



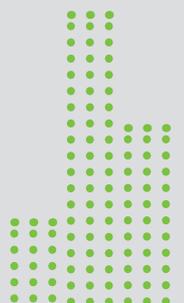
**PACIFIC
THEOLOGICAL
COLLEGE**



A COVID-19 WELLBEING STATEMENT

**Rethinking Health from a
Theological and Pasifika Cultural Perspective**

Prepared by the
PACIFIC THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE
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A COVID-19 WELLBEING STATEMENT

Rethinking Health from a Theological and Pasifika Cultural Perspective

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

Governments and churches worldwide have been advocating for vaccination in order to get back to some normalcy. While this statement fully supports vaccination, a ‘single-vaccine approach’ alone is limited and needs rethinking. The evolving nature of the virus needs evolving and multidimensional solutions. The vaccine’s effectiveness against infection is declining despite promises of strong protection against hospitalisation. Therefore, science alone, with all its benefits, does not suffice during health crises. It is not enough to depend solely on medical practitioners and state healthcare facilities, and it is extremely unhelpful to work against them.

Today more than ever, it is crucial for Pasifika communities to revisit what we mean by health. We need a holistic narrative that encompasses the numerous other strands of life and wellbeing that could assist Pasifika communities endure the pandemic crisis. This statement proposes some of these other strands, in particular the wellbeing and spirituality strand that is critical to a holistic view of health. This statement also broadly addresses some theological questions and mis/disinformation in relation to the pandemic.

OBJECTIVE

This statement serves to assist Pasifika and worldwide churches, partners, faith-based organisations, and grassroots communities with a broader multidimensional approach to health, framed within the biblical, theological, and cultural principles of wellbeing.

THE COVID19 HEALTH CRISIS

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) characterised Covid-19 (C-19) as a ‘pandemic’. To date, there have been more than four (4) million deaths and more than two hundred (200) million cases worldwide. Today, C-19 is turning into a “thermo-nuclear pandemic” as predicted in 2020 by Dr Eric Reigl-Ding from Harvard University, pushing medical facilities and services to the brink of collapse (Burstein and Shields 2021). Despite global efforts to suppress the virus, the situation is worsening not only due to the evolving nature of C-19—for example the highly contagious Delta variant spiraling out of control worldwide even for highly vaccinated countries and now a new variant called C.1.2 detected in New Zealand and other parts of the world which medical experts believe is “worse than Delta” (New Zealand Herald 2021)—but also because of the uncontrollable waves of mis/disinformation, for instance, the unhealthy conspiracy theories and dispensational theologies (defined below) circulating within the faith community.





RETHINKING THE NARRATIVE THROUGH WELLBEING PRINCIPLES

The following three principles of wellbeing—*whole of life*, *love of neighbour*, and *integrated whole*—form the basis of this statement. These principles are informed by biblical and theological traditions yet also find expressions that resonate deeply with the diverse cultural traditions of Pasifika. The intent in placing these principles ‘alongside’ the mainstream health strand in the mat of wellbeing is to encourage our individual and collective responsibilities towards the self and to communities beyond the self, including the Earth.

Whole of Life

Wellbeing is best understood when it is approached from a whole of life perspective that is consistent with the holistic embrace of life. In the Hebrew bible, health and wellbeing are presented as *shalom*. Though often translated as peace, the word is intricately linked to health (Jeremiah 8:15) and wholeness (Isaiah 53:5). These definitions are not confined to an individual nor are they are restricted to the physical. Rather, both are mutually inclusive of wellbeing.

The whole of life principle is at the centre of Jesus’ teachings on the ‘fullness of life’ (John 10:10). The Greek word *pleroma*, meaning ‘fullness’, can also be translated as whole, complete, or fulfilling. Within this context, life refers to an ‘inextricable whole’. We encounter this holistic consciousness in the new social order ushered in by Jesus which privileged God’s transformative vision and not Caesar’s (Mark 1:14-15). In it, Jesus makes no separation of the physical from the spiritual, or the political from the religious. It is also witnessed in Mark’s account of Jesus’ healings and exorcisms where there is an integrated view of personal and social suffering equally attributed to a demonic Roman violent system as highlighted in the story of the man possessed by a Legion (Mark 5:1-15). In Jesus’ approach, addressing personal ailments also means addressing the political, economic, social, and religious ills and ideologies at the root of their marginalisation and struggle.

