

FAITH LEADERS' COVID – 19 PLATFORM MEETING REPORT



Linde Motel, Dowa - Malawi - 12th May, 2020

On the cover photo: Faith Leaders captured in the meeting

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Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

ACT Alliance – Action by Churches Together Alliance

CARD – Churches Action in Relief and Development

DCA – Dan Church Aid

EAM – Evangelical Association of Malawi

ECM – Episcopal Conference of Malawi

MAM – Muslim Association of Malawi

MCC – Malawi Council of Churches

MIAA – Malawi Interfaith Aids Association

PECHANOMA – Pentecostal Churches Network of Malawi

QMAM – Qadria Muslim Association of Malawi

SDA - Seventh Day Adventist

PMAM – Prophetic Ministries Association of Malawi

NCA – Norwegian Church Aid

CA – Christian Aid

ELDS – Evangelical Association of Malawi

I. BACKGROUND

a) Introduction

Malawi recorded the first three cases of COVID-19 on 2nd April, 2020. 12 days later after the first three cases were confirmed, the number for COVID-19 rose to 19 (an increase of more than 500 %). Malawi now is one of the high risk countries to COVID-19 as cases are increasing speedily. Malawi has large population of expatriates from Europe, Asia and America whose countries have registered increased COVID 19 cases. In addition, Malawi's big trading partners in Africa which include South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia have all confirmed COVID-19 cases. Unfortunately, the country has a very weak health system that cannot manage an outbreak like COVID-19 on its own. Currently, Malawi has 9 testing sites. Information on COVID-19 is very scanty and there is continued growing myths about the diseases. Stigma and panic is rapidly growing. COVID-19 could impact Malawi heavily. With co-infections to HIV (1 in 10 Malawians are living with HIV), TB, Cancer and Malaria (endemic to Malawi), the impact could be very devastating.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already brought a series of financial, social and political challenges and has disrupted lives, economic activities and exacerbated structural problems, including humanitarian response which is already overstretched by the number and scale of existing crises. The faith community has equally been challenged. In a bid to exercise safety from the infection, the faith community has had to face the need to review some religious practices and in worst situations, religious gathering being suspended. However the significant role of the faith leaders in influencing adoption of desirable behaviours continue to exist beyond pandemics. The country has the pressing need for a coordinated national response that recognizes and utilises religion's social capital.

In this regard, ACT Alliance Malawi Forum is implementing a project entitled "Faith Based Response to COVID 19 in Malawi" with funding from Dan Church Aid. One of the key activities of this project is to facilitate Creation of a National Faith Leaders' Platform on COVID 19.

This report details proceedings, deliberations and resolutions of a Faith Leaders' Covid-19 Platform meeting which marked the launch of this important structure in Malawi.

b) Objectives of the Faith Leaders meeting

- Introduce participants to the project concept and the role of the faith leaders in its implementation
- To share updated comprehensive information on COVID – 19 to Faith Leaders.
- To develop messages of Faith Leaders' joint statement on COVID 19.

c) Date and venue of the meeting.

The meeting was conducted on 12th May 2020 at Linde Motel in Mponera, Dowa District in Malawi.

d) Participants.

The meeting brought together top faith and religious leaders in Malawi. These include General Secretaries, Country Representatives/Executive Directors, board chairpersons and Heads of Programmes. A total of 46 (41 male and 5 female) participants attended this important meeting.

II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE MEETING

a) Opening Prayer

The opening prayer was offered by Mr Juma Abdullah of the Muslim Association of Malawi.

b) Welcome Remarks

The ACT Alliance Malawi Forum Convenor - Mr. Dickens Mtonga, in his opening remarks highlighted the threat faced by the nation and the whole world from COVID -19. He also underscored the need for faith actors working together to ensure that there is a meaningful impact in the COVID – 19 response. He welcomed all Faith Leaders and called upon all participants to fully take part in the deliberations.

c) Key Note Speech by the Guest of Honour.

