



Vaccines and vaccination

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is having a huge global impact on the well-being of communities. While the impact varies from country to country, millions of people have lost family members, friends or neighbours as a result of the virus. Restrictions have had significant social and economic impacts, with the vulnerable and marginalised in communities generally suffering the most.

Sickness and suffering are not what God intended for creation, so the development of Covid-19 vaccines is seen by Tearfund and many others as a breakthrough in the struggle against the disease that we can celebrate. If everyone has access to vaccination against Covid-19 this will provide a pathway to recovery from the many direct and indirect impacts of the disease.

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Why this resource?

Decisions that each of us make about the Covid-19 vaccines will have implications for our wider community. However, conflicting information about the vaccines is eroding trust and creating confusion.

This resource helps church leaders and Christian organisations consider how they can apply their faith in a practical way and use their influence in society to:

- reduce misinformation and confusion
- build a good understanding of, and trust in, the Covid-19 vaccines
- help shape and support vaccination programmes that are good for society, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised.

The aim of this resource is to provide general guidance based on trustworthy sources of information and previous experience. It should be adapted as needed for use in different cultural and faith contexts. Within the core resource there are links that lead to more in-depth information, guidance and tools, allowing readers to go deeper into particular issues if they want to. When adapting the resource for local contexts, links to local sources of trustworthy information should be provided where possible.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for church leaders and organisations working with the church and other faith groups at national and local level.

Tearfund's position on Covid-19 vaccines

Having assessed a variety of reliable sources and theological views, Tearfund believes that for the vast majority of people, having one of the approved Covid-19 vaccines is a safe choice. Having an approved vaccine is important to protect yourself, and to protect others around you.

There is **no reliable evidence** to back up common myths that suggest the vaccines contain microchips, alter your DNA, contain any fetal cells or will cause you to catch Covid-19.



Going deeper: Further information on Covid-19 vaccines

[Covid-19 vaccines: Questions and answers](#)

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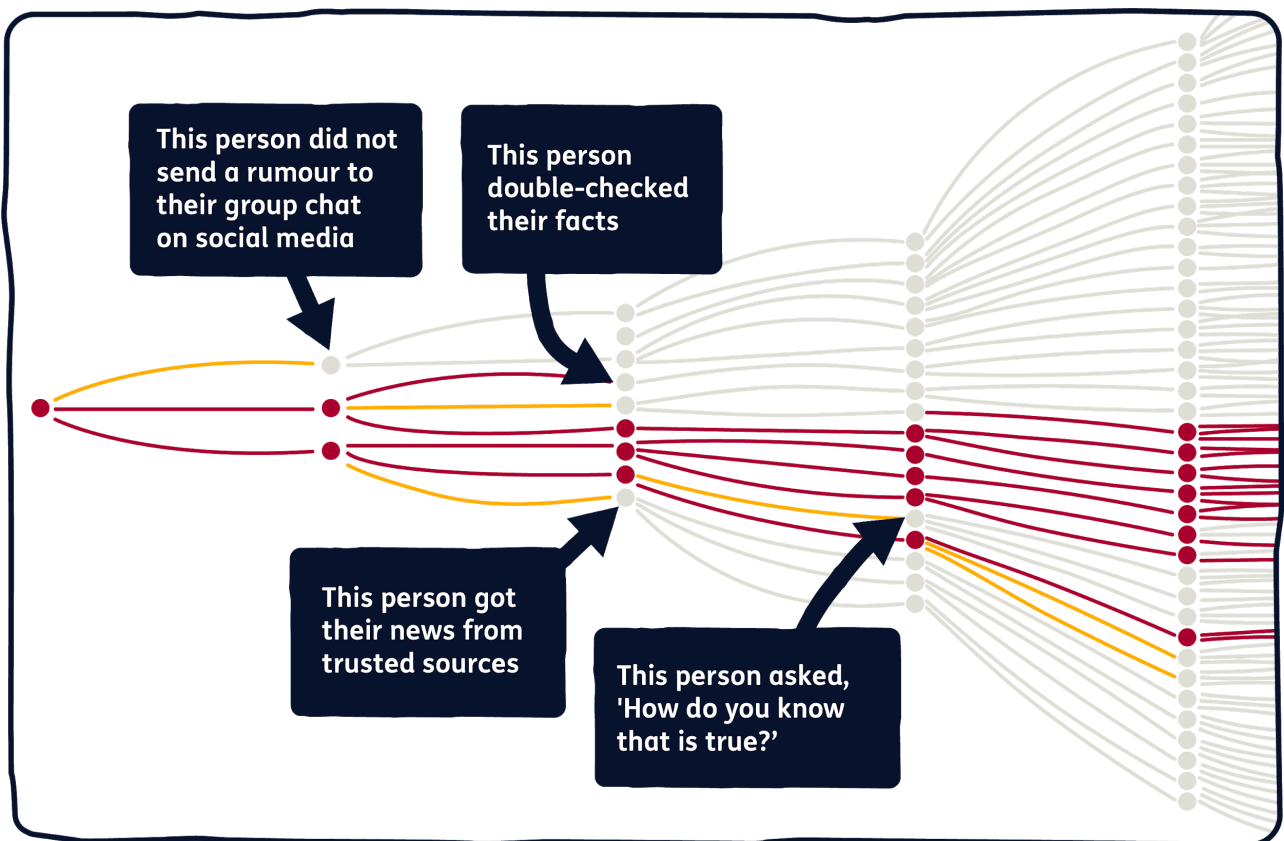
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How to recognise trustworthy information

