

Reflections upon the response of the Standing Committee and the Diocesan senior leadership to the COVID-19 Pandemic

(A report of the Standing Committee.)

Key Points

- The Standing Committee established a committee to consider, and provide reflections on, the response of the Standing Committee and the Diocesan senior leadership in relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic (**the Committee**).
- The Committee examined the period 1 January 2020 – 20 September 2022, being the start of the year in which the Pandemic was declared, to the end of the Synod session in 2022.
- The COVID-19 Pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for Sydney Anglican churches, schools, and Diocesan organisations, testing the resilience of our communities in profound ways. While the acute phase of the Pandemic has passed, its lingering impact remains, with individuals and families still grappling with health concerns, economic hardship, and emotional strain. Acknowledging this ongoing suffering is vital, as it reflects our commitment to compassion and support. This report seeks to honour all such experiences, recognising the good faith efforts of leaders while exploring lessons to strengthen our response in future crises.

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Synod with a series of reflections upon the response of the Standing Committee and Diocesan senior leadership to the COVID-19 Pandemic (**the Pandemic**).

Recommendations

2. Synod receive this report.
3. Synod, noting the report 'Reflections upon the response of the Standing Committee and the Diocesan senior leadership to the COVID-19 Pandemic', encourage the Standing Committee, Archbishop and the Diocesan senior leadership, parishes, rectors, church workers, Diocesan organisations and schools, and Moore Theological College to consider the relevant recommendations at paragraph 220 of the report and take appropriate steps in their context.

Background

4. At its meeting on 23 October 2023, the Standing Committee appointed a Committee to 'undertake a review of decisions made by' the Standing Committee and the Diocesan senior leadership in relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic (**the Committee**).
5. Subsequently, at its meeting on 20 May 2024, the Standing Committee amended the terms of reference of the Committee, and agreed that the Committee was to 'consider, and provide reflections on, the response of the Standing Committee and the Diocesan senior leadership in relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
6. The Committee comprised the Rev Nigel Fortescue (Chair), the Rev Joseph Wiltshire, the Rev Zac Veron, the Rev Stephen Gibson, Mr Jeremy Freeman, a representative of (the then) Sydney Diocesan Services (**SDS**) nominated by the CEO, and up to two other members appointed by the Archbishop. The CEO of SDS nominated Mrs Briony Bounds, who also served as Secretary. The Archbishop appointed Dr Claire Smith and Dr Emma Penzo to the Committee. Dr Penzo resigned from the Committee in July 2024.

7. Throughout the duration of the Committee's work, conversation often turned to the personal impact of the Pandemic. Every member of the Committee was individually touched by the Pandemic, having contracted COVID-19 and/or knowing those who are suffering from long-COVID and having endured the disruption to life and relationships caused by lockdowns and other mitigation measures. Moreover, a family member of one Committee member died from COVID-19 during the Committee's work. Prayers were said regularly for those who still suffer the ill-effects of the Pandemic in many and various ways.
8. The Committee therefore wishes to acknowledge, on behalf of many in our churches, that the negative impact of the Pandemic was not limited to infection by the SARS-CoV-2 virus but included psychological, relational, educational, financial, social, and spiritual burdens that were shared across the community and our churches, and experienced by some people and subsets of society more than others. Both individuals and churches within the Diocese are dealing with the ongoing health impacts (such as COVID complications including 'long COVID', delayed diagnoses and treatment of unrelated health conditions, vaccine injuries, and ongoing mental health issues) in various ways.
9. The Committee met 13 times from October 2023 to June 2025.
10. The Committee met with Bishop Gary Koo, as Chair of the (former) COVID-19 Taskforce, Bishop Glenn Davies, and Archbishop Kanishka Raffel. The Committee also considered the following materials –
 - (a) all meeting notes and materials from the COVID-19 Taskforce, which met from March 2020 to March 2021,
 - (b) correspondence from the Archbishop to rectors in the years 2020 – 2022,
 - (c) parish attendance data held by the Registry for the years of the Pandemic, including qualitative questions about the impact of COVID-19 on attendance,
 - (d) copies of cached webpages from SydneyAnglicans.net in the years 2020 – 2022,
 - (e) the report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission, *The Relationship of Church and State and Religious Freedom*,
 - (f) articles and other publications about similar reviews undertaken by other institutions,
 - (g) supporting materials from Diocesan regional zoom meetings held in September 2021, and
 - (h) unsolicited copies of correspondence from members of our parishes.
11. The Committee also put specific questions to SDS Legal, the Archbishop's Office, and the Regional Bishops, and considered the responses to those enquiries.
12. The Committee examined the period 1 January 2020 – 20 September 2022, being the start of the year in which the Pandemic was declared, to the end of the Synod session in 2022.
13. The Committee agreed that Diocesan organisations and schools were out of scope for the present work but recommended that those entities to conduct their own reviews.
14. This report is comprised of two sections: a joint report from the Committee as a whole, followed by individual reflections from Committee members. The Committee's terms of reference were to provide reflections on the response, and since its members held a variety of perspectives and opinions on the Pandemic itself and the Diocesan response to the Pandemic, it considered this structure was the best way to give voice to the different views held. To this end, the part of the report titled 'Individual Reflections' was added to allow all members choosing to do so to provide an individual reflection, to be read as an accompaniment to the combined report.
15. The COVID-19 Pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for Sydney Anglican churches, schools, and Diocesan organisations, testing the resilience of our communities in profound ways. Lockdowns, restrictions, and uncertainty disrupted worship, education, and pastoral care, placing immense pressure on leaders, clergy, and congregants alike. The rapid shift to online platforms, while innovative, could not fully replace the richness of in-person fellowship, leaving many feeling isolated. Schools faced logistical hurdles, and Diocesan structures navigated complex government directives with limited precedent. While the acute phase of the Pandemic has passed, its lingering impact remains, with individuals and families still grappling with health concerns, economic hardship, and emotional strain. Acknowledging this ongoing suffering is vital, as it reflects our commitment to

compassion and support. This report seeks to honour all such experiences, recognising the good faith efforts of leaders while exploring lessons to strengthen our response in future crises.

Obstacles faced by the Committee

16. It should also be noted that ours is by no means the only report written regarding the handling of the Pandemic. A variety of non-church organisations have commissioned reports on responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic but in most cases, they have been completed by paid, qualified researchers with resources to receive thousands of submissions and host scores of roundtable discussions. This has not been within our capacity, but we have investigated the responses of the Standing Committee and Diocesan senior leadership to the best of our ability.
17. While doing this, we have encountered several difficulties.
 - (a) During the Pandemic, advice was sought by the Diocesan leadership in many different ways on many different issues. Advice was also given regularly to Diocesan leadership, often unsolicited and by email. Sometimes the advice sought was given verbally, sometimes written and sometimes given on the understanding that it would remain confidential. Often “advice” was little more than a shared understanding or position held after a meeting of the COVID-19 taskforce. For these reasons, while our Committee requested access to all the records held, we could not gain access to absolutely everything considered by Diocesan leaders in the process of making decisions, including any matters subject to legal professional privilege. This should not be construed to mean that anyone was obstructionist; indeed, to the contrary, we had access to everyone we requested an interview with and more than 1,000 pages of information.
 - (b) One of the early actions of the Committee was to consider constructing a survey to allow grassroots feedback on the Diocesan response to the Pandemic. Following an in-depth conversation between the Chair, Secretary and a leading Diocesan researcher, the Committee determined that such a survey ran significant risk of corruption due to memory bias. In addition, the Committee determined that insufficient resources were available to be able to deal with detailed analysis of data across the potential volume of responses whilst managing the potential response corruption. We acknowledge that for some on our Committee and some church members this is a significant disappointment. There are stories still to be told and grief that remains unexpressed. As a Committee, we believe that the best place for stories to be told and for any pastoral response is in our local churches. There is a recommendation for parishes to consider later in this report. We are also recommending that the Archbishop and Diocesan senior leadership give consideration to holding regional or diocese-wide gatherings for thanksgiving, healing, and prayer (for bodies, minds, spirits, and relationships).
 - (c) Given the rapid onset of the Pandemic and its implications for our churches, several of the people we interviewed relied on scant handwritten notes and other documents to aid memory. While notes were taken of various meetings, few were ratified as minutes and exist rather as memory aids rather than formal documentation.
18. These matters notwithstanding, it has been a privilege for us to do this work for the Diocese, and we believe that the recommendations made will aid us in the future, not just in the case of medical emergencies and other crises but in our operation and working together.

Timeline of NSW Government and Sydney Anglican Diocesan Actions 2020-2022

19. The year 2020 was marked by the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which required coordinated and decisive action from both the NSW Government and the Sydney Anglican Diocese. The Diocese, led by the Archbishop, Standing Committee, and the COVID-19 Taskforce were responsible for staying up-to-date with government measures and providing advice and/or directives about complementary strategies to ensure public safety of parishioners, staff and employees, and the broader community, alongside the continuity of spiritual leadership and pastoral care.

January to February 2020: Early Awareness

20. On 30 January 2020, the Archbishop issued a message encouraging church leaders and parishioners to be vigilant, pray, and adopt safety precautions to protect their communities. This early action reflected the Diocese's proactive approach, preceding any government interventions.

March 2020: The onset of restrictions

21. On 5 March, the Archbishop provided guidance on Holy Communion practices, recommending the individual serving of the bread and the wine/juice. Encouragement was also given for safe protocols for children's ministry and communal dining practices.
22. On 13 March, the NSW Government limited public gatherings to 500 people, effective 16 March, with religious events included in the directive. On the same day, the Diocese responded by advising rectors to prepare for smaller gatherings and to have contingency plans for larger congregations.
23. On 16 March, the Archbishop formally established a COVID-19 Taskforce under Bishop Gary Koo and advised that a dedicated webpage would be launched to provide communication about the Diocese's evolving response.
24. By 18 March, the NSW Government restricted indoor gatherings to 100 people (including religious gatherings). On the same day, pre-empting the tighter restrictions that were to be mandated by the government over the following days, the Archbishop announced the suspension of all Sydney Anglican church gatherings, including services, house parties, and retreats. Weddings and funerals were restricted to any bridal party, immediate family members and officiants, while churches were encouraged to transition to online services.
25. From 19 March 2020 until 31 December 2020, St Michael's Cathedral livestreamed via Facebook 'Cathedral Bell Prayers' at noon every single Thursday, for 42 weeks in total (and in many of those weeks on one or more other days), where a pastoral staff member rang the Cathedral bell for a full minute, and then covered in public prayer a very wide range of COVID related topics for up to 15 minutes, preceded by a short Scripture reading. The two other cathedrals in the Diocese were encouraged to do likewise. Many from our churches tuned in and were encouraged to pray and to take heart across the Illawarra and beyond.
26. On 21 March, the NSW Government introduced mandatory social distancing of four square metres per person. Then, on 23 March, it mandated the closure of non-essential venues, including places of worship, while limiting weddings to 20 attendees and funerals to the same number. On the same day, the Archbishop responded by directing that church properties were not to be used for any public gatherings, and communicating the new wedding and funeral restrictions. Small home groups were permitted to meet under social distancing guidelines, while limited staff were allowed on-site to manage live-streamed services. The Standing Committee endorsed several key measures on the same day, including deferring Parish Cost Recovery payments, allocating \$50,000 to the COVID-19 Taskforce, and forming an Emergency Executive Subcommittee to ensure governance continuity.
27. By 26 March, the government further reduced attendance limits for weddings to five, and funerals to ten. This represented a tightening of restrictions that had been communicated by the Diocese on 23 March. On 31 March, the NSW Government implemented a general public lockdown, restricting gatherings to two people and movement to essential purposes. Clergy were permitted to leave their residences for pastoral care or essential duties. The Archbishop provided guidance on Holy Communion at home, emphasizing its exceptional nature.

April to June 2020: Lockdowns and gradual easing

28. By 7 April, churches had been deemed a workplace, meaning that church staff and volunteers could utilise the on-site space (including for the live streaming of services), so long as social distancing measures were in place. On the same day, the Archbishop communicated that funerals could be attended by ten people, while weddings remained at a maximum of five attendees (not including those essential for conducting the service). On 20 April, the Archbishop encouraged rectors to prepare for financial relief programs such as JobKeeper and provided advice on eligibility and application processes. On 24 April the Archbishop confirmed that clergy would be included in the JobKeeper program. On 28 April he commended the COVIDSafe app to parishioners and extended the deadline for AGMs to 30 June 2020.
29. By 15 May, the NSW Government permitted gatherings of up to ten people for weddings and up to 20 for funerals. This information had been communicated to churches by the Archbishop a few days earlier, on 12 May. The government also allowed for religious gatherings capped at ten attendees. The Diocese, however, advised against immediately resuming in-person Sunday services,

emphasized safety and regulation for any mid-week gatherings on church property and advised that small home groups of five people would be able to meet again.

30. On 25 May, the Standing Committee agreed to make a recommendation to the Archbishop at or before its July meeting regarding the timing of the next ordinary session of the Synod. It also resolved to write to the Attorney General requesting permission for Anglican diocesan councils to not convene their Synods in 2020 if it proved impossible or inexpedient to do so, noting that it is a legal requirement in New South Wales for Anglican synods to meet annually.
31. On 27 May, the Archbishop provided advice on Diocesan COVID Safe measures to be put into place ahead of an anticipated return to larger gatherings, and reiterated how important it would be for these guidelines to be followed. These included adherence to mandated social distancing, contact tracing measures, no congregational singing until medical advice confirmed it was safe to do so and more. Instructions were also given about various options for the conducting of AGMs ahead of the 30 June deadline.
32. On 2 June, after restrictions were eased to allow gatherings of up to 50 people, the Diocese provided detailed guidance to parishes, including the need for COVID Safety plans, strong encouragement to not resume congregational singing based on the latest medical advice about aerolised spread, and encouragement to restart children and youth ministries with care and wisdom. On 16 June, the Archbishop advised that small groups of up to 20 were permitted in private homes (with social distancing encouraged even as it was not mandated), church gatherings could now include up to 50 people per room on church property (with social distancing measures taken into account), that COVID Safety plans were now mandatory for all religious services and that external parties (or no more than 20 people) would now be permitted to use church properties.

