



INTERFAITH
DIALOGUE
IN ACTION

A GUIDE
FOR DEALING WITH
COVID-19

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) would like to thank the Fellows and partners for providing examples of their work and giving feedback on this guide, without which its development would not have been possible. While the COVID-19 pandemic remains an ongoing reality, KAICIID will strive to continue to look to its partners and survey the field for new and innovative work being done to help faith-based organizations, interfaith organizations, religious actors and others working in the interfaith and interreligious dialogue fields.

Editor: Colette Holden

Authors: Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Anas Alabbadi, Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović and Renata Nelson (née Smith)

Design: Sophie Combette

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The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)
Schottenring 21, A-1010 Vienna, Austria
www.kaiciid.org

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INTRODUCTION

In the absence of any effective medicine or vaccine, COVID-19 remains a global threat. Social and political sciences inform us about patterns of behaviour among individuals, communities, societies and states in times of crisis and conflict (Figure 1). In such situations, policymakers and societies can become less tolerant. Violence and exclusion against people perceived to represent a threat may “not only (be) tolerated but also justified”.¹ The roles and reactions of religious agencies in such a context become essential for many people, guiding them to cope with the situation and interact with “the Other”.^{2,3}

IN THIS WAY, MANY OF THE CHALLENGES WE ARE SEEING DURING THE PANDEMIC CLOSELY MIRROR THOSE FACED BY SOCIETIES IN CONFLICT, POST-CONFLICT AND OTHER CRISIS SITUATIONS.

1 Dragojević, M. (2019). *Amoral Communities: Collective Crimes in the Time of War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

2 Abu-Nimer, M. (2015). Religion and peacebuilding: reflections on current challenges and future prospects. *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies*, vol. 16.

3 Abu-Nimer, M., & R.K. Smith (2016). Interreligious and intercultural education for dialogue peace and social cohesion. *International Review of Education*, vol. 62, No. 4 (August).

Figure 1. Crisis reaction phases^a



^a Individuals and communities pass through these three phases at different speeds subject to history, level of awareness and context.

The interfaith⁴ setting has followed a similar pattern of crisis management during the pandemic. Rapid but informed responses by community leaders, religious actors and stakeholders to address narratives and issues are crucial to prevent negative dynamics and damage to social cohesion. Cross-community links offering a shared humanity are of great importance to encourage and support interfaith initiatives responding to the global challenges.⁵

Religious agencies and policymakers are focusing on how to engage constructively with each other and be more effective in responding to the pandemic.⁶ Interreligious dialogue work has become a tool of increasing importance in developing intercommunity trust, relations and cooperation in numerous sectors, such as development, environmental protection and peacebuilding. It is integral to much interfaith work in general. In fragile contexts, particularly those currently experiencing conflict or dealing with the legacy of a conflict, interreligious dialogue has served to bridge communities and alleviate tensions.⁷

4 The terms “interfaith” and “interreligious” are used interchangeably in this document since they reflect the language used by different Partners and the examples within this guide.

5 We assume the potential positive role of religion in responding to global, national and local events is already established and needs no further debate.

6 Abu-Nimer, M. (2015). Religion and peacebuilding: reflections on current challenges and future prospects. *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies*, vol. 16.

7 Little, D. (2007). *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles in Conflict Resolution*. New York: Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding.

This guide provides practical examples and recommendations that spur the growth of existing interfaith initiatives, and the establishment of new ones, to address some of the many challenges related to COVID-19, while emphasizing the development and strengthening of cross-community relations through dialogue. In particular, KAICIID would like to highlight ways in which interreligious dialogue strengthens initiatives that foster joint open communication and diversity to prevent further community disconnection, isolation, wastage of resources and deeper distrust.⁸

The pandemic has imposed major challenges on interreligious work around the world, but this is not a reason to make interreligious dialogue less of a priority. Interreligious dialogue is perhaps even more necessary now for maintaining peace and preventing escalation of tensions or violence arising due to fear and suspicion of “the Other”, growing community tensions, feelings of isolation and many other challenges.

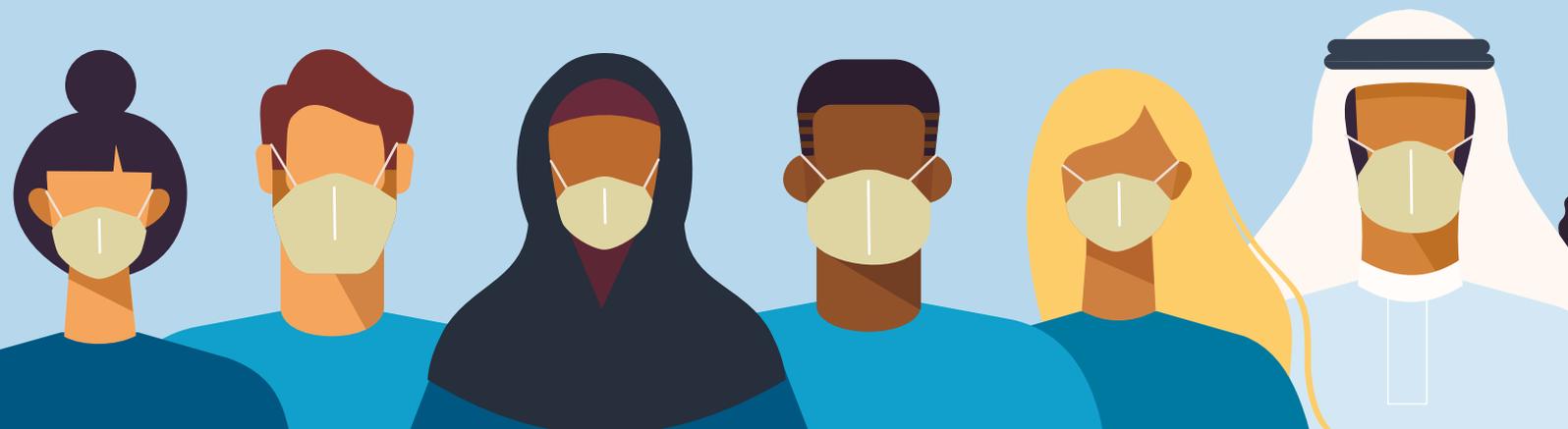
THIS GUIDE PRESENTS SOME CHALLENGES TO INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS AND INTERFAITH WORK, AND THEN PROVIDES A SERIES OF RECOMMENDATIONS WITH EXAMPLES FOR PRACTICAL ACTION AND A SET OF PRINCIPLES TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN DESIGNING OR JOINING AN INTERFAITH INITIATIVE.⁹

8 Abu-Nimer, M., and M. Garred (2018). *Making Peace with Faith*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

9 We collected these responses using two methods. We emailed a survey to KAICIID International Fellows, to which we received responses from over 50 Fellows. We also held online discussions involving over 100 Fellows in 4 regions, asking questions such as “How has this crisis impacted interfaith relations in your country?” and “What do you foresee will be the lasting consequences of the crisis on your interfaith work?” Answers included issues related to places of worship being closed, face-to-face interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding activities being cancelled, funds being shifted to other priorities, and financial challenges facing religious institutions. The most common challenge Fellows agreed on was related to social distancing preventing their mobility and interaction. Partners were consulted both directly to share examples of their work and through their resource platforms, such as the JLI and Berkley Center resource repository for COVID-19.

