

Congo churches continue work to stop Ebola despite attacks by militants

A Methodist church-based messaging platform has sent hundreds of texts to people's phones about how to prevent Ebola transmission.

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [July 3, 2019](#) issue

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, church leaders who have joined health professionals to fight the second-largest Ebola epidemic in history are facing obstacles as the self-described Islamic State has declared the region to be the Central Africa province of its caliphate.

More than 1,300 have died since the epidemic was officially declared in August in the eastern DRC. That death toll is exceeded only by the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa in which 11,000 people died.

From the start, churches and other faith-based organizations have been helping health officials get the word out on prevention methods, producing songs about hygiene and hand washing for local broadcasts, hosting talks, and offering pastoral support for those affected. Most churches have imposed bans on exchanging hand greetings during services.

In the DRC, the local church is often the most trusted institution and is a crucial ally in the health crisis.

“The church is at the forefront, guiding and educating the local people on prevention and care,” said Josué Bulambo Lembe-Lembe of the Church of Christ in the Congo. “We are telling our members not to accept any lies and misinformation, since disease threatens everyone.”

Additionally, Lembe-Lembe said churches have been investigating whether militants active in the region are in fact associated with ISIS.

“Rebel groups, especially in Butembo area, are proving a major obstacle,” Lembe-Lembe said. “They are preventing the vaccination of children and the movement of health workers.”

Forced out of its bases in Iraq and Syria, ISIS has claimed responsibility for several recent attacks in the DRC, Mozambique, and on the Congo-Uganda border.

Francis Kuria Kagema, general secretary of the African Council of Religious Leaders, noted that such claims from ISIS may be “an empty boast.” However, if ISIS fighters have entered the area, “it will be difficult to dislodge them, as we have seen in Nigeria-Cameroon border, where the heavy forest cover provides a hiding area.”

Church leaders in the Congo have been alert to the growing presence of militants and the prospect of local youth being radicalized since November, when members of the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel group with origins in Uganda, killed two Christian pastors and five others in an attack on two villages in northeastern Congo.

The group has been accused of carrying out kidnappings, looting churches, and burning villages since October 2014, killing 1,000 people, according to a November report by the Congo Research Group at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Though the ADF is not as sophisticated as the Islamic State group, the report states that ADF recently received financial support from ISIS through a Kenyan facilitator.

Despite the challenges, church groups are continuing their efforts to educate people about Ebola.

Judith Osongo, director of communications for the Eastern Congo area of the United Methodist Church, told United Methodist News Service that a church-based messaging platform has sent hundreds of text messages to people’s phones about how to prevent Ebola transmission.

“We sent messages for the adoption of the handwashing culture,” she said. “We also assure communities that the Ebola outbreak is not a hopeless situation. Ebola is treatable. Many patients survive if they receive the appropriate care as soon as possible.” —Religion News Service and World Council of Churches; added information

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