July to September 2020: Adjustments amid emerging challenges

33. From 1 July, the NSW Government directed that gathering limits (including for church services, weddings and funerals) were to be determined by the four square metre rule, with no fixed cap on attendee numbers. The Diocese continued to advise caution. On 21 July, the Archbishop communicated that, due to a significant outbreak in Victoria, numbers of church services (including children) would be restricted to 100 in each building on site, that attendees should not mingle before or after services, and that congregational singing was still not allowed (though singers and choirs were permitted under specific conditions). On 23 July, places of worship were required to register as COVID-Safe businesses and on 24 July the Archbishop communicated that all parishes were to comply with this directive.
34. On 27 July, the Standing Committee discussed a number of matters related to the Pandemic's implications for the first ordinary session of the 52nd Synod. It was resolved –
 - (a) to recommend to the Archbishop that an ordinary session of the 52nd Synod should be convened prior to the special session to elect the next Archbishop (in order to remove ambiguity about which session would be the Archbishop election session),
 - (b) that for the purposes of elections, 12 October 2020 be deemed the first day of the first ordinary session of the 52nd Synod,
 - (c) to recommend that the Archbishop not convene a session of the Synod in 2020 while there is evidence of community transmission in NSW,
 - (d) to note that the Archbishop may decide to convene a one-day Synod some time between October and December 2020 so long as doing so was not in contravention to the Public Health Orders at the time,
 - (e) that the week commencing 19 April 2021 was presently scheduled for the special session to elect an Archbishop, and
 - (f) that the Diocesan Secretary was authorised to take reasonable steps to secure a booking with the International Convention Centre, Darling Harbour (**ICC**) for the special session.
35. On 4 August, the Archbishop recommended (but did not mandate) that everyone attending a church service should wear a face mask, but noted that anyone who chose not to wear a mask was not to be excluded from the gathering. He also recommended that only one or two singers (and no choirs) should sing in church services. On 18 August, the Archbishop advised that the Minister for Health had sought his views on making mask-wearing compulsory for church services. He replied that he

“thought a mandatory requirement would be counter-productive, as many in our churches have voluntarily agreed to wearing a mask to church”.

36. On 24 August, the Diocesan Secretary informed the Standing Committee that bookings had been made for both the ICC and the Wesley Theatre for the week starting 3 May 2021 for the special election session of the Synod (with the ability to cancel one or the other depending on social distancing requirements at the time), and that a one day ordinary session of the 52nd Synod had been scheduled for 27 April 2022.
37. On 1 September, the Archbishop advised rectors that he had acted as a signatory to a letter sent to the Prime Minister which expressed concerns about ethical compromise in the development of a vaccine by Oxford University. At this time, church gatherings remained at a maximum of 100 attendees per building or the equivalent of one person per four square metres (whichever was smaller), while weddings had been increased to 150 attendees. On 24 September the NSW Government announced that, while wedding services would no longer require the implementation of COVID Safety plans, they would still remain in place for Sunday church gatherings.

October to December 2020: Ongoing restrictions and Christmas preparations

38. By the beginning of October, the number of attendees permitted at Sunday church services remained unchanged, despite loosening restrictions for other venues. The Archbishop communicated that he had written to the Premier indicating “his grave concern that the Government is discriminating against people of faith, because places of public worship are subject to much greater restrictions compared with other public venues” and submitting that attendance restrictions for public worship ought to be on par with pubs and clubs (a maximum of 300).
39. On 19 October, the Standing Committee discussed matters related to the venue of the special session of the Synod scheduled for 3-7 May 2021. It appointed a committee to make decisions regarding the booking of a venue and finalising dates for the 2021 sessions of the Synod.
40. On 21 October, the Archbishop advised that (following ongoing representations to the NSW Government), as of 23 October, the government would permit church gatherings of up to 300 people at places of worship, subject to the four square metre rule. Based on government medical advice and direction the Diocese maintained restrictions on congregational singing, though the Archbishop made a request to the government to consider permitting soft singing with masks in the near future. Following further representations to the government by the Archbishop, it was confirmed that mask wearing in churches was optional and that, “Accordingly, ministers need no longer recommend the wearing of masks in church”. In a 27 October letter clarifying the wearing of masks in church services, the Archbishop wrote that “the Minister for Health has conceded at my meeting with the Minister, that there is minimal risk when members of the congregation are seated and socially distant”. In the same letter, the Archbishop expressed his confidence in rectors’ and wardens’ decisions on this matter and confirmed that they were “free to encourage your flock to wear masks, but you are also free to allow your parishioners not to wear masks... I believe our people need some respite from the rigours of overly cautious recommendations”.
41. In letters dated 20 and 25 November, the Archbishop communicated that weddings and funerals were capped at 300 attendees, that outdoor events (such as carols) were capped at 500 (subject to social distancing requirements), and that while indoor congregational singing was still not permitted (despite ongoing representations to the NSW Government by the Archbishop), communal singing at outdoor gatherings was allowed for those wearing a mask.
42. On 3 December the Archbishop announced that, as of 7 December, the NSW Government would be easing certain restrictions. This included a removal on the cap on numbers from all services (including weddings and funerals, though with a two square metre restriction in place, reduced from four square metres), reintroduction of congregational singing (though masks remained recommended by the government), choirs of up to 50 singers, and outdoor events accommodating up to 3000 people (subject to social distancing) with no cap on performing singers. The announcement of these easing of restrictions followed representations from the Archbishop and other faith leaders for the relaxation of certain restrictions.
43. On 8 December the Archbishop provided further commentary on this loosening of restrictions, and provided specific comment for his rationale regarding the permitting of congregational singing without

requiring mask wearing, concluding that “Each rector must decide how he wishes to advise his people, and allow the liberty of choice to his congregational members. Sometimes, exercising personal liberties can adversely affect others, so wisdom is needed in every case”.

44. The emergence of the Northern Beaches outbreak prompted the NSW Government to reinstate some limits and restrictions. On 19 December, the Archbishop directed churches in the affected areas to transition back to online services. For the rest of Sydney, indoor services were capped at 300 attendees, with masks strongly recommended and congregational singing once again prohibited. The Diocese encouraged all parishes to ensure that Christmas services complied with all public health orders.

January to May 2021: Renewed restrictions and stability

45. In response to concerns about localised outbreaks, the NSW Government announced that from 3 January, face masks were to be mandated in indoor settings, including places of worship. Attendance at places of worship was also to be capped at 100 persons (per building) or one person per four square metres, whichever was lesser. On a letter dated 2 January, the Diocese provided advice about the import of these restrictions for churches (as well as information about a new requirement for all churches in Greater Sydney to use a QR code to record all contact details) and the significance of ensuring that parishes adhered to mask mandates and capacity limits.
46. On 25 January, a summons was sent calling members of the Synod to the first ordinary session on 3 May 2021, and to a special session to elect the new archbishop commencing 4 May 2021, to be held at the ICC (subject to Public Health Orders at the time).
47. On 12 February, the Archbishop communicated that mask requirements for church services were to be lifted, and the two square metre rule replaced the stricter four square metre rule, allowing for increased attendance. This shift marked a significant loosening of restrictions on church activities. On 22 February, the COVID-19 Taskforce noted that many churches were returning to normal operations, with some resuming all regular activities, while others maintained visible changes to their routines. The Taskforce also acknowledged ongoing advocacy efforts, including a multi-faith group writing to health authorities and direct communications with NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard. Concerns about the continued ban on singing were highlighted, with a doctors’ group suggesting it might no longer be warranted. Additionally, the Taskforce emphasized personal conscience in addressing ethical considerations surrounding vaccine options.
48. On 26 February, the Archbishop communicated further easing of restrictions, such as increases in the number of visitors allowed in homes and the number of singers permitted at the front during services. However, the Archbishop expressed disappointment that congregational singing remained prohibited and indicated he was advocating strongly for its return.
49. On 2 March, the Standing Committee resolved that, at its meeting in May 2021, it would consider the available and relevant information to enable a recommendation to the Archbishop regarding dates, duration and implications for elections of the planned second ordinary session of the Synod (at that time intended to be held at the ICC on 6-8 September 2021).
50. On 22 March, the Emergency Executive Committee was dissolved by the Standing Committee and a week later, on 29 March, the Taskforce discussed addressing perceptions of inequality between entertainment venues and places of public worship, particularly in relation to seating arrangements. The Most Reverend Dr Glenn Davies concluded his tenure as Archbishop of Sydney on 26 March, and Bishop Peter Hayward assumed the position of Administrator of the Diocese.
51. On 15 April, the NSW Government removed restrictions on the use of the common cup for the Lord’s Supper. However, the Administrator communicated that “While we thank God for the welcome changes to many of the restrictions that have been in place like this, we still strongly recommend the continued use of individual cups at communion”, particularly for the sake of those who felt anxious about sharing from the common cup.
52. On 6 May, the Very Rev Kanishka Raffel was elected Archbishop of Sydney (and installed on 28 May). On the same day as the election, new restrictions were introduced in Greater Sydney due to rising case numbers. Household visitors were limited to 20, masks became mandatory again in indoor venues, including churches and on public transport, and congregational singing was

prohibited. The Administrator advised that Youthworks had recommended that youth over the age of 12 wear masks during church services.

53. On 17 May, the Standing Committee recommended that the Archbishop convene a three-day second ordinary session of the Synod on 6-8 September 2021 and agree to allocate up to \$20,000 from the Synod Fund Contingencies for this purpose.

June to August 2021: The delta outbreak and strict lockdowns

54. On 16 June, NSW reported its first confirmed case of delta variant community transmission. By 25 June, stay-at-home orders were issued for the Sydney CBD and certain Local Government Areas, restricting residents to essential activities. On 26 June, a two-week stay-at-home order was extended to all of Greater Sydney, the Blue Mountains, Wollongong and the Central Coast. The Archbishop instructed diocesan parishes in those areas to move services online for those two weeks. Parishes outside those areas were allowed to meet with compulsory masks, no singing and the four square metre rule in place.
55. On 28 June, the NSW Government prohibited weddings altogether and restricted funerals to 100 attendees. On 30 June, the Archbishop communicated that government advice prohibited indoor singing even for the purposes of livestreaming services, that anyone assisting the production of a live-streamed services was required to wear a mask (which could be removed if they were speaking on camera). He indicated that Diocesan leaders continued to make representations to the government, particularly on the issue of singing for live-streamed services.
56. On 3 July, the NSW Government issued a Public Health Order which provided churches with an exemption for indoor singing for the purposes of livestream services (with certain geographical conditions in place). The Archbishop wrote that, "We have repeatedly questioned the first ruling from the Health Department [prohibiting singing], pointing out that it was in conflict with what the Public Health Order said. The new exemption goes some way towards what we have been seeking".
57. On 7 July, the Premier announced that lockdown restrictions would be extended. By 11 July, the government further limited funerals to ten attendees, excluding officiants and essential personnel. The Diocese communicated this directive through a letter from the Archbishop, urging rectors to comply strictly while continuing to provide pastoral care through virtual means.
58. On 9 July, the Archbishop summoned members of the 52nd Synod (6-8 September), noting that the summons was 'dependent upon the ability to convene a Synod in compliance with any restrictions on gatherings under a Public Health order applicable at the time'.
59. On 27 July, the Standing Committee noted that alongside increasing levels of community transmission, expectations of protracted lockdowns and restrictions made it very unlikely that 800 Synod members from across Sydney would be able to meet on 6-8 September. Since it was determined that postponing the session would have no impact on elections, that there were no urgent matters for discussion at the Synod, and that no financial penalty would be incurred, the Standing Committee recommended to the Archbishop that he postpone the scheduled session of the Synod until further notice. They also asked the Diocesan Secretary to report back to the next meeting about possible future dates and arrangements for the postponed session of the Synod.
60. On 28 July, the NSW Government extended Greater Sydney's lockdown by four weeks. Ministers in "affected" Local Government Areas (LGAs) were prohibited from leaving their LGA to visit their church site, if they lived outside their LGA (with the only exemption being to conduct a funeral, church service or health related chaplaincy service). Ministers (and volunteers) in "non-affected" LGAs could travel to their church site for essential work. The Diocese maintained its advice for online-only services and emphasized pastoral care through remote channels.
61. In a letter dated 29 July, the Archbishop indicated that he had been approached by the media regarding the matter of vaccination take-up. He wrote, "There is no Biblical reason not to be vaccinated. We are relying on the health advice of the NSW Government and encouraging people to speak to their doctor and get vaccinated if they choose to do so". He also indicated that the Diocese continued to have robust and positive engagement with the government, advocating that churches continue to be treated fairly.

62. At its 9 August meeting, the Standing Committee –
- (a) recommended to the Archbishop that he plan to convene the second ordinary session of the 52nd Synod from 28 February to 2 March 2022, and
 - (b) approved securing a booking at the ICC for those dates (with provisions for cancellation due to COVID-19) and that these dates be communicated to Synod members as the planned session dates.
63. On 12 August, the Archbishop confirmed that he had strongly encouraged government ministers and officials to consider the heightened challenges faced by congregants during extended isolation, and advocated that clergy be allowed to make ‘mental health’ visits to parishioners. He also addressed the issue of vaccinations, writing that “Vaccination is an important element of keeping the community safe. If you have no objection, please get vaccinated yourself and do your best to address the concerns of those in your congregation who are ‘vaccine hesitant’. I am not asking you to dispense medical advice. We are encouraging people to talk to their GPs about medical concerns. However, social media is awash with fanciful theories including that the vaccines are a Trojan horse for governmental control or ‘the mark of the beast’. These ideas need to be repudiated graciously but firmly”.
64. By 14 August, stay-at-home orders expanded statewide, and further limits were imposed on movement and gatherings. In areas of concern, curfews were introduced on 23 August, alongside restrictions such as limiting exercise to one hour daily. On 27 August, the Archbishop advised clergy that the NSW Government had introduced travel permits that allowed them, as “authorised workers” to travel freely within, and also outside their LGA. He noted that, from 30 August, “authorised workers” who live in a LGA of concern would need to have at least one dose of a vaccine or provide medical evidence for why they are not able to be vaccinated. He also confirmed that the Diocese had joined other faith leaders in asking that the prohibition on weddings be lifted as a matter of urgency.

