

In Ebola-hit Sierra Leone, places of worship the only places to gather

November 10 2014, by Anne Chaon

With Ebola rampaging through Sierra Leone, most ordinary outings are off limits—for fear of contracting the virus that has killed more than 1,000 of their compatriots, people cannot go to school or the movies, a football game or a concert.

But they can go to the mosque or to a church.

On Sunday, several hundred people headed to the Freetown branch of the Winners Chapel megachurch, where a revivalist minister presided over services like a rock star.

Wearing a purple suit and mauve shirt, microphone in hand, Olatunji Oseni stood on a raised platform in the centre of this building in a relatively affluent part of the capital, angrily punching the air with his clenched fist.

"We will overcome Ebola through the blood of Christ, with his help, and with prayer," he shouted, bringing the crowd to their feet.

They threw their arms into the air, clapped their hands, and begged God to forgive them for their sins and the wretchedness of their souls.

Outside the gates to the church, as at all public venues, large buckets of chlorinated water are available for people to wash their hands in.

Often there are also officials who check people's temperatures as they go

into a venue.

"We have no case of Ebola in this church," the deacon, who would give his name only as Jim, told AFP. He added that the church had followed all preventive measures—including a ban on physical contact—ordered since the start of the outbreak early this year.

"We used to shake hands, to hug, but we don't do it anymore," he said, noting how the rows of chairs were arranged so that worshippers could not touch.

"We have nowhere to go, we find our salvation in God," Jim said.

Leaving the service, a buxom 19-year-old named Princess jokes with a crowd of youths gathered around her: "We have to stay home, we can't go out, I can't see my girlfriends or my boyfriend. Going to [church](#) is the only way we can see each other. It's really boring."

Some 1,130 people in the impoverished west African country have died from the virus out of 4,862 cases in the current outbreak, declared a state of emergency on July 31.

The combined death toll with Guinea and Liberia, the two other countries where the current epidemic is centred, is near 5,000, the UN agency said on Friday.

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Citation: In Ebola-hit Sierra Leone, places of worship the only places to gather (2014, November 10) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-ebola-hit-sierra-leone-worship.html>

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