

**Preamble:** From time to time, the National Faith and Life Team (NFLT) responds to important questions we face as a church community seeking to be faithful to Jesus. The following document represents NFLT's intentional attempt to provide a biblical-theological foundation and practical guidance to MB leaders and churches as we together face questions of Covid-19 vaccination, religious conscience, and governmental requirements for vaccine mandates/passport. We hope that this **DRAFT document** is helpful for you and would love to hear feedback from you about how we could edit it to make it better. You can contact us at [listeningwell@mbchurches.ca](mailto:listeningwell@mbchurches.ca)

## **Vaccinations and Living Well for Jesus (Discussion Version)**

Disciples of Jesus facing complex and formidable ethical questions do not immediately jump to human opinion or wisdom, but must seek guidance from the Holy Spirit who speaks most clearly through Scripture. This seeking involves joining together as a community in prayer and filtering the question through a biblical-theological foundation. While our biblical-theological foundation will not, like a vending machine, pump out precise guidance on each and every dilemma disciples face, it will provide at least some solid foundation stones to stand on while we together discern God's will in this moment.

As a church family across Canada, we have seen deep divisions emerging as we respond to vaccination, government vaccine and mask mandates, as well as government restrictions over church gatherings. Some of our churches have divided into two entrenched groups based on their responses to these questions. Harsh words have been exchanged; ultimatums expressed; fellowship broken; and the church's witness harmed in the community. Pastors and leaders are throwing up their hands, and some are, understandably looking for the exits. We are needing the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit to guide us together.

We know that no document about vaccination is by itself the solution to our division but we hope it can be a conversation starter as we focus on our shared identity as children of God, citizens of God's eternal Kingdom, and members of the Body of Christ.

Because this document focuses on our shared biblical-theological convictions that are part of our shared identity, we will not be drawing conclusions based primarily upon political leanings. We will neither criticize big government nor praise individual freedom. The Biblical prophets did not denounce governments because of how large they were but rather because of their lack of concern for the well-being of their people (cf. Isaiah 3:13-15).

We will also not be making arguments based on whether our secular government has legal rights or precedents to do these things. We do not begin by consulting lawyers who can advise us about the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (or any other legislation). We are not saying that these are unimportant but only that we do not believe that this is where we need to start. The following document is, therefore, not a critique or a commendation of any political party or political position, but a biblical-theological exploration to help disciples of Jesus

(specifically those in Canadian MB churches) have a solid foundation to stand on as we face these difficult questions.

**The presupposition behind our foundation stones is that our calling as disciples of Jesus is to bear Jesus' image faithfully before a watching world (See MB Confession Article 10).** While all humans are divine image bearers, disciples of Jesus have been forgiven, cleansed, and Holy Spirit empowered for this huge responsibility of reflecting Jesus' character in the world. We want to live well for Jesus—lifting up the name of Jesus positively in our communities. This means that our **convictions, behaviours, and communication** need to be consistent with God's "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). As we bear Jesus' image in the world, all humans are to witness our "good works" and come to "worship our God" (Matthew 5:16; cf. Ephesians 2:10).

**This presupposition means that our priority in this conversation is to ask how our convictions, behaviours, and communication reflect the character of Jesus before our watching world.** Article 10 calls us to be "true to Jesus in everyday life" while Article 7 explains how the church "witnesses to God's reign in the world." Jesus says we are to be his "witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8; cf. Article 1). What we say and do in relation to vaccines, mandates, and government restrictions must be set in the context of our being witnesses to Jesus in the world. Although we will inevitably fail to live up to this lofty ideal in each and every circumstance, not having this as our top priority will certainly guarantee that we will fall far short of this goal.

When we as a church family project ourselves into the future when these specific vaccine questions have passed, we must ask whether our chosen convictions, behaviours, and communication today will have imaged Jesus well? Will our neighbours have seen in us an accurate reflection of Jesus—both when we agree with their opinions and when we don't?

