

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL BRIEF

PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF DISEASE ORDINANCE (CAP. 599)

PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF DISEASE (PROHIBITION ON GROUP GATHERING) (AMENDMENT) (NO. 3) REGULATION 2020

INTRODUCTION

At the meeting of the Executive Council on 19 May 2020, the Council **ADVISED** and the Chief Executive **ORDERED** that the the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulation 2020 (“the Amendment Regulation”) (at Annex A Annex A) should be made under section 8 of the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap. 599) (“the Ordinance”) to expand the list of exempted group gatherings under Schedule 1 to the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) (“the Regulation”) to allow religious gatherings to be held in public places.

PRESENT POSITION AND CONSIDERATIONS

Local Situation

2. Hong Kong has successfully flattened the epidemiological curve with the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (“COVID-19”) dropping to just three local cases, 26 imported cases from Pakistan, United States, United Kingdom and France and one case affecting a close contact of an imported case in the past four weeks (from 20 April 2020 to 17 May 2020). In particular, there were 23 consecutive days of zero local case from 20 April 2020 to 12 May 2020.

3. However, a cluster of local transmission cases has surfaced, with three cases involving the grandmother, grandfather and granddaughter in the same family being confirmed positive in the period from 12 May 2020 to 14 May 2020. This change raised concern that there could be undetected transmission of the virus in the local community.

4. As at 18 May 2020, there are **1 056** COVID-19 cases (including one probable case) in Hong Kong in total, comprising –

- (a) 67 local cases,
- (b) 167 epidemiologically linked with local cases,
- (c) 631 imported cases,
- (d) 26 epidemiologically linked with imported cases,
- (e) 103 possibly local cases and
- (f) 62 epidemiologically linked with possibly local cases.

As at 18 May 2020, 27 patients remain hospitalised, with one in critical condition and three serious.

New Normal

5. According to World Health Organization (“WHO”), COVID-19, of which more than 4.5 million cases worldwide are recorded, may become just another endemic virus in our communities and this virus may never go away. As it is unrealistic to aim for eradication or elimination of COVID-19 in Hong Kong in the near future, we need to keep adjusting the intensity of our social distancing and border control measures to strike an optimal balance amongst the public health, economic and social needs of the community. We have been adopting a “suppress and lift” strategy¹ thus far.

Readiness of Hong Kong on Future Lifting

6. We announced on 5 May 2020 that the time had come for us to lift some of the social distancing measures while remaining agile and ready to reverse back to the “suppression” mode once adverse signs resurface, by adopting a relatively low threshold. Having regard to the six factors as advised by WHO, the maximum number of persons in group gatherings in public places was increased from four to eight and the list of exempted group gatherings under Schedule 1 to the Regulation was expanded.

7. Had it not been for the re-emergence of local transmission cases without identifiable sources, we might be able to contemplate some further relaxations in the current round of assessment. However, in light of the public and experts’ concern, the imminent resumption of classes on 27 May

¹ “Suppress and lift” model advocated by Cambridge mathematician Professor Timothy Gowers, where a threshold with low trigger enabling frequent switching would be conducive to preparing the population to adapt to the new normal as well as the evolving situation in this long marathon.

2020 and the time needed to significantly increase community testing for disease surveillance purpose, we do not consider it opportune to move into the next phase of relaxation. Neither should we re-introduce tightening measures or delay the resumption of classes as planned and announced. The considered view of the Steering Committee at Emergency Response Level under the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance is to maintain the status quo for the time being but, among other refinements to our social distancing measures, allow resumption of religious gatherings.

ENHANCEMENT MEASURES: RESUMPTION OF RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Calls from Key Religious Leaders

8. The Home Affairs Bureau (“HAB”) has been maintaining close contact with the leaders of six key religious bodies and there have been constant calls on the Government to permit the resumption of religious gatherings in public places when the situation permits. In particular, all of the leaders expressed a willingness to comply with reasonable and viable pre-cautionary measures to be laid down by the Government to facilitate the resumption of religious activities without causing undue public health risks. For instance, observing distancing among participants is a condition to which they all readily subscribe.

