

COVID-19 & Religious Engagement

The current pandemic is a defining moment for humankind today. If we are going to succeed in transforming our world into a healthier, just and more peaceful one we must focus our main efforts on building more inclusive societies where all stakeholders play their role. COVID-19's wake-up call is telling us not to return, when this is over, to the divisive and unjust ways of the past that hurt us and our environment, but to take a different trajectory to building a fairer and more peaceful world.

During this crisis, we are seeing how religious actors - men, women and youth - are leading their communities' responses to COVID-19. **Religious actors and faith-based organizations have been some of the most trusted first responders, playing essential roles in explaining safety regulations, adapting religious rituals and providing hope, food, education and succor to communities.** Indeed, religious actors are often found on the front lines of crises and conflicts supporting communities in need. However, they are mostly excluded from civic, public health and political decision-making processes, resulting in policy creation that is often not religiously and culturally sensitive for the more than 80% of the global population who are religiously affiliated¹. Religious communities have been some of the hardest hit by COVID-19 and continued exclusion will hinder religious actors from reaching their greatest potential in supporting resilience and recovery from the current pandemic. As societies seek to build a new post-pandemic normal, governments need to take this opportunity to partner with religious actors and public health bodies in a more inclusive process that builds trust and amplifies their ability to mitigate the virus's damage. Religious actors need to be equipped and trained with the necessary information and resources so that they can play their role in sustaining the spiritual health, stability and social cohesion of their communities while caring for the most vulnerable.

For more than two decades, Search for Common Ground (Search) has been spearheading projects in Africa, Asia and the Middle East to strengthen the role religious actors can play in building safer, just and more harmonious societies. Search has gained experience working with religious actors and has built trusting relationships with them and their communities. Drawing from our expertise, this statement highlights the responses of religious actors during the pandemic, poses current challenges and provides recommendations on how to amplify the positive contributions of religious actors in mitigating and recovering from this crisis.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES: Religious Actors Responding to Crisis

1. Religious actors and faith-based organizations are providing hard-hit and poor areas with hope, food security, health care and education. They are key contacts in local communities and have unique insights about the intersection of religious practices and COVID19 transmission. They are thus well positioned to understand and reconcile public health objectives and religious practices, ensuring that no-one is left behind. Of the many organizations in the field, Islamic Relief is distributing water, sanitation, and hygiene supplies²; Isra-Aid is providing food supplements to combat the rise of malnutrition³ and the Risho Kosei Kai Buddhist movement is providing psycho-social support and counselling⁴. Baha'is are assisting parents in homeschooling their children⁵ and among UNICEF's many activities in Bangladesh, over five hundred imams and other religious leaders are spreading messages about hygiene from their pulpits and reaching thousands of community members with messages that reduce stigma and discrimination.⁶

2. Religious actors are trusted leaders of their communities making them vital partners for governments and the international community. Ensuring that official health guidelines are followed, and accurate community assessments are conducted is of utmost importance to combating diseases like COVID-19. Yet, in many places there is a lack of trust between governments and their citizens. By partnering with religious actors, government and public health organizations can better understand community needs, present health guidelines in a culturally and religiously appropriate manner, and increase 'buy-in' and compliance from religious communities who might otherwise be skeptical of government and scientific

intervention, thus building legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Religious leaders are linking existing hygiene practices that are observed as part of religious ritual to the COVID-19 context, encouraging congregants to focus on rituals that can not only be practiced safely⁷, but may even prevent the spread of the virus⁸. Muslim leaders noted that *Wudhu*, ablution before prayer, can help emphasize the importance of handwashing as part of COVID-19 prevention⁹. As a senior advisor to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) recently wrote ‘the role played by faith actors in ensuring and supporting the resilience shown by so many and under such difficult circumstances needs to be more widely acknowledged by policy makers and factored into key policy decisions as we recover from the effects of the pandemic’.¹⁰

3. Religious actors are working to maintain community spirit and practice despite lockdowns and restrictions.

Religious actors have found creative ways to maintain community connections and religious practice while socially distancing. The Pope continued to engage with Catholic worshippers virtually, while the Vatican closed St. Peter's Square and the Basilica in Rome¹¹. Hindus were encouraged to engage in *Darshan*, “the act of beholding the Deities and divine personalities with reverence and adoration”¹² at home via a website¹³, rather than worshiping at a local temple¹⁴. Rabbis conducted wedding ceremonies for Jewish couples on rooftops with their friends and families celebrating from nearby balconies¹⁵. In Pakistan, Islamic clerics ruled that the ritual bathing of bodies, *Ghusl* is not necessary for coronavirus patients, and that *Tayammum*, a dry ablution is sufficient before burial¹⁶. Christians have found ways to celebrate the Eucharist without sharing utensils or wine, limiting the opportunities for virus transmission¹⁷.

