

Christians' long support for vaccines

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This past summer, [a judge in New York City ruled against three families](#) who filed suit against the public school system, claiming their right to free exercise of religion was violated when their unvaccinated children were barred from school. In another case last year, [a measles outbreak sickened unvaccinated members of a large church in Texas](#), drawing claims the church had discouraged vaccinations. The church later hosted vaccination clinics, and a spokesman denied the church had ever advised against vaccines.

These public episodes seemingly pit immunization against faith. Yet Christians have a long history of promoting vaccines.

In fact, religious leaders have often been the pioneers of vaccinations. Famous 17th-century Massachusetts preacher Cotton Mather had himself and his congregation inoculated against smallpox when it was still very controversial. In the early 1800s, Iceland and Sweden made the clergy responsible for vaccinations.

In some cases, religion is used as an excuse not to vaccinate when the cause is actually misplaced fear of vaccine side effects. In politically unstable countries, immunization campaigns are sometimes thwarted by groups lashing out at Western nations. Tragically, children become the victims in these cases, suffering paralysis from polio or death from measles.

Instead of standing in the way of immunization, many faith-based organizations are helping to reach children who would otherwise miss out on vaccines. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 35 percent of the 515 health zones in the nation are co-managed by faith-based organizations, especially Catholic and Protestant churches. These church-sponsored groups transport vaccines, train health workers, provide vaccinations, and serve as key players in national immunization campaigns.

The DR Congo is not unusual in this respect. In many rural areas of Africa, Christian missionaries began providing formal health care long before government or other private health-care systems, and Christian organizations remain important providers of care today. World Health Organization studies have shown that faith-based health facilities provide anywhere from 25 to 50 percent or more of health care in some African nations.

Although the world has experienced a tremendous decline in childhood mortality over the last two decades, [we still lose 1.5 million children each year](#) to diseases that can be prevented with vaccines. We know that vaccines are one of the most cost-effective health interventions we can make to save the lives of children. To reach even more children, Christian organizations have recently begun collaborating with [Gavi](#), the Vaccine Alliance, a global institution supporting expanded immunization. Since its creation in 2000, Gavi has helped immunize hundreds of millions of children in the world's poorest countries, saving more than 6 million lives.

Christians have quietly been part of the immunization success story for years, and faith communities already play an important role in reaching the underserved with vaccines. It's time to speak up to dispel myths that vaccines are harmful, and in support of continued U.S. support for immunization programs. No child should have to die of a disease we can prevent.