

Vaccinations

Faith that Changed Public Health History

Cotton Mather, a Puritan minister in Boston, knew well the force of a ravaging infectious disease. In 1713, his wife, newborn twins, and two-year-old daughter all died from measles. Mather also lived through several waves of small pox.

From an enslaved African, Mather heard about a procedure the man claimed he had undergone while still in Africa. He described inoculation and said that among his people, no one died from small pox anymore. Mather did his homework, worked with Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, and then in 1721 used his pulpit and popularity to urge inoculation.

That year more than half of Boston's 10,000 residents contracted small pox. Mather could not sit by and not try to stop the scourge. In the end, 14 percent of people who caught small pox but were *not* inoculated died. Only 2 percent who were inoculated died.

Immunizations have evolved considerably in the last 400 years to be a safe and effective public health tool. The Centers for Disease Control puts immunization at the top of the list of ten great public health achievements of the twentieth century. Small pox has been eradicated, and because of immunizations polio, measles, mumps, and other diseases that used to run rampant are greatly reduced threats.

And it all started with a curious pastor who was not afraid of listening well to someone without power and partnering with a person of science.

The challenge now is to ask ourselves how our faith can grow and expand so that we hear the call of God in our own century as we have this new tool of a vaccine for COVID-19 at our disposal.

What do we learn from Cotton Mather?

1. By being curious we can learn what we need to help others.
2. Being committed to public health expresses our faith.
3. God calls us to use our voices and influence for healing.
4. We can find practical actions that take the lead.
5. When we care for one another with vaccines, we honor God.

For more information on health ministry resources, contact fce@churchhealth.org or visit www.ChurchHealth.org/fce/