

This Group of Christians are Lining Up to Take the Vaccine as Fast as They Can

COVID-19 vaccine refusal rates may be high among white evangelical Christians, but the International Mission Board—which deploys thousands of missionaries—is not hesitant about the shot.

The global agency of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical Protestant denomination in the U.S., announced this month it is requiring vaccinations for missionaries they're sending into the field amid the pandemic.

The IMB may be the first U.S. missionary agency known to have such a mandate, according to leaders in the field, as other faith groups approach the issue in a variety of ways including limiting where people can serve and making considerations for uneven global access to the vaccines.

"This is a very common-sense decision," said Ed Stetzer, a Southern Baptist who is dean of Mission, Ministry and Leadership at Wheaton College. "Mission-sending agencies from the United States have the real opportunity to be vaccinated, and they're going to places around the world that don't."

The IMB policy applies to both current and future missionaries as well as some staff members. Among the reasons it cited for the measure are health concerns and the fact that increasing numbers of countries are implementing their own vaccine requirements — some field personnel have reported needing to show proof to board airplanes and subways or enter restaurants and malls.

In a statement announcing the policy, IMB leaders acknowledged that it could be a deal-breaker for some people considering

missionary work or currently serving with the organization.

The Rev. Allen Nelson IV, a pastor who leads a Southern Baptist congregation in Arkansas, said he is not against vaccines but is completely opposed to mandates for missionaries.

“This is something that must be left up to a person’s own conscience, research and discussions with a doctor, as well as their particular ministry context,” Nelson told The Associated Press.

Among religious groups that have stopped short of issuing vaccine mandates is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, widely known as the Mormon church, which is giving unvaccinated missionaries assignments in their home countries.

The United Methodist Church, for its part, strongly encourages missionaries to get vaccinated but does not require it. That is partly because availability is not consistent around the world, according to Judy Chung, executive director of missionary services for the denomination’s Global Ministries.

“We have discussed how to promote vaccination without making a mandatory requirement,” Chung said, “because some may not have access to that yet.”

The denomination currently has about 240 full-time missionaries serving in 70 countries, and the most recently deployed cohort of about 40 has a vaccination rate around 80%.{eoa}

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