

Building Trust and Equity through Vaccinations



A Conversation with Rev. Dr. J. Lawrence Turner and Dr. Altha Stewart

In a February 26, 2021 webinar, Rev. Dr. J. Lawrence Turner, senior pastor at Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, and Dr. Altha Stewart, associate professor and chief of social and community psychiatry at University of Tennessee Health Sciences, offered reflections and recommendations on the role of faith leaders in guiding people to truth that builds trust in an atmosphere of uncertainty and misinformation about vaccines. Here are some highlights.

How mRNA vaccines work: The m stands for messenger. The vaccine shows your immune system a picture of the virus with a message that says, “If you see this, kill it!” Then the message disappears and your immune system remembers what to do. It makes antibodies that protect you by destroying the virus if it enters your body. Scientists have been working on this technology for well over a decade, including Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett, a young Black scientist leading a breakthrough vaccine team at the National Institutes of Health.

“Vaccine acceptance” vs. “Vaccine hesitancy”: Language makes a difference. Vaccine hesitancy focuses on fears and worries. Vaccine acceptance when it’s available focuses on accurate information and better access. The reasons it is hard to make and keep an appointment are high as a mountain—technology, transportation, jobs, families, weather. We have to chip away at the mountain and bring the vaccine into neighborhoods.

The role of faith leaders: Faith is attached to service in keeping the flock healthy. Anything that has to do with health and healthy lifestyle is in the purview of the faith community. This is a time when we have to go all out in helping people get as much information as they need. Many people who hesitate to take the vaccine believe they don’t have enough information about it. We can help with that by being trustworthy sources. Whatever their decision, at least it will be based on information they trust.

Equity for people of color: For the first time, African Americans were ethically represented in vaccine research. However, they still have been disproportionately represented among those infected, severely ill, and lost. Faith leaders have an opportunity—a responsibility—to promote information and access so that vaccines become a way to bridge the inequity of the past with equity of the future. As we begin to see equity as part of our community of faith, we begin to see progress.

The full recording of this webinar on which this material is based is available at ChurchHealth.org/fce