

# Christian researcher says ‘help is on the way’ in fighting COVID

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COVID-19 is not yet “in the rearview mirror,” but millions of Americans could be vaccinated from the virus in the near future, said Francis Collins, director of the [National Institutes of Health](#).

“It won’t happen overnight,” said Collins—a noted evangelical Christian physician-geneticist, best known for mapping the human genome—in a Dec. 3 webinar sponsored by the Southern Baptist [Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission](#). “The good news is that help is on the way.”

## Embrace truth, not fear

Vaccines potentially can end the pandemic, but that depends on their widespread acceptance by Americans, he emphasized.

In an [online conversation](#) with ERLC President Russell Moore, Collins encouraged fellow Christians to reject “wild, crazy ideas” about vaccines and “pretty outrageous” conspiracy theories promoted on social media.

He urged them to embrace truth and consider hard evidence instead of surrendering to doubts driven by fear. And he called on Christians to follow the Apostle Paul’s admonition in Philippians 4:9 to focus on “whatever is true, ... honest ... (and) of good report.”

“Here’s a great opportunity for Christians to say, ‘Let’s really look at the truth of the situation and evaluate what the evidence demonstrates for and against the idea that this is something I want to take advantage of myself,’” Collins said.

Current evidence indicates “a pretty good balance of benefits and risks that you’d want to engage in and probably take advantage of yourself and roll up your sleeve,” he said.

## Vaccine appears safe and effective

Collins expressed confidence in the research and development process that led to the first two vaccines likely to receive FDA approval for emergency use this month.

“We were delighted, thrilled, amazed to see that it looks like the effectiveness is about 95 percent,” he said. “We’re on a very good path.”

As part of Operation Warp Speed, manufacture and production of the vaccines by manufacturers proceeded simultaneously with the trials, he explained.



Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, discusses vaccines to combat the COVID-19 virus. (Screen Capture)

That means 40 million doses—enough to provide 20 million Americans the necessary two injections one month apart—should be ready for health care providers and high-risk nursing home and assisted living residents soon after the vaccines are approved, he said.

While “dead time” in production was eliminated, researchers exercised exceptional rigor to ensure the vaccines’ safety and efficacy, Collins said. Clinical trials involving 4,000 people are typical for approval of new drugs, he said. In contrast, 43,000 were involved in trials for the vaccine Pfizer developed and 30,000 for the vaccine Moderna developed, he said.

The “Operation Warp Speed” name was meant to communicate the idea that researchers were not bogged down in bureaucratic red tape, but Collins acknowledged it may have conveyed the incorrect impression that they were cutting corners.

“I want to assure you as a scientist, as a physician, as a researcher who has been in the middle of all this since January, we have done nothing to compromise in even the smallest way the safety or efficacy standards for these vaccines,” he said.

Every medical intervention carries some level of risk, but the potential benefits of the vaccines in combating a virus that has claimed 280,000 American lives greatly outweighs the slight risks, he said.

## **Vaccines a ‘life-saving intervention’**

He acknowledged the concerns of abortion opponents. A cell line from an elective abortion performed in Scandinavia in 1972 was used in both lab tests and production of vaccines from AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson.

No fetal tissue was used in the production line of the vaccines developed by Pfizer and BioNTech or Moderna, the first two vaccines that will be considered by the FDA, Collins stressed, although they did use some abortion-derived cells in certain lab tests.

As Christians consider the ethical implications of the drugs’ development and production, they should keep in mind the vaccines are “a life-saving

intervention.”

When asked about waiting for “herd immunity” to provide widespread protection from the virus, Collins said there would be “millions of us no longer around” by the time that threshold is reached.

“That’s not a Christian answer if we love our neighbors,” he said.

## **Adopt common-sense measures**

Until the pandemic is under control, Collins urged churches to consider remote virtual worship services as the safest option. While worshippers may wear masks when entering a sanctuary, Christians find it difficult not to greet each other with a hug or handshake, he said.

“I know people are tired, but the virus does not care that we are tired,” he said.

While Americans wait for vaccinations to become widely available, Collins urged them to follow the “3 Ws”—“wear your mask, watch your (six-foot) distance and wash your hands.”

Mask-wearing is “not a political statement,” an infringement upon liberty or a sign of weakness, he insisted.

Rather, a mask is “a life-saving medical device,” and Americans need to “adopt common-sense measures” to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Masks provide some protection for those who wear them but primarily serve to protect the well-being of others.

“That sounds like a Christian action if I’ve ever heard one,” he said.

# **‘I don’t have a crystal ball’**

Asked when churches can expect to return to their normal schedule of activities safely, Collins admitted, “I don’t have a crystal ball.”

However, he said, health care workers, high-risk individuals and essential workers should be vaccinated by April.

By next summer, most American adults likely will have had the opportunity to receive vaccinations. So, Collins said, he is “guardedly optimistic” activities such as Vacation Bible Schools might be scheduled then. By fall 2021, he offered hope for a return to some sense of normalcy.

“But there are a lot of steps between now and then. And, of course, it will go better if we don’t have our healthcare system utterly devastated by the ongoing pandemic that we could have potentially turned around by all of us” by observing health and safety guidelines, he said.

Collins challenged Christians to respond to their calling to be “agents of healing.” They can help researchers expedite treatment for patients with COVID-19 by participating in clinical trials, he said. Those who have survived the virus can donate plasma, he added. To learn more or volunteer, [click here](#).