

'We've come this far by faith:' Vaccines, religion, and community in Arkansas



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At Bethesda Worship and Healing Missionary Baptist Church in Jonesboro, Arkansas, the Reverend Kenneth B. Thomas Sr. preaches the gospel of "Mask it, vax it or choose the casket. The choice is yours."

In Craighead County, where Jonesboro is located, only about 34 percent of all eligible people are fully vaccinated against COVID-19. That figure is around 10 percent lower than the state as a whole, and 20 percent lower than the national average.

On a recent Sunday, the reverend urged his majority-Black congregation to get vaccinated. "The virus may not take you out, but it's serious," he said, in his booming bass voice. "Just because you haven't been sick doesn't mean you won't get sick."

On cue, the choir sang We've Come This Far by Faith, as if testifying about the past 18 months and the burdens ahead as new variants cause more illness and death across the nation.





Three-year-old Lyrica Ray and her mother, Sharon Alexander, attend Sunday worship service at Bethesda Worship and Healing Center in Jonesboro, Arkansas on August 8, 2021.

Thomas has seen how the pandemic and vaccination efforts have played out in his community. In addition to serving as a pastor, Thomas owns Daddy's Choice Barber Shop; he also coaches sports and teaches math and social studies at a local junior high school.

In each of those spaces, he's seen the casualties of a pandemic that is complicated, multi-faceted, and doesn't have a neat beginning or end. Jonesboro accounts for 78,394 of the county's population of 111,000 people, which recently ranked second in the state for new cases of COVID-19. About 10 percent of the county's population currently has the virus, according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Thomas recognizes that schools, barber shops, beauty salons, and places of worship function as both safe havens and information centers in many Black communities. He also knows that everyone who sits in his church pew or in his barber shop chair isn't vaccinated, so he uses each encounter as a teaching moment.





Top: Julian Turner, 36, receives a haircut at Daddy's Choice Barber Shop in Jonesboro, Arkansas on August 6, 2021. Shop owner Rev Kenneth B Thomas Sr encourages his clientele to get vaccinated. Left: Kadejus Williams receives a facial and beard treatment before getting a haircut at Daddy's Choice Barber Shop in Jonesboro, Arkansas on August 6, 2021. Right: When asked about the COVID-19 vaccine, Julian Turner said: "It helps us."

The reasons he hears for not getting vaccinated are as varied and nuanced as the haircuts he gives. Andre Jones—a client who has an appointment about every two weeks for a beard treatment, facial and line up—is still hesitant about the vaccine. He arrived at the shop without a mask.

"I don't feel like I need the vaccine, but I'm considering it. I'm open to it. But I've never had a flu shot, either," said Jones, who has a 10-year-old daughter.

Still, he acknowledges that the virus isn't a hoax.

"It is real and it is deadly. A lot of friends have been near death and some have been on oxygen," he said.



Camden Woods, 13, checks his haircut at Daddy's Choice Barber Shop in Jonesboro, Arkansas on August 6, 2021. Woods is vaccinated.

Latoshia Woods, who was recently at the barber shop getting her 13-year-old son's hair cut for the first day of school, says that she's "pro-vaccine," partially because of her oldest child's kidney condition. While she, her husband, and a son have been fully vaccinated, two other sons are still too young to be vaccinated.

"We shouldn't have to lose millions more people to the virus while they wait for the longevity of research on the vaccine," Woods said. "And by having people die from the virus, we are decreasing our representation in the African American community in the nation," she said, watching her eldest son get his haircut. "We have to think about the children who can't get vaccinated. It's more dangerous not to vaccinate than to vaccinate."

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— Latoshia Woods

Earlier this year, Thomas received the Pfizer vaccine; he wears a mask and gloves when in contact with people outside of his family.

"I wanted to be the guinea pig for my family, my church family, my clients, and everybody," Thomas said. "I said to them, 'I'll take the vaccine and you see how I do.' I didn't have any side effects."

Thomas' decision to get vaccinated gave Rose Robinson, Bethesda's financial secretary, the assurance she needed to be vaccinated. "When he started talking about the shot, he tried to put people at ease. We kind of made a joke out of it, but we know it is serious," said Robinson, 68. "That kind of put me at ease. And he also talked about how God put these scientists in these positions and we should listen to them."