9. While all appreciate the need to ban food and drinks, the Catholic Diocese and the Christian groups have expressed a strong wish to have the Holy Communion covered under the relaxation as they consider Holy Communion an integral, sacred and essential part of the religious ritual rather than consumption of food and drinks. They have proposed various pre-cautionary measures (including perform hand hygiene, avoid distribution of the bread in the Holy Communion to the mouth and maintain distance between participants awaiting their turn to take the Holy Communion) which are in line with the WHO’s latest advice (at Annex B) and the practices of other places including Italy and Macao.

Justifications for resuming religious activities

10. Hitherto, religious groups have been very supportive of Government’s anti-COVID-19 measures. Noting that one of the early local

transmission clusters took place on a religious (Buddhist) premises, all religious groups have voluntarily introduced measures to help minimise the instances of local transmission. For instance, the Taoist groups have, of their own accord, regulated tomb-sweepers so as to avoid mass gatherings during Ching Ming Festival. While churches remain open for those who wish to pray therein, the Catholic Diocese has introduced measures to segregate churchgoers wide apart from one another. Regular religious gatherings have been suspended. Sermons and masses have also been delivered on-line. So far, no further local transmission cases are traceable to religious settings/gatherings.

11. Noting the progressive relaxation in group gatherings, scheduled premises and activities thereon, religious groups naturally wish that they can avail themselves of the relaxation, if only to render spiritual and psychological support to their followers whose mood, like that of most Hong Kong people, cannot avoid being affected by prolonged social distancing due to COVID-19.

Overseas Practice

12. We note that an increasing number of countries with more challenging epidemic situation than Hong Kong has started to plan for or implement exit strategies. In particular, various countries, such as Australia, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United States, have been gradually relaxing religious activities, among other relaxation of social distancing measures.

Exemption under the Regulation

13. At present, Schedule 1 to the Regulation, which prohibits group gatherings in public places, specifies 13 types of exempted group gatherings Annex C (at Annex C). Other than the 13 exempted group gatherings, permission may also be given by the Chief Secretary for Administration (“CS”) on a case-by-case basis if it either is necessary for governmental operation or, because of the exceptional circumstance of the case, otherwise serves the public interest of Hong Kong.

14. We will allow resumption of religious activities by introducing a new category of exempted group gatherings under the Regulation. Having regard to the diversity of rituals and practices of different religions, we have only set out the overarching principles in the legislative provision, i.e. stipulating that measures should be in place for restricting the number of participants in

the activity to **not more than 50%** of the number of persons that may normally be accommodated on the premises as a place of worship. As for other standard hygiene requirements and social distancing measures, they will be dealt with administratively in the form of guidelines, in consideration of **avoiding undue interference with the practice of religion**, maintaining parity with other exempted group gatherings under the Regulation and the religious bodies' willingness to comply with reasonable and viable precautionary measures to be laid down by the Government.

15. Given that it is impossible to exhaustively define religious activities, the relaxation is **premises-based**. Specifically, only those group gatherings during religious activities held at **premises constructed or regularly used as a place of worship** (including a church, monastery or nunnery, mosque, synagogue or temple) will be exempted. Under the current formulation, ad hoc religious gatherings held at parks and piazzas (e.g. Yu Lan Festival celebrations) will not be covered in the exemption. **Food or drink, other than being served as part of a religious ritual (e.g. the Holy Communion), will not be allowed**. In other words, meal gatherings, such as the "Eid-ul Fitr" (開齋節), the end-of-fast feast of the Muslims, will not be covered by the exemption.

Customised guidelines to be worked out by respective religious bodies based on Department of Health ("DH")'s health advice

16. Support from the religious communities would be crucial to ensure viable implementation and vigilant observation. Accordingly, HAB has been engaging the various key religious leaders and they have agreed to the recommended approach above. Indeed, since the beginning of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hong Kong, the religious communities have already promulgated out of their own volition some guidelines in response to COVID-19 for their worshippers. We have invited the various religious leaders to work out individual sets of guidelines which could best suit their own religious needs based on DH's health advice for religious assemblies.

