

February 16, 2021

President Joseph Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC

Dear President Biden:

We, the undersigned religious organizations, call on you during this global health crisis to take every possible step to create a just and equitable policy toward the development, manufacture, and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. We represent diverse faith communities with the shared value that the lives of each person -- young or old, all colors and genders, indigenous or migrant, laborer or CEO -- are equally beloved and that it is our responsibility to ensure the preservation and dignity of all. Our lives are intertwined, making COVID-19 vaccines accessible to all is a race to save humanity.

Our community rejoiced when your Administration rejoined the World Health Organization and pledged resources to global vaccine alliances as one of its first acts. COVID-19 is impervious to borders, wealth, or level of development, and it's spread across the globe, reminds us, as Pope Francis noted, that we are "all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all."¹ Over a year after its emergence, the pandemic continues to rage, taking the lives of over a million people and straining human and material resources. As people of faith, we believe it is our moral responsibility to save all lives. As these words from the Quran remind us: "If anyone saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of the whole humanity."²

A vaccine must be distributed both equitably and timely, so that every health care and essential worker and those at highest risk of infection are inoculated first regardless of where they live in the world or the level of wealth or development of the country. Failure to do so undermines the world's capacity to develop herd immunity against the virus. Given the inequities of global distribution thus far, even as the U.S. and other wealthy countries expand vaccinations, without a dramatic change in global manufacturing production, the pandemic will continue to rage in developing countries for years. This lack creates continued health risk for the U.S. as well as developing nations. COVID-19 has made it clear that we are a global village.

With this in mind, we write today to urge your Administration to undertake the following actions to remove barriers to vaccine production and equitable distribution everywhere:

¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter "Fratelli Tutti", n. 32.

² The Quran 5:32.

Mass production of available global vaccines needs to happen immediately. The technology is there and scientists in specific pharmaceutical companies hold the knowledge and property of life-saving vaccines. The production of these vaccines must meet global demand. No company or companies can do it alone.

- Since October 2020, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been engaged in discussions regarding whether to invoke an intellectual property rights waiver under the TRIPS Agreement for prevention, containment and treatment of COVID-19 in order to enable increased production of COVID-19 tests, treatments and vaccines. In this ongoing global emergency, all nations must cooperate for the common good, and it is essential that we do not let intellectual property rights create “barriers to the timely access to affordable medical products including vaccines and medicines or to scaling-up of research, development, manufacturing and supply of medical products essential to combat COVID-19.”³ As a global faith community concerned about the health of vulnerable people around the world, we support this life-saving waiver. Waiving intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines would remove a key barrier to enabling widespread manufacturing on a scale needed to quell the pandemic, lower costs and ensure equal access. As Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention stated, “Each human life is more significant than a trillion-dollar gross national product. Stocks and bonds are important, yes, but human beings are created in the image of God.”⁴
- Our best hope rests on continued development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) and associated organizations secured the commitment and funding of 82 developed nations and 92 lower-income nations to the COVAX Facility platform to support the research, development, and manufacturing of over 150 possible vaccines with the goal of producing and distributing 2 billion doses by the end of 2021. Each participant nation will receive enough vaccines for 20 percent of their population, ostensibly enough to inoculate health care workers, the elderly, and those most at risk. Even with new U.S. commitments, there is not enough production planned to end the COVID pandemic in a timely manner. Yet, our humanity depends on it. As Pope Francis reminds us, “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together.”⁵
- Progress toward creating COVID-19 vaccines has proceeded at a historically unprecedented pace. Much of this progress is attributed to the unprecedented scale of resources being devoted to addressing COVID-19 by governments around the world. The U.S. government alone has committed more than \$13 billion dollars to create vaccines ⁶.

³ Cfr. Doc IP/C/W/669.

⁴ Russell Moore, “God Doesn’t Want Us to Sacrifice the Old,” *New York Times*, 26 March 2020.

⁵ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter “Fratelli tutti”, n. 32.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Fact Sheet: Explaining Operation Warp Speed [Internet]. Washington (DC): HHS; 2020 [cited 2020 Oct 5]. Available from: <https://www.hhs.gov/coronavirus/explaining-operation-warp-speed/index.html> Google Scholar

Given the significant investment of U.S. taxpayer dollars to fund vaccines as well as the global crisis at hand, we implore your Administration to use existing legal authority to accelerate global vaccine manufacturing including by sharing vaccine intellectual property with qualified manufacturers around the world and meaningfully supporting efforts to build global manufacturing capacity. The U.S. can lead the way to expand production, thus overcoming scarcity, rationing, and preventable death.

- Additionally, we urge your Administration to support the issuance of \$2 trillion special drawing rights at the IMF. These new SDRs are needed to help low and middle-income countries to purchase vaccines, locally produce vaccines, and revive their economies to save lives. The World Bank estimates that the COVID-19-related economic crisis is on track to create the worst global economic catastrophe, including putting 40 million people into abject poverty and famine. We have the means to stop this through the SDRs, and the U.S. must lead the way.
- Current efforts to respond to COVID-19 are reinforcing existing inequalities within and between countries. Rich countries have bought up much of the current supply of vaccines leaving little access to vaccines for developing countries. Even within wealthy nations, like the United States, the wealthy are securing vaccinations at higher rates than those struggling in poverty. Black, Brown and Indigenous communities, who are about three times more likely to endure COVID-19 related hospitalizations and almost twice as likely to die from the virus compared to white people, do not have adequate access to these lifesaving medicines. The most marginalized, including those in prisons and migrants in detention, are desperately neglected and must be prioritized. We call for just and equal distribution of available vaccines globally and nationally.

Going forward, the policies of the United States must be one of solidarity with all peoples in order to respect and promote human life and dignity. The words of Jeremiah 8:22 ring loudly today: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?” We must act accordingly, for the very nature of this disease is that a threat to any one life is a threat to all. One year out, we are making progress, but we must remove barriers undermining the pace at which all get access to these life-saving vaccines.

Signed,

Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN)
American Friends Service Committee
American Jewish World Service
Association of Concerned Africa Scholars (USA)
Churches for Middle East Peace
Church World Service
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries

DC Dorothy Day Catholic Worker
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Faith in Public Life
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Islamic Society of North America
Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Pax Christi USA
Poligon Education Fund
Presbyterian Church of the USA
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team
The Episcopal Church
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society
TNUMC Board of Church and Society
Torture Abolition And Survivors Support Coalition International
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries