

Friday, 17 September 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers

Pastoral Letter regarding Vaccination and COVID-19

I write to raise the issue of vaccination for COVID-19.

Since the NSW Government released news of its Roadmap to Freedom last week there has been much discussion about the easing of COVID-19 Restrictions over the coming months. With Sydney reaching 80% (first vaccination) of the 16+ population last week, it seems certain that some of the elements of the plan will soon be impacting us. This has implications for us as individuals but also of course for the Anglican Church in Grafton Diocese.

Key to COVID-19 recovery is vaccination. The evidence is clear that we all need to get vaccinated in order to protect ourselves and others.

The government's roadmap assumes certain workers will need to be vaccinated. For those who work in schools (including SRE Teachers), for example, the NSW Government has announced that full vaccination will be required by 8 November. Similarly, the Federal Government has signalled that for healthcare workers (including Hospital Chaplains), full vaccination will be mandatory from 30 September.

While the government has not released the details, it is possible that those leading Public Worship, including officiating at Weddings and Funerals, will also need to be fully vaccinated before the end of the year. If a Public Health Order mandates this, licensed ministers in the Diocese of Grafton will need to comply. Such a mandate could also apply to other church workers, such as Parish Office and Administrative Staff (who interact with vulnerable people on a regular basis).

For these reasons, at a recent meeting of NSW Diocesan Bishops we were advised that Dioceses should begin to assess the vaccination status of their licensed ministers and other staff. In Grafton Diocese we are responding to this by asking licensed ordained and lay ministers and administrative staff in parishes and the Registry, to respond to a *voluntary* survey to report (anonymously) their current vaccination status. The Registrar will soon send a Survey Monkey link to all clergy who hold a licence (including ATOs), all LLMs and Parish Office and Registry Staff. When you receive it, I encourage you to complete this short survey to assist us.

Perhaps more difficult and less clear is the issue of whether or not the government will require full vaccination for anyone attending services of Public Worship. There is currently a public debate about this and the government's position is unclear. Last week the Archbishop of Sydney, Kanishka Raffel, together with other religious leaders from various denominations and faiths, attended a meeting with the Health Minister. The religious leaders expressed concerns about requiring full vaccination for attendance at worship. We do not want the unvaccinated to be denied access to church life indefinitely or for any longer than absolutely necessary. Also this would place unreasonable demands on volunteers such as welcomers.

In Archbishop Kanishka's words, "*it is not appropriate to ask volunteer welcomees to be responsible for turning away unvaccinated people*". Despite expressing concerns about this eventuality, as Provincial Bishops we once again committed ourselves to full compliance with Public Health Orders.

I have fully discussed all these matters with my colleague Bishop Greg Homeming, the Bishop of Lismore, and both of us are totally committed to complying with Public Health Orders.

Please pray in these uncertain times for our political leaders as well as leaders in education, health and other industries, as well as Bishop Greg and myself, as we wrestle with these matters which have a direct impact not only on our church life but on the public good.

Yours in Christ

+ Murray

Dr Murray Harvey
Bishop of Grafton