

# **Some religious leaders urge vaccine exemptions for military**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—More than 1,700 religious leaders organized by former President Donald Trump’s faith advisers are urging the U.S. military to grant religious exemptions to COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The group alleges service members with spiritual objections to the inoculations are being “stripped of their religious liberties.”

While the effort singled out COVID-19 vaccine mandates first initiated by President Joe Biden, it did not grapple with similar military mandates that predated the ongoing pandemic.

It also lacked support from at least one of Trump’s longtime faith advisers, Pastor Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas—a hint at possible divisions among the former president’s evangelical allies regarding COVID-19.

## **Call for religious exemptions**

In a letter sent to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Nov. 15, the faith leaders insisted military brass grant exemptions to COVID-19 vaccines before looming deadlines.

“We should be rewarding their bravery and the bravery of all our men and women in uniform, by not forcing them to choose between sincere religious convictions and staying in the military,” the letter read.

“We urge you to grant religious exemptions as soon as possible for every American risking their lives to defend our country. Religious freedom is

enshrined in our Constitution and must always be protected.”

The letter was organized by the National Faith Advisory Board, a group founded in September with the former president’s support and led by Paula White-Cain, a Florida pastor who oversaw the Trump administration’s faith office.



Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano (File Photo)

Signers of the letter included several evangelical Christian leaders who advised Trump, such as Pastor Jack Graham of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, televangelists Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, and Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

Other prominent signers included Ralph Reed, founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition; former Minnesota congresswoman Michele Bachmann; and conservative commentator Eric Metaxas.

The letter zeroed in on the COVID-19 vaccine but did not mention other long-standing vaccine requirements for members of the military. According to *The Washington Post*, neither the Army nor the Navy granted any religious exemptions to vaccine requirements over the past seven years—including during Trump’s tenure.

Representatives for the advisory board did not immediately respond to questions about whether they took issue with the military's previous record of not granting vaccine exemptions on religious grounds.

## **Most active-duty personnel vaccinated**

Most active-duty service members have already been vaccinated against COVID-19, with the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force reporting inoculation rates of at least one dose ranging from 94 percent to 99 percent (the Air Force's data includes members of the newly created Space Force).

But holdouts have caused controversy, with critics noting military leaders are largely rejecting religious accommodation requests. For example: As of Nov. 16, the Air Force reported it was processing 4,817 such requests but had yet to grant any.



In addition, large swaths of Reserve units—whose vaccination deadlines range from later this year to into next summer—have yet to get the shots.

Among those siding with faith-fueled refusals is Catholic Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, the head of the Archdiocese for Military Services who also signed on to the board's letter. Although many U.S. dioceses have refused to issue religious exemptions for Catholics, Broglio published a statement last month in which he insisted that denying religious exemptions to the vaccine would be "morally reprehensible."

"Even if an individual's decision seems erroneous or inconsistent to others, conscience does not lose its dignity," he argued.

Broglio noted some Catholics have raised concerns about vaccine

manufacturers' use of cells believed to have been originally derived from tissue from an aborted fetus in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, taking COVID-19 vaccines crafted with the use of such cell lines—a common practice throughout the medical industry—was deemed morally acceptable by Vatican officials, and Swiss Guard troops tasked with protecting the Catholic city-state were subjected to a strict vaccine mandate this year.

## Division in the ranks?



Robert Jeffress

Notably absent among the signers of the board letter was longtime Trump supporter Jeffress, who has taken a decidedly different stance on the question of religion and COVID-19 vaccines. He told The Associated Press in September via email that “there is no credible religious argument against the vaccines.”

He added: “Christians who are troubled by the use of a fetal cell line for the testing of the vaccines would also have to abstain from the use of Tylenol, Pepto Bismol, Ibuprofen, and other products that used the same cell line if they are sincere in their objection.”

Some religious leaders have challenged vaccine mandates or the COVID-19 vaccines themselves, but faith groups have also been among the most vocal

supporters of COVID-19 vaccination.

Religious leaders participated in COVID-19 vaccine trials and opened up their sanctuaries to assist with vaccine rollout, and Pope Francis has described getting vaccinated against the novel coronavirus as “an act of love.”