

**"Unvaxxed and Uninvited: Christians Whose Communities Worshipped Without Them
During a Pandemic"**

By Laura Rousseau

**A Graduate Project Submitted to
Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, Nova Scotia;
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Divinity.**

April 5, 2023

© Laura Rousseau

**Approved: The Rev Dr David Csinos
Associate Professor
Of Pastoral Theology
Date: April 5, 2023**

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Research Question.....	4
Methodology.....	6
Data Analysis	
Theme 1: Suffering to Forgiveness.....	11
Theme 2: Fear to Hope.....	13
Theme 3: Isolation to Community.....	18
Theological and Pastoral Implications.....	22
Conclusion.....	25
Works Cited.....	27
Appendix A: Literature Review “Christian Responses to Vaccine Mandates”.....	29
Appendix B: Theological Essay “Vaccine Mandates for Christian Worship”.....	37
Appendix C: Research Ethics Board Certificate.....	45
Appendix D : Research Ethics Board Proposal.....	46

Abstract

"Unvaxxed and Uninvited: Christians Whose Communities Worshipped Without Them During a Pandemic"

Author: Laura Rousseau

"Unvaxxed and Uninvited" is a social constructivist phenomenological study that describes the experiences of six unvaccinated Christians who could not attend worship during the Coronavirus pandemic due to their vaccination status. Themes emerging from participant interviews are presented in three experiential spectrums: from suffering to forgiveness, from fear to hope, and from isolation to community. Pastoral implications of this study rooted in the mystical image of "Divine Mercy" suggest that further exploration of issues such as clericalism, technology use and communication strategies may be helpful in overcoming church division.

Submitted: April 5, 2023

Introduction

About 18 months into the Coronavirus pandemic, I began serving a Christian congregation as a student pastor in solo congregational ministry. Around this time (fall 2021) the vaccines for COVID-19 had become widely available in Canada, and 80% of the people in my Province had received the two doses that were required to be considered “fully vaccinated” and receive a plastic card with a QR code that came to be known as a “vaccine passport.”¹ As the healthcare system continued to be overloaded, politicians and the media declared that we were now in a “pandemic of the unvaccinated.”² This corresponded with a targeted “lockdown for the unvaccinated” that placed strict capacity limits on faith gatherings that included unvaccinated people. Faith gatherings that did not include unvaccinated people could operate at full capacity.³

This policy initiated many conversations between myself and my church’s leadership committees about whether we should exclude unvaccinated people from worship. Our fall worship attendance to that point had not exceeded the limited capacity restrictions for gatherings that could include unvaccinated people, but it was pointed out that immunocompromised people would feel safer attending worship in a group that did not include unvaccinated people. In the end our congregation settled on alternating Sunday worship services between requiring proof of vaccination for in-person attendance and having in-person worship open to all. Attendance was

1. Paul Samyn, “A roundup of COVID-19 developments for Friday Oct. 1, 2021,” the Winnipeg Free Press COVID briefing email newsletter, 2021.

2. Samyn, “A roundup of COVID-19 developments,” the Winnipeg Free Press COVID newsletter, 2021.

3. The Government of Manitoba, *The Public Health Act (C.C.S.M. c. P210), Orders under The Public Health Act, October 1st, 2021* retrieved from <https://www.gov.mb.ca/covid19/prs/orders/previous-pho.html>

slightly lower at the worship that was open to all. Most other faith communities of our denomination in our area were requiring proof of vaccination for in-person worship attendance at that time.

As Church leaders were making decisions about vaccine passports for worship, a group denominational email chain was set up within our region. The main rationale given by the pastors who decided to require vaccine passports to attend in-person worship was that it would be an expression of loving our neighbours by “protecting the vulnerable” in accordance with Jesus’ commandment. This perspective, that receiving the vaccine was an “act of love” for our neighbours, received widespread support among many major Christian denominations. For more on this, see Appendix A “Christian Responses to Vaccine Mandates.”

Elderly and immunocompromised people were a particularly vulnerable demographic during the pandemic because they were at higher risk of health complications due to COVID-19 infection. I, however, knew unvaccinated people who were also feeling vulnerable, although it was a different kind of vulnerability: the vulnerability of being subject to a targeted lockdown based on a personal health decision and being vilified in the public discourse. I knew unvaccinated people who were emotionally struggling as they continued to experience a degree of isolation in their homes that vaccinated people no longer had to endure while at the same time being aware that many people considered them to be selfish and ignorant.

The Research Question

This study was therefore conceived in order to investigate the question “what were the experiences of unvaccinated adults who belonged to Christian faith communities that required vaccination for in-person worship during the Coronavirus pandemic?”

Conducting this research was challenging for me. Prior to the pandemic, I was aware that my church denomination prided itself on its attempts at radical inclusivity and often talked about extending hospitality, being welcoming, etc. I experienced significant cognitive dissonance during the pandemic when the majority within my denomination decided to close its doors to those who had made what they had determined to be the “wrong” choice about vaccination. The perceived severity of this temporary physical excommunication of the unvaccinated also illuminated issues around liturgical and sacramental theology: for many in my denomination, virtual worship was seen as equivalent to in-person worship, so most people believed that unvaccinated people could still be in communion with one another via the internet. For a brief discussion of this, see Appendix B “Vaccine Mandates for Christian Worship: A Theological Perspective.”

While struggling as a pastoral leader to think through the theological implications of vaccine mandates for worship, I came across a statement by the local Catholic Archbishop who said “It is inappropriate to try to create two classifications of parishioners who seek to hear the Word of God and receive the sacraments.”⁴ I found myself in agreement with his analysis and uncomfortable with the analysis done by my (now-former) denomination. This was one factor among several that contributed to my resigning my call to ordained ministry in the United Church of Canada in January 2022 and joining the Roman Catholic church.

As my personal story probably illustrates, I came to this research with the following biases: I was frustrated with Christians who had chosen to limit access to worship and I was sympathetic towards the sufferings of unvaccinated people. I was also working through my own grief about the loss of my vocation for ordination as I conducted and analyzed this research. I

4. The Archdiocese of Winnipeg, “November 5, 2021: The Archbishop's Friday Report.” YouTube. Accessed November 5, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1VBAwUCsJo>. 5:13.

tried to bracket all of these things as I conducted my study so that the voices of my unvaccinated participants would be conveyed with as little distortion as possible by my own experience. I expect that some who read this research will have perspectives that are different than mine, but I hope that you, the reader, will nonetheless have ears to hear the experience of our brothers and sisters in Christ who could not attend worship during the pandemic because they were unvaccinated, as that is the primary goal of this research. Several of my research participants expressed appreciation that I showed an interest in their stories and said they experienced the interview process as a form of healing. In that spirit, I am offering this research to you as an opportunity for you to perform an act of loving your neighbour (or depending on your opinions about how the COVID pandemic was handled by the churches, perhaps even loving your “enemy”) by listening to their perspectives.

Methodology

I have provided the aforementioned details about my personal history in order to better convey my positionality with respect to this research. My research sprang from curiosity about how the issue of restricted worship access had actually impacted unvaccinated people. I conducted this research with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that my research participants had had experiences other than both my own experiences and the experiences of vaccinated people more broadly and that I could come to know something of the reality of the experiences of unvaccinated people by their own verbal descriptions of these experiences. I was also inspired by Shawn Wilson’s description of Indigenous Research methods which emphasizes the process of relationship-building within what he calls “the Research Ceremony.”⁵ In light of

5. Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 61.

this, I was conscious that I was entering into relationships with my participants through this research and was ethically obliged to re-present their perspectives in this report as accurately as possible according to my own understanding as a form of relational accountability to them as persons. For the purposes of qualitative research, one can consider this relational accountability as one of the means of validating this research, alongside other means such as peer feedback.⁶

This relational accountability also connects to my axiology in this research: because I am a Christian researcher I believe that all human beings are equal in dignity and worth. I was aware that unvaccinated people had been publicly maligned during the pandemic and I sincerely hoped that my research would always convey respect for the dignity of my research participants and hopefully even contribute to helping the re-formation of harmonious relationships between both vaccinated and unvaccinated members of the church who had been divided on the issue of vaccine mandates.

