

PROPOSED COVID-19 GUIDELINES FOR THE SAFE OPERATION OF RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN SIERRA LEONE

RESEARCHED & COMPILED BY:

**THE INTERNS AND VOLUNTEERS AT
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SUBMITTED TO:

THE INTER RELIGIOUS COUNCIL OF SIERRA LEONE

THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL WELFARE,

THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SANITATION,

THE NATIONAL COORDINATOR

**(EMERGENCY OPERATION CENTRE—COVID -19
SECRETARIAT), FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE**

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the frontliners and health workers in Sierra Leone who are risking their lives on a daily basis to help fight away the coronavirus from the country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Special thanks go to Jehovah, God Almighty for gracing us with wisdom and strength to put these guidelines together.

We also want to extend special thanks to the Board, Executive, members and volunteers at LEGAL LINK for taking time out to research and compile these guidelines.

It will be remiss on our part if we fail to thank Commissioner Rashid Dumbuya Esq, the Executive Director of CHRISTIAN LAWYERS CENTRE (LEGAL LINK) for inspiring us and also providing us with the requisite leadership in the development of these guidelines.

ACRONYMS

AU	Africa Union
APC	All Peoples Congress
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease discovered in 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
EOC	Emergency Operation Center
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West Africa States
ESCR	Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
GNP	Gross National Product
HCP	Health Care Personnel
ICCPR	International Convention on Civil and Political Rights
ICU	Intensive Care Unit
MERS	Middle East Respiratory Syndrome
MoHS	Ministry of Health and Sanitation
NGC	National Grand Coalition
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SLPP	Sierra Leone Peoples Party
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UN	United Nations
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

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ABSTRACT

These COVID 19 GUIDELINES have been developed by CHRISTIAN LAWYERS CENTRE (LEGAL LINK) to help accelerate the safe return of religious activities in Sierra Leone.

As an organization that defends the rights of religious communities in Sierra Leone, it is within our mandate and competence to advocate and push for legal, regulatory and policy reforms that will serve the interests of the religious community in Sierra Leone.

Against this backdrop and coupled with His Excellency's call for the Inter-Religious Council to develop guidelines for the safe reopening of churches and mosques in Sierra Leone, the Executive and legal Volunteers at CHRISTIAN LAWYERS CENTRE (LEGAL LINK) have decided to research and put together these proposed guidelines in a bid to compliment the efforts of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Inter-Religious Council, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, the Emergency Operations Centre and the Government of Sierra Leone for the safe reopening of religious institutions in the country.

This Guideline document have been categorized into general and specific and further contain specific objectives, justifications, benefits and challenges regarding its implementation.

It is vital to also emphasized that these guidelines do not portend as a magic wand or a substitute for a scientific response in the fight against COVID 19 but rather an attempt to inject among other things a spiritual response to the COVID fight in Sierra Leone.

In conclusion therefore, these guideline document is a mere proposal meant to stimulate a national conversation for the development of a more comprehensive policy document or regulation by the Ministry of Social Welfare in conjunction with the Inter-Religious Council that will guide the smooth operation of churches and mosques in Sierra Leone in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone is a secular state, although Christianity and Islam exists as the two main dominant religions in the country. The 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone under section 24 provides for freedom of religion and the government of Sierra Leone generally protects it. According to statistics from the Inter Religious Council, 77% of Sierra Leone's population are Muslims, 21% are Christians and 2% are followers of traditional African religion.

Sierra Leone is regarded as one of the most religiously tolerant countries in the world. Muslims and Christians collaborate and interact with each other peacefully. Inter-religious marriages usually occur between both faiths in the country. In politics, the overwhelming majority of Sierra Leoneans vote for a candidate without regard to the candidate being a Muslim or Christian. Muslim and Christian prayers are usually held in the country at the beginning of major political events including presidential inauguration.

The country contains legal, institutional and policy frameworks that regulate religious activities in Sierra Leone. In terms of legal framework, the constitution of Sierra Leone under section 24 recognizes and protects the right to freedom of religion in the country. With regards institutional frameworks, there is a Ministry of Social Welfare that provides policy oversight to the religious community and an Inter-Religious Council that superintends over inter- faith disputes in the country. Sierra Leone's Inter-Religious Council is made up of both Muslims and Christian religious leaders and further serves as moral guarantors to the peace and religious tolerance in the country.

Absolute faith and devotion to God is one of the unique characteristics of Sierra Leoneans while religious tolerance has been reputed as Sierra Leone's most cherished international accolade within the global community of nations. Muslims and Christians are often seen happily working together to promote peace, social cohesion and national development in the country.

The Corona virus which started in Wuhan, China as far back as November 2019 migrated rapidly over the world and has become a global pandemic claiming thousands of lives on a daily basis; Sierra Leone being no exception.

As scientists battle to find a vaccine to tackle and prevent the disease, every country has adopted measures to halt its spread. Like the rest of the world, Sierra Leone announced a ban on social and religious gatherings with churches and mosques closed since the first index case on the 31st of March 2020.