Sin in its many forms is a failure to accurately reflect Jesus in the world. While what we do in the present moment is not a salvation issue, it is incorrect to say that our response to these health questions is not a sin issue. **If we fail to reflect the character of Jesus in this moment, we will be guilty of sin and in need of repentance.** We should not minimize the importance of our individual and corporate witness as we live out our convictions before our watching world.

**Reflection Questions:**

- 1) *When you think about your own convictions, behaviours, and communication around these questions, how do they reflect our shared desire to demonstrate the character and values of Jesus to our watching world? Is there anything you could do to better reflect Jesus to your neighbours, friends, co-workers, etc.?*
- 2) *When you think about how you have communicated your convictions, how has this communication reflected the truth and grace of Jesus, as well as the fruit of the Spirit (viz. love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control)? Is there anything you would like to do better in the future?*

**The first foundation stone is that we want to be people who together seek and speak truth in our world.** We are to image Jesus whose ways are “just and true” (Revelation 15:3; cf. 16:7). We want to think on “whatever is true” (Philippians 4:8); we are called to investigate what is “true” (Acts 17:11); and follow in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul who asserts that what he spoke was “true” (2 Corinthians 7:14). Imaging Jesus in the world involves investigating, discerning, reflecting, and speaking what is “true” (See Article 10). We want to discern together what is true about vaccinations, mandates, and government restrictions—and reject what is false.

If we are not doing this well, we are not accurately reflecting Jesus in the world. It is an act of Christian discipleship to ask questions, investigate competing truth claims, and seek out trustworthy sources. We reflect Jesus’ image in the world when we demonstrate a desire to seek and speak truth. We must seek truth together or else we will fracture into a community where everyone does “whatever seems right [true] in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

The “together” part of this seeking and speaking truth means that while individual conscience is important, individual conscience does not mean that I should have the freedom to pick whatever “truth” I want. An individual conscience can be trustworthy if it is confirmed by the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1) but it can also be “weak” and untrustworthy (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:7-12) or even “seared with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:2). Deacons are selected on the basis of holding on to the “deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Timothy 3:9). We do not decide ethical issues based on the individual consciences of people—since this is an untrustworthy foundation. Conscience is only valuable when it is firmly based on what is true. Let us seek and speak truth together!

**Reflection Questions:**

- 1) When it comes to these questions about vaccination, mandates, and government restrictions, what are the trustworthy sources of “truth” that have formed your convictions? Why have you decided to trust these sources?**
- 2) An important part of resolving any conflict is being open to new truth. What “evidence” would need to emerge for you to reconsider what you presently hold to be true about vaccination, mandates, and government restrictions?**

**The second foundation stone is that we value and support whatever is in the direction of rich and robust human life (physical, spiritual, relational, etc.) lived in harmony with creation (see Articles 2, 5).** God is the “living God” (Psalm 42:2) who created life and called it “good” and “very good” (Genesis 1:25, 31). True (or Shalom) life is what humans are created for. Sin opposes, diminishes, and kills this true life. In the Old Testament, following God’s way in the world was to lead Israel to experience long lives (Exodus 23:25-25; Deuteronomy 6:1-2). In the New Testament, we hear that Jesus who is the “way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6) comes so that we might have “life to the full” (John 10:10). Jesus died on the cross and went from death to life to defeat death (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). Disciples of Jesus are promised access to “eternal [true] life” (John 3:15-16).

Everything disciples of Jesus do is about this kind of true life. We worship Jesus who brings life. We walk in the way of Jesus which is the way of life not death. We invite others to worship and follow Jesus because it is the way of life. We oppose efforts to diminish human life, shorten human life, and take human life. We support efforts to relieve human suffering and scientific research that values and points in the direction of life. While the biblical definition of “life” is more robust and rich than simply one’s physical body having a beating heart, we believe that God is the Life Giver and the one who has numbered our days and has the right to give and take life. While we affirm this life principle, we recognize that there is an appropriate time to release our fragile and broken bodies (and the fragile and broken bodies of our loved ones) to God’s care even in death (See Article 14).

