

As churches take measures to prevent Ebola, traditional healers ply herbs

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) As the Ebola outbreak widens, churches in Africa have begun issuing new guidelines to prevent infection even as traditional healers continue to ply their herbs.

In Nigeria, Roman Catholics have begun giving Communion wafers in the palm of the hand rather than on the tongue.

Across West Africa, hand-washing buckets with soap and chlorine are strategically stationed at the entrances to worship centers.

Ushers have been asked to don gloves as they collect and count offerings. And many people are reluctant to give hugs or shake hands.

The epidemic has killed more than 1,200 people in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Nigeria, according to the World Health Organization.

But now churches and mosques are battling a new enemy: superstition.

Traditional healers or herbalists outnumber biomedical workers in rural areas, according to the WHO. These healers use ritual and herbal remedies to treat people in areas where suspicion of modern medicine persists. They have been in demand in West Africa since the outbreak began.

In the eastern district of Kailahun in Sierra Leone, Mamie Lebbie, a traditional herbalist, claimed special powers to cure Ebola and attracted a multitude from Guinea, according to Ebun James-Dekam, general secretary of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone.

Lebbie became the first woman to be infected in Sierra Leone and to die. At her funeral, mourners came from all corners to pay their respects, touching her body

and those of their healthy colleagues, leading to a chain of infections.

“Rural communities initially viewed this disease as witchcraft and took their sick relatives to traditional healers, while others administered herbs,” said Bishop Sumoward Harris, a retired bishop of the Lutheran Church in Liberia.

Now, governments and religious groups are turning to healers to spread the word that there is no cure for the disease.

James-Dekam said churches in Sierra Leone that are part of the Council of Churches, an umbrella group of 20 denominations, are leading education and sensitization efforts among the communities.