



## NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Toronto, ON

Day 2

March 31, 2023

### EVIDENCE

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**Witness 11: Dr. Wesley Mack**

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[00:00:00]

**Shawn Buckley**

Dr. Mack, can you hear me?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes, I can, thank you.

**Shawn Buckley**

Can you turn your video on? There we go. And then maybe tilt your screen a little better.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Very good. Thank you.

**Shawn Buckley**

I'd like to begin by asking you to state your full name for the record and spell your first and last name for the record.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Sure. Wesley, W-E-S-L-E-Y. Mack, M-A-C-K.

**Shawn Buckley**

Then, do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth today?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

I do.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, my understanding is you have a Master's of Education in Administration.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes, that's right. A B.A. for my undergrad, basically in music education, and a Master's of Education in administration.

**Shawn Buckley**

And you also have an honorary doctorate degree.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

I do.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, you've got, basically, a career that is church-related, as I understand it.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Primarily, yes. In a variety of capacities, actually. But yes, primarily interrelated with church and what we would refer to as parachurch and national media. There are several different elements combined with that. But it relates to what we would refer to as the ecclesia, the community of believers or the church at large.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right, indeed. And one of your achievements is you spent quite a bit of time developing a Christian school system in Hong Kong, both primary and then secondary.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes, right. My wife and I both have educational backgrounds, a background in education administration. I was asked to go to Hong Kong to basically take over a system that had a number of elementary students—3,500 elementary students—coalesce that into a school system. And then to develop and build a school for them to progress to. It culminated in a school for 1,200 students. It was called United Christian College, with two other organizations in Hong Kong.

**Shawn Buckley**

And we don't need a whole lot of detail there. I'm just trying to establish that you are really plugged into the church system. And then I was going to move you to— You've been living in the Toronto area now for quite some time. But instead of being involved in one church, you actually had, prior to COVID, been heavily involved in three churches. Am I right about that?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes. I should expand that little bit. I've been involved with the national church scene for a number of years, ever since coming to Toronto from Hong Kong. And that includes media, it

includes having actually been present in meeting pastors, speaking in over a thousand churches nationwide, literally from coast to coast.

So yes, I have a comprehensive view— fairly comprehensive view of the national church scene.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

I do have fairly close connection with three churches in the metropolitan Toronto area. They'd be described as what we'd refer to— One of them in particular is a megachurch; the other two are large facilities, which previously have had full capacity in the range of 1,500 to 2,000. The megachurch would have a weekly attendance of somewhere between four to five thousand.

**Shawn Buckley**

And you are actually friends with the pastors in all three churches and would have what in the Christian world would be known as an elder role for those pastors.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes, that would be that would be a good description. Being able to spend time with these three individuals on a personal level. Being able to share with them their ministry objectives.

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Being able to provide some counselling perhaps from time to time, that kind of thing.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay. And these were three churches that were very important to you and they were important for you and your wife to attend.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Exactly.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay. So now COVID comes along. We're in the year 2020. Can you tell us what happened to churches in Ontario, and those three churches in particular?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes. Let's back up just a little bit to begin with. What is a church? A church is a fellowship of believers that come together under common cause. Those causes are generally born out of fellowship; it's born out of the desire for teaching and for learning from their scriptural backgrounds. Also, the desire for spiritual nourishment on the part of interaction with co-

worshippers as well as from the pastoral community. And then, as an outgrowth of that, obviously a community outreach into the communities, whether it's community support, providing support systems for the community, and so on.

So it historically in Canada, as in other countries, has played a significant role in the communities that they have been developed in. Our personal opportunity here in Canada has been really involved in all of those aspects. And we have seen, as a result of the lockdown that took place, a drastic decline in all of those aspects of fellowship, of—

**Shawn Buckley**

Well, let me just back you up if I may.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Sure.

**Shawn Buckley**

My understanding is that churches in 2020 were shut down for a period of time in Ontario. Is that correct?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes. Perhaps just a brief—I was going to give you a rather lengthy, but we'll combine this. March the 16th, 2020, the provincial government closed all of the churches, schools, day cares, recreational facilities, bars, restaurants, et cetera. The interesting thing there is that they allowed big-box stores to remain open. Facilities like the local liquor board, the LCBO in Ontario, abortion clinics, a variety of special interest groups that were allowed to continue to remain open. But churches were closed on March 16th of 2020. March the 18th, the federal government closed all the borders for Canada. So that shut down all kinds of things. It also affected us because our children live abroad.