In that same spirit, perhaps you, the reader, and Christian readers in particular, can engage with the written form of this research as a form of “Research Ceremony.” Rather than calling this a “ceremony” as Shawn Wilson does in his Indigenous cultural context, we might use our own ecclesial language to label this process a “liturgical” ceremony or ritual. Liturgy, from the Greek λειτουργία is literally “the work of the people.” In this case, I hoped to use qualitative research as a vessel for formalizing a process of relationship-building within this research topic and among Christians. It is my hope that through this ritual work of qualitative research, the Holy Spirit might move us towards a healthier unity within the diversity of the Body of Christ, the Church.

6. Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 101.

Research Design

Out of my moral and philosophical commitments, this study was designed as a phenomenological study within a social constructivist theoretical framework. The phenomenon under investigation was “the experience of unvaccinated Christians who were unable to attend in-person worship during the COVID pandemic due to vaccination status.” Through the lens of social constructivism, this phenomenon was examined with the intention of contributing purely to the understanding of the experience of unvaccinated people. This approach differed from theoretical frameworks used by other extant research on this topic which considered abstention from vaccination to be problematic and sought to understand the experience of unvaccinated people as a means of gaining insight into how unvaccinated people might be persuaded to become vaccinated (see Appendix A).

Procedure

To understand the experience of unvaccinated Christians who had been unable to attend in-person worship during the pandemic due to their vaccination status, I first distributed an online questionnaire through email and social media (see Appendix C). Possibly due to the impersonal nature of this first attempt at researching the topic, the data collected during this stage was not sufficiently “thick” for me to further my relationship to both my participants and this topic of research in order to build any meaningful understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Fortunately, several participants who had completed the online questionnaire were willing to participate in follow-up interviews which were held via telephone, in-person or on Zoom. These interviews asked for clarifications and expansions on the responses given in the online questionnaire. Some people were also interviewed via phone or Zoom without having

first completed the questionnaire but were asked the same questions. Interviews ranged in duration from 30-45 minutes. Six people were interviewed. None of the research participants were affiliated with any faith community in which I had exercised any form of leadership at any time prior to this study. This was an aid to bracketing my own experience of having navigated my particular role in church leadership during the time when the research participants had been affected by vaccine policies within their Christian communities.

Sample

The inclusion criteria for this study were (a) having received one or fewer doses of a COVID vaccine and belonging to a faith community that required proof of vaccination against COVID-19 at some point during the pandemic (b) having been actively participating in worship in a particular faith community prior to the pandemic and (c) 18 years of age or older when the exclusion from worship occurred.

All participants in this study happened to be female. Ethnic/racial data was not collected, although other researchers have noted that there may be significant differences among attitudes towards vaccination corresponding to racial identity.⁷ For further description of study participant characteristics, please see Table 1.

7. See for example Cato Laurencin, “Addressing Justified Vaccine Hesitancy in the Black Community,” *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* no. 8 (2021), 543–546.

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Length of Exclusion from Worship	1-2 services to several months
Duration of Prior Involvement with Faith Community	<2 years to entire lifetime
Activities Involved in Prior to Pandemic	Worship, faith formation, volunteer music ministry, paid accountable ministry
Highest Level of Education Received	High School to Doctorate
Denominational Affiliation	Anglican, Baptist, Non-Denominational, Mennonite Brethren
Canadian Province of Residence	Nova Scotia, Manitoba, British Columbia
Age range of participants	18-49 years

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed according to procedures for phenomenological research described by John Creswell and Cheryl Poth.⁸ Interviews were transcribed and read through several times for key thoughts, phrases and words. Out of these semantic units, clusters of meanings formed to generate the themes that were organized into spectrums. The spectrums that emerged were: suffering to forgiveness, fear to hope, and isolation to community. Each spectrum describes a range between opposing positive and negative poles of experience. This organization of the data was intended to draw attention to the fluidity of experience and redirect the reader's attention to

8. John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 80.

the movement of the Holy Spirit who has the power to transform experiences of suffering, fear, and isolation into forgiveness, hope, and community. These spectrums are presented below. I have tried to include as many direct quotes of the participants as possible in order to accurately represent their descriptions of their experiences. Where required, I have added my own comments and analysis which stems from the relationship I formed to this topic and my research participants through the research process.

As you approach this research, I also want you, the reader, to know that many of my participants cried at some point during their interview. The disembodiment of this written report and the limitations of language as the sole conveyer of knowledge-relationships within this topic probably obscures much emotional information that would be pertinent to a more holistic understanding of this topic. With that in mind, you the reader are encouraged to consider this report as a starting place for what I hope will be an ongoing development of your relationship to this topic that will take on more personal and embodied forms within your own context.

Themes

Suffering \leftrightarrow Forgiveness

The first thematic spectrum was suffering and forgiveness. Unvaccinated people who participated in my study all stated that they experienced various degrees of exclusion from in-person participation in their faith communities. This experience occurred in the context of suffering a wider range of losses due to their vaccination status. These losses included the loss of jobs, the loss of friendships, and the loss of trust in civic authority.

Some participants had spouses and other family members who disagreed with their position on vaccination, and they lamented the division that different attitudes towards the

vaccine had created. One participant said “I’ve got a home division and a church division, and to me, again, that is the evil. This was breaking up churches and it was breaking up families. I’m like, that is satanic. That is purely satanic.”

Participants were also aware of others’ derision towards them because of their choice to remain unvaccinated. One participant used the word “contempt” to describe her perception of the attitude of her fellow vaccinated church members towards her. Another participant expressed her feeling that being excluded from worship was a form of punishment for having made what those in power had decided was the “wrong” choice about vaccination. Another participant felt that her church had been largely silent while unvaccinated people were “belittled” and “shamed” when they questioned the ethics of policies that resulted in job losses and the inability of unvaccinated people to travel to be with dying loved ones. Another participant felt that if she brought up any of her concerns about vaccine side-effects people would “shrug it off or they’ll roll their eyes or they’ll think I’m crazy.” She then mentioned a Reddit group she had seen online during the pandemic that was dedicated to ridiculing unvaccinated people. She summarized the ongoing effect of her experience of the public ridicule of unvaccinated people saying, “my willingness to connect with people has been severely diminished, I’m kind of afraid to make friends.”

One participant whose faith community held separate services for the vaccinated and the unvaccinated expressed feeling more stuck in the negative end of the spectrum between suffering and forgiveness. The unvaccinated services she attended had very low turnout. After the two worship services converged and she was able to fully participate in her faith community again, she started attending a different faith community which had never had policies that treated unvaccinated people differently than vaccinated people during the pandemic. She said, “I think my heart is very hard and I just was struggling with a great deal of inability to forgive to be

honest. And I just decided I couldn't go anymore because I thought there might be some discussion or conversation [after the restrictions were lifted], but there wasn't." She described the feeling of leaving her former faith community, in which she had been a lifelong member, as "I feel like I'm divorcing a spouse."

This participant, however, had experienced some softening in her heart when her new faith community's pastor offered a general apology from the pulpit. She recalled him saying "I know some of you are here because you had previously been hurt by church leaders... what I want to say is on behalf of church leaders, I want to apologize. And if I have hurt anyone... I want to apologize."

Another participant described her movement towards forgiveness as something that was occurring in waves. She said, "I have these weird waves of I'm upset, then I'm healing, and now I'm angry and now I'm bitter and now I'm working through forgiveness."

Another participant seemed to be moving towards forgiveness by looking at the issue of vaccine mandates within her church from others' perspectives. She said, "people who are used to being able to, or assuming that they can trust people in power without asking questions, I can't really blame them for that reaction." This same participant also drew on her past experiences of congregational life for perspective. She said, "every church has their own politics, and so there's going to be good and there's going to be bad and there's going to be human error, and there's going to be forgiveness and growth, and there's going to be seasons for everything. Because I've grown up in the church, so I've kind of seen it all."

