

# The Dallas Morning News

## Many faith leaders in North Texas embracing their role in vaccine push

Houses of worship have hosted vaccine drives and urged members to get the shot, though a recent survey shows evangelicals remain the most vaccine hesitant.

By [BeLynn Hollers](#)

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Marian A Williams, co-coordinator for outreach at St. Luke Community United Methodist Church, pictured during a Project Unity COVID-19 vaccine clinic at Frazier Townhomes Community Center on Saturday, July 31, 2021, in Dallas. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

As the delta variant spreads in North Texas, faith groups are among the organizations pushing to get more people vaccinated. In recent weeks, churches, mosques and other places of worship have held vaccination drives to encourage their members to get the shot.

That kind of outreach is important because faith leaders can play a role in reducing vaccine hesitancy, according to a survey released Wednesday by the Public Religion Research Institute and Interfaith Youth Core. About one in five Americans said they looked to a religious leader for information before deciding whether to get the vaccine, the survey showed.

“Among groups with strong attachments to religion, faith-based approaches rival the effects of family members and healthcare providers,” the report stated.

Robert P. Jones, CEO and founder of PRRI, said that religious leaders are often closer to the ground and more trusted than governmental authorities.

“When [religious leaders] are sponsoring an event or whether they are offering educational resources or pop-up clinics they are already people who are embedded in a

local context that people trust because they have been there working on other types of issues prior to this,” he said.

The survey, updated from a similar one done in March, showed there are lingering differences in vaccine acceptance among different faiths and denominations. It was done in June, before the heightened alarm over the delta variant.

The survey showed that Jewish Americans are most likely to be vaccine acceptors, however their acceptance has not changed since March, whereas all other faith groups have seen at least a 10 percentage point increase.

White evangelical Protestants and Hispanic Protestants have both roughly increased 10 percentage points while Black Protestants have increased their acceptance of vaccines by 17 percentage points. White Catholics have increased their acceptance of vaccines by 11 percentage points while Hispanic Catholics have increased their acceptance by 24 percentage points.

Non-Christian religions saw a 14-percentage-point increase to vaccine acceptance since March.

# Mapping the need

Reasons for vaccine hesitancy among religious groups can vary. Some are concerned about whether the vaccine's ingredients meet their dietary restrictions or whether it aligns with their values.

But some concerns are not specific to religion — many faith groups include members who are undocumented or who have little access to health care.

**Dallas Area Interfaith** has been working to help stop the spread of COVID-19 since the very beginning of the pandemic. The group, which has members from all religious groups, particularly saw a need for vaccinations in immigrant congregations.

“They are already fearful, they have a fear of the government, our approach is that you reach people in the institution that they trust most, that is closest to them and their family and those are our congregations,” lead organizer Josephine Lopez Paul said.

DAI surveyed the areas hardest hit by COVID-19 and mapped out where their congregations were located. They found that the nine areas with high rates of infection in Dallas were within their congregations.

“The most need in our membership has been among Roman Catholics, especially those who are undocumented,” Paul said.

DAI so far has had vaccination events at four area churches where more than a thousand people total were vaccinated.

One of those was Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Oak Lawn. Father Mike Walsh, the parochial vicar of the church, noticed a need when the Sunday Spanish Masses at his church were filled with more than half of the congregants wearing masks. At the time, the mask recommendation had been dropped for most vaccinated individuals.

Parishioners of Holy Trinity and DAI took the initiative to set up the vaccination event on June 17, partnering with Baylor Scott & White Health and DAI. Baylor and the

members canvassed the area prior to the event to sign people up.

Although vaccines are easy to find in Dallas, Walsh knew that some of his parishioners would feel more comfortable getting vaccinated at church.

“We just know that immigrants especially will get vaccinated at church even though it’s very easy to find a free vaccine,” Walsh said. “They trust church.”

PRRI’s survey showed that while white Catholics have shown an increase in vaccine acceptance, the growth in acceptance among Hispanic Catholics was especially dramatic. Hispanic Catholics’ vaccine acceptance rose from 56% in March to 80% in June.