This foundation stone means that we want to support all actions that contribute to human life and well-being unless there are extenuating circumstances involved that are contrary to some other foundation stone of Christian discipleship.

**Reflection Questions:**

- 1) ***How are your convictions and behaviours relating to vaccines, mandates, and government restrictions supporting robust human life?***
- 2) ***Do your convictions and behaviours in any way increase the likelihood of human death? If so, what other values or conviction would you see as justifying this—since it is contrary to our biblical-theological foundation stone?***

**The third foundation stone is that our actions must reflect God’s true love of neighbour (Matthew 22:39) and God’s true love of the enemy (Matthew 5:44) (See Article 7).** True love looks to the interest of others rather than to our own interests (Philippians 2:4) and even lays down its life for the well-being of others (1 John 3:16). This kind of love is not simply true when and if our neighbours and enemies feel our love or feel supported, but when we can honestly say before Jesus that our actions are for their ultimate well-being (viz., true/Shalom life).

Love for neighbour is especially focused on the most vulnerable: “Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place” (Jeremiah 22:3; cf. Zechariah 7:10; Isaiah 58). A sign that God’s Kingdom has come is when the “blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:22). The lives and well-being of the vulnerable are particularly valuable in the eyes of God.

We must ask about the outcomes of our behaviors related to vaccines, mandates, and religious freedom. How has our behaviour expressed both truth and grace? How has our behaviour contributed to the well-being of others—especially the most vulnerable? How has our behaviour been experienced by those with whom we disagree?

**Reflection Questions:**

- 1) *If “love of neighbour” is a key foundation stone, how will you communicate that your convictions and behavior are motivated by a love for your neighbours?*
- 2) *What impact will your convictions and behaviours have on vulnerable people both inside and outside of your church community?*

**The fourth foundation stone is that we are answerable to God for the stewardship of our own bodies (and for those individuals under our care) (See Articles 14-15).** God has knit each of us together in our mother’s womb which makes our physical lives and physical bodies “sacred.” We are not owners of our lives or owners of our bodies but “stewards” of these sacred gifts. This means that what we do with our bodies and put into our bodies is not simply a question of personal freedom or preferences, but a discipleship question. Stewardship means that we should not take unnecessary risks with our bodies, abuse our bodies, or avoid medical treatments that could provide a means of healing and/or protection of our bodies.

**Reflection Questions:**

- 1) *How will your convictions and behaviours in this area contribute to your being a good steward of your physical life/body (and of those under your care)?*
- 2) *What behaviours have you adopted in order to be a good steward of your physical life/body during this pandemic? Are there any behaviours you could adopt to be a better steward of your physical life/body?*

**The fifth foundation stone is that we are called to live wisely in relation to human governments (See Article 12).** We walk in a balance between Romans 13 and Revelation 13. In Romans 13, Paul implores the early Christians facing an oppressive Roman government to “be subject to the governing authorities” because the government has been “established by God” (v.1) and is “God’s servant for your good” (v.4). For the vast majority of the New Testament, the default assumption is that governments play a supportive role in God’s true-life intentions so that God’s Kingdom community can flourish. By implication, Romans 13 is telling us that we should normally comply with government guidelines and health measures which are there “for [our] good” (cf. 1 Peter 2:13).

But Romans 13 is not the whole story. Christians and church families have been persecuted by evil governments wanting to overstep their divinely approved mandate to bring order, and instead desire ultimate and unconditional loyalty. Revelation 13 paints this sort of picture as governments take on the role of “beast” or “dragon” in strong opposition to God’s eternal Kingdom, the Body of Christ, and the well-being of all creation. We must not be naïve to the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). If a secular government is deliberately taking steps in opposition to God’s Kingdom, our refusal to give it loyalty or blind obedience is also a part of faithful Christian discipleship. In such moments, we “must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29).