We are exposed to information about the Covid-19 vaccines from many sources. We do not need to know everything about them, but it is important that we base our opinions on trustworthy sources of information. This will help us to make decisions that benefit our own lives, and the lives of those around us.



The way that we respond to information should be shaped by our faith. God calls us to speak truthfully (Psalm 15:2–3). When giving guidance on personal behaviour and the importance of sharing accurate information, the book of Leviticus says: ‘ “Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour’s life” ’ (Leviticus 19:16).



How misinformation can spread quickly, and how this can be stopped.

We can reduce the rapid spread of false information by finding out if the information we have received is true. If we are not sure it is true, we should not pass it on to others. Adapted from a World Health Organization illustration (www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/let-s-flatten-the-infodemic-curve)

To help decide if the information you read or hear can be trusted, ask yourself these six questions.

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1. What is the source? If the information came from a website, do not automatically assume that it is trustworthy. Look at the organisation's contact details, values and aims. If the information is copied from a social media page, find out where it came from.
2. Have you read more than the headline? Headlines are often exaggerated to encourage more people to read an article. Read the whole article and then ask yourself if the headline is accurate.
3. Who is the author? Find out if the author is real and credible. Credible sources back up their claims with reliable evidence. Check various trusted sources to see if they say the same thing.
4. When was it written? New research information is being published regularly on the Covid-19 vaccines. Older news might now be out of date and no longer relevant.
5. Are you biased? Think about whether your own assumptions might be affecting your judgement. Be aware that Facebook and Google filter what they suggest we look at based on the types of posts we have read in the past, so they are not balanced sources of information.
6. If still in doubt, can you consult other trustworthy sources? If you know people who have in-depth knowledge about the Covid-19 vaccines from multiple reliable sources, ask them what they think.

Why should the church get involved?

The church is the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). It is the body of people God has entrusted to serve in God's mission and purpose. Jesus wants people to enjoy 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10 GNT) and his ministry demonstrates his concern for every aspect of people's lives, including their physical and mental well-being (Matthew 4:23). The leaders of the early church also reflected this in their ministries (Acts 5:16).

Diseases caused by viruses have cast shadows over the world for thousands of years, causing uncertainty, fear and suffering, particularly among the vulnerable and those living in poverty. However, since the discovery of the smallpox vaccine over 200 years ago, the support of church leaders for vaccines has helped shine light into this darkness, alleviating suffering and saving millions of lives.

The influence of faith leaders

Recent research in Asia and Africa suggests that endorsement by religious leaders is vital for the promotion of accurate health information and community acceptance of Covid-19 vaccines.¹

The World Health Organization also recognises that when faith leaders share health information it is more likely to be accepted than from other sources.²

¹ www.wvi.org/newsroom/coronavirus-health-crisis/faith-leaders-must-play-key-role-covid-19-vaccine-roll-out

² https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331707/WHO-2019-nCoV-Religious_Leaders-2020.1-eng.pdf

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The logo for Tearfund, featuring the word "tearfund" in white lowercase letters on a blue rectangular background.

