

Culture and Ebola Virus Disease Prevention in West Africa: The Nexus

Introduction

This activity will help students to:

- Demonstrate the importance of public health professionals demonstrating respect for other cultures
- Analyze the role of religion in influencing cultural norms and values
- Develop strategies for identifying and acting on shared commitments between the perspectives of local communities and the objectives of a public health response to an infectious disease outbreak.

Purpose

The 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa offers an important case study into an initial public health response that failed to adequately engage with religious and cultural norms in respectful ways. Because burial practices contributed to new infections and helped drive spread of the disease, the initial infection control response was to dictate how burials would be carried out in the midst of the outbreak. Some members of local communities refused these mandates, opting to carry out the burials according to long-standing and deeply held religious practices instead. Public health officials eventually began working in collaboration with religious leaders and faith-based organizations to modify burial practices so that could important elements such as prayer could still be carried out while also minimizing the potential to spread the virus; when this happened, new cases of Ebola transmission lowered and a subsequent analysis in Liberia demonstrated that adaptation of burial practice directly lowered new cases of infection and substantially slowed infection rates. This assignment will examine religion as a social force in the context of the Ebola outbreak by raising some questions for analysis and reflection from two readings and a video interview from the CDC's online Ebola exhibit.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- identify the varied influences of religion on the Ebola response
- describe examples of tension and alignment between religious practices and the public health response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa
- describe the positive contributions of faith communities, religious leaders, and faith-based organization to the public health response to the Ebola outbreak.

Activity

Activity 1: Please read the following article describing the contributions of religious leaders and faith-based organizations to the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone: [John Blevins, Mohamed Jalloh, Jr., and David Robinson, "Faith and Global Health Practice in Ebola and HIV Emergencies," *American Journal of Public Health* 109 \(2019\): 379-384.](#)

After reading the article, please answer the following questions:

- 1) In your opinion, why do you believe some people in Sierra Leone were reluctant to follow the mandated protocols regarding burial of their loved ones?

- 2) Describe three ways that public health officials, religious leaders, and faith-based organizations worked together to safely adapt burial practices and to educate local communities about Ebola infection.
- 3) How did lessons learned and capacities built through the faith-based response to HIV help in developing the collaboration between public health and religious organizations during the Ebola outbreak?
- 4) Religion does not always contribute to sound public health responses. List 2 or 3 examples of ways in which religion created challenges for the public health responses to the Ebola outbreak.

Activity 2: Listen to a portion of the video that is part of the archives of the CDC's Ebola exhibit—an interview with [Dr. Mohamed Jalloh, Director of a non-governmental organization in Sierra Leone called FOCUS 1000](#) (from this page, please click on the link labeled, “58:17—Working with Sierra Leone’s traditional healers and religious leaders during the 2014-2016 Ebola epidemic.”). After listening to the interview, please answer the following questions:

- 1) How did Dr. Jalloh reach out to the leader of a group of traditional healers?
- 2) Dr. Jalloh describes the close collaboration that was established between Christian pastors and Muslim Imams. How did that happen?
- 3) According to Dr. Jalloh, one of the lasting benefits of the inter-religious response to Ebola has been increased respect and harmony between people of different religious faith. In your opinion, why would the collaboration during the Ebola response have this lasting effect?

Activity 3:

Go through the online exhibit at the CDC museum entitled *Ebola: People + Public Health + Political Will* (www.cdcmuseum.org). Pay special attention to the content in the “Faith, Culture, and Tradition” exhibit of section 5, “Communication and Participation.” Choose one of the posters or graphic materials highlighted in this section and analyze the content of this material by answering the following:

- 1) What is the key message communicated in the poster/graphic?
- 2) How is that message communicated? Is the message only communicated via words or do certain images re-enforce the message? If images are re-enforcing the message, please describe how they do this.
- 3) Various posters/graphics show a religious leader (including representatives of the Christian faith, the Muslim faith, and traditional healers). In your opinion, what effect does including a religious or spiritual leader have in how a message is received?

Activity 4:

Reflect on the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak in the United States and the things you have likely heard about to help slow the spread of the virus (e.g., keep a distance of at least 6 feet between people; wear a mask when around others; wash your hands frequently for 30-40 seconds with warm, soapy water). Keeping in mind the kinds of posters/graphics you saw in the online exhibit (see Activity 3), create a poster or information sheet that provides sound public health guidance for slowing the spread of COVID-19 and frames that guidance with one or more religious messages. One example might discuss that the primary health benefit of wearing a mask is that it lessens the chance of someone who has the virus but doesn't have any symptoms from spreading

the virus to someone else through the air. This public health message could be framed in light of a common teaching across various religious traditions we call the Gold Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Use this example, or better yet, think of your own. If possible, include graphics, photographs, or drawings to make your poster or information sheet more interesting. If you’re part of a religious community, consider sharing it with your pastor, imam, rabbi, or priest so they can share it with others in the community.