with whom I come into contact. I firmly believe that my health and wellbeing is deeply bound with the health and wellbeing of all others.

The Queensland government is introducing significant changes to public health and social measures, which come into effect on 17 December. The changes have the potential of creating conflict and friction in our communities. Please be gentle with yourself and with each other, for God is gentle with you. Couch your community's conversations in a spirit of gentleness and forgiveness. I encourage mutual conversations about the complexities of the current health directions within our communities, with a commitment and a willingness to listen to one another and the desire to seek Christ in the other. We are all in this together. Our current challenges can draw us together and be a source of healing.

I especially encourage the governing committees of calling bodies to have conversations with their pastors and church workers. New health directives restrict unvaccinated from working in early childhood services, schools and working in or visiting aged-care facilities, disability services or hospitals. Our pastors are called to regularly work in these spaces to fulfil the expectations of their call. Hence, it is important that pastors and the governing committees of calling bodies talk to one another in a spirit of transparency and mutual trust. For those pastors who work in early childhood, school or aged-care settings in any capacity, the new health directives make COVID-19 vaccination mandatory.

Although we live in a time of continued uncertainty, Advent and Christmas remind us that the angels' exhortation to the shepherds, is also a message to us: 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people' (Luke 2:10). Christianity's message is inherently hope-filled. We have confidence that God is faithful and that he does not abandon us in our collective *anfechtung*, but he continues to journey with us through this COVID-19 wilderness. In biblical imagery, the wilderness serves a cathartic and purifying purpose. It is in times of sojourn in the wilderness that we can become aware not only of the beasts of fear, to use Patrick Oliver's words, but also of the fact that we are children of God. We are the beloved.

The following points are based on material that has been prepared in the churchwide LCA space. I offer them as encouragement and guidance in this time of COVID-19:

1. God calls us to love our neighbour and put their needs ahead of our own.

Jesus modelled a life of love and service to his neighbours in which he considered their needs ahead of his own. We can follow Jesus' example in our current situation by actively listening to each other with the desire to understand rather than to persuade; by being humble and seeing things from the perspective of the other person; and by caring for and praying for those who hold opinions different from our own. When disagreements over COVID-19 safe practices cause tension or threaten to divide congregations and/or families, we encourage each of us to come before God in prayer and repentance, and to open our hearts to peace and reconciliation, through Christ.

2. Vaccination can be seen as a gift from God, an answer to prayer.

I thank God for the unprecedented cooperation between medical scientists from around the world as they developed a range of COVID-19 vaccines in such a timely way. I support ongoing work to increase access to these vaccines, particularly in countries where vaccination rates remain low. I also thank God for ongoing research into the disease and for emerging vaccines that may be even more effective and longer lasting than the ones we already have. Such medical advances are one way in which God brings physical health and healing to his world. I thank God that many have decided to be vaccinated. At the time of writing, over 93% of people in Australia and almost 90% of Queenslanders have had at least one vaccine dose.

3. I encourage church members and friends to consult their GP.

I encourage church members to heed the advice of the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) and the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) in Australia on vaccine safety and efficacy. These advisory bodies are comprised of highly qualified people who are committed to safe medical practice. The currently available vaccines, as with all things in life, are not infallible. They do, however, offer us substantial protection against serious illness and death, slow the spread of COVID-19 within the community, and help our health services meet everyone's need for health care in an

effective and timely manner. Getting vaccinated can be a practical means of loving our neighbour as we love ourselves, by freeing up resources that otherwise might not be available for the care of others if large numbers of us remain unvaccinated. I encourage you to consult your GP. Your GP is best placed to offer you advice in relation to your health and wellbeing needs.

4. I recognise the freedom of individuals to decide against vaccination.

The church's mission in the world is to proclaim Jesus Christ. The church can offer advice for reasons of public safety and how to care for each other in difficult times, but it cannot and does not intend to take the place of government. It can encourage certain behaviours in a church setting, but it has neither the calling nor the means to compel vaccinations. Neither would it be wise to make blanket rules that segregate our common life in worship and fellowship. Local issues arising in this COVID-19 environment must be handled as close to the situation as possible. Consequences arising from decisions by individuals or families not to be vaccinated, or not to comply with COVID-19 safe regulations, must be worked through by those affected within the congregations and communities in which they arise, as is already happening. The LCAQD and its leaders want to support and encourage you as you work through these issues on a case-by-case basis.

5. I do not view current government health directives as religious persecution.

While we may not agree with their every decision, I believe that our governing authorities are earnestly trying to achieve the best possible outcome for Australians in a difficult and emerging situation. This view is in line with biblical and Lutheran teaching as expressed, for instance, in Luther's explanations to the fourth commandment in the Small and Large Catechisms. I do not interpret current governmental COVID-19 related directives about church attendance numbers and protections as intentionally denying us the freedom to practise our faith. Similar restrictions apply to all organisations across society, including sporting and social clubs, businesses, entertainment venues and workplaces.

In summary, I encourage you not to be fearful of COVID-19 vaccines, but to consult your GP. Taken under medical advice, and combined with the practical health measures we've become familiar with, they are currently our best option – not only for ourselves, but for society at large, especially those people who are most vulnerable to the ill-effects of the disease.

Therefore, I close with an encouragement from Philippians 2:1-5:

'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.'

Your Fellow Servant



Mark Vainikka

Bishop, LCAQD

Scripture quotations from The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. (1989). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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