Collaboration between faiths

By working together, Christian and Muslim leaders played a significant role in stopping the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa in 2013–15. They agreed to focus on the issues that united them against the virus. On one occasion more than 70 religious leaders were vaccinated in public to demonstrate by example that the negative rumours about the Ebola vaccine were false.



Going deeper: Further learning on collaboration between faith leaders

See [Faith response to Covid-19: Taking lessons from the Ebola response into Covid-19](#)

What can churches do?

This section discusses how churches can:

- raise awareness of Covid-19 vaccines
- influence government Covid-19 vaccination policies
- support Covid-19 vaccination at community level.

Churches can raise awareness of Covid-19 vaccines

Bringing people together to share information

Church denominations or networks can use their influence to bring together groups of church leaders with respected medical experts and theologians who can share information and answer questions, particularly regarding common rumours about the vaccines.

Such gatherings can be held face-to-face (physical distancing rules permitting) or virtually via the internet. In some contexts, especially when planning the first meeting of this type, it can be helpful to only invite a small number of influential church leaders to enable more open discussion. These leaders can then share information with others after the gathering.

Consider forming a core group of church leaders, medical experts and theologians who can stay in regular contact to discuss new information and rumours, and to address any new myths that might be circulating.

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📷 A group of Church leaders meeting in Nigeria: Photo: Andrew Philip/Tearfund

Wider information sharing

Following discussions between church leaders, medical experts and theologians, church leaders can play an active role in sharing trustworthy information and addressing misconceptions circulating in their communities or congregations.

Until everyone in a community is vaccinated, the importance of continuing to follow Covid-19 safety guidelines (such as physical distancing, wearing masks and handwashing) should be emphasised.

Agreed information about the Covid-19 vaccines should be circulated in forms that local pastors can share in sermons and other church and community gatherings.

This could include:

- video or audio interviews with meeting participants summarising the most important points discussed
- a brief statement describing the common understanding reached on the vaccines
- other information about the vaccines from trustworthy sources, for example posters.

Consider translating the information into local languages and developing a mix of written, visual and audio materials to ensure as many people can access the information as possible.

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Challenging misinformation in Zambia

Early in 2021, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ) was concerned about misinformation that was circulating on the Covid-19 vaccines, and how the church could use its influence when the country eventually received supplies of approved vaccines.

With Tearfund's support, EFZ organised a gathering of denomination leaders together with a respected theologian and a respected Christian medical scientist experienced in vaccines.

The scientist set out facts on the vaccines and, together with the theologian, helped the church leaders to understand that the common myths about the vaccine were untrue.

The denominational leaders agreed next steps which included:

- developing an agreed statement on the Covid-19 vaccines, aiming to reach senior church leaders in the provinces to address common vaccine myths at a local level
- holding EFZ-facilitated conversations between church leaders and the Minister of Health to enable the church to influence the government's Covid-19 vaccination plans.

Churches can influence government Covid-19 vaccine policies



There are many stories in the Bible about people who engaged in advocacy. Men and women who loved God, spoke out against injustice, modelled an alternative society, challenged the misuse of power, confronted people in authority, influenced decision-makers, prayed for God to intervene and persuasively brought about change in society.

In addition to Jesus, some of the most obvious advocates in the Bible are:

- Moses and Aaron, who were sent by God to ask Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery
- Nehemiah, who confronted Jews in positions of power who were treating vulnerable people unjustly (Nehemiah 5:1–13)
- Esther, who advocated before the king to save her ethnic group from mass murder.

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Going deeper: Further Bible study and theology resources

[Bible study on our responsibility to stand up for the rights of other people](#)

[Prayer and Bible study resources for Covid-19](#)

[‘What’s my part?’ A series of Bible studies to help us find our place in God’s mission](#)

An opportunity not to be missed

As Covid-19 vaccines become increasingly available, national governments will develop their own vaccination policies. The church can play an important role in influencing the development and implementation of fair and just policies that adequately take into account people who are the most vulnerable in their communities.

