

CERES INTERVIEW KATHY

[music playing]

Kathy Williams:

Welcome to Building Vaccine Confidence: Tell Me the Truth, the Women's Health Awareness Podcast series from the NIEHS Office of Human Research and Community Engagement. I'm Kathy Williams. There can be little doubt that faith-based leaders have been highly influential in promoting confidence in and acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines. Our guest for this podcast is a prime example of that. He has worked tirelessly to keep his community and his congregation safe and shares his thoughts about the experience and the lessons learned as a result. Joining us is Rev. Dr. D. Gregory Ceres, the senior pastor of Peace Missionary Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina. Dr. Ceres is a Durham native and attended Durham public schools. He graduated from North Carolina Wesleyan College, Duke Divinity School, and Eastern University Palmer Theological Seminary. He was installed as senior pastor at Peace Missionary Baptist in 2017. Rev. Ceres, welcome to our podcast. Thanks for joining us.

D. Gregory Ceres:

Thank you. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Kathy Williams:

What do you see as the role of churches and faith-based leaders like yourself in disseminating vaccine-related information to the community?

D. Gregory Ceres:

I've always seen, and I continue to see the role of the church to really remain the same and as always has been. One of the ways in which the church has been described, and one of ways in which I've always seen the church is, among other things, it is a place of safe refuge. And so faith leaders such as myself should always recognize that that there will always be this level of trust that the communities have for places of worship. But I also must confess that there have been times in history church where that trust had been broken at times, and I'm sure certainly where some of the issues that have come about within, for example, the Catholic Church, and even the Southern Baptist Convention, where there were issues of trust with the community. So oftentimes, the church has had to reestablish that trust, but it is that trust that has always been there in some form. And I think the role of the church is to continue to foster that sense of trust and the way in which to do that is simply to tell the truth and be a place in which they can come and hear the truth to those who seek it.

Kathy Williams:

In our study on vaccine confidence, we found that the community trusted faith-based leaders and organizations as reliable sources during this pandemic for helping them to make informed decisions about safety, testing, and vaccination. Has that been your experience as well?

D. Gregory Ceres:

To a certain degree, it has been. What has helped many of our faith-based leaders, I think, with regards to how much communities trust us is really based upon what we said prior to the pandemic. In other words, we faced leaders who have taught and preached about what I've referred to and what has been referred to as holistic ministry. I believe it has had the greatest impact on the congregation. In other words, we've already talked about issues of health as it relates to faith, issue of being engaged in the community, and so when issues of the community arise, they've already heard it before. And so they're already aware and they're comfortable with our conversation. And I think those churches who had more difficulty conveying that type of trust were communities, faith-based, who did not have those conversations. And it's important that we've already had some of these hard, difficult conversations to talk about that being whole means that we are not only spiritually whole, but we're physically whole. We're mentally whole and all those things are connected to one another.

Kathy Williams:

Do you feel that most faith-based leaders understand the great role of influence and responsibility that they have on the Black community for public health messaging and information? Can you expand on the role of the Black church historically and during this pandemic as an influence for the Black community?

D. Gregory Ceres:

I certainly do believe that faith-based leaders do understand the role and responsibilities that that the Black church has. And to address the question from a historical standpoint, the church has always been historically a place where the church stood in the middle of the Black community. I'm reminded of, for example, what W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his book, "Souls of Black Folk." He called the church the social center of Black life in America. And so whatever the issues have been within African American communities, whether it be civil rights, economic inequalities, healthcare disparities, mass incarceration, the church has always had a voice and framing those conversations.

Kathy Williams:

We have learned that Black church organizations worked together to push the message out to the community and congregation about the importance of vaccination. Tell us some of the ways they've worked collaboratively to get the messaging out to their communities and put practices in place to keep congregation safe and to promote the importance of vaccines.

D. Gregory Ceres:

We have, as a matter of fact, just recently, the Ministerial Alliance as well as the New Hope Association, along with other clergy in the area held a press conference at one of our local churches. And that press conference was for the purpose of advocating vaccines and also to reassure the community that the churches were still active in their communities. And again, even though the doors and the buildings may have been empty, the churches were still engaged in the communities. And we continue to look at those and attempt to try to come together to collaborate, whether it be sharing information with various events, or even just giving information back to one another.

For us, during the pandemic, there was several faith leaders, along with myself who began meeting virtually weekly with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Resources. And what we did was we discussed the work that had been done by those particular organizations, and Dr. Mandy Cohen, who worked for the governor at the time, led those discussions. And what we would do, we would take the information that we received in those conversations and share those with our congregations. But many of us took it one step further.

We also took that as an opportunity not just to parrot or just to simply repeat what the Department of Health was saying, but to push back on them. And we used that as opportunity to become advocates for our members and our congregations to give them a perspective that they may not have been aware of and to let them know that we were also wanting to hold them accountable because we knew, we suspected, I suspected that the same health disparities that we'd seen in other areas we could possibly see that with regards to COVID-19. And so we were very active. We were very intentional in those conversations with the Department of Health and Human Resources.

Kathy Williams:

How has the pandemic affected members of your congregation and your community?

