

## COVID-19 Vaccines

How can clergy and lay leaders lead in the new vaccination efforts?

Several vaccines to protect against COVID-19 are rolling out across the country. The vaccines will be made available in a phased approach, with health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities to receive the first phase. Next will be people with multiple health concerns which would put them at greater risk of serious complications were they to become infected. These risk factors include chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease and respiratory illnesses, as well as advanced age. Next would likely be older adults without other risk factors, and finally the younger, healthier members of the population.

The Pfizer & Moderna vaccines require two doses given 3-4 weeks apart, (depending on the vaccine given), to develop enough protection against significant illness due to the virus. It is especially important to receive both doses and to receive them on time in order to have the best chance of developing protection from a strong immune response to the vaccine.

Ideally the entire population should be vaccinated. To protect the community, including those who may not be able to receive the vaccine, at least 70% of the population needs to get the vaccine. Once a large enough part of the community is immunized, COVID-19 infection rates will decrease because fewer and fewer people who are exposed are susceptible. This is known as herd immunity, when enough people are protected that transmission of the virus to unprotected people is much less likely. *People with underlying health conditions who are concerned about receiving the vaccine should consult with their health care provider.*

Currently, studies show the vaccine to be about 95 percent effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 illness. But, as remarkably effective as they appear to be, the vaccines are NOT 100 percent effective. They fail to protect about one person in 20. Many people who are asymptomatic and do not know they are infected may spread the virus. It is not yet clear whether the vaccines prevent asymptomatic disease and limit transmission from asymptomatic people.

Therefore, until COVID-19 infection rates are reduced to very low levels so that few people are at risk of exposure, we need to continue to use other means to

protect against the virus. Wear masks, keep social distance, do activities outdoors more than indoors, avoid large gatherings, and wash hands frequently.

Clergy and lay leaders in the United Methodist Church have a unique opportunity and responsibility to speak out, encouraging church members to continue safe practices to mitigate against the spread of the virus and to receive the doses of the vaccine once it is available. In this way we follow the example of John Wesley, who wrote and spoke on the public health issues of his time. We can build bridges of trust and information to care for our neighbors by joining public health efforts combatting COVID-19.

*—Dr. Karen McElfish and the Return to In-Person Worship Work Group*