THIS GUIDE IS AN INITIAL
LOOK AT WAYS INTERFAITH
APPROACHES CAN BE
APPLIED IN THE PANDEMIC.

KAICIID hopes to catalyse creative initiatives for faith-based organizations, religious actors, civil society organizations, and governmental and multilateral organizations working with faith. This is a live document in challenging and changing times, and we aim to add to it. KAICIID welcomes information about projects and initiatives outside the areas described here. The guide focuses on interfaith work, but the best practices and recommendations can be modified to accommodate interethnic, intercultural and other forms of intercommunity relations and dialogue.



The guide has been developed to:

01

help interfaith and interreligious organizations work in different contexts worldwide;

02

inspire a more systematic growth of activities and initiatives beyond one's own religion or faith towards developing cross-community cooperation and collaboration;

03

enable interfaith cooperation to better deal with the challenges associated with COVID-19;

04

help individuals and organizations think of creative options to address the numerous challenges of COVID-19 while following interfaith and development practice principles;

05

capture some useful lessons on practical recommendations and best practices.





CHALLENGES

The following challenges have arisen due to, or been exacerbated by, COVID-19. They include areas that interreligious work typically addresses, that strain interreligious relations, and that have created barriers to interfaith work.

- 1 Increased fear and suspicion
- 2 Increased xenophobia
- 3 Exclusion of stigmatized groups
- 4 Tolerance to restrictive rules and injustice
- 5 Breakdown of interethnic and interreligious relations in fragile contexts
- 6 Promotion of theologically exclusive doctrines
- 7 Logistical challenges of keeping apart
- 8 Diminishing cross-community interaction
- 9 Shifts in funding
- 10 Adaptability versus tangibility



CHALLENGE 1

Increased fear and suspicion

The impulse to protect family, friends and community is often paired with the tendency to exacerbate suspicions towards people perceived as “different”, such as people from other countries or members of other faith or ethnic communities. In the COVID-19 pandemic, fear and suspicion towards people outside the immediate community are partly related to the virus being transmitted through close contact with others. Fear has also been associated with rituals and practices of ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Asian communities, and religious groups, such as Evangelical Christians in the United States of America, Muslims during Ramadan in South Asia,¹⁰ and Jewish communities in New York.¹¹ There may also be suspicion about the motivation behind faith-based organizations’ humanitarian work and support for members of other religious communities.

10 Perrigo, B. (2020). It was already dangerous to be Muslim in India. Then came the coronavirus. *Time*, 3 April. Available at <https://time.com/5815264/coronavirus-india-islamophobia-coronajihad/>.

11 Hassan, C., and G. McDonnell Nieto del Rio (2020). New York City Jewish leaders write to mayor saying they were hurt by his comments and request a meeting. *CNN*, 30 April. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/30/us/new-york-jewish-leaders-de-blasio-letter/>.

CHALLENGE 2

Increased xenophobia

The pandemic has contributed to increased xenophobia. The term “the Chinese virus” has led to xenophobic attitudes towards Asian people, with subsequent isolation, exclusion, and verbal attacks or violence against people of Chinese heritage¹² and “people who look Chinese”.¹³ Rising xenophobia can lead to harassment, hate speech, proliferation of discriminatory stereotypes, conspiracy theories, and stigmatization and exclusion. Several policymakers and religious institutions and leaders have issued statements condemning such behaviour. Prejudices and misinformation are not linked to one group or another, but have stemmed from and targeted different actors, including health authorities, media, state officials and religious communities.

We need every ounce of solidarity to tackle [COVID-19] together. Yet, the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering; and the foreigner sentiment has surged online and in the streets. Antisemitic conspiracy theories have spread and COVID-19-related anti-Muslim attacks have occurred.

António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General

12 Asmelash, L. (2020). With the spread of coronavirus came a surge in anti-Asian racism online, new research says. CNN, 20 April. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/10/us/sinophobic-racism-rise-coronavirus-research-trnd/index.html>.

13 DW (2020). Campaign aims to #WashTheHate of coronavirus racism. Bonn. Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/top-stories/s-9097>.

CHALLENGE 3

Exclusion of stigmatized groups

Increased xenophobia adds to stigmatization and may lead to the exclusion of specific ethnic, racial or religious groups. People who have already been subject to public scrutiny on the basis of their appearance, practices or adherence to vulnerable groups are at risk of further stigmatization and face even greater challenges from a public health perspective warranting a greater focus.¹⁴

Refugees and internationally displaced people often live in poor conditions and may be viewed as “outsiders” linked with negative stereotypes. Increased risk of exclusion and stigmatization may result in people hiding their symptoms rather than seeking treatment. Images from several countries support this bias, showing refugee camps in isolation from the local population, strengthening the psychological boundaries imposed between “us” (the host population) and “them” (refugees and migrants).

Stigmatized groups are particularly vulnerable during epidemics and pandemics ... because stigma can lead people to hide symptoms of illness and refrain from seeking medical care to avoid discrimination ... [in the United States], Asian American, African American, American Indian, Native Alaskan, Muslim American and Latinix populations ...

President of the American Psychological Association

14 Vertovec, S. (2020) *Covid-19 and Enduring Stigma: The Corona Pandemic Increases Xenophobia and Exclusion Worldwide*. Munich: Max-Planck-Gesellschaft. Available at <https://www.mpg.de/14741776/covid-19-and-enduring-stigma>.



Many people during the pandemic, particularly migrants and refugees living with HIV or other infections,¹⁵ who are already stigmatized in some countries, are having difficulties with making a living, accessing medicines or having enough food. Some people with COVID-19 have been bullied on social media or had their rights violated. Self-stigmatization associated with isolation may occur.



¹⁵ This is true in several South and Southeast Asian and African countries, but it is not exclusive to these regions. Even in non-crisis times, stigma is often worsened when the person is a migrant or “outsider” (Smith-Palmer, J., K. Cerri, U. Sbarigia, E.K.H. Chan, R.F. Pollock, W.J. Valentine and K. Bonroy (2020). Impact of stigma on people living with chronic hepatitis B. *Patient Related Outcome Measures*, vol. 11). The United Religions Initiative (URI) Regional Coordinator informed KAICIID on 24 April 2020 of this situation in South Asia and the interfaith relief work that URI has put together to help highly stigmatized and now even more ostracized groups.



CHALLENGE 4

Tolerance to restrictive rules and injustice

Tolerance of infringements of human rights and religious freedoms, especially against minorities and other stigmatized groups, may extend beyond accepting injustice and be seen as justified. COVID-19 has made social injustice more visible and more pronounced, particularly for vulnerable populations. Everyday life for many people around the globe has become more challenging, especially when adhering to required health measures. This is particularly visible in areas where social distancing is not possible or where access to water and sanitation is difficult. Often the majority groups or populations within societies are better suited to accept restrictions. The inability of vulnerable populations to adhere to government or medical measures can contribute to greater discrimination, increased divisions, societal injustice and government measures or legislation legalizing injustice.¹⁶

¹⁶ United Nations (2020). *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*. New York. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf>.

As some minorities are marginalized in some societies and have economic disadvantages, leading them to potentially suffer more during a pandemic, tensions and faith/ethnic differences can be exaggerated; leaders may use the pandemics to further divide; communities may take care of their community before anybody else (or the whole); people are thinking of their faith and community more than interfaith; there are other more pressing issues at play that cannot be necessarily solved through interfaith work.