Then, moving quickly, in December of— Well, on occasion, they would allow a bit of flexibility. They would allow 10 people to meet in September of 2020. Ten people to meet in small groups: obviously that was ridiculous in terms of church attendance. Then in November of 2020, this provincial government established a five-tiered colour system where they would allow certain groups to open in different capacities based on the colour of their zone. Toronto, the GTA area, was designated a red zone. And so the entire GTA, including the churches I have described, were under the red zone restrictions and in total lockdown.

December the 26th, 2020, the provincial government again reverted to a complete total lockdown of everything.

In January of 2021, there began to be some resistance to that. Some pastors rebelled, started to allow small group meetings in their churches. A couple of pastors were arrested and fined.

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In fact, it has resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of fines that have been placed on a couple of these pastors.

Interestingly, March 7th, 2021—so that’s almost exactly one year from the beginning of the church lockdown—the Archbishop of Toronto issued a letter to Premier Ford personally, and it was published widely, making a strong appeal for the church to be allowed to open, especially for the Easter services. The response to that was that on April the 7th, 2021, Premier Ford and the Province issued another complete lockdown. And everything went back to the original state.

Then over the next year, they did allow a progressive opening. At first, it was 15 per cent of your capacity. Obviously, if you have a 1,500-seat auditorium, a 2,000-seat auditorium, that makes no sense at all. Then they allowed only vaxxed people to come in—

**Shawn Buckley**

Can I just stop you?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Sure.

**Shawn Buckley**

Was that actually a government requirement or was that just a recommendation?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

It was a requirement.

**Shawn Buckley**

So an actual government requirement that to go to church in Ontario, you had to be vaccinated.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Exactly. Yes. And you had to wear a mask as well. Everyone. And you had to be seated six feet apart in the auditorium. And there was a pew— You had to have a vacant pew between each of the occupants as well.

Then they began to allow a percentage based on your size of your auditorium. And they began then to allow non-vaxxed people to attend. But they had to sit in a secluded section of the auditorium. They could not be in with the general vaxxed populace. So for example, in one of the churches we attend, the large 2,000 seat auditorium, we would go for the services. We are unvaxxed.

We made the decision not to be vaccinated for a variety of reasons. We had done extensive research into the mRNA vaccination, in particular, and made a decision that we would not. Earlier we had contracted COVID and got excellent care in our local health facility. We were hospitalized for two weeks. And then, as a result of that, even our doctors recommended that we did not have to be vaxxed because of the natural immunity that we had coming out of the COVID experience.

However, again, back to the church, we would be able to attend but we would have to sit in a secluded area that was designated for non-vaxxed.

**Shawn Buckley**

I just want to make clear. So that was one church. But was that a government recommendation that they be segregated or was that a decision of the church?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

It was a strong recommendation. Whether or not it was actually a written mandate, I'm not sure, but it was strongly recommended by the provincial government.

**Shawn Buckley**

And then am I correct that two of the other churches excluded non-vaccinated persons for a period of time when it was not a government requirement?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Exactly. Yes, that is true.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

I continue with the progression. April 15th, 2022, Easter services: this was the first time when the provincial government then did allow churches to open to the general public. Some of the churches still at that point maintained the six-foot separation between parishioners and the vacant pew between the people within the auditorium.

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However, the provincial government did allow for full Easter services to be held April the 15th, 2022. And that was exactly two years and one month from the total lockdown.

So in effect the churches were, for all intents and purposes, shut down for over two years. Let me just state, this was widely broadcast internationally. We got a lot of international attention from Canada to the international world as a result of that. To the point— And of course, that also included the arrest of a number of well-known pastors in Canada; the confinement of these pastors, some of them actually in solitary confinement.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, Dr. Mack, I want to focus you a little bit off of the history and more on your personal experience.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Let me just make one statement.

It got to the point where the state of Ohio, which is a conservative state— But the state of Ohio actually drafted a bill that they took before the state senate as a result of the publicity that came out of the experience of the churches in Canada. And they voted on this petition, which was sent to the international court. As of that petition, which was overwhelmingly

voted in the positive by the state senate of Ohio, Canada is now on the international freedom of religion list as being a country that does not adhere to freedom of religion for their Christian community. That is how serious it became internationally: the exposé of everything that was taking place within the church community.

**Shawn Buckley**

I want to turn now to kind of your personal experience and then your thoughts on the effects of others.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Sure.

**Shawn Buckley**

For a period of time, once the churches were allowed to open, but the government was strongly recommending that only vaccinated persons be allowed, two of the three churches that you had been a vibrant part of basically excluded you and your wife.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes, yes. The regulations were such that we were not able to attend any of those churches.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right, but it wasn't government regulations. Because they were allowing people back in churches, but they were recommending that only vaccinated people be allowed. Right?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

That's right.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay. So two of the churches chose to exclude unvaccinated people.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

That's right.

