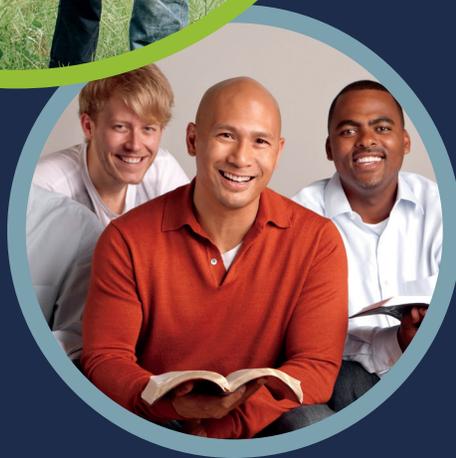


Faith in Vaccines

A Guide for Talking to Your Congregation



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The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund (Health Fund) developed this guide to serve as a resource to help faith leaders create an open and empathetic space to discuss COVID-19 and the vaccines. To inform the development of this sermon guide and toolkit, the Health Fund hosted and facilitated six regional roundtable discussions with faith leaders across Kansas. We would like to thank the leaders who participated in those conversations for sharing their ideas, passions and lessons learned with us.

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This sermon guide and toolkit was developed by **Lisa Hancock, PhD**, in partnership with **Health Fund staff** and **BowerComm**.

ABOUT THE HEALTH FUND

The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund is a statewide health foundation that facilitates conversation and action to improve the health and wholeness of Kansans—especially those in rural and under-served communities. Through funding programs and ideas, providing hands-on expertise, and convening influencers, the Health Fund advances innovative solutions to improve Kansans' health for generations to come. Located in Hutchinson, Kansas, the Health Fund has provided more than \$72 million in grants and program support since its inception in 1986.

Should you have any questions about this sermon guide and toolkit or need assistance, please email Health Fund staff or call 620-662-8586.

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Faith in Vaccines Sermon Guide and Toolkit

Widespread vaccination is the key to ending the COVID-19 pandemic and enabling a return to normal life. As a statewide health philanthropy, the Health Fund is focused on improving the health of Kansans by increasing access to care, supporting early childhood development, and building healthier communities through our Healthy Congregations program.

Ensuring Kansans and all Americans are vaccinated is critical to our mission and our work because it will prevent more illnesses and deaths, help end the damage to the economy, and ultimately eliminate and eradicate COVID-19. The Health Fund supports vaccination as a safe and highly effective way to prevent disease but also recognizes that the decision to be vaccinated is a personal one. That decision is influenced by many factors and complicated by the difficulty of discerning truth amid a flood of misinformation. Research shows that Americans trust their own doctors and their faith leaders for information about COVID-19 and vaccines.

Through our dedication to health and the faith community, and with recognition of how personal the vaccination decision is, the Health Fund developed this sermon guide and toolkit to help faith leaders create an open and empathetic space to start a discussion and answer questions about the effectiveness and importance of the vaccine.

The toolkit also provides resources on how to share messages about vaccine effectiveness, resources on how to connect with medical providers to share scientific data, and ideas for you to consider in how your congregation can play a leadership role in discussing the benefits of the COVID-19 vaccines.

HOW TO USE THIS SERMON GUIDE AND TOOLKIT

Welcome! Whether you come to this guide with excitement, trepidation, curiosity, or simply feeling like you are at your wit's end, you are welcome here.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, talking about vaccines was already a difficult conversation, and the pandemic has only seemed to increase our communities' polarization and politicization around vaccinations even more. We hope this sermon guide will give you some helpful approaches and language to use as you talk with your congregation about choosing to get the COVID-19 vaccines.

OUR INTENTIONS

It is important to note the intentions of how this guide is meant to be used. This guide is offered as a tool for creating an empathetic space to hear one another's fears, discern the truth in the midst of fear, and follow Jesus toward building a loving and connected community within our families, friends, and neighborhoods.

This guide does not encourage shaming, blaming, or otherwise manipulating people to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Most critically, it also does not seek to discount or dismiss the fears that many people have about the COVID-19 vaccines or other vaccinations. Neglecting people's fears and/or shaming them into action drives them further into their vaccine hesitancy or rejection ideologies.

In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines are one incredibly important means to restoring safe and healthy communities!

TOOLS

This sermon guide and toolkit is intended to support your efforts to create an environment of empathy and openness to one another's thoughts and feelings as well as to the benefits of COVID-19 vaccinations. Accompanying the sermon guide and materials is a series of tools to support your efforts to discuss vaccinations and open conversations. Tools included are:

- A toolkit that includes suggestions and steps faith leaders can take to support COVID-19 vaccination efforts.
- Included in the toolkit, contact information for Kansas and national groups that can be helpful in addressing medical and public health questions regarding the pandemic and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccinations.
- Talking points and suggestions on how to communicate about COVID-19 vaccinations and the pandemic.
- Sample social media posts to promote best practices and this guide.

Note: all listed resources also available via <https://healthfund.org/faith-in-vaccines>

GUIDE STRUCTURE

Covering a two-week series, for each week this guide provides hymn selections, a call to worship, a children's sermon, a pastoral prayer, exegesis on the chosen scripture, and sermon notes. You will notice that specific mention of the COVID-19 vaccine does not come until the end of the sermon notes. Feel free to re-order the information in any way that feels natural to you and your community. However, as you incorporate the topic of vaccines into your sermons, we encourage you to contextualize the COVID-19 vaccines within the wider story of our Christian journey – using both scripture and context in our world.

Each sermon will end with an invitation for congregants to take action, which will include a list of safe practices for the week that can also be used as a bulletin insert. You will see that one part of the invitation to act includes having a conversation with the pastor. The intent of this guide is to get the conversation started from the pulpit, but we also hope it sparks opportunities for more intimate conversations. Often these conversations are more influential than a sermon could ever be on its own.

The content of this sermon guide was heavily influenced by the approaches recommended by public health experts for addressing vaccine hesitancy. A few key takeaways from these approaches include the following:

- *Avoid judgmental language when talking about people who are concerned*
- *Emphasize the rigorous research and approval process*
- *Highlight the people behind the vaccine development, research, approval, and distribution processes*

This guide also builds on research conducted by the de Beaumont Foundation and Missouri Foundation for Health, including conversations with Missourians about their perspectives on getting vaccinated and what might motivate them to do so. Key message points include:

- *The vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and your family from the virus.*
- *Getting vaccinated is not just about you, it is about your whole community.*
- *It is our choice to get vaccinated.*
- *The vaccines are a key step in getting back to normal, so that we can safely get together again like we used to.*
- *A vaccine has been reserved for you.*

Ultimately, we must meet people where they are in dialogue about their concerns and hopes. This sermon guide seeks to provide a path to do just that.