This sense of holistic embrace was reiterated by Paul’s claim that God and creation (which includes humans) are brought together and reconciled by the sacrificial love of Jesus (Colossians 1:19-24). To use a Pasifika metaphor, the image of multiple strands woven together into a mat resembles a diverse community ‘reconciled’ to one another. Thus, the whole of life is a mat in which all are invited to sit. Key to this invitation on to the mat of wellbeing is the notion of reconciliation. Put simply, the fullness of wellbeing can only take place when all strands of life participate in mutual understanding and making room for reconciliation with one another. Reconciliation merits not absolutising one’s right but renegotiating even at the extent of sacrificing one’s freedom in order to be reconciled with those who are vulnerable and left behind by a problematic world order. The cross of Jesus is the symbol of this act of deep solidarity.

Upholding that vision and practice of wellbeing as its core mission, enabled the Early church to reframe its identity as Ecclesia, a committed community of equals that cared for the whole of life. As a caring and sharing community, the Early church structure itself as a community of embrace, embodying love, mutuality and deep solidarity. In particular, love for the vulnerable, mutuality with the underprivileged and deep solidarity with the marginalised was clearly evident in the way the early Christians lived as recorded in the book of Acts. In seeking her salvation collectively and relationally, it was not uncommon in the Early church for individuals and communities to ‘give up’ one’s own comfort for the sake of the other.

The whole of life principle is also at the heart of Pasifika and indigenous/native wellbeing. At the crux of the works by Epeli Hauofa in his new Oceania consciousness (1993), Winston Halapua in his Moana embrace (2008), and many others, is a vision of radical inclusion not just for the community of persons, creation, and God, but in particular the underprivileged, the marginalised, and the poor. This holistic embrace is obvious in Pasifika communities, particularly in their observance of life as a continuum and reciprocal sequence.





To mention a few, for Maori (Cook Islands), the continuum of wellbeing can be achieved through the values of *no'o'anga meitaki* and *ora'anga meitaki* which should lead to *kia ora ana* (may you live on). In Fiji, whole of life is epitomized in *sautu* (wellbeing) or in the Fijian greeting *bula vinaka* (good health). These cannot be achieved if we do not observe the values of *veivakarokorokotaki* (courtesy), *veidokai* (respect), *veirogorogoci* (listening to each other), *veivakatavulici* (grooming/nurturing/teaching), *veinanumi* (considerate), *veikauwaitaki* (caring), and *veilomani* (loving). For I-Kiribati, it is *te maiu raoi* (wellbeing) as a state of goodness or wellness. But this cannot be achieved until people observe *marin abara* (healthy ecology), *te toronibwai* (set skills of self-reliance in relation to subsistence and spiritual communion with the Earth), *te katei* (customary practices), and *te karinerine* (demonstration of respect). The ideal state of wellbeing for Niuean is understood as the co-existence of spirituality, environment, relationships, and mana. This comes under one of its wellbeing concepts called *vahā loto mahani mitaki*, which denotes being in relationship with the whole (see *Nga Vaka o Kāiga Tapu*, 2012). Other non-indigenous peoples have their own wellbeing principles guiding them during crises. The few examples above mean that health and wellbeing is not one-dimensional, it is also a process of observing life-affirming values for the self and for others including the Earth.

Love of Neighbour

The question “Who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29) invites a journey back to the parable of the Good Samaritan who came to the rescue of a victim disposed and left on the side of the road. During this pandemic crisis, we have seen a lot of painful images on TV of disposable bodies. The deaths have been largely disproportionate as the health and socio-economic systems of the old normal had failed and made disposable victims of those at the bottom (Reddie 2021, 243-257).

The good news is, the question can redirect us back to refreshing a new/old ‘neighbourly consciousness’. It should allow us to remember the importance of our faith and Pasifika cultures of sharing, reciprocity, reception, mutual understanding, and deep solidarity with one another in times of crisis. These are practical expressions of love of neighbour that should include the Earth, which in many Pasifika cultures is perceived as a ‘relative’; *flesh, bones, and blood*. The self and neighbour cannot be separated as we now see in this health crisis where neighbours are disposed, marginalised, and stigmatised.

