RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND COVID-19
GUIDANCE IN BRIEF (V.2)
In addition to the medical and material response, communities’ beliefs and attitudes need to be mobilized to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and its impact. Religious actors’ status, trust and wide networks can be factors of further danger, or positive change. In times of crisis, NCA can, in contexts where this is possible, step-up its work with religious actors, enabling them to:

- Support effective dissemination of messages by health authorities (hand hygiene, physical distancing, etc.).
- Counter misconceptions, stigma, scapegoating, fake news and other dangerous ideas within their communities.
- Take the lead in providing safe alternatives to important religious rituals and regular worship services, which are in line with the advice and measures from health authorities.
- Promote unity, solidarity and humanity in times of hardship. Work to reduce tensions between different interest groups and towards potentially discriminated groups.
- Advocate for the needs of the most vulnerable in these times of crisis. Societies at large will feel the economic consequences of lockdowns and quarantines but certain groups (e.g. daily wage laborers, informal traders) are most vulnerable to them. The same measures can also lead to an increase in gender-based violence and child abuse.
- Help community members find solace and purpose in times of great distress. Crisis are stressful situations that create anxiety and fear. Religion and spirituality are important for the mental health of people of faith.
- Ensure religious health facilities, schools and other diaconal structures follow national COVID-19 guidelines, and when possible provide relevant services to combat the pandemic.

How can NCA encourage religious actors to take effective action?
Many religious actors belong to global or regional fellowships of belief, and are guided by statements from these bodies during times of crisis and uncertainty. NCA Country Offices can assist to make these statements available for local faith partners. Some key statements are provided here:

- Religions for Peace and ACT Alliance (25.03.20): [https://rfp.org/a-joint-statement-urgent-action-needed-to-prevent-covid-19/](https://rfp.org/a-joint-statement-urgent-action-needed-to-prevent-covid-19/)

NCA Country Offices can also encourage faith partners to take action by:

1. **Informing themselves, having accurate and updated information from health authorities.** It is a precondition for religious actors to know what the advice from health authorities is and to embrace it. Male and female religious actors can then spread the message, through their congregations but also among their peers who might not yet be aware of the health advice and how to combine it with their religious faith.
2. **Using references to holy texts and appropriate contextualized theology to raise awareness** and promote social behaviors that protect people and communities from harm. Health advice can resonate better within religious communities.
when it is linked to their own faith and beliefs and builds on strong theological foundations.

3. **Assess religious practices that are affected by physical distancing and finding suitable alternative ways** to perform those rituals. (culturally sanctioned alternatives to handshaking as a way of greeting; concerns about inability to access religious sites, including practices of kissing holy symbols; baptisms, weddings, confessions, funerals and burials, postponing giving of the Eucharist in churches, religious practice during festivities, etc.)

4. **Emphasize the value of togetherness and human dignity in times of crisis**, with references to praxis and theology within their own religions, and by joining forces with religious actors from other faiths (in joint statements or media initiatives, for example) and with other actors such as the youth, and secular civil society.

5. **Utilizing existing intergenerational, intra- and inter-faith platforms** at national and international levels, sharing practices and learning from other religious communities and male and female religious actors. Even though each context is different, congregations around the world are facing similar challenges and finding ways to overcome them.

6. **Speak out on behalf of the marginalized and advocate for leaving no one behind** in this collective response to the crisis and its long-term effects. Religious actors can continue to partner with secular civil society to monitoring that government responses to the crisis, to ensure that they do not undermine human rights and democratic governance.

7. **Reaching out to armed opposition groups** and populations in non-government controlled areas. In some contexts, religious actors can facilitate ceasefires and humanitarian access for health officials to opposition-controlled areas.

8. **Use local capacities and established institutions (such as schools, hospitals and clinics) to provide material and spiritual support** for communities affected by COVID-19 (health, education, food, shelter, etc.). This can be put to the service of communities at large in coordination with authorities as appropriate, practicing solidarity across faiths and thus strengthening social bonds.

9. **Mobilise volunteer action within their communities to care for the most vulnerable.** Solidarity circles of volunteers can channel individuals’ desire to help in times of crisis and provide material and spiritual support to other women, girls, men and boys.

10. **Create emergency funds and collect donations** and voluntary contributions to help those most severely affected by COVID-19 and related measures.

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**Adapted communications channels**

Existing faith-owned print media, radio and television channels could disseminate information to allay fears in the country and create awareness. Many religious institutions have also moved to social media and use platforms like Youtube and Facebook. These same channels could be used for community outreach. Religious communities who do not have these possibilities should be supported or can enter into partnerships with, for example, youth organizations, to increase their use of these means. Faith women groups and female religious actors have a key role to play, also in relation to communication. Religious actors should collaborate with the Ministry of Health officials to ensure information is accurate information.
USEFUL LINKS


• **Faith Based Organizations and Faith Leaders**, WHO, [https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/faith-based-organizations-and-faith-leaders](https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/faith-based-organizations-and-faith-leaders)

• **COVID-19 Coronavirus Outbreak**, ACT Alliance, [https://actalliance.org/covid-19](https://actalliance.org/covid-19)


Front page photo: Kirsti Næss

This note (01.04.2020) aims to be a tool to guide Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) programme staff during their discussions with faith-based partners and religious actors on formulating and implementing responses to COVID-19 and its effects. It does not constitute NCA policy. Contact person on this theme: Javier Fabra-Mata, Senior Advisor, [jfm@nca.no](mailto:jfm@nca.no)