The guide includes links to resources for increasing vaccine acceptance and answering questions and concerns about the COVID-19 vaccines throughout, but we also include below so you can have them in one place:

- <https://debeaumont.org/changing-the-covid-conversation>
- <https://getvaccineanswers.org>
- <https://vaccinateyourfamily.org/questions-about-vaccines/covid19faq>

You are welcome to utilize other sources that you have vetted. If you share with your congregation, we encourage you to use the criteria we outline at the end of Week #1 for vetting information sources – provided below.

- Clarity – it uses clear and concise language
- Verified – it is vetted by scientific and/or health experts
- Supported by research

THANK YOU

Finally, we want to say thank you. Thank you for the care you are giving to your congregation and community by courageously taking on the task of talking about vaccinations from the pulpit. We hope this guide helps you know you are not alone and gives you some beneficial tools as you take on this important work.

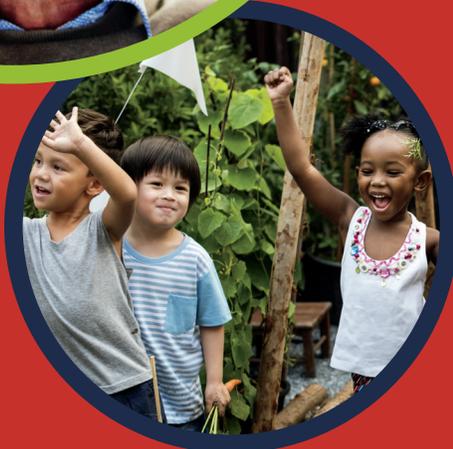
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Faith in Vaccines

Toolkit

A Guide for Talking to Your Congregation



Faith in Vaccines Toolkit: Tips and Resources to Help Pastors Support COVID-19 Vaccination

Widespread vaccination is the key to ending the COVID-19 pandemic and enabling a return to normal life. The decision to be vaccinated is a personal one, influenced by many factors and complicated by the difficulty of discerning truth amid a flood of misinformation. Research shows that Americans trust their doctors and faith leaders for information about COVID-19 and vaccines. Pastors can help by sharing facts, inviting conversations, and setting examples.

People want unbiased facts about vaccine safety and effectiveness, and information to help them decide whether vaccination is the right choice for them. This toolkit includes things you can do to help improve vaccine acceptance, tips for talking with your congregation about vaccination, and examples of messaging that works.

15 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE VACCINE ACCEPTANCE IN YOUR CONGREGATION

1. Lead by example. Get vaccinated and encourage your staff to be vaccinated.
2. Share educational materials widely. Post information in common/high visibility areas in your church. Publish information on the church website, on social media platforms, in emails, and in your bulletins.
3. Consider sending a letter or email to your congregants. Start by expressing your concern for the health of your congregants and their families. Provide facts, refer to additional resources, and let them know you are available to answer questions and talk through concerns.
4. Add laments for the pain that COVID-19 has caused. Lament world-wide deaths and losses. Create opportunities to heal as a community.
5. Highlight the mission work the church has done to respond to COVID-19 so the congregation can remember the real impact it has had on the community.
6. Have congregation members give testimonies about their vaccinations.
7. Have congregation members that are doctors/nurses give testimony about the crisis.
8. Create an art wall where congregation members can add their reasons for deciding to get their vaccination.
9. Have pastoral leaders talk about their own vaccination experiences. Live stream or post pictures.
10. Avoid any sermons on how God will protect us from COVID. Instead focus on our acts and role in the world to combat sin and reconcile us to him.
11. Provide opportunities to thank physicians/nurses/front line workers for their efforts during the pandemic.
12. Support those dealing with response to COVID vaccination (back-up care for single parents, care packages).
13. Offer transportation options to enable those whom are homebound to get vaccinated.
14. Be available on a regular schedule to help people register and complete sign-up for COVID vaccination.
15. Work with your local Health Department, pharmacy, or other partners to host a vaccine clinic site.

TALKING TO YOUR CONGREGATION

Every interaction is an opportunity to share information, answer questions, and discuss concerns about COVID-19 vaccines. Here are research-based suggestions for productive conversations about COVID-19 vaccines:

Start from a place of empathy and understanding.

Acknowledge the disruption COVID-19 has caused in all of our lives. Remind congregants that getting vaccinated is the most important thing they can do to move back toward normal activities. Recognize that it's normal for someone to have concerns about a new vaccine for a new virus. Encourage them to ask questions, and answer in a way they can understand.

Acknowledge that getting vaccinated is a personal decision.

A pastor's role is to provide information, answer questions, and talk through concerns so everyone can make the decision that is right for them and for their loved ones.

State clearly what we do and don't know.

Don't overemphasize "potentials" (potential risks or potential benefits). Contrast the known long-term effects of COVID-19 with the unknown potential risks of the vaccines.

Focus on the benefits of getting a COVID vaccine.

Not just the consequences of not getting vaccinated. Emphasize that the benefits of getting the vaccine far exceed the risks.

Explain the health risks associated with declining to be vaccinated.

Tailor the conversation for the person you're talking with, from your perspective as their pastor.

After talking, let them know you are open to continuing the conversation, and encourage them to take at least one step.

That may include scheduling a vaccination appointment, reviewing vetted information you provide about the safety and importance of the vaccines, or learning what to expect.

Be direct.

- I strongly recommend that you get a COVID-19 vaccine.
- This vaccine is especially important for you because of your [job/high risk/high-risk relatives/health challenges/etc.]
- I believe in this vaccine so strongly that I got it as soon as I could, and I made sure everyone in my family did too.
- A vaccine has been reserved for you.

MESSAGING THAT WORKS

In recent research, people have said that these messages would make them more likely to get vaccinated for COVID-19. This can be used in social media, emails, or almost any other communication.

- The vaccines are highly effective in preventing illness – even more effective than the annual flu vaccine.
- The COVID vaccine will help protect you from getting sick.
- The quickest way for life to return to normal is for most people to get vaccinated.
- Nearly all doctors who have been offered the vaccine have taken it.
- Millions of people have been vaccinated safely. Tens of thousands of people participated in the phase 3 trials for the three authorized vaccines. After being fully vaccinated, no trial participants were hospitalized or died from COVID-19.
- A vaccine has been reserved for you.

Addressing Concerns About Side Effects

- Severe side effects are rare and treatable. Minor side effects usually go away within a few days.
- No one can say for sure, but there is no reason to think there will be any long-term side effects.
- The FDA and CDC will continue to monitor the vaccines for safety to make sure that even very rare side effects are identified.

