

# **IMB updates vaccination policy to maximize access**

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RICHMOND, Va. (BP)—Desiring to help its personnel maintain access to unreached peoples and places and remain healthy, the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board announced a policy Sept. 8 related to COVID-19 vaccinations.

This policy addresses the challenges of overseas life and travel requirements for IMB missionary personnel and staff members who travel overseas.

The policy requires IMB missionaries and their children ages 16 and older to be vaccinated against COVID-19 prior to attending field personnel orientation prior to their long-term field service.

IMB missionaries and their children ages 16 and older also are required to be vaccinated against COVID-19 prior to attending a stateside conference during their periodic return to the United States.

Attendance at the two conferences is mandatory for missionaries before initial entry or return to a country of service. The policy also requires staff members who must interact with field personnel at field personnel orientation and stateside conferences to obtain COVID-19 vaccination. The policy is effective immediately.

Volunteers serving with IMB field teams must follow the recommendations and requirements of the government of the hosting country for the volunteer trip. IMB does, however, recommend those who are not required to be vaccinated by the host country to consider being vaccinated, given the risks associated with travel.

The recommendation for volunteers is designed to protect not only the volunteer, but also the field personnel, national partners and ongoing field ministries.

## **Maintain access to unreached, protect health**

“The International Mission Board exists to serve Southern Baptists in carrying out the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations—even to those people in the overpopulated urban cities, even to those in the hardest-to-reach jungles and plains,” said IMB President Paul Chitwood.



“And the IMB is pressing forward to share the gospel even in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic that is no respecter of geographical boundaries or human demographics.”

“We must make every wise decision, even when a decision is exceptionally difficult, that maintains our team members’ access to the growing number of unreached peoples and places around the world where vaccines are required for entry,” Chitwood added. “We also want to do all we can to undergird our team members’ spiritual and physical health to maximize our effectiveness as we serve Southern Baptists in our global gospel endeavors.”

A growing number of the countries in which IMB field personnel serve are requiring proof of a COVID-19 vaccine to enter, remain in or exit the country. Some field personnel have reported incidents in their countries of

service where proof of vaccination must be shown for adults and older children to board a subway, enter a shopping mall, eat in a restaurant, or board an airplane for travel.

Vaccination requirements are not new for the IMB. Since the IMB implemented vaccine requirements for field personnel in the 1980s, the number of vaccine-preventable illnesses have significantly decreased among IMB field personnel and their families.

## **Adhering to WHO and CDC recommendations**

The IMB requires certain vaccines for several reasons: Vaccines prevent unnecessary sickness, suffering, and even death for field personnel and their families; vaccines protect national partners and those who missionaries minister to from contracting illnesses from IMB personnel and their families; vaccines help ensure better health for field personnel so they can focus on the missionary task; and vaccines lower medical expenses, which fosters good stewardship of the funds that have been entrusted to IMB.

IMB's medical team and senior leadership team are adhering to precautions recommended by the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and are following all local and federal regulations with the policy. As of Sept. 3, 2021, the Pfizer vaccination is available in the United States and is authorized for everyone age 16 and older. Personnel and staff received a list of additional approved vaccines that fulfill the policy for adults, as well as directives for those personnel who have a physician-documented medical exception.

Senior leaders acknowledge that the policy may result in some field personnel and staff members choosing not to join the IMB; to take a leave

of absence; or to discontinue their employment with the IMB because of the requirement. Throughout the years, others have opted out of serving internationally with IMB due to other vaccine requirements.

“We take seriously our responsibility to make the best decisions we can for those serving with IMB,” said Todd Lafferty, IMB executive vice president. “The challenges of COVID-19 continue to deeply affect us all. Some have lost loved ones, others have dealt personally with terrible illness, and many remain in lockdown throughout the world. Just when it seems the pandemic may be loosening its grip, more information arrives, and we encounter new complications.”

“Praise the Lord that we all have hope and faith in Jesus Christ to carry us through these turbulent times,” Lafferty added. “We know exactly who is in control, and we cannot lose sight of how God is using us for his purpose and mission in our day. We are called to bring the hope of eternal life to those who have not yet had the opportunity to hear the gospel.”

## **Navigating difficult decisions**

Chitwood said IMB’s senior leadership team and medical personnel continue to navigate many difficult decisions stemming from COVID-19 and the ways in which it affects various family situations and plans for IMB’s field personnel and staff. He said they continue to seek God’s wisdom as the organization navigates each difficult decision and as conditions continue to change.

Ultimately, he said, the IMB aims to remain on mission, unwavering in its work to advance the gospel.

“We’re praying that this will be a time of global awakening, that many would come to know the Lord as the fear of the global pandemic lingers,” Chitwood said. “We know that the Lord has given an ultimate cure.

“As humans, we’re afraid of death, but the believer doesn’t have to be afraid of death. Death has no sting, and the Lord’s given us his vision in Revelation 7:9—a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes, all peoples, all languages around the throne in heaven.

“We’re praying and trusting that some will be there because of the way God used this pandemic to foster a new openness to the gospel. We want to be on the field to take that good news to these souls.”