

# Responding to Requests for COVID-19 Vaccine “Religious Exemption” Letters

~ Rev. Leslie Mamas, August 11, 2021

With more and more venues, schools, and employers requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccination, it was only a matter of time before one of my members asked for a vaccine “religious exemption” letter. I was not nearly as prepared to have the conversation as I would have liked. I was not certain whether I was being called to witness to one individual’s genuine personal belief or represent the congregation and tradition I serve. I did not know whether I was supposed to judge the legitimacy of this person’s theology, or simply attest to the presence of their belief. Should I use the encounter as a teachable moment to dissuade vaccine hesitancy? Following the encounter I did some research, discernment, and consulted with fellow clergy. The following are points to consider when asked to supply a vaccine “religious exemption” letter.

1.) What does the state of Pennsylvania require for “religious exemption” to vaccines?

Traditionally when talking about vaccine exemption, we are referring to state mandated immunizations for public school students. Provisions for exemption from public school vaccines are found in Pennsylvania Code §23.84 - Exemption from Immunization. However, the requirements for any individual employer could be completely different. How exactly does the employer define “religious exemption,” and what are the employer’s standards of proof? When it comes to Pennsylvania public school immunizations, religious exemption is defined as adhering to a “religious belief whose teachings are opposed to such immunizations.” This is different than a philosophical or personally-held belief. There is a difference between sincere - even fervent - belief in something, and having it be legitimate “religious grounds.” Vaccine exemption forms mention religious *teachings* that are opposed to vaccination. The implication is that the individual is a member of an organized religious tradition that actively teaches opposition to immunization. An example might be a specific vaccine created using embryonic stem cells. A faith tradition with literalist anti-abortion teachings might legitimately call upon members to forgo that particular vaccine. (The COVID-19 vaccines do not fall into this category.) The Church of Christ, Scientist holds as a fundamental tenet that diseases can be cured or prevented by focused prayer. Therefor members could conceivably argue their religious teachings contradict the use of immunizations. If a church member wanted religious exemption from the military draft, she/he would need to belong to a faith tradition that upheld pacifism as a basic tenet. Simply holding a personal belief, devoid of an organized religious teaching, does not rise to “religious exemption.”

2.) What does the Church say about COVID-19 vaccines?

Every faith tradition (and individual congregation) is different. However, nearly all Christian denominations have actively endorsed vaccination during this pandemic crisis. On January 10, 2021, Pope Francis stated that COVID-19 vaccination is a moral obligation: "I believe that morally everyone must take the vaccine... It is the moral choice because it is about your life but also the lives of others." In June 2021 the Orthodox Church in Russia went so far as to call those refusing COVID-19 vaccination "sinners

who would have to atone for the rest of their lives." The Pennsylvania Council of Churches (comprised of thirteen member denominations) has an active pro-vaccination initiative based on shared Christian values. The United Church of Christ not only endorses community COVID-19 immunization but is also engaged in justice advocacy around the lack of global vaccine access.

3.) What does your congregation say about COVID-19 vaccination?

Very few local churches have official proclamations regarding COVID-19 vaccines. However, many churches demonstrate their shared values around vaccination in concrete ways:

- Has your church hosted or sponsored a community vaccine clinic?
- Has your church encouraged members to get vaccinated, helped members access vaccine appointments, or provided transportation to vaccination clinics?
- Does your church require COVID-19 vaccination for in-person worship?
- Does your church require COVID-19 vaccination for its employees or volunteers?
- Has your church helped to publicize vaccine clinics or bolstered vaccine awareness through sermons, publications, or online presence?

4.) What does scripture say about vaccination?

Every effort should be made to avoid proof texting. However, the individual may ask about specific scriptures. In short, the Bible does not explicitly say anything about vaccines since immunization did not exist in Biblical times. (Although some have tried to draw parallels to Moses lifting up the snake-on-a-pole in Numbers 21.) Nevertheless, the Bible says quite a lot about individual responsibility for the health of the community and loving one's neighbor. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures there are multiple commandments meant to mitigate the spread of infectious diseases. Individuals are responsible for protecting the health of the greater community, even if doing so requires personal inconvenience or self-sacrifice. Levitical law prescribed quarantining people and property with infections that could spread to others (Leviticus 13). Landowners were held responsible for injuries incurred on their property (Deuteronomy 22:8). God's people were held accountable for risking the health of others. In the New Testament, believers continued to be stewards of one another's well-being. Jesus' followers were called to act and care for "the least of these." Jesus taught that the two most paramount commandments are "love God" and "love your neighbor" (Mark 12:31). Christians are morally obligated to care for one another, putting love of neighbors before fear: "in humility regard others as more important than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). One could even argue that Christians are morally obligated to set a good example by getting the COVID-19 vaccine, so that others are less likely to succumb to misinformation (1 Corinthians 8:1-13). Paul wrote: "take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak."

5.) Why does this person truly want to circumvent vaccine requirement?

It is worth having this conversation. Perhaps the individual is scared that the vaccine will have unforeseen side effects. What does our religion say about living out of fear instead of faith and love? Perhaps the individual cites U.S. American principles of independence and personal freedom. What does our religion say about placing cultural values (even

noble ones) - before Christian love of neighbor? Having this deeper conversation may allow for a teachable moment, as well as more empathy and opportunity for confession.

Ayvezov, Olzhas. "Vaccinate or repent, Russian church says amid hundreds of daily COVID-19 deaths." *Reuters*. July 5, 2021.

Laney, Matt. "Vaccination is Biblical." *UCC Daily Devotional*. April 8, 2021.

McElwee, Joshua J. "Pope Francis suggests people have moral obligation to take coronavirus vaccine." *National Catholic Reporter*. January 11, 2021.