Where possible, church leaders should look for opportunities to influence the development of vaccination policies right from the beginning of the process. This may include offers of support and/or direct participation in groups that are making decisions about the vaccines. The early involvement of church and other faith leaders will help to avoid repeating mistakes made in West Africa when the significant influence of faith leaders was not mobilised until later in the Ebola outbreak.

This could be a fairly short period of potential influence, so church leaders need to act quickly to avoid missing the opportunity.

What are the advocacy issues?

- [Access and reach of vaccines provided by COVAX](#). The COVAX Facility was established by the World Health Organization and other international partners. It aims to ensure the equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccines internationally, irrespective of a country’s income level. In the first phase of allocation, doses will be made available to all participating countries until they can cover 20 per cent of their population. The groups prioritised should normally be health workers, older adults and people with serious health conditions. If there is enough funding, further vaccines might be made available to some countries, prioritising those with vulnerable populations and limited health care systems. An important focus of advocacy should be on influencing governments to ensure that vaccines obtained through the COVAX Facility are distributed and used in the way that is intended under this scheme.

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COVAX phase 1 priority groups

COVAX countries initially receive vaccinations for 20 per cent of the population. This should be enough to immunise the following priority groups:



Health care workers



Older adults



People with serious health conditions

- Policy for other people not reached by vaccines provided by COVAX. Governments should develop policies to allow everyone in the population to have access to Covid-19 vaccines. Some countries are considering making the vaccines available under a privatised service but this risks the vaccines being inaccessible for many groups due to the price that would be charged. Fair and just Covid-19 vaccination programmes should ensure no-one is left out due to factors that often cause exclusion in society such as ethnicity, language, religion, age, gender, socio-economic status, disability or limited access to communications technology such as the internet.
- Effective communication of vaccination policy. Government policy and implementation plans should be communicated and explained effectively, ensuring information reaches and is understood by everyone. Communication approaches should particularly consider how to reach people with different types of disabilities and levels of education, using a variety of communication approaches including audio messages, sign language, pictures and local translations.
- Transparent monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Mechanisms should be in place to encourage community feedback on the implementation of vaccination policy, and for corrective action to be taken if policy is not being applied as it should be.
- Behind the pandemic. There are other life-threatening health and economic challenges that continue to affect people in addition to Covid-19. These should not be forgotten while governments implement their Covid-19 vaccination plans.

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Planning collaboratively to raise a strong voice

Churches can increase the strength of their voice by working together in a representative church network, such as an evangelical alliance.

In addition, where possible, the church should join with leaders of other faiths and civil society groups to present their case with a single voice and unified message. Working with like-minded, respected experts in themes relating to the vaccines and people's access to them can also help strengthen the case that the collaborating groups are making.

Taking action

Working collaboratively, churches can present their position to governments by:

- writing letters, making phone calls and meeting with government decision-makers
- mobilising people to take part in advocacy activities such as street marches, petitions or public meetings
- working with the media to raise public and government awareness.

The church can offer to support the implementation of good government policy by raising community awareness and providing feedback on policy implementation through agreed monitoring and accountability mechanisms.



📷 Church leaders in the United Methodist Church of Abbe broukoi, Cote D'Ivoire. Photo: Stephen German/Tearfund

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Going deeper: Further information and advocacy resources

Understanding COVAX: [COVAX explained webpage](#); [Vaccine Alliance video](#)

The People's Vaccine Alliance: [What is it?](#); [People's Vaccine Alliance FAQs](#)

Tearfund's *Reveal* tools: [Advocacy: Communicating with people in power](#) and [Making the most of meetings with decision-makers](#)

[Tearfund's Advocacy toolkit](#)



Advocating for vaccine access for migrants in Latin America

In 2020, inspired by Leviticus 19:33–34, churches and Christian organisations across Latin America came together in a campaign to promote the rights of migrants and refugees. Migrants typically face stigma and generally do not have legal status in the countries where they now live, excluding them from many services the host country governments provide.

When Covid-19 spread to the region, the campaign advocated for migrants to be considered with impartiality when governments decide who to prioritise in vaccination plans.

Some key principles being applied by the campaign include:

- focusing on areas of agreement rather than disagreement
- communicating a very clear Biblical mandate to justify what they are doing
- using existing campaign relationships to address new and emerging Covid-19 issues
- working collaboratively with secular groups that have shared aims (eg with specialists in humanitarian law and government policy).

