



Faith and Covid-19

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Related to Danish Mission Organizations and churches. Experiences, insights and reflections collected by Danish Mission Council through conversation and mail exchange with member organizations and international partners during April 2020.

Member organizations of Danish Mission Council

Danish Mission Council has 36 members, representing 24.198 members, 277 employees abroad (missionaries) and approximately 250 employees in Denmark (numbers from 2017).

- Most organizations have had to send substantial parts of their staff on paid leave, making use of government programs.
- Several of the member organizations of Danish Mission Council are facing challenges of liquidity, especially related to the (voluntary) closure of recycling/thrift shops, or lack of tithing/collections during Sunday worship.
- Some of the member organizations have called for donations for emergency help, since partners, and people in their local societies, are facing hunger. Other have partner who do not report on emergency situations.
- Some member organizations have called employees abroad (missionaries) home, while others have allowed them to choose whether they want to stay abroad or return to Denmark. Almost all volunteers have been called back to Denmark.

Lessons learned (often expressed in terms of questions) by member organizations:

- Information: It is important to secure channels of information internally. How do update when we cannot meet? Furthermore, the crisis has stressed the need for information sharing with international partners. If Danish organizations and churches have international partners, they need to share information and decision-making in difficult times, as well as in 'normal' times.
- The crisis has been a lesson in the basic fact that human share life condition: rich and poor – are exposed to the virus. At the same time, it is evident that the poor/marginalized are affected more...

Pending issues to be discussed and clarified:

- Humanitarian crisis: The current crisis may develop into a humanitarian crisis, which calls for preparation...
- Partnership: for many member organizations of Danish Mission Council it is a question how partnership is going to be affected by the virus crisis? Will it be possible to send missionaries/Danish staff abroad again? Or is the time of missionaries over? How do we follow projects (monitor, evaluate, learn...) when we cannot travel?

International partners

Danish organizations and churches engaged in mission work with, or through, international partners, and are involved both in development and emergency relief, as well as in church development and evangelization.

- Where Christians are daily laborers international partners face poverty and even hunger as a challenge among their constituency.
- Churches reach out – both in preaching and diaconia:
 - o Making hospitals/clinics or empty institutions available to health authorities.
 - o Churches distribute emergency help for members in need, and for local society in need.
 - o Preaching and worship are made available on virtual platforms.
- Partners report a growing challenge of stigmatization and ‘scapegoating’:
 - o Stigmatization
Sick people are understood as carriers of disease, and perhaps even of God’s wrath (examples: in Syria and in different places in Africa). This is a concern among both Muslims and Christians.
 - o Scapegoating
White people are understood as the root-cause in Cambodia, Tanzania...
Rich people are root-cause in Nigeria...
Danes are root-cause in Greenland...
Asians are root-cause in US.
- In India the threat is multifaceted: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/covid-19-indian-churches-stand-poorest-communities>:
 - o The Covid-19 virus pandemic turns into an economic pandemic, threatening lives;
 - o The call for “social distancing” challenges Dalit and Adivasi communities, already exposed to marginalization (source: Chandran Paul Martin in Facebook blog). Churches promote vocabulary of “physical distance” instead...
- Religious practice and rites have been identified as a potential chain of infection, and in some cases worship and large gatherings have been identified as a hotspot for the spreading of the virus. Consequently, there has been concern of worship services and other rites, as e.g. funeral rites – cf. Muslim practice of washing the body.

International networks and organizations

Christian networks and organizations have addressed the situation– with a concern to involve members and other religious communities in promoting safe conduct, saving lives, strengthening faith...

- o AACC – All African Conference of Churches: <http://aacc-ceta.org/en/news/204-faith-responses-to-covid-19-listening-to-representatives-of-religious-communities>
- o CCA – Christian Conference of Asia: <https://www.cca.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Letter-to-Churches-COVID-19.pdf>
- o EA – Evangelical Alliance (Corono virus hub): <https://www.eauk.org/coronavirus?ref=modal>

- LWF – Lutheran World Federation: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/covid-19-strengthened-faith-standing-against-injustice>
- MECC – Middle East Council of Churches: <https://www.mecc.org/covid19>
- Pentecostal World Fellowship: <https://www.pwfellowship.org/covid-19>
- WCC - World Council of Churches: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/messages-and-letters/pasoral-letter-18-march-2020>
- WCRC – World Communion of Reformed Churches: <http://wrcr.ch/news/wcrc-responds-to-unfolding-impact-of-coronavirus-pandemic>

Other organizations relating to religious actors' and communities' function during the crisis:

- Islamic Relief Worldwide - <https://www.islamic-relief.org/islamic-relief-launches-guidance-on-safe-religious-practice-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>
- TPNRD – Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy: <https://religionanddiplomacy.org.uk/2020/04/16/tpnrd-releases-its-2020-strategic-note/>
- WHO – World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19?fbclid=IwAR3-nxIFtOutRqT8qivbZKZTTNmA1ALpGZ304sPd8k4o3DBvayJkzF6YY74>

Issues touched on and reflected upon

As the global pandemic evolves religious communities are being challenged and discuss...