Fear ↔ Hope

The second spectrum of unvaccinated experience is between fear and hope. Although many of the unvaccinated Christians who participated in this study perceived their exclusion from certain in-person gatherings (including worship) as an infringement upon their human rights including their right to bodily autonomy (because they had been subject to what they considered to be excessive social coercion to receive a medical intervention that they did not want), many of their fears were not individualistic in nature but expressed a “love for their neighbour” that was very different than the vaccinated majority during the pandemic. Whereas the vaccinated majority saw the vaccine as an act of love, unvaccinated participants in this study usually expressed their concern for the well-being of others by trying to draw attention to the fact that a society’s willingness to create two different classes of people with different levels of personal freedom was immoral, and that this had sometimes occurred in the past in milder forms as a precursor to horrific human rights abuses.

Some participants also felt that their church’s unwillingness to resist government pressure to segregate them indicated that their faith communities would be unable or unwilling to protect them if or when secular governments attempted to infringe further upon their fundamental human rights. One participant said “this was the first test of governmental overreach. And I don’t see it as the last in regards to religious freedoms and rights.” This same participant was terrified because she knew from family members who worked in health care that some physicians hated the unvaccinated and said “literally murderous things about them.” She worried about how the hatred of people with powerful positions in society might lead to increasingly severe repercussions for unvaccinated people. She said, “it was really scary knowing that powerful people in our main institutional bodies just hated the unvaccinated. I literally didn't know if it

would get to the point where they would take my children away, and maybe that was me catastrophizing, but people were losing their jobs.”

Other participants similarly expressed fears that their experience of segregation from worship was a manifestation of something evil that could develop into something worse. These participants cited historical examples of the marginalization of particular groups by the Church. One participant compared the pressure on the unvaccinated to conform to “right” ways of thinking about the vaccine to the Inquisition. She said,

The period that I can think to be the absolute, the lowest, the most embarrassing horrific period of church history that we need to repent of the most is the Inquisition, where we're saying, you know, you don't believe the right thing, therefore we're going to out of love, out of love torture you to think the right thing. So I don't know, it caused me to be saying... compelled belief in forcing people to believe certain things or you're going to hurt them... during the pandemic it seemed to me in my guts and in my heart that we were forcing people to do things that they didn't necessarily know or agree with. And if you don't do it we're going to take away your ability to see your family, we're going to take away your ability to have an education.

Additional comparisons were made by participants between their experience of being labeled a differently-treated “class” of people within society and the gradual process of government-led marginalization of particular groups of people in the years preceding the Shoah. One participant said,

How did the church ignore what was happening in Germany in World War II? How did the church ignore, how did they let that happen without speaking out? And this last two years, I said, oh, this is exactly how. Nothing to see here. I don't want to see it. And that is what they're doing. They don't want to see it. They're not looking. They're not interested. It's too scary, it's too uncomfortable.

Some participants also thought that a lack of skepticism in the churches towards government-backed policies shed light on the historical complicity of Canadian churches in the Indian Residential School System. Many Christian people participated in the Residential schools as an act of love, often understanding that the system was imperfect but genuinely believing that

they could contribute to the well-being of Indigenous children within the system.⁹ The policies of the Canadian government of the time, however, were often more concerned with political goals related to assimilation which would nullify the Treaties than the well-being of the children themselves.¹⁰ One participant in this study viewed her faith community's lack of skepticism towards government vaccination policies as an example of the naïveté the church had shown in cooperating with the Residential School system: many Christians had been motivated by love to participate in the system perhaps unaware that government officials had designed the system with other politically expedient goals in mind (i.e. the nullification of the Treaty rights of Indigenous peoples). This participant said, “we just had Truth and Reconciliation day yesterday. How can the church one day after going through that whole thing, because it was a big deal in our church, say, oh, the government wants to do all this and we're just following along.”

This same participant, who came from an Anabaptist background, saw her church's emphasis on obedience to government authority as being inconsistent with her faith tradition's history. She referred to the torture and execution of Anabaptists during the Reformation that occurred because the Anabaptists insisted upon fealty to their own faith practices which were deemed to be “capital offenses” both by Catholic and other Protestant authorities. She was surprised that she was in such a small minority within her Anabaptist faith community in being critical of how government authorities were handling the COVID pandemic.¹¹

In addition to reflecting on history to make sense of what they were experiencing, participants also looked to scripture. One participant refrained from receiving the vaccine

9. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Vol. 1: Summary*, (Winnipeg: James Lorimer and Company, 2015), 128.

10. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 58.

11. Brad Gregory, *Rebel in the Ranks*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 119

because the thought that it might be the “Mark of the Beast” referred to in the Book of Revelation. Another participant was reflecting eschatologically on her experience. She wondered if her experience of being unvaccinated indicated that there would be further human rights violations to come and what her responsibility as a Christian is if she is, in fact, living during the “end times” that precede Jesus’ return. She said, “we still live in a democracy... until I don't have any rights left, I'd like to try to push for my rights until I know that the end is here. Then there's nothing I can do except pray for my persecutors. But until that point, surely, surely there's something that we can do and that I get the sense that no one wants to.”

As the aforementioned examples illustrate, participants experienced an intense level of fear for themselves, their families and their society. To endure this fear, many participants strengthened their relationship with God, the ultimate source of hope. Many participants increased their faith practices including prayer, journaling and the reading of scripture. One participant recalled feeling hopeful at a worship service when someone offered a prayer that any leaders with evil intent would be thwarted. She thought that the willingness to name the reality of evil was an encouraging first step in being able to address it as a community.

One participant described how she brought her lament to God after losing her job as a Pastor because of her vaccination status. She asked “what is life all about? Where am I headed now, God?” Because my whole world crumbled before me.” By turning to God, she found a source of hope. She added, “I believe that God has really strengthened my faith. I’m at a point now when I can say God strengthened my faith and my trust and my reliance.”

Isolation ↔ Community

The last thematic spectrum identified in my research was isolation and community. Although some Christian denominations in Canada expressed the view during the pandemic that online community and in-person community were equally valid (see section “Virtual Worship” in Appendix B), the actual experience of unvaccinated Christians was that depersonalized communication, often enabled by technology, contributed to their experiences of isolation in certain instances. One participant recalled her community’s 2021 Christmas worship service when there were two separate services that were vaccine-only and vaccine-optional. She was not able to attend in-person (for reasons unrelated to her vaccine status) but recalled watching the vaccine-optional service on Zoom and seeing her unvaccinated friend cry through the sparsely-attended service as she herself cried at home in front of her computer. Although this participant’s grief at this situation was complex, one wonders whether the actual experience of virtual connection she was having via Zoom at that time was experienced more as a compounded fracturing of what had previously been a physically corporate body of worship in her faith community prior to the pandemic.

Another participant recalled her feeling of exclusion when she sat with a small handful of people looking at the PowerPoint announcements prior to worship that advertised other events her faith community was planning that were only for vaccinated people. If church announcements had instead been made orally by a live person, the announcer would have either realized that it was insensitive to announce these events to unvaccinated people or if they made the announcements, perhaps they would have noticed expressions of sadness or distress in the faces or body language of the unvaccinated people who were present.

Another participant experienced a form of this depersonalized mass communication when she first learned of her faith community's vaccine-only policy for in-person worship from a poster on the church door. This participant was the youngest in the study (18 years old at the time of vaccine-mandated worship; 20 years old when interviewed for this study). She never returned to that church and was no longer participating in any form of organized Christianity at the time of the study. She said she was open to joining a Christian community again at some point in the future, but had not made it a priority in the near term.