Corresponding Amendments to Conditions under which Wedding Ceremonies are Allowed under the Regulation

17. As set out in paragraph 15 above, food and drink as part of a religious ritual would be allowed during religious gatherings. As some wedding ceremonies held at places of worship may comprise religious rituals that involve food and drink, it is necessary to resolve the interface issues between

those wedding ceremonies conducted at places of worship and those conducted elsewhere.

18. Currently, wedding ceremonies of not more than 50 persons at which no food or drink is served are a type of exempted group gatherings under the Regulation (Item 10 in Annex C). Having regard to our decision to allow food and drink as part of a religious ritual at religious gatherings, we also introduced corresponding relaxation for wedding ceremonies, i.e. while food and drink should remain to be prohibited at wedding ceremonies, food and drink being served as part of a religious ritual would be allowed for the sake of consistency. As the relaxation only aims to achieve consistency on the restrictions applied among the exempted group gatherings, we would maintain the limit on the maximum number of persons at wedding ceremonies at 50 persons.

OTHER OPTIONS

19. The resumption of religious activities may also be allowed by introducing places of worship as a new type of scheduled premises under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F). Having considered the purposes of the two pieces of emergency regulations under the Ordinance, i.e. Cap. 599F and the Regulation, we are of the view that allowing resumption of religious gatherings by making an amendment to the list of exempted group gatherings in the Regulation could send a clear message to the community that we are under a **“lifting” mode**, instead of introducing yet another type of scheduled premises the mode of operation of which may be subject to the control under Cap. 599F (as in fitness centres and places of public entertainment) no matter the premises are a public place or not.

THE AMENDMENT REGULATION

20. Section 3 of the Amendment Regulation amends Schedule 1 to the Regulation to –

- (a) add a new item 14 for the exemption for religious gatherings (see paragraphs 13 to 15 above); and
- (b) correspondingly amend existing item 10 regarding the exemption for wedding ceremonies (see paragraphs 17 and 18 above).

LEGISLATIVE TIMETABLE

21. The legislative timetable is as follows –

Publication in the Gazette	19 May 2020
Tabling at the Legislative Council	20 May 2020
Commencement	22 May 2020

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSAL

22. The proposal is in conformity with the Basic Law, including the provisions concerning human rights.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

23. Given the exigency of the situation, public consultation is not feasible.

PUBLICITY

24. We have issued a press release on 19 May 2020 and announced the legislative amendment as well as other social distancing measures at a press conference on the same day. A spokesperson has also been made available to respond to public or media enquiries.

25. HAB has also prepared a set of frequently asked questions, which will be uploaded to the COVID-19 thematic website.

BACKGROUND

26. Section 8 of the Ordinance empowers the Chief Executive in Council to make public health emergency regulation for the purposes of preventing, combating or alleviating the effects of a public health emergency and protecting public health. Among others, the occurrence of a novel infectious disease or the imminent threat of an epidemic that has a high probability of

causing large number of deaths or serious disabilities (whether or not long-term) constituted a public health emergency.

ENQUIRIES

27. For enquiries on this brief, please contact the Food and Health Bureau at 3509 8765.

Food and Health Bureau
20 May 2020

Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) (Amendment)
(No. 3) Regulation 2020

Section 1

1

**Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on
Group Gathering) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulation
2020**

(Made by the Chief Executive in Council under section 8 of the Prevention
and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap. 599))

1. Commencement

This Regulation comes into operation on 22 May 2020.

**2. Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group
Gathering) Regulation amended**

The Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group
Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599 sub. leg. G) is amended as set out
in section 3.

3. Schedule 1 amended (exempted group gatherings)

(1) Schedule 1, item 10, after “served”—

Add

“(except as part of a religious ritual)”.

(2) Schedule 1, after item 13—

Add

“14. Group gathering during a religious activity (other than a
wedding ceremony)—

- (a) held at any premises constructed or regularly
used as a place of worship (including a church,
monastery or nunnery, mosque, synagogue or
temple);

Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) (Amendment)
(No. 3) Regulation 2020

Section 3

2

- (b) in which no food or drink is served (except as
part of a religious ritual); and
- (c) in which measures are in place for restricting
the number of participants in the activity to not
more than 50% of the number of persons that
may normally be accommodated on the
premises as a place of worship”.