KAICIID International Fellow



CHALLENGE 5

Breakdown of interethnic and interreligious relations in fragile contexts

With the increase in need for strong leadership to manage the pandemic, some politicians and religious leaders have used the situation to mobilize people to support certain policies or to apply more restrictions on specific groups. This can damage or reverse intercommunity relations in fragile contexts.

A man attempting to burn down an Armenian church in Istanbul testified: "I burned it because they brought the coronavirus".¹⁷ Islamophobia found expression in populist discourse and has led to government measures that place targeted restrictions on Muslims. Another example is the negative reaction of politicians in some societies with Orthodox Christian majorities towards minority Protestant groups, since they are perceived as providing aid for the sole purpose of gaining converts.¹⁸

Solidifying existing fears, tensions and xenophobia undermines progress made in defusing tensions between groups, harms societal inclusion and can reignite violence.



17 Agos.com (2020). Bakırköy Ermeni Kilisesi'nin kapısı yakılmak istendi. Available at http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/24007/bakirkoy-ermeni-kilisesi-nin-kapisi-yakilmak-istendi?fbclid=IwAR3C4726M4eInN1SKM1a-4nDFLEhfYdLxTLiLTsmDWI_dj3ISVZO7XjpGUM.

18 Leustean, L. (2019). *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*. London: Routledge.

CHALLENGE 6

Promotion of theologically exclusive doctrines

Some religious leaders are promoting a “theology of salvation” for the faithful and punishment for all others, claiming the virus was created as a punishment directed at “the sinners”.¹⁹ This kind of religiocentric narrative propagated by a small number of religious leaders has worsened the spread of COVID-19 among congregations as preachers have continued to hold services and celebrations.²⁰ This behaviour has been exhibited by churches in Greece,²¹ Serbia²² and the United States,²³ while some Hasidic Jewish communities in New York,²⁴ some strictly orthodox Jews²⁵ and some Muslim preachers²⁶ have continued religious rituals despite calls to close places of worship.²⁷ In some cases, the actions of a handful of leaders have created a backlash against whole religious groups.

19 Today Online (2020). Outrage as Singapore ustaz says coronavirus God’s punishment on Chinese. *New Straits Times*, 8 February.

20 Abu-Nimer, M. (2001). Conflict resolution, culture, and religion: toward a training model of interreligious peacebuilding. *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 38, No. 6 (November).

21 Greek City Times (2020). Residents in Patras defy coronavirus restrictions and attend Sunday church service. 6 April. Available at <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/04/06/residents-in-patras-defy-coronavirus-restrictions-and-attend-sunday-church-service/>.

22 Baboulias, Y. (2020). Communion and the coronavirus: COVID-19 triggers deep Orthodox divisions. *BalkanInsight*, 27 April. Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/27/communion-and-the-coronavirus-covid-19-triggers-deep-orthodox-divisions/>.

23 Aljazeera (2020). US churches confront coronavirus restrictions for Easter. 10 April. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/churches-confront-coronavirus-restrictions-easter-200409202439519.html>.

24 Markowitz, J. (2020). “Plague on a Biblical scale”: Hasidic families hit hard by virus. *New York Times*, 21 April. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/nyregion/coronavirus-jews-hasidic-ny.html>.

25 Rothwell, J. (2020). Israel’s ultra-orthodox Jews in health crisis after defying coronavirus lockdown. *The Telegraph*, 14 April. Available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/14/israels-ultra-orthodox-jews-health-crisis-defying-coronavirus/>.

26 Abi-Habib, M., and Z. ur-Rehman (2020). Imams overrule Pakistan’s coronavirus lockdown as Ramadan nears. *New York Times*, 23 April. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/world/asia/pakistan-coronavirus-ramadan.html>.

27 Austin, H. (2020). Hundreds of thousands defy Iraq’s curfew to visit martyred imam’s shrine. NBC News, 21 March. Available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/hundreds-thousands-defy-iraq-s-coronavirus-curfew-visit-martyred-imam-n1165536>.



CHALLENGE 7

Logistical challenges of keeping apart

The need to prevent contagion presents numerous challenges. Social distancing and lockdowns are possible only if physical space allows. In poorer segments of society and dense population settings, precautions aimed at prevention of COVID-19 may not be possible. Confinement in crowded homes, increased home responsibilities, challenges in acquiring essentials, and lack of opportunities to meet with other people have contributed directly to a rise in domestic violence and violence against children.²⁸ Loneliness and isolation are challenging for vulnerable groups such as children, older people and sick people denied the comfort of physical contact or presence of loved ones. Taking a clear interreligious stand is a necessary step, but social distancing regulations have made it more difficult to actively develop joint responses.

... as distancing measures are put in place and people are encouraged to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase.

World Health Organization²⁹

²⁸ United Nations (2020). UN chief calls for domestic violence “ceasefire” amid “horrifying global surge”. *UN News*, 6 April. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>.

²⁹ World Health Organization (2020). *COVID-19 and Violence Against Women: What the Health Sector/System Can Do*. Geneva. Available at <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/emergencies/COVID-19-VAW-full-text.pdf>.

CHALLENGE 8

Diminishing cross-community interaction

Inability to gather is one of the greatest challenges for faith communities and interfaith action. Millions of followers have changed their religious practices and rituals to follow health and safety measures. Cross-community social interaction is critical to success in interfaith work - the whole concept of dialogue is based upon human contacts and relationships. This lack of interaction is hindering relationship-building and may reverse years-long progress made in bridging divides across faiths.

Sustaining trust over many years in relationships requires continuous positive contact.³⁰ We cannot assume pre-pandemic positive interreligious relationships will withstand isolation. Further negative implications of the pandemic are reflected in the intra-faith dimension, dividing religious leaders who see physical gathering as an obligation, and those who support the move of rituals to private or online spheres. Intra-faith dialogue has become even more necessary to prevent tensions between members of the same community.



In [my religion], religious life happens when we meet the community, we share meals, prayers, moments. The challenge is to be able to find a way to stay connected and feel close.

KAICIID International Fellow

³⁰ Brown, R., and M. Hewstone (2005). An integrative theory of intergroup contact. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 37.

CHALLENGE 9

Shifts in funding

With the economic downturn^{31,32} and priorities shifting to directly address the pandemic, financing for interfaith activities is shifting. Many local faith-based organizations and religious institutions are dependent on donations and grants.³³ Donors have turned towards pandemic-related research and projects and reduced funding to other interreligious work requiring religious institutions, faith-based organizations and interfaith organizations to shift their activities to focus more on delivering aid and relief.^{34,35} There is a danger that these funding shifts will result in scaling back or suspending dialogue and interreligious projects, which can adversely affect progress made in building bridges, particularly in fragile contexts.³⁶

31 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020). *COVID-19 to Slash Global Economic Output by \$8.5 Trillion Over Next Two Years*. New York. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/policy/wesp-mid-2020-report.html>.

32 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020). *The World Economy on a Tighrope*. Paris. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/>.

33 These shifts may also affect funding for other types of dialogue-related work, cross-community relief-work and development aid, such as childhood vaccinations, effects of other ongoing diseases (e.g. Ebola) and famine.