One participant who was confused about when she was able to return to her faith community after the restrictions were dropped recalled checking the website for her church's region and seeing that it had not been updated to communicate the lifting of restrictions on unvaccinated people attending worship. She said, "At that point, nobody was really talking to me, checking on me. So it was like we just got forgotten." This participant was not the only participant who felt that her experience of being isolated during the pandemic was not well-resolved after vaccine restrictions were lifted. Multiple participants noted that they were saddened by the perception that no one from their faith communities reached out to them after the vaccine requirement was lifted to invite them back or express regret for the times they had been unable to fully participate in the community.

This feeling of being "forgotten" or "invisible" both during and after the pandemic occurred both within the context of technology-enabled communication and in-person involvement. One participant recalled an in-person worship service she attended when a prayer of thanksgiving for the COVID vaccine was offered from the pulpit. She said, "I just think that's such a political move. Not everyone in Canada is so thankful for the vaccine so maybe don't pray that way." Because unvaccinated people were a small minority in her faith community it would

have been easy for others to neglect to consider how their words might be perceived from the perspective of unvaccinated people.

Several of my participants recognized the effort their church leaders had sometimes made in eschewing time-saving means of mass communication such as email and had instead personally reached out to them via phone call or in-person meetings to communicate vaccination policy changes that were often upsetting. There was considerable variation among participants as to whether or not their input was sought in the development of these vaccine policies for worship. Some participants, however, had not silently accepted vaccination requirements for worship. Some participants wrote emails and letters and attended meetings with policy decision-makers within their communities but most felt that their concerns were largely ignored. Many participants felt that their fellow church members lacked interest and effort in trying to understand their reasons for remaining unvaccinated and this contributed to their sense that they were not only physically isolated from their communities, they were also psychologically isolated. One participant described her experience, saying “there’s absolutely no room to just talk about each other’s thoughts and discuss things openly without insisting that if they don’t agree with you, then they’re against you, which is entirely un-Christian.”

Another participant also lamented the lack of dialogue between vaccinated and unvaccinated people saying “we tried to keep people safe, but what we did with dividing people and setting people against each other and segregating and isolating and marginalizing, it was all counter-Christian.” One participant explicitly connected the lack of dialogue and divisiveness around the topic of vaccines to the polarizing effect of technology in weakening in-person communities prior to the pandemic. She commented “I think what happened in Canada in 2021

has a lot to do with the lack of dialogue and the lack of community. We're all just getting our algorithms fed to us through social media.”

On the positive end of the spectrum, however, many of the participants were able to transform their experience of isolation into a renewed call to build community. During the pandemic one participant hosted Bible studies in her home in compliance with local public health orders. Another participant has made a point of opening her home post-pandemic to others from her faith community for fellowship-building events. A third participant, herself a mother with young children, was actively discerning how she could transform her experience of isolation into something positive. She said, “if you build it, they will come. If you need it, make it yourself. So I was actually, I'm in the process of praying about and trying to determine how best to make a community of peers of Christian couples with young children.”

Although many study participants had experienced their exclusion from worship as hurtful, it was clear that all of them wanted to forgive their fellow members of the Body of Christ for what had happened, and many of them saw the road forward as necessitating a renewed and active commitment to finding ways to build community.

Theological and Pastoral Implications



Figure 1 "The Merciful Tin-Can Phone"

One of my participants imagined the communication between vaccinated and unvaccinated Christians during the pandemic as being like a string and tin-can phone which had been hung up quietly or not-so-quietly on both ends. With her permission, I adapted this image and nailed it onto a backdrop (see Image 1). This backdrop is the cross with blue and red rays emanating from it as a reference to the Divine Mercy image revealed to the 20th century mystic St Faustina.

In St Faustina's vision, red and blue rays emanated from Jesus' heart as representations of the blood and water that gushed from the hole pierced in Jesus' side after his crucifixion.¹²

12. St Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary of St Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*, (Stockbridge: Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception, 2020), 24 (299).

The blue represents the waters of baptism by which all Christians have been made members in the Body of Christ and the red represents Christ's blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.¹³ This image is called the "Divine Mercy" image because Jesus told St. Faustina that the red and blue rays emanate from the depths of his mercy.¹⁴

In my research project, I encountered Christians who had been hurt by their faith communities. I saw these people as members of the mystical Body of Christ and I imagined the division between people within the church caused by different attitudes towards the vaccines as a wound in the Body of Christ. I originally thought maybe my research could offer some suggestions for healing this wound.

But now rather than offering suggestions for healing the wound, I have come to wonder if this wound will not necessarily be healed. I have come to wonder if there could be a parallel between this wound and the wound in St Faustina's vision: the wound in Christ's body that is a fount of mercy, an open wound that is a portal through which grace is flowing.

I think it is unlikely that Christians will be able to achieve any uniformity of thought about our handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, we do not need uniformity of thought to remain in communion with one another, as we are all One in the Body of Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to maintain our unity even amid great the great diversity of individual members.

The "Merciful Tin-Can Phone" image is a reminder that our unity is founded upon our Christian identity and that by virtue of our baptism, all division within the Body of Christ is an illusion that obscures the reality of our oneness in Jesus Christ. On a pragmatic level, the

13. St Faustina, *Diary*, 24 (299).

14. St Faustina, *Diary*, 24 (299).

“Merciful Tin-Can Phone” image is a call to pick up our own end of the tin can phone and commit ourselves to reopening personal lines of communication between people with opposing perspectives rooted in the recognition of our unity in Christ.

It should be noted that this type of person-to-person communication will require the efforts of all baptized people. Pastoral leaders may be helpful in galvanizing this movement towards increased communication rooted in a deep commitment to unity through the power of the Holy Spirit, but pastoral leaders cannot be solely responsible for managing the challenge of diversity within the church. To rely only on people in defined leadership roles to address the deep divisions within the church would be an expression of clericalism. Clericalism, the creation of a professional class of Christians that are responsible for being service providers to the rest of the church members who then become spiritual consumers is both unbiblical and unsustainable.¹⁵ All Christians should consider how the overloading of community-building tasks on pastoral leaders may be forcing them to rely on means of mass communication that result in an *ipso facto* disconnection within the faith community, particularly within the context of controversial issues such as vaccination status during the pandemic.

A related issue that deserves further consideration by the church is the role of technology in the polarization of society. Virtual technologies such as Zoom have often been considered by the church as means of increasing accessibility particularly for those with physical mobility issues, however, churches should investigate how certain groups of people may be experiencing marginalization as an unintended consequence of the increased emphasis on virtual church that is

15. See for example the concept of the “Priesthood of all believers” in 1 Peter 2:5. This letter is addressed to several Christian communities exhorting *all* of their members, referred to as the “elect/chosen” (Greek ἐκλεκτοῖς) to the same goals: striving for holiness (1 Pet 1:15) and accepting suffering (1 Pet 4:19). Leaders, referred to as “elders” (Greek πρεσβυτέρος) are only distinct from other ἐκλεκτοῖς in that they serve as examples of this way of life (1 Pet 5:3).

persisting beyond the exigencies of the pandemic, and consider how theologies of incarnation should inform our church praxis.

This study was limited to adults. As was mentioned in the “Isolation to Community” theme section, the youngest participant in this study was the only one who had completely disengaged from participation in Christian community after her experience. Other participants had longer personal histories with the church, which one of the older participants had explicitly drawn on to maintain hope that she and the church could endure the cycle of hurt and forgiveness (see section “Suffering to Forgiveness”). For this reason, a future study on the experiences of unvaccinated people under the age of 18 may yield significantly different results than what was found in this study.

Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson wrote that “if research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right.”¹⁶ I began this report with an account of my own struggles related to the topic of vaccine mandates for Christian worship. Conducting and analyzing this research forced me into a prolonged contact with this difficult topic, and like my research participants, this forced me to learn to lean more heavily into the everlasting arms of God. For me to personally manage the fear and grief connected to this topic, I had to continually be reminded to look for the work of the Holy Spirit rather than fixate on what is painful to me (Phil 4:8). In this way, I feel that I have learned something in this (often unpleasant) research ritual about the mystery of redemptive suffering: how the attempt to orient one’s heart, soul, mind and strength towards God in the context of personal difficulties is the participation in something truly good (2 Cor 1:5).

16. Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 135.

Conclusion

As members of the Body of Christ, we Christians respond to the love of God we have come to know by seeking to embody this love in becoming the hands and feet of Christ in loving service of our neighbour. This research has been an opportunity to listen to our neighbours' experiences as an act of love. In doing so, we have touched a wound in the body of Christ that formed due to differing perspectives on vaccination during the pandemic. Our trust in God gives us the courage to encounter the wounds of suffering, fear and isolation. We are then empowered through our baptism into the Body of Christ to respond to our call to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work of transformation that brings forgiveness, hope and community.

Works Cited

- Cato, Laurencin. "Addressing Justified Vaccine Hesitancy in the Black Community." *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 8 (2021), 543–546.
- Creswell, John W. and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018.
- Gregory, Brad. *Rebel in the Ranks*. New York: Harper Collins, 2017.
- Kowalska, St Maria Faustina. *Diary of St Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*. Stockbridge: Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception, 2020.
- Samyn, Paul. "A Roundup of COVID-19 developments for Friday Oct. 1, 2021." The Winnipeg Free Press COVID briefing email newsletter, 2021.
- The Archdiocese of Winnipeg. "November 5, 2021: The Archbishop's Friday Report." YouTube. Accessed November 5, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1VBawUCsJo>.
- The Government of Manitoba. The Public Health Act (C.C.S.M. c. P210), Orders under *The Public Health Act, October 1st, 2021*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.mb.ca/covid19/prs/orders/previous-pho.html>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Vol. One: Summary*. Winnipeg: James Lorimer and Company, 2015.
- Wilson, Shawn. *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2008.

Appendix A: Literature Review

“Christian Responses to Vaccine Mandates”

Paper Submitted November 21st 2022

In March 2020, the worldwide rapid spread of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) caused the unexpected shutdown of many non-essential gatherings. At that time, some Christian churches expressed a sense of caution in the face of the unknown by cancelling in-person worship for what they hoped would be a short period of time. Other Christian communities of faith continued to gather, sometimes even in contravention of Governmental Public Health Orders.

¹ Over the subsequent months it became clear in Canada that the population would be placed in and out of various levels of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders until a vaccine was developed and distributed.

In Canada, most people were able to receive two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine by autumn 2021. At this time, religious gatherings were permitted under certain limitations and the governing bodies of individual congregations generally made decisions about whether to require proof of vaccination for in-person worship in consultation with guidelines set for them by their respective denominations and in accordance with governmental public health orders.

In this paper, I will review the literature relevant to various responses to vaccine mandates with a specific focus on Canada’s three largest Christian denominations: the United Church, the Anglican church and the Roman Catholic church. While all three denominations

1. Andrew Weichel, “Church Representatives in Fraser Valley Fined \$18,400 for Violating Health Orders,” British Columbia (CTV News, December 19, 2020), <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/church-representatives-in-fraser-valley-fined-18-400-for-violating-health-orders-1.5238312>.

expressed strong pro-vaccine views, they each raised different contextual issues concerning vaccination and vaccine mandates for worship.

The United Church of Canada required all of its active ministry personnel to be vaccinated and issued a document that explored the legal issues around requiring proof of vaccination at various church-related events which ultimately concluded that “a mandatory policy requiring congregants to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in order to attend [worship] in-person could be acceptable.”² The United Church of Canada also noted that vaccine hesitancy tends to be higher in racialized groups, citing qualitative studies that explored higher rates of vaccine hesitancy in African Americans that were thought to be related to a “history of racism in medical research and medical care.”³ An oft-cited example of racism in medical care is the decades-long Tuskegee syphilis study in which the health of black men with untreated syphilis was studied without their informed consent.⁴ While seeing the reasonableness of vaccine hesitancy among historically marginalized groups, the United Church, however, continued to maintain that those groups with vaccine-hesitancy based on historic injustices could be compassionately steered into receiving their COVID-19 vaccination once they became “further educated by the scientific evidence and satisfied of the vaccines’ safety, efficacy, and necessity.”⁵

2. Cynthia Gunn, “United Church Communities of Faith and Vaccination Policies,” June 2021, <https://livingskiesrc.ca/united-church-communities-of-faith-and-vaccination-policies/>

3. Cato Laurencin, “Addressing Justified Vaccine Hesitancy in the Black Community,” *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 8 (2021), 543–546.

4. “Tuskegee Study - Timeline - CDC - NCHHSTP,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 22, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>

5. The United Church of Canada Office of Vocation, “Background Document re Vaccine Hesitancy” in FAQ on Interpretive Memo on Ethical Standards for Ministry Personnel and COVID-19 Vaccination Status, 5.

The Anglican Church in Canada, like the United Church, also tended to express strong support for the COVID vaccine. As in other denominations, their policies varied by region. An example of a restrictive vaccine policy was the Diocese of Toronto whose COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Policy stated that “All Clergy, Employees and Volunteers are to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 unless a Volunteer is less than 12 years old.”⁶ The creators of this policy said “we have a moral obligation to protect others and set an example to communities we serve. There is one crucial way we can love our neighbours, and that is to vaccinate ourselves against COVID-19.”⁷ This perspective was echoed by the worldwide leader of the Anglican church, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, in a media interview in December 2021.⁸

Whether or not they agreed that vaccination was an act of love for neighbour, not all Anglicans were as comfortable as the Diocese of Toronto with the introduction of vaccine passports as a means of excluding the unvaccinated from full participation in church life. In April 2021, over 1200 British church leaders (including many Anglican clergy) signed an open letter to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The signatories expressed their opinion that vaccine passports were a way to “shut out those deemed by the state to be social undesirables,” and they argued that denying anyone access to full participation in the life of the church based on vaccine status was “a fundamental betrayal of Christ and the Gospel.”⁹

6. The Diocese of Toronto, the Anglican Church of Canada, “COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Policy” September 17th, 2021, <https://www.toronto.anglican.ca/parish-resources/covid-19-updates/?lang=en>

7. The Diocese of Toronto, the Anglican Church of Canada, “COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Policy” September 17th, 2021, <https://www.toronto.anglican.ca/parish-resources/covid-19-updates/?lang=en>

8. Jaclyn Peiser, “U.K.’s Top Archbishop Says Getting a Coronavirus Vaccination Is a Moral Issue: ‘It’s How We Love Our Neighbor,’” *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/22/archbishop-canterbury-welby-covid-vaccine/>.

9. Open Letter from Christian Leaders to the Prime Minister Concerning Vaccine Passport Proposals, accessed October 29th, 2022, <https://vaccinepassportletter.wordpress.com/>.

Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic church, like his fellow international Christian leader Archbishop Justin Welby, advised all Catholics to receive the COVID vaccine if eligible, deeming it an “act of love” in August 2021 and referring to it as a “moral obligation” in January 2022 as the omicron COVID variant was causing a new wave of the virus.¹⁰ The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, however, had officially stated back in December 2020 that “the common good may recommend vaccination,” but recognized that there would be people who refused vaccines for “reasons of conscience” and that they must “do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent.” The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith produced this directive to address what was thought to be a major cause of vaccine hesitancy among Catholics— that all available vaccines had used abortion-derived cell lines at some point in their production or testing. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops echoed the message of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reassuring Canadian Catholics that it was morally licit to receive the vaccines since the connection between receiving the vaccine and participation in abortion is remote.

