

Advisory: Religious Exemption and the COVID 19 Vaccine

Assemblies of God, Northern California and Nevada District Council

What should the pastor do when a church member asks them to provide them a theological statement, a letter, or otherwise endorse their application for a religious exemption to the COVID 19 vaccine?

The issue of mandatory vaccines has always been a controversial intersection, where personal religious freedom crosses paths with the public interest. In recent days, this debate has resurfaced as schools, the military, and employers have announced vaccine mandates. Many pastors and church members have contacted us to know if the AG has a position on this issue, and whether the Pastor can write a letter endorsing a church member's application for a religious exemption.

The short answer is that the Assemblies of God does not have a doctrinal statement on the matter, but a statement from the church or denomination is not necessary anyway—application for a religious exemption requires the individual to state their personal religious belief, a statement from the church would not be sufficient.

The longer answer requires us to review the legal and theological issues separately, and then bring them together.

First, it's important to understand the basis for a religious exemption:

Very few religious groups in America have adopted a theological statement against vaccination. Some religious groups have expressed a general "faith over medicine" theology, which is often a basis for selective rejection of medical treatment or vaccines, but even those statements don't prohibit all medical treatment completely.

The Assemblies of God has not adopted a "faith over medicine" theology. On the contrary, the AG position paper on Divine Healing contains two affirmations of the value and role of medical treatment, indicating that the fellowship holds a "faith and medicine" view. Consistent with this, our fellowship has historically looked unfavorably on those that have withheld medical treatment from those that are sick, and instead relied solely on prayer.

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But medical care and vaccinations are not necessarily the same thing, and one may reasonably accept the one and object to the other. There are many AG ministers and members that do not have a faith over medicine theology, but still have a theological belief against vaccinations. This is a “personal faith” decision not an “essential faith” decision. It is a legitimate position, even if it is not the official church position. (The official position is: “either are valid.”)

And so, if a church member has a sincere religious objection, they will have opportunity to express and explain their religious belief on their application. But a statement from the church will not satisfy, it needs to be their statement.

Second, it’s important to understand the legal basis for religious exemption.

Both federal and state law allows public schools and certain employers to require their people to be vaccinated. These laws are pursuant to the public interest to combat contagious diseases and promote public health. Federal law also guarantees that individuals have a right to be free from religious discrimination. In order to reconcile these two rights, the law requires employers to make “reasonable accommodation” for individuals with a genuine religious objection to the vaccine.

However, you should also be aware that “reasonable accommodation” does not mean “no consequences.” It could mean assigning the employee to a different job with less public exposure. And if there are reasonable accommodations can’t be made, then it may result in termination of employment. Being granted a religious exemption does not mean that the individual will be exempt from the consequences of the decision.

Ultimately, this is a personal faith decision the individual is making, and since their decision may have significant consequences, they should take responsibility for their convictions and their choices.

Note: Many organizations are developing their own official-looking religious exemption application. Some of these versions ask for the name of a “recognized religious organization”

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and/or ask for a pastor's signature. However, it is not required that a person be a member of an religious organization, or that they obtain a pastor's signature. The applicant's own statement and signature is all that is necessary.