34 Tony Blair Institute (2020). *COVID-19: Guide for Governments Working with Religious Leaders to Support Public Health Measures*. London. Available at <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/Tony%20Blair%20Institute%2C%20Working%20With%20Religious%20Leaders%20to%20Support%20Public%20Health%20Measures.pdf>.

35 United States Agency for International Development (2020). *Faith-based Organizations Responding to COVID-19*. Washington, D.C. Available at <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1875/faith-based-organizations-responding-covid-19>.

36 Before the pandemic there was a growing acknowledgement of the need to work within and foster the humanitarian-development-peace triple nexus (United Nations Economic and Social Council (2020). *Enhancing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus*. New York. Available at <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/node/14973644>). This cross-sector nexus is particularly apparent in work by local faith actors and faith-based organizations, where it has occurred organically. Without consciously developing work in a programmatic way, these actors have worked in all three areas to reinforce their work, preventing compartmentalization. As interreligious dialogue and interreligious work are a part of peacebuilding work in many areas, it should not be abandoned or scaled back during the pandemic.

CHALLENGE 10

Adaptability versus tangibility

How do we develop something concrete? The ability to adapt religious rituals to official measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19 has been a constant challenge. Some religious rituals are not easily adapted, such as baptism and burial. Beyond religious rituals, we need to examine how interreligious and interreligious dialogue work can be conducted and how resilient and adaptable the actors need to be. Continuous virtual engagement can lead to frustration and the need for physical and tangible outcomes. In many of the webinars on religious and interreligious responses to COVID-19, participants underlined the need for real impact on the ground. It is not just a matter of changing the framework, format and thinking behind interreligious work, but also addressing challenges associated with online availability and connectivity strength. In many regions and communities, particularly in fragile contexts, it is difficult or impossible to shift all work or personal activity online.³⁷ Adapting to COVID-19 and interfaith work cannot and should not be confined to doing the same activities as before, but virtually.



³⁷ This was especially noticeable in the examples of Fellows during the online conference, where they mentioned challenges with internet connection and online literacy.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF INTERFAITH ACTION

Here we focus on a non-exhaustive list of recommendations derived from examples of diverse interfaith and religious work since February 2020 to address the challenges of COVID-19. Accompanying the recommendations are practical interfaith and monoreligious examples that could serve as the basis for future interfaith actions.

AS MANY OF THE CHALLENGES ARE LINKED WITH ISSUES OF TRUST, SUSPICION AND MISPERCEPTION, OR DIRECTLY WITH INTERFAITH WORK, THE RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES ARE DESIGNED TO INFORM INTERFAITH WORK THAT HIGHLIGHTS COLLABORATION AND SOLIDARITY AND RELIES ON THE PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE TO BUILD AND STRENGTHEN SOCIAL COHESION.

Interreligious dialogue should show its strength and resilience. More than ever it should demonstrate the unique value of unity in diversity: it is not our external appearance and rituals but the inner confidence in the role of humanity that should move us through these challenging times. Each expression, knowledge and wisdom of each person and community should nurture the entirety of the body of humanity suffering this life-threatening virus. Reliance on God does not mean we are immune; it should mean that our recognition of the divine in each other inspires us to extend a helping hand to everyone.

KAICIID International Fellow

Issues of trust, suspicion and misperception are best treated through interfaith endeavours and dialogue. Dialogue aims to restore trust and build “bridges of communication among those who are different”; it transforms relationships “from a state of intolerance, stereotyping and misunderstanding to a state of deeper understanding and respect of each other’s differences”.³⁸ In times where social cohesion is under threat, activities that aim to build trust, such as acts of solidarity, collaboration and understanding, are essential. Interfaith and interreligious activities contribute by referring to religious concepts and values to transform competitive into more cooperative relationships. During the pandemic, it is important to think outside the box to develop interfaith initiatives which, while not always dialogical in format, nevertheless build bridges, have a humanizing effect, provide information and relief, and where possible inform interfaith and interreligious dialogue activities.

³⁸ Abu-Nimer, M., and A. Alabbadi (2017). *Fellows: Interreligious Dialogue Resource Guide*. Vienna: International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID). Available at <https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/fellows-interreligious-dialogue-resource-guide>.

INTERFAITH ACTION AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE DURING COVID-19: FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following guiding principles for developing an interfaith initiative are relevant at all times, but the rapid shift in focus to address the challenges worsened or created by the pandemic risks them being forgotten. Five guiding principles include first and foremost health and public safety measures as priority in their implementation.



Create a culture of inclusion. All relevant groups and individuals should be involved. Inclusivity is a priority in interfaith activities and should be adopted by all religious communities in a crisis. It requires a safe environment where every person and every group is treated equally.



Express empathy and display solidarity across religions, regions and cultures to foster hope and dispel fears.



Strengthen charitable and service efforts, making them more regular, better coordinated, and more applicable across communities.



Adapt behaviours, approaches, methodologies and techniques to strengthen resilience.



Emphasize human interconnectivity and interdependency. Remind people and communities of the importance of being connected to counteract divisiveness. Interreligious work underscores the humanity of "the Other", helps dispel fears, and can alleviate the debilitating nature of isolation and loneliness.

Establish
interfaith and
cross-sector
partnerships
to strengthen
activities

The most fundamental best practice is to team up with other actors across faiths or sectors with similar goals. All initiatives, responses and activities, whether public prayers, advocacy statements or relief activities, are strengthened when different actors work together. Most of the best practices outlined here demonstrate the importance of partnerships.

There are many statements, webinars and initiatives organized by different faith-based organizations and representatives from different faiths encouraging solidarity and cross-community cooperation. Organizations and interfaith platforms have aligned their activities to respond to the pandemic. Some of these partnerships and platforms existed before but have been reinforced to achieve the same goal, contributing to a joint response to the pandemic. New partnerships have also emerged.

*We need to come together as one humanity
against a common unseen enemy.*

KAICIID International Fellow

At various times during the pandemic, such as at the outbreak, when new information has created panic, when changing circumstances have heightened fears, or during resurgences of the virus, it has been necessary to act quickly. The following interfaith actions can serve as rapid responses to ever-changing circumstances.

Make joint statements as an expression of solidarity, advocating for compliance to government measures or calling for societal and government action

One of the first interfaith actions witnessed during the pandemic was a number of joint interreligious statements. Religious leaders and actors representing a multitude of faiths came together to react to the challenges. Some statements called for religious leaders and actors to ensure their communities adhere to precautionary measures.³⁹ Others asked governments to ensure the inclusion of religious actors in COVID-19 responses and the maintenance of a balance between precautionary measures and freedom of religion and belief.⁴⁰ Others emphasized the need for humane action and called for people, governments, multilateral institutions and civil society organizations, including faith communities, to take decisive, forward-looking actions.⁴¹

As part of the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith and Local Communities (JLI), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Religions for Peace issued a statement on the well-being of children.⁴² The Interreligious Platform for Dialogue and Cooperation in the Arab Region issued a statement calling for multireligious and multicultural collaboration in regional responses to the pandemic.⁴³

Such statements unite different voices from a number of religious communities and serve as an expression of interfaith solidarity. They create awareness of particular issues related to religious communities, interreligious interaction and government measures, act as countermeasures to xenophobia, and have the advantage of being rapidly produced and widely disseminated.