Clerk to the Executive Council

COUNCIL CHAMBER

2020

Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) (Amendment)
(No. 3) Regulation 2020

Explanatory Note

Paragraph 1

3

Explanatory Note

This Regulation amends Schedule 1 to the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599 sub. leg. G) mainly to provide for an exemption for religious activities held at religious worship premises.

Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19

Interim guidance

7 April 2020



Background

Religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities can play a major role in saving lives and reducing illness related to COVID-19.¹ They are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve. Religious leaders of faith-based organizations and communities of faith can share health information to protect their own members and wider communities, which may be more likely to be accepted than from other sources. They can provide pastoral and spiritual support during public health emergencies and other health challenges and can advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations.

By sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19, religious-inspired institutions can promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices. Religious leaders are integrated into their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need. Religious leaders are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.

Purpose of this guidance

This document is based on guidance and recommendations developed by WHO in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It acknowledges the special role of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities in COVID-19 education, preparedness, and response, through:

- Sharing evidence-based information about COVID-19, preparedness, and response
- Avoiding large group gatherings and conducting rituals and faith-related activities remotely/virtually, as required and whenever possible
- Ensuring that any decision to convene group gatherings for worship, education, or social meetings is based on a sound risk assessment and in line with guidance from national and local authorities

- Ensuring safe faith-based gatherings, ceremonies, and rituals when they do occur
- Strengthening mental and spiritual health, well-being and resilience, through individual contact (while observing appropriate physical distancing) and through social and other communications media
- Ensuring that a human-rights-based approach to advocacy, messaging, and service delivery is systematically upheld
- Addressing stigma, violence, and the incitement of hate
- Promoting ecumenical and interfaith collaboration, and peaceful coexistence during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Ensure that accurate information is shared with communities; counter and address misinformation.

Gatherings (where permitted)

Local and national health authorities are the primary source of information and advice about COVID-19 in communities and can provide information about locally mandated restrictions on the movement of people, whether gatherings are permitted and, if so, of what size. Those organizing a gathering should comply with guidance issued by national and local authorities and if a medium or large gathering is planned, the organizers should establish and maintain contact with the authorities in the buildup to and for the duration of the gathering. If gatherings are permitted, religious leaders and faith-based communities should take the following steps to reduce the threat of COVID-19 in their community.² If they are not able to perform these steps to keep their community safe, then the planned physical gatherings should be cancelled. Once decisions have been made, it may be helpful to describe any adjusted practices and measures and visibly present them at the entry of the place of gathering (in writing or drawing).

If remote/virtual gatherings are not feasible, keep the duration of the gathering to a minimum to limit contact among participants.

Maintain at least 1 m (3 feet) of distance between people at all times

¹ For terminology descriptions please refer to http://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2010/jc1786_fbo_en.pdf

² These steps are based on [Key planning recommendations for Mass Gatherings during COVID-19](#)

COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks. These droplets can land on people or be breathed in by those close by. Religious institutions and faith-based organizations should protect their members by helping them maintain a safe distance between them (“physical distancing”).

- Discourage non-essential physical gatherings and organize virtual gatherings through live-streaming, television, radio, social media, etc.
- If a gathering is planned, consider holding it outdoors. If this is not possible, ensure that the indoor venue has adequate ventilation.
- Regulate the number and flow of people entering, attending, and departing from worship spaces to ensure safe distancing at all times.
- Gatherings with few people are better than crowded sessions. Religious leaders and communities of faith should consider multiple services with a few attendees, rather than hosting large gatherings.
- The numbers and flow of pilgrims at pilgrim sites should be managed to respect physical distancing.
- Seating or standing of participants in faith services should be at least 1 m (3 feet) apart. Where necessary, create and assign fixed seating to maintain safe distances.
- Identify a room or area where a person could be isolated if he or she becomes ill or begins to develop symptoms.

