**The Challenge of Covid to the Christian Churches**

7 March 2023

Rev Andrew M Tiver

ativer@y7mail.com

In early 2020 when Covid loomed as a threatening plague I searched out a copy of Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Years* (1722)*.*  I was interested to know how the church had responded to plagues of the past. When the great plague of London first came upon the city the response of church and state was to sponsor services of confession and repentance to implore the mercy of God. The aetiology of plague was to be found in divine punishment for sin. The churches of every persuasion were overflowing with suitably humble penitents … at least at first. Over time many of the clergy of the established church sought refuge in the countryside and Defoe records how many of the pulpits were taken over by non-conformists. While no one was safe from the plague, it was most severe on the poor, who were confined to rat infested squalor and had no escape to a rural refuge.

Defoe presents a stark contrast to the social and religious response to the covid plague in our modern secular present. Most people turned have not turned to religion for answers but to biomedical scientific knowledge. It is not state sponsored penitential rites that people attended to each day but to the daily press conferences of the chief medical officer. Churches were not full but rather physically closed or subject to strict social distancing rules.

In 2020 there were several Christian publications that came out from diverse perspectives that attempted to address questions of theodicy; if God is good, why are we suffering the effects of Covid? However, they did not get much traction because these did not seem to be the kinds of questions people were struggling with, even within religious communities. It was not God who was the focus but rather support or rejection of the biomedical consensus.

While there were Christians who strongly resisted the biomedical dominance of the covid response, most mainstream Christian churches, as one commentator observes, “publicly moved closer to a wholehearted, accommodationist embrace of science than in any previous pandemic.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In May 2020, Pope Francis called on believers of all faiths to join in a common day of fasting and prayer to seek divine help to overcome the epidemic. Monsignor Yoannis Gaid (second papal secretary) articulated this as a call to the faithful to pray that ‘God Almighty may inspire and guide scientists and researchers to discover a vaccine soon’. He further explained how Covid 19 had demonstrated the complementarity of science and faith. The head of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew, spoke of the need to embark on a journey to the Promised Land, ‘where science, by the grace of God, will overcome this virus.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This same attitude was held by mainstream denominations here is Australia. It explains why most churches were willing to embrace health directives and seek out other ways of maintaining church life, even in the absence of face-to-face gatherings.

There were Christian groups particularly in the USA but also in other places including Australia who vigorously opposed vaccine mandates, masking, and lockdowns. Many of these groups had links to conservative evangelical churches and to some Pentecostal and charismatic traditions. Gareth Jones in a study of religious concerns around covid vaccines suggests that distrust of biological and biomedical sciences existed prior to the pandemic and was rooted in biblical literalists equating biological science with evolutionary theory and the perceived threat it posed to the maintenance of biblical inerrancy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In Australia opposition to vaccination mandates and health regimes were evident for example in the widely circulated Ezekiel Declaration and the Moses Statement, both of which had their origin among conservative protestant clergy and were written as open letters to the prime minister to protest what was referred to as, ‘therapeutic totalitarianism’. Collectively these statements were signed by thousands of clergy people from around Australia. They challenged the right of the state to restrict the freedom to meet for worship, the loss of personal freedom, the way in which vaccine mandates supposedly created what was referred to as ‘medical apartheid’ etc.

Some Protestant and Catholic ‘right to life’ groups also claimed that the vaccines were tainted by unethically obtained foetal material used in their development. The official position of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith of the Roman Catholic Church in 2020 was that the Covid vaccines were morally acceptable.

In the great plague of London, the plague was identified as divine punishment and repentance as the appropriate human response. In 2020 the emphasis among mainstream Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches was not on repentance but on ethical conduct towards one’s neighbour, especially the wellbeing of the most marginal and disadvantaged.

The criterion for ethical action was how the church can contribute to the common good. Mask mandates, vaccinations, following social distancing and lockdowns, even when it meant disruption to worship, was presented as ethically right, not primarily because it prevented us from becoming sick, but as a duty to the welfare and health of our neighbour, especially the most vulnerable.