**Shawn Buckley**

And I'm wondering— I'm asking you, what the effect of that was on you and your wife?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Thank you. Obviously, it excluded us from the fellowship with fellow believers. It did not allow us to participate in the normal function of a church community. We had to revert, as many hundreds of thousands of people did, to receiving our inspiration from church services online or through television.

Subsequently, there are many friends that we haven't been in touch with for several years. As a result of that, we have felt that we have not been able to contribute to the church community. And within our own family experience, we maintain a regular—what would I call it?—a worship experience ourselves. We have devotions together. But we obviously miss that opportunity of interaction with the fellow believers, interaction with the church communities, the opportunity of contributing to the church communities. And one of the real detriments is the decline of the church. And this really affects me in particular because I know the church well, nation-wide.

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I know the churches in the Greater Toronto Area very well.

**Shawn Buckley**

And what's happened to them?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Well, to be very honest, there are some who have had to close their doors. And there are actually— Some of the churches have had to sell their buildings because they simply could not maintain the expense of maintaining their buildings without the natural flow of income.

The pastors have gone through a great turmoil personally and their families. There are a number of pastors that I know of who have left the ministry as a result of that: because they felt like they no longer had the opportunity of ministry to their people.

Attendance has been greatly reduced, even since the opening of churches. Entire denominations that I'm in touch with have publicly stated that their attendance is less than 50 per cent of what it was prior to the lockdowns. The national average actually is— They are saying it is between 30 and 35 per cent in many of the denominations across Canada. Now, there are some very special and unique opportunities that independent churches in particular have been able to increase their attendance. And we're grateful for that. But, by and large, the average church has lost at least 50 per cent of their regular attendance during this lockdown period of time—some of them as much as reducing it to 30 to 35 per cent.

**Shawn Buckley**

So what do you think the long-term effects are going to be, then, on these churches being able to stay afloat and continue on?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Very good question. And a difficult one to answer because it depends largely on the leadership within the local church. It does depend somewhat as well on the denominational leadership and the vision that they have maintained. The more independent churches seemingly have been able— Many of them have been able to survive this fairly well and are progressing. Whether this is a movement away from the traditional church into a more independent church, that is a possibility.

But there's no question that the lockdown had a serious deleterious effect on the entire church community across Canada with, as I said, many churches having to close. They have

suffered financially. Whether or not they are going to be able to recoup that and move on and progress from here is a very, very serious question, particularly in the financial climate that we're in. With all of the effects of the federal regulations and so on, people do not have the kind of money that they once had to be able to contribute to charitable organizations.

**Shawn Buckley**

And I'm just going to cut you a little short because I think you've made the point that they're struggling financially.

Those are all the questions that I have for you, Dr. Mack. I mean, I have actually a whole bunch of more questions, but we don't have time for them. I'm just going to ask the commissioners if they have any questions of you. And they do, so just sit tight.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Sure.

**Commissioner Kaikkonen**

Hi, my question is around the church organization. You mentioned a cross-section of three churches. Who exactly made the decision to follow the mandates? Was it the board? Was it the leadership within the church? I'm just wondering whether it's maybe the minister and the elders. Who decided that—when the Ford government said that we had to follow these mandates—we simply had to follow the mandates, that we didn't have a choice?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Thank you. A good question. The churches that I'm familiar with, they actually set up a separate commission within the church structure

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that was designated as those responsible for the response to the COVID lockdown and to make judgment as to whether to open, when to open, according to the provincial regulations. So it did not fall primarily on the pastor themselves in the three churches that I am more closely associated with. And again, prior to this, they were very large churches. In fact, all three of them are considered to be the largest of their denomination and independent churches. All three of them are considered to be the largest churches in Canada. The pastors did appoint, or select, a group who were responsible for making those decisions. And they're the ones who got all of the regulations, maintained the church response to those regulations, and followed through with advising the congregation as to what those regulations were and how they would work with them.

**Commissioner Kaikkonen**

So just to continue on that thought. Was there any point where somebody within the congregation, whether it be the committee or somebody outside of the committee, decided that the mandates were not constitutionally accurate? Was there anybody who said, "No, I think we're just going to stay open." And how would that appear in terms of the congregation?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Not in those three churches. There were churches in the Toronto area that made that decision. The Province moved in with force and closed those churches down. There is video of literally police forces moving into those churches during their worship service and shutting down the service and actually manhandling the people out of the congregation. Particularly the pastors and taking them away, as being arrested.

