

Newsletter N° 1, 26 November 2014

Dear readers,

Welcome to the first edition of the Ecumenical Ebola Response newsletter!

Churches and faith communities have a vibrant role to play in addressing the current Ebola outbreak in West Africa. As we continue our efforts for better coordination of churches, church-related health associations, ecumenical organizations and UN agencies in their response to the Ebola crisis, this newsletter will bring you updates from various meetings organized by the World Council of Churches on this topic.

Please feel free to share this newsletter and its contents with your networks! If this copy was forwarded to you by someone else, you can sign up with your own email address for the next edition at www.oikoumene.org/e-news. All editions of this newsletter are available for download at www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/health-and-healing/ebola-newsletter/

We hope you will find this newsletter useful and wish you and all of us God's blessings in our work together!

Cooperation is the key to fight against Ebola, WCC consultation hears

Dr Ian Njeru, the head of disease surveillance and response at Kenya's Ministry of Public Health has welcomed closer cooperation between governments and faith-based organizations in the fight against the lethal virus Ebola.

The Kenyan officially opened the World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation, A Collaborative Response to the Ebola Crisis at Regional and Level on 24 November 2014.

"We need to have a close collaboration with churches and to strengthen our partnership," said Njeru.

The host organization is the Africa Church Health Associations Platform (ACHAP).

More than 80 people have taken part in the consultation at the Desmond Tutu Conference Centre at the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in Nairobi, Kenya.

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“We know you can make a difference. Need to stand together and do work together and do whatever needs to be done,” said the WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit in a [video message](#) (for more related videos, see www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/videos/ecumenical-ebola-response).

It was sent from Cyprus where he was attending the WCC Executive Committee meeting.

Tveit noted that after a New York United Nations meeting he attended earlier in November he learned the world body is aware that the WCC and its member churches are in the midst of those affected by the Ebola pandemic.

“We need to stand together and do together whatever need to be done.

We are together in this very significant consultation in Nairobi. The world is in a crisis and in particular churches and the people in West Africa,” said Tveit.

Dr Agnes Abuom, the moderator of the Central Committee of the WCC, said in her [video message](#) from Cyprus, “We must be bearers of blessings not curses.”

Abuom, a Kenyan Anglican, explained how once before the faith community had helped people overcome HIV and AIDS “to overcome stigmatization” which is also afflicting those affected by Ebola.

“It is a time for us to overcome fear. It is a time for us now once again for us to draw on our resources, to be courageous and to be at the forefront of a march for meaningful life without Ebola.”



Participants at the WCC's regional and national response to Ebola meeting held in Nairobi from 24-26 November. © Dickson Akidiva

Among the partners taking part at the 24-26 November consultation are WCC members and partners such as the AACC, ACHAP, the ACT Alliance, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, World Vision, Caritas Internationalis, African member churches and regional inter-religious organizations.



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WHO protocol on safe, dignified burial eases health workers' burdens

Sally Smith, partnerships adviser at UNAIDS, says the United Nations works with faith-based organizations against Ebola through the World Health Organization (WHO) Advisory Group on the Ebola Virus Disease Response.

Church-run hospitals account for significant percentages of Africa medical services and cooperation with them is vital, said Smith.

She was speaking at the World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation, A Collaborative Response to the Ebola Crisis at Regional and Level on 24 November 2014 in Nairobi.

“One of the roles of churches and faith-based organizations is to speak out against discrimination of health worker in the fight against Ebola,” said Smith.

She has field experience after working as a nurse with a mission services group in Nepal before joining UNAIDS in Geneva.

Smith cited the Ebola toll on 24 November as 15,381 cases of the disease in eight countries resulting in 5,459 deaths.

Having a good community response is vital to health authorities working through faith-based organizations as these groups have the trust of their communities, said the UNAIDS worker.

Trying to implement safe burial practises without the aid of churches and faith-based groups was a problem for health authorities who were sometimes seen as akin to aliens from outer space in their white medical protection gear.



Sally Smith addresses the WCC's regional and national Ebola response meeting in Nairobi, Kenya on 24 November © WCC / Peter Kenny

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Health workers have been attacked and killed in some instances due to community fears and suspicion about them, making their work more difficult.

In West Africa the custom of washing people's bodies after death has triggered a significant number of fatalities, and due to the religious significance of the practice it has sometimes been difficult to halt for the sake of medical safety.

“Matters have improved since the WHO introduced a new protocol for safe and dignified burial of people who die from Ebola virus disease.

“It emphasizes inclusion of family members and encouraging religious rites as an essential part of safe burials.”

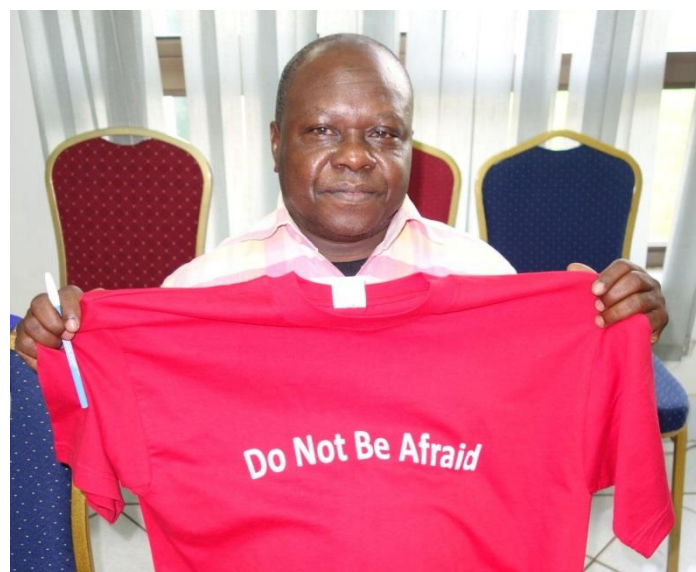
Touching rituals put on hold over Ebola crisis

Dr Daniel N. Gobgab, the chief executive officer of the Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN) says Christian customs of touching during praying have had to stop during the Ebola crisis.

“This has caused problems in faith communities, particularly among Christians who often lay their hands on people when praying for healing.

He was speaking at the World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation, A Collaborative Response to the Ebola Crisis at Regional and Level from 24 to 26 November 2014 in Nairobi.

Dr Mutmainah A Ekungba Adewelo a Nigerian doctor said at the same consultation that faith leaders can help



Dr Daniel N. Gobgab at the WCC's regional and national Ebola response consultation. © WCC / Peter Kenny



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themselves by being practical when it comes to teaching their followers safe practices in preventing the spread of Ebola.

She said that when it comes to Ebola and faith leaders can help in training their follower by being practical.

As a public health medical doctor she said, “The major issue about Ebola is contact.”

As a Muslim, and a representative of Nigeria’s Association of Religious leader living with HIV/AIDS she said Islamic men and women do not normally shake hands with one another and there is no laying of hand when praying for healing.

She gave the example of the last prophet from the Quran who spoke to God when he had problems with witches.

“God spoke to him and said that even if he was thought he was the best he had to protect himself. ‘Protect yourself and God will protect you’.”

Dr Adewleo, from Owo in Ondo state in southwest Nigeria said, “Pastors don’t have to touch congregations. In Islam we don’t lay hands on children when praying for their healing.

“We can pray from a distance and God will still answer. There should be no handshaking. This is just for the period of Ebola. Once we have overcome the disease we can go back to normal. Everything is faith and spiritual beliefs. You don’t have to touch people.”



Dr Mutmainah A Ekungba Adewelo at the WCC consultation in Nairobi. © WCC / Peter Kenny