Churches can support Covid-19 vaccination at community level

Ensure nobody misses out on important information

The implementation of a national Covid-19 vaccination plan provides churches with excellent practical opportunities to love their neighbours by supporting those who are most vulnerable in their communities.

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As well as raising awareness of vaccination plans among their own congregations, church leaders can collaborate with local health services and other community groups to support awareness-raising in the wider community.

It is important to assess which people in a community are at risk of not receiving or not understanding important information about the vaccine programme. If others are carrying out this assessment, church leaders should ask to participate. People identified by the assessment might include:

- the elderly
- people living with physical disabilities
- people living with mental health conditions
- those with a low socio-economic status or who are part of a low caste
- those with low literacy
- people from minority faiths and ethnic groups
- migrants and displaced people
- people at risk of abuse
- those who may be marginalised due to their sexual orientation or gender identity
- anyone else who is marginalised, might be rarely seen or suffers from stigma and discrimination.

Local support groups might already exist for some specific groups of vulnerable people and, if so, church leaders or congregation members should try to coordinate with them.

The support groups are well placed to organise discussions about the vaccines in physically distanced settings, or online if this is possible for all group members. Such discussions will allow information to be shared in appropriate ways and in local languages. They will also provide opportunities to answer specific questions raised by people who might otherwise struggle to access or understand important information.

Support group discussions can be useful for checking that the right people are being offered the vaccine and, if not, to present an evidence-based case to local authorities that the vaccination list needs to be amended.

Some countries might require people to register in advance if they wish to be vaccinated. It is important to ensure that all vulnerable people in priority groups are aware of such requirements and have access to any help they need to complete the registration process.

Ensure priority groups can access vaccination services

Church members can work together with others in the community to make sure all those prioritised to receive vaccines are able to travel to and from the locations where vaccinations are being given. Vulnerable people might need someone to stay with them during the vaccination to help them understand and respond to questions health workers will ask. Remember to follow up-to-date guidance on the wearing of masks and handwashing.

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📷 Helping an elderly man get to a medical centre in Nepal. Photo: Steve Collins/Tearfund

If the vaccine requires two doses to be effective, similar support might be needed again when the person returns to receive their second dose.

Support monitoring and transparency

Church leaders should know how to provide feedback on the implementation of the vaccination programme. If this information is not available, they should coordinate with other community leaders to lobby their local authorities for details. Communities have a right to know how any feedback system should work, including the way authorities plan to respond and inform communities of any corrective action they have taken.

National and local church leaders should be coordinating during this period through their denominational or other network structures. Information on how the vaccination programme is being implemented can flow both ways, not just communicating issues of concern but also points for celebration. National church leaders can use their relationships and channels of communication to provide feedback to central government, and to lobby for corrective action if this is needed.



Going deeper: Further resources related to community support

[Footsteps 112 – Communicable diseases](#)

[Footsteps 113 – Mental health and well-being](#)

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Advice on adapting this resource for local contexts

Adaptation, contextualisation and translation of this resource into local languages is strongly encouraged to ensure it is relevant and accessible to local audiences.

It can be helpful to:

- keep the language in translations clear and appropriate for the intended audience
- provide further details on any particular issues that are relevant in your local context
- provide links to further information on the Covid-19 vaccines developed by trustworthy organisations from your context, including details of relevant government departments or other authorities, local contact numbers or websites
- change images and illustrations if needed to make them more representative of your context.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following groups of people in Tearfund who helped shape the structure and content of this resource through the initial consultation process and feedback on drafts: Cluster Leads, Country Directors in the Latin America & Caribbean Cluster and East & Central Africa Cluster, the Thematic Support team (especially the Church & Development Unit, the Gender & Protection Unit and the Quality, Accountability & Learning Unit), the Humanitarian & Resilience team, the Theology & Network Engagement team, and the Communications for Development team.

Special thanks to Loida Carriel, Anne Mumbi and Chalwe Nyirenda who provided the case studies from Latin America and Zambia, and to Lucy Gardner and Andrew Philip for their guidance throughout the process of developing the resource.

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