So yes, there were churches—there was actually police presence that moved in, took charge of the church, shut the church down, and arrested the pastors.

**Commissioner Kaikkonen**

So in essence then the pastors were considered like criminals in the performance of their duties?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes, exactly. In fact, if I may divert just for a moment, one pastor that I have had communication with, actually he and his family came to Canada from a communist-controlled country in order to get away from the dictates of the communist country. He was put in prison, confined in solitary confinement for 40 days. He has publicly stated that the treatment that he received at the hands of the police in this situation is worse than what he experienced under communism. Now, that's his personal experience; it certainly isn't across the board, but it did degenerate to that degree.

**Commissioner Kaikkonen**

So then, when the mandates changed from being full closure to five in attendance, did the church push back and have five in attendance? Or did they just remain closed, each of these churches?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

No. The three churches remained closed.

**Commissioner Kaikkonen**

And the communication that came from government: Was there a response from each of these churches back to government to advocate for their constitutional freedom and right to practice religion or their faith, in whatever form that looks like?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yeah, that's an exceptionally wise and astute question. The response to the government, very honestly, has been less than biblical—if I may say so. The only public response that I know of that there has been, that was made public, is the response a year after lockdown

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by the Archbishop of the Catholic Diocese here in Toronto, who wrote a public letter condemning the Province's lockdown of the churches and making a personal appeal. The archbishop himself made a personal public appeal to the Premier to please open the churches—particularly for the Easter services—and to allow people to return to their

congregations. As a result, as I indicated, a month later the response was the province initiated, again, a complete lockdown of everything across the board.

**Commissioner Kaikkonen**

I have one final question. When it came to the Ford government and the Health Minister deciding that we were going to cancel Christmas, did the churches respond at that point to the Ford government and say that Christmas should continue?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Not officially. No, I am not aware of any official response from the church community. The churches basically went along with the mandate. And that's regrettable. But that is the case.

**Commissioner Kaikkonen**

Thank you.

**Shawn Buckley**

Actually, Dr. Mack, I have a question that came up during that questioning. My understanding and—where I'm going to go is, just to ask if you can comment on basically, the effect this would have on Christian believers, by just emphasizing some things that are important for them for assembly. But tell me, my understanding is that corporate worship is just so essential in the Christian church. So actually, Christians coming together, being together to worship. Is that a fair statement?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

That is one of the primary reasons for church. The very name church, *ecclesia*, indicates a coming together of the community in fellowship and worship and being together for a time of fellowship. I mean, that's the term. Not being together is totally contrary to Christian doctrine. It's totally contrary to biblical instruction. It's totally contrary to historic practice. And if I may add, it's totally contrary to the rights and privileges of the Canadian populace as outlined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedom*.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right, but just avoiding the legal thing, it's important for Christians to get together and worship. It's important for them to fellowship. It's important for them to pray for each other and actually help each other.

Isn't the church—the Christian church is meant to be a community where, basically, they love each other in a way that follows Christ's example.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

That is the primary function of the church. Absolutely. Without that fellowship, without that community, without that ability to be able to pray together, to worship together, to sing together, to hear the Word together, to fellowship together, to share their burdens, their heartaches, their joys, whatever. That is the function of church. Without that—

**Shawn Buckley**

Right. So do you have any insight, then, to the impact on then those Christians in Ontario that were not able to participate as a church for largely a two-year period?

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Yes. It's been devastating. People, well—have gone through all kinds of experiences. We have friends who have gone into deep depression as a result. They have lost their sense of community. They've lost their sense of being part of a meaningful relationship with others. Pastors who have literally just given up their life's goal, their mission in life as a result of it. But yes, it has had a devastating effect on the entire— And that's reflected in the response since the lockdown has been lifted to people going back. People have just, in many cases, given up on the whole concept of community and being together and have drifted into other areas of interest.

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But no, it's been devastating on the community at large and on the individuals to—to a serious degree, in many cases.

**Shawn Buckley**

And I'll stop you there, just because we're really short on time, unless there's any further council questions. So Dr. Mack, on behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, I sincerely thank you for giving us this insight and testifying today and sharing with us your thoughts on the effect on the church.

**Dr. Wesley Mack**

Thank you so much. And may I just take a moment to congratulate the National Council on doing this inquiry.

We applaud you for your efforts in making this a national response to this. And thank you for allowing us to express our individual personal situations. This is very meaningful to us personally, but also to everyone nationally. Thank you for doing this.

**Shawn Buckley**

Thank you, Dr. Mack.

[00:36:12]

***Final Review and Approval:*** Jodi Bruhn, August 16, 2023.

*The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an "intelligent verbatim" transcription method.*

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