September to October 2021: Transitioning towards eased restrictions

65. On 2 September, the Archbishop (and other faith leaders) met with the Minister for Health and the Chief Health Officer. On the next day, he wrote that, at that meeting, he and others raised concerns about vaccine passports for places of worship, with the Archbishop opposing any mandatory vaccination for church attendance, viewing it as inconsistent with the gospel and its mission. While supporting efforts to ensure churches remain safe, he had stressed the ethical complexities of vaccination, urging respect for conscience while promoting informed decision-making: “Neither ‘side’ of this debate can claim ‘the moral high ground’. We are frail and fallible creatures and the assertion of moral certitude in this area is out of place”. He also communicated that the Regional Bishops would be arranging virtual meetings with rectors and wardens to assist in preparing for the lifting of lockdown restrictions.
66. On 9 September, the NSW Government announced its roadmap to freedom, detailing eased restrictions for the fully vaccinated. The Diocese began preparing parishes for gradual reopening, emphasizing the importance of COVID-Safe plans.
67. On the same date, the Standing Committee received a report from the Diocesan Secretary noting that the ICC was holding the Diocese’s Synod booking for 28 February to 2 March 2022, without a deposit. He also reported that a second hold had been placed for 20-22 June 2022 (in the event of a COVID-related cancellation of the February-March dates), while also noting that a June 2022 session might be unnecessary given its proximity to the third ordinary session scheduled for September 2022.
68. On 10 September, the Archbishop wrote that he had “concerns about an indefinite ‘two stream economy’ based on vaccination. This is particularly inappropriate when applied to attendance at church...[However] We are not at liberty to disobey the Public Health Orders. Any objection to the ‘vaccinated only’ rule cannot justify flouting that rule. At 70% [double vaccinated], stay at home orders remain for unvaccinated people”. He also commented that when church buildings were permitted to reopen, rectors and wardens were free to choose to do so or to consider delaying resuming services at the expense of the unvaccinated. He reiterated this in a letter on 17 September, in which he reiterated that compliance with the Public Health Order was a mandatory requirement and encouraged rectors to consider not reopening until the 80% double vaccinated goal had been reached if they thought that an earlier reopening might result in parishioners breaching the order. He

concluded that “some will maintain conscientious objection to vaccination, and we must ensure that they are able to participate in the ongoing life of the local church”.

69. On 27 September, the NSW Government announced the “Roadmap to Recovery”. It detailed the return of gatherings and community activities on the Monday after the 80% vaccination target was reached. The Diocese released detailed reopening guidelines, addressing issues such as contact tracing, cleaning protocols, and pastoral care for vulnerable congregants. On 30 September, the Archbishop confirmed that the government’s allowance for church buildings to reopen without restriction at 80% indicated their affirmation of churches as “essential services”. He stressed that communicating safety measures to parishioners would be important in providing them with clarity and confidence.
70. On 6 October, the Archbishop confirmed that church buildings would be allowed to reopen for vaccinated individuals on Sunday 17 October, which is when the 70% level was expected to have been reached (though he again reflected that some parishes may choose to wait until 80% to avoid the need to screen people by vaccination status). Upon reopening, congregational singing would not be permitted and masks were mandated for those over the age of 12 (with the exception of those engaged in vocal services in church services such as leading in singing).
71. On 11 October, the Standing Committee received a report from the Diocesan Secretary noting that, according to the NSW Government’s roadmap for easing restrictions, the 28 February – 2 March 2022 session of the Synod should be able to proceed as planned and that a further report would be presented at the November meeting of the Standing Committee.
72. Also on 11 October, the government lifted stay-at-home orders across NSW. On 17 October, the 80% double vaccinated target was reached and on 18 October, places of worship were removed from the list of premises that unvaccinated adults could not attend, and limits on weddings and funerals were lifted.
73. On 22 October, the Archbishop wrote to churches confirming that church services could now be conducted in person again. Congregational singing remained prohibited, except for choirs of up to ten fully vaccinated singers. He noted that some parishes may choose to have a “vaccinated only” gathering as well as an “open” meeting as a way of giving confidence to those who were anxious or physically vulnerable. He also encouraged churches to ensure that those involved in children’s and youth ministry were vaccinated. (In a letter dated 29 March 2022, the Archbishop wrote that, given how circumstances had progressed, “it may be wise to review this recommendation at your next wardens or parish council meeting. You may decide it no longer applies in your context”.)
74. At the 8 November meeting of the Standing Committee, a motion was passed noting with concern the ongoing and indefinite COVID ban on school overnight outdoor education excursions and particularly the impact this was having on Youthworks and its employees. At the same meeting, the Standing Committee received a report concerning the plausibility of a second ordinary session of the 52nd Synod to be held on 28 February to 2 March, and the intention to convene the Synod for the presidential address on 26 February at Oran Park, with Synod business to resume on 28 February. The Diocesan Secretary advised the Standing Committee that the tentative booking for the ICC had been confirmed and a deposit paid at their request.
75. On 9 November, the state reached a 90% double vaccination rate.
76. On 19 January 2022, the Archbishop wrote to all members of the Synod to inform them of his decision to cancel the session planned for 26 February and 28 February – 2 March 2022. Considering the May 2022 session of the General Synod, and the ordinary Sydney Synod session planned for 12-20 September 2022, the 28 February – 2 March 2022, Synod session was cancelled rather than postponed. He said, “I have formed the view that the risk of Synod becoming a ‘spreader event’ are too great for us to continue as planned. Given the format and duration of our meetings; the fact that we draw from every part of the Diocese; the likelihood of some people being COVID-positive and others needing to isolate as result; as well as the uncertainty about the impact of the resumption of schooling; and ‘the options’ – it seems to only sensible course.”
77. At the 7 February meeting of the Standing Committee, the Diocesan Secretary reported on the financial implications of having lost the deposit placed with the ICC for the cancelled session of the Synod, and foreshadowed the possibility that the Pandemic may potentially compel the September

2022 session of Synod to be held at a larger venue than the booked Wesley Theatre. The Standing Committee authorised the Diocesan Secretary to place a deposit on a three-day booking for the ICC on 19-21 September, while noting its preference to hold a five-day Synod session at the Wesley Theatre as planned.

78. On 29 March, the Archbishop sent a letter to incumbents and assistant ministers suggesting a review of previous recommendations for mandatory vaccination for individuals involved in children's and youth ministry. He advised churches that evolving circumstances meant it may be wise for them to assess whether this recommendation remained necessary in their specific contexts.
79. On 4 April, the Diocesan Secretary advised the Standing Committee that while the ICC had not yet required a full deposit to secure a contingency Synod venue booking for 19-21 September 2022, he expected this would not remain the case for much longer and planned to secure the booking with a deposit when it became necessary.
80. On 30 May the Diocesan Secretary advised the Standing Committee that, on 10 May the ICC had indicated that payment of a full deposit was necessary to secure the booking. He reported that, following consultations with the Archbishop and a number of other key people, he had recommended that the Diocese not proceed with the formal booking of the ICC as a contingency plan. As a result, the booking had been withdrawn, and no deposit was paid.
81. On 27 June the Standing Committee resolved to hold the first day of the forthcoming session of the Synod on 10 September 2022, at Oran Park Anglican College and the remainder of the Synod session on 12-20 September 2022, at the Wesley Theatre.
82. The 14 July first circular advised members of the Synod of certain logistical arrangements pertaining to COVID-19 restrictions and health requirements. These included that those displaying symptoms or required to self-isolate should not attend the Synod; that all members were requested to administer at Rapid Antigen Test on the first day of their attendance each week; and that all members would be expected to wear masks while in the venue, unless addressing the Synod. The factors were –
 - (a) erring on the side of caution out of care for the large number of Synod members who fall into the 'at risk' category,
 - (b) noting that masks were somewhere in-between the two extremes of being at worst uncomfortable and ineffectual, and at best preventing severe illness and possibly death, but would likely not interfere with the business of the Synod,
 - (c) the unique nature of the logistics of the Synod, being proximity of many people for long periods over successive days, and
 - (d) government advice at the time still included the strong recommendation to wear masks in indoor public venues, and government requirements for masks still included public transport and in public transport waiting areas.

Discussion

Theological reflections on the Pandemic

Nature of ethical decision making

83. The Committee wrestled with the question of how people who shared the same core theological convictions came to hold different views about aspects of the Pandemic and the response to it by governments, office holders, churches, and individual believers. Such differences were often evident in families, churches, the Diocese, and our wider society, both during and after the Pandemic. They were also evident within the Committee.
84. The Diocese of Sydney holds to reformed evangelical convictions that recognise the canonical Scriptures as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. We recognise the Bible's unique divine inspiration and authority; the intrinsic unity of its message;¹ and the progressive and Christ-

¹ Article XX.

focused nature of God's revelation, where each part must be read in its salvation historical context and where all the promises of God find their fulfilment in the person and work of Christ.

85. The Scriptures are sufficient to instruct, correct, and train us for godly living (2 Tim. 3:16), but their treatment of ethical issues is not exhaustive, neither do they provide detailed, definitive and rigorous guidance for every situation. Thus, it is possible to have shared convictions about the nature of Scripture and the hermeneutical process governing its interpretation and yet arrive at different applications of certain Biblical principles to specific situations: e.g., which measures introduced by governing authorities to restrict the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus were to be obeyed or disobeyed.
86. The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* does not mean that Scripture is the *only* authority we consult in decision making. It is the *ultimate* source and *final* authority but not the only one. Natural law, tradition, reason, and experience all play a legitimate role in decision making. For example, the rightness and usefulness of celebrating the Lord's Supper in online liturgical services raises questions of tradition and experience, as well as Scripture. The usefulness of masks to limit airborne transmission of a pathogen during communal singing is a question for science not Scripture. A decision about whether or not to avoid large indoor gatherings during a pandemic has no universally 'correct' Biblical answer; it will depend on the nature of the pathogen, the nature of the event, any public health orders in place at the time, a person's health and susceptibility to infection, their desire to protect others from onward transmission or to avoid sickness in order to care for others, and so on.
87. Another factor that affects decision-making is a person's view of the relationship between Christ and culture. This can be understood in different ways. Richard Niebuhr suggested a fivefold taxonomy: Christ *against* culture (an oppositional model); Christ *of* culture (an assimilation model); and Christ *above* culture, expressed in three ways: *both* Christ *and* culture (synthesist); Christ and culture *in paradox* (dualist); and Christ *the transformer* of culture (conversionist).² This paradigm is not without its problems. For instance, instead of dividing the Scriptures into competing streams of thought that support one pattern or another, D. A. Carson suggests that 'we should be attempting a holistic grasp of the relations between Christ and culture, fully aware, as we make our attempt, that peculiar circumstances may call us to emphasize some elements in one situation, and other elements in another situation'.³ For example, Christian obedience requires submission to human authorities (i.e., Christ and culture in paradox; e.g., Matt 22:15–22; Rom. 13:1–7), but there may be times where obedience to the commands of human authorities would entail *disobedience* to God and so those human commands must not be obeyed (i.e., Christ against culture; e.g., Acts 4:19; 5:29). Meanwhile, both responses acknowledge that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ.
88. It has been observed, especially in the USA, that left-right political voting patterns show a correlation with personal views about the Pandemic, government mitigation efforts, and vaccines.⁴ To generalise, those on the right perceived less threat from the virus and prioritised personal freedom, whereas those on the left perceived more threat from the virus and supported restrictions of personal freedom to limit its spread. However, this dichotomy is overly simplistic. For example, it has also been found that supporters of a governing party were 'much more likely to say their government [was] handling the coronavirus outbreak well' than those who did not support that party, irrespective of that party's left-right ideology.⁵ Other research suggests that a person's trust or distrust in 'the system' correlates even more strongly than their left-right wing ideology in determining their attitudes to the Pandemic and changed behavioural responses to it.⁶
89. Ethical decision-making is also informed by existing promises or workplace requirements by which that person is bound. For example, employment, especially in healthcare and allied health, may have mandatory vaccination and screening requirements for a range of diseases.⁷ Also, Anglican deacons

² As summarised by D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 13–30.

³ Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 43.

⁴ E.g., <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10410236.2023.2263220>; <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8242330/>

⁵ E.g., <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/08/11/partisanship-colors-views-of-covid-19-handling-across-advanced-economies/>

⁶ E.g., <https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1475-6765.12749?af=R>

⁷ E.g., <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/immunisation/Pages/oasv-faq.aspx>

and presbyters promise in their ordination vows to ‘reverently obey [their] ordinary and other chief ministers set over [them] in the church, gladly and willingly following their godly counsel’.⁸

90. Two further factors feature in our ethical decision-making: ‘wisdom’ and ‘conscience’. The ethical teaching of the New Testament not only comprises laws or commands that must be obeyed (e.g., 1 John 3:2; 1 Peter 1:14–16; Rom. 13:1; 1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 6:1–3), it also calls on believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to exercise wisdom by doing what is good, necessary, or fitting (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Cor. 11:13; Rom. 12:2, 9; 13:3; 14:16; 15:2; Eph. 2:10; Tit. 3:8, 14; cf. Rom. 1:32; 2:14–15), and to exercise reason and discernment, so we might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Rom. 12:2; 14:5, 22; Col. 1:9–10; Gal. 6:4; Phil. 1:9–11).⁹ That is, some decisions are not a two-way choice between ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; some are matters of wisdom where different answers are equally possible, e.g., ‘Should I marry or remain single?’; ‘Should we seek to have another child?’
91. An appeal to conscience can also be a feature of ethical decision making.¹⁰ In Scripture, conscience is an inner conviction of having (or not having) sinned against God’s righteous demands (e.g., Rom. 2:12; 2 Cor. 5:11). Consequently, it is possible to have a conscience that is ‘good’ or ‘clear’ (e.g., Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Cor. 1:12; 1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 2 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 13:18) or, if God’s righteous commands have been consistently rejected, one that is ‘seared’, ‘evil’, or ‘defiled’ (e.g., 1 Cor. 8:7; 1 Tim. 4:2; Tit. 1:15; Heb. 10:22). It is also possible to ‘wound’ another’s conscience, particularly if their conscience is weak (1 Cor. 8:12), that is, immature or uncertain. Nevertheless, choosing to do something which we (mistakenly) believe is sinful is itself sin (Rom. 14:23). Thus, while conscience should never be ignored, it is not always a reliable moral guide and an appeal to conscience is not an infallible indicator of God’s will. Like wisdom, its validity is dependent on being cleansed by Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, and instructed by and in conformity with the word of God. Christians have a responsibility to ensure that their conscience is mature and governed by Scripture as the ultimate authority.
92. This short exposition of theological factors related to the Pandemic demonstrates the difficulty of navigating such complex pastoral situations. In the Committee’s view, it is no surprise that church workers and members found the whole situation complex and distressing, coming to different conclusions about what the “right” thing to do was. Often it is easier (and necessary) to react quickly in complex and urgent ministry situations and the opportunity afforded by hindsight to think and act deliberately can pass us by.
93. The Committee also considered the constant bombardment of information that was a feature of the Pandemic. This was a double-edged sword. While it was easy to search for information about anything, there was so much information available that we could never hope to understand it all. In an anxious situation, we are easily influenced by spin, sound bites and stirring anecdotes and we fail to recognise how the algorithms in our search engines and social media sites work and mistake words spoken in our echo chambers for “the truth.” This can create a dangerous mix, making us easy victims of coercive manipulation and self-deception, opening the door to overreactions and conspiracy theories. The documentary “Social Dilemma” documents and demonstrates that one powerful outcome of this is that tribalism has increased and our ability to listen, consider and discuss has significantly decreased. This became very apparent during the COVID-19 Pandemic and as a result some Christians were caught up in very strong opinions about the Coronavirus itself (its origins, transmission, and seriousness), government restrictions and enforcement (being good or bad or, even more extremely, righteous or evil), vaccinations and more.
94. Despite good theology, Christians were not immune from being caught up in these debates and to dividing into camps as the information world we lived in was saturated with the sole issue of the Pandemic. As a result, there are many sad cases where people allowed personal convictions to override fundamental Christian principles, thinking and behaviour. This has caused unnecessary division, distrust and even hatred amongst believers, just as it has done in our community. However, as disciples of Jesus Christ who have each been saved by his blood and born again into a living hope and who are indwelt by the Spirit, irrespective of our views on complex issues, we are called to speak with each other in a manner which shows to whom we belong, and to examine ourselves and be conformed to God’s word.

