

September 17, 2021

**A Perspective on COVID-19 Vaccines and Church Re-opening** by Rev. Daniel Hayward

I'm writing this at the end of a federal election campaign in which anti-vaccine protests got much of the attention. It seems that vaccination has dominated our news for months. As many communities of faith return to in-person worship, I get questions about vaccination and churches: can access to the church building be restricted to fully vaccinated people? Can ministry personnel and lay employees be required to be vaccinated? Can ministers issue exemptions from vaccination, or mask wearing, on religious grounds?

In responding to these inquiries, I am mindful of our call to be the church, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. I am also attentive to how our denomination's polity reserves different responsibilities for different courts of the church. Accordingly, when asked about exemptions from vaccination or masking, my response is that such exceptions are without precedent in our tradition. The United Church of Canada has never opposed vaccines or other public health measures. Therefore, I would argue that it would be outside the authority of individual ministers or the governing bodies of communities of faith to grant such exemptions; this is not a responsibility they have in our polity, and is so unprecedented that it would require the General Council – which is responsible for doctrine – to allow them to do so.

Regarding vaccination and attendance at in-person worship, there have been calls for the General Council or Regional Council to mandate that only double-vaccinated people can attend worship services, but this is beyond the authority of these church courts. In our polity the responsibility for worship lies with the Session or other governing body of a community of faith.

Ontario is now introducing requirements for a vaccine passport to enter many businesses and events, a system already in place in Quebec. Places of worship are exempted from this mandate. But this does not mean that communities of faith cannot decide on their own restrictions. While only specified businesses and organizations are legally required to use vaccine passports, the provincial governments do not prevent other bodies from establishing a vaccination policy.

In June the United Church's legal counsel gave guidance on how communities of faith can approach questions about vaccination, and, even in this pandemic time when things change so quickly, her advice still stands up well: that it may be reasonable for communities of faith to implement a mandatory vaccination policy, given that indoor worship is a high-risk activity, particularly for the older worshipers who make up a significant proportion of many churches, and children who cannot be vaccinated currently.

Such a policy would need to be crafted with great care. It could not discriminate against people who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons, so accommodation would have to be made. The policy's application to activities in the church building other than worship would have to be

considered prudently – as the legal advice document says, requiring vaccinations for people to access a food bank or other social services would likely not be reasonable. Similar caution would need to be exercised with tenants and inserting a vaccination requirement into a new or existing lease. Privacy laws govern how health information is handled, so records of attendees' vaccination status cannot be retained. Finally, such policies are untested in law and there are few legal precedents should a person who is refused entrance go to court. I encourage you to read the entire document: <https://eoorc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Vaccination-Policies-in-Congregations-24Jun2021.pdf>.

Similar care needs to be exercised with communities of faith requiring vaccination for ministry personnel and lay employees. This is an area where more than one church court is involved – the General Council, for example, is responsible for the ethical standards and standards of practice for ministers – so please bring any questions to me as your regional council staff.

As communities of faith grapple with these considerations, balancing safety, privacy and accommodation, these debates can get emotional and feelings run high. I have read very heated discussions on social media. As a disabled person, I appreciate that the arguments in favour of a mandatory vaccination policy are made out of concern for people like me. But I also understand the worry that such policies limit the church's welcome, just as disabled people have been excluded through barriers of church architecture and attitude.

We need to remember that any disputes are taking place within a small part of the spectrum of possible views on vaccination. The United Church is pro-vaccination. The Moderator has spoken out in favour of vaccination numerous times. We are a leader in a coalition of churches for global vaccine equity. The majority of our ministry personnel and lay people have eagerly embraced vaccination. We are on the same team. Disagreement on how to approach a vaccination mandate must not obscure this reality, within the community of faith and within the regional council, and must not diminish our compassion for each other and our respect for each community of faith deciding what is best in its context. As A Song of Faith says, we are all broken but hopeful believers, in community, striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place.