

GENERAL CONFERENCE



**October 2021**

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# REAFFIRMING THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

*This document has been produced by the General Conference Administration, Biblical Research Institute, General Conference Health Ministries, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department, General Conference Office of General Counsel, and Loma Linda University Health. It builds on the immunization statement voted in April 2015 and affirms both this latter statement, and the information on the COVID-19 vaccines shared on December 22, 2020.*

The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest public health crisis in a hundred years. It has devastated populations around the world and severely affected physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, and relational health. In its wake isolation, recurrent surges, economic disruption, and death are all ongoing. We are confronted with mitigation measures such as masking, social (physical) distancing, handwashing, early detection, testing, and contact tracing that have become part of our daily lives.

In the midst of this time of crisis and disruption the Seventh-day Adventist Church is committed to the mission of lifting up Christ, His Word, His righteousness, and the proclamation of His Three Angels' Messages to the world in preparing people, through the Holy Spirit's power, for Jesus' soon coming. The health message is the right arm of the gospel and therefore a healthy lifestyle has been an important part of the beliefs of the Adventist Church since its early years and remains so. We are still committed to live, share, and promote healthy living as expressed by the wholistic Adventist health message entrusted to the Church. The Adventist health studies have confirmed the unequivocal benefits of increased longevity and quality of life through implementing such health practices. These include a balanced vegetarian diet, exercise, drinking adequate volumes of water, regular exercise, careful exposure to sunshine, fresh air, abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful substances, adequate rest and sleep, and importantly, trust in God. These practices enhance and maintain healthy immunity. Beyond those benefits of healthy lifestyle principles and preventive public health practices, the Church affirms and recommends the responsible use of vaccines as an important public health measure, especially during a pandemic. At the same time, the Church respects the rights of individuals' freedom of choice for those who choose not to be vaccinated.  
<https://www.adventist.org/guidelines/immunization/>

The current position of the Church on immunization and vaccines, including COVID-19, builds on the insights of the comprehensive health message Seventh-day Adventists have endorsed early on with ample support in Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White that refer to the importance of disease prevention. As a denomination, we have advocated the synergy of a healthy lifestyle and responsible immunization for more than one hundred years. In the light of the global magnitude of the pandemic, the deaths, disability, and long-term COVID-19 effects that are emerging in all age groups, we encourage our members to consider responsible immunization and the promotion and facilitation of the development of what is commonly termed herd immunity (pre-existing community immunity of approximately 80 percent of the population or more as a result of previous infection and/or vaccination). We are aware that vaccines may have side effects, and these can be severe in a small percentage of cases, including death in rare situations. No vaccine is 100 percent effective. Therefore, our decisions need to carefully take into consideration the risk of taking the vaccine compared to the risks of being infected with COVID-19. The immunity conferred by both the natural infection and the vaccine are time limited and the administration of "booster" doses may be needed. Acquiring a booster shot, upon recommendation from one's health care provider, may further promote personal and public health. The need for such a booster shot does not indicate the "failure" of a vaccine but reflects the nature of antibody levels that may drop over time.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church respects each individual's freedom of choice to make responsible decisions regarding their own health. Since our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and we are Christ's both by creation and redemption, we should personally seek God's will about COVID-19 vaccinations. The decision whether to take the vaccine or not is not a matter of salvation, nor is it related, as some may suggest, to the mark of the beast. It is a matter of personal choice. We firmly believe that in matters of personal conviction we must be guided by the Word of God, our conscience, and informed judgment. In weighing the various options, we should also take into consideration that the benefits of vaccination extend beyond oneself and help to protect the local and global community at large. After personally researching all sides of the question, considering one's own unique health situation, seeking medical counsel, and praying, individuals should then, in consultation with their medical advisor/doctor, make the best choice possible (see 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20; Psalm 32:8; Proverbs 11:14; James 1:5; Isaiah 58:11). As the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists' information on COVID-19 vaccines released on December 18, 2020, and predicated on the 2015 Immunization statement confirms:

"THE DECISION TO BE IMMUNIZED OR NOT IS THE CHOICE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL, AND SHOULD BE TAKEN IN CONSULTATION WITH ONE'S HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER. PERSONAL RESEARCH ON THE SUBJECT IS IMPORTANT. WE ULTIMATELY RELY ON FOLLOWING BIBLICAL HEALTH PRACTICES AND THE SPIRIT OF PROPHECY, AND FOLLOWING GOD'S LEADING IN OUR LIVES, WHICH WILL BRING US PEACE AND ASSURANCE IN OUR DECISION-MAKING."