With respect to vaccine mandates specifically, the American National Catholic Bioethics Center openly stated that they do not endorse mandated COVID-19 immunization, warning against the pressure placed on individuals by mandates which prevents them from giving “free and informed consent... during the important and personal process of deciding about appropriate medical care and serving the common good.” In Canada, this perspective was not always shared

10. Devin Watkins, “Pope Francis Urges People to Get Vaccinated against Covid-19,” Vatican News, August 18, 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-08/pope-francis-appeal-covid-19-vaccines-act-of-love.html> and Nicole Winfield, “Pope on Covid Vaccines Says Health Care a 'Moral Obligation',” AP NEWS (Associated Press, January 10, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-pope-francis-health-religion-093068b2ca50eb1680f8c440cff1fd18>.

at the Diocesan level, for example, the Diocese of Grand Falls, Newfoundland mandated vaccines for every person 12 years and older, and the Catholic church in Quebec complied with the provincial government's mandating of vaccines for in-person worship attendance.¹¹

How unvaccinated Christians experienced their participation in church life during this time when the majority of their leadership was unsympathetic to their decision to abstain from the vaccine is an area that has not been the subject of much investigation. Several qualitative studies on the experiences of faith communities during the pandemic have been published to date that investigate Christian experience of the pandemic more generally. For example, Carroll, Lackenby and Gorbanenko performed ethnographic research of the experiences of Orthodox Christians in the UK, Serbia, Greece and Russia, describing the importance of materiality within Orthodox Christianity and how the research participants had sometimes modified their liturgy for 'performative security' and engaged in faith practices that were publicly frowned upon, if not illegal, after they turned off the livestreaming cameras.¹² Lang described the responses of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in the U.S. and Israel and the Amish in the U.S. and Canada, noting that they ultimately complied with public health orders due to a history of "negotiation and pragmatic accommodation between the state and [their] religious sect."¹³

Exline *et al.* looked at some differences between vaccinated and unvaccinated Christians in a study of 3196 U.S. adults which investigated beliefs about whether God or the Devil was

11. Quinton Amundson, "Bishops challenged to condemn Church vaccine mandates," *The Catholic Register*, Feb 3 2022. <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/33994-bishops-challenged-to-condemn-church-vaccine-mandates>

12. Timothy Carroll, Nicholas Lackenby, and Jenia Gorbanenko, "Apophatic Love, Contagion, and Surveillance: Orthodox Christian Responses to the Global Pandemic," *Anthropology & Medicine*, August 10, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2022.2080180>, 5, 11.

13. Graeme Lang, "Religious Responses to a Pandemic," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 16, no. 1 (May 6, 2022): pp. 23-49, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.19456>, 40.

responsible for the COVID vaccine. They found that “Demonic vaccine attributions were linked with more anti-vaccination attitudes and lower odds of vaccination.”¹⁴ This study also noted that demonic vaccine attributions were “related to more spiritual struggle.”¹⁵ It is this spiritual struggle of the unvaccinated that my research seeks to explore. Whereas the three aforementioned studies (Carroll *et al.*, Lang and Exline *et al.*) approached their research subjects at least partially in an attempt to understand the attitudes and behaviours of the unvaccinated so the resulting knowledge could be used to increase these particular groups’ compliance with government policies and persuade them to conform to mainstream perspectives on prosocial behaviour during a pandemic, my research makes no such attempt. My study will be a phenomenological investigation into the experiences of unvaccinated adult Christians whose faith communities required proof of vaccination for in-person worship attendance. As this literature review has shown, the majority of Christians voiced their support for vaccination to varying degrees. The purpose of my study is to give this minority group, unvaccinated Christians, the opportunity to describe their experiences of the pandemic and to give the pro-vaccine Christian majority the opportunity to hear these minority voices.

14. Julie J. Exline et al., “Demonic and Divine Attributions around COVID-19 Vaccines: Links with Vaccine Attitudes and Behaviors, Qanon and Conspiracy Beliefs, Anger, Spiritual Struggles, Religious and Political Variables, and Supernatural and Apocalyptic Beliefs,” *Religions* 13, no. 6 (June 6, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060519>, 1.

15. Julie J. Exline et al., “Demonic and Divine Attributions around COVID-19 Vaccines: Links with Vaccine Attitudes and Behaviors, Qanon and Conspiracy Beliefs, Anger, Spiritual Struggles, Religious and Political Variables, and Supernatural and Apocalyptic Beliefs,” *Religions* 13, no. 6 (June 6, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060519>, 17

Works Cited

- “Tuskegee Study - Timeline - CDC - NCHHSTP.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 22, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>.
- Amundson, Quinton. “Bishops challenged to condemn Church vaccine mandates,” *The Catholic Register*, Feb 3 2022. <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/33994-bishops-challenged-to-condemn-church-vaccine-mandates>
- Carroll, Timothy, Nicholas Lackenby, and Jenia Gorbanenko. “Apophatic Love, Contagion, and Surveillance: Orthodox Christian Responses to the Global Pandemic.” *Anthropology & Medicine*, August 10, 2022, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2022.2080180>.
- Exline, Julie J., Kathleen C. Pait, Joshua A. Wilt, and William A. Schutt. “Demonic and Divine Attributions around COVID-19 Vaccines: Links with Vaccine Attitudes and Behaviors, Qanon and Conspiracy Beliefs, Anger, Spiritual Struggles, Religious and Political Variables, and Supernatural and Apocalyptic Beliefs.” *Religions* 13, no. 6 (June 6, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060519>.
- Lang, Graeme. “Religious Responses to a Pandemic.” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 16, no. 1 (May 6, 2022): 23–49. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.19456>.
- Laurencin, Cato T., “Addressing Justified Vaccine Hesitancy in the Black Community,” *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 8 (2021), 543–546.
- Open Letter from Christian Leaders to the Prime Minister Concerning Vaccine Passport Proposals. <https://vaccinepassportletter.wordpress.com/>
- Peiser, Jaclyn. “U.K.’s Top Archbishop Says Getting a Coronavirus Vaccination Is a Moral Issue: ‘It’s How We Love Our Neighbor.’” *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/22/archbishop-canterbury-welby-covid-vaccine/>.
- The Diocese of Toronto, the Anglican Church of Canada, “COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Policy”
- The United Church of Canada Office of Vocation, “Background Document re Vaccine Hesitancy” in FAQ on Interpretive Memo on Ethical Standards for Ministry Personnel and COVID-19 Vaccination Status, 5.
- Watkins, Devin. “Pope Francis Urges People to Get Vaccinated against Covid-19.” *Vatican News*, August 18, 2021. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-08/pope-francis-appeal-covid-19-vaccines-act-of-love.html>.

Weichel, Andrew. "Church Representatives in Fraser Valley Fined \$18,400 for Violating Health Orders." British Columbia. CTV News, December 19, 2020. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/church-representatives-in-fraser-valley-fined-18-400-for-violating-health-orders-1.5238312>.

Winfield, Nicole. "Pope on Covid Vaccines Says Health Care a 'Moral Obligation'." AP NEWS. Associated Press, January 10, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-pope-francis-health-religion-093068b2ca50eb1680f8c440cff1fd18>.

Appendix B: Theological Essay

“Vaccine Mandates for Christian Worship: A Theological Perspective”

Paper Submitted November 26, 2022

Jesus’s directive to “love one’s neighbour” is one of the most universally accepted features of Christianity. During the Coronavirus pandemic, most Christians considered receiving a vaccine when it became available and encouraging others to receive their vaccine to be acts of love. However, when Christian churches began to enact policies that excluded unvaccinated people from participation in in-person worship, this was certainly not perceived as an act of love by those who were excluded. The following paper examines some of the significant Biblical, historical, and theological background related to vaccine mandates for Christian worship. It will begin by briefly considering Biblical attitudes towards obedience to authority. It will then examine the theological perspectives of two Christian leaders who lived during other historic plagues: Cyprian of Carthage and Martin Luther. Finally, it will examine two different understandings of the importance of in-person worship.

