

Opinion Why faith communities are key partners in planning for a coronavirus outbreak

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Faith communities are important points of connection between COVID-19 and broader society, and they are key to successful preparation for and response to an outbreak. (piermichelemalucchi / Getty Images).

On March 11, the World Health Organisation officially designated COVID-19 a pandemic. Like climate change, this coronavirus is no respecter of persons. It is a multifaith, multicultural challenge in our society that is best combatted by a united community. Therefore, now is the time for our political, community and emergency service leaders to maintain or even deepen relations with communities of faith and faith-based service organisations as a key part of their preparation and response planning.

I offer these thoughts on the potential effects COVID-19 may have on faith communities in the hope to:

- help guide decision making by political, community, religious and business leaders;
- help maintain a broad focus and avoid bunker mentality; and

- help identify potential gaps in preparation and response planning.

Faith communities

Our society will be affected in three broad areas by the intersection of COVID-19 and faith communities. The first of these is the potential impact on faith communities themselves and is something preparation and response planning should consider.

Primarily, it seems quite likely that certain *religious practices* will be challenged. For example, as part of the worship service in some Christian congregations, attendees will drink from a communal cup or eat from a communal tray. And Muslim prayers are frequent, communal practices that explicitly bring worshippers together shoulder-to-shoulder.

In short, the spread of the virus in society could be facilitated by religious practices that are more than just many people gathering together. Such practices are not simply logistical accommodations to having large numbers of people together; they are doctrinally supported demonstrations of belief and should be recognised as important issues in any planning process.

Related to the point about religious practices is the effect the virus will have on *places of worship*. Most easily identified and quantified is that attendance numbers will be down as people avoid public gatherings, or places of worship will be closed for a period of time. However, places of worship aren't just places of worship; they are also places of social gathering, places of refuge and points of provision for informal, yet essential, services.

Professor Ram Cnaan at the University of Pennsylvania calculates a \$150,000 economic contribution per congregation per year is due to places of worship. Deloitte Access Economics reports that Australian religious communities contribute almost \$500 million annually through volunteering and donations. These figures do not include the economically and socially significant contributions made through marriage and family support, childcare, counselling, domestic violence prevention and response, homeless care and employment services, and many other services accessible through places of worship.

Thus, the effect of COVID-19 on society through its effect on faith communities is likely to be economically and socially significant, yet difficult to identify and address. Therefore, it would be wise to include engagement with faith communities as part of preparation and response planning.

The elderly

A second point of convergence between COVID-19 and faith communities is the elderly. In a macabre coincidence, the age at which one is most vulnerable to developing life-threatening symptoms from COVID-19 is also the age at which people are most religious. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that over 73 percent of those 65 years of age or older identify with a religion. And while many estimate the overall death rate to be about 2.6 percent, this rises to 3.6 percent for those in their 60s, 8.0 percent for those in their 70s and 14.8 percent for those in their 80s.

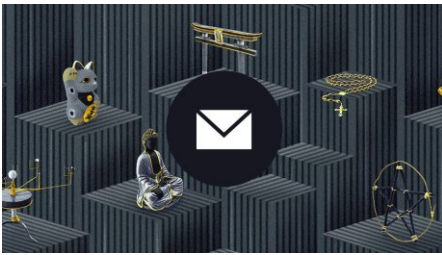
This means that faith communities are among the most likely to be connected with the most vulnerable to the virus's attacks. Faith communities are well situated to know who the elderly are, to know how they are faring and to be trusted to provide care and support. Thus, preparation for and responses to COVID-19's effect on the elderly would be strengthened by partnering with faith communities beginning in the planning stages.

Community services

A final point of intersection between COVID-19 and faith communities is through faith-based community service providers. In Australia, these community service providers:

deliver services relating to emergency relief, housing and homelessness, health, mental health, education, community development, advocacy, research, income support and other "social services," covering a wide and diverse range of community welfare needs.

In the case of a serious outbreak of COVID-19, many community services will be strained to continue operations. This is because many have very little capacity to pay for leave or be flexible in work arrangements. Their already-stretched resources may be called upon even more. Many do not have the experience or financial resources to design and implement sophisticated business continuity planning. And too many have little capacity to absorb shocks or unexpected costs, or to delay projects or externally funded project outcomes.



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As with climate change, religious communities' responses to pandemics are varied. Some facilitate addressing and combatting or mitigating its effects, while others exacerbate its effects or impede strategies to combat them. Whatever the response, faith communities are important points of connection between COVID-19 and broader society, and they are key to successful preparation for and response to an outbreak. Therefore, it would be wise for our community, political and emergency service leaders to seek to understand how they can best work with faith communities to provide a strong, united front in combatting this threat to our society.

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