It is against this backdrop that Christian Lawyers Center (a.k.a LEGAL LINK), an organization that defends the rights of religious communities and vulnerable groups in Sierra Leone have thought it fit to put together this document in a bid to influence the powers that be to consider implementing a comprehensive guideline that will ensure the safe reopening of churches and mosques in the country.

These proposed guidelines are not intended to undermine the scientific approach to the Covid fight but rather serve to strengthen and complement existing efforts to effectively manage the risks that Covid-19 may bring along with it as religious activities goes into full operation in Sierra Leone.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE GUIDELINES

- The major aim of this guideline is to effectively and efficiently manage the risks that Covid-19 may bring along with it as religious activities goes into full operation in Sierra Leone.
- Among other things, these guidelines provide an optic for the safe reopening of churches and mosques in the country.
- Furthermore, the guideline puts obligations on both religious leaders and their followers regarding compliance to the protocols that must be observed while engaging in religious activities or rites of passage in the country.

JUSTIFICATION/ SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GUIDELINES

- These guidelines are significant because it will dictate how religious communities should operate within a COVID 19 environment.
- Among other things, they will help ensure an effective and efficient management of the risks that COVID 19 might bring along with it when churches and mosques goes into full operation.

- Churches and Mosques are places that hold our society together and keep people united. Their full operation will therefore serve as a unifying force and platform for national cohesion.
- This guideline will also give the Nation a spiritual focus in the Covid fight and enable the nation to collectively seek the face of God for His divine intervention in the fight against Covid-19, since God remains the greatest Physician of all.
- Churches and Mosques are important places that provides essential services well as employment opportunities to people.
- Religious institutions play a critical role in the mental, spiritual and physical needs of their followers. Through the guidelines, religious leaders can help provide the social, educational and emotional needs of their followers which might help win the COVID fight.
- These guideline will also help incentivize the religious community in Sierra Leone to join the fight against Covid 19 in a comprehensive way and bring out strategies that will ensure safe religious activities of their members; which will ultimately help increase awareness about the Covid- 19 pandemic in the country.
- Religious leaders are considered as key actors in peace building initiatives and the development of a community – based health disaster management system. They are often more trusted locally and have higher outreach and influence to the people than Government officials or any other political leader. Their presence will make a huge difference to the Covid19 fight.

TARGETED BENEFICIARIES

The targeted beneficiaries are the Christian communities, Muslim communities and other traditional faiths and denominations.

COVID 19 GUIDELINES FOR THE OPERATION OF SAFE RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN SIERRA LEONE

The COVID 19 Guidelines for the safe operation of religious activities in Sierra Leone is divided into two (2) parts; the General Core Guidelines and the specific guidelines directed to churches and mosques in the country.

GENERAL CORE GUIDELINES

1. There must be an Emergency Response Committee or Health Emergency Committee in every religious institution that will handle all issues relating to the health of their members. This Committee will liaise with the EOC on emergency issues relating to members of the religious institution they belong to. They will observe and monitor the health of members, identify the sick, give first aid treatment and report any suspected cases during services or prayer hours. They will also be responsible to initiate and implement safety measures appropriate to their various institutions to mitigate any risks associated with the COVID fight. The Committee must therefore be predominantly comprised of individuals learned in the field of medical science or experience.
- 2 Pastors, Imams and other religious heads must sensitize members on safety measures and the Guideline whilst in churches or mosques and ensure that they fully comply with government safety protocols.
- 3 The use of face masks by worshippers must always be enforced whilst in church, mosque or other religious institutions.
- 4 Veronica water buckets with detergent soap for the washing of hands by worshippers must be placed at the entrance of every church/mosques or other religious centres; and worshippers compulsory made to wash their hands before entering the worship centre.
- 5 There must be in every religious institution a medical first aid kit for emergencies.

- 6 Social distancing of 6 feet between persons must be observed; whether by sitting positions in churches or standing positions in mosques.
- 7 Shaking of hands and hugging by worshippers should be discouraged.
- 8 Crowd gatherings after service and prayers must be discouraged.
- 9 The church / Mosques should also endeavor to provide hand sanitizers through ushers and volunteers for use by worshippers.
- 10 Monthly report on compliance to the health, safety guidelines and challenges of worshippers in religious institutions must be sent by all heads of churches and mosques to the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Inter Religious Council.
- 11 A Taskforce should be set up by the Ministry and the Inter Religious Council to effectively monitor the implementation of this guideline, enforce compliance, assess risks, and impose disciplinary actions on defaulters.
- 12 The use of temperature checking devices must be maintained at the entrance of all religious institutions to determine those with covid 19 signs and symptoms.
- 13 Regular disinfecting of the environment of churches and mosques as well as sitting and praying accommodation must be encouraged.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES FOR CHURCHES

1. Church members must be encouraged to carry hand sanitizers with them at all times to mitigate the risks of COVID 19 transmission through exchange of mics, touching of seats, offering bowls, lecterns and other objects in the church auditorium.
2. Churches should endeavor to provide sanitizers to worshippers through the ushers and usherettes during service meetings for intermittent application by the congregation.

