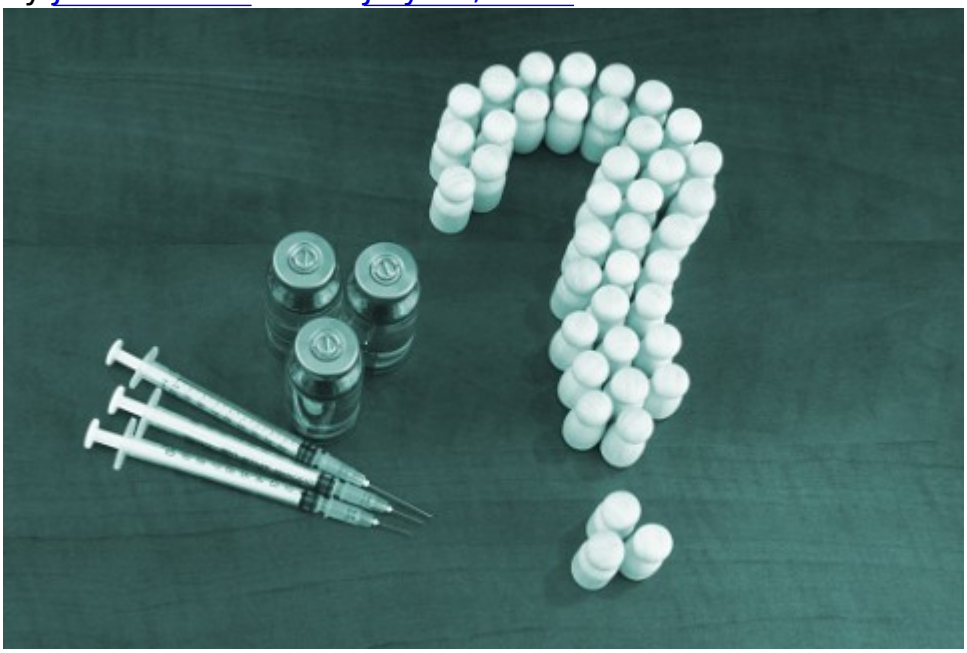
Amish put faith in God’s will and herd immunity over vaccine

by John Seewer in the July 28, 2021 issue



(Photo © Valerii Evlakhov/iStock/Getty)

When health-care leaders in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country began laying out a strategy to distribute COVID-19 vaccines, they knew it would be a tough sell with the Amish, who tend to be wary of preventive shots and government intervention.

Early on, they posted flyers at farm supply stores and at auctions where the Amish sell handmade furniture and quilts. They sought advice from members of the deeply religious and conservative sect, who told them not to be pushy. And they asked three newspapers widely read by the Amish to publish ads promoting the vaccine. Two refused.

By May, two rural vaccination clinics had opened at a fire station and a social services center, both familiar places to the Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. During the first six weeks, 400 people showed up. Only 12 were Amish.

The vaccination drive is lagging far behind in many Amish communities across the United States, following a wave of virus outbreaks that swept through them during the past year. In Ohio’s Holmes County, home to the nation’s largest concentration

of Amish, just 14 percent of the county's overall population is fully vaccinated.

While their religious beliefs don't forbid them to get vaccines, the Amish are generally less likely to be vaccinated for preventable diseases such as measles and whooping cough. Though vaccine acceptance varies by church district, the Amish often rely on family tradition and advice from church leaders, and a core part of their Christian faith is accepting God's will in times of illness or death.

Many think they don't need the COVID-19 vaccine now because they've already gotten sick and believe their communities have reached herd immunity, according to health-care providers in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. The three states are home to nearly two-thirds of the estimated 345,000 Amish in the United States.

"That's the number one reason we hear," said Alice Yoder, executive director of community health at Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health, a network of hospitals and clinics.

Experts say the low vaccination rates are a reflection of both the nature of the Amish and the general vaccine hesitancy found in many rural parts of the country.

Because many Amish work and shop alongside their neighbors and hire them as drivers, they hear the skepticism,

the worries about side effects, and the misinformation surrounding the vaccine from the "English," or non-Amish, world around them even though they shun most modern conveniences.

"They're not getting that from the media. They're not watching TV or reading it on the internet. They're getting it from their English neighbors," said Donald Kraybill, a leading expert on the Amish. "In many ways, they are simply reflecting rural America and the same attitudes."

In one case, an anti-vaccine group took out a full-page newspaper ad showing a smashed buggy with the words, "Vaccines can have unintended consequences."

Public health officials trying to combat the confusion and hesitancy have put up billboards where the Amish travel by horse and buggy, sent letters to bishops, and offered to take the vaccines into their homes and workplaces, all without much success.

“It’s not due to lack of effort,” said Michael Derr, the health commissioner in Holmes County, Ohio. “But this thing is so politically charged.”

Some health clinics that serve the Amish are hesitant to push the issue for fear of driving them away from getting blood pressure checks and routine exams.

During the first months of the pandemic, the Amish followed social distancing guidelines and stopped gathering for church and funerals, said Steven Nolt, a scholar at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania.

But when non-Amish neighbors and local elected officials began pushing back against state and federal mandates, they resumed the gatherings, he said. What followed was a surge of outbreaks last summer, Nolt said.

Most now say they have already had the virus and don’t see a need to get vaccinated, said Mark Raber, who is Amish and a member of a settlement in Daviess County, Indiana, which has one of the state’s lowest vaccination rates.

“As long as everything stays the same, I don’t think I'll get it,” he said.

Changing those opinions will require building trusting relationships with the Amish, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a report looking at outbreaks in Amish communities last year.

What won’t work, health-care providers say, is bombarding the Amish with statistics and vaccine lotteries—because of their general distrust and rejection of government help.

Trevor Thain, who owns Topeka Pharmacy in Northern Indiana, where there are 25,000 Amish, worked with the CDC on bridging communication gaps in LaGrange County, where just 18 percent of all residents are fully vaccinated.

Since the vaccine became available, they’ve immunized 4,200 people—perhaps only 20 of them Amish, he said.

Earlier this summer, he put out flyers offering private appointments and doses dispensed inside homes. Only a few Amish people responded, Thain said, including one who came with a request: “Don’t tell my family.” —Associated Press