

COVID-19: Why the clergy is concerned over ban on congregational worship

By Kemo Cham

The government's decision to ban congregational worship as part of latest measures imposed to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has sparked concern within the religious community in Sierra Leone.

Religious leaders say not only does the move have the effect of excluding them from the national response efforts, but that some of the directives announced by the government left them confused as to the exact intention of those behind the decision.

In a televised address on Thursday, July 1, President Julius Maada Bio announced a series of measures geared towards containing the spread of the virus, including a one month ban on congregational worshipping in churches, mosques and other religious centers. Bio also reimposed a nationwide six-hour curfew running from 11pm to 5am.

The move comes after the National Covid-19 Emergency Response Center (NaCOVERC) confirmed that the feared 'Delta' variant of the virus had been detected in the country.

According to the NaCOVERC, the variant is behind the severity of the ongoing third wave of the pandemic in the country, which has seen cases and fatalities increased exponentially.

Data from the NaCOVERC show that Sierra Leone recorded the highest number of cases and fatalities in the pandemic in June.

As of Thursday July 1, the country had recorded 5,652 cumulative confirmed cases and 102 deaths.

“More people have tested positive for Covid-19 in the last few weeks. More people have been hospitalized and 72 percent of beds in treatment and care centers are occupied. More people are dying and the western area is the epicenter of the latest covid-19 infections,” President Bio said in his address to the nation.

But according to the Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL), the umbrella body representing the two dominant religions in the country - Christianity and Islam - while the government’s move was commendable, in terms of reimposing restrictive measures to contain the virus, the ban on congregational worship is counter-productive in this effort.

In a statement, the Council argued that shutting down churches and mosques deprived religious leaders the platform to help in sensitizing their members.

The statement, signed by the Most Reverend Edward Tamba Charles, President of IRCSL, added that banning congregational worshipping while allowing funerals and weddings also created confusion in the minds of the religious community.

According to the measures, funerals, weddings and all other social events are forbidden from accommodating in excess of 50 participants.

“The confusion stems from the fact that in the two main religions in Sierra Leone, Christianity and Islam, funerals and weddings take place in the context of congregational worshipping. Therefore, we are forced to ask where weddings and funerals are to take place if not in churches and mosques,” noted Reverend Charles, who is also the Archbishop of Freetown Diocese.

He added: “The total exclusion of congregational worship in churches, mosques or any other religious place, denies religious

leaders their most important and effective platforms - namely their places of worship - to sensitize their congregations about the virus and how the infection can be avoided.”

The IRCSL statement comes at the backdrop of a huge public debate sparked by the presidential proclamation. Those critical of the decision to ban congregational worship question the rationale behind it while allowing entertainment centers to continue operating.

According to the new measures, pubs and restaurants are allowed to operate up to 9pm.

An internal memo from the Council of Churches Sierra Leone (CCSL), the umbrella body of all churches in the country, which was shared on social media, illustrates the level of frustration among the leadership of the Christian community over the issue. The memo dated July 2nd and addressed to all heads of churches nationwide, lamented that it wasn't consulted by the relevant authorities prior to reaching the decision.

CCSL however urged all church leaders to abide by the directives while it consults with the authorities to address their concerns.

Sierra Leone is a highly conservative society, with nearly 100 percent of the population practicing one form of religion. Christianity and Islam constitute the two dominant denominations, with over 70 percent of the population practicing Islam while over 20 percent practice Christianity, according to data attributed to the IRCSL.

Religion has a huge influence in the thinking and behaviour of the people.

When the West African Ebola epidemic broke out in 2013, it took the intervention of the religious establishment to get the

people cooperate to measures instituted by the authorities, paving the way to contain the spread of the virus which claimed over 11, 000 lives and sickened nearly 30, 000 people in the subregion.

FOCUS 1000 was at the center of that effort, after its first Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) study in 2014 revealed the gap created by the failure of authorities to involve the community in the response efforts.

That study revealed that people felt marginalized by their inability to care for their sick loved ones or to pray for them when they died. It also revealed that some of the messages were not clear enough, leading to confusion and fear among the masses. Fear, according to its findings, led to resistance and consequent rise in infection and death rates.

That study however informed a new strategic approach which influenced a change in behaviour, leading to the end of Ebola.

FOCUS 1000 has employed the same approach in the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But with the closure of churches and mosques, a crucial aspect of its social mobilization efforts - religious leaders – will be missed.