The Guest of Honour for the meeting was the General Secretary for MIAA Rev. Dr. Gilford Matonga. In his keynote speech he reminded Faith Leaders that since it was declared a Global Pandemic by the WHO on 11th March 2020, COVID-19 has infected over 4 million people globally and has claimed over 280 000 lives. He added that in Malawi the pandemic has so far infected 56 and claimed 3 lives. He also highlighted that, COVID19 has brought a wide range of challenges and the faith community has equally been affected. Rev. Dr. Gilford Matonga stressed that Malawi as a nation and the faith community in particular is facing a situation that is new and unique which has affected the normal business of religion. A situation which has led to change and modification of social and religious practices that have stood the test of time.

The Guest of Honour observed that, COVID – 19 pandemic has come with a wide range of misconceptions resulting from mis-information. He bemoaned the tendency of politicians for disregarding the set restrictions by government on COVID 19 a situation which he said is exposing everyone including the faith community members to high risk of contracting the disease.

He concluded by saying that it is absolutely necessary that Religious Leaders should come together and contribute to the national response in controlling the spread of the virus. He urged all Faith Leaders present to participate and demonstrate commitment to ending this pandemic before it hits the nation hard.

PRESENTATIONS

a) Why Faith Leaders COVID – 19 Platform?

Answering this big question the Steering Committee highlighted in the concept note that they shared with Faith Leaders during the meeting that creation of a Faith leader's platform is a milestone in bringing together religious leaders and representatives of various faith-based

organizations across Malawi. The concept note further reveals objectives behind the establishing of this platform as:

- To come together at national level in order to create space for discernment and cooperation to respond to this crisis in a compassionate and effective way;
- To share a common understanding of the pandemic so as to provide accurate information to the faith community on Covid19 and;
- To mobilize a unified voice of faith leaders that is capable of advocating for issues within the Covid19 national response.

Adding weight to the concept note, ACT Alliance Malawi forum Acting Coordinator, in his presentation highlighted key roles Faith Leaders can play to respond to COVID 19 pandemic as follows:

- Saving lives and slowing the spread of Corona virus
- Offering sound health information framed in ways that are intelligible, culturally and theologically relevant, contextually practical, and trusted.
- They are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve.
- Information by faith leaders is likely to be accepted than other sources.
- Fear and stigma can be addressed by Faith leaders easily
- Have wider network and can reach out to more followers and general populations

b) Coordination and membership of the Faith Leaders' Platform

In his presentation Mr Matthews Msiska who is the ACT Alliance Malawi forum Acting Coordinator echoed that the Faith Leaders' Platform on COVID 19 in Malawi will be coordinated by Action by Churches Together (ACT) alliance Malawi forum. ACT Alliance Malawi Forum is a network of 7 churches and faith based organisations. ACT Alliance Malawi Forum is also part of the Global ACT Alliance which is the largest Protestant/Orthodox coalition in the world that engages in humanitarian, sustainable development and advocacy work.

The ACT coordinator added that the Faith Leaders' COVID - 19 Platform in Malawi will be steered by 3 religious networks which are: ACT alliance Malawi Forum, Malawi Interfaith AIDS Association (MIAA) and Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM). The ministry of Health as a coordination unit for COVID – 19 in Malawi and Dan Church Aid as the funding member are also included in the Steering Committee.

He added that Members of the Faith leaders Platform on COVID 19 include, 7 ACT Alliance members in Malawi which are, Norwegian Church Aid, Dan Church Aid, Christian Aid, World Renew, Salvation Army, Churches Action in Relief and Development and Evangelical Lutheran Development Service; 8 members of the Malawi Interfaith AIDS Association which are Evangelical Association of Malawi, Malawi Council of Churches, Muslim Association of Malawi, Qadria Muslim Association of Malawi, Seventh Day Adventist, Episcopal Conference of Malawi,

and Pentecostal Churches and Assembly Network of Malawi, and; The Prophetic Ministries Association of Malawi.

c) Project Overview

The presentation on Project Overview was made by Pirira Ndaferankhanda , Executive Director for MIAA. She prefaced her presentation by giving a timeline of the Covid-19 outbreak from the announcement of 20th March 2020, in which the State President declared Malawi a ‘State of Disaster’ due to the threat of COVID-19.

Pirira revealed the overall project objective as “to prepare for Covid -19 and reduce its impact”. In addition MIAA ED informed Faith Leaders that the project has 4 specific objectives as follows: Faith Actors deliver evidence based, credible information, counter stigma & fake news, advocate for needs of most vulnerable and transform health-risking religious messages/theology to ensure access to reliable information; Faith life and social distancing promoted; Counter stigmatisation and discrimination of persons with Covid-19 and; To protect human rights of Covid-19 Vulnerable groups and health workers.