Addressing Concerns About the Rapid Development of Vaccines:

- The COVID vaccines have been held to the same rigorous standards as other vaccines. The government didn't cut corners; it cut red tape to expedite the approval process.
- While the vaccines were created quickly, they weren't created from scratch. Researchers have been studying and working with mRNA vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) for decades, and scientists began using viral vectors (Johnson & Johnson) in the 1970s.
- Viral vector vaccines have been used successfully to treat cancer and prevent diseases like the flu, Zika, and HIV; mRNA vaccines have been studied for prevention of the flu, Zika, rabies, and other diseases.

Addressing Misinformation:

It would be impossible to counter all the misinformation being spread about COVID vaccines, but these are some of the most important facts:

- The vaccines cannot give you COVID-19.
- The vaccines do not affect or interact with your DNA in any way.
- The vaccine does not stay in your body.

Stay up-to-date on misinformation and how to address it by following the Misinformation Alerts provided by the Public Health Communications Collaborative: <https://publichealthcollaborative.org>

RESOURCES

- de Beaumont Foundation COVID-19 messaging resources: www.changingthecovidconversation.com
- Public Health Communications Collaborative <https://publichealthcollaborative.org>
- COVID-19 Vaccines Guide for Physicians; American Medical Association <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/covid-19-vaccines-guide-physicians>
- CDC communication toolkits <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/resource-center.html>
- “The Language of Vaccine Acceptance” cheat sheet https://debeaumont.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/VaccineToolkit_1pger.pdf
- AAP COVID-19 Vaccine for Children <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/covid-19-vaccine-for-children>
- Kansas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics COVID-19 Resources <http://www.kansasaap.org/wordpress/covid-19-coronavirus-resources/>
- Kansas Academy of Family Physicians COVID-19 Resources | <https://kafponline.org/covid-19>
- Immunize Kansas Coalition Resources | <https://www.immunizekansascoalition.org/>
- Kansas COVID-19 Vaccine Equity Resources | <https://www.immunizekansascoalition.org/vaccine-equity.asp>
- Kansas Department of Health and Environment Vaccine Information | <https://www.kansasvaccine.gov/>
- Kansas Office of Recovery COVID-19 Resources | <https://covid.ks.gov/>
- Kansas Department of Health and Environment COVID Response Site | <https://www.coronavirus.kdheks.gov/>
- Vaccines.gov COVID-19 Vaccine Finder | <https://www.vaccines.gov/search/>

THANK YOU / ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We appreciate the research conducted by the Missouri Foundation for Health and the de Beaumont Foundation, which informed the development of this toolkit.

Sermon Guide

Week 1





Hymn Selections:

- **“The Gift of Love”**
United Methodist Hymnal #408
- **“O Christ, the Healer”**
United Methodist Hymnal #265
- **“Help Us Accept Each Other”**
United Methodist Hymnal #560
- **“Blest Be the Tie That Binds”**
United Methodist Hymnal #557



Call to Worship

Creator God, who formed us in your image, who made us to be in relationship with you and one another...

Meet us in our need for community.

Creator God, who gives us every breath and who with every breath we offer praise...

Meet us in our need for abundant life.

Creator God, who knows our every thought, fear, and worry...

Meet us in our need for comfort.

Creator God, who remains faithful while confusion, false reports, and conflicting stories swirl around us...

Meet us in our need for understanding.

Creator God, who loves us abundantly that we may learn to love one another into abundant life...

Meet us in our need for love. Amen.



Children's Sermon

MATERIALS: Offering plate, small object(s) for each child like a rock or a small colorful piece of paper, a small cloth to cover the offering plate.

Bring the offering plate and small object(s) for each child and set them in front of you.

Then say: Have you ever been scared before? *(Pause for answers.)* Do you like feeling scared? *(Pause for answers.)* Yeah, me neither. In fact, I don't like being scared so much that I will go out of my way to avoid things that scare me. If I see a spider in a room, you can guarantee I'm not going in there for the rest of day. If you tell me I need to climb a ladder, I will find an excellent excuse to leave immediately! *(Or, fill in another appropriate example for you.)* But see, not talking about our fears or simply avoiding things that scare us isn't very kind to ourselves or to others. When we do that, we don't give God and our parents or our neighbors a chance to help us move through our fears.

In today's story, we meet two people who are very afraid and confused. They followed Jesus and learned so much from him about how to love each other and God, and then Jesus died! They were heartbroken and sad. And then, a couple days later, they hear a report that Jesus was back! Jesus had risen from the dead! But as much as they wanted that to be true, they didn't want to get their hopes up. They were still afraid and sad. As they were walking the long journey home talking about all of these things, a stranger approaches them—it was Jesus, but they didn't recognize him. Jesus asks them what was going on, and these disciples tell him the sad news about how Jesus died and then the strange news that he might be back from the dead. How do you think Jesus responded to them? *(Pause for answers.)* Jesus didn't get mad at them for not understanding. Jesus didn't yell at them or make fun of them because they didn't understand. Instead, Jesus listened to their story and then walked with them on the road and explained how God uses all of this strange and sad news to save us.

Today, I want us to take a moment to listen to one another's fears. I am going to give you each a rock/piece of paper. I want you to hold onto it tight and think for just a minute about something you are afraid of. Now, as you drop it in the offering plate, if you want, you can name your fear out loud.

(Give space for children to name their fears out loud, but do not force them to say something if they don't want to.)

Now, let's pray: Dear God, in this plate are all of the things we are afraid of. We know you love us and listen to us, including listening to our fears. Please help us know that you never leave us alone when we are afraid. Amen.

Then say: God's love covers us even when we are afraid, so I am going to cover this plate with a cloth representing God's love for us. This is to remind us that when we are afraid, God's love is like a blanket that wraps us up and takes care of us. So, come back next week to find out what happens when we wrap our fears up in God's love.



Pastoral Prayer

Merciful God, you know us more intimately than we know ourselves, you love us more than we can possibly comprehend, and you desire abundant life for all of us. We admit that after more than a year of living in this pandemic, we carry many fears and worries that make it difficult to recognize where you are and what you are doing. Thank you for showing up time and again to remind us that even in our fears, you never leave us alone. We pray for healing, restoration, and flourishing for the nations and peoples across the globe experiencing continued hardship related to the pandemic, including our families, friends, and neighbors. May you continue to form us into disciples who journey with one another and you through fear and into empathy. Amen.



Scripture • Luke 24:13-27

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.