Prevent touching between people attending faith services

Many faith traditions involve physical contact between worshippers. Respiratory droplets containing COVID-19 can settle on a person’s hands and can be passed on to others through physical contact. Religious leaders and faith-based communities should consider how worship practices and community connections can be adapted to prevent touching between participants in services and other faith- or community-based activities.

Create new ways for your community to greet one another that reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Some greetings being adopted within faith communities include:

- Replace hugs, kisses, and handshakes with a bow or peace sign or using a greeting in sign language while maintaining physical distance.
- Greet people at the entry to worship spaces with friendly words and smiles, rather than handshakes or other forms of physical contact.

Many worshippers share a “sign of peace” during services including handshakes and hugs. These are being replaced by, for example:

- Eye contact and a bow while saying “the peace” to others.
- A communal “sign of peace” offered in unison, orally, or through a bow, by the attendees in unison, while staying in place at a safe distance between each other.
- Any form of culturally and religiously sanctioned alternative that avoids physical contact.

Prevent touching or kissing of devotional and other objects that the community is accustomed to handling communally

Many faith traditions include touching or kissing of sacred and symbolic objects during worship services and prayer. The virus that causes COVID-19 can remain on such surfaces for hours or days. Religious leaders and faith-based communities need to protect their members from becoming infected by avoiding practices involving touching or kissing of such surfaces. Leaders can create and help community members accept new ways to reverence these objects and symbols safely. Some religious leaders and faith communities have encouraged their members to:

- Bow before sacred statues or icons, instead of touching them.
- Receive a blessing from at least 1 m away and avoid the distribution of Holy Communion that involves placing the wafer on the tongue or drinking from a common cup.
- Consider using individual pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious or ceremonial foods, rather than shared portions from communal containers.
- Empty fonts of holy water to prevent people from dipping their fingers into a common bowl.
- Eliminate rituals involving touching such as foot washing and substitute appropriate practices.
- Encourage worshippers to perform their ritual ablutions at home before attending the place of worship.

Encourage healthy hygiene among participants in faith services and other activities when gatherings are permitted

- Help attendees maintain healthy hygiene practices by providing handwashing facilities for members before and after the service; foot washing facilities for places where worshippers enter barefoot; or by placing alcohol-based hand-rub (at least 70% alcohol) at the entrance and in the worship space.
- Place disposable facial tissues within easy reach and closed bins for used tissues.
- Ask worshippers to bring their own personal prayer rugs to place over the carpet for daily prayers.
- Encourage worshippers to avoid attending worship services if they have any symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have travelled recently to an area with community spread of COVID-19.
- When attendees enter a site or building barefoot, shoes and sandals should be placed separately and in bags.
- Provide visual displays of advice on physical distancing, hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette.

Frequently clean worship spaces, sites, and buildings

- Establish routine cleaning with disinfectant of worship spaces, pilgrimage sites, and other buildings where people gather, to remove any virus from the surfaces. This routine should include cleaning immediately before and immediately after all gatherings.

- Frequently clean often-touched objects such as door knobs, light switches, and stair railings with disinfectant.

Conducting faith activities remotely/virtually (as long as required)

It is likely that most religious leaders and communities of faith will make decisions to cancel services and other gatherings for some time in the COVID-19 pandemic. Large gatherings are already banned or are being discouraged in many countries. Religious leaders should remember that they are important community role models for reinforcing these recommendations and showing how communities can still maintain connection by conducting faith activities remotely/virtually. The suggestions below are already being used by many religious leaders to maintain connection with and among their members through high and low technological means. Where online technologies are used, religious leaders can provide information on the potential cybersecurity risks, particularly where children and vulnerable adults are concerned.

Use technology to maintain community and continue worship

Consider how your faith community or organization can use technology to make services and other faith-based events available online. Consider partnering with other organizations to leverage on-line channels. For example:

- Video or audio-tape worship services and ceremonies and broadcast or post them on social media.
- Conduct individual pastoral and care visits by phone or through social media and video chat platforms.
- Use a remote or virtual meeting platform or teleconference facilities for meetings or small group interactive prayer.
- Expand use of television and radio channels.