The ED then highlighted project activities as follows:

- Create a national faith leaders Platform on Covid-19 through ACT Alliance– EAM, ECM, MCC, QMAM, MAM, Seventh Day, PECANOMA and Prophetic Ministries – atleast 20 member platform
- Create a Steering Committee that will be under it : DCA, ACT Alliance Desk, MIAA and EAM
- Dissemination of reliable information about COVID 19 to faith followers/congregations
- Development of faith messages on hand washing, sanitation, sneezing, coughing, social distance guidelines on sermons, weddings, funerals , public transport
- Documentation of Covid19 human rights violations practices undertaken by faith leaders and media houses
- Production of COVID 19 radio and tv series following evidence gathering...
- Press release article in newspaper on findings.
- Development and Dissemination of messages that counter stigmatization of persons with COVID-19

The presentation closed with a disclosure of the project’s working budget as MWK31, 920,941.00.

d) Plenary

The plenary raised the following issues:

Insufficient budget for meaningful impact – It is indeed, but only intended as a starter package to facilitate such activities as resource mobilization for the platform, as well as leading the faith-based response , including advocacy. However there is need to develop a set of interventions so that these can be marketed to potential donors for financing.

Can the platform not strategize to tap funding other opportunities? – Other opportunities welcome including, the government basket funding. The steering committee adopted the proposal.

How to reach out to grassroots considering limitations to congregating as well as technology gaps in the extreme rural communities? – Primarily through member churches and home cells, radios and Television.

Why is EAM a member of the steering committee and yet is already represented in MAAA as well as the ACT Alliance? – EAM was involved in technical design of the project and as such is well equipped and placed to give technical support to ensure quality implementation

What is the project's lifespan? – 3 months April – June, 2020

e) Covid-19 Response in Malawi – (Presentation MoH)

The presentation was developed by Dr. Andrew Likaka, a Global Health Specialist and Director of Quality Management and Digital Health. Mr H. Kasiya and Dr. Wakisa co-facilitated the presentation.

The presentation touched on Background of the pandemic, the Current global and local Situation, Evidence towards Prevention, Challenges for Malawi and recommendations on the Response by the Faith Based Leaders to the pandemic.

Dr. Likaka emphasized on the following:

- Covid-19 is everywhere – regional temperature is not a factor in spread of the disease.
- There are currently no cures for viral infections, only vaccines and none has been found for Covid-19 yet.
- Not every person who is coughing or sneezing has Covid-19. There are NO Symptoms in 85 to 90% of cases. Symptoms include Fever, Sore throat, Flu, Cough, Breathing difficulties.
- The higher number of recoveries versus deaths recorded demonstrates that there is a higher chance of recovery. However persons with underlying health conditions are at risk. The elderly are at particularly high risk i.e. from 49 above. Faith leaders are at high risk as most are elderly. This should be considered when advocating re-opening of churches.
- The Singapore and South Africa Covid-19 cases spread quickly primarily through church-related gatherings. Contact tracing evidence points to a praise team in one case and church celebration in the other. Faith leaders in Malawi therefore need to be particularly careful when advocating for opening up of government on re-opening of churches. He highlighted that risk is particularly high during intercessory prayers and singing as a lot of breath is released increasing thereby chances of transmission as transmission is primarily airborne and contact. He pointed out that this is particularly dangerous as church members are drawn from a wide constituency and area thus increasing chances of local transmission.
- Dead bodies are safe to handle as they are wrapped in plastic body bags at the mortuary to avoid transmission. The more important aspect is to protect the living by keeping numbers of the gathered to a minimum and practicing social distancing during funerals.
- The Covid-19 in Malawi is likely going to begin peaking in the week beginning 5th June, 2020. This may see Malawi begin to register high numbers of either positive cases and/or deaths. Health services, churches, and funeral services are likely to be overwhelmed with few able to attend funerals, do hospital visits, or bury all the dead bodies. Evidence shows that in other countries, peak Covid-19 conditions have led to a rise in loss of hope. He advised that the faith community must rise up just as it did during HIV pandemic and speak hope to the hopeless.