Exegesis

Interpretations of this narrative invariably focus on the end of these two disciples' journey. The point of the story, we're often told, is their move from confusion to understanding, from being ignorant to recognizing Christ as their companion on the road to Emmaus. Only then can they join the disciples in Jerusalem in proclaiming Christ's resurrection. In fact, this story serves as the second of three total stories that all occur the day of Jesus' resurrection, beginning with women at the tomb and ending with Jesus' appearance to all of the disciples—including these two travelers—in Jerusalem that evening. The Gospel writer's lack of identifying information for these two disciples, outside of naming one Cleopas, likely indicates that these were two long-time followers of Jesus who were not part of his core group of twelve disciples. Some speculate that this post-resurrection experience hearkens back to Jesus' sending out of the seventy-two disciples in Luke 10. The Good News of Christ's resurrection must be entrusted to more than the Twelve in order to reach all those who need to hear that the Kingdom of God has come near.

Rarely, though, do we take time to dwell with these two disciples in the moments before they recognize Jesus, and that is precisely what we are going to do this week. We meet these disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, "discussing all of these things." "These things" indicates the testimony of the women that Jesus had risen from the dead as recounted in Luke 24:9-11. Notably, instead of sticking around, these two disciples leave for the 7-mile walk to Emmaus. Luke does not tell us why, though some scholars speculate that they were returning home after being in Jerusalem to observe the Passover. But note—after being told that Jesus was not dead but alive, these disciples leave. Upon hearing this strange but joyful news, they choose to separate from the community of Christ followers.

We get an inkling of their state of mind as they tell the incognito Jesus about Jesus' crucifixion, death, and apparent resurrection in verses 19-24. The Greek word "existemi" translated in the NRSV as "astounded" in verse 22, means "to throw out of position; to displace." The news that we might expect would bring them joy actually throws them off kilter. They could not make sense of it. Perhaps that is why they left—to feel the literal ground under their feet when their minds and hearts could find no footing in the face of the women's story. Between the trauma of Christ's crucifixion and death and the astonishment of the women's discovery that very morning, these disciples are navigating a vortex of fear, confusion, and grief when they meet the Jesus-stranger on the road.

Notably, this passage also features the first words that Luke puts into the mouth of the Risen Christ. In verse 17, Jesus asks, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" There is a gentleness to this question, an invitation to share without forcing himself on this duo. Only after they have told their story does he respond with his first statement: "Oh, how foolish you are..." There are many instances of the word "fool" in the New Testament, and not all of these instances use the same Greek word. In this case, the word the NRSV translates to foolish is *anoetos*, meaning "not understood; unintelligible; not understanding." Jesus is not calling these disciples empty-headed or senseless. Jesus is indicating that they do not recognize all that is happening around them and what God might be up to. Instead of berating them, Jesus proceeds to interpret, coming from the Greek *diermeneuo*, meaning "to unfold the meaning of what is said." Jesus meets their confusion and lack of understanding with empathy that listens to their fears and their grief and then offers them a fuller understanding of the events they had experienced.



Sermon Notes

Introduction - The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is like a road trip. From the very beginning of the story, we are invited on a journey, and we can easily fall into the temptation of asking “Are we there yet?” as we anticipate arriving at our destination. Of course, the destination of this story is not necessarily a place but the disciples’ discovery that Jesus is, in fact, their road trip companion. While that moment of discovery is so powerful, by focusing on the end of the story, we can miss or dismiss all that is happening at the beginning. So, we are going to spend two weeks taking this journey alongside the disciples, holding off on reaching the end until next week so that today we can enter into the disciples’ state of mind at the beginning of the story.

Key Points - **1.** When we meet our two companions, they are full of grief, bewilderment, and fear. As they discuss with one another and with the unrecognized Jesus, they lost their Messiah and friend, and in the midst of their grieving are suddenly met with the news that he came back from the dead. Their hope wants to cling to the possibility that this is true, but isn’t resurrection impossible? Who are they supposed to believe? We, too, are living in a time of fear, grief, and wondering who we are supposed to believe. In January of 2020, many of us could not have picked out a coronavirus from a photo line-up, while today there are pictures of it in Internet articles, the evening news, and even billboards on the side of the road. A year ago, many of us probably only had a vague understanding of how vaccines are developed and approved for use. Now, every stage of a COVID-19 vaccine’s development, clinical trials, and FDA Emergency Use Approval makes national and global headlines. Technologies and insights being used to save countless numbers of lives were not even available a century ago. There is so much new information for us to process, who are we supposed to believe? On top of that, we have lost so many people. In 2020, COVID-19 was the third leading causing of adult deaths in the United States behind heart disease and cancer. We have also lost time—time at our jobs, time with our families, time where everything feels normal and routine. We have so much to grieve. I wonder if those disciples on the Road to Emmaus could relate.

2. Notice what happens when Jesus approaches the two disciples as a stranger on the road. He asks a question. In fact, he asks two questions. He doesn’t jump in and start correcting the two companions once he finds out what they’ve been discussing. He listens. He listens not only to the content of their story, but to their emotions. Only after listening to them does Jesus say the most amazing thing—“Oh, how foolish you are!” This may seem a little harsh, but translated, it’s more like “oh, how you do not understand!” In response, Jesus fills in the gaps, connecting with the disciples in their grief, confusion, and fear and then addressing their fears with greater understanding, drawing on Moses and the prophets as sources that they trust to help explain what they do not understand. After living over a year with the COVID-19 pandemic, we are weary from having to weigh the risks and rewards of decisions for which it feels hard to access clear information, which is only heightened by our collective fear and grief as a society. When faced with the fear and grief of the unknown, Jesus shows us that the first step is empathy—empathy with ourselves and empathy with our neighbors.

3. Brené Brown explains that “empathy is connecting with people, so we know we’re not alone when we’re in struggle.” https://brenebrown.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Integration-Ideas_Empathy.pdf. This is what Jesus does. Jesus comes alongside the disciples, listens, and helps them start to recognize how God had been at work in all they had experienced. When I think of all the issues that bring up fear and grief right now, one that particularly stands out is the COVID-19 vaccine. There is so much information out there, it is hard to know who to trust. What’s more, we have so many fears that contribute to our decisions about whether to receive the vaccine. This week, I want to invite you to meet your own fears and grief, as well as the fears and grief of your neighbors, regarding the COVID-19 vaccine with empathy. It can be so easy for us to get locked into our decision one way or another that we don’t stop to consider why we’re making that decision. When we haven’t taken time to listen to our own emotions and those of our neighbors, we start focusing on being right instead of getting it right. In other words, when we stop being empathetic to ourselves and our neighbors—when we stop listening to one another—we stop loving each other the way Christ teaches us to love.