3. Disinfectants should also be provided by the church to be used in restrooms and other prone areas.
4. Every Christian worshipper should wear face mask before entering the church for services and prayers and may drop it below their chins while praying or praising, with proper social distancing protocols maintained from the other worshipper.
5. Pastors should desist from touching members during prayers and during service meetings.
6. All church services, meetings or specialized activities must be completed on or before 12noon on Sundays and 6:30 pm during weekdays. Members must have exited the church premises by this time to make it safely to their homes and avoid the risk of violating the curfew imposed by the state.
7. Where necessary, there should be a vacant seat in between sitting spaces; just to maintain social distancing protocols between persons and worshippers.
8. In conjunction with guideline (7) above, churches with inadequate space and/or large congregation should consider having two, three or as many services as may be required in order to comply with social distancing protocols.
9. Churches will be allowed two services a week; one on Sundays and any other day in the week as may be convenient and practicable. Weekly services must not exceed 1 hour 30 minutes.
10. Children should be with their parents or closely monitored so as to avoid close contact with other children or persons. Sanitizers should be administered to them at all times as well as face masks where practicable.
11. Depositing of offerings should be done through envelopes with the congregation seated while the ushers pass the offering baskets around.
12. All churches should have at the entrance of their compound, a hand washing facility for the effective washing of the hands of worshippers before entering the main auditorium or worship place.

13. The use of temperature checking devices must be maintained at the entrance of all churches to determine those with covid 19 signs and symptoms.
14. The use of gloves by members administering communion must be encouraged.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES FOR MOSQUES

- 1 Due to the shortened time frame of Muslim prayers, the five daily prayers should be allowed in all mosques.
- 2 There should be a stop on shaking of hands and hugging after prayers.
- 3 Social distancing should be enforced in all mosques and worshippers should keep themselves more than 6 feet from each other while praying.
- 4 IMAMs should desist from touching members during prayers and during specialized meetings.
- 5 Notwithstanding the use of ablution (washing of hands and feet), all mosques should have Veronica Buckets or hand sanitizers for their members to wash their hands before performing ablution and entering the mosque.
- 6 Every Muslim worshipper should wear a face mask before entering the mosque for prayers and may drop it below their chins while praying, with proper social distancing protocols maintained from the other worshipper.
- 7 Regular disinfecting of the environment of mosques and the praying accommodation areas must be encouraged.
- 8 The use of temperature checking devices must be maintained at the entrance of mosques to determine those with covid 19 signs and symptoms.
- 9 All mosques in the community must have health volunteers that will provide first aid treatment and liaise with the EOC where someone displays covid 19 signs and symptoms.

BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES

- Among other things, the guideline will help ensure an effective and efficient management of the risks that COVID 19 might bring along with it when churches and mosques go back into full operation.
- It will help give the Nation a spiritual focus in the Covid fight.
- Churches and Mosques are important places that provide essential services to people. Their full operation will therefore serve as a unifying force and platform for national cohesion
- Religious institutions play a critical role in the mental, spiritual and physical needs of their followers. Through the guidelines, religious leaders can help address the social, educational and emotional needs of their followers which might help to positively impact on the COVID fight.
- These guidelines will also help incentivize the religious community in Sierra Leone to join the fight against COVID 19 in a comprehensive way and bring out strategies that will ensure safe religious activities of their members which will ultimately help increase awareness about the Covid - 19 pandemic in the country.
- Religious leaders are also considered as key actors in peace building initiatives and the development of a community – based health disaster management system. They are often more trusted locally and have higher outreach and influence to the people than Government officials or any other political leader. Utilizing their platforms may be key with respect to dealing with Covid 19 in the country.

CHALLENGES

- The possibility of ensuring that worshippers wear face masks all the time might be of great challenge.
- Lack of adequate medical personnel / equipment in religious institutions.
- The difficulty of dealing with children and ensuring compliance of the guidelines on their part might also be a challenge.
- The long queue of people after every service or prayers might hinder social distancing practices.
- Mega churches and mosques with large congregations and worshippers might pose a higher risk of an outbreak.

CONCLUSION

It is vital to further pinpoint that these guidelines do not portend as a magic wand or a substitute for a scientific response in the fight against COVID 19 but rather an attempt to inject among other things a spiritual response to the COVID fight in Sierra Leone.

They therefore represent a mere proposal meant to stimulate a national conversation for the development of a more comprehensive policy document or regulation by the Ministry of Social Welfare in conjunction with the Inter-Religious Council that will guide the smooth operation of churches and mosques in Sierra Leone in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic.

It is hoped therefore that this document which has been put together by the interns and volunteers of **CHRISTIAN LAWYERS CENTRE (LEGAL LINK)**, will serve as a first step towards the development of a much more comprehensive guideline that will help mitigate the risks associated with the re-opening of religious institutions in the country.

Faithfully submitted
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