The question should also allow us to pause and seriously reflect on what is really meant by human rights. During this health crisis, the privatised direction of human rights has often obscured our moral and social responsibilities to the other. This is because, as Wanda Deifelt argues, in many Western countries who framed the notion of human rights according to their contexts and needs, they normally label collective efforts as either socialist or communist. What has transpired during this pandemic as a result of this social indifference is that people are “used to tackling every problem through the lens of ‘individual rights’ or ‘personal privilege’, and this disempowers the common good and any collective response to the pandemic” (2021, 317). Without a sense of accountability for our neighbours (human and non-human), the protective function of the right becomes obsolete. It pushes our human right as the only option especially when it suits our agenda even if it compromises the rights of others. This pandemic has revealed that the church can no longer run away from seriously engaging and reframing human rights for the sake of equal application and collective responsibility.

One of the popularly cited biblical texts used by many Christian conspiracy theorists to oppose C-19 is the book of Revelation, in particular, the misplaced perceptions on the ‘mark of the beast’ and the doctrine of the ‘end-time’ from chapter 13. Many have been driven mainly by dispensational theologies that have roots in Greek/Western colonial worldview based on the ideology of dispensationalism. It’s worth mentioning two central focuses of these theologies. First, they emphasise a sharp distinction between body and spirit, an age-old colonial tactic that has driven the church to focus only on saving ‘individual souls’ at the expense of addressing the welfare of the larger society. Those who emphasise this theological position are mostly indifferent to social issues that affect the neighbour and normally undermine public health policies as we see during this pandemic.





Second, they are obsessed with future-oriented or doomsday prophecies based on the premise that these are all part of God's judgement. They view famines, pandemics, conflicts, and natural disasters as curses and signs of the end-time. The C-19 has seen a resurgence of these views. Those who follow this ideology normally emphasise a heavy future-oriented heavenly escape from this cursed world (for more on 'dispensationalism', see Saje 2021, 134-137). It blames individual wickedness as being the primary cause of them being poor and underprivileged (Zauzmer 2017). Some have gone to the extent of blaming victims, including those who have died in the current health crisis for the C-19 (see Deifelt 2021, 314; Wilson, 2020).

John's vision in Revelation is not to prove a linear timetable of the end-time but rather portrays a resistance movement by early Christians to oppressive imperialism and the hope for the 'end of the Empire' and its corruptive system. Babylon (city), the whore (person), and the beast (animal) in John's vision function as the incarnation of a unified oppressive system of power with inordinate wealth where even deaths and disposable bodies are treated as statistics and not as real lives as we see during this crisis (Kelber 2006, 108).

The whole second half of the book of Revelation, which encourages early Christians to understand their present crisis in the light of global dimensions, unveils the Christ-like subversion of injustice executed by this highly admired unified oppressive social, economic, religious system represented by Rome or Babylon against the poor and the marginalised. It unveils not only the demonic imperial 'mark of the beast' (or mark of the Empire) but also the influence of this imperial system on everyone. It was a system set against the already struggling neighbour.

What the church refers to as eschatology therefore is not so much about the 'afterlife' but rather about a call to radical justice in the present within the framework of the future hope in Jesus Christ. In the eyes of Early Christians, the book of Revelation ushered in a new 'neighbourly consciousness' that called for real time responsibility and solidarity with the underprivileged and victims of beastly and imperial atrocities of the day. It is about offering hope for the suffering community including the liberation of victimised bodies and communities and not just the soul. This community 'neighbourly consciousness' is key to survival when it comes to crises such as the current pandemic.

Admittedly, history tells us of a mutual link between the church and the Empire as seen during the late third century under Emperor Constantine, where Christianity became the "glue that would hold the Empire together" (Howard-Brook 2016, 182). Today, this link is particularly obvious when the church is silent on issues that victimise the ordinary citizen. People are pushed to disregard this world through an appeal to live a more privatised 'righteous life' and the crisis of the present realities end up being relegated either to the background or to a heavenly domain. The more these escapist theologies gain momentum during a crisis like the current pandemic, the more the justice and wellbeing for the neighbour is replaced by a privatised salvation.