Invitation to Act

So, taking our cue from Jesus, you are invited this week to ask questions, listen, seek out trusted sources, and extend kindness to yourself and your neighbors. Now, these are values and actions we should always strive for in our lives, but this week I want you to particularly seek to incorporate these practices with regard to the COVID-19 vaccine. Whether you have chosen to receive the vaccine, are still weighing your options, or have decided you do not want to be vaccinated at this time, all of these invitations to act are for you.

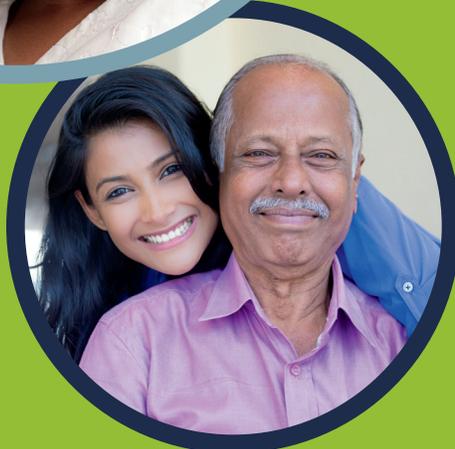
1. Take 15 minutes this week to write down a list of the fears and griefs you have surrounding your experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and your decision to receive or not receive a COVID-19 vaccine.
2. Make an appointment with your pastor or other church leader to talk about your fears and griefs.
3. Do a little research! Go to <https://getvaccineanswers.org/> or <https://vaccinateyourfamily.org/questions-about-vaccines/covid19faq/> and spend at least 10 minutes investigating answers to your questions about the COVID-19 vaccine.
4. Be open to opportunities to practice empathy with your neighbors. Whether you agree or disagree in your decisions to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, be prepared to ask about and listen to the concerns that motivate your neighbor's decision. Think of this as an opportunity to replace "being right" with "being love" to one another.

Let me end with just a note on trusted sources. All of the links provided here have been vetted as trusted sources based on three criteria: 1. clarity, 2. verified by experts, and 3. supported by research. You may have other trusted sources that you would prefer to explore. I just encourage you to consider these criteria any time you are discerning whether you can trust the information a source is providing.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)

Sermon Guide

Week 2





Hymn Selections:

- **“For the Healing of the Nations”**
United Methodist Hymnal #428
- **“Christ Is Alive”**
United Methodist Hymnal #318
- **“Lord Whose Love in Humble Service”**
United Methodist Hymnal #581
- **“Blest Be the Tie That Binds”**
United Methodist Hymnal #557



Call to Worship

Loving God, who made us to be in relationship with you and one another...

Send us out to be your loving community.

Loving God, who gives us every breath and who with every breath we offer praise...

Send us out to promote abundant life for all.

Loving God, who knows our every thought, fear, and worry...

Send us out to comfort and be comforted by one another.

Loving God, who remains faithful while confusion, false reports, and conflicting stories swirl around us...

Send us out to bring understanding and empathy to all we meet.

Loving God, who loves us abundantly that we may learn to love one another into abundant life...

Send us out to love you and love our neighbors well. Amen.



Children's Sermon

Materials: Offering plate from week before (keep the rocks/pieces of paper in the plate), a wrapped snack of some kind (enough that every child can take two), and a cloth. (Beforehand, place the wrapped snacks among the rocks/pieces of paper in the offering plate and cover it with the cloth.)

Say: Last week we shared our fears by putting them in the offering plate and then covering them with the cloth to represent God's love that wrap us up fears and all. Now, who can help me take this cloth off and discover what's in the plate now? (Have the children take the cloth off and tell you what they see.) That's right! There's food in here. In fact, there are enough snacks for you each to take two, one for you and one for you to share with a friend or family member. In our story today, we meet Jesus and his two friends on the road again. Now remember, the friends don't know who Jesus is yet. They just know that he was loving and kind to them as they told him about how they were afraid and sad. So, when they get to their house, the two friends invite Jesus to come and join them for a meal. As they sit down together, Jesus breaks the bread and shares it with them, and that's when the two friends recognize Jesus! They are so excited that even though Jesus disappears, they can't wait to go tell their other friends about seeing Jesus again. So, they run a long way back to their friends, and everybody is so excited to hear them talk about how they saw Jesus! And it all started by being kind and sharing a meal together.

This week, I want to give you a challenge. Choose someone who you trust that you can talk to about something important to you and invite them to share a snack with you. As you do that, remember that when you share love and a meal with someone, Jesus is there with you too.

Let's pray: God, thank you for always being with us, for loving us in our fears, and for showing us how to love one another as family. Help us to share your love with one another over a meal, at school, as we play, and as we work to take care of others. Amen.



Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for meeting us on our journey with love and empathy, teaching us to journey with others in love and empathy, too. As we continue to encounter our fears and concerns, grant us clear minds and discerning hearts to receive and follow the truth in the midst of our confusion. We pray for the health of our families, friends, and neighbors as we work toward being able to gather safely once again. We thank you for all the people who have worked so hard to develop, test, review, approve, and distribute the vaccines that are moving us toward a healthy and safe future together. Guide us ever closer to you and one another as we discern how we can be faithful in our love of God and neighbor during this time. Amen.



Scripture • Luke 24:28-35

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



Exegesis

The conclusion to the Road to Emmaus narrative comes with a couple of surprises, one the story sets up from the beginning and another that hides a little deeper below the surface. We pick up the story at what seems to be the end, or at least a rest stop, of the disciples' journey. According to the etiquette of ancient hospitality, Jesus and the disciples each play their part well. Jesus moving to go on with his journey was an act of "good manners"—a guest does not impose their presence on the host. At the same time, the disciples' insistence was also proper, because it is the host's responsibility to vigorously offer hospitality to the guest. Up to this point, all parties involved act in an expected manner.

Only when they sit down at the table do we begin to encounter the unexpected. The moment the two disciples recognize Jesus at the table is called an *anagnorisis*. An *anagnorisis* is the classical recognition scene in ancient literature when a hidden identity (usually a deity) is revealed. From verse 14 on, Luke sets the reader up to expect an *anagnorisis*, an event that is surprising to the characters in the story but, to some degree, not a surprise to the reader at all. Today, we read that Jesus broke the bread and immediately think of the Lord's Supper. However, at that time, the phrase "to take bread" means simply "to take a meal." So, Jesus was not necessarily celebrating Communion with these disciples. He was sharing an everyday meal with them, pointing to the fact that every meal we share has the potential of being a sacred event. Christ demonstrates his presence to these two disciples, first in the scriptures as mentioned last week and then in sharing a meal. Even today, when we join one another in a meal, whether that's the Lord's Supper or sharing dinner in-person or over Zoom, we have the opportunity to share in the presence of Christ

But the story does not end at the table. In the moment that the disciples recognize Jesus, he disappears! The disciples then exclaim how they felt their hearts "burning within us" as Jesus had explained the scriptures on the road. The disciples acknowledge that something within them discerned the truth of Jesus' explanation of Moses and the prophets before they fully understood and recognized him in their midst. By offering them empathy in their fear and grief, Jesus created the opportunity for the disciples to listen to him with their minds and their hearts. In turn, the disciples paid attention to their emotional connection to what Jesus said as much as they did the content of what he was saying. This interaction demonstrates how a safe conversation space can help all participants listen and discern with their whole selves when they are experiencing fear, grief, and/or stress that might otherwise cloud their attention to their emotions.

