Fostering social cohesion during a pandemic

Potential or actual outbreaks of Covid-19 can create fear, uncertainty and desperate need. This can lead to an increase in tension within and between households, communities and different ethnic or tribal groups. Ultimately, it can lead to an increase in violence. The measures necessary to prevent or mitigate the spread of this virus, such as physical distancing, quarantines, lockdowns and rationing, can also add to pressures and so exacerbate the risk of violence.

This document has been created for you to think through ways to actively promote unity, inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence.

This virus is a challenge that we need to work together to overcome. What will beat this threat and overcome the longer-term challenges that it is creating is working together to prevent the virus from spreading, building trust in authorities and health services, showing empathy with those individuals and communities affected, and providing practical help to the most vulnerable and those directly or indirectly affected.

What you can do

Here are some tips on what you as a member of the community can do to promote peace and social cohesion.

- Consider the potential effects of the virus on the whole community and the relationships between different groups, including any underlying tensions that are already present. This includes the effects of the preventative measures taken to reduce the spread of Covid-19.

- Promote messages of peace, compassion, unity and collective action.

- Look for new opportunities to work together with others, including those you may disagree with, and those that may be in conflict with each other, to fight this common threat and support the most vulnerable.

- Be creative in how you connect with your own community and others.

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Consider the potential effects of both the virus and the responses to it on relationships within and between communities.

What new tensions or threats might they create? What opportunities to strengthen relationships might arise?

Covid-19's most direct impact is on the health of members of our communities. However, there are also secondary effects which could result from people getting sick or dying from the disease.

Similarly, preventative measures imposed by authorities, such as quarantines, changes in allocations of aid and resources, or bans on public gatherings, can all have significant and negative impacts on relationships.

Use the questions in Annex 1 at the end of this guide to think through the potential negative impacts and consider ways in which you might mitigate them.

It is also important to monitor existing sources of tension and conflict, as these may flare up as a result of the virus.

Promote messages of peace, compassion and collective action

If you are a leader or respected member of your community, you can play an important role in developing and maintaining peaceful relationships across your community.

What you say and do during this challenging time can have a significant impact. Therefore, focus on sharing positive messages of hope and solidarity, supporting those on the margins or in a minority, and encouraging non-violent peaceful resolution where issues or tensions require action. Your words matter.

Your actions matter too, so try as best you can to 'walk the talk' and model the actions that you are calling for.

- **What are your key messages?**

- **What opportunities do you have to share these messages?**

- **What methods of communication do you, your local community and surrounding areas have available?**

Some examples of messaging you can share are given in Annex 2 at the end of this document.

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Look for opportunities to reach out and work with others, including those you may disagree with, and those who may be in conflict with each other.

Consider how you might use the opportunity offered by this common threat to reach out to others in your community or in neighbouring communities, inviting them to work with you in addressing the challenges of Covid-19.

Be prepared to be the first to reach out across divides to bring healing, not just to those affected by Covid-19 but also to the community as a whole.

- Where are there already existing tensions or disagreements in the community or with others that might increase due to a Covid-19 outbreak?

- Are there community or faith leaders in those conflicting groups you can reach out to?

- What could be the common ground that you could collaborate on?

- How might you reach out and work collaboratively with them?

The list of resources at the end of this guide may give you some tools and techniques that you can apply.

Did you identify any potential changes to a conflict or disagreement using the questions in Annex 1? How might those changes create new opportunities to find a solution? Consider using the resource listed below called 'Getting to win-win solutions'.

Be creative in how you connect with your community and others

At this time of physical distancing and hardship, it is easy to look towards ourselves, our own family, our friends and our community, and shut ourselves off or feel threatened by outsiders.

However, it is important to find ways to connect and ensure everyone is included.

The preventative measures implemented in many countries have made it difficult to meet as groups and disrupted our normal means of connecting and communicating.

This demands creativity. Are there different ways in which you can get your message out to the community?

- How might modern communications or digital technology help? How might other or past technologies and traditional ways of doing things be brought back?

- Can you develop a 'communications tree' among those with mobile phones who can be responsible for safely passing messages on to three or four others?

- Are there any members of the community who need support or training to learn how to use technology to help them stay connected? Keep instructions as simple as possible.

- Are there noticeboards or locations where you can post relevant and trusted information?

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- Could you set up Facebook or WhatsApp groups for sharing ideas and helping people stay connected? Perhaps a Facebook group for mothers to share ideas for childcare, remote Bible study groups, exercise groups where participants are exercising within their own homes at the same time?

Communicate regularly. It's important that people feel like they are still connected to what's going on around them, even if they are unable to leave or go far from the house. Ensure key decisions made by leaders and authorities are communicated quickly and accurately. But don't overload people with too much information.

Further resources

- [Mainstream and Margin bible study](#)

    This tool explores how different parts of society take on different roles in setting behavioural norms, decision-making and deciding who is 'in' and who is 'out'. It looks at how this can impact the experience of different groups, and the risks of marginalisation and creating vulnerability.

- Social Transformation of Conflict [guide](#)

    This tool explains how problems and disagreements can develop into significant conflicts. During Covid-19, there are likely to be more and more problems: understanding how these can escalate is essential to addressing them before they become worse.

- Getting to [win-win solutions](#).