The Rev. Kenneth B. Thomas Sr., pastor of Bethesda Worship and Healing Center in Jonesboro, Arkansas, prays before preaching during Sunday service on August 8, 2021. Thomas encourages his members to get vaccinated.

Like many pastors, Thomas has eulogized some members. Others haven't returned to the church since it reopened in June 2020 for fear of exposure.

The congregation, which once numbered 150 members, has dwindled to about 35 people at Sunday service.

"A lot of people have made their mind up. It doesn't make sense to try to shame them into getting vaccinated."

— Claude Daley, church deacon

When the church first reopened after being closed from March to June 2020, Thomas said that one family walked out because they didn't want to wear masks, while another member who had lost his mother to COVID-19 wouldn't leave his house, let alone come to church.



Congregants of Bethesda Worship and Healing Center in Jonesboro, Arkansas pray during Sunday service on August 8, 2021.

In Jonesboro, Thomas is an important voice in the ongoing vaccine conversation. "I see myself in a position of trust," and in the Bible that comes with responsibility.

While the roles he plays in his community are unique, his experience is one that countless other leaders are facing nationwide. Thomas doesn't know how effective his efforts are, he just knows how people have—or haven't—responded.

"If every preacher and every leader were saying the same thing about the virus, more people would be willing to take the vaccine."

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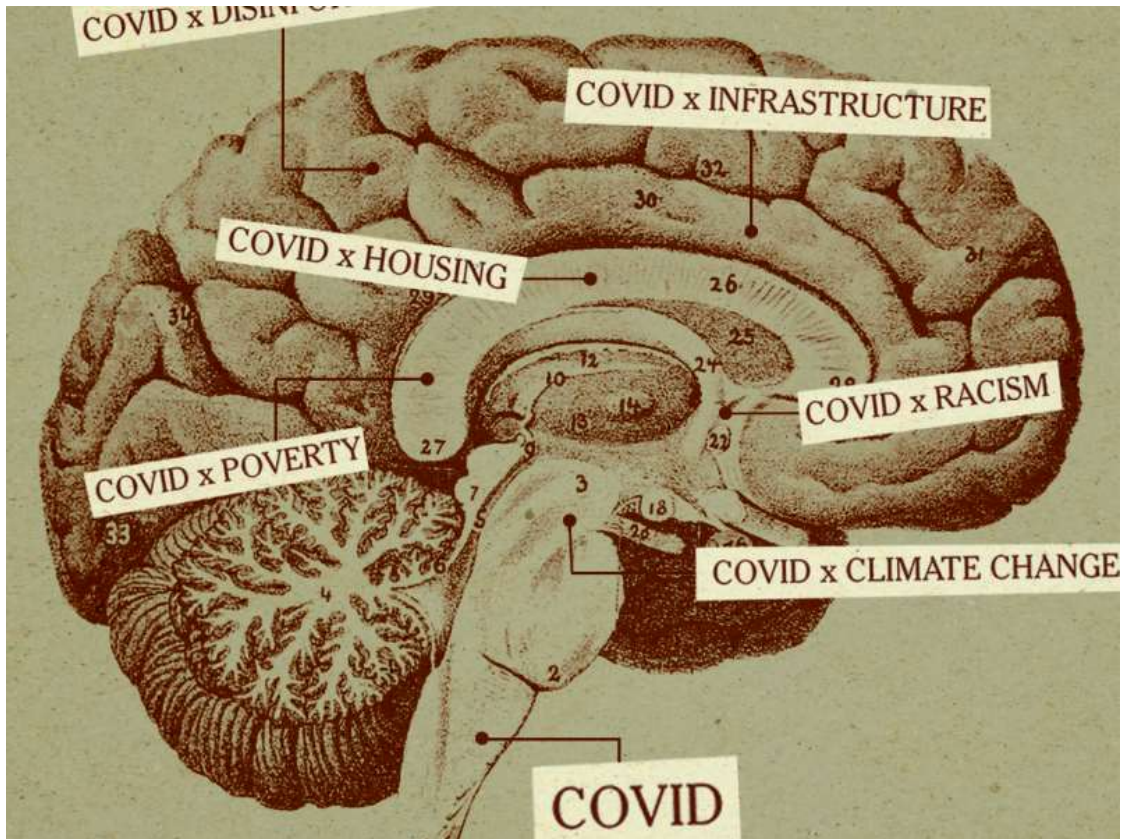
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