In my own local Uniting Church in eastern Melbourne this was clearly the ethical criteria for our covid decision making, for example … when and if we should resume face-to-face gathering, how it would be done, who should come, how and if we should engage in home visiting etc.

We also put a lot of energy into maintaining our social outreach to those in need in the wider community. We saw it as one of our greatest achievements that we were able to maintain a food bank, meal programs and even home delivery of food to people in need throughout the covid period without significant interruption. This became even more important because we saw other churches and community organizations in our area suspending their services, not primarily because of lack of commitment, but because they were dependent on volunteers who were older and considered covid vulnerable themselves.

All Christian traditions share an understanding of church as in some way the gathered community of the faithful, so controls on gatherings presented a fundamental challenge to ecclesiological self-understanding. How is the church constituted if the people cannot gather face-to-face? We all share some basic understanding that the church is constituted mystically as the body of Christ, but the church is also necessarily a material face-to-face reality, a ‘visible society’.

The central liturgical action for most protestant and non-protestant churches is the mass or Lord’s supper (there are some exceptions, e.g., the Salvation Army) even though in some traditions it is celebrated less frequently. For the Roman Catholic Church, the mass is regarded as a re-presenting of Jesus sacrifice which the priest offers acting in the person of Christ ("*in persona Christi*"), however for most other traditions, including the Orthodox tradition, eucharistic celebration requires the presence of the gathered community.

In the Uniting Church for example, our national body (the Assembly) gave temporary permission for the eucharist to be celebrated virtually or on-line. While this was widely embraced, there were those who raised questions about its legitimacy. The community may be said to be gathered virtually when the people simultaneously join in a live stream at 10.00am on a Sunday morning, but what about those who watch the service at another time?

Conducting online worship has forced many churches to rethink fundamental ecclesial issues such as how is the church as the body of Christ constituted in time and space?

During Covid most churches adopted some form of online worship, however how this was done varied a great deal. For some denominations members were encouraged to participate in a service streamed from a central place, e.g., a cathedral service conducted by a bishop, others were very local such as 20 people gather in real time in a zoom room, yet others developed pre-recorded services with high production qualities, that attracted people from outside their regular membership, often from distant places. There is a Baptist church in Melbourne that adopted on-line worship, attracted people from interstate and overseas, and has not returned to face-to-face worship but plans to continue as a growing geographically dispersed online community.

In some places the local church has been strengthened and maintained, while in others, people have become alienated and disconnected from their local church. While this does not necessarily follow along denominational lines, there was a tendency for some ecclesial structures to be more able to adapt and respond than others. In clerically focused church communities where the role of pastoral care was filled by one person or a small group, it became more difficult to maintain contact with members over the long periods of lockdown and social distancing. In more ‘congregational’ type structures where roles were more dispersed and shared among the membership more creative care models emerged.

Again, to relate my own experience as a minister in the Uniting Church. As a church in the reformed tradition, we share a confessional principle of “the priesthood of all believers”. In its origin this meant that the believer came to God through the mediation of Christ alone and came to reflect a change in the understanding of priests and ministers as servants of the community of believers rather than sacramental mediators. It also came to mean that believers shared together with ministers or priests in being engaged in the whole ministry of the church.

This meant that when it came to covid restrictions the membership of the church was already prepared theologically to understand that they had a ministry of mutual care for each other.

We experimented with putting members into small clusters (what we called pastoral circles). The task of each person was to keep in contact with everyone else in the group. For example, if there were five in the group, everyone in that group would call the four other people each week, and in turn receive calls from the other group members. Many went beyond this in sending cards and gifts, joining in a weekly zoom together. Despite covid many found this an unprecedented time of building greater intimacy and connection with other church members.

While the impact of covid was across the whole of the society the burden did not fall equally on all. Women carried an unequal burden because they already had an unequal share in the primary care of others, not just their own children, but also dependent parents. Women also constituted most of our care workforce, in nursing, aged care, home care, childcare, etc.

There is also what is being referred to as the ‘shadow pandemic’ which has been the dramatic increase in violence and coercive control against women since the advent of covid, not only in Australia, but as a global crisis. As churches I don’t believe we were adequately prepared or effective in helping women carry these added burdens or supporting them as they were confronted with increased abuse. Most Christian churches remain patriarchal in some ways, and as so often what those in power fail to experience or see themselves, fails to receive an adequate response.

Other groups that we struggled to adequately minister to, were youth and the elderly. For most Christian churches in Australia high school and university aged young people are already a missing demographic. As most of you know too well, studying online and study disruption was incredibly stressful. After a school week of online engagement more of the same was the last thing young people wanted, and as churches we had very few other resources, even peer support groups and phone calls did not prove very successful. In my own church community, we lost these people and are only just now after lots of focused work beginning to reengage.

Older people were also extremely vulnerable not only to covid itself, but to social isolation, which made many feel less confident and for some resulted in more rapid cognitive decline.

Within Christian communities there is a high expectation that ministers and priests will be available to church members at times of significant illness and at the end of life. There were times during covid when this was not possible, as well as limitations on opportunities to console the bereaved, on the conduct of funerals, and on who could attend. Other significant religious events such as baptisms and weddings were also disrupted.

I have contrasted the very overt religious focus of the 17th century with the biomedical focus on the 21st century, also the limited attention to questions of theodicy, however there is research to show that there was one area where people were drawn into deeper and often faith based self-reflection.

Data from McCrindle Research indicates that: “During the pandemic almost half of Australians have thought more about the meaning of life (47%) or their own mortality (47%). A third of Australians have thought more about God (33%), while three in ten (28%) have prayed more.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

People have indicated they had more time for deep reflection and re-evaluation of diverse aspects of their lives. “Four in five Australians agree COVID-19 has clarified the relationships in which they want to invest their time (79%) and, positively, has strengthened their family/household relationships (79%). The experience has also ushered in a return to local and a focus on community, with half of Australians (53%) valuing a strong local community more than they did three years ago.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is maybe too early to know if these changes will be enduring or what practical outcomes they will have in terms of faith and church participation. Anecdotally from my own congregation there are some church members who are no longer around or have a more tenuous relationship to the church, but there are also a significant number of new people who have become attenders who may have had a church involvement in their personal history, but who were not attending a church immediately prior to covid. For most of these the decision to attend church came out of a process of reconsidering life priorities, and some had also engaged with our on-line services before they decided to attend in person.

The impacts of the pandemic on society, churches and people’s faith have been deep, extensive, and profound, I am not sure we know the extent of this impact fully. Another final story, not scientifically sourced or tested, and way outside my sphere of competence, relates to something our play group staff said last week, ‘The kids are so different than before covid, they are so focused on their parents, and are not confident in playing with the other kids’, when I asked why I was reminded that all the kids we have now are covid babies. I imagine in covid the circle of adults around these kids narrowed and intensified, rather than a wider circle of adults and other kids. What will that mean going forward?

This has been a very narrow presentation I have not even attempted to discuss the international dimension of covid and Christianity, I know from reading that in other parts of the world the covid response and the experience of the churches has been very different from here in Australia.

Thank you for listening.

1. Howard Phillips (2020) “’17, ’18, ’19: religion and science in three pandemics, 1817, 1918, and 2019” *Journal of Global History* 15: 3, 434–443 (p.442) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Phillips *ibid* pp.442-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gareth Jones (2022) “Religious Concerns About Covid-19 Vaccines: From Abortions to Religious Freedom” *Journal of Religion and Health* 61:2233-2252 (p.2235) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark McCrindle & Sophie Renton (October 2022) *Australia’s spiritual climate,* McCrindle Research Pty Ltd. (p.7) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.,* (p.11) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)