⁸ The Ordering of Deacons; The Ordering of Priests, in *AAPB*, 607, 613.

⁹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, ‘Wisdom’, in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 843–48, here 847.

¹⁰ See §5.7, *Doctrine Commission Report on Church and State*.

95. There are many issues surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic and the way the government, Diocese and various agencies reacted, about which we may always disagree with each other, but there are fundamentals which we should hold to and a bond of fellowship which should not be broken in our disagreements over the Pandemic. These fundamentals include understanding that:
- (a) God is sovereign over the affairs of this world including over disease and disaster.
 - (b) In all things God will bring about His purposes which cannot be thwarted.
 - (c) God is sovereign over governments which he installs and removes for His own purposes.
 - (d) Governments have the responsibility under God is to administer justice and wield great authority in doing so, which should be submitted to as a general rule.
 - (e) We should not put our trust in governments to save the world, promote Christianity or make the right decisions in every circumstance.
 - (f) We, as well as our leaders (inside and outside the church), are finite and sinful and can make mistakes.
 - (g) As Christians, we have an eternal salvation which is our firm hope, even in the face of sickness and death.
 - (h) The gathering of believers around the word of God for their mutual encouragement, edification and prayer is essential.
 - (i) The Gospel is the most important piece of news anyone can know, which we Christians have been given to share with our world.
96. Many of the debates Christians have had over the COVID-19 Pandemic have centred around how these principles all fit together. There is no one right answer to this, we hold them all to be true and do our best to discern a godly way forward under the pressure of challenges we face. But we should also commit to the process of critical self-reflection and review after a crisis to examine our actions and responses and reflect on whether there are things to learn or do differently in the future.

Doctrine Commission Report: The Relationship of Church and State and Religious Freedom

97. In September 2024, the Diocesan Synod endorsed the Doctrine Commission Report, *The Relationship of Church and State and Religious Freedom*. This report sets out clear principles and circumstances where Christians must respectfully disobey the government. The report gives very clear examples of where godly disobedience would be required of Christians and also of where it would be ugly and inappropriate to dishonour God's institution of secular authority by civil disobedience. However, by design, the report leaves a fairly wide gap between these ends of the spectrum in which godly wisdom and humility are called for. "This leaves the church with a certain latitude as it is confronted by government directives that are contrary to the word of God—a latitude defined by the space between commands that we must disobey and those that we may disobey. The best path will not always be clear. The choices we make in any given case will be a matter of Christian wisdom, guided by the absolute priority of gospel proclamation." The report also cautions against conscience being the sole reason a believer might engage in civil disobedience (cf. sections 4.7 and 5.7).
98. One painful concern raised with the COVID-19 review Committee were conscience issues which arose amongst some Anglicans (both clergy and lay) over what they saw as a failure of the Diocesan senior leadership during the Pandemic when government directives were endorsed particularly in relation to the closure of church buildings and vaccine mandates which saw people stood down from positions or (temporarily) excluded from church. The result of this was a strained relationship between critics and the Diocesan senior leadership which resulted in varying levels of hurt, criticism and bitterness. On the other hand, Diocesan leadership were also receiving large volumes of correspondence expressing deep appreciation for their wise, thoughtful and godly leadership in following government directives, as well as in helping churches understand and conform to the directives. The Committee wrestled deeply with this both because of the passion expressed on both sides, but also because the issues raised are complex theologically, pastorally and practically.
99. One major complexity is that Anglican Christians interact with the government in at least four different modes:
- (a) as citizens and church members in society,
 - (b) as volunteers in government spaces (e.g., SRE teachers),

- (c) as agents in government spaces (e.g., Anglicare and The Anglican Schools Corporation) where we receive government funding to provide services to the community such as food and financial relief, housing, aged care, counselling, chaplaincy and education, and/or
 - (d) as employed/subsidised people in government spaces (e.g., Hospital, Police, Rural Fire Service, Prison and Military Chaplaincy)
100. The consensus of the Committee is that the decisions made during the Pandemic fell into the grey area of “may” rather than “must” in the Diocesan Doctrine Commission report. This is the most challenging area to operate in, requiring tremendous wisdom and humility, as no clear pathway exists to make definitive calls. While this may require some further reflection from those who were involved in decision making, the Committee agreed that throughout the Pandemic both wisdom and humility were exercised consistently by the Diocesan senior leadership in making complex judgement calls.
101. As a result, while individual Christians may still disagree about particular decisions that were made (or not made), the attitude of all members of the Diocese should be one of respectful submission to, and thankfulness for, our Diocesan senior leadership who were called upon to make these challenging decisions. In addition, because none of the decisions fell into categories which the Diocesan Doctrine Commission report would conclude are clear cut moments where godly resistance to government authority would be called for, to break Christian fellowship over these decisions is inappropriate, and reconciliation should be sought. Recommendations will be made later in the report concerning possible mechanisms that could be implemented to assist with this reconciliation. A further recommendation will be made that all Anglican leaders familiarise themselves with the Diocesan Doctrine Commission report and reflect further on the limits of making definitive determinations in many circumstances we may be faced with particularly in crisis situations, and how to maintain fellowship when decisions are made about disputable matters.

Positive aspects of the Diocesan response

102. A twelve-month Australia-wide research project in 2022 involving interviews with 65 church leaders¹¹ found that about 59% felt happy with the help and guidance they got from their denomination. However, 41% were unhappy and they felt the hierarchies responded with “deadly silence” and thought “they obviously did not know what to do either.” They even felt that the guidance was “not terribly helpful”, “fairly impractical”, “friendly fire” or “out of touch”. The Committee is unable to present statistics for our Diocese but, given the positive feedback received by the Archbishops, we expect the “happy” figure may be higher due to the active, practical, in touch nature of correspondence and information. Indeed, there is much to be thankful for in our Diocesan response as we detail below.

Appreciation for decisions made by Archbishops

103. Many Sydney Anglicans and ministry workers were and remain grateful for the spiritual and practical leadership provided by the Archbishops in office and Regional Bishops during the Pandemic. Both Archbishops expressed their appreciation of the large volume of positive feedback they received via email and in person. The encouragement to pray and be vigilant, even weeks before the Pandemic was declared (30 January 2020), was of particular note.
104. Those at high risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19 and their families and carers benefited from mitigation efforts implemented by the state and federal government and accepted by the Archbishop and adopted (for the most part) by churches in the Diocese. Those in the high-risk category included people aged over 65; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with underlying medical conditions; people with a weakened immune system; neurological diseases (e.g., stroke, dementia); chronic lung disease (e.g. severe asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease); heart disease; obesity; diabetes; chronic kidney disease; and pregnancy. Those who were moderately to severely immunocompromised were also high risk (e.g. chemotherapy, high dose corticosteroids, cerebral palsy, Downs syndrome). Those in aged care or with a disability that made social-distancing or hygiene measures difficult to observe were also at high risk.¹²

¹¹ *Australian churches during coronatide: lessons & opportunities*. Pieter-Jan Bezemer and Sten Langmann (Edith Cowan University). (<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5087&context=ecuworks2022-2026>)

¹² <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/covid-19/high-risk-groups-and-settings>

105. In the early weeks of the Pandemic, Archbishop Glenn Davies brought together a COVID-19 Taskforce to provide assistance and advice on the way forward for the Diocese as a whole and the churches individually. This taskforce met at least fortnightly and at times convened daily to examine information, feedback and action steps. The work of all the Taskforce members is to be commended, especially the work of Daniel Glynn as Secretary of the Taskforce. Further, the Committee recognised as invaluable Bishop Gary Koo's medical knowledge, and Archbishop Davies' connections within State government. Without these people in key positions, our response would have been severely impoverished, and the value of this group was evident in that other denominations sought advice (at least initially) from the Diocesan senior leadership as to what decisions they were making and why.
106. With this in mind, the Committee recommends that:
- (a) in any future major crisis, an advisory Taskforce with expertise be created to provide guidance and wisdom to the Archbishop and the Diocesan senior leadership, and
 - (b) the Standing Committee give consideration to passing an ordinance providing for the existence of alternate and temporary Diocesan governance structures for use in extreme circumstances when ordinary structures (such as the Synod or the Standing Committee) are unable to meet or operate.

Appreciation for positive communication from the senior leadership team

107. During the Pandemic, the Archbishops wrote regularly to clergy, church workers and wardens, providing encouragement, information and resources for prayer and ministry. The Committee noted with thankfulness the timeliness, volume, proactivity and encouraging nature of these emails. The encouragement to pray each day at 1900hours was remembered fondly. Regular communication kept churches updated with recommendations on how the Public Health Orders should be interpreted and implemented, and what the Diocese was doing to assist churches, while keeping a clear gospel focus. The constant encouragement to prayer was both sage and necessary.
108. The Committee was particularly struck by one bishop's disclosure that he had been triggered to the point of tears while re-reading his own correspondence sometime later. It revealed the extent of invisible grief experienced by those in leadership roles, especially those responsible for unexpected, unprecedented decisions. The Committee has made a recommendation for church workers regarding the impact of the Pandemic on ministry mindset and capacity.

Leadership responsive to concerns from churches about how to proceed

109. Our Diocesan structures and leadership greatly benefited the Diocese, as demonstrated in the responsiveness of leadership to questions and concerns raised with them by rectors and wardens. Many requests were made for clarification on government rulings about social distancing, mask wearing, singing, JobKeeper, vaccine mandates and reopening plans which were all answered in timely, courteous and professional ways with information sheets circulated to parishes answering common questions. Several online seminars and webinars were held to inform parishes of how to manage ministry, potential risks and organisational obligations. These were well attended and provided opportunities for many questions to be asked and information to flow.

Information sharing and ministry continuance strategies

110. The Archbishop's COVID-19 Taskforce and SDS served diligently in sharing information and providing ideas for ensuring the continuity of ministry during the Pandemic. This included providing and promoting online tools and technological solutions to support parish ministries, and prompt communication regarding government health orders and financial assistance options. This was highly valued by many clergy and wardens, particularly during the early months of uncertainty. The rapid encouragement towards and facilitation of online services, meetings, and ministry gatherings enabled some level of continuity for churches, staff, and volunteers. Zoom was heralded as a helpful tool churches could use to connect members of churches together during lockdowns. Bishop Michael Stead and SDS worked quickly to raise awareness of the product and then organise competitive rates for the Diocese and coordinated applications in a helpful manner (circular email 1 April 2020).

Financial management and financial relief

111. In March 2020, as the Pandemic was unfolding, the Standing Committee endorsed several helpful measures to provide financial relief to parishes. The first of these was to suspend the payment of the Church Land Acquisition Levy payable by parishes in 2020. The Standing Committee also –
- (a) requested Sydney Anglican Loans to offer amnesty on repayments from parishes or to require interest repayments only,
 - (b) suggested parishes which expected to have difficulty in funding Parish Cost Recoveries (**PCR**) charges on time contact SDS to arrange to move away from the Direct Debit system of payment and instead make payment at a time when the parish had the necessary funds, and
 - (c) asked the Finance Committee to monitor the situation regarding arrears in PCR payments.
112. A Diocesan Financial Taskforce was established to investigate, analyse and make recommendations for action on the current, medium- and long-term financial impact on all parishes and organisations across the Diocese as the result of COVID-19. Other Diocesan bodies also provided financial relief. For example, while out of scope for the Committee's work it noted that in May 2020, the Anglican Church Property Trust (**ACPT**) approved financial relief to parishes for the remainder of 2020 by authorising a 50% reduction in the ACPT management fee component of the PCR charge from May 2020 through to December 2020. This represented aggregate fee relief to parishes of \$172,000. SDS also gave timely guidance on Job Keeper/Job Seeker and related support, which helped alleviate financial stress for many parishes. These practical supports were commendable and reflect a genuine desire to serve the Diocese during an evolving crisis.
113. While the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions was felt in some areas immediately (e.g. parish licence fee income and Youthworks camp fees), in other cases the impact took longer to be felt and longer to recover. For example, any impact on the income available to the Synod from distributions from the St Andrew's House Fund would not have emerged immediately. Ultimately, the combination of relief measures and assistance from the Commonwealth Government in the form of JobKeeper was a generous provision from God which enabled parishes to survive financially, despite massive uncertainty and ongoing inflationary implications.

Concerns about the Diocesan response*General lack of preparedness and the need for an Emergency Action Plan*

114. It is reasonable to assume that there will be another pandemic or some other crisis with the potential to interrupt the usual functioning of churches and diocesan life. History demonstrates a consistent pattern of global disruptions, from economic downturns to natural disasters and health emergencies. Given increased global connectivity and environmental shifts, the likelihood of such events impacting communities, including religious organisations, remains high.
115. The Diocese's readiness for emergencies like a pandemic is crucial for the continued ministry and mission of our churches and the proclamation of Christ to the world. Having a robust emergency plan ensures essential services, pastoral care, and communication can be maintained during disruptions. Such a proactive approach safeguards vulnerable populations, supports clergy and parishioners, and allows the Diocese to adapt and respond effectively to unforeseen challenges, demonstrating resilience and commitment to its mission in times of crisis.
116. Unfortunately, in 2020 we were not ready for such an enormous crisis. We did not have structures in place to easily facilitate the ongoing work of churches or the Diocese and this led to heightened stress and quick, reactive decision making. The Committee recognises that in "crisis response" mode, decisions still have to be made and are to a large extent shaped by the shared sense-making that occurs in teams and by leaders. There are always challenges and risks of bias and unintended consequences because decisions are being made rapidly, and without any prior knowledge or experience and often by hurriedly collected groups of leaders.
117. We note that disagreement about the handling of the Pandemic was therefore inevitable. Across our Diocese it is impossible to have a shared sense of "best practice" for every possible future scenario and those in leadership need to make decisions to the best of their ability. Archbishop Glenn Davies anticipated this in his letter of 16 March 2020, saying "There will be difficult times ahead which will test our commitment to the Lord and to his people. We shall face criticism from those who consider

us alarmist, and from those who consider us irresponsible. However, what should characterise our actions are faithfulness to God and love of all people. May God empower us to such action which is pleasing in his sight and brings honour to his name”.