- “Big” questions surfacing during the Covid-19 crisis:
 - What is the meaning? Are sick people targeted by God b/c of their sins/problems?
 - Is this the apocalypse, or a sign of the apocalypse approaching?
 - Where is God in this situation? What does he call us to do – or to become?
- Language: how to form language to the new situation? This is a challenge relevant for public statements as well as for the Church: how do we pray in these days? How do we worship when we cannot sing together?
- Diaconia (re-action):
 - what to do as religious agent/community faced with poverty or even hunger?
 - How do we help when we are isolated?
 - Should we help when we are suffering ourselves?

Analysis

Patterns of reactions (source: Katherine Marshall, Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, 20200429 – webinar on “Challenge for religious/faith actors and communities? Responses from the field and global partners”). Six lessons learned from March to April 2020

1. **Religious communities are integral part of the situation**, following but also shaping the best public health. Faith actors are critical of authorities, keeping them to the best ideals. Faith actors are able to see the need for wholistic engagement, encouraging integrated approaches, avoiding thinking in ‘siloes’.

Action: work on partnerships (faith actors – secular authorities, science, business, civil society)! (NB – how does this new situation affect partnership b/n faith actors and international partners?)

2. **Information and understanding.** Faith actors/communities have important role in dissemination of information, correcting misinformation, countering “fake news”. Vital role played by youngsters and women, going beyond male face of religious leadership.

Action: leading by example!

3. **Vulnerable communities and support:** Those in need – elderly people, hungry, poor – are being helped by faith communities, advocacy to the governments on behalf of these groups are being done.

Action: make knowledge of who needs help available!

4. **Addressing exclusivism and discrimination:** “scapegoating” and stigmatization, magnifying latent prejudice (homophobia, tensions b/n ethnic/religious groups) flourish.

Action: Stress of common humanity! Interreligious engagement (knowing that ecumenical and interreligious engagement increases moral authority).

5. **Trust is an all-important character:** Faith actors need to build trust to public health authorities among their constituency, and earn trust by public authorities by acting responsibly.

Action: build trust in public health institutions; nurture trust in reliability and responsibility of religious institutions; work for better governance (in small bites, not with a wholesale criticism).

6. **Diversity and complexity.** Faith landscape is diversified and not well mapped. Interreligious relations are needed in order to build lasting partnerships, and together involve in rebuilding and re-imagining.

Action: find practical ways to include and integrate other faith actors, with a focus for lasting outcome: critique of inequalities and injustice, real preference to those in need, educate for human flourishing and dignity.

Character: Learnings from inquiries about character in the Corona crisis, from Uni of Birmingham:

<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/2864/character-education?fbclid=IwAR0A9xeYlf3Q8Oj04kzbc1kzbXb4Czx8jo0PiBP872-cdzvwGxDI57xMhVY>

- a. Health of the older generation is favored for economic prosperity;
- b. Compassion and care are highly valued;
- c. Good judgment is what is valued in leaders.

Spirituality

Aspects of spiritual literacy, or spiritual competence, inspired by Biblical actors and narratives, with a special relevance in a time of crisis. (Source: online presentation by Henrik Sonne Petersen from March 31 to April 8 on the Facebook site of Danish Mission Council)

- Groans, sighs and lamentation – as a way of getting in touch with reality and confirming the presence of God;
- Silence and waiting – as a connection with identity, both related to oneself and to God;

- Being at service – as an archetypical expression of humanity, i.e. a confirmation of a common humanity related to receptivity, happiness and life, providing tools for a crisis and guidelines for all the actions/activities.

The Biblical narratives portray of a human being seems bleak and anemic, compared to a modern humanity characterized by technique, action and rationality. But in a closer look we find a human being with more flexibility than we're used to, being able to oscillate between reception and action, silent prayers and expressive outbursts, being at service and being at war. Exactly this increased flexibility of emotions and expressions is the spiritual competence (not to say "spiritual resilience," which resonate of conflict resolution) which makes it possible for Biblical actors to navigate, exist, and gain a footing in times of crisis.

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