D. Gregory Ceres:

It has affected us in many ways, and it continues to affect us. One of the things that we had to deal with during the pandemic that was very much unforeseen is we were not allowed as pastors and faith leaders to visit hospitals. And so those moments in which our congregants needed us for that spiritual support in those hospitals, we were turned away. We had to stop having funerals at the church. Obviously, we had to close our doors. There was no in-person fellowship. And so there was all these things we had to deal with that we had never really had any background orientation as to how to approach them.

And at the same time, it became an opportunity for us to do things very differently. One of the things we discovered was how we were to the building. And as a result of no longer being in the building, we had to rethink and relook and do ministry and. And so there was an expression that someone came up with that the doors are closed, but the church is open. And so that's kind of the mantra that we began, at least I begin to kind of embrace. And so we began to look at more creative ways to do ministry and not be tied to the building. And hopefully, we can take those lessons learned as we move forward and realize that there are a lot of communities that need us, and all those communities may not necessarily come to us, but as the Gospel teaches us, that we ought to go out and reach them.

Kathy Williams:

Rev. Ceres, tell us a bit more about your and your team's efforts with respect to COVID-19 and vaccination.

D. Gregory Ceres:

One of the first things we did, and we continue to do is to encourage our members, their families and their neighbors and friends, to get vaccinated, and also to get the booster shot. And we even started an internal campaign on getting vaccinated and encouraging our family members to do

the same. But also, I continue to frame it within the context of scripture. There a portion of scripture in Mark 12 where there is a rabbi who comes to Jesus and asks Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" And Jesus replies, he said, "Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength." And then he goes on to say, "And then love your neighbor as yourself. And there is no commandment greater than these."

And so I made the argument, and I continue to make the argument that it is my understanding with the vaccine that not only does the vaccine protect me, but it protects others. So me being vaccinated also helps others. So it's a neighbor issue, and so it is a love issue. So the way in which we as Christians express love is to make sure not only that we're safe, but our neighbors are safe. And so those that are somewhat hesitant, "Well, I really don't -- I don't want to take it," just think that it's not just about us. It's about those around us, those most vulnerable, those who have pre-existing conditions, those who have compromised immune systems. Those are our neighbors. And what are we doing as a church to make sure we love those individuals whom we say are our neighbors.

Kathy Williams:

Rev. Ceres, how has your church collaborated with the Durham County Department of Public Health over the course of the pandemic?

D. Gregory Ceres:

There was two particular events. Early on in the in the pandemic, we set up a drive-through testing facility where persons could drive through on our [unintelligible] and get tested. They didn't have to get out of the car. And so we did that on a weekly basis. We also, in conjunction with the Durham Health Department, along with eight other churches I might mention also, eight of the congregations here in the city of Durham, we partnered with Department of Health for a one-day vaccination event. And as a result of that, the Department of Health was able to vaccinate approximately 500 adults. And it was specifically directed toward our brown and Black members of our community.

Kathy Williams:

What have been the most important or effective messages you've communicated to your congregation and to your community?

D. Gregory Ceres:

What we have put in place and our church is several things. We've tried to stay in line with the guidelines that have been presented through both the CDC and the Department of Health. Obvious things, we do social distancing. We continue to do temperature checks. We continue to ask those questions as far as COVID exposure. We continue to provide masks. We still wear masks in the sanctuary, and we will continue to do those things until the point in which we, along with the science that we continue to follow, will again get us back to what I referred to earlier, that safe refuge, that safe space because prior to that, we saw that safe space from the viewpoint of a spiritually safe space. Now we have to also include to make sure that's a physically safe space. And so until we get to that point that we then are providing a safe refuge, safe space, we'll continue to follow the guidelines as far as hand washing, all those things that that have been put in place. And I try to say that on a regular basis that that's what the new safe space looks like.

Kathy Williams:

So what kinds of responses have you gotten from your congregation and other members of the Durham community?

D. Gregory Ceres:

They have been real kind to me. We have not got a lot of pushback as we're wanting to take our mask off. And I believe the reason why, I could be wrong, is the way in which I originally framed it. Early on, I said to them, I said, listen, there may be some members who say, "You know what, I'm healthy. I exercise. I eat my vitamins. You know, I do all these things. I'm not necessarily concerned about it." Then I said to them that's fine. That's wonderful. But think about those most vulnerable. When Jesus talks about who we looked out for, he talks about what you've done to the least of these. And I said our framework and what we do ought to be geared not toward the strong, but the least of these, those most vulnerable. And that's who we must make sure we take care of. So even if you maybe think you can handle a bout with COVID, but think about those persons who cannot, you know, and many of those are older members, and that that is to be our responsibility.

Kathy Williams:

Rev. Ceres, thank you for the outstanding work you've done with your congregation and the local community to build vaccine confidence and make our community safer over the course of this pandemic. And thank you for joining us on the podcast.

D. Gregory Ceres:

Thank you so much. I certainly enjoyed the conversation.

Kathy Williams:

Please join us for the other episodes of our podcast series, which is brought to you by the NIEHS Office of Human Research and Community Engagement. We will be speaking in-depth with community leaders who've been working to protect their populations from the COVID-19 pandemic and promote vaccinations. We will hear about their experiences and the lessons they have learned as a result. And don't forget, tell me the truth.

[music playing]

[end of transcript]