Obedience to Governing Authorities

During the COVID pandemic, many church leaders expressed their trust in governments and public health experts, exhorting their flock to follow the public health orders within their respective jurisdiction. In some cases, this meant excluding unvaccinated people from public gatherings.¹ This trust in authority seems consistent with Paul’s advice in Romans 13 that

1. Quinton Amundson, “Bishops challenged to condemn Church vaccine mandates,” *The Catholic Register*, Feb 3 2022. <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/33994-bishops-challenged-to-condemn-church-vaccine-mandates>

“everyone be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom 13:1 NRSV-CE). For vaccinated Christians who trusted in the general benevolence of politicians, public health experts and the pharmaceutical industry, there was no perceived discrepancy between public health orders and the Christian injunction to love one’s neighbour. They considered the public health orders a necessary means of protecting the vulnerable, particularly the immunocompromised and the elderly who were at higher risk of serious complications and death due to the Coronavirus.

For those who had various reasons for abstaining from the vaccine, however, governmental pressure to become vaccinated was perceived differently. For a minority of Christians, vaccine mandates were seen as a form of government overreach that ought to be resisted. An example of Biblical precedent for this attitude towards governing authority could be drawn from the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the third chapter of the Book of Daniel. When asked to bow before the golden idol created by Nebuchadnezzar, they refused and were thrown into a furnace where they were protected from the flames by an angel of God. Similarly, Christians opposed to vaccine mandates wanted to resist bowing to the false idol of “safetyism” espoused by secular authorities. These Christians pointed out that “A socially reinforced preoccupation with bodily life can disorder our priorities.”² Although safetyism is a contemporary neologism, the fear of illness and death from which it stems is a part of the human condition that has been resisted by Christianity on theological grounds over the past two millennia. In my next section, I will look at two historical writings, Cyprian of Carthage’s *De Mortalitate* (On the Mortality) and Martin Luther’s “Whether One May Flee From A Deadly

2. R.R. Reno, “Safetyism,” *First things* (New York, N.Y.) 317 (2021): 65.

Plague” as case studies in theological attitudes towards lived experiences of two past plagues that occurred within Christian history.

Theological Responses to Contagion: Two Historical Examples

Many Christian leaders encouraged everyone to respond to the COVID pandemic by practicing social distancing and limiting their close contacts as was generally recommended. This behaviour is different from how Christians in previous centuries reacted to instances of plague. Rodney Stark notes in his book *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* that during plagues that occurred during the first few centuries of the Church, the willingness of Christians to nurse others with contagious illness was a marked departure from the non-Christian majority who “pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.”³ Health protocols during the COVID pandemic that restricted visitor access in hospitals, requirements for self-isolation of the ill, and gathering restrictions for funerals likewise valued infection control over embodied care.

An example of the theological rationale for Christians to nurse others with contagious illness can be found in the pastoral letter “De Mortalitate” by Cyprian of Carthage. Cyprian of Carthage, after whom the plague of Cyprian from AD 249 to 270 was named, encouraged Christians to tend to the ill, reminding them that they had nothing to fear from death since upon

3. Dionysius in Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*, HarperCollins eBook 2011, 138.

their death they would be united to Christ in eternal life.⁴ He also encouraged Christians to embrace suffering as an opportunity to grow in faith and become closer to Jesus.

Over a millennium later as humanity was still dealing with infectious outbreaks, Martin Luther wrote a letter entitled “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague” in 1527. While others had fled to the countryside to escape contagion, Luther, his pregnant wife, and his young son stayed in Wittenberg and operated a hospital out of his home.⁵ In his letter, Luther remarked that it would be better if the ill could be cared for in hospitals but when hospital care was unavailable, Christians should recognize their fear of death as originating from the devil and have the courage to care for those with contagious illness themselves. However, Luther also admonished those who were careless about infection control, saying that one who contracts the illness through carelessness and then passes it along to others is “responsible before God for his neighbor’s death and is a murderer many times over.”⁶ Luther’s remarks could be applied to the COVID pandemic as providing support for the majority of Christians’ adherence to public health orders such as lockdowns and gathering restrictions. The availability of government-funded health care during the COVID pandemic removed the imperative for Christians who were not health care specialists to personally interact with the ill and likely contributed to the sense that

4. Cyprian, “On the Mortality (or Plague) De Mortalitate,” EWTN Global Catholic Television Network, accessed November 26, 2022, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-the-mortality-or-plague-de-mortalitate-11412>.

5. Nathan Runham, “Why Did Luther Not Flee From the Deadly Plague?” *Stimulus* 27, no. 3 (2020), 63. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,shib&db=rft&AN=ATLAI0200727000725&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

6. Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” *Christianity Today*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/martin-luther-plague-pandemic-coronavirus-covid-flee-letter.html>.

“loving one’s neighbour” was best expressed in terms of infection control rather than any form of embodied care.

It seems, then, that in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, the answer for most Christians to the titular question “Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague” (or perhaps more fittingly in our context, “Whether One May Retreat Behind a Zoom Camera”) is yes. At the end of his letter, however, Luther provides some pastoral considerations about “how one should care and provide for the soul in time of death.”⁷ His advice is that people living through a plague should “attend church and listen to the sermon so that they learn through God’s word how to live and how to die” and attend confession and receive the eucharist every week or two. Luther placed a high value on responsible infection control, but it seems that infection control was still subordinate to the importance he placed on preaching and sacraments.

Virtual Worship

One final topic to consider with respect to vaccine mandates for Christian worship has to do with different understandings of liturgical and sacramental theology. Restricting attendance at in-person religious gatherings has different significance depending on the beliefs of the particular Christian group with respect to what occurs when they gather in-person and, significantly for the COVID pandemic, whether these significant features can occur by other means (i.e. on Zoom or other virtual media). The United Church of Canada, for example, decided that online communion

7. Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” *Christianity Today*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/martin-luther-plague-pandemic-coronavirus-covid-flee-letter.html>.

was permissible, whereas the Catholic church does not see virtual sacraments as valid.⁸ In light of this, exclusion of unvaccinated people from in-person United Church worship is not an exclusion from anything essential to Christian life and salvation, since the excluded person can still participate both in hearing the Word proclaimed (preaching) and receiving the sacrament of communion via Zoom or using other technologies.

In the Roman Catholic church, however, the eucharist is seen as “the source and summit of the Christian life” and the sacrament must take place physically in order for it to be valid.⁹ For Catholics who believe that Christ is really present in the transubstantiated eucharist host, this “physical contact with the Lord is vital, indispensable, irreplaceable.”¹⁰ Exclusion of unvaccinated people from the celebration of the Mass in the Roman Catholic church is therefore a much more serious matter.

The Coronavirus presented a challenging situation in which Christians had to discern how best to love their neighbour. This paper has considered some of the complexities within that challenge by looking at different scripturally-based attitudes towards authority, by considering two pastoral letters writing during previous plagues and by pointing out the different significance of worship exclusion for Christian groups with differing sacramental theologies. Within these Biblical, theological and historical considerations are three important themes of Christian attitudes towards suffering, death and incarnation. These themes may offer some promise for a

8. Daniel Hayward and John Young, “Online Communion in The United Church of Canada” United Church of Canada, April 6, 2020, <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/faith-communities-and-covid-19/worship-online-during-covid-19#Downloads>

9. Robert Sarah, “Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy,” *Catholic News Agency*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/45815/full-text-cardinal-sarah-let-us-return-to-the-eucharist-with-joy>.

10. Sarah, “Let Us Return.”

deeper conversation between Christians who have been divided on the issue of vaccine mandates.

Works Cited

- Cyprian, "On the Mortality (or Plague) De Mortalitate," EWTN Global Catholic Television Network, accessed November 26, 2022, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-the-mortality-or-plague-de-mortalitate-11412>.
- Hayward, Daniel and Young, John. "Online Communion in The United Church of Canada." United Church of Canada. April 6, 2020. <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/faith-communities-and-covid-19/worship-online-during-covid-19#Downloads>
- Luther, Martin. "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague." *Christianity Today*. May 19, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/martin-luther-plague-pandemic-coronavirus-covid-flee-letter.html>.
- Reno, R.R. "Safetyism." *First things*. New York, N.Y: 317 (2021): 65.
- Runham, Nathan. "Why Did Luther Not Flee From the Deadly Plague?" *Stimulus* 27, no. 3 (2020), 61-67.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,shib&db=rft&AN=ATLAI0200727000725&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Sarah, Robert. "Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy." Catholic News Agency (Catholic News Agency, August 15, 2020), <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/45815/full-text-cardinal-sarah-let-us-return-to-the-eucharist-with-joy>.
- Stark, Rodney. *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*. HarperCollins eBook 2011.