In the gospels, central to Jesus' vision for justice and salvation is the love of neighbour as we love ourselves (Mark 12:29-31; Matthew 25:40; Romans 13:8-10; 1 John 4:21). The reformation legacy of the church reminds us of how many have followed this vision beyond privatised rights, comfort, and profit. Despite risks of persecution and death, many Christians and prophets of faith intentionally sided with the underprivileged, neighbours who were deprived of their basic rights and needs to live because of the greed of the Empire.

Today the vaccination can be another way of helping the neighbour, in particular the vulnerable already victimised by the oppressive systems of modern Empires. We vaccinate to protect our families and neighbours. To relieve the frontliners and healthcare workers who also have families and loved ones waiting for them to come home. And to not occupy a hospital bed that is meant for others who need them most. However, while we encourage vaccination, the international community on the one hand must be cautious not to allow this universal dominating system that the book of Revelation warns us





against to dictate access to health benefits, in particular vaccination. On the other hand, it must be cautious not allow any government or organisation to use vaccination to justify withholding any socio-economic benefits to the unvaccinated in particular the vulnerable. Both health and economy should have a neighbourly consciousness. Both should have a whole of life focus. The biblical call to radical neighbourly love is something that can enhance the vaccination appeal and at the same time can be used as a biblical tool to deconstruct the capitalist ideology behind it.

The good news is, Christianity has a subversive side acting as a radical instrument of God in bringing wellness in societies that are sickened by various forms of oppressive structures that we normalise as culture. The African Christianity, for example, insisted vehemently on the wellness of all in the face of brutal racism in apartheid practices. The Latin American Christianity is a living memorial for the resistant spirituality that challenged the life-threatening military oppressions that caused destruction not only to the human beings but also to the life of whole creation. The Dalit Christians in India have been demanding the healing of Indian society that is sickened and fragmented in the name of Casteism.

The Pacific churches since the 1960s have been at the forefront of confronting the modern Empires and addressing destructive political, economic, and social systems that deeply impact on the wellbeing of Pacific neighbours. For example, the nuclear testing in French Polynesia, the climate crisis, the violation of the rights of the first peoples of West Papua, New Caledonia, Tahiti, Guam and others, the issues of self-determination and militarisation, and land and deep-sea mining. All these issues have harmful consequences on the wellbeing of the people, land, ocean, and communities. With C-19 as the late comer, the importance of neighbourly love and solidarity should be addressed more than ever.

Integrated Whole

Life is multidimensional and an integration of inextricable relationships. It is not just a set of natural rules and systems. This interconnectedness of the whole means therefore that the health of the whole depends on the health of individual parts. Wellbeing cannot be adequately measured or addressed one-dimensionally. Much like the strands of a mat, the upkeep of health and wellbeing requires more than the fragmented efforts of individuals. It is an undertaking that invites a community of weavers. There is a fluid flow of health and wellbeing. It entails a consideration of the integration of the individual and the social, the physical and the spiritual, as well as humanity and the cosmos into an interwoven whole. In an integrated fashion, several scenarios are critical to consider.

First, people and Earth cannot be compartmentalised. The health of the peoples depends on the health of the land and ocean, rivers, mountains, etc, and vice versa. Health is structured in the light of the wellbeing of the whole. When one is affected, all are affected. When one suffers, all suffer. Hence a person's health has to be treated as a whole. The pandemic crisis today is not just about a C-19 virus that was detected in one country and later transported to the whole world. This is a crisis of deep systemic and structural injustice behind much of the uneven economic, political, and religious developments continuing to destroy our God-given gift of creation.

Second, spirituality cannot be compartmentalised. From an integrated whole of life perspective, we cannot evade real-time justice when it comes to spirituality. Burning issues faced by the neighbour, like health, racism, poverty, and climate change, are the result of a spirituality crisis. Conspiracy or dispensational theorists only add to this crisis by heavenising solutions and over spiritualising the bible. This stands in direct contrast to Jesus who demonstrated a true concern for the concrete issues of his day, particularly through his non-involvement with the business of postponing all hope to the afterlife. This is realised in the hope of the cross. When coupled with an obsessive demonising of the flesh, these conspiracies aim to condition people to look the other way on matters of justice and loving the neighbour. Systemic problems are easily dismissed as things of the world and any concrete action connected to the current wellbeing of the neighbour, including the Earth, is demobilised. This, of course, is not to invalidate God's promise in the 'not yet', but rather serves as a reminder for Christians in the meantime to live out their lives to the fullest with others who need life most.