118. The Committee has no doubt that every person involved in the Diocesan response did their best to provide wisdom and advice; however, they were not helped by our lack of preparedness for a situation like a pandemic.
119. The Committee had wide-ranging discussions about Emergency Action Plans (**EAPs**). An EAP is a structured framework that outlines how an organisation will respond to unexpected crises or emergencies. It includes procedures for communication, decision-making, resource allocation, and continuity of operations. An effective EAP identifies potential risks, assigns roles, and ensures that all stakeholders understand how to respond swiftly and safely.
120. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, a diocese with a well-developed EAP could have responded more efficiently and effectively to rapidly changing circumstances. Such a plan might have included protocols for alternate worship, digital communication with congregations, financial contingency plans, and health and safety protocols for clergy and parishioners. This could have enabled clearer coordination, reduced confusion, and ensured ministry continuity despite lockdowns. Moreover, proactive planning could have supported mental health and community cohesion, helping the Diocese adapt to uncertainty with resilience and faithfulness to its mission.
121. An EAP could emphasise the priority of gospel proclamation, sensitively tailored to explain and engage with the crisis circumstances. The Committee has made a recommendation regarding consideration of an EAP for the Diocese and parishes. In doing so, it is noted that –
 - (a) the Standing Committee does not have a crisis management framework (or EAP), essentially entrusting this matter to the Endowment of the See Corporation (**EOS**) and Sydney Anglican Services (**SAS**),
 - (b) the Standing Committee does not have a risk management framework, or systematically consider risk in its decision-making processes, and
 - (c) the Diocese lacks an operational continuity plan and does not encourage parishes to develop local plans as part of their governance activities.

Greater awareness of available funds is necessary

122. During the Committee’s work it was drawn to our attention that a national emergency fund exists, and is managed by the ACPT. We were advised that the net asset value of the fund as of 30 April 2025 was approximately \$2.6 million.
123. The provisions managing the use of the fund are found in the *Church of England National Emergency Fund Ordinance 1978*, the key part of which reads:

The remainder of the assets of the said fund shall be held on trust for the Church of England in Australia in the Diocese of Sydney as a national emergency fund provided that until such time as the Standing Committee declares by resolution that a national emergency exists three-fourths of the income from the said assets or such greater proportion as the Synod may determine shall be applied for the benefit of such of the following as the Synod may determine from time to time by Ordinance: –

 - (a) Anglican Youth Department Diocese of Sydney;
 - (b) Any body or organisation which is supported or assisted from time to time by Anglican Youth Department Diocese of Sydney;
 - (c) Board of Education Diocese of Sydney;
 - (d) Sydney Diocesan Churchwomen’s Association

any income not so applied shall be capitalised.
124. To the best of our knowledge, the existence of this fund was unknown during the Pandemic and the resources it holds were therefore unable to offset financial needs in the Diocese at the time.

125. The Committee therefore recommends that the Standing Committee request the ACPT to consider all funds held in trust and identify any funds that could be used in future emergencies, for inclusion in a diocesan EAP.

Did we lose gospel proclamation opportunities?

126. One of the questions often discussed during the Pandemic and considered by the Committee, was whether we lost opportunities to declare the gospel to our city by not publicly rejecting and acting against public health orders. The Diocesan leadership recommended a very conservative response to the government rulings and did not encourage parishes to test the boundaries of what was being mandated by the government. This is not to say that leadership acquiesced to every public health order. In interactions with the Minister for Health, the COVID-19 Taskforce and Archbishops continually raised concerns and pushed for changes to the rules, but these interactions were characteristically about consistency, fairness and reasonableness of the restrictions in application of public health orders rather than emphasising the gospel's pre-eminence, the priority of gatherings or the inviolability of the church.
127. Some clergy believe on theological grounds that we should have kept church buildings open in public protest against the public health orders and government intrusion into church activity. Examples from the USA are often given where church buildings remained open, and churches reported growth. While true, this does not mean that the same would have happened here. The complexity of the Australian culture, governance, and mindset need to be taken into account when assessing the faithful navigation of a public health crisis for the benefit of mission. While clergy arrested for defying public health orders may have provided gospel opportunities, it may also have done the opposite. Interestingly, the Committee heard one story of a church member calling the police to report their rector for holding church gatherings during a lockdown. The Police attended the church and discovered he was not holding gatherings, rather, he was livestreaming the service with a small group of technicians.
128. In our Diocese, what was communicated was that complying with health directives was not fear-driven but reflected the biblical command to love our neighbour (Mark 12:31) and care for the vulnerable (James 1:27). In his communication dated 18 March 2020, Archbishop Glenn Davies, after encouraging all churches to offer only online services, wrote "I realise how inconvenient this measure will be to implement, and many may protest that where their church gatherings are less than 100, surely they could still legally meet. However, I am asking all churches to consider the greater good. Our leadership and example in protecting the safety and welfare of our people, as well as those who visit, ought to be paramount. Erring on the side of caution is a good principle to follow in such extreme times – and the presence of this virus in our world is nothing short of a global catastrophe".
129. The Diocese was encouraged to see these temporary closures as expressions of Romans 13:1–2, which urges respect for governing authorities, especially when their intent is to preserve life, rather than the work of an oppressive government trying to squash the gospel. So Archbishop Davies wrote on 31 March 2020, "These are indeed, severe restrictions upon our lives, and yet, I trust we shall abide by them for the sake of the health and safety of all Australians, and as a model of good citizenship, let alone our commitment to obey our ruling authorities." And then on 21 July 2020, "Last week I had two conversations with Government ministers who informed me that the Government did not want to see churches closed, despite the recent outbreak of COVID-19 in Victoria, which has now impacted parts of NSW. However, with the increased risks in our community, the advice of the Chief Medical Officer is to limit the number of people attending church services to 100."
130. Though in-person fellowship is vital (Hebrews 10:25), the Church's witness continued through creative ministry, online worship, and sacrificial service. Trusting God includes using wisdom (Proverbs 3:5–6), and risking unnecessary harm could have undermined both public trust and gospel credibility (1 Peter 2:12). Rather than viewing compliance as a lack of courage, it can be seen as a faithful embodying of humility (Philippians 2:3–4), patience, and solidarity. This quiet witness may yield fruit as lasting as public defiance.
131. In discussing the various viewpoints around these issues, the Committee noted that we serve the risen Lord Jesus Christ and proclaim his Kingdom that cannot be shaken. In reality, no pandemic was ever going to thwart the progress of the gospel. However, any crisis serves to highlight our impermanence, our fragility, our vulnerability, our dependence on God, and ultimately our exposure

to his wrath. We know that he works through history, including crisis events, to call individuals, communities and nations to repentance and to call to himself a people to be his own (Luke 13:4). Whilst it might be seen as opportunistic to proclaim him amid our community's distress, especially if done whilst indifferent to our neighbour's material and emotional needs, it must also be said that it would be outright negligent not to remind our neighbour of their opportunity to change their attitude and behaviour toward God, especially by seeking his forgiveness and his help.

132. If our mission was tempered at any point, perhaps it was because we focused far more on dealing with our own anxieties, questions and concerns over the implementation of the various public health orders and other government mandates rather than creatively proclaiming Christ. Correspondence from the Archbishops to the rectors was often focused on compliance issues, along with assurances that the COVID-19 Taskforce and Archbishop were working with the Minister for Health on seeing restrictions wound back. More emphasis on our role as ambassadors of Christ and how we might create and use opportunities even under restrictions to share the gospel with a dark world could have been helpful.

Lessons to be learnt for the future

The priority of diocesan-wide prayer

133. While the Diocese was quick to embrace Zoom as a standard tool for video communications very early on, we did not immediately start diocese-wide prayer meetings, even for clergy. One such event ('Lifting Our Voices to God') was organised by St Philip's Caringbah in September 2021, but it wasn't until 2024 when Archbishop Kanishka Raffel organised quarterly prayer meetings on Zoom for rectors to pray with him for the Diocese and for each other that we began to regularly use this medium for one of the most basic and vital things the church does together (Acts 2:42). We may have underestimated the encouragement of gathering online for corporate prayer. The Committee's reflection is that in any future emergency technology be used as soon as practicable to facilitate prayer.

Appreciation of regional differences in the Diocese

134. During our work, it became apparent that differences existed between regions in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and that those with carriage of decision making and communication of decisions may not have appreciated this adequately. The Committee was struck by these regional differences multiple times. An example of this came from the weeks immediately prior to the lockdowns in 2020. In the Northern region, church attendance through February 2020 was significantly lower than normal, while in the South West, church attendance spiked with some churches nearly doubling average numbers during the same three-week period. When Archbishop Glenn Davies was asked by the Committee about his decision to shut church buildings on the Sunday prior to the official lockdown, his response was that he understood all the churches were emptying anyway. In conversation with the Committee, it became evident that the Archbishop was unaware of this regional difference. In another example - the Committee was shown a photo of a notice placed on pews from one church in the Northern region "This area is designated for those who are TRIPLE VACCINATED AND WEARING MASKS Thanks for loving our church family" (emphasis original). This not only went beyond any mandates issued at any time but was also placed after both vaccine and mask wearing mandates had been removed. This was in contrast to other regions where wardens worked to ensure any restrictions and exclusionary measures were removed as fast as possible when they could. These show very different regional attitudes to government, authority, rules, and restrictions.
135. If these differences were more fully appreciated at the time, there may have been less confusion about why some churches were reacting more strongly against the directives, and why others were expressing deep appreciation for the same measures. While particular decisions reached may have been unchanged with the information, their communication could have been improved and helped bring calm. In addition, helping the regions understand regional differences between them might aid fellowship and understanding in other matters than just crisis management. Diocesan leadership and decision-making bodies would do well to do more work to further appreciate the cultural differences between regions and what factors contribute to them.

Management of personal views

136. A feature of the Pandemic was that people within the community and the Diocese and our churches held different views about the Pandemic and about the mitigation efforts to respond to it. Often these views were held very firmly and reflected different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. Managing the competing claims and conflict created by these views was a challenge shared by all people in the community, our Diocese, and churches. The Committee was made aware of instances where these competing claims were not adequately understood or managed. The committee also heard that some church members with origins in countries currently or recently run by totalitarian regimes, felt grieved that they could not engage with Diocesan senior leadership about their experience of, and issues of conscience arising from, the implementation of government restrictions. Regrettably, in some cases, church members felt unheard, dismissed, and not valued as 'proper Anglicans'.
137. As a result of the different views held across our churches, some felt and experienced exclusion during the Pandemic. While church leaders aimed to protect, responses sometimes lacked compassion and curiosity. For some, the sense of being unwelcome in their church family was deeply painful, leading to lasting disconnection. This period highlighted a need to better reflect the unity and mercy the church is called to uphold, especially toward those who quietly held differing convictions.
138. The existence of differing views is unavoidable. However, a lesson for the future is to encourage ministry workers and Diocesan employees to discharge their duties in anxious times not only with professionalism, sensitivity, and care, but in a way that expresses and encourages fellowship even when there is disagreement over non-gospel matters. Care is needed to ensure that advocacy for personal views does not cause a deleterious effect on the gospel nor unnecessary offence. Also, particular care is needed to understand and communicate with those from various cultural backgrounds and beliefs.
139. A recommendation regarding the establishment of pastoral guidelines for conscientious objectors will be found later in this report.

The need for pastoral care in HR processes

140. During the Pandemic, vaccine mandates meant that several people in our churches and Diocesan organisations were stood down from employment and from volunteer positions. An extract of a Synod answer provided on 12 September 2023 is attached. To the Committee's knowledge all such decisions were handled professionally and courteously, though this did not make the decisions or implementation easy on any party. It is unknown whether alternative measures were offered for people whose consciences were exercised such as extended leave with or without pay. The Committee recommends all avenues be explored in future crises where positions are made untenable by government restrictions.
141. During the Committee's work it was also noted that at least some of those who had been let go or stood down had not been contacted in a pastoral capacity to express loving concern for their wellbeing, to ensure that people felt heard, to build Christian fellowship which may have been impaired, and to help ensure wherever possible that they be kept in the local church orbit. Doing so could have helped better ensure that "that no bitter root might be allowed to spring up among us." (Hebrews 12:15). The Committee also recommends that processes for dismissal in such circumstances include some kind of pastoral and spiritual welfare checks at a later date.

The role of the Archbishop

142. In a crisis it is both understandable and appropriate that power is ceded to a smaller number of central figures within an organisation in a way similar to the formation of the Australian War Cabinet on 26 September 1939. These abnormal measures for abnormal times are required due to the need for rapid decision making. However, it is important to recognise there is a challenge when the crisis is averted in resetting things back to the usual systems and forms of governance. In some cases this challenge may come because those with power do not wish to relinquish it, but in many cases, it comes inadvertently as the organisation becomes used to this new way of operating and forgetful of some of the principles by which they had established the regular systems of governance.
143. During the COVID-19 crisis the Archbishop, his episcopal team and the COVID-19 Taskforce effectively became our "War Cabinet". The decision to establish such a group happened quickly as

there were decisions that needed to be made which affected all of our parishes and organisations (such as closures, reopening, and verdicts on what public health orders meant for churches).