Use low-technology means to maintain faith-based practices in the community

Not every faith-based organization has the capacity to engage its members using advanced technology. Even so, the community can continue to connect through practices such as:

- Telephone calls between members of the faith community for paired-prayer and use of telephone “chat” services.
- Communicating times when your faith community can observe religious practice remotely (prayer, specific liturgies, etc.) at the same time every day or week, despite being physically apart.
- Encouraging individual and household observance of prayer and other spiritual practices.
- Compiling and circulating requests for prayers from the faith community to be supported by all members.

Many celebrations and solemn ceremonies performed by religious leaders in worship spaces will need to be modified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Where gatherings are allowed by local health authorities, religious leaders can perform ceremonies such as weddings and funerals if they follow the guidance for physical distancing as outlined in the “Safe Gatherings” section of this document and by observing the limits set by national or local public health authorities on the number of persons who can participate in such gatherings.
- When in-person gatherings cannot be held in accord with national or local public health guidelines, ceremonies may still be possible with essential members in attendance and a larger number of guests participating through distance, live streaming, and video technologies.
- If/when health authorities issue guidance limiting in-person funeral prayers, extended family members and friends can offer funeral prayers in absentia.

Safe burial practices

Faith leaders can help grieving families to ensure that their departed loved ones receive respectful, appropriate funerals and burial rites, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowing how to safely plan and perform such funeral rituals and services worship can both protect and comfort mourners and show respect for those who have died without causing any infectious risk to the mourners.

1. When acceptable or appropriate according to respective faith traditions, embalming, burial, and cremation should be allowed for the remains of persons who have died of COVID-19.
2. Religious leaders and local religious communities can work with families to integrate appropriate religious and cultural practices with burial and funeral steps that reduce the chances of infection. For example:
 - If washing the body or shrouding are part of faith traditions, modifications will be needed to protect mourners:
 - At a minimum, people conducting these activities should wear disposable gloves.
 - If splashing of body fluids is possible, additional personal protective equipment may be required for those participating in the ritual (such as disposable gowns, face shields or goggles and medical masks).
- If the family of the deceased wishes to view the body after its removal from the medical facility where the family member has died, they may be allowed to do so, in accordance with local physical distancing restriction, with no touching or kissing of the body and thorough handwashing before and after viewing.
- As modifications to burial and funeral rites are adopted, particular attention should be paid to protect children and older adults in attendance.

Safe ceremonies

Strengthening mental health and resilience

Religious leaders and faith communities play a unique role in creating relationships and connections between people across age groups, professions, and neighborhoods. In addition, religious leaders are often linked into other service organizations through their professional and pastoral roles. As a result, these leaders and organizations are uniquely positioned to reinforce connections between people who may be isolated during periods of physical distancing. Maintaining and strengthening relationships during this distressing time can fortify the mental and spiritual health of your members and followers and contribute to resilience in the larger community. Religious leaders can also help their communities respond to COVID-19 with practices appropriate to their organization's mission or faith tradition. Practices such as prayer, inspirational reading, and safe community service can build confidence and create a sense of calm. Below are steps that can help.

Keeping the community connected

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can strengthen their communities and combat self-isolation through regularly checking in on individual members, preferably via phone. This is particularly important to account for individuals who may be living alone, who are elderly, who have disabilities or are otherwise vulnerable. They can ensure that community contact lists are up-to-date and accessible to their members. Organizations can create "calling trees" in which individual members volunteer to phone several other members regularly to check on their well-being. In-person visits should be avoided where possible and if necessary, should employ appropriate physical distancing and other preventive measures. Additionally, religious leaders are encouraged to prevent family separation and promote family-based care options in situations where children are separated from their families.

Helping others

Helping others who need assistance can benefit the person giving the assistance as well as the person receiving it. Faith communities can identify ways that their members can help others, depending upon individual risk levels (checking on the elderly, people with disabilities, and vulnerable neighbors by phone and offering to deliver groceries, etc.). Religious leaders and faith communities can promote the sharing of resources to provide for those whose livelihoods are disrupted and who cannot provide for themselves and their families. Of particular importance is the care for health workers, law enforcement officers, and workers in essential services who continue to work, sometime away from their families. Religious leaders can encourage those who have the financial means to make donations to those whose livelihoods have been affected by the pandemic. As community members work together, they can create a sense of solidarity and build resilience.