As if they cannot keep still and cannot keep this news to themselves, they immediately leave and hurry back to Jerusalem. They returned to the community they left in fear and confusion ready to proclaim with certainty that Christ had been with them, only to hear upon their arrival that Jesus had also appeared to Simon. It is as if a flood of certainty flows into the narrative to replace the fear and confusion that dominated the beginning of this story. Further, this story ends with these two disciples being restored to community with Christ and with their fellow Christ followers. Restoration here is so much bigger than one or two individuals—through empathy, understanding, and loving teaching, Christ mends the fractures caused by fear and confusion, shares a meal with these companions, and in their recognition of Jesus returns them to their community.



Sermon Notes

Introduction - Last week, we talked about how the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus story is like a modern-day road trip. We stopped reading the story last week just before we arrived at their intended destination so that we had an opportunity to contemplate the journey rather than jumping to the destination. The two disciples on the road begin their trip in sadness, confusion, and fear. Then, a stranger walks up and inserts himself into their conversation. The stranger (who we know is Jesus) asks questions, listens to their confusion and grief with empathy, and then talks with them about all the pieces of the story they're missing. He doesn't berate them for what they don't know or how they've misunderstood. He listens and then offers loving feedback. And that's where we ended. This week, we finally arrive at our destination. Or, at least, we think we arrive at our destination.

Key Points

1. We open with Jesus doing the polite thing—he acts as if he's going to keep going so as not to impose on himself on these two potential hosts. But they insist that he stay with them, as was the custom, so they all go into the house together. Last week, we talked about empathy as connecting with others' emotions so we know we are not alone in the struggle. It might be easy to read this interaction between Jesus and the disciples as everyone being polite and nothing more. But, under the surface of "good manners" lies an important lesson - in a relationship built on empathy and respect, one person does not force themselves on another. Empathy means caring about another person's boundaries and limits, making it possible to the hospitality of mutual respect and caring as equals.
2. There are few things as wonderful as sharing a table with friends after a long, hot day on your feet. Then, something remarkable happens—the guest becomes the host. Jesus took, blessed, broke, and served the bread to the others and in that moment, they recognized Jesus. The Jesus who did these same things when he fed the 5,000 and when he had his Last Supper with his disciples was the same man who had met their fear with empathy and kindness, increasing their understanding and giving comfort without forcing his love and friendship on them. And then he was gone! In the wake of his absence, the disciples recognized the truth of his presence. In the midst of their confusion, their hearts told them they were hearing the truth even when they didn't fully understand. Discerning the truth when confusion, fear, and grief are swirling around us is incredibly difficult. If you were able to participate in any of the invitations to act from last week, you undoubtedly encountered the complex emotions and opinions surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines. As you read the vetted sources, listened with friends and neighbors, or took stock of your own emotions, did you have a moment when your heart burned within you? Was there something that cut through the chaos of confusion and grief and resonated inside you, like it was pointing to the truth even when you didn't fully understand it?
3. After Jesus disappeared from their midst, the two disciples did the unexpected—they leapt up, rushed back to Jerusalem, and returned to their friends. As they all gathered, they shared stories about how Jesus really had risen and had appeared to Simon and now these two disciples. The community that was splintered by fear came back together by sharing the love Christ showed them. Empathy towards their fears turned these two disciples back toward their community. The ultimate destination for these two disciples on the road to Emmaus was not the village they were returning to, but community with their friends in Jerusalem. But this sense of community was not possible without the attitude of love and understanding that Jesus demonstrated to them on the road. And the same is true of us. As we encounter our differing approaches to the COVID-19 vaccine, I encourage you to consider how your words and your actions convey empathy modeled after Jesus no matter who you are talking to.



Sermon Notes

4. So, what does this unexpected ending to the story have to say to us? We certainly are living with many questions about the COVID-19 vaccines swirling around us. Are they safe? Are they effective? How can I trust such a quick development process? These are understandable fears and concerns. What is important to remember is that all of the people who have made the vaccines possible are people encountering this pandemic too. The development of these vaccines was made possible because of the groundbreaking cooperation between leading medical experts here in the U.S. and pharmaceutical companies across the globe. The speed of development happened because these experts shared research on a scale never attempted before. Every study, and every phase of every trial, was carefully reviewed and approved by a safety board at the FDA. The process has been transparent and rigorous throughout, with continual oversight and expert approval (https://debeaumont.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/VaccineToolkit_1pger.pdf). Everybody who participated in this process is a person experiencing this pandemic, too.

5. This can be a lot of information to take in, and you may still have questions. That's ok. Keep asking your questions. As you continue to navigate your decision to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, I encourage you to consider the fruit of your decision. In our Scripture passage, the truth of Christ's teaching and presence with the disciples returned them to their friends and to their community. For us today, getting vaccinated is a critical step to keeping our family, friends, and neighbors safe and bringing us all back together as a community. There are so many, including people in our community, that cannot get a vaccine. Children, immuno-compromised persons, and others depend on those of us who can to get vaccinated so that they can safely return to community, too. Further, by getting vaccinated, we can help end the damage to the economy, prevent more illnesses and deaths in America, and eliminate and eradicate COVID-19. All of that sounds like a life-giving return to community to me!



Invitation to Act

You are invited today to answer the question: how will I love like Jesus every day? I hope you will follow Jesus in meeting your own fears and those of others with empathy, seeking answers that address your fears not with more fear but with clear information from experts, and doing all you can to make loving community a possibility for everybody. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Ask a friend or family member to share their experience of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.
2. Make an appointment with your pastor or other church leader to talk about your fears or concerns surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine.
3. Investigate whether there are opportunities to help transport people to and from vaccine sites. If not, consider partnering with other members of your church and/or other organizations to see how you can help.
4. Offer to drop supplies by to someone who just received a vaccine and may be experiencing side effects. Better yet, help your church develop a plan to support people in your neighborhood who may need some extra help with meals or caregiving if they experience side effects after receiving a vaccine dose.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)

Social Media Toolkit



For those who would like to share information on vaccinations with their friends or congregation, we've compiled some easy-to-use tools for you to use. Feel free to re-work the language in a way that fits the voice of your channel, so long as the message is clear and the information is accurate and fact-driven.

