

Vaccines Save Lives

How Faith Groups Can Help



Imagine a world without vaccines. For so many parents, vaccines have become a routine part of life, as shots are logged each time they bring their child to the doctor. Every year, vaccines save the lives of **2.5 million children**; children who would not see their first day of school without them. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that every child receive **10 vaccines** to fight diseases such as measles, polio, whooping cough, as well as new vaccines against the worst forms of the two biggest child killers, pneumonia and diarrhea.

Unfortunately, not all children are being reached. According to the WHO, **1.5 million children** under five years of age die each year from diseases that can be prevented with vaccines. **Twenty percent of children** in the world are not receiving the vaccines they need. Many of these children are in hard-to-reach rural areas, urban slums or areas shattered by conflicts; and parents are often unaware of the necessity and availability of vaccines. We *can* reach those children with the help of faith groups.

Christians Respond

Sylvia, a 27-year-old mother of three in Uganda, was aware of vaccines but did not fully understand their importance until an outreach worker from the nonprofit **Bishop Masereka Christian Foundation (BMCF)** came to her village and explained that her children were at risk of life-threatening disease that could be prevented by a vaccine. Now she makes sure her children are fully immunized. “Today I learned about a new vaccine for pneumonia which my child would have missed if I had not taken her to the health center,” explained Sylvia. Churches play a large role in promoting child health and immunization in the Kasese district of Uganda where Sylvia lives, and health is frequently discussed at church gatherings.

Often, church is the one place people gather on a weekly basis, coming together for worship services, meetings and choir practice. In addition, faith leaders are often highly respected and trusted, making them ideal messengers about vaccines. In many areas of Africa, Christian missionaries began providing formal healthcare long before government or other private healthcare systems. Today, faith-based health facilities provide anywhere from 25 to 50 percent or more of care in some African nations, according to WHO mapping studies.

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Sylvia takes her baby Phiona to the Bishop Masereka Medical Center in Kasese, Uganda for vaccines. Photo courtesy of Bishop Masereka Christian Foundation.

Impact of Care-Giving Faith Communities

The Bishop Masereka Medical Center in Kasese, operated by BMCF, immunizes children each weekday. To reach pregnant mothers and children in villages, the foundation brings the vaccines to the villages four days each month. In 2013, the center immunized 8,839 children and pregnant women against polio, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, tuberculosis, hepatitis B and haemophilus influenza B. In February 2014, the center began administering pneumococcal vaccine.

Religious Objections

Widely reported religious objections to vaccines are usually based on misinformation, since all major religions support measures to protect children. In industrialized countries, some parents hold unfounded fears about the side effects of vaccines. In a few developing countries, local politically motivated leaders opposing their own governments spread rumors about immunization. Islamic organizations such as Muslim Aid and faith leaders are working to dispel myths that vaccines are harmful or being used by Western governments to reduce fertility.

We Are Making Progress

The [GAVI Alliance](#), a public-private global health partnership, was launched in 2000 to help save children's lives and protect people's health by increasing access to immunization in over 70 countries worldwide. With GAVI support, an additional [440 million children](#) have been immunized and an estimated [6 million childhood deaths](#) have been averted. GAVI recognizes the crucial role of faith communities in delivering and advocating for vaccines and is working with faith-based organizations to establish a Faith Caucus within the GAVI Alliance constituency of civil society organizations.

Vaccines Save Lives and Money

Protecting the health of children through immunization is not only the right thing to do, it saves healthcare costs and results in healthier and more productive communities. Faith communities already play an important role in reaching the underserved with vaccines, and with additional commitment and support, could help the global community reach that 20 percent, or the fifth child, who are now being missed.

For more, visit www.ccih.org > Resources > Immunization

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Protecting Children in Zambia

*The clinics and hospitals making up the Churches Health Association of Zambia provide more than **50%** of formal healthcare in rural areas and roughly **35%** of all healthcare in the nation. These facilities, run by both Catholic and Protestant churches, provide vaccines on a regular basis and it is common for them to have a particular day of the week, known as "Under-Five Day," where the staff focuses on immunization.*

How Faith Groups Can Help Save Lives

- Educate
 - Advocate for increased resources for immunization
 - Deliver vaccinations and increase immunization coverage
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