Helping members manage the onslaught of worrying news

Religious leaders can encourage their communities to take steps to manage their stress and to keep up hope during such times of isolation, fear, and uncertainty. The constant torrent of news reports about COVID-19 can cause anyone to feel worried. Religious leaders can encourage community members to seek information on the virus at a few, regular, select times a day, and point members to credible sources of

information, and to maintain hope by reading sacred texts and guidance from their respective faith traditions.

Responding to situations of domestic violence

In settings where movement restrictions are in place, there is the potential for an increase in domestic violence, particularly against women, children, and other marginalized people. Existing vulnerabilities associated with age, religion, migration status, sexuality and ethnicity may be exacerbated. Religious leaders can actively speak out against violence and can provide support or encourage victims to seek help. Where a child is concerned, religious leaders should be informed of child protection and safeguarding policies, including what to report, to whom, and how.

Offer special prayers for the sick alongside messages of hope and comfort

Religious leaders can provide faith communities with appropriate prayers, theological and scriptural reflections, and messages of hope. Highlighting the opportunities presented for reflection, prayer, and time with family members others can prove helpful.

Faith leaders' role in COVID-19 education

Religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and communities of faith are among the most trusted sources of information, as well as both pastoral, health, and social care in our communities. Their followers and community members may trust and follow guidance about COVID-19 coming from faith leaders even more than if delivered by governments and health authorities. The health care and social services of faith-based organizations are often more accessible, especially in rural communities and among marginalized populations. Faith leaders also have a special responsibility to counter and address misinformation, misleading teachings, and rumors, which can spread rapidly and cause great damage. Sermons and messages can build on factual information provided by WHO and national or local public health authorities and is in line with doctrine/teaching and practice of their respective faith traditions.

What to communicate

Accurate information can reduce fear and stigma. Religious leaders can access guidance in formats and lay language that their members can understand. WHO's [guidance has been replicated](#) and shared on certain faith platforms. Religious leaders should also be aware of local and national health authorities websites and other information channels to access local guidance.

The most important protection information religious leaders and faith-based communities can communicate to their members includes the following:

- Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth. Hands touch many surfaces and can pick up viruses. Once contaminated, hands can transfer the virus to your eyes, nose or mouth. From there, the virus can enter your body and can make you sick.
- Practice respiratory hygiene. The virus is spread through respiratory droplets. By following good respiratory hygiene, you protect the people around you from viruses such as flu and COVID-19. This means covering your mouth and nose with your bent

elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze. Then dispose of the used tissue immediately in a bin with a lid and wash your hands.

- Stay home if you feel unwell. If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical care and call in advance. Calling in advance will allow your health care provider to quickly direct you to the right health facility. This will also protect you and help prevent spread of viruses and other infections.
- Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Washing your hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand rub kills viruses that may be on your hands.
- Maintain at least 1 m (3 feet) distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing. A person who coughs or sneezes sprays small liquid droplets from their nose or mouth, which may contain virus. If you are too close, you can breathe in the droplets, including the COVID-19 virus if the person coughing has the disease.
- Follow the instructions of your local health authority. National and local authorities will have the most current information on the situation in your area. They are best placed to advise on what people in your area should be doing to protect themselves.
- Stay informed and follow advice given by your health care provider, your national and local public health authorities or your employer on how to protect yourself and others from COVID-19. Stay informed on the latest developments about COVID-19 from WHO and national authorities.
- Stay informed about risk; older people and people with underlying medical conditions are more at risk of severe illness.

How to communicate health protection information

Faith leaders are encouraged to use faith channels such as organizational web pages; newsletters; emails; phone tree; and faith publications, radio, or other broadcast media. Social media technologies offer religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and communities of faith new ways to share life-saving messages. COVID-19 messages can also be woven into sermons and prayers to be shared with communities. It will be important for community members to hear these messages and updates frequently on different channels and message platforms.