KEY CHALLENGES:

1. Persuading conservative religious actors to comply with health guidelines when they contradict traditional religious practice:

Religious leaders holding fundamental approaches have been suspicious of government regulations like lockdown orders that are based on ‘secular’ scientific standards, perceiving them to be subservient to their divinely ordained beliefs. Many religious groups, while acknowledging the danger of COVID-19, believe that the pandemic has emanated from God and only through greater religious observance will it disappear. This trumps warnings that health risks are linked to particular rituals¹⁸. Others, like some Churches in the United States, have refused to comply with shut-down orders of their places of worship, citing the right to freedom of religion in the United States Constitution’s first amendment¹⁹.

2. Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) is at greater risk during the COVID-19 period as governments take extensive measures to curb the spread of the virus.

Many governments are implementing lockdowns, travel restrictions, surveillance, and use of artificial intelligence (AI). People fear that these emergency steps are being used to repress religious minorities. In Nepal, there are reports that police authorities are disproportionately punishing minority Christians for illegal gatherings, while turning a blind eye to similar meetings of Hindu groups²⁰. The Rohingya in Myanmar²¹, and Hindu and Christian minorities in Pakistan²² are being discriminated against regarding access to food aid and health care. Religious minorities are also concerned that surveillance and data gathering measures leave them vulnerable to government sanctioned persecution and repression.²³

FoRB is not only threatened as a result of government measures, it is also at risk from non-state actors. Religious extremists are using the COVID-19 pandemic as a distraction and cover to attack communities and expand their reach and power. During the pandemic, Islamist groups in West Africa have orchestrated large-scale assaults and massacres while government and international attention has been focused on the pandemic²⁴.

FoRB also includes the freedom to *disbelieve* which is at risk during the pandemic. The lockdown has forced people who no longer practice prayers and rituals to continue doing so by family members while staying at home²⁵. Artists in Myanmar were charged with the crime of ‘insulting religion’ after painting a mural to raise awareness about coronavirus that featured a Grim Reaper figure who Buddhist nationalists claimed, looked like a Buddhist monk²⁶.

3. The COVID-19 period has been accompanied by a steep rise in conspiracy theories, racism and discrimination.

These ideas are fueled by traditional and online media that publish fake news targeting specific religious groups. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories regarding the origin of COVID-19 abound and have been promoted online²⁷ and Muslims in India and Sri Lanka are targeted by economic and social boycotts, hate speech and physical attacks, after being blamed for the spread of the virus²⁸. According to Fernand de Varennes, UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, “COVID-19 is not just a health issue, it can also be a virus that exacerbates xenophobia, hate and exclusion”²⁹.

4. Women have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis³⁰. Many women and girls are experiencing an exacerbation of physical, social, economic psychological, and cyber abuse, a phenomenon that has been termed ‘a shadow

pandemic'³¹. Emerging data shows women facing increased domestic violence, as stay-at-home orders trap women with their abusive partners³². These orders also prevent women from seeing friends and family, who would otherwise serve as a support network. The added pressure of the pandemic on health services, compromises life-saving care and support for women, such as clinical management for rape survivors. While crisis hotlines are registering a drastic increase in calls for help,³³ others are noting a surprising decrease, likely indicating that women are unable to safely access support services³⁴. As perpetrators of domestic violence are also found in faith communities, religious women have been impacted by this shadow pandemic too³⁵. For them, the isolation resulting from lockdown is particularly painful as they cannot access support from within their faith community or pray at their places of worship which could provide tranquility and succor³⁶.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Religious Engagement and COVID-19 Responses

Search recommends implementing the following actions while engaging religious actors in COVID-19 responses. Where some are already taking place, we encourage Search staff to work with religious actors to harness and expand these efforts.

Recommendation 1 - Partner with religious actors and organizations to create COVID-19 community responses

Engaging religious actors in dialogue with government actors, health workers and local community actors in the development and implementation of community pandemic safety plans is vital to ensuring 'buy-in' and compliance from religious communities that may otherwise be suspicious of government intervention and/or believe that religious observance provides Divine protection. It is especially important to include religious women who are on the front lines but whose voices are generally untapped and unheard. National and international stakeholders can encourage this effort by:

- Supporting inter-agency dialogues between religious actors, health workers and governments
- Supporting religious dialogues on the operationalization and implementation of a community pandemic and safety plan
- Conducting trainings on community-based measures for COVID-19 prevention for religious actors
- Funding faith-based organizations' health and food aid initiatives

Recommendation 2 - Promote 'socially distant - spiritually close' community initiatives.