39 Religions for Peace and ACT Alliance (2020). *A Joint Statement: Urgent Action Needed to Prevent COVID-19*. Available at <https://actalliance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-statement-ACT-RfP-FINAL.pdf>.

40 G20 Interfaith Forum (2020). *Statement Urging G20 Action: Interfaith Networks Support G20 Action Across Sectors and Communities to Respond to the COVID-19 Crisis*. Available at <https://www.g20interfaith.org/2020/04/27/statement-urging-g20-action-on-covid-19/>.

41 ACT Alliance (2020). *ACT Statement: A Call for Humanity and Stronger Global Governance*. Geneva. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/act-statement-call-humanity-and-stronger-global-governance>.

42 United Nations Children's Fund and Religions for Peace (2020). *Joint Statement from UNICEF and Religions for Peace*. New York. Available at <https://jliiflc.com/2020/04/launch-of-global-multi-religious-faith-in-action-covid-19-initiative/>.

43 KAICIID (2020). *IPDC Calls for Multireligious Cooperation in the Arab World to Overcome COVID-19 Crisis*. Vienna. Available at <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/ipdc-calls-multireligious-cooperation-arab-world-overcome-covid-19-crisis>.

Seek private-sector promotion of interfaith action

Building on a two-day conference organized by the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation and the Busch School of Business at the Catholic University of America in February 2020, the two institutions held a webinar, *For Humanity: Inter-Faith Solidarity and Joint Action*, which highlighted how interfaith action and solidarity can promote resilience in a crisis. The initial conference worked to develop interfaith employee resource groups with the aim of sharing best practices, challenges and opportunities. These employee resource groups are now becoming an interfaith mechanism within a number of Fortune 500 companies; they address the lack of resources and shifts in priorities, forming exchange platforms on how to work together in an office environment during the pandemic.

The Religious Freedom and Business Foundation spearheaded discussions on how religions might respond with its webinar on COVID-19, religion and economics.⁴⁴ Interventions through the private sector to deal with the pandemic have been remarkable, although the incorporation of an interfaith lens is often missing from these private-sector initiatives.

Channel the energy of youth

Engaging the creativity and energy of young people can address immediate challenges and more effectively reach other youth. Young people tend to use social rather than traditional media to obtain their information, so it is important to engage youth in the development of such campaigns. One example is the youth-driven COVID-19 social media campaigns developed as part of a KAICIID initiative.⁴⁵

Another method is to engage young people to research, write and disseminate interfaith information aimed at other youth and wider audiences. When South Asia locked down quickly to stem the spread of COVID-19, many students were unable to return to their homes. The United Religions Initiative tapped into the energy and talent of these young people and asked them to write about similarities between different religions and cultures to reinforce their humanity. These articles were published in Hindi or Urdu by the United Religions Initiative and distributed through social media.

44 Religious Freedom and Business Foundation (2020). *For Humanity: Inter-faith Solidarity and Joint Action to Combat COVID-19*. Annapolis, MD. Available at [https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/2/post/2020/04/for-humanity-inter-faith-solidarity-and-joint-action-to-combat-covid-19.html?ct=t\(EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_4_21_2020_20_32_COPY_01\)&mc_cid=960ccc7e20&mc_eid=6fcbf2d2a4](https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/2/post/2020/04/for-humanity-inter-faith-solidarity-and-joint-action-to-combat-covid-19.html?ct=t(EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_4_21_2020_20_32_COPY_01)&mc_cid=960ccc7e20&mc_eid=6fcbf2d2a4).

45 KAICIID (2019). *KAICIID Trains Youth on How to Use Social Media as a Space for Dialogue*. Vienna. Available at <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/kaiciid-trains-youth-how-use-social-media-space-dialogue>.



Engage women and women's networks

Women often have established networks or connections. Although these are not necessarily founded as interfaith networks, they can be tapped into as a way to create interfaith solidarity or support interfaith efforts.

An example was shared by a KAICIID Fellow alumna. In Vienna, women of different faiths have come together to coordinate and help each other to effectively handle home-schooling during the pandemic. This has proven particularly helpful for families who are not native speakers of German. The support network has increased resilience, maintained personal and family mental health, helped counter xenophobia or "Othering" of migrants and members of religious minorities, and enabled minority groups to deal with the challenges and limitations imposed by social distancing and other government regulations. Other networks have helped with preventing or finding solutions to domestic violence.

Gather and disseminate information

Several partners and organizations are gathering and disseminating information. Interfaith efforts to share reliable information can help to counter the risk of destructive and harmful rumours and fake information targeting social cohesion.

Develop interfaith tools and guidelines to address the pandemic and its challenges

Some interfaith tools are being developed to address the pandemic. Some include an interfaith dimension to guide followers in interacting with other faith communities and becoming more inclusive. Many monoreligious guides could be expanded to include an interreligious perspective or provide recommendations on proactive interfaith action. Examples include resources developed for faith communities with recommendations on planning and responding to COVID-19;^{46,47} Biblical references to support reactions on dealing with the crisis;⁴⁸ support for Muslim communities in adapting religious rituals and practices;⁴⁹ recommendations for dealing with xenophobia, exclusion of stigmatized groups, and interfaith and interethnic tensions;⁵⁰ and guidance on reopening religious schools.⁵¹

46 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020). *Community and Faith-based Organizations*. Atlanta, GA. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>.

47 World Health Organization (2020). *Practical Considerations and Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Faith-based Communities in the Context of COVID-19*. Geneva. Available at <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19>.

48 Globethics (2020). *10 Commandments for Responsible Pastoral Reactions to the Corona-crisis*. Geneva. Available at https://www.globethics.net/blog/-/asset_publisher/PHTOEQkH6J2J/blog/10-commandments-for-responsible-pastoral-reactions-to-the-corona-crisis.

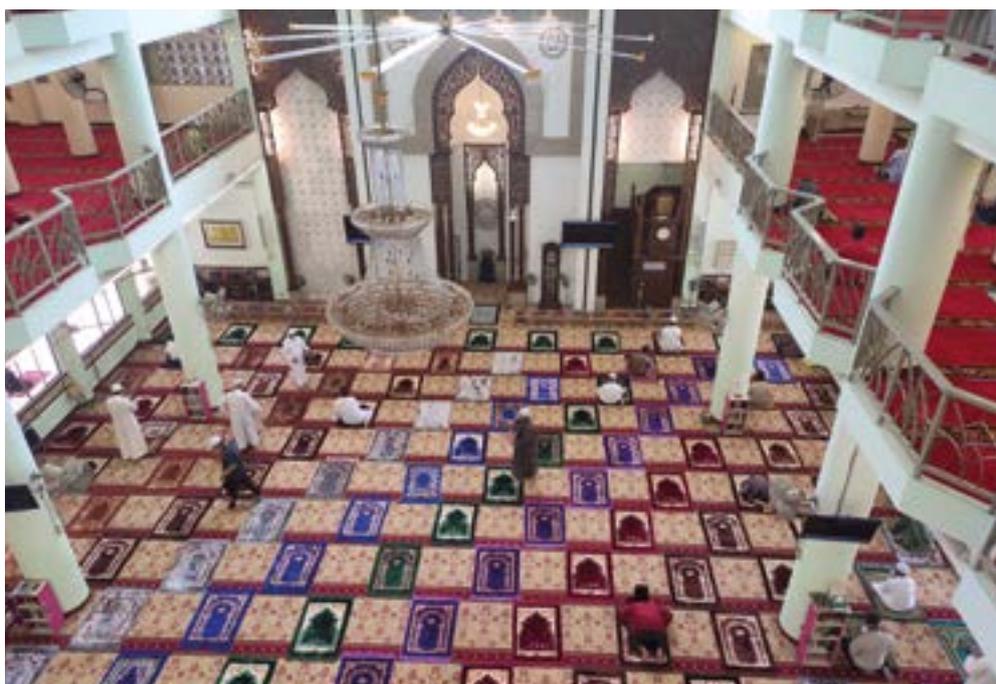
49 Islamic Relief (2020). *Islamic Relief Launches Guidance for Muslims on Safe Religious Practice During the Coronavirus Pandemic*. Birmingham, United Kingdom. Available at <https://www.islamic-relief.org/islamic-relief-launches-guidance-for-muslims-on-safe-religious-practice-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

