



OCTOBER 2021

A Statement About Church Attendance and Vaccination

COMPASSION IS A CHRISTIAN PRIORITY. Jesus tells us to love God with our all hearts and to love those around us as we do ourselves (Mark 12:29-31). Being concerned for the safety of others is a clear expression of compassion and therefore the member churches of the Tasmanian Council of Churches encourage all people to be vaccinated.

As more Tasmanians become vaccinated for COVID-19 and the state government looks to allowing greater ease of entry to Tasmania, it is possible that the government will follow the example of other states and territories and mandate that attendance at public gatherings is permitted only for double-vaccinated people. For churches, as for all religious institutions, this has raised what may appear to be dilemma between being inclusive and following public health orders. The Tasmanian Council of Churches does not see this as a dilemma.

FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH, WORSHIP IS FUNDAMENTAL. Corporate worship brings individuals together in community to offer prayer and praise to God through word, song and ceremony. Corporate worship also reminds each worshipper that the life of faith draws them into community, into something that is larger than themselves, and that faith is not just something for the individual but informs and transforms every aspect of human life and society. Within the Christian community there is a common conviction that worship is open to all. Following the example of Jesus, the Church believes that it is to be servant of all, and that in welcoming people it is both modelling God's welcome of all and to welcoming God.

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Throughout the pandemic, Tasmania's churches have adapted worship to maintain their obligation to abide by public health orders and to do everything possible to care for the well-being of individuals and the community. Churches have cared for people's safety by providing alternatives such as online worship when in-person worship has not been possible and by maintaining contact with those who are isolated. When in-person worship has been possible, churches have ensured electronic and manual check-in facilities, the availability of hand-sanitizer and that the number of attendees is consistent with appropriate physical distancing. These are small inconveniences that are important to ensure the safety of all.

If, in future, public health orders prevent unvaccinated people from attending church, churches will continue to provide alternative opportunities for worship for those who are unvaccinated in order to maintain our commitment to inclusive worship as well as fulfil our obligation for public health. As a matter of pastoral care, if people feel there is discrimination towards the unvaccinated, we gently remind people that in almost all cases the decision not to be vaccinated is a matter of personal choice carrying certain consequences. Nevertheless, within church communities there will be different attitudes about this issue: there will be some who demand inclusion and others who demand exclusion, causing tensions within communities. This, too, is a pastoral issue requiring sensitive attention and being careful not to be drawn into 'either/or' debates.

THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE SUPPORTING VACCINATION IS CLEAR, with the medical reasons for not being vaccinated being rare. There are no commonly accepted theological reasons for opposing vaccination. We also don't have to choose between trusting God or taking wise action. For those who are hesitant about getting vaccinated, we encourage all to listen to these concerns and try to sense where they arise from, avoiding hurtful criticism and provocative language. We caution against the reliance on social media for health advice. Algorithms designed to generate profits or to create division can rapidly direct those with a genuine enquiry towards conspiracies about vaccination or even active opposition. We urge all to not allow the strength of your convictions to betray you into making statements or allegations that are unfair or untrue, and to remember the importance of compassion.

Adopted at the Executive meeting of the Tasmanian Council of Churches,
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The Tasmanian Council of Churches (TCC)

is a fellowship of Christian Churches in Tasmania committed to the promotion of Christian unity.

Member Churches

Anglican Church of Australia
Churches of Christ Tasmania
Roman Catholic Church

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
The Salvation Army
Uniting Church in Australia