    This is a four-step process that helps people come up with creative solutions that satisfy all parties to a conflict, a solution in which all involved 'win'.

Annex 1: Questions to consider about the potential effects of Covid-19 and responses to the outbreak on relationships within and between your communities.

Here are a few questions, tips and tools, to help you think through what some of these impacts might be. Write down your answers, then think about what can be done to prevent or reduce negative impacts you've identified. What can you do? If you are a church or community leader, you may want to do this as a group with other leaders. If you are a church or community leader, you may want to do this as part of a group with others.

1. What concerns do members of your community currently have?

2. What are some of the key needs that members of your community have which will be harder to meet if/when there is an outbreak?

3. What are the key support mechanisms for the community and its people (eg health care services, schools, social protection schemes, local charities, support groups, churches)?

   ○ How might these be impacted by an outbreak?

   ○ Where is there expected to be a gap in these services?

4. Are there particular groups within your community who are likely to become more vulnerable or at risk as a result of impacts such as reduced availability of food, sickness or death of a member of their household? Who might suffer as a result of rules preventing physical contact or travel outside their home?

   For example:

   - Day labourers

   - Single-headed households

   - Elderly

   - Disabled

   - Households reliant on income from a family member living elsewhere

   - Others?

5. Are the authorities and health services in your area trusted by the community?

   ○ Are actions such as enforced quarantines or banning gatherings of people likely to increase tensions between the community and the authorities?

6. Are there any groups or members of your community who could become stigmatised? **Possible examples could include:**

   ● Those people who have and are being treated for Covid-19

   ● Families of those who have or have had Covid-19

   ● Already marginalised or minority groups

   ● Foreigners who could be wrongly accused of bringing the disease

   ● Health care workers

   Please see the [Preventing and addressing stigma](#) resource for more guidance on how to address issues of stigmatisation.

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7. Are decisions on how to respond to Covid-19 being taken by leaders who represent all parts of society? Are there any members of the community whose voice might not be heard by decision-makers and who you can be a champion for?

8. Is there any history of conflict or violence within your community or with other communities nearby?

    ○ If so, what are some of the causes?

    ○ How will those situations be affected by Covid-19?

9. What are some of the existing tensions between the different parties to the conflict?

    ○ How might these be exacerbated by the impacts of a Covid-19 outbreak?

10. What influence and opportunities do I have to reduce some of the tensions and negative attitudes towards others?

    ○ Am I in a position to speak to other stakeholders in the conflict?

    ○ Who are other trusted leaders in the community I could work with to resolve disagreements and instances of violence or conflict if they occur?

11. Who are the actors involved in activities to prevent or respond to outbreaks of Covid-19? NGOs? Local authorities? International aid agencies?

Annex 2: Examples of messages of peace, compassion and collective action

- **God is still with us. Even though you might not be able to meet and gather as a church or a community, God will be with you in your home.**

    ○ 'Where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them' (Matthew 18:20).

    ○ [Link to graphic](#)

- **We are still all part of the body of Christ, even if we can't gather together at this time.**

    ○ 1 Corinthians 12:16. [Link to graphic](#)

- We have Emmanuel, God with us, who understands our suffering, accompanies us through it and asks us to bring our fears and worries to him in prayer (1 Peter 5:7).

- **Look out for your neighbour (Luke 10:25–37).**

    ○ In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus calls us to be a neighbour and help those in need, even those who are not part of our own community and who may be looked down on as second-class citizens. In choosing a

Samaritan as the hero of this parable, Jesus is saying that we are to help, as far as we can, anyone in need no matter what their background is.

- ○ Who from another group or community could you be a neighbour to at this time?

- **Include and support the marginalised and vulnerable (Acts 6:1–7).**

  - ○ [Mainstream and Margins bible study](#)

  - ○ We can learn much about how to deal with conflict from this example in Acts 6 of conflict in the early church. In this case, the Jewish Christians were in all the leadership positions within the church. The church, however, was made up of a mix of Christians from many backgrounds, including those of Greek descent. It appears that these Greek widows were being overlooked in the food distribution. (They weren't on the beneficiary list!)

  - ○ When the issue was brought to the leaders' attention, they listened and then included people from the Greek group in working out and administering a fair solution.

  - ○ Who might be being left out of your decision-making process? What might you be able to do to ensure that their voices are being heard? How can you bring them into the decision-making process?

- **'Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn' (Romans 12:15).**

  - ○ Find ways to mourn and grieve with members of the community who may have lost loved ones and acknowledge the pain and difficulty they will be going through.

  - ○ Share stories of local people who have experienced Covid-19 and have recovered, or those who have supported a loved one through recovery, to emphasise that most people do recover from Covid-19.

  - ○ By bringing the community around families who are both mourning and rejoicing in recovery, you can humanise the reality that many will be living and reduce stigma that might arise around these families.

- **Love your enemies (Luke 6:27).**

  - ○ In Luke 6, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. What he is suggesting is a radically different way of responding to conflict. He tells us to be creative in how we respond, to do so in a way that affirms our common humanity and that builds relationships rather than deepens the fault lines. Covid-19 affects everyone in our community, including those we might consider enemies. In this time of global need, there may be opportunities to restore relationships that have been broken, to find ways in which we can love our enemies.

- Are there any groups or other leaders of groups in the community that you are in conflict with? How could you show God's love to them in this time of crisis?

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