This fifth foundation stone assumes that we begin with a Romans 13 posture unless there is strong evidence that our government is in deliberate opposition to God's Kingdom. If we agree together as a community that our government has adopted the role of "beast" or "dragon" from Revelation 13, we must "seek first [God's] Kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). We must live out this opposition in a way that is consistent with our presupposition and other foundation stones.

**Reflection Questions:**

- 1) Do you believe that this is a Romans 13 moment where we submit ourselves to governmental mandates and leadership during the pandemic OR a Revelation 13 moment where we need to be in opposition to our government and "obey God rather than humans"? If it is a bit of both, how should we respond?**
  
- 2) What evidence do you have to support your answer? What evidence would lead you to change your mind?**

**To summarize our biblical-theological foundation stones**, as disciples of Jesus we want to image Jesus well to our watching world by seeking and speaking truth together, by encouraging God's true-life purpose in ourselves and others, by loving well all of our neighbours even at personal expense, by stewarding well our physical bodies, and by discerning what Paul's words to submit to government authorities means in this moment.

Theological convictions must be embodied for them to be a faithful witness for Jesus. As we try to respond to frequently asked questions, we must filter each of our responses through our biblical-theological foundation stones. But we must begin with much prayer, individually and corporately, asking for wisdom from the Holy Spirit. How we respond together in this moment will become part of what Church historians will reflect on for the decades ahead. What does faithfulness to Jesus look like in this moment?

**FAQ #1: How should MBs respond to our health authorities' strong recommendations to get vaccinated against Covid-19?**

**FAQ #2: How should MBs respond to government mask mandates and government vaccine mandates which limit services to those with a certain vaccination status and/or require a certain vaccination status for specific occupations?**

**FAQ #3: How should MBs respond to government mandates, attendance restrictions, and forced closures directed specifically toward the local church operations?**

**Conclusion:**

This document was designed as a discussion starter for each of us to ask questions about how our particular perspective on key pandemic related questions relates to our shared biblical-theological foundation stones.

It is hoped that having greater clarity about the foundation stones and our different assumptions about truth will help us to have better conversations. We hope that this document will cause each of us to re-examine carefully our own convictions and see how they fit with our larger church family's shared convictions. We hope that we will be more open to listen to others who have different perspectives on what is true in this moment. And we hope that each time we open our mouths, write a lengthy email, or post something on social media, we will ask how this communication fits with our desire to communicate with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And, finally, we hope that we will pray for those who disagree with us because love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Alert readers will notice, possibly with some surprise or even disappointment, that we did not make church unity a foundation stone—separate from and maybe even superior to the others. True church unity is certainly an expectation that the New Testament highlights (cf. John 17; Ephesians 4:1-6), but we must not avoid hard conversations in order to maintain some thin veneer of pretend unity in the midst of each of us chasing our own path. There is also no virtue in disciples of Jesus standing unified around something that is not true and, therefore, contrary to the way of Jesus.

The path to unity is not pretending that this is a "debatable matter" and then ignoring key questions as if our convictions and behaviours don't matter. Our choices in the moment have life and death consequences—but we still want to have the mind of Christ who calls us by "name." We must call each other by "name" and seek truth together. We must be careful when we start seeing people in our church family not as deeply loved image bearers of Christ but as members of a category—like the "vaxers" or the "anti-vaxers." If this happens, we lose our ability to sit with others, listen, and be transformed.

We must pray for a new and deeper Spirit-empowered unity that emerges as we pursue together our desire to be faithful witnesses for Jesus in this pandemic moment. In our present world filled with fear, uncertainty, loneliness, and even hopelessness, there is no better time for our church to embrace that faithful witness, representing the true Light of the world who ultimately will gain victory over all darkness, sin, and death!