Appendix C: Research Ethics Board Certificate

Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0132022
Title of Research Project:	The Perspectives of the Unvaccinated on Vaccine-Mandated Worship
Faculty Supervisor:	Rev. Dr. Dave Csinos
Investigator	Laura Rousseau

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 8 December 2022 to 30 April 2023

Dated this 23th day of December, 2022 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Dr. Alyda Faber
Chair, Research Ethics Board
Atlantic School of Theology
660 Francklyn Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3H 3B5

Appendix E: Research Ethics Board Proposal

Name of Student Investigator: Laura Rousseau

Title of Research Project: The Perspectives of the Unvaccinated on In-Person Worship which Required Proof of Vaccination during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Summary of Proposed Research

Description

During the Coronavirus Pandemic, Public Health departments across Canada enacted various policies to limit the spread of COVID-19. At the start of the Pandemic, gathering sizes were limited. As vaccines became widely available, new Public Health policies were introduced that restricted the access of unvaccinated people to certain gatherings that were deemed non-essential. At this time, faith communities across Canada were making decisions in accordance with the public health orders about whether or not they would allow unvaccinated people to attend in-person worship services. As the majority of Canadians became vaccinated, many churches restricted their worship attendance to only those who were considered fully vaccinated. This proposed study will investigate the question “What were the experiences of unvaccinated adults who belonged to Christian faith communities that required vaccination for in-person worship during the Coronavirus pandemic?”

Proposed Research Field Sites

There will be no specific field site as participants will be selected from a variety of different faith communities having experienced the shared phenomenon of “being an unvaccinated adult who belonged to a Christian faith community that required vaccination for in-person worship during the Coronavirus pandemic.” Participants will be recruited by word-of-mouth as well as through solicitation on social media platforms e.g. Redditt, Locals, Telegram and Signal.

Principal Research Consultant

Rev. Miriam Spies is an ordained Minister in United Church of Canada. She is the Co-Editor of [The Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability](#) and a PhD Candidate at Emmanuel College, Toronto.

Methodology

This will be a phenomenological study that investigate the phenomenon of “being an unvaccinated adult who belonged to a Christian faith community that required vaccination for in-person worship during the Coronavirus pandemic.”

Participants will initially be given a written questionnaire by email (see Appendix A) and will be asked to indicate their willingness for a follow-up phone interview. Results of the questionnaire will be coded to uncover commonalities and noteworthy features of the experience of “being an unvaccinated adult who belonged to a Christian faith community that required vaccination for in-person worship.” Subsequent phone interviews may be conducted with participants who indicated willingness for follow-up interviews in the initial questionnaire. These phone interviews will expand upon the questions outlined in the written questionnaire.¹

Potential Benefits from Study

During the Coronavirus pandemic, unvaccinated people were often maligned in the popular media and their perspectives on vaccination were minimized. The exclusion of unvaccinated people from in-person worship further contributed to their social marginalization specifically within the Christian context. In an increasingly polarized society, the Christian church as the Body of Christ has a call to heal the divisions within our own community so we can be salt and light to an increasingly divided world. This study will give voice to the experiences of unvaccinated people, allowing this marginalized group an opportunity to be heard by the vaccinated-majority which may increase compassion and respect for the common humanity among both the vaccinated and un-vaccinated.

Potential Risks from Study

Due to the criteria for this study’s research participants (unvaccinated Christians), this study will necessitate disclosure of personal health information (vaccination status). This information will be protected as per the “**Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data**” procedures (see below).

Psychological distress due to difficult memories of conflict or perceived abandonment by one’s faith community may necessitate supplementary pastoral care. Participants may also have experienced conflict within their families or friend groups due to their unvaccinated status. Participants may also have experienced financial stress if they were employed in certain fields that required vaccination for continued employment. I will offer the option to refer participants to either Father Colin Peterson or Pastor Daren Redekopp.

1. Agreement was made between instructor Dr David Csinos and Laura Rousseau via email on Dec. 8 2022 that a numerical target for participants would be 15-20 questionnaires with 6-8 interviews.

Process for Obtaining Informed Consent

After I have identified potential participants, I will email them the questionnaire and a copy of the consent form. If follow-up telephone interviews are conducted, I will obtain verbal consent at the beginning to the phone interview, letting participants know that the conversation will be recorded for later transcription.

Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data

Protecting Identity of Participants and Storage and Destruction of Data:

- 1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants, I will:
 - a) keep one copy for myself which I will place in an envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.**
 - b) provide one copy to my supervisor (Dr Rev David Csinos), also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in his office at AST.****
- 2. Participants will be given code names. Audio tapes of phone interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent until deleted permanently from my device at the completion of the research (April 5th 2023).**
- 3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password-protected, encrypted USB drive from the time of data collection until the final paper is due (April 5th 2023)**
- 4. When the final paper is submitted to my supervisor on (April 5th 2023) all hard copies of research data and encrypted USB drive will be mailed to Dr Rev David Csinos for storage in a locked file cabinet for one year in his office at AST, after which all data will be destroyed by shredding or crushing.**

Appendix A: Proposed Written Questionnaire

1. Which church denomination (e.g. Pentecostal, United Church, non-denominational) did you belong to prior to the pandemic?
2. Approximately how many people attended a typical worship service in your community of faith prior to the pandemic?
3. How long had **you** been attending your community of faith prior to the pandemic?
4. Prior to the pandemic, how frequently did you attend worship on average?
5. Prior to the pandemic, did you participate in any activities in your community of faith besides worship? If so, please describe.
6. After the onset of the pandemic but before the vaccine became available, were you still involved with your faith community? If so, please describe.
7. When your community of faith required proof of vaccination for worship attendance, how was that decision communicated to you?
8. Do you feel that your relationship with your community of faith was impacted by the decision to require a vaccine passport for worship? If so, please describe.
9. Was your relationship with God impacted by your experience of the COVID pandemic?
10. What is your current level of participation in the community of faith you attended prior to the pandemic?
11. Is there anything you would like to communicate to the wider Christian community about your experience as an unvaccinated Christian?
12. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview by phone? If so, what is the best number to reach you?

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Are you an **unvaccinated Christian** who belonged to a faith community that **asked for proof of vaccination to attend in-person worship** during the pandemic?

Do you want an opportunity to share your perspective with the wider Christian community?

My name is Laura Rousseau and I am a student at the Atlantic School of Theology. I am looking for people who fit the above criteria to answer a questionnaire about their experiences.

The results of this research will be presented in an online webinar (DATE) and made available in written form through the Atlantic School of Theology.

This is your opportunity to confidentially share your particular experience of this historically significant pandemic as a contribution to research that will compile, analyze and present perspectives of unvaccinated Christians. For more information or to participate in this study please contact me at ASTworshipstudy@proton.me. The deadline to participate is January 13th 2023.

Appendix C: Informed Consent

I acknowledge that I have been given a description of the research project, “**The Perspectives of the Unvaccinated on In-Person Worship which Required Proof of Vaccination during the Coronavirus Pandemic.**” I am aware that my participation is strictly voluntary, and that I can end my participation in the project at any point in the process.

I am aware that my participation is confidential. All responses will be stored in a locked cabinet until the results of the research are presented in April 2023. I understand that my name and other identifiers will be changed in the research results to maintain my confidentiality. Questionnaire responses will be securely stored for 1 year at the Atlantic School of Theology in a locked file. One year after completion of the research results (April 2024), all personal responses to this questionnaire will be destroyed. This consent form will be stored separately from the research data in order to maintain confidentiality.

This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology. Any ethical concerns about this project may be taken to this Research Ethics Board.

By signing below, I am consenting to participate in this research study.

Name Date