Lastly, our reading of the bible cannot be compartmentalised. Much like the strands of a mat, the bible is an integrated whole that cannot be treated as if one text is purely disconnected from others. This happens in the literal reading of the bible that has resurfaced during this pandemic. During situations of crisis, people are in fragile states as they desperately seek assistance from governments and in particular from faith-based communities including spiritual counsel from church and faith leaders. Most often those who are meant to give answers exploit and play on people's emotions and vulnerabilities by using the bible as a tool to push their own personal or denominational agendas. Understanding the broader and deeper context of things including biblical texts counters a narrow literal approach that intentionally zooms into one dimension of the text or context. During crises, the church is called not only to help people see the bible as a counter-imperial story, but also engage in a responsible reading from the horizons and context of the suffering and colonised community in order to respond effectively to multiple sufferings happening around us.

RESILIENCE: THE WAY FORWARD

The search for resilience in the times of crisis and hope for the wellbeing of our people, lands and the lives of our earthly community, takes a village of hands, wisdoms and intersectional skill-sets. Resilience is not just about a reaction to recover from crises. Resilience should be built into the social fabric of intergenerational processes so when a crisis occurs, there are already pre- and post-crisis mechanisms in place to cater for people's wellbeing. In other words, resilience is a process not a reaction. This involves the faith communities' ability to read the signs of the times and potential indicators of crises. It involves collective action to revive the power of resilience embodied in the collaboration of members of the grassroots community, a new kind of power that the Jesus justice movement was famous for (Rieger 2018, 25).

One of those structures for example is the "we are" structure of life. Both the gospel and many Pasifika relational cultures teach us of the "we are" structure in contrast to the "we have". The former encourages collective personal, social, and ecological responsibility. It also encourages gratitude and joy in the midst of a crisis, especially within the framework of love of the neighbour, through assisting and sacrificing for others in need. The latter powers the machinery of greed and obsession for more profit and growth at the expense of the underprivileged. This is often the case in the context of rich pharmaceutical enterprises that mostly control access to vaccination and health benefits.

During situations of crisis, the "we are" structure of life (Vaai 2021, 216-217) does not prioritise the question of curse and divine punishment. While these questions are important to the faith of the people, and should be part of the process of renewing the faith of the church, sometimes they are either driven by rational and individualistic ideologies that regularly push God away from the suffering community or by the agenda to blame the victim. The latter is not new. Even Jesus' disciples asked the question "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (v.3). The question by the disciples represents the ordinary peoples' questions which the church should be prepared to articulate and respond to during crises. It also represents our ongoing quest to find out the origins of suffering and pain. But Jesus was not interested in origins or what academics called 'the problem of evil', which is the obsession of philosophers and dispensational theorists. Rather he was interested in the Father's presence and solidarity with the struggle of the victim. This is the hope for any victims of illness and social stigmatisation.

In the "we are" structure the focus is on the questions: 'What can we do together to help each other?' 'What is our collective responsibility?' 'How can we survive together as a community?' The more we develop practical responses to these questions, the more we make sense of God's will and presence during crises. The "we are" philosophy of life is structured around the 'action-reflection' process





where the more we perform our responsibilities towards the self and the neighbour, the more we find traces of the presence of God in us and the more our questions are given possibilities for reframing.

Crises reveal either the best or the worst of us. They expose the raw truth of systemic and structural flaws that we normalise. The role of the church and faith communities during crises is to be the conscience of society. To speak out against imperial dominating systems at the root of many crises. But before it attends to this important mandate, it should attend first to denouncing any theologies and biblical interpretations created to suit misplaced personal and doctrinal agendas. The church should be missiological and pastoral in the sense of building and creating life-centred environments that assist with hope and resilience. This includes creating structures that allow space for collaboration with other sectors such as science and medical health. While keeping its distinctive role as the conscience of society, the church must attempt to talk to sectors such as health. The basic characteristic of community resilience involves a spirit of openness, caregiving, a sense of sharing of life and expectations, identity and solidarity, solving problems together, and careful articulation of decisions and action that benefit the wellbeing of individuals, group or the community as a whole.

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