



PREVENTING COVID-19 AT PLACES OF WORSHIP

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FEBRUARY 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, and the eventual shutdown of socio-economic activities by the government. Engaging in religious activities was one of the major challenges people and government battled with. Religious leaders have been identified as a major stakeholder in preventing the spread of the virus, spreading of fake news and violent-inciting altercations.

Therefore, with support from the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative organized a programme themed “Interfaith Awareness on COVID-19 Prevention at Places of Worship.” BBYDI selected religious leaders across north Central Nigeria and trained them on COVID-19 prevention. Subsequently, the religious leaders engaged in a dialogue to identify ways to sanitize religious places from COVID-19 and prevent people from spreading the virus during religious activities.

Through the series of engagements, it was discovered that:

1. There is lack of sincerity and political will on the part of the government. As role models and decision makers, government officials have broken COVID-19 protocols more than any other groups. Therefore, it is difficult to convince people to obey COVID-19 protocols
2. The government is responsible for making legislations that will ensure compliance, provide adequate funding for these initiatives and also collaborate with various interest groups such as Civil Societies, media houses, etc.
3. The spread of misinformation about the virus contributes greatly to the lack of compliance. At the beginning of the pandemic, authorities had to combat the spread of falsehood from various aspects of the society including religious institutions.

To address these, it was recommended that:

1. The government should:
 - a. establish COVID-19 news verification platforms that are accessible through digital and traditional media to debunk fake news.
 - b. continuously enlighten the public through various media channels.
 - c. Create a synergy among the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Presidential Task Force (P.T.F) on COVID-19, Ministry of Interior, and religious leaders.
 - d. monitor prevention activities by Civil Society Organisations.
 - e. Make legislation to mandate the use of face mask, maintenance of social distancing, etc, with adequate sanctions for violators.
 - f. Proden budgetary allocation to cover the cost of funding different initiatives.
 - g. Involve religious leaders in the entire process formulation by ensuring that all religious groups are well represented.
 - h. Provide protective materials for citizens especially those in rural areas.
2. The religious leaders should:
 - a. Support policy deliberations by participating and providing suggestions and recommendations to the National Task Force on COVID-19.
 - b. Lead by example by always adhering to COVID-19 protocols, exhibit it in their attitudes and encourage others to obey protocols
 - c. Always include COVID-19 issues in their preachings and use verses from the scriptures and other divine lessons to support advocacy for all COVID-19 protocols.
 - d. Educate congregations on vaccines and douse tensions around it.

- e. Place posters in areas around the places of worship to create more awareness.
3. The general public should:
- a. display civility by being reasonable and responsible.
 - b. take their health and wellbeing into their hands. Also, they should encourage one another to adhere to instructions.
 - c. Create Awareness through Family and Neighbourhood Community.
 - d. limit visit to large gatherings, most especially at places of worship.
 - e. Adhere to social distancing while at places of worship.

It is anticipated that this document would help all stakeholders, government, religious leaders and the general public in strategically manage the spread of COVID-19, most especially at the places of worship.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many activities – social, religious, economic, etc. Governments, corporate bodies, private enterprises, etc, sought alternative means to continue many of their activities. In all of these, religious institutions were greatly affected. Many religious activities involve large gatherings and physical interactions which are surefire ways of spreading the virus.

In a country where religion is a fundamental part of the lives of many citizens, changing how things were done was met with resistance. Some religious leaders contributed to the problem by misinforming their congregation on the existence and nature of the virus. The spread of this misinformation and lack of compliance by some religious groups at the start of the pandemic proved costly. However, through combined efforts of major stakeholders and citizens, progress has been made.

Setting strategies and parameters to prevent COVID-19 at places of worship is very crucial to forestall the spread of COVID-19 and prevent violence that could erupt from places of worship as a result of COVID-19. Setting the agenda for policy guidelines is part of the priorities of the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID).

Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, a Non-governmental organisation with focus on sustainable peace and good governance in Nigeria, organized training and dialogue sessions with religious leaders across North-Central Nigeria. This policy report is a product of the observations and recommendations from the sessions.

It is anticipated that this document provides a guide towards preventing unwarranted spread of COVID-19, supporting religious leaders to be more active in the fight against COVID-19 Pandemic and promoting interactive dialogues on how to keep our community safe, secured and protected.

This Report provides a manual that is useful to policy makers, Ministries, Departments and Agencies, religious leaders, community leaders, youth leaders and responsible citizens.

PREVENTING COVID-19 IN PLACES OF WORSHIP



Preventing the spread of COVID-19 required the concerted effort of all the members of the society. Despite the increase in number of daily recorded cases (Second wave), people continue to go to mosques and churches for worship. Fortunately, places of worship are part of the respected locations in our human life. They are guided by principles and guidelines that adherents always comply with. The religious leaders are respected and are role models.

Therefore, preventing COVID-19 should start from the places of worship. When worshipers obey COVID-19 protocols at places of worship, they not only help in curbing the spread, they show responsibility and responsiveness to community demands (a major principle of our various religions). To achieve this objectives, several players must work together. These players include, Government, Religious Leaders and Individuals.

Role of Government

1. **Leadership by Example:** There is a trust deficit between citizens and government which has been enforced by the poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the government. The government at various levels has failed to lead by example in the fight against the coronavirus. From flouting the COVID-19 prevention regulations by organizing public gatherings, conducting elections without adequate safety measures to failing to provide adequate support for citizens during the lockdown, they have fueled strong

disbelief in the existence of the virus. **The government must lead by example. Adhere to all COVID-19 protocols motivate other citizens through their actions.**

2. **Enforce COVID-19 Protocols Guidelines:** All COVID-19 protocols on safety measures should be enforced at places of worship. Government should ensure that beyond laying guidelines, efforts are in place to enforce the guidelines, most especially at places of worship. These guidelines include:
 - a. Provision of Hand Washing materials at all places of worship. Any worship ground without this provision should be restricted from operating.
 - b. Compulsory use of face mask by all members of the congregation at all places of worship (whether large or small).
 - c. Disallow superogatory programs and functions religious gatherings.
3. **Increase Awareness:** Through the combined effort of the Ministry of Information and Culture, Ministry of Health, and the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC), Government should increase public awareness and create more public understanding of the coronavirus. The government must encourage this understanding through exemplary leadership. Initiatives such as the creation of jingles, cartoons, posters for adverts will increase public awareness and encourage citizens to follow laid down regulations. Government should make provisions for these to be distributed at all places of worship.

The government must also show the political will to see that these initiatives are achieved through adequate allocation of funds and resources and collaborating with news media groups. There must also be a synergy between them and religious leaders to facilitate obedience and cooperation from citizens at places of worship.



Role of Religious Leaders

1. **Support in Policy Deliberations and Formulation:** through established interfaith fora, discuss issues related to COVID-19 prevention and suggest recommendations to the COVID-19 National Task Force – the Presidential Task Force.
2. **Display Leadership and Lead by Example:** Nigeria is a multi-religious country and leaders of various religious groups are very influential. They control a large percentage of the country's population through their actions and their words. Therefore, preventing COVID-19 in places of worship cannot be achieved without them. Religious leaders must show leadership by adhering to all the COVID-19 protocols and exhibiting it in their attitudes and relationship with their congregations. This will encourage the people to be more responsible in taking action.
3. **Include COVID-19 Issues in Preaching:** by including COVID-19 preventive and protective measures in regular preaching services at the mosques and churches, issues related to COVID-19 will not die down in the places of worship and the congregations will become more sensitive and aware. There is a need to devise strategies to enforce compliance through the use of relevant scriptures to intimate their congregation.
4. **Place Posters in Areas Around the Places of Worship:** include COVID-19 posters in strategic points at places of worship. This will create more awareness about the virus and

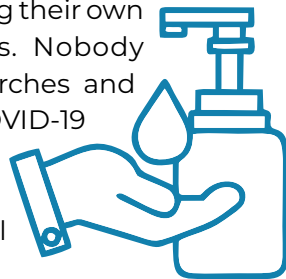
will indicate the commitment of the place of worship to the public health of the people.

5. **Provide Preventive/ Protective Toolkits at Places of Worship:** Provide washing materials (soap, water, hand sanitizers) and other disinfectants at the entrance of places of worship to ensure that the people are well sanitized before entering the religious centre.
6. **Provide Rules and Regulations on COVID-19 Protocols:** Religious institutions should compel religious leaders to make adherence to COVID-19 protocols compulsory. Any individual not abiding by to the instructions should be prevented from entering the places of worship. To achieve this, therefore, COVID-19 Marshals must be created to watch and ensure compliance to all the guidelines.

Role of The General Public

1. **Be Reasonable and Responsible:** Every citizen must display civility by being reasonable. A lot of awareness have been carried out (and are still being carried out) on COVID-19. The general public should take responsibility by protecting themselves first. Each individual should take his/ her health and wellbeing into their hands. Also, they should encourage one another to adhere to instructions.
2. **Create Awareness through Family and Neighbourhood Community:** All households must adhere to instructions and encourage their immediate families and neighbours to adhere as well. It is important to take responsibility from the level of family. When every individual is responsible for keeping their household safe, we reduce the burden on places of worship and other locations.

3. **Invest in Face Masks and Hand Sanitizers:** The general public should invest in buying and using their own face mask and sanitizing materials. Nobody should wait for organisations or churches and mosques to provide for them. As COVID-19 has brought in the “New Normal”, face masks and hand sanitizers should be considered as daily essentials which will be given accurate investment.
4. **Resist Visit to Places of Worship Unless Compulsory:** people must limit their visit to large gatherings, most especially at places of worship. This should only be done on compulsory acts of worship. Superogatory activities can be executed, if possible, virtually.
5. **Adhere to social distancing:** while at places of worship, people should try, as much as possible, to prevent physical contacts.



CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge to this project is the lack of political will on the part of the government. The government is responsible for making legislations that will ensure compliance, provide adequate funding for these initiatives and also collaborate with various interest groups such as Civil Societies, media houses, etc.

The spread of misinformation about the virus contributes greatly to the lack of compliance. At the beginning of the pandemic, authorities had to combat the spread of falsehood from various aspects of the society including religious institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we enter into a second wave of the coronavirus, lessons must be learnt from the first wave. To avert similar challenges, the first step is to dispel propaganda. The harmful effects of propaganda cannot be overemphasized. The government, healthcare institutions, religious leaders, etc, must work together. Part of efforts that must be taken include:

1. The government should establish COVID-19 news verification platforms that are accessible through digital and traditional media to debunk fake news.
2. Continuous enlightenment of the public through various media channels.
3. Creation of a synergy among the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Presidential Task Force (P.T.F) on COVID-19, Ministry of Interior, and religious leaders.
4. Proper monitoring of prevention activities by Civil Society Organisations.

5. The government must legislate on the mandatory use of face mask, maintenance of social distancing, etc, with adequate sanctions for violators.
6. Provision of budgetary allocation to cover the cost of funding different initiatives.
7. Involvement of religious leaders in the entire process formulation by ensuring that their groups are well represented.
8. Provision of protective materials for citizens especially those in rural areas.

● CONCLUSION ●

This report covered the importance of preventing COVID-19 in places of worship and how it is essential if success is to be achieved in curbing the spread of the virus. This report identified salient issues and challenges that have been encountered and how they can be resolved. It is also provided recommendations for policymakers, religious leaders and individual to implement for the safety the general citizens both at worship sites and other places.





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