

Study finds evangelical Christians were less likely to get COVID-19 vaccine after conversations with faith leaders

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Evangelical Christians who sought information from their religious leaders about getting the COVID-19 vaccine were significantly less

likely to be vaccinated, while evangelicals who spoke with a health care provider about the vaccine were more likely to be vaccinated, according to a new Virginia Commonwealth University-led study involving a survey of 531 self-identified evangelical Christians in the U.S.

"Evangelical Christians are among the most hesitant to get the COVID-19 [vaccine](#)," said Jeanine Guidry, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture in the College of Humanities and Sciences and director of the Media+Health Lab. "[We found] that contact with [health care providers](#) and clergy for this particular population absolutely do matter, and they seem to matter in opposite directions."

The study, "Between Healthcare Practitioners and Clergy: Evangelicals and COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy," will be published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. It explores differences in demographics, health beliefs and faith-based variables among evangelical Christians who had already received a COVID-19 vaccine, those who were not willing to get a COVID-19 vaccine, those who were undecided and those who were planning to get the vaccine.

The goal was to better understand vaccine beliefs and barriers of self-identified evangelicals and provide a foundation for future research aimed at improving vaccine uptake within that population.

"I'm hoping that this will help us not just create better messaging and create better trust relationships related to the COVID vaccine, but also to other vaccines," Guidry said. "We're still dealing with COVID, but we may be able to extrapolate this to the flu vaccine, the HPV vaccine, the MMR vaccine, to the next pandemic's vaccine."

Gina A. Zurlo, Ph.D., co-director of the Center for the Study of Global

Christianity at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and co-author of the study, said the study is "important because it puts facts behind a common refrain from the media over the past two years—that evangelical Christians are anti-vaccination."

"While it is true that generally, this group of people are vaccine hesitant, our study revealed more nuance related to age, family status and rural/urban dynamics," Zurlo said. "Furthermore, this research helps [religious leaders](#) understand just how influential they are not only in their parishioners' spiritual health, but also their physical health."

The study's findings that evangelical clergy are influential in vaccine decision-making presents an opportunity for positive change, the researchers wrote.

The findings showed that those who were receptive to faith-based vaccination promotion strategies were more likely to be vaccinated. That suggests, they wrote, that positive attitudes towards vaccination can be reinforced by trusted religious leaders who themselves acknowledge getting the vaccine and encourage others to do the same, and that clergy can be helpful in dealing with perceived barriers to getting the vaccines.

"We asked [study participants], would any of these affect your likelihood to get the vaccine: If your pastor said they were vaccinated? Or if your pastor encouraged vaccination from the pulpit? Or if you could get information about the vaccine in your church?" Guidry said. "Those faith-based variables made it more likely for people to say 'Yes, if those things were in place, that could affect my decision.'"

As an example of the importance of engaging religious leaders, Guidry highlighted the example of Facts and Faith Fridays, a partnership between VCU Massey Cancer Center and the African American faith-based community. Led by community leaders Rudene Mercer Haynes,

Rev. F. Todd Gray and VCU Massey Cancer Center Director Robert A. Winn, M.D., the program was founded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants work to enhance their communities through participating in ongoing dialogues around COVID-19 and vaccine distribution; systemic racism and health inequity; cancer risks and prevention; medical myths and mistrust; and health resources in urban and rural communities.

"Facts and Faith Fridays recognizes that faith leaders are trusted sources of information and can act as ambassadors for their communities," Guidry said. "This study leans into that, saying, 'OK, we have health care providers who—by and large—are a fairly trusted source of information. And we know that clergy are trusted sources of information. What we need to do is bring health care providers and clergy together.'"

The study is the latest research led by Guidry revealing insights into COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and COVID-19 misinformation. In February, a study led by Guidry found that cancer patients undergoing active treatment were more likely to believe misinformation related to COVID-19 than those without a history of cancer. Last fall, a study she led revealed that college students in seven countries were more likely to practice social distancing if they believed two things: that it would protect against COVID-19 and that it was an action they could easily carry out.

"We still lose too many people to COVID every single day," Guidry said. "Anything I can do to help make it easier for people to protect themselves, that's what I want to do."

More information: Jeanine P. D. Guidry et al, Between Healthcare Practitioners and Clergy: Evangelicals and COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph191711120](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191711120)

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