50 World Vision (2020). *COVID-19: Guidance for Communities*. Monrovia, CA. Available at https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Guidance%20for%20Faith%20Communities_FINAL.pdf.

51 Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America (2020). *Guidance to Shuls and Communities on Reopening Presented by the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America*. New York. Available at https://www.ou.org/assets/OU-Guidance-To-Shuls-And-Communities-5-8-2020_F-1.pdf.

Develop or contribute to one-stop shops for resources

Some organizations are creating “one-stop shops” on COVID-19 on their websites. Examples include statements, webinars and guides, news articles on interfaith cooperation, and local faith actors’ humanitarian responses. Resource collections can provide health information; medical and government precautionary measures; means to enhance communication, counter false information, and reduce stigma and discrimination; adaptations for religious gatherings and rituals; ideas for promoting spiritual well-being, resilience and community service; and recommendations for protecting women, children and vulnerable populations. Religions for Peace,⁵² the United Nations Environmental Programme,⁵³ USAID⁵⁴ and other organizations have gathered a number of sources online. One of the most comprehensive resource sites is the Faith and COVID-19: Resource Repository, which is updated daily.⁵⁵



52 Religions for Peace (2020). *Religions for Peace’s Multi-religious COVID-19 Hub*. Available at <https://rfp.org/multi-religious-covid-19-hub/>.

53 United Nations Environmental Programme (2020). *Faith in the Frontline with COVID-19*. Nairobi. Available at <https://www.unenvironment.org/faith-frontline-covid19>.

54 United States Agency for International Development (2020). *COVID-19 Resources for Faith and Community Leaders and Organizations*. Washington, D.C. Available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/admin/content/media/covid-19-resources-faith-leaders>.

55 Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (2020). *Faith and COVID-19: Resource Repository*. Washington, D.C. Available at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FLxwvN6ICTxWWYOwRiv9sBLgf7v0vstsZv7_o_1-B8/edit.

Moving interfaith endeavours and action online

Due to the restrictions on mobility and isolation, online has become the ultimate way to communicate. Many organizations have chosen to take action or continue their interfaith work by moving it online.

Hold interfaith online consultations, webinars, videos and podcasts

With the help of various virtual platforms, online consultations, webinars, videos and podcasts have become commonplace. These mechanisms are cost-effective and can be an ideal way to share initiatives, offer information to a wider audience, or answer audience questions.

The International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development webinar shared best practices and innovative opportunities for faith actors in responding to COVID-19 with an audience worldwide.⁵⁶ A Berkley Center webinar involved



⁵⁶ International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development (2020). PaRD Webinar on COVID-19 pandemic: challenges for religious/faith actors and communities? Responses from the field and global partners. Available at <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/service/news-archive/article/pard-webinar-on-covid-19-response-on-april-29th/>.



interactive exploratory conversations on identifying specific challenges and finding creative solutions to religious and interreligious gatherings.⁵⁷ The World Economic Forum created a podcast on opportunities for youth action in the digital realm.⁵⁸

Online mechanisms can serve as a convenient way to show interfaith solidarity across faiths and continents, reassuring believers that following health advice is the right thing to do⁵⁹ or providing spiritual guidance or mental health care. Online formats can also be a way to adapt interfaith work in general. The United States Institute of Peace held a series of round tables online, and KAICIID held a full online conference for over 100 Fellows, with plenaries for all participants and break-out sessions; this conference has informed the development of this guide.

57 Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (2020). *The COVID-19 Crisis: Taking Stock of Religious Responses*. Washington, D.C. Available at <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/the-covid-19-crisis-taking-stock-of-religious-responses>.

58 World Economic Forum (2020). *Love Your Neighbour: Islam, Judaism and Christianity Come Together Over COVID-19*. Available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/religions-covid-19-coronavirus-collaboration/>.

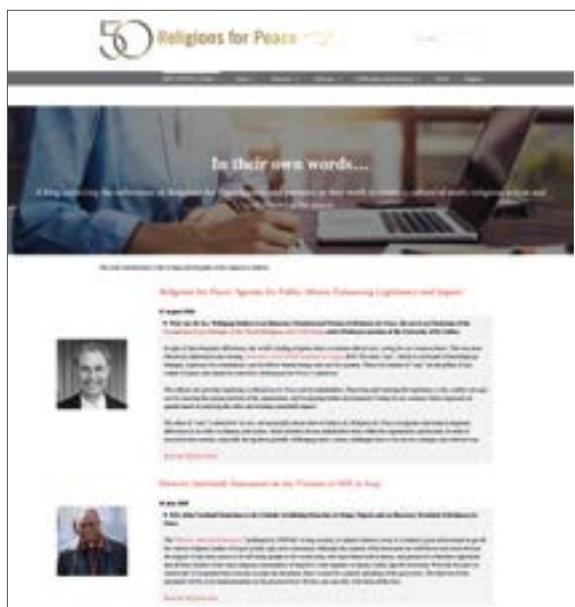
59 Global Interfaith WASH Alliance and United Nations Children's Fund Tanzania (2020). *Proactive Faith Leadership in Times of Crises*. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpcS3yj8U8I&fbclid=IwAR2luyqCnlgSk7ZJ1MEBdKjgN7nDTQJ1jymqdIM8RATATplqs5H8uSUdxME>.

Provide a regular dose of optimism by highlighting positive stories

Taking full advantage of online and virtual platforms, it is possible to counter xenophobia, fears and suspicion and strengthen interfaith and interethnic solidarity with positive messaging and examples. Interfaith action can be a source of hope.

The Corona to Karuna (Compassion) initiative was launched by the United Religions Initiative in northern India and Afghanistan in response to growing suspicion towards others, increased xenophobia, heightened tensions between religious groups, and increased exclusion of certain ethnic and religious groups exacerbated by COVID-19.⁶⁰ The initiative uses social media to disseminate examples of interfaith help, cooperation and collaboration to show signs of hope and counter suspicion and further exclusion.

The initiative also gathers three true stories involving real people, clergy, faith groups and communities from different faith groups in India daily. These stories aim to counter the fake information fuelling hatred and suspicion being circulated on social media. The short, accessible stories are designed to be accessed and understood by as many people as possible and to be read and shared via all social media channels.