Because of their influence, religious leaders can be powerful resources for agencies and organizations that are communicating with the public about COVID-19. Leaders should become informed on organizations presenting credible information in their communities and join with them, using and endorsing their messages (e.g. WHO, universities, nongovernmental organizations).

Religious leaders have a particularly important role to play in championing attention to and inclusion of, vulnerable populations including minorities, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, indigenous peoples, prisons, people with disabilities, and members of other marginalized groups, by creating supportive environments; advocating for their rights and access to diagnosis, treatment, and vaccines; sharing evidence-based accurate information; and publicly standing against statements and acts that encourage violence and human rights violations against people. By drawing on language within their own faith tradition, religious leaders can promote positive messages that affirm the dignity of all people, the need to protect and care of the vulnerable, and inspire hope and resilience in those affected by, or vulnerable to, COVID-19. On the practical side, faith-based organizations can work with health and development agencies to identify mechanisms to increase access to information and services for vulnerable communities, including those that are provided by faith-based organizations themselves. Moreover, most of these faith traditions serve all people in need, without regard to national or ethnic origin, race, sex, or religious affiliation, and are motivated by universal values and ethical principles of “do no harm,” solidarity”, and the “golden rule”.

Conclusion

Various global religious and inter-religious groups have issued guidance, advisory notes, and statements to support the actions and role of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of those same groups have contributed to this guidance, through a common acknowledgement that COVID-19 is a global pandemic, affecting all races, ethnicities, and geographic regions, that demands a global response. Inter-faith collaboration between both majority and minority faiths is crucial, particularly through the sharing of knowledge, resources, and best practices where possible.

The [accompanying decision tree](#) provides a simple flow chart to support decision-making regarding hosting a religious event during the COVID-19 pandemic. When national or local authorities permit gatherings, the organizers of a gathering can make their own informed decision about the risk and plan appropriately based on it.

WHO continues to monitor the situation closely for any changes that may affect this interim guidance. Should any factors change, WHO will issue a further update. Otherwise, this interim guidance document will expire 2 years after the date of publication.

Upholding human rights and addressing stigma and discrimination

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Schedule 1 to the the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation 2020 (Cap. 599G) specifies the following 13 types of exempted group gatherings –

- (1) group gathering for the purposes of or related to transportation
- (2) group gathering for performing any governmental function
- (3) group gathering for performing any function of a statutory body or an advisory body of the Government
- (4) group gathering at a place of work for the purposes of work
- (5) group gathering for obtaining or receiving hospital or healthcare service at a healthcare facility
- (6) group gathering of persons living in the same household
- (7) group gathering necessary for –
 - (a) the conduct of proceedings in a court, magistrates' court or tribunal;
 - (b) the performance of any function of a judge or judicial officer;
 - or
 - (c) the conduct of any other business of the Judiciary
- (8) group gathering necessary for the proceedings in the Legislative Council or a District Council
- (9) group gathering during a funeral, or during any other occasion for mourning for or remembering a deceased who has yet to be buried or cremated (including any ritual or ceremony held in the vicinity of the place where the deceased died or suffered fatal injury to mourn for the death of the deceased)
- (10) group gathering of not more than 50 persons during a wedding ceremony at which no food or drink is served
- (11) group gathering during any of the following meetings at which no food or drink is served and, in the case of a group gathering of more than 50 persons, measures are in place for separating them in different rooms or partitioned areas, each accommodating not more than 50 persons –
 - (a) a meeting of a body that must be held within a specified period in order to comply with any Ordinance or other regulatory instrument that governs the operation of the body or its business;

- (b) a shareholders' meeting of a company listed on a recognized stock market (as defined by section 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 1 to the Securities and Futures Ordinance (Cap. 571)) that is held in accordance with any Ordinance or other regulatory instrument that governs the operation of the company or its business
- (12) group gathering held for imparting information or skills, or handling supplies or items, that are conducive to the prevention and control of the specified disease
- (13) group gathering at any premises to which a direction issued under section 8 of the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599 sub. leg. F) applies, except premises that, according to the direction, must be closed