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NC pastor, Southern Baptist Convention push COVID vaccine while facing criticism

by DAVID CRARY AP National Writer
Tuesday, April 6th 2021



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The president of the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest evangelical denomination, posted a photo on Facebook last week of him getting the COVID-19 vaccine. It drew more than 1,100 comments — many of them voicing admiration for the Rev. J.D. Greear, and many others assailing him.

Some of the critics wondered if worshippers would now need "vaccine passports" to enter The Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina, where Greear is pastor. Others depicted the vaccines as satanic or unsafe, or suggested Greear was complicit in government propaganda.

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The divided reaction highlighted a phenomenon that has become increasingly apparent in recent polls and surveys: Vaccine skepticism is more widespread among white evangelicals than almost any other major bloc of Americans.

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In a March poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 40% of white evangelical Protestants said they likely won't get vaccinated, compared with 25% of all Americans, 28% of white mainline Protestants and 27% of nonwhite Protestants.

The findings have aroused concern even within evangelical circles. The National Association of Evangelicals, which represents more than 45,000 local churches, is part of a new coalition that will host events, work with media outlets and distribute various public messages to build trust among wary evangelicals.

"The pathway to ending the pandemic runs through the evangelical church," said Curtis Chang, a former pastor and missionary who founded ChristiansAndTheVaccine.com, the cornerstone of the new initiative. With white evangelicals comprising an estimated 20% of the U.S. population, resistance to vaccination by half of them would seriously hamper efforts to achieve herd immunity, Chang contends.

Many evangelical leaders have spoken in support of vaccinations, ranging from Dallas megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress to the Rev. Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptists' public policy arm.

Jeffress believes a majority of his congregation at First Baptist Dallas welcome the vaccines, while some have doubts about their safety or worry they have links to abortion. Jeffress is

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members raise questions about vaccinations.

"These vaccines are cause for evangelicals to celebrate and give thanks to God," he said via email. "I am confident that pastors and lay members alike want churches full again and vaccines will help all of us get there sooner rather than later."

Other evangelical pastors have been hesitant to take a public stance.

Aaron Harris, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Junction City, Kansas, hasn't discussed the vaccine from the pulpit or decided whether he'll be vaccinated.

"We don't believe that this is a scriptural issue; it is a personal issue," said Harris, who estimates that 50% of the congregation's older adults have been vaccinated, while fewer younger members plan to do so.

"We shouldn't live in fear of the virus because we do have a faith in eternity. However, just because we aren't in fear of it, where is the line of what we ought to do?" he asked. "I'm not going to lay down in front of a bunch of alligators to show my faith in that way."

Some Christians say they prefer to leave their fate in God's hands, rather than be vaccinated.

"We are going to go through times of trials and all kinds of awful things, but we still know where we are going at the end," said Ron Holloway, 75, of Forsyth, Missouri. "And heaven is so much better than here on earth. Why would we fight leaving here?"

John Elkins, pastor at Sovereign Grace Fellowship in Brazoria, Texas, about 50 miles south of Houston, said only one person in his SBC congregation of about 50 has been vaccinated.

"We're in a very libertarian area. There's a lot of hesitancy to anything that feels like it's coming from the federal government," said Elkins, who is also forgoing the vaccine, at least for now, along with his wife.

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Phillip Bethancourt, another Southern Baptist pastor in Texas, has encouraged his congregation at Central Church in College Station to get the vaccine and believes most will. The church hosted a vaccine drive for staff and volunteers at other churches; 217 people got their first doses March 22.

"Even people who might be skeptical from a medical standpoint can understand it from a missional standpoint," he said. "If it helps more people be able to serve at their church again, so more children can learn about Jesus, that's a good thing."

Bethancourt, a former vice president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, has spoken with congregants who spurn the vaccine and say they're unafraid of dying if that's God's will.

"The sentiment doesn't trouble me on the face of it, but there's inconsistency," he said. "We don't adopt that mentality in other aspects of our life, like not wearing a seat belt."

Chang said that as a former pastor, he understands why some whose congregations are mistrustful of the government and the vaccines muzzle themselves rather than risk backlash if they urge their flock to get vaccinated.

"There's going to be some courage required," he said.

His initiative includes a toolkit for pastors offering suggestions for how to address — within a Christian framework — the various concerns of skeptical evangelicals. They range from the extent of the vaccines' link to abortion to whether they represent "the mark of the beast," an ominous harbinger of the end times prophesized in the New Testament's Book of Revelation.

Partnering in the initiative is the Ad Council, known for iconic public service ad campaigns such as Smokey Bear and "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk."

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As the vaccines first became available, there was widespread concern that many Black Americans would be hesitant to take them due to historic, racism-related mistrust of government health initiatives. But recent surveys show Black Protestants are more open to vaccinations than white evangelicals.

"This pandemic has hit our community like a plague — and that's made our job easier," said Bishop Timothy Clarke of First Church of God, a Black evangelical church in Columbus, Ohio. "We've done a tremendous job of educating."

Associated Press writer Heather Hollingsworth in Kansas City, Missouri, contributed to this report.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

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Business booms for vendors as fans enjoy race weekend in Darlington

by Carlos Flores
Sunday, May 9th 2021



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was, said Darlington County native Frank Prenziss.

"It's our first time up here to the racetrack and I say the racing has been outstanding up here," said Ricky McFadden.

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emic,

but this past weekend they said it has bounced back stronger than ever.

Some who weren't there last year told ABC 15 that business was so good, they plan to not miss another race in Darlington again.

"A lot of people are starting to get back out and get back into it," said Terry Hammon.

"It is so good to be back in Darlington and to see the fans are coming to your city. This is very good for us. For all the vendors and for the race fans," said Bahman "Batman" Maalizadeh.

Prentiss is from Lamar, S.C., and said he comes to the track every race weekend. He believes having two races back at Darlington this year is not only huge for fans but for Darlington County.

"I love it having two races again on the schedule. Darlington needed that," said Prentiss.

Officials with the Darlington Raceway are hoping to open up the track to full capacity for September's race so even more people can enjoy the Track Too Tough to Tame.

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