

# CONVERGENCE

## Research Report: Churches and Vaccination

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While all churches worked overtime during the last 15 months to adapt existing ministries to new realities, some churches responded to the pandemic by addressing brand new issues. Possibly the most impactful of these is the movement of churches all over the US to promote and provide vaccination to underserved populations, including their own congregants. Lower vaccination rates in some communities due to access issues and vaccine hesitancy limit the possibility of reducing Covid-19 to manageable levels.<sup>12</sup>

Vaccine hesitancy in minority communities is understandable, due to a long American history of exploitative and negligent health experiences for BIPOC Americans. Fortunately, religious communities can help to address that mistrust. In a survey conducted by PRRI and Interfaith Youth Core, 44% of adults who attend religious services and were hesitant about vaccination and 14% of adults resistant to vaccination said that faith-based approaches would make them more likely to get vaccinated.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, those who attend religious services were more likely to be open to vaccination than those who seldom/never attend, with the exception of white evangelical protestants.

Access to vaccines is another concern. As many as 30 million American adults, many of whom are lower in income and living in socially vulnerable counties, are open to getting the vaccine but have had difficulty accessing the vaccine due to time, transit, and language limitations, among other barriers.<sup>4</sup> Faith communities can become access points for their neighbors to provide a convenient and trusted vaccination experience. Churches across the country have used existing networks, communication methods, and church facilities to increase vaccination in their communities in creative ways.

Those who have access to vaccines in an environment where they feel safe, and who don't have to coordinate online reservations, time off from work, and arrange transit to get to a mass vaccination site or even a retail drugstore, are more likely to get vaccinated. In Cleveland, several Black churches have hosted clinics in their church facilities, placing access to vaccination in the neighborhoods where people live and work. The Ohio Department of Health found that vaccination rates for Black residents in Cleveland and the surrounding area had fallen significantly behind those of white residents. An initiative coordinated by the Greater Cleveland Congregations interfaith coalition to address this disparity has seen significant turnout by Black residents at congregational vaccine clinics. Churches used phone and email to reach out to members and neighbors about the clinics.<sup>5</sup> Associations of local churches and even political mobilization groups like Souls to the Polls are using their existing mobilization networks in cities like Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee to target specific neighborhoods with vaccination clinics and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wecandothis.hhs.gov/vaccine-hesitancy-your-community>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://time.com/5957032/religion-covid-19-vaccine-hesitancy-survey/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/us/covid-vaccines-vulnerable.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ideastream.org/news/clevelands-black-churches-host-vaccine-clinics-to-protect-their-flock>

communications campaigns.<sup>6</sup> In Latino communities in California and Nebraska, churches hosted bilingual vaccine clinics in Catholic churches, church parking lots and migrant worker camps, meeting people where they are to increase access and spreading the word with translated flyers and on Spanish radio stations to build awareness.<sup>78</sup>

In other areas of the country, particularly in southern states, white residents are those less likely to be vaccinated.<sup>9</sup> Access issues also affect this population in rural areas, but vaccine hesitancy plays a larger role. Local pastors in white mainline and evangelical churches have taken on the challenge of hosting vaccine clinics and preaching the need to get the vaccine. One pastor in West Virginia used his own story of vaccine reluctance followed by experiencing dangerous side effects of Covid-19 to help persuade members of his church and community to get the vaccine.<sup>10</sup> A Baptist church in rural Tennessee offered vaccines 5 days a week to make it convenient for members and neighbors to get vaccinated.<sup>11</sup> The US Covid-19 Community Corps has members from many faiths and denominations and provides resources for congregations seeking to help vaccine acceptance in their community.

Supporting vaccination efforts is not always an easy sell for churches and their leaders. It can be challenging in politically divided congregations to advocate and support vaccination efforts. Already navigating fraught decisions about gathering face-to-face and wearing masks during church activities, pastors may fear that discussing the vaccine will create additional conflict in their congregation, or cost the church members or financial support. The stress of the past year has already driven many congregation leaders into burnout and considering leaving their profession.<sup>12</sup> In the face of such division and stress, some pastors will talk one on one with congregants about their vaccination experience, but are less likely to do so publicly or from the pulpit. However, for those who do speak up in worship, praying thankfully for vaccines and medical science can be a neutral ground.<sup>13</sup>

With vaccine hesitancy and access issues still critical in much of the US, how are you as a faith leader called to address this need?

How can your congregation play a role in increasing vaccination rates?

What other ways is your congregation called to respond to new needs in your community as we emerge from the pandemic?

Let us know if we can help you think through these issues with a coaching or consulting call.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tmj4.com/news/coronavirus/souls-to-the-polls-bringing-covid-19-vaccines-to-milwaukee-area-churches>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-04-17/baldwin-park-vaccine-clinic-catholic-church-how-it-came-together>

<sup>8</sup> <https://fox42kptm.com/news/local/south-omaha-vaccination-clinic-helps-migrants-get-the-coronavirus-shot>

<sup>9</sup> <https://wbhm.org/2021/using-pastors-and-pints-gulf-states-try-to-boost-covid-vaccination-rates-in-white-communities/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://fox4kc.com/news/pastor-goes-from-vaccine-hesitant-to-vaccine-advocate-holds-clinics-at-church/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wbir.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/vaccine/as-vaccination-rates-slow-tennessee-turns-to-faith-leaders-for-help/51-427ce6d0-7b39-4fc7-bd51-7228ae46188d>

<sup>12</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2021/05/07/for-some-pastors-the-past-year-was-a-sign-that-it-was-time-to-quit/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/may/white-evangelical-pastors-covid-vaccine-hesitancy-preach-ch.html>