## **Barriers to vaccination**

The Islamic Center of Irving was in a community at the epicenter of Irving’s infections, Imam Saeed Purcell said. Throughout the pandemic, the center has provided masks, hand sanitizer and food delivery, and it continues to serve as a vaccine site.

“If we aren’t taking care of the local area, we aren’t doing it right. We need to be taking care of those closest to us,” Purcell said.

Purcell attended Zoom calls with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in order to better inform his community. During one of the calls a discussion of whether the vaccines are halal came up — an issue, Purcell said, he had not originally thought about. They are.

“Having to have that conversation was one of the aspects that I had to do,” Purcell said. “I had to be able to access that information to share with them, as well as a legal ruling within a religious standpoint around these vaccinations, and whether the ingredients were permissible or not.”

Purcell noted that there were many factors that contributed to distrust of the vaccines among some Islamic Center members.

“We have some who are very reluctant because we have some who are first generation in the country and their comfort level with vaccination is low,” he said.

Purcell said that his own wife was quite reluctant to get vaccinated despite all of the information he shared with the community. His wife finally decided to get vaccinated when the Saudi Arabian government issued a requirement that pilgrims to Mecca must be vaccinated.

“I wasn’t going to pressure her, I was going to try and convince her, but I wasn’t going to push her into doing something she wasn’t comfortable with,” Purcell said.

## **Faith and science**

Faith leaders also do outreach away from their houses of worship.

For pastor Richie Butler, it’s important to be in the community and listen to residents’ concerns.

Project Unity, the faith-led community organization that he founded, has held multiple community vaccination events, vaccinating over a thousand people, the most recent at Frazier Townhomes Community Center on Saturday.

“When the pandemic happened, we realized that this was going to impact communities of color disproportionately



more than other communities and that proved to be the case,” Butler said.

Marian Williams, co-outreach director at St. Luke UMC, canvasses neighborhoods before vaccination events.

“It’s our job to make sure we can say, ‘We went to this community and we went door to door giving out information.’ We have Spanish speakers alongside us, most of materials in Spanish, too, so we can make sure we blanket the community to be able to be better stewards of materials and resources,” Williams said.

Butler said that the key to reaching the unvaccinated is trust.

“It’s hard to get people vaccinated because it’s a population where they are hesitant, they’re afraid, they don’t trust,” Butler said. “So you need a trusted, respected partner or institution that they may turn to or are willing to give a shot.”

He hears their concerns without judgment.

“We have to meet people where they are. I literally had someone say ‘I understand that the vaccine, if I take it, will deform my body,’” Butler said.

He said he tries to give information based on science.

“There’s also a disconnection between faith and science. If I am a person of faith, how can I lean into science? My argument is that science and faith are not in conflict; they complement each other,” Butler said.

## **‘Part of the solution’**

While vaccine hesitancy among some white evangelical Christians has been widely reported, some faith leaders among this group are also trying to increase vaccine acceptance.

In PRRI’s March survey, while evangelicals remain least likely to say they would be vaccinated, vaccine acceptance numbers have risen from 45 percent in March to 56 percent now.

However, Jones, the PRRI CEO, cautioned that white evangelicals’ slower pace is still significant.

“That group makes up one in five Texans. It’s going to affect everyone.”

One high-profile evangelical pastor who has been outspoken in support of vaccination is Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Dallas, which partnered with County Judge Clay Jenkins to deliver vaccines to its congregation on May 16 with second doses on June 13.

“In our church, one reason we have decided that for their safety and for their health and because it is so important that we as a church are able to come back together and worship the lord corporately,” Jeffress said.

Jeffress said that though the church is “not pressuring” anyone to get the vaccine,” it is sending the message that getting vaccinated is crucial for returning the congregation to normal.

“We do continue to encourage people to get the vaccine and we stress the reason that we hope they will is because we care for them and we care for those around them,” he said.

Jones said evangelical pastors could do more to urge vaccination among their congregations, but noted the rise in vaccine acceptance among evangelicals as a positive sign.

“What that says to me is that we have seen more churches that instead of being a barrier have actually moved to being part of the solution,” he said.