TALKING POINTS

- Widespread vaccination is the key to ending the COVID-19 pandemic and will allow us to return to a normal life. It will also help us prevent more illnesses and deaths, help end the damage to the economy, and ultimately eliminate and eradicate COVID-19.
- Research shows that Americans trust their own doctors and their faith leaders for information about COVID-19 and vaccines; that's why churches are crucial in helping us end the pandemic. They can offer support for those unsure about the vaccine, and they can help people discern their options and make informed decisions.
- The decision to get vaccinated is personal for many. To help faith leaders lead open and empathetic discussions, the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund developed a sermon guide and toolkit to help start a discussion and answer questions.
- Vaccines are safe and effective, and one has been reserved for each member of your congregation.

KEY HASHTAGS

#FaithInVaccines
#HealthFund

FOLLOW THE UNITED METHODIST HEALTH MINISTRY FUND

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/UMHealthFund>

Twitter - <https://twitter.com/umhealthfund>

LinkedIn - <https://www.linkedin.com/company/umhealthfund/>

Sample Facebook/LinkedIn Posts

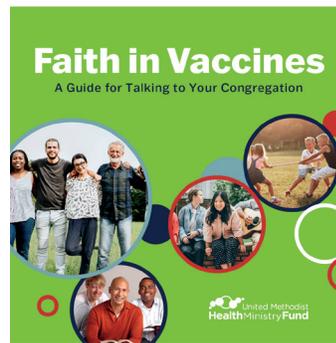
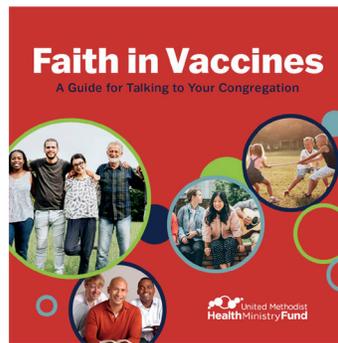
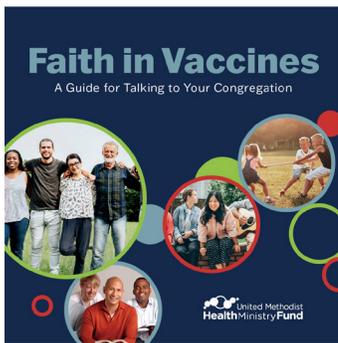
TO SHARE WITH OTHER FAITH LEADERS

POST IDEA 1

Attention Faith Leaders! Are you looking for ways to have an open, honest, and empathetic conversation with your church about vaccinations? The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund has created a multi-denominational sermon guide and toolkit. In this free guide, faith leaders will get access to:

- A worship guide for a two-part sermon series
- A fact sheet and suggestions for faith leaders
- Talking points and suggestions on how to communicate about COVID-19 vaccinations and the pandemic
- Sample social media posts

To download your free guide visit www.healthfund.org/faithinvaccines. #HealthFund #FaithInVaccines



POST IDEA 2

Here are 15 things you can do to improve vaccine acceptance in your congregation:

1. Lead by example. Get vaccinated and encourage your staff to be vaccinated.
2. Share educational materials widely. Post information in common/high visibility areas in your church. Publish information on the church website, on social media platforms, in emails, and in your bulletins.
3. Consider sending a letter or email to your congregants. Start by expressing your concern for the health of your congregants and their families. Provide facts, refer to additional resources, and let them know you are available to answer questions and talk through concerns.
4. Add laments for the pain that COVID-19 has caused. Lament world-wide deaths and losses. Create opportunities to heal as a community.
5. Highlight the mission work the church has done to respond to COVID-19 so the congregation can remember the real impact it has had on the community.
6. Have congregation members give testimonies about their vaccinations.
7. Have congregation members that are doctors/nurses give testimony about the crisis.
8. Create an art wall where congregation members can add their reasons for deciding to get their vaccination.
9. Have pastoral leaders talk about their own vaccination experiences. Live stream or post pictures.

10. Avoid any sermons on how God will protect us from COVID. Instead focus on our acts and role in the world to combat sin and reconcile us to him.
11. Provide opportunities to thank physicians/nurses/front line workers for their efforts during the pandemic.
12. Support those dealing with response to COVID vaccination (back-up care for single parents, care packages).
13. Offer transportation options to enable those whom are homebound to get vaccinated.
14. Be available on a regular schedule to help people register and complete sign-up for COVID vaccination.
15. Work with your local Health Department, pharmacy, or other partners to host a vaccine clinic site.

For a free toolkit with tips and information on talking to your congregation about vaccines, visit www.healthfund.org/faithinvaccines. #HealthFund #FaithInVaccines



POST IDEA 3

Tips for talking to your congregation about vaccinations:

- Start from a place of empathy and understanding
- Acknowledge that getting vaccinated is a personal decision
- Stay focused on the facts
- Focus on the benefits of getting a COVID vaccine
- Explain the health risks associated with declining to be vaccinated
- Be direct

For a free toolkit with tips and information on talking to your congregation about vaccines, visit www.healthfund.org/faithinvaccines. #HealthFund #FaithInVaccines

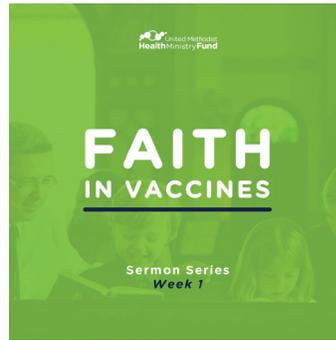
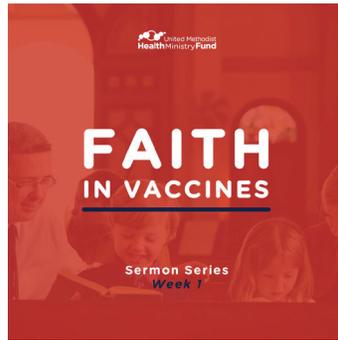
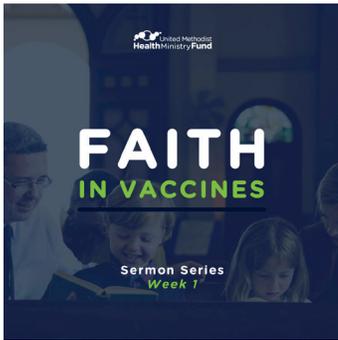


TO SHARE WITH YOUR CONGREGATION

POST IDEA 1

Whether you look at vaccines with excitement, trepidation, curiosity, or frustration, we welcome you to be a part of our church's conversation around the topic of vaccinations. This Sunday we'll start a 2-part sermon series on the topic. We know this is a very difficult and personal subject for some, and we want you to know our intention is to be open and empathetic no matter how you feel.