144. The Committee believes that this course of action was appropriate even though there were some churches and individuals who were uncomfortable with this change in the power dynamics, and others who were appreciative of the strong leadership shown during this time. Whatever we may as individuals think, the Standing Committee (and the Synod) should ask if there have been inadvertent changes to the way that we as a body or the Diocese as a whole relate to the Archbishop's office as a result.
145. As an example of the power exercised, the Archbishop informed all rectors on 18 March 2020 of his intention to publish a press release that day saying that he had closed all church buildings from the following Sunday. This action was taken a few days before the first Public Health Order was released banning gatherings. Some describe the Archbishop's action as positively pre-emptive while others described it as an assumption of power which had rarely, if ever, been tested. Again, many applauded the strong leadership especially with its concern for the health and wellbeing of the people of our Diocese and those who visit our churches, but many others questioned whether this was within the scope of the Archbishop's powers or a desirable use of power.
146. Now that the Pandemic is over, it is recommended that the Standing Committee consider whether this question needs clarification. Questions to be considered in light of ecclesiastical law and the polity of the Diocese of Sydney may include—
 - (a) what constitutes a lawful command?
 - (b) what would constitute an unlawful command?
 - (c) what rights does the rector have over the use of the church buildings in his parish with respect to when a church building may or may not be open for public services of worship?
 - (d) what authority do parish wardens have over the use of the church buildings in their parish with respect to when a church building may or may not be open for public services of worship?
 - (e) what rights does the Archbishop have over the use of the church buildings in his Diocese with respect to when he can conduct a meeting or service in a church building?
 - (f) what is the lawful authority of the Archbishop over the provision, availability of and ministry of word and sacrament in church property in a Parish in which a rector has been appointed?
 - (g) what is the lawful authority of the ACPT over the ministry of word and sacrament in church property in a Parish in which a rector has been appointed?

Care of church workers in a crisis

147. On several occasions, the Committee reflected on the need for further consideration of how church workers and volunteers should be cared for in a crisis by those charged with oversight. During the COVID-19 Pandemic many in pastoral ministry roles felt increased levels of stress and anxiety not just concerning the virus itself but also in terms of how they could exercise their roles effectively. They wrestled with many complex issues at the coal face. These included how to care for those they were charged to lead with heavy restrictions in place, understanding exactly what these restrictions meant as they changed on a regular basis, and how to care for so many in their charge who were themselves at high levels of stress. They also wrestled with finances, staffing complexities, the sadness of standing volunteers down and of potentially barring people from meeting due to space limitations or vaccine status. Many also wrestled with the new technology which was being recommended and introduced at a rapid pace. These pressures compounded and meant that many in leadership and pastoral ministry felt inadequate for the task. (We want to acknowledge the very high volume of communications to bishops, archdeacons, and the COVID-19 taskforce asking for clarifications, exemptions or other forms of help and advice.)
148. A survey conducted in early 2020 by Moore Theological College examining how pastors were coping with changes since coronavirus, found 90% of Sydney Anglican ministers felt exhausted.¹³ This feeling continued at least through to the end of 2022. Despite hope for the future, many faced burnout from low volunteer support and sustained pressure. Leaders saw opportunities for deeper discipleship but lacked energy for change, while congregations often preferred returning to familiar routines, making transformation especially difficult. The Committee did not have the resources to

¹³ <https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/five-ways-to-build-up-your-pastors/>

conduct research into the ongoing extent or effect of these pressures, or whether the response by regional bishops and archdeacons differed across the regions.

149. Any crisis management plan (such as an EAP) which may be developed for the future should include a clear reminder on the vital importance of the need for pastoral care at all levels. This would include guidelines for Diocesan senior leadership to intentionally reach out to rectors, pastoral and other key leaders, as well as providing ministry workers with guidelines in how to deal with other ministry staff, administrative staff, volunteer leaders and pastoral carers under their care during and following a crisis.

Individual Reflections

150. The following section is for individual member's reflections, which all members of the Committee were invited to provide. The Committee deemed it appropriate for individual members to express additional reflections that may capture the views of some people in our churches. One member of the Committee took up this opportunity and provided this individual reflection to be read as an accompaniment to the combined report.

The Rev Zac Veron

151. I wish to express my appreciation for the opportunity to participate in this important review. Nevertheless, I note that the Committee's ability to fully reflect on the Diocesan leadership's response was significantly constrained by several obstacles.
152. Foremost among these was the inability to access any of the legal, medical, ethical, or theological advice that was relied upon by the Archbishop and the COVID-19 Taskforce during the Pandemic. This limited the review Committee's capacity to evaluate the reasoning behind key decisions made during a critical period in the Diocese's history.
153. The absence of some documentation makes it difficult to determine, for example, why certain directives were issued, why Diocesan responses sometimes exceeded government requirements, and whether sufficient theological advice played a meaningful role in guiding policy. I do not question the sincerity of those who led during this difficult time, but I wish to highlight that decisions made without transparent accountability risk losing credibility both within and beyond the Diocese.
154. In addition, we encountered reluctance among some Diocesan leaders to engage openly with concerns, especially when those concerns came from members of the minority who objected to certain public health measures. This hesitance extended even to a Standing Committee decision in 2024 to reverse its earlier support for a broad survey of clergy and lay leaders (a reversal that effectively narrowed the scope of grassroots feedback available to the COVID Review Committee).

Concerns regarding balance in the Diocesan senior leadership's response

155. The response of our senior leadership appeared driven by legal liability, risk minimisation, and a concern not to offend public health authorities. These are understandable instincts in some respects, but they must never override our responsibility to uphold truth, defend the powerless, and maintain fidelity to Christ's call to shepherd his flock with courage. Leaders appeared to be fearful of consequences (of being seen to contradict government guidelines, or of appearing reckless). But the greater risk was the erosion of trust within our churches, the silencing of differing opinions, and the moral compromise of treating conscience-bound individuals as problems to be managed rather than members of the body of Christ.
156. In hindsight, the Diocesan response lacked balance. While it rightly focused on compliance, safety, and continuity of ministry, it failed to critically engage with emerging evidence, failed to heed the voices of dissenting medical professionals, ethicists and theologians, and failed to foresee the long-term spiritual and societal consequences of supporting government overreach. Those who tried to raise these concerns within Diocesan structures often found little sympathy or engagement.
157. This is not a call to attribute blame, but to seek wisdom. We must be better prepared in future crises to discern truth from propaganda, to prioritise theological integrity over compliance, and to provide

pastoral care that honours both conscience and Christ. The world is changing rapidly, and through wisdom and humility our Diocese needs to be better prepared for any future crises.

Concerns regarding a loss of our practical religion, and the way some people adversely impacted by and gravely concerned with government mandates were treated in some churches, with recommendation for development of pastoral guidelines for situations that involve conscientious objections.

158. The Archbishop served the Diocese well in acting as a signatory to a 1 September 2020 letter sent to the Prime Minister, which expressed ethical concerns regarding the vaccine developed by Oxford University. The Prime Minister was not deterred by the stated concerns. The Archbishop appropriately challenged the Premier of NSW in his 6 October 2020 letter because the government was discriminating against people of faith. No response was received from the Premier. The Archbishop is to be commended for challenging government officials on 2 September 2021 regarding vaccine passports for places of worship, and for urging respect for conscience while promoting informed decision-making on 3 September 2021. Sadly, some of this advocacy effectively fell on deaf ears as the consciences of millions of citizens (many of whom did not give 'informed consent' to an experimental medical procedure) were trumped by coercive measures. This raises the question whether traditional avenues of advocacy with government need to give way to more effective measures.
159. Acting against your conscience is always sinful, as it is an action willingly done while believing that such an action disobeys the Lord (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-is-conscience/>) Sadly, not a few Anglicans were coerced by their spiritual leaders into taking a vaccine against their conscience!
160. A notable concern that emerged during the Pandemic is the way in which some members of our churches (especially those who conscientiously objected to government mandates) were treated. While parishes varied in their pastoral responses, there are credible reports, verified to the Synod, that many individuals were stood down from ministry roles, denied opportunities to serve, and in some cases publicly or privately shamed for not receiving an experimental and provisionally approved COVID-19 vaccine (which did not work as originally promoted). These individuals were not acting from malice or selfishness, but often from a biblically-informed conscience, medical caution, or ethical concern about novel vaccines developed using aborted foetal tissue.
161. For some of these believers, the exclusion they faced within their own church family was deeply wounding. Some felt they were no longer welcomed in the place where they had once served, worshipped, and belonged. In some cases, entire families left their local churches - some have not returned. The unintended but very real consequence was that the local church appeared to some as a conditional community: one in which compliance with government health directives became a prerequisite for fellowship and service.
162. One of the more troubling legacies of the COVID-19 period has been the sense among some church members that we, as a Diocese, lost touch with the essence of "practical religion" as defined in James 1:27, caring for the vulnerable and upholding the dignity of those in distress.
163. While motivated by a desire to protect, our Diocesan response sometimes failed to embody Christlike compassion, especially towards those who were struggling with complex health decisions or resisting coercive mandates on grounds of conscience. These individuals, often devout and well-informed, were too easily categorised as problematic. In some parishes, they were prevented from serving, seated separately, or encouraged to worship solely online. Conscientious objectors faced segregation or ostracism in some churches, such as a reserved section for the "triple vaccinated and masked" people in one of our Diocesan churches, undermining the unity the Bible commands (1 Corinthians 12:26). In a few cases, they were publicly shamed, either explicitly or by implication.
164. This treatment did not reflect the pastoral grace that should characterise Christ's body. It created division and spiritual trauma. It also stands in contrast to the example of earlier generations of Christians, who risked their own wellbeing to care for the sick during times of plague and hardship. Historically, Christians have held the hands of the dying during plagues, yet COVID-19 restrictions predominantly prevented this, often leaving the sick isolated in aged care facilities. This shift, driven by fear, contrasts with our calling to love in action (Matthew 25:36). Tragically, some churches became places of exclusion rather than refuge, especially for those who, despite personal cost, chose not to comply with vaccine mandates or mask requirements based on conscience or medical

history. Further, those coerced into experimental vaccines (which did not work as originally advertised), under threat of job loss, received little pastoral support and understanding, reflecting a gap in compassion. Moreover, many who complied under duress now live with vaccine injuries or lingering health issues, and report feeling invisible within their churches. Little has formally been done to acknowledge this reality, or to offer public lament, intercession, or comfort. The indifference in some congregations grossly contrasts with the compassion Jesus had for those who were suffering.

165. We must reflect seriously on how we treat those whose convictions place them at odds with prevailing norms. The gospel calls us not to uniformity, but to unity in Christ. We are to bear with one another in love, especially when decisions are shaped by conscience, wisdom, and fear of God, not fear of man.
166. The Archbishop understandably relied on trusted advisors for decisions made during the Pandemic. Some of that advice was not sound. For example, the Archbishop on 22 October 2021 encouraged churches to ensure those involved in children's and youth ministry are vaccinated. Yet we now know (as many people suspected before their introduction, and despite government assurances to the contrary), that none of the experimental and provisionally approved vaccines prevent contraction or transmission of COVID-19. Further, as of 3 June 2025 the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) has declared "COVID-19 vaccine is not recommended for healthy infants, children or adolescents who do not have medical conditions that increase their risk of severe illness. This is because the risk of severe illness was extremely low in this cohort over the course of the Pandemic, and benefits of vaccination are not considered to outweigh the potential harms." The risk posed by the virus to children "was extremely low" during the pandemic, yet many people who ministered to children were stood down from their ministries to children over their choice not to get vaccinated.
167. This episcopal encouragement, together with the presentations made at the regional zoom meetings of September 2021, contributed to at least 22 people being stood down from their church-based ministries. According to the numbers revealed at the 2023 Synod, five lay church members within the five regions of the Diocese were stood down from their ministries by their rectors, during 2021-2022, because they were not injected with an approved COVID-19 vaccine, and 17 lay church members within the 5 regions of the Diocese were encouraged to voluntarily stand down from their ministries during 2021-2022, because they were not vaccinated with an approved COVID-19 vaccine. Further, 13 employees and church workers in diocesan organisations and churches were sacked, stood down or resigned over COVID-19 vaccine mandates during 2021-2022.
168. There was no evidence presented to the Committee that any of these people subsequently received an apology.
169. Could this represent, in part, a loss of our practical religion? James 1:27 defines true religion as caring for the vulnerable and remaining unstained by the world, not as drawing lines of fellowship based on government compliance. The prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 10:1-3) rebuked those who issued oppressive decrees and deprived the powerless their rights. Vaccine mandates were oppressive decrees and deprived the powerless their right to work, yet our Diocesan leaders not only failed to challenge government on this issue, they also mostly supported the government's actions (either explicitly, or implicitly by their silence). The pastoral cost of failing to accommodate the conscience-bound must not be overlooked. That some were treated as lepers rather than brothers and sisters reveals a serious pastoral misstep, even if unintentionally done in the name of safety.
170. For this reason, it is recommended that pastoral guidelines be developed for future situations involving government mandates or polarising public health measures. Such guidelines should aim to:
 - (a) affirm the primacy of Scripture and also the role of conscience,
 - (b) protect the unity of the body of Christ,
 - (c) develop protocols for how churches can respond to controversial mandates while caring for and not alienating the vulnerable and those with conscience issues, and
 - (d) encourage humility, patience, and mutual understanding when disagreements arise among believers.
171. Looking ahead, our Diocese must reaffirm its commitment to uphold both the conscience and dignity of each believer, especially in times of crisis. Disagreement on public health measures should never become grounds for spiritual alienation. Instead, the church must be a place where love, truth, and grace abound - especially when the world is ruled by fear.

172. It is recommended that our churches must never again be places of segregation or silent judgement. Instead, we must recommit to being sanctuaries of grace, especially for those who have paid a high cost to walk faithfully with Christ.
173. The at least 22 people who were stood down from their church-based ministries for resisting vaccine requirements should receive sincere apologies from those who stood them down (Matt 5:23-24).

