

Religious groups could expedite response to biggest global health challenges of 21st century

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Faith-based organisations [1] are crucial in achieving the promise of universal health coverage—an adequate standard of health care for all people—especially for poor and marginalised groups, according to a new three-part Series on faith-based health care, published in *The Lancet*. The Series argues that building on the extensive experience, strengths, and capacities of faith-based organisations (eg, geographical coverage, influence, and infrastructure) offers a unique opportunity to improve health outcomes.

Because of their broad reach and influence, faith-based groups have for centuries played critical roles in delivering education, health, and social services. "Not every community has [health services](#), but most have some type of faith-based group," explains author Professor Edward Mills from Global Evaluative Sciences in Vancouver, Canada. "Religious groups are major players in the delivery of healthcare, particularly in hard-to-reach and rural areas that are not adequately served by government. Yet, the general medical community knows very little about them."

There is a lack of evidence about the magnitude of health services represented and provided by faith-based organisations. Yet, the available evidence indicates that faith-based health providers play an important part in meeting public health needs such as immunisation, antimalarial campaigns, preventing mother and child deaths, and HIV services, especially in fragile health systems (Paper 1). For example, in Sierra

Leone, Muslim and Christian leaders led a UNICEF campaign which increased immunisation rates in children under one year old from 6% to 75% [2]. During the Ebola outbreak in west Africa, faith groups were key mediators of community education, especially safe burial, while providing vital medical services and support.

Religious leaders provide a much needed complement to public health messages when they inspire congregations to adopt healthy behaviours (Paper 3). World Vision's 'Channels of Hope' project, for example, mobilised more than 390000 local faith leaders to transform health and development in local communities [3]. "With more support from governments, donors, and international faith networks, this movement could rapidly scale up to reach millions of people with critical health issues," write the authors.

The Series outlines many case studies showing effective partnership between religious leaders and groups with governments, public-sector agencies, and international development actors. The authors discuss controversies in faith and health care, but are optimistic that with better understanding of the interface between faith perspectives and [health care](#), and with improved professional and intellectual cooperation, improved services with a better reach can be accomplished. Towards this goal, they propose mechanisms for improved collaboration in order to save lives (Paper 2). They also note successful examples of faith groups organizing themselves across traditions and within countries or regions to be more accessible partners to governments and donors (Paper 3).

According Professor Mills, "As the global health community plans for sustainable health goals for the future, it will be crucial to leverage existing infrastructure and existing community partnerships to improve [health outcomes](#). Faith-based organisations often represent the only [health infrastructure](#) in a region and have strong cultural ties to the communities. It is time for the general medical community to recognise

the magnitude of services offered and partner or support to provide long-standing improvements in [health](#)."

The first paper in the Series was led by Dr Jill Olivier from the School of Public Health and Family Medicine at the University of Cape Town in South Africa; the second paper by Andrew Tomkins, Emeritus Professor of International Child Health at University College London, London, UK; and the third paper by Jean Duff from the Partnership for Faith and Development, Washington, DC, USA.

More information: [1] Faith-based groups as diverse as Islamic Relief, Salvation Army, Anglican Alliance, Tearfund, Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Samaritan's Purse, and Adventist Relief and Development Agency.

[3] Building trust in immunization. Partnering with Religious Leaders and Groups. [www.unicef.org/ceecis/building ... ust immunization.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/building...ust_immunization.pdf)

[4] World Vision Inc. Channels of Hope: igniting a movement to transform communities. www.wvi.org/health/publication/channels-hope

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