In this sermon series, we'll discern the truth in the midst of fear, and follow Jesus toward building a loving and connected community within our families, friends, and neighborhoods. #FaithInVaccines



POST IDEA 2

This Sunday, we'll wrap up our sermon series on vaccinations. We appreciate the open, honest, and empathetic conversations we've been having with church members throughout the week.

Remember, we all approach the subject of vaccinations from a different point of view. As we continue our conversations, it's important to remember we do not encourage shaming, blaming, or manipulating people to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Most importantly, we should not discount or dismiss the fears that many people have about the COVID-19 vaccine or other vaccinations. This can lead to more vaccine hesitancy.

Vaccines are an incredibly important to getting things back to normal in our community and congregation. Thanks to all of you who have been willing to participate openly in this important conversation! #FaithInVaccines



POST IDEA 3

Looking for more information on how to talk about the COVID-19 vaccines? Check out this great website from the de Beaumont Foundation. The language we use is an important tool to help more people get vaccinated and help us return to a normal life. www.changingthecovidconversation.com

For even more helpful links, visit www.healthfund.org/faithinvaccines. #HealthFund #FaithInVaccines

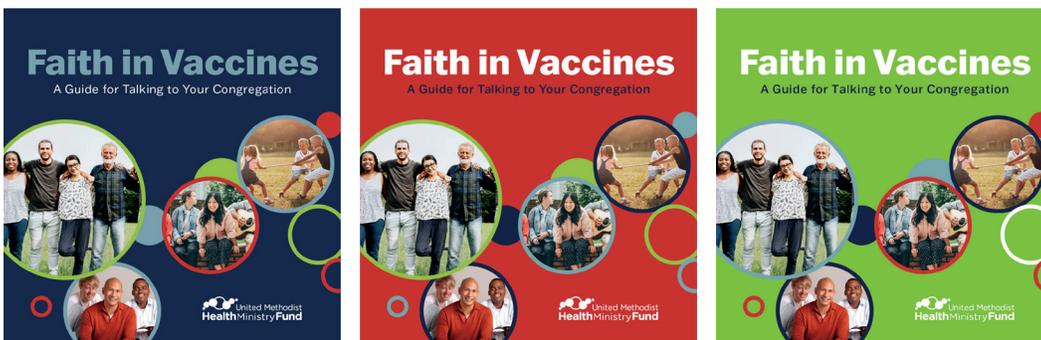


Sample Twitter Posts

TO SHARE WITH OTHER FAITH LEADERS

POST IDEA 1

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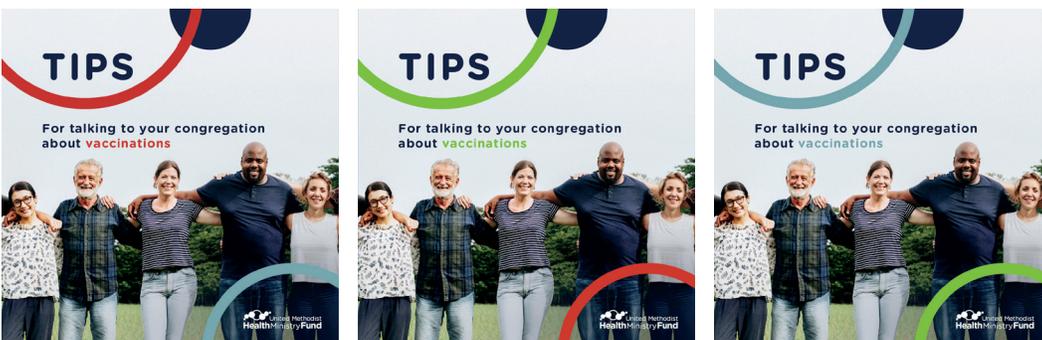
POST IDEA 2

Ready to talk about vaccines with your congregation? Here are 15 things you can do to improve vaccine acceptance. For a free toolkit with tips and information on talking to your congregation about vaccines, visit www.healthfund.org/faithinvaccines. #HealthFund #FaithInVaccines



POST IDEA 3

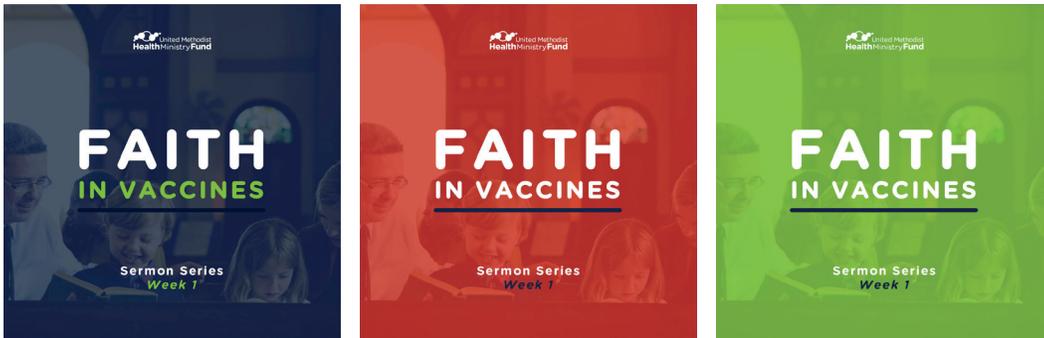
Need tips for talking to your congregation about vaccinations? The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund has developed a toolkit to help you start the conversation. To download your free guide visit www.healthfund.org/faithinvaccines. #HealthFund #FaithInVaccines



TO SHARE WITH YOUR CONGREGATION

POST IDEA 1

This Sunday we'll start a 2-part sermon series on empathy as it relates to vaccines. We know this is a very difficult and personal subject for some, and we want you to know our intention is to be open and understanding. We hope you'll join us! #faithinvaccines



POST IDEA 2

This Sunday, we'll wrap up our sermon series on vaccinations. We appreciate the open, honest, and empathetic conversations we've been having with church members throughout the week. Thank you to everyone who has been willing to participate! #faithinvaccines"



POST IDEA 3

Looking for more information on how to talk about the COVID-19 vaccines? Check out this great website from the de Beaumont Foundation. The language we use is an important tool to help more people get vaccinated and help us return to a normal life. www.changingthecovidconversation.com

