

The logo features the text "NC Rural Coalition Fighting COVID-19" in orange on a dark blue background. To the right, there is a graphic of overlapping triangles in shades of blue and orange, forming a larger triangular shape that points to the right.

## NC Rural Coalition Fighting COVID-19

NC Rural Coalition Fighting COVID-19  
July 21, 2021 \* Meeting notes

Facilitator: Todd Brantley, VP of Public Affairs, NC Rural Center

Speakers: Brianna Goodwin, Executive Director, Robeson County Church & Community Center  
Brian Foreman, Director, [Campbell Youth Theological Institute](#) and Associate Campus Minister at Campbell University

*Topic: How faith communities can help in the recovery and response to COVID-19.*

Todd Brantley welcomed participants and guests and reviewed the background of the Coalition. The group, comprised of non-profit and government agencies, was formed to share and disseminate information regarding the fight against COVID-19 and hear what's working and not from people in communities. The Coalition is made up of a partnership with the Foundation for Health Leadership & Innovation, The Governor's Task Force, Hometown Strong; NCAHEC, The Rural Center, and the Office of Rural Health, a division of the NC Department of Health & Human Services. The information gathered is shared with NCDHHS to help provide needed resources to those communities. Todd introduced Brianna Goodwin to discuss how faith communities, which are strong community anchors and trusted sources, can aid in the response and recovery from COVID-19.

Brianna described her organization as a 50 year old faith based non-profit founded by the United Methodist Church. They consider themselves domestic missionaries, and focus on emergency assistance. Robeson County is the poorest county in NC and is a minority majority county. Thirty percent of its citizens are in poverty.

The largest barrier to vaccine distribution is transportation. Lumberton is the county seat and it's a 30 minute drive to the closest remote communities. People can't get to the health department where the vaccine is distributed due to no vehicle, no gas money and no public transportation. As a solution, her organization has partnered with the library system, which is easily reached by walking, to distribute vaccines. They have also partnered with the school system, which is convenient and well known, and where the staff is trusted. As of yesterday, 25% of the county was vaccinated. Bringing the vaccine to the community has made it accessible.

Vaccine hesitancy can be overcome by those who have been vaccinated sharing their stories. Brianna recounted that one staff member was reluctant to receive the vaccine, but finally did. Once she was vaccinated, the rest of the staff got the vaccine. People look to their immediate supervisors for guidance. The same goes for church leaders. If a pastor doesn't get vaccinated, the congregation won't. Getting the leadership to publicize that they've been vaccinated will encourage others to do so. Brianna has recorded videos that the churches present.

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COVID-19**

Although social media works outside the county, within Robeson County, word of mouth is 10x more powerful. Vaccination has been presented as a civic duty to protect other citizens. A digital presence has been updated, but phone calls and word of mouth are far more effective.

Two vaccination sites in Lumberton have been funded by two grants. Plans are under way to create a Back-to-School vax event, on Saturday, August 7, from 9:00-2:00, providing school supplies, vendors from the community college to provide information and \$25 gift cards. The health department will distribute the vaccine. The Pfizer vaccine is being used for the event, since individuals 12+ can receive it, so students can be vaccinated. Moderna is only available to people over 18 years old. The event to supply the second dose of the vaccine will be smaller.

What methods were effective to persuade congregants to get the vaccine?

Brianna responded, saying Jesus would've received the vaccine if He were here today, to protect people around us, changes their perspective. Love God, love others. How can you love others if you put them at risk? Relating the sacrifices Jesus made for us, and that He lived among the suffering, can be equated to those who have suffered with COVID-19. What would Jesus do?

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From the chat: Lisa Bennett: We have a CHW program with DHHS ORH covering the Charlotte area and surrounding counties. Mecklenburg Health hosted a recent Doors to Doses event.

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Todd introduced Brian Foreman, and asked about what work he is doing at Campbell University and what he's been doing to build those relationships in the county. He also asked, what has changed since February and what insights could he share.

Brian recounted that everything stopped in March 2019 when the pandemic hit. There was a moratorium on in-person community engagement, so they had to decide how to build out collaboration efforts to support communities. The School of Medicine received emergency COVID-19 funding and bought three mobile healthcare cruisers and went around the state to do health and vaccine clinics. They were allowed to be in the communities. In doing so, they could find out where support was lacking and asked how the University could support what they were doing.

The church and community have a trust exchange, which is critical to the work the University is doing. Most congregations have stopped trying to convince people to get vaccinated. Instead, they are telling stories of why they got vaccinated. He recounted a story of an 18 year old who was reluctant to get vaccinated, even though his parents were, due to peer pressure and misinformation. It's important that

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the voices people are hearing are well informed, such as those of community organizers and leaders, and clergy, and to share success stories instead of horror stories. The faith community faced death in the community and the former bravado of faith, that God will take care of us, is countered with God will save us through the gifts and talents of the community.

The students were on the Campbell campus the entire year and COVID cases were low, since students mostly stayed in their bubbles. Indiana University, Wake Forest and Duke University won't allow unvaccinated students on campus in the fall, which may lead to confusion. If students are getting the message not to get vaccinated, while being told the way to success in life is to get an education, these requirements by universities to get vaccinated are perceived as additional barriers and restrictions to education.

Does the same message regarding vaccine safety works across different age groups to build trust? Supporters of NC State baseball or SE conference football may hear coaches say that they want all players to be vaccinated. It's the same message, but a different vehicle. Dr. David Tillman of the Campbell Public Health Program, received a grant from the Interfaith Youth Corp for a Faith and Vax Ambassadors Program. Students will work in four communities to learn what obstacles and hesitancy exist to the vaccine. They are an African American faith community in Halifax County, a Latinx community in Sampson County, a church community in the Cohari tribe, and conservative Evangelical churches in Harnett County. They're working to identify what's causing the hesitancy, and what is needed to build trust. Up to now, assumptions have been made, but it's essential to drill down to get a more narrow understanding of the obstacles.

How can church leaders use their influence to promote trust?

Brian responded that it starts with listening to understand what's holding them back. Don't inundate them with loads of data; they have had access to it and still don't want the vaccine. Ask what would help them feel more comfortable and love them through it.

Brianna suggested empathy. We are in a difficult time to process information and trust it. We've been deceived and have conflicting information. Take an intentional stand and don't falter. Don't shame, guilt or require the vaccine; they will only dig in their heels. The appearance of the delta variant has changed many minds. People realize it's not going away soon and they are putting themselves and others at risk.

Brian added that there's been confusion about data and misinformation. Faith leaders can help by removing the confusion over the mixed messages.

Where do faith leaders go for support?

Brianna stated that here is lots of division in the faith leaders' stands in Robeson County. Many take an ultra-conservative approach, encouraging congregants to pray and trust that God will see us through this. There's a difference of theology and perspective of faith, creating obstacles to adequate support. They need to be open to more networking and support, which can remind us that we're not alone in this work, and celebrate the victories together.

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What are the biggest concerns of the lasting impact of the pandemic?

The county has already faced health issues pre-pandemic, such as diabetes, etc. COVID worsens all of those ailments. Seeing more cases of the delta variant is a real, terrifying possibility.

Those who choose not to be vaccinated put themselves and others at risk. COVID-19 has amplified disparities in communities. People of faith are sending mixed messages to the broader world. We worry how to rebuild relationships to improve people's lives and change conditions to allow everyone to flourish.

The next session will be on August 18 and will focus on the mental health effects of COVID-19.