

A Joint Statement - Urgent Action Needed to Prevent COVID-19

The COVID-19 virus presents the entire world with a series of humanitarian, financial, social and political challenges, which do not spare faith-based actors and institutions.

This pandemic disrupts lives and economies and exacerbates structural problems in many parts of the world, including a humanitarian system which is already overstretched by the number and scale of existing crises globally. But we are also witnessing a tremendous wave of increased solidarity among people during this crisis.

We, as people of faith, must participate in the fight against this pandemic. We must do what we can to stop its spread. With faith rooted deeply in our hearts, we are called upon to ensure that we listen to the wisdom of the scientific community and their advice, that we learn the implications of how to protect one another and our loved ones, and that we enable our communities of faith to be servants to the health and welfare of all of our world.

Medical experts around the world, from the World Health Organization to emergency room doctors insist on the wisdom of avoiding physical contact and avoiding public spaces. We understand how deeply this reality pains so many of us who need, sometimes desperately, to be in our places of worship, and to serve our communities' spiritual and humanitarian needs. In fact, at few moments in history has humanity needed the sustenance of shared worship as much as it does now. But again, we must remember that medical experts advise against public gatherings, which includes worship services.

Moreover, as faith actors we are deeply rooted in the communities we serve. Local faith institutions, religious leaders and other faith-based organizations are responding to the needs of their communities due to the COVID-19 pandemic as humanitarian actors and long-term agents of change.

All faiths compel us to protect, to save lives, and to acknowledge and honour the divine breath within each of us, and in one another. There is no faith tradition that calls upon us to intentionally harm ourselves or others, even when there may be a deep sense of injustice sustained. Therefore, it is imperative that we fully respect human rights and humanitarian principles and ensure protection to everybody.

This is why we must heed the calls of the faith leaders who urge us to remember the divine within, and to keep one another out of harm's way.

Yes, it pains us not to come together in worship in our places of worship. It is particularly painful during these months of the year for several of our faith traditions who would usually be celebrating central religious occasions. But endangering the lives of our loved ones and our communities at large by gathering in large numbers is not an act of worship.

In times of unprecedented crisis where the enemy is intangible but deathly real, we need to listen to our faith leaders, armed with faith and science, and to our medical establishments, and our governments, and common sense – all of which guide us that temporarily staying away from public spaces – including temples, mosques, synagogues, churches, gurudwaras – to avoid the risk of infecting one another, may well be the most effective means of saving lives.

We can build on the positive experiences of those faith institutions who have cancelled physical gatherings, but are experiencing new forms of engagement, community and connection beyond their usual spaces of worship. And we encourage others to do so, too.

This is not a time to dispute the body count and believe that faith alone will prevent and save. This is the time to show that faith is part of taking preventive and responsive actions to protect one another in every corner of our world.

We call ACT alliance members, *Religions for Peace* interreligious councils, women of faith and interfaith youth networks, and other interreligious groups to come together at national and regional level in order to create spaces for discernment and cooperation to respond to this crisis in a compassionate and effective way.

Yours sincerely,



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