Faith & Vaccines

Researchers reach out to faith communities.

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The HIV Vaccine Trials Network (HVTN) Faith Initiative launched on World AIDS Day 2021 to expand on the success of an earlier program headed by science leaders and faith ambassadors that countered COVID-19 misinformation and encouraged COVID vaccinations. In honor of National Faith HIV/AIDS Day, observed the last Sunday in August, POZ spoke with Ulysses Burley III, MD, MPH, the national initiative's project director.

Which religious communities do you work with?

The faith ambassadors represent Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and the Baha'i faith. However, our faith networks also reach Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Indigenous faith communities.

Do you enroll folks in trials?

The HVTN Faith Initiative isn't directly involved in HIV vaccine trials. Our mandate is to [offer] culturally competent, socially relevant and theologically sound information, education and capacity building training from trusted community voices in science and faith. If our outreach compels people of faith to volunteer for an HIV vaccine trial, we work with our HVTN colleagues to connect them with one of the four Phase I HIV vaccine trials currently recruiting adults across about 41 sites in the United States. The HVTN has recently launched the "Help End HIV" campaign (HelpEndHIV.org), which features a national Red Ribbon Registry designed to educate and match people who are interested in supporting HIV vaccine research with HIV clinical trials.

Why include faith communities in this research?

Faith—much like scientific research—is rooted in the desire for abundant life for all, with healing as a key tenet in every sacred text. Faith leaders continue to be trusted messengers, particularly in BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of color] communities hesitant to participate in research studies due to a legacy of medical abuse and present-day trauma. Science is only as useful as the people who are willing to use it. With 37 million people living with HIV [worldwide] and 40,000 new annual HIV diagnoses in the U.S. alone, even a marginally effective HIV vaccine would save millions of lives. The active pursuit of an effective HIV vaccine that can bring wellness and wholeness to the world is not just theoretical but theological as well.

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