- Due to their older age, most church leaders, Maddrassah teachers, and pastors are at very high risk. There is need therefore to reduce contact. He also highlighted that it is not advisable to visit the elderly in the villages as these are most vulnerable.
- Evidence shows that young people (especially the very young) are carriers of the virus with minimal impact to their own health. Grandkids should not be allowed to visit their grandparents during this time to reduce risk.
- Malawi may begin to see a drop in numbers sometime after July, most probably August or September, 2020 if steps are taken to reduce, contain and manage local transmissions.
- The current political activities are putting many Malawian lives at risk.
- He ended by saying that tough as it may be, the best option for Malawi is to implement the proposed partial lockdown. He however, bemoaned the most effective time would have been during the 18th April, 2020 lockdown commencement date. As things stand, it likely that the nation should expect the numbers to keep on rising.
- He advised the church to advocate for a lockdown but that this should have sound Social Protection measures in place before it is affected and might include requests for social support for pastors and their dependents and other vulnerable members of the community.

III. WAY FORWARD

The following action points were identified to help the platform map the way forward:

Activity	Responsible Persons /organization	Timeframe
Creation of a faith based platform -Lobby and Advocacy -Creation of Safety nets-in the event we have a lockdown -Church presence in the community is an advantage	Top leaders	
Resource mobilization -Tap into government Covid-19 basket fund -Approach other donors -Need to have concepts and interventions ready for selling to potential donors	Steering committee	
Awareness creation-information gap 1. Develop messages radio + TV 2. Disseminate message 3. Churches to take an active role-psychosocial support 4. Increase engagement with MOH officials?	Top leaders	
Study on stigma and Discrimination	Steering committee	
Document Human rights violation practices	Steering committee	
Statement	Church leaders	

a) Contributions from Faith Leaders' Covid-19 Platform on the Action Plan

- i. It is important to recognize that the faith community have great potential in contributing to mitigating against the spread and impact of the pandemic but need resources
- ii. Government must proactively engage the faith community in prevention and awareness interventions due to their wide constituency and reach at national and district levels
- iii. Government should live by example in adhering to prevention measures.
- iv. Increase testing
- v. There should be transparency on the use of Covid-19 funds.
- vi. Churches should not be closed because God heals. James 4:7 says we should have the Devil space.
- vii. Government should maintain standard of 100 on church gatherings
- viii. Enforce disinfection and fumigation of public spaces including minibuses
- ix. Total shutdown of borders
- x. Faith leaders and their dependents should be included in any social support mechanisms that the government will employ to mitigate against the pandemic's socio-economic impact.

IV. CONCLUSION

The closing remarks were given by Mr Melton Luhanga, ED for Church Action for Relief and Development (CARD) and a member of ACT Alliance membership board at Global level.

He highlighted the following in his closing remarks:

- i. Proposed recommendation from church leaders need to take into account the development on a faith position and strategy that incorporates technically sound approaches.
- ii. It is likely that members of the Faith Leaders' Covid-19 Platform may be called upon from time to time to support project activities
- iii. It is critical that the Platform should be active and responsive to unfolding issues.
- iv. Having been thus equipped with knowledge, it is critical that going forward, faith leaders should endeavour to share the right information to their members.
- v. Due to the tight timelines of the funding opportunity, others may be called upon shortly to deliberate other matters, in particular the development of a statement, among other things.

The GS of EAM also took an opportunity to welcome members of the Prophetic Network in Malawi into the fold and encouraged them to participate in this, and other programs in the future.

Senior Prophet Justice Hara of ECG and an Associate Prophet to Prophet Shepherd Bushili gave the closing prayer at the end of the meeting.

d) APPENDIX: THE MEETING IN PICTURES



Figure 7: Reverend Dr. Gilford Matonga, the Guest of Honour opening the meeting



Figure 6: Dr. Likaka, Director of Quality Management and Digital Health of Ministry of Health addressing the Faith Leaders' Covid Platform



Figure 3: ACT Alliance Desk Coordinator giving the Rationale behind the Faith Leaders' Covid-19 Platform



Figure 1: Bryer Mlowoka, Regional Director for EAM presenting on agreed action points



Figure 4: A cross-section of the participants listen attentively to the presentation



Figure 2: Programme Manager for MIAA moderated the meeting's proceedings