Concerns regarding the Diocesan leadership's understanding of the relationship between church and state

174. The relationship between Church and State has long been a subject of theological reflection within the Anglican tradition. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, this relationship was tested as government directives increasingly dictated how and when Christians could gather, sing, participate in Holy Communion, and engage in pastoral ministry. It is the considered view of some within the Diocese that the senior leadership failed to give sufficient theological consideration to this issue, and in so doing, allowed civil authority to extend beyond its God-given remit into the realm of spiritual oversight.
175. The New Testament affirms government as instituted by God to restrain evil and promote good (Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17). However, this affirmation is not absolute. When rulers defy God's moral order or infringe upon obedience to their Lord's commands, Christian obedience to God must take precedence. The biblical pattern is clear: the Hebrew midwives disobeyed Pharaoh, Daniel continued to pray despite a ban, and the apostles in Acts declared, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Submission to governing authorities is limited by the higher obligation to obey God's Word and accepts punishment from those governing authorities for upholding faith or not obeying unjust laws.
176. This understanding of the Scriptures was not always well reflected in the Diocesan senior leadership's response. Instead, there was a general posture of acquiescence. The closing of church buildings, the silencing of congregational singing, the segregation of unvaccinated believers in some churches, and even the limiting of pastoral visitation in aged care facilities, were all done with little theological resistance. In some cases, the Diocese appeared to exceed even the government's requirements. For example, the COVID-19 Taskforce wrote to NSW Health in October 2020 asking that mask use in church be mandated (not merely recommended), despite a lack of clear medical or biblical rationale.
177. A theology that recognises the authority of government must also be clear about its limits. Article 37 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion affirms the civil magistrate's role but denies that princes may "minister the Word or Sacraments." The Anglican reformers' resistance to state overreach, reflects a historical Anglican commitment to ecclesiastical autonomy in matters of faith and practice. John Calvin reinforced this in his commentary on Romans 13:4, noting that magistrates are "responsible to God and to men" and restricted to promoting public good, not dictating religious observance. The state may govern civic order, but it must not determine the form, timing, or theology of Christian worship. Yet this is effectively what occurred during the Pandemic. Churches were told when and how they could gather, what they could do when gathered, and who could be present. Similarly, government officials prescribed when and how we could conduct weddings and funerals. This was unprecedented. The Diocesan senior leadership, rather than standing firm with the English reformers, ultimately chose compliance over principle. The 1 February 2021 COVID-19 Taskforce notes reveal no tested evidence existed substantiating choir restrictions, yet compliance persisted, suggesting a deference to state authority beyond its biblical or Anglican scope. Critics argue this reflects a misunderstanding of Article 37, ceding control to a government whose measures, in hindsight, included political motives (e.g. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's push for aged care worker mandates against health advice [ABC, 4 June 2021]).
178. Historically, Anglican leaders like Thomas Cranmer resisted state interference to preserve doctrinal purity, a legacy that some believe was sidelined during the Pandemic. The Black Death saw churches remain open, with clergy ministering despite risk, embodying a prophetic witness the Diocese could have emulated. Instead, the leadership's trust in government (reinforced by media narratives like the Trusted News Initiative's censorship of dissent) may have limited critical engagement with directives that interfered with worship, such as the dismissal of unvaccinated church workers or the segregation of congregants. This trust contrasts with Calvin's caution against unchecked power, suggesting a lesson for future discernment: the Diocese must evaluate whether state actions align with its God-given purpose before yielding.

179. Theologically, the lack of strong public objection emanating from our senior leadership was concerning. The suspension of Sunday services, intended to mitigate health risks, may have amplified a “gospel of fear” rather than the “gospel of hope” (1 Peter 1:3). The September 2021 Zoom meetings, focusing on legal liabilities rather than spiritual resilience, reflect this shift, with some of the bishops amplifying government messaging of fear over biblical encouragement. This contrasts with the early church’s boldness, meeting in homes under Roman persecution, or even modern examples like John MacArthur’s Grace Community Church (one church among many other similar examples in the USA), which defied California’s closures in 2020, facing fines but no arrests, and saw attendance grow. Had Sydney churches remained open, perhaps with rector discretion as some advocated, they might have offered sanctuary to a fearful society, drawing seekers as government overreach became evident. Globally, churches that resisted (like MacArthur’s) demonstrated that defiance need not lead to chaos, nor any legal fines. Instead, compliance cost congregants (some left over vaccine disputes, others felt abandoned) while weakening our public witness. A balanced approach, perhaps designating churches as essential services and accepting fines (albeit illegal fines, as they have recently been shown to be), could have preserved ministry while testing government resolve, as mass resistance to soft totalitarianism often deters enforcement. Further, if the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Sydney had effectively resisted the soft totalitarianism in 2020-21 it is likely the NSW Government would have heeded our ethical concerns on a series of recent legislative reforms which effectively seek to limit our speech, prayer, pastoral ministry, and the exercise of our faith.
180. There appeared to be insufficient exploration or public acknowledgement of the principle that Christians may be required to submit to government (by accepting penalties) without necessarily obeying unjust or intrusive commands. This principle, exemplified by the Apostle Paul’s willingness to suffer imprisonment, or by early Christian martyrs, is central to Christian ethics. To our regret, such a principled stand was largely absent. Fear of legal liability and reputational harm appeared to outweigh the imperative to offer a gospel of hope and courage amid fear.
181. The pastoral implications of this approach were severe. Many felt abandoned by their shepherds. Pastoral visitation was hampered; the sacraments were suspended or digitised; and church, as physical community, was reduced to livestreamed consumption. The suggestion (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) that Zoom services were a God-given equivalent to gathering in person revealed a troubling pragmatism. Holy Communion cannot be rightly administered through screens. Church is an embodied gathering, not merely a content stream.
182. The deeper concern, however, lies not only in what happened but in what it revealed. The Diocese’s pandemic response exposed a tendency to place government above Scripture in shaping ministry practice. This was not only a theological misjudgement but a pastoral miscalculation. When “two weeks to flatten the curve” became months and years of spiritual disruption, many believers looked in vain for their leaders to offer an alternative voice - a prophetic challenge to fear-driven policies of government. Instead, the combined voice from much of the Diocesan bishops and clergy often echoed the anxieties of the state.
183. What would a different response have looked like?
184. First, it would have asserted the essential nature of public worship. Church gatherings are not optional; they are commanded (Hebrews 10:25). They are vital not only for spiritual nourishment but as a visible witness to a watching world. Closing church buildings should have been a last resort, not the first. If supermarkets and liquor outlets were essential, so too were churches. The senior leadership did make a case to have churches classified as “essential services”, but that case failed to make any significant impact. And if closing was unavoidable for a short time, it should have been accompanied by public protest and a clear theological explanation, not largely silent compliance.
185. Second, it would have upheld the rights of conscience. Many Christians resisted mandates not out of rebellion, but because of deeply held conscientious beliefs. These believers were often silenced or marginalised, both by government and, tragically, by some in leadership positions. This was a failure of pastoral care and a betrayal of Christian liberty.
186. Third, it would have distinguished between loving one’s neighbour and obeying every health directive. The claim that taking a vaccine was a Christian duty to “love thy neighbour” bordered on being spiritual abuse at the time and has aged poorly. The experimental and provisionally approved vaccines did not prevent transmission. This truth is now widely acknowledged, including by

government leaders themselves. And yet, the rhetoric remains largely uncorrected by church leaders who initially endorsed it. This undermines the church's credibility and damages trust.

187. Finally, a more biblically grounded response would have spoken prophetically against the rise of state overreach. Church leaders should not be silent when governments enact unjust laws, segregate society, or use fear to coerce behaviour. The role of the Diocese is not to reinforce the prevailing fear-based narrative, but to offer a counter-narrative of hope rooted in the gospel of Christ. As Revelation 13 reminds us, godless government and false religion have in the past, and will in the future unite to oppose the faithful. That opposition will not always be overt - it often begins subtly, through policies that sound wise but lead to compromise. We cannot prevent the God-ordained persecution depicted in Revelation 13 from occurring, yet we can work towards ensuring it does not happen in our generation - through education and standing firm on our convictions – but in the end, in God's timing, it will happen. What we must do is prepare our people for that future, so that their faith will be strong and so that they will be able to stand firm with Christ when end comes (1 Corinthians 16:13, Ephesians 6:13). In the meantime, and looking ahead, we must not punish or shun or bully our people who can read the signs of the times, and who try to warn others when rogue government and false religion conspire to persecute the faithful for political and financial gain.
188. The Anglican Reformers understood these tensions well. They did not advocate blind submission to civil rulers, but a robust engagement that held Scripture as the final authority. We must recover that tradition. Failure to do so may mean that politicians may come to mistake our good-natured compliance for subservience and begin to believe that the opportunity exists to further crush our freedoms, and by doing so remain in power. Our Diocese needs to be ready for the next time government may try to limit our churches' ministries, because the Bible tells us we will be persecuted by government. It's up to us to say, "Not in our generation." We must teach our people the theology of suffering, the cost of discipleship, and the limitations of government. We must prepare for future seasons that we know are coming (cf. Revelation 13) when compliance with the state may mean compromise with the world. Romans 13, read alongside Acts 5 and Article 37, suggests submission stops where God's commands are violated - e.g. assembling for worship or protecting conscience (Romans 14:5). Training for bishops and clergy could explore these tensions, drawing on historical Anglican resistance (e.g. Cranmer's defiance of Mary I) and modern case studies. A framework for discerning unjust laws (assessing evidence, intent, and impact) would equip leaders to resist, when necessary, perhaps through public statements or legal challenges, as Paul appealed to Roman law (Acts 25:11).
189. In conclusion, this is not about criticising past decisions for their own sake but about learning from them. Our Diocese' senior leaders principally acted with good intentions. But good intentions are not enough. We must explore a biblical theology of resistance to unjust laws and lead courageously. We must recover a faithful ecclesiology, a robust doctrine of church and state, and a willingness to stand firm in the face of pressure. The gospel demands it. Our people need it. And the Lord deserves nothing less.

Concerns over some theological and ethical declarations and advice

190. During the height of the Pandemic, some senior leaders within the Diocese (reflecting similar positions expressed in broader Christian and public health circles) encouraged COVID-19 vaccination as an act of Christian love. This was often framed as a moral duty, with appeals to "love your neighbour" and protect the vulnerable. While motivated by concern for others, such declarations were made before the full facts about the vaccines' efficacy and safety were known. We now know that the experimental and provisionally approved vaccines did not prevent transmission (nor contraction) of the virus, a point eventually publicly confirmed by political leaders, including the NSW Premier in early 2023.
191. Framing vaccination as a Christian duty on theological grounds has, in hindsight, proven problematic. Not only was the ethical basis flawed (given the vaccines' inability to stop transmission) but it also risked spiritualising a personal medical decision. For some, this messaging created intense moral pressure, even guilt, and gave rise to coercion within families and churches. It also contributed to an atmosphere in which those who declined vaccination, even for valid ethical or medical reasons, were viewed as failing in their Christian obligation.
192. Theological clarity is essential in such matters. "Loving one's neighbour" must not be reduced to compliance with state-endorsed health policies, especially when those policies are themselves

contested or illogical. The irrational directive of so-called 'health experts' who welcomed in 2021 the early return to work of nurses still recovering from COVID-19 and still displaying COVID-19 symptoms, while at the same time refusing to re-employ unvaccinated healthy nurses, underscores the absurd, illogical, unscientific and unethical mindset many people held. Christian ethics calls for informed consent, respect for conscience, and truthfulness. It should never be used to endorse coercion, shame, or blind trust in authorities whose interests may not align with good outcomes.

193. Churches must exercise great caution when linking gospel imperatives with novel medical or political directives. In doing so during COVID-19, we risked entangling the church with the credibility of government and pharmaceutical companies' financial interests (many of which are now subject to widespread public scepticism). This not only weakens our witness but undermines trust in the church's moral and theological leadership.

Concerns regarding lost gospel declaration and supportive Christian ministry opportunities by substantially limiting our ministries for long periods of time, and not publicly challenging questionable public health orders from overreaching government officials and departments.

194. A concern voiced during this review process, but not enjoying majority support, is that, in its response to the Pandemic, the Diocese surrendered opportunities to declare the gospel with courage and clarity. By substantially limiting our churches' ministries for extended periods, limiting sacramental life, and aligning so closely with government health messaging, our senior leadership unintentionally allowed the "gospel of fear" to overshadow the "gospel of hope".
195. The early stages of the Pandemic were undoubtedly marked by uncertainty and a genuine desire to protect life. Yet as restrictions persisted, inconsistencies in public health orders became apparent. These included illogical rules on indoor and outdoor gatherings, inconsistent mask mandates, bans on wedding ceremonies, bans on singing and communion, and regulations that separated families or denied the dying the presence of loved ones. These were, at times, unscientific and lacked compassion. Nevertheless, the Diocese chose compliance over critique, often reinforcing public fear rather than countering it with biblical assurance.
196. The core of Christian ministry is the proclamation of hope during suffering. Historically, Christian leaders stood apart by ministering boldly during plagues and crises. Yet during this recent pandemic, many churches across the Diocese became indistinguishable from secular institutions (cautious, silent, and driven by risk aversion). While I commend efforts to adapt ministry through online means, digital church is not a sufficient replacement for the embodied life of the gathered people of God.
197. There were opportunities to speak publicly, to affirm the essential nature of worship, to question the disproportionate restrictions on churches, and to model pastoral courage in the face of overreach. Yet for the most part, these opportunities were not seized. The silence was noticeable, not only among our people but also in the public square, where many were looking for moral and spiritual leadership to counterbalance the growing climate of anxiety, coercion, and government control.
198. The result was a lost moment for the Diocesan churches to be what they truly are: the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Timothy 3:15), a city on a hill (Matthew 5:14), and a beacon of comfort in the storm. We missed the opportunity to remind our society that death is not the worst thing that can happen, and that Christ offers peace beyond fear and life beyond the grave. Instead, some churches communicated (whether explicitly or by implication) that safety was paramount, even above worship, community, and sacramental life.
199. Moreover, the prolonged closures and restrictions sent a mixed message about our priorities. Supermarkets remained open, construction sites resumed, but churches were often among the last institutions to return to regular operations. This reinforced the impression that church was non-essential, even to Christians. A generation already drifting from regular attendance has now been further disconnected, and the long-term spiritual consequences are still unfolding.
200. Churches that did choose to remain open overseas, often with legal challenges, demonstrated that it was possible to balance public safety with faithful witness. While not without cost, such churches reported significant spiritual fruit, public respect, and even growth. Their example suggests that a more courageous path was possible. Globally, churches like John MacArthur's in California resisted closures, remaining open with minimal repercussions, offering a model of defiance rooted in faith, and many of those churches experienced a marked increase in numerical growth. Had Sydney

Anglican churches followed suit, declaring themselves essential services and trusting God's protection, they might have attracted many seekers fleeing state overreaching control. Instead, compliance amplified government messaging, with regional bishops' September 2021 Zoom meetings overwhelmingly focusing on legal fears rather than spiritual resilience. This missed a prophetic opportunity to challenge government overreach, as seen in biblical examples like the apostles defying orders to stop preaching (Acts 5:29).