The Berkley Center and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities have developed a newsletter that highlights positive interfaith action on a daily basis.⁶¹ The Religions for Peace blog highlights positive reflections from its religious leader members.⁶² KAICIID supported the Interreligious Platform for Dialogue and Cooperation in the Arab Region's statement for multireligious solidarity by writing 11 articles highlighting interreligious ways to deal with COVID-19 and inspire hope in the Arab region.⁶³

60 United Religions Initiative (2020). *Corona to Karuna (Compassion)*. San Francisco, CA. Available at <https://uri.org/uri-story/20200427-corona-karuna-compassion>.

61 Available at <https://georgetown.us1.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=dfcac1bf9a4ccb7126f3d2bc8&id=869109c52a>.

62 Religions for Peace (2020). *In Their Own Words*. Available at <https://rfp.org/learn/center-of-excellence/resources/in-their-own-words/>.

63 KAICIID (2020). *Standing Shoulder to Shoulder: Religious Leaders from the Arab Region Call for Solidarity*. Vienna. Available at <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/%E2%80%9Cstanding-shoulder-shoulder%E2%80%9D-religious-leaders-arab-region-call-solidarity>.

Develop social media campaigns to advocate compliance with safety measures and counter hate speech and misinformation

The pandemic has unleashed a degree of uncertainty. The virus is new and information on its spread, symptoms and effects is constantly evolving. Social media is often blamed for the spread of hate speech, xenophobia and conspiracy theories. The internet and social media are easy platforms for spreading misinformation, and false assumptions online can enhance stereotypes and exclusion.

There are, however, great opportunities to use social media to advocate for interfaith action and solidarity and to share accurate information with targeted groups or global audiences.

The KAICIID Social Media as a Space for Dialogue Programme has reactivated several online campaigns and launched new hashtags to counter the spread of the pandemic across countries in the Arab region.⁶⁴ The campaigns seek to raise awareness about the risks of COVID-19 and support the “stay at home” message. They also enhance, support and shed light on religious leaders’ roles in facing such a crisis, amplifying their messages on the campaign pages and promoting solidarity and common citizenship values among people by fighting discrimination and helping vulnerable groups.

A Religions for Peace, United Nations Children’s Fund and Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities initiative has developed a social media campaign highlighting shared values across religions and guiding actions against COVID-19.⁶⁵



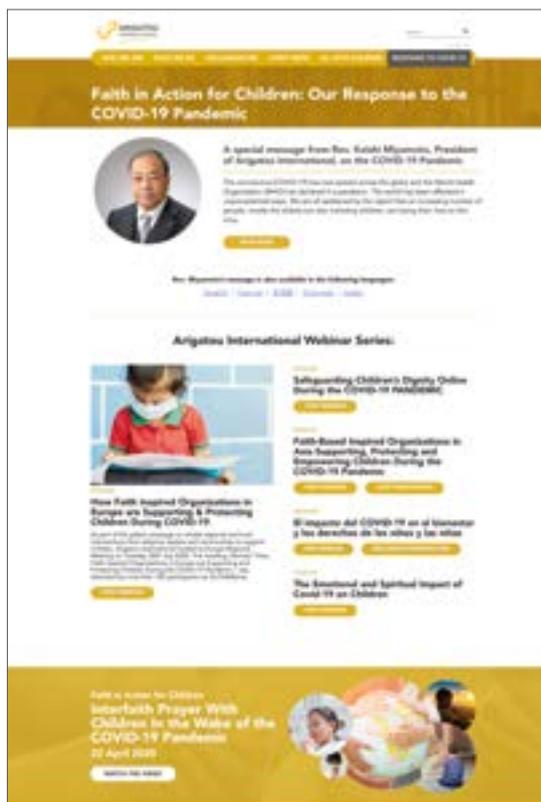
KAICIID's Senior Advisor Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer trains youth on how to use social media as a space for dialogue in Riyadh

⁶⁴ KAICIID (2019). *KAICIID Trains Youth on How to Use Social Media as a Space for Dialogue*. Vienna. Available at <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/kaiciid-trains-youth-how-use-social-media-space-dialogue>.

⁶⁵ Religions for Peace, United Nations Children’s Fund and Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (2020). *Interfaith Call to Action on COVID-19*. Available at <https://rfp.org/an-interfaith-call-to-action/>.

Move interfaith rituals online or other creative means

Several faith-based organizations are collaborating to adapt rituals and practices to fit COVID-19 precautionary measures. Religious services are being provided online in ways that go well beyond broadcast services. Virtual applications can provide opportunities for adapting interfaith rituals to an online space.



Arigatou International organized an interfaith prayer as part of its Faith in Action for Children response, with the participation of representatives of several interfaith organizations, faith-based organizations and children from different faiths.⁶⁶ This example raises interfaith awareness of the direct challenges to children's health, the possible effects of a parent's illness or death, logistical challenges of social distancing, including access to education and food, and an increase in violence against children.

The Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, represented by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Al-Tayeb, organized the worldwide Prayer for Humanity on 14 May 2020, during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, bringing together believers from different traditions to pray, fast and do works of charity as a joint effort in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁷

The Tri-Faith Initiative hosted an online conversation with Priya Parker to provide creative ideas for hosting religious and interfaith gatherings from afar.⁶⁸

Outside the virtual realm, a member of the European Muslim Jewish Leadership Council shared a story of people gathering individually on their balconies in Vienna for a group prayer.

⁶⁶ An interfaith campaign designed to mobilize faith leaders and strengthen interreligious connections to protect and empower children during the pandemic (Arigatou International (2020). *Faith in Action for Children: Our Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Tokyo. Available at <https://arigatouinternational.org/en/response-to-covid19>.)

⁶⁷ Vatican News (2020). *Higher Committee of Human Fraternity Calls for Day of Prayer*. Vatican. Available at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-05/higher-committee-human-fraternity-prayer-appeal-end-pandemic.html>.

⁶⁸ Pirigyi SS (2020). *Gathering Together While Apart with Priya Parker (Online)*. Omaha, NE: Tri-Faith Initiative. Available at <https://www.trifaith.org/events/gathering-together-while-apart-with-priya-parker-online/>.

Using existing interfaith infrastructures may be less challenging than starting new initiatives. Many grassroots religious actors are working with their communities or each other to address challenges related to COVID-19. The following examples could be undertaken to reach local communities. Each could be done separately or in combination with others in a larger initiative.

Strengthen
and expand
existing
work

39

Identify the needs of local faith actors and communities and disseminate the information gathered

The lack of resources and shift in priorities may be felt particularly strongly in vulnerable contexts, especially in contexts that are post-conflict or have seen violence between groups in the past. Conducting dialogue encounters has often helped alleviate tensions and worked towards building or rebuilding trust, but traditional interfaith efforts have been compromised in the pandemic.

This may, however, be a time of opportunity to understand shifting needs in local contexts.

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers has established a series of “socially distant townhalls” to identify resources and support for local faith actors to address COVID-19 and wider community concerns.⁶⁹ The discussions are interactive and include local faith actors representative of the particular context. The “townhalls” provide a platform for people to share their needs and activities and to connect to regional, national and international actors who may be able to provide support for their interfaith endeavours.



69 Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (2020). *Responding to COVID-19*. Helsinki. Available at <https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/covid-19/>.