<https://www.healthministries.com/covid-19-vaccines-addressing-concerns-offering-counsel/>

Countries and societies around the world have previously faced public health mandates in various forms. These have been put in place as a protection, recognizing that the health of the community is a major determinant of individual health and disease susceptibility. Public health practices have been mandated from the time of

Moses and, probably, earlier. More recent examples of mandated public health practices include the banning of smoking on aircraft, and the use of safety belts as a general requirement for all motor vehicles. Over the past 120 years, mandated smallpox vaccination has been implemented in the United States general population and in countries around the world, resulting in a smallpox-free world at present. Numerous other infectious diseases have been brought under control by vaccinations and have also been subject to mandates (e.g. polio, measles, diphtheria). Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in the 1930s were instructed by the Church, as their employer, to receive the smallpox and typhoid immunizations. These requirements have been shared widely over the years in the Church's official publications and acceptance of this requirement by Church members has been positive overall. The requirements for missionaries to be appropriately and responsibly vaccinated continue today. Ellen White did not comment on the issue of religious liberty in connection with vaccination mandates in her lifetime. She clearly understood the wholistic health message entrusted to the Church better than most.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not opposed to public safety and government health mandates. Submission to government authorities is a biblical principle unless it conflicts with obedience to God (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:1-7). In many cases the Seventh-day Adventist Church has supported government mandates in support of health and safety issues. When it comes to COVID-19 vaccinations, we believe individuals have the right to state and defend their conviction whether to be vaccinated or not. Mandates usually allow exemptions for individual religious convictions or health conditions. With widespread personal testing available, individuals may choose instead to submit to regular testing if required.

The Public Affairs and Religious Liberty department of the General Conference (PARL) regards COVID-19 as a Public Health crisis and views connection with vaccines accordingly. PARL provides support and assistance for members who are standing for the religious teachings and doctrines of the Church, as expressed in its system of beliefs and policy statement (and also for other faith groups). We recognize that at times our members will have personal concerns and even conscientious convictions that go beyond the teachings and positions of the Church. In these cases, the Church's religious liberty leaders will do what they can to provide support and counsel on a personal basis, not as a Church position, even at times assisting members in writing their own personal accommodation requests to employers and others. To avoid confusion, however, about the Church's own positions, it will often be the case that in such circumstances the Church will not wish its support or advocacy for the member to be reflected in public correspondence or communications. It is important that the Church preserve its ability to speak to issues that are central to its system of beliefs and identity, and that its influence not be diluted by pursuing personal convictions and agendas that are not central to its Gospel and prophetic concerns.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, in consultation with the Health Ministries and Public Affairs and Religious Liberty departments of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, is convinced that the vaccination programs that are generally being carried out are important for the safety and health of our members and the larger community. Therefore, claims of religious liberty are not used appropriately in objecting to government mandates or employer programs designed to protect the health and safety of their communities.

This has generally been the position of the Church for the last century, since the

modern vaccine program was developed. If we use our religious liberty resources in such personal decision advocacy efforts, we believe that we will weaken our religious liberty stance in the eyes of the government and the public. Such efforts would make it less likely that these arguments will be heard and appreciated when they are used for matters of worship and religious practice. We understand that some of our members view things differently, and we respect those convictions. They may at times have rights that can be pursued under the law, and we will point them towards materials and resources for doing so but cannot directly undertake this personal effort for them.

How has Loma Linda University Health (LLUH), one of our fine denominational health universities, and its school of medicine responded during the pandemic? Currently, 90 percent of our LLUH students are vaccinated as are 97 percent of our doctors. Religious declinations are offered at hospitals for those who feel strongly about not getting the vaccine, but must be accompanied by weekly testing. As a result, COVID-19 reports among students and staff have significantly declined since December 2020.

What will really count during this pandemic and beyond is how we treat each other, particularly within the Church but also within our wider communities. Anger, stigmatization, or vilification should not reside within the body of Christ. We need to relate to each other with respect, love, and compassion.

Instead of focusing on our individual convictions, we should draw more closely together in relationship with Christ and with each other. We should practice encouraging one another and bringing hope to the people of the world as we share God's important Three Angels' Messages and the anticipation of Christ's soon return. We should work on becoming more active in our churches and not create divisions within the wider Church body. As Adventists we are to be an example to others, keeping in mind that the universe is watching.

It is important to care for one another, taking others into account in our practices. This includes the prevention of the spread of deadly disease and, in considering the vaccine or not, having love for one another and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Then, together, we may move forward in faith, "bearing with one another in love" and heeding Heaven's counsel: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2, 3). Christ calls us to not be afraid and to place our assurance in Him as nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:31-39). "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." (Deuteronomy 31:8; also John 16:33) Let us put our hope in Jesus and be encouraged in Him for He has overcome the world!

References and Sources:

<https://www.adventist.org/guidelines/immunization/>

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