201. The "gospel of fear", emphasising safety over salvation, contrasts with Christ's promise of eternal life (John 11:25-26). The senior leadership's overwhelming acceptance of mandates, such as the recommendation some issued to stand-down unvaccinated church workers, reinforced this narrative, potentially driving away members who saw it as a betrayal of liberty (Galatians 5:1). Public critique of questionable orders (e.g. the suppression of hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin, or the redefinition of vaccines, or the exempting of parliamentarians and judges from vaccine mandates), could have positioned the Diocese as a voice of truth, drawing on the Anglican tradition of resisting state overreach (e.g. Cranmer's reforms). Clive Palmer's donation of hydroxychloroquine (used to effectively treat President Trump) for every Australian citizen, destroyed by government officials despite its safety record, together with the suppression of ivermectin, suggest a coordinated agenda of certain pharmaceutical companies and government officials, the Diocesan leadership might have questioned. Instead, the focus on legal compliance may have signalled subservience, risking a decline in credibility. In my opinion, if the Diocesan senior leaders had publicly challenged government for issuing unjust laws (like men and women of faith have done for millennia) our Diocese would have been inundated with new people, flocking to our churches searching for God to save them from the plague and looking to people of faith to save them from totalitarian government (albeit perhaps losing, for a time, some bishops, clergy and church members who had swallowed the propaganda deep into their souls).
202. The over-reliance on legal caution and the failure to question the state's claims of total authority over religious practice reflect a theology that requires urgent re-examination. We must return to a biblical ecclesiology that views church gatherings not as a dispensable activity, but as the lifeblood of God's people, essential not only spiritually but also socially, psychologically, and culturally.
203. The Diocese must also prepare for future crises (pandemics, persecution, or political instability) by developing a theology of resistance. We must train our leaders and congregations to discern when "Caesar" exceeds his mandate, and to stand graciously but firmly in defence of Christ's Lordship over his chosen people. Revelation 13, along with countless historical examples, reminds us that when the state overreaches, church leaders must not remain silent. Nor should church leaders ever again embrace a religious-like belief in a vaccine to save them from the plague, like a talisman, making them feel safe and secure, despite large numbers of vaccine injuries, disabilities and sudden death tragedies. Moving forward, the Diocese could develop strategies to maintain fully open churches during crises, with pastoral plans for those facing consequences. Engaging with global Christian networks that resisted could inform this approach. While recognising the leadership's good faith, this reflection invites a shift toward a hope-filled witness, ensuring future responses reflect the gospel's transformative power rather than temporal fears.
204. In conclusion, the lost opportunities during COVID-19 are not just regrettable - they are instructive. We must learn from them. Let us not be driven by fear in the future, but by faith. Let us not outsource moral clarity to government but recover our prophetic voice. Further, let us recommit to being God's fellowship of churches in all their fullness: gathered, embodied, unafraid, and grounded in the hope that neither virus, nor lockdowns, nor even death itself can extinguish.

Concerns regarding unintended negative consequences on church members flowing from actions and decisions taken by the Diocesan senior leadership

205. It is important to recognise that the decisions made by the Diocesan senior leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic, while made with good intentions, led to several unintended but deeply significant consequences for church members.
206. In particular, the suspension of Sunday services, while aimed at safety, isolated vulnerable members, exacerbating mental health issues and reducing access to pastoral care at a time of crisis.
207. One of the most pressing concerns was the dislocation and emotional harm experienced by members who were excluded from in-person gatherings, ministry, or fellowship due to their vaccination status.

Some were stood down from positions of leadership or prevented from serving in their congregations. Others were made to feel unwelcome in their spiritual home. This exclusion, often framed as a matter of safety, had the effect of isolating and discouraging faithful Christians (many of whom had served sacrificially for many years). Exclusion is a form of bullying, yet contrary to *Faithfulness in Service*, our Diocese accepted exclusion in some of our churches.

208. For some, this resulted in a crisis of trust toward church leadership and, tragically, toward the church itself. Some families left their churches, long-term relationships were fractured, and several individuals reported feeling spiritually abandoned at a time when they most needed support. Some have not returned to church at all.
209. Additionally, the heavy reliance on online platforms during extended lockdowns unintentionally entrenched a passive or consumerist view of church, especially among the vulnerable and newly converted. While appreciated for a season, “Zoom church” has had lingering effects, including decreased attendance, a weakening of congregational bonds, and the perception that Christian community is optional rather than essential.
210. There were also indirect consequences on clergy and lay leaders, many of whom faced unprecedented pressures. Some felt unable to voice reservations about Diocesan guidance or government mandates for fear of reputational damage or institutional reprimand. This contributed to a climate of anxiety, discouragement, and spiritual fatigue.
211. Excess deaths and vaccine injuries, now acknowledged in 2024 Senate discussions, suggest health impacts that the senior leadership did not anticipate or address, leaving affected congregants unsupported. The amplification of a fear-based narrative, rather than hope, may have contributed to division, with some feeling judged for their choices.
212. I do not suggest that the Diocesan senior leadership acted with ill-will. However, the impacts of these decisions must be acknowledged. We must learn from the pain caused, not only to those who left, but to those who stayed and now carry silent and deep wounds.
213. It is hoped that this reflection leads to repentance where appropriate, renewed pastoral sensitivity, and a commitment to uphold the unity of the body of Christ, especially during times of public crisis and political pressure. It is recommended that the pandemic Archbishops hold a ‘Truth and Reconciliation Day’ event in 2026 to hear the stories of Anglicans that felt abandoned by their spiritual leaders and churches, pray together, share any lessons learned, forgive and repent where appropriate, and agree to move forward together in a spirit of Christian unity.

Concerns regarding the lack of awareness or interest among the Diocesan leadership, in the “Excess Death Rate” Australia has suffered from, in all age groups, with apparently no discussion about it, nor prayer at the Synod, nor in our churches, together with a general lack of awareness or interest in COVID vaccine injuries within our nation and therefore within our churches

214. One of the more sobering realities to emerge post-pandemic has been the significant rise in Australia’s excess mortality rate within the time period examined by the Committee (1 January 2020 - 20 September 2022). According to publicly available data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Actuaries Institute, 2022 witnessed the highest excess death rate in over 80 years (15.4% above expected levels in 2022 according to ABS data before the ABS changed its method of calculation – as did similar organisations in other countries which are also experiencing marked increases in excess death rates since 2022). This increase affected all age groups, and while a portion of these deaths were attributed to COVID-19 itself, a large number remain unexplained. The excess death rate was raised in the Senate on several occasions, yet within our Diocese, there has been an unsettling silence. No formal mention, no public prayer, and no pastoral lament has been offered for the thousands of additional lives lost.
215. The lack of engagement with this reality raises serious concerns about our theological attentiveness and pastoral sensitivity. If the church cannot grieve publicly, intercede faithfully, or seek understanding about such a significant national phenomenon, it risks losing its moral and spiritual authority. Death is not only a public health concern; it is a deeply theological one.
216. Moreover, there has been little to no formal acknowledgment within the Diocese of the growing number of Australians reporting injuries linked to the COVID-19 vaccines (injuries that include

myocarditis, blood clots, debilitating neurological conditions, and sudden death; <https://www.news.com.au/technology/science/human-body/dr-kerryn-phelps-reveals-devastating-covid-vaccine-injury-says-doctors-have-been-censored/news-story/0c1fa02818c99a5ff65f5bf852a382cf>). Some members of our own churches are among those affected, yet they have received little support or recognition. Bishop Glenn Davies shared with the Committee his personal connection to someone severely injured. Many of my colleagues and I also know people who have similarly suffered. Perhaps if *Southern Cross* published stories of Sydney Anglicans similarly vaccine injured, it would go a long way towards pastorally supporting all Anglicans injured by the experimental and provisionally approved vaccines?

217. This silence is compounded by the Standing Committee's 2024 reversal of its 2023 decision to survey clergy and lay leaders regarding their reflections on the Diocesan pandemic response. That reversal has signalled, to many people, a reluctance to engage with uncomfortable truths or to learn from past decisions.
218. Future engagement could involve raising awareness through Diocesan publications, incorporating prayer for those affected, and petitioning the government to commission independent reviews of excess deaths and injuries. Perhaps our Archbishop could request the Prime Minister to hold a Royal Commission into Australia's response to COVID-19 (as Anthony Albanese declared many times he would hold, before he broke his 2022 pre-election promise)? This would align with our duty to seek justice and mercy (Micah 6:8). Offered with respect for differing perspectives, this concern aims to enhance our pastoral care and preparedness, ensuring no issue of such magnitude is overlooked again.
219. I urge that the members of the Diocese take seriously the biblical imperative to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15), and to demonstrate pastoral leadership by naming collective suffering and praying corporately for healing, justice, and truth. These are not merely political or medical matters, they are deeply spiritual concerns.

Recommendations

220. The Committee recommends the following actions.

Audience	Recommendations
Standing Committee	<p>That the Standing Committee give consideration to –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="571 1328 1401 1451">(a) Passing an ordinance providing for the existence of alternate and temporary diocesan governance structures for use in extreme circumstances when ordinary structures (such as Synod or Standing Committee) are unable to meet or operate. <li data-bbox="571 1458 1401 2033">(b) Developing an Emergency Action Plan for the Diocese, including – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="651 1529 1401 1776">(i) recognition of the vital importance of the need for pastoral care at all levels. This would include guidelines for senior Diocesan leadership for intentional reaching out to rectors, pastoral and other key leaders, as well as providing these ministry workers with guidelines in how to deal with other ministry staff, administrative staff, volunteer leaders and pastoral carers under their care during and following a crisis. <li data-bbox="651 1783 1401 1933">(ii) directions for a post crisis review two years following the event. This review should include understanding any ongoing effects on the governance and relationships of the Diocese, both from the crisis itself as well as how it was managed. <li data-bbox="651 1939 1401 2033">(iii) the important distinction between governance structures and relationships in times of crisis and 'normal' times when making structural decisions.

Audience	Recommendations
	<p>(c) Requesting SAP (the ACPT), as part of its annual report to the Synod, to provide (subject to legal and contractual obligations) –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) a list of trusts held by the APCT that may be available for use in an emergency, and (ii) a list of trusts held by the ACPT that are to be applied other than for the purposes of one or more parochial units. <p>(d) Questions of ecclesiastical law and the polity of the Diocese of Sydney.</p>
Archbishop and Diocesan senior leadership	That consideration be given to – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (e) Holding gatherings sharing experiences of the Pandemic and for thanksgiving, healing, and prayer (for bodies, minds, spirits, and relationships) (f) Creating pastoral guidelines for situations where conscientious objections are made. (g) Setting aside time to discuss and reflect on their own perceptions of change in Diocesan governance structures and relationships as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. (h) In any future major crisis – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) an advisory Taskforce with expertise be created to provide guidance and wisdom to the Archbishop and the senior Diocesan leadership, (ii) all avenues be explored where positions are made untenable by government restrictions, and (iii) that processes for dismissal in such circumstances include some kind of pastoral and spiritual welfare checks at a later date.
All Diocesan organisations and schools	That all Diocesan organisations and schools – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Reflect on their response to the Pandemic, seeking to learn lessons for the future and addressing any issues found. (j) In any future major crisis – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) all avenues be explored where positions are made untenable by government restrictions, and (ii) that processes for dismissal in such circumstances include some kind of pastoral and spiritual welfare checks at a later date.
Parishes	That parishes be encouraged to – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (k) Consider providing an opportunity for church members to share their experience of their church's response to the Pandemic. (l) Develop local emergency action plans as part of their governance activities.
Rectors	That rectors – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (m) Familiarise themselves with the Diocesan Doctrine Commission report and reflect further on the limits of making definitive determinations in many circumstances we may be faced with particularly in crisis situations, and how to maintain fellowship when decisions are made about disputable matters. (n) Give consideration to their preparedness for situations that give rise to critical disruption of ministry (such as another pandemic) and put in place strategies or systems that can be utilised easily and regularly reviewed. This may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Emergency Action Plans,

Audience	Recommendations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (ii) A policy for financial contingency, and (iii) Plans in the case of unplanned departure of critical staff.
All church workers	<p>That all church workers –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (o) Continue to provide pastoral care for those suffering from the long-term effects of COVID-19, who are often absent from church and invisible in the body. (p) Give personal consideration to the impact of the Pandemic on them and their ministry mindset and capacity and where necessary, bring this topic of conversation to a pastoral supervision or counselling session.
Moore Theological College	<p>That consideration be given to –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (q) Creating a training module to assist church workers to navigate the task of disagreeing well in pastoral situations that evoke strong anxious responses, such as a pandemic, when multiple strongly held irreconcilable views conflict and yet decisions need to be made.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee.

BRIONY BOUNDS
Diocesan Secretary
 18 August 2025

Extract of the Question and Answer provided on 12 September 2023

Covid vaccine mandates in the Diocese

The Rev Zac Veron asked the following question –

- (a) Do any diocesan organisations and churches still have COVID-19 vaccine mandates in place as at 15 August 2023? If so, which organisations?
- (b) What reason(s) did any heads of diocesan organisations and churches offer for still having COVID-19 vaccine mandates in place as of 15 August 2023?
- (c) Which diocesan organisations and churches introduced COVID-19 vaccine mandates during 2021-2022 for their employees or persons licenced by the Archbishop?
- (d) How many employees and church workers in diocesan organisations and churches were sacked, stood down or resigned over COVID-19 vaccine mandates during 2021-2022? How many of these people have since been offered their jobs back and reinstated to their positions?
- (e) How many lay church members in each region of the Diocese were stood down from their ministries by their rectors, during 2021-2022, because they were not vaccinated with an approved COVID-19 vaccine, and how many of these people have since been reinstated?
- (f) How many lay church members in each region of the Diocese voluntarily stood down from their ministries during 2021-2022, because they were not vaccinated with an approved COVID-19 vaccine, and how many of these people have since been reinstated?

To which the President replied –

I am informed that the answer is as follows –

An online survey was circulated to parishes and diocesan organisations a fortnight before the first day of Synod. The survey invitation was sent to 275 people. Participation was voluntary and 131 responses were received. The answer to this question is based on the results of the survey and is therefore not comprehensive.

- (a) No.
- (b) Not applicable.
- (c) At times, and in certain circumstances during the pandemic, a COVID-19 vaccination was a requirement under public health orders for a person to work outside their place of residence or enter certain places including aged care facilities, schools and places of worship. In that sense a vaccine mandate was introduced by the NSW Government for organisations and churches in those instances.

The list of organisations and churches based on the survey responses will be available on the notice board in the foyer [and is available in the Synod proceedings for 2023].

- (d) 13 were terminated, or suspended, or resigned, and 3 were offered re-employment or re-instatement.
- (e) Northern Region: 2 stood down, 2 re-instated.
Western Region: 0 stood down, 0 re-instated.
South Western Region: 1 stood down, 0 re-instated.
South Sydney Region: 2 stood down, 2 re-instated.
Wollongong Region: 0 stood down, 0 re-instated.
- (f) Northern Region: 8 stood down, 6 re-instated.
Western Region: 2 stood down, 2 re-instated.
South Western Region: 1 stood down, 1 re-instated.
South Sydney Region: 4 stood down, 2 re-instated.
Wollongong Region: 2 stood down, 1 re-instated.