Connect those who want to help with those who need it most

Organizations may be willing to provide relief or support but unaware of who needs it most. Networks of faith-based organizations are uniquely placed to connect these actors. The United Religions Initiative has connected faith-based organizations in their networks with vulnerable groups in need of assistance.^{70,71}

The United Religions Initiative is providing relief to former drug users and those living with HIV or hepatitis, who are strongly stigmatized. In the first two weeks of this initiative, the organization provided relief to more than 5000 people.



In close cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Interreligious Council of Peru, composed of 27 diverse faith-based communities, is providing aid to a number of vulnerable groups, including refugees and migrants. The increased number of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, and the difficulties they face during the pandemic, have indicated the need for an interreligious approach to counter stigmatization and hate speech.

70 United Religions Initiative (2020). *Undugu Family of HOPE Distributes Essential Supplies in Nairobi*. San Francisco, CA. Available at <https://uri.org/uri-story/20200410-undugu-family-hope-distributes-essential-supplies-nairobi>.

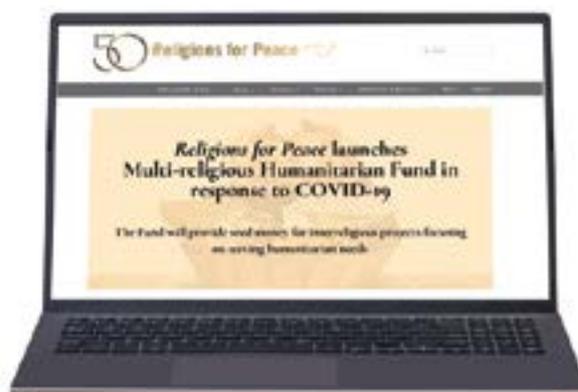
71 United Religions Initiative (2020). *Delivering Rations among Mumbai Colony Residents*. San Francisco, CA. Available at <https://uri.org/uri-story/20200427-delivering-rations-among-mumbai-colony-residents>.

Develop interfaith efforts that provide financial and technical support to local faith actors and faith-based organizations

International actors can enhance local efforts or implement initiatives by partnering with or supporting local actors through funding or expertise. Many local faith actors are working across faiths in their communities to ensure COVID-19 measures are taken seriously, provide aid and humanitarian relief, support maintenance of mental health, prevent or address domestic violence, and reduce interreligious and interethnic tensions in creative ways. Many of these actors are lacking in resources to do this work, and most multilateral organizations can provide funds only through member states.

Interfaith coalitions, interfaith organizations, faith-based organizations and civil society organizations have the opportunity to support these actors through funding mechanisms that also offer guidance and expertise to strengthen existing or new initiatives.

Religions for Peace launched its Multi-religious Humanitarian Fund in Response to COVID-19, which accepts applications from interreligious councils and multireligious networks for projects that strengthen awareness of and compliance to precautionary measures in preventing the spread of COVID-19, support vulnerable households, counter xenophobia and discrimination, and provide for the needs of the most vulnerable individuals and communities.⁷²



ACT Alliance is directing funding from its network to local faith actors who are responding to the challenges to COVID-19.⁷³

KAICIID has launched an interfaith COVID-19 micro-grant funding process for its international and regional Fellows and is looking into widening the reach of funding beyond Fellows by offering micro-grants through its regional programmes.

⁷² Religions for Peace (2020). *Religions for Peace Launches Multi-religious Humanitarian Fund in Response to COVID-19*. Available at <https://rfp.org/rfp-launches-the-multi-religious-humanitarian-fund-in-response-to-covid-19/>.

⁷³ ACT Alliance (2020). *Programmatic Response to the Global COVID-19 Pandemic*. Geneva. Available at <https://mailchi.mp/c1a82a07d908/humanitarian-3215305?e=c0ad96083f>.



CONCLUSION

It is easy to believe that interfaith and interreligious dialogue activities are less of a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BUT IF WE CONSIDER THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC, AND HOW IT IS AFFECTING THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF MANY PEOPLE, THE ROLE OF INTERRELIGIOUS INTERACTION, COOPERATION AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE BECOMES QUITE APPARENT.

Do we abandon interfaith work during times of crisis? On the contrary. Human interaction suffers during crises. Relationships need to be strengthened and sustained as essential ingredients towards healing. The role of prominent religious actors cannot be underestimated. In times of crisis and uncertainty, many people appeal to religious leaders and faith-based organizations for security, moral and spiritual guidance, and concrete help. COVID-19 has shown that we are interdependent and interconnected. While these characteristics are not new, it has reminded us of what we know and how we can adapt our efforts to be more effective during a pandemic.

As with any crisis, interfaith workers must find constructive ways of reacting to and developing systematic methods to deal with negative consequences. Being an agile and responsive organization requires a degree of organizational flexibility and the capacity to accurately diagnose stakeholders' needs. Posing questions to improve reactions and relevancy is necessary in the case of COVID-19, and there is no doubt that the interreligious work undertaken will have to be adjusted.

Social distancing has reminded us of the value of the most precious component of dialogue and interfaith work: the capacity to interact and build trust. When reconsidering priorities and capacities, the core mission of interfaith and interreligious dialogue work – to build and strengthen peace, coexistence and common understanding between faith groups, and protect and sustain existing interfaith relationships – should not be compromised.

Every crisis is an opportunity for change.

Organizations dealing with interfaith and interreligious dialogue must work to re-examine their target audiences, thematic priorities and designs; to avoid the limitation of preaching to convert; and to grow and improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in the context of the crisis. At the same time it is critical to keep true to their fundamental aims.

AS SHOWN IN THIS GUIDE, THIS IS HAPPENING. COVID-19 HAS ALREADY RESULTED IN A NEW WAY OF CONDUCTING INTERFAITH WORK THROUGH VIRTUAL PLATFORMS, AND WE HAVE SEEN THE EMERGENCE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO REACH NEW AND DIFFERENT TARGET AUDIENCES.



THIS RE-EVALUATION AND CREATIVITY SHOULD NOT STOP HERE. IN MOVING FORWARD IN THE COMING MONTHS, INTERFAITH WORKERS SHOULD STRIVE TO ADDRESS SOME KEY QUESTIONS:

How can interfaith organizations be flexible to adequately address stakeholders' needs?

01

How can interfaith workers adjust their ways of operating to become more relevant in the pandemic?

02

Building and sustaining relationships are the core of interfaith work. How will interfaith and interreligious dialogue work reinstall this capacity in the new reality of COVID-19?

03

Considering the difficulty of moving work online in some regions, how can interfaith and interreligious dialogue work be adjusted to the COVID context while offline?

04

After six months of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for global communities, there is a need to foster further understanding of the consequences of this crisis on interreligious relations.

There is no doubt many interfaith workers have responded in heroic ways in confronting the difficult and at times disastrous consequences brought on by the pandemic. Many of the examples in these pages vividly reflect this courage and initiative. This guide cannot recognize and appreciate enough the investments and efforts made by many of these interfaith and religious actors.

WHILE THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED FOR INTERFAITH AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE ACTIVITIES, KAICIID ALSO ENCOURAGES PEOPLE WORKING IN OTHER FORMS OF DIALOGUE OR CROSS-COMMUNITY RELATIONS TO ADAPT THE SUGGESTIONS AND EXAMPLES TO FIT THEIR OWN WORK.



CHURCH IS CLOSED

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© 2020 The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)
Schottenring 21
A-1010 Vienna, AUSTRIA
Tel: +43 1 31322 0
Email: office@kaiciid.org