

Top Ebola scientist points to funerals in disease spread

by [Trevor Grundy](#)

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LONDON (RNS) Touching or kissing the corpses of Ebola victims at funerals is helping to spread the deadly virus, according to one of the world's top scientists who was among the first to identify Ebola in 1976.

Peter Piot, the director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said worsening conditions in West Africa contribute to a "perfect storm," including a growing population, decades of civil war, widespread government corruption, dysfunctional health systems, and a growing distrust in Western medicine.

Piot, who in 1976 co-discovered the Democratic Republic of Congo's first case of Ebola, said traditional cultural and religious beliefs in parts of Africa help spread the virus.

"There are very strong traditional beliefs and traditional funeral rites which require that the whole family touch the dead body," he said in an interview, "and they have a meal in the presence of the dead body."

As well as being a scientist and doctor, the Belgian-born Piot is also a former diplomat, having served as undersecretary-general at the United Nations from 1994-2008.

Part of what's fueling the deadly outbreak is funeral rites that involve touching or kissing the bodies of the deceased; dead bodies can still host the Ebola virus and spread the disease to the living.

Churches across the region have been closed or have altered some worship rites, including shared communion, in a bid to stop the spread of the disease. Some aid workers have been killed by suspicious locals who fear foreigners are spreading the disease, not stopping it.

Piot is now reaching out to African religious and cultural traditionalists who believe that the goal of life is to become an ancestor, and that particular funeral rites are required to ensure the deceased's passage into "the other world."