Religious actors have been very creative at maintaining 'socially distant - spiritually close' communities, especially during festivals and other holy days, enabling members to still feel the support and spiritual upliftment of their communities during this challenging COVID-19 period. Adapting religious practices so that they are 'COVID-19 safe' is most successful when adaptations are drawn from religious texts and interpretations and are led and legitimized by trusted religious actors from *within* the community. This provides them with credibility in the eyes of worshippers. 'COVID-19 safe' initiatives may include:

- Virtual religious services and rituals, or services that respect social distancing
- Virtual communal fellowship meetings with religious actors, youth, parents and the elderly leading to face-to-face meetings within social distancing requirements
- Technical capacity-building for religious leaders on trauma healing and psycho-social support
- Creating a local hotline conducted by religious actors for callers needing help
- Creating virtual support groups, or small face-to-face groups that enable social distancing, within the religious community for women to share experiences during COVID-19 lockdowns
- Religious leaders speaking out about domestic and other abuse against women and children in their communities and helping to amplify the voices of women and their concerns

Recommendation 3 - Amplify voices promoting religious and multi-faith messages of solidarity and peace

Religious actors can combat the increase in racism and discrimination during this COVID-19 period by spreading peaceful messages through traditional and new media initiatives. All major religions see life as a supreme value and uphold the dignity of human beings. Saving lives and standing up to misinformation can be a rallying point for interreligious collaboration.

These initiatives can be supported by:

- Establishing interreligious COVID-19 committees to discuss communal challenges and find joint solutions.

- Organizing interfaith online religious events that emphasize multi-faith solidarity like the WhatsApp conference organized by Search's Nigerian office through its *Advancing Religious Tolerance* initiative in April. The event was hosted by a Muslim sheikh and a Catholic priest with over 150 participants in attendance and promoted a unified, inter-religious response to COVID-19.
- Developing religiously driven radio programs, reality shows and social media initiatives focused on spreading messages of mutual acceptance, peace and social cohesion. This is most successfully implemented in collaboration with young people who are naturals in the social media world
- Developing local messages to counter negative online and offline narratives, stigmas and misinformation through individual and joint opinion pieces in newspapers, community newsletters and other media forms by religious actors of different faiths

Recommendation 4 – Build alliances between religious actors, policymakers and other stakeholders to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief

In addition to the need for multi-sector partnerships that focus on the health aspects of the pandemic, engaging religious actors in such alliances is also essential for protecting FoRB which is especially at risk from both state and non-state actors at this time. Top-down foreign policy tools and international coordination by governments need to go hand in hand with bottom up development strategies, usually implemented by NGOs like Search, to protect FoRB. Such efforts might include:

- Supporting multi-sector dialogues between religious, government, law-enforcement and security sector actors that explore the key drivers of FoRB violations and the needs of the stakeholders towards building sustainable solutions
- Researching and highlighting FoRB violations on media platforms that are taking place under cover of the pandemic
- Building trust and finding common ground in locations where intolerance is rife through holding interreligious dialogues, religious/secular dialogues and other meetings between peoples in conflict at the grass-roots level
- Investing in training and educational programs that promote FoRB for a variety of target populations including youth, religious actors, law enforcement officers, policymakers and diplomats
- Finding the 'champions' among the leaders of the different sectors who support FoRB and highlight their voices to amplify their influence
- Ensuring that collaboration around FoRB is inclusive by prioritizing the participation of women and youth

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Rev. Kyoichi Sugino in 'PaRD Webinar on COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges for religious/faith actors and communities? Responses from the field and global partners', April 29, 2020

⁵ 'COVID-19, Religion and Belief: Webinar Series. Episode 3 - Civil Society Organizations' Perspective', April 23, 2020.

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⁶ The COVID-19 Communication and Community Engagement HUB: communit.com/covid/

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⁸ Mehmet Ozalp, 'How coronavirus challenges Muslims' faith and changes their lives', April 2, 2020 <https://theconversation.com/how-coronavirus-challenges-muslims-faith-and-changes-their-lives-133925>

⁹ Rose Aslan, 'What Islamic hygiene practices can teach when coronavirus is spreading', March 16, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/what-islamic-hygienic-practices-can-teach-when-coronavirus-is-spreading-133221>

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