

Muslim Communities & COVID-19 : Challenges & Reflections

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Introduction

When I think of what has been achieved and just how much has changed, I am astounded. The sense of unity that was borne out of adversity, the unrelenting service provided by those on the frontline and of course the compassion and care every one of us shared towards each other – all a reminder of our common humanity. I take this time to share the Muslim Council of Britain's experiences; critical challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for what could have been done better. I also express my thanks to the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) and the wider healthcare community; this was a public health emergency, and we could not have been prouder of the leadership you have shown, the sacrifice made and legacy that has been left.

The challenges

The onset of the pandemic was a time of much confusion and uncertainty for British Muslims. On the 16th of March the MCB issued a statement strongly recommending mosque leaders to suspend congregational activities, realising the critical nature of the situation. This was a week before the government-mandated and was essential for the protection of life (1).

The MCB facilitated a national platform for affiliates and non-affiliates to come together to provide a national plan of action and response. The MCB also set up several COVID Response Groups, ranging from Mosques, Charities, Mental Health, to Economic and Burial, these served as platforms for coordinated action (2).

Given this was a public health emergency, the MCB affiliate, the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) helped lead in formulating timely guidance for communities about the virus.

Bereavement & Loss

One of the first major concerns from Muslim communities was a proposed measure by the government to potentially cremate all COVID-19 deceased. The MCB collaborated with the National Burial Council to provide clarity on the latest guidance and ensure those who passed away would get the utmost respect at end of life. Mosques worked relentlessly to find ways to support families, ensuring compliance with regulations whilst delivering religious rites in the most sensitive way possible. (3)

I also pay tribute to the first deaths of COVID-19 which were Muslim doctors and nurses on the frontline, they gave the ultimate sacrifice for our safety. My prayers are for their families and that they may be granted the highest abode in heaven. (4)

Guidance & Communication

Another key challenge for our communities was the frequency in which the guidance was changing, causing confusion both at national and local levels. Given the reach of the MCB and its trusted reputation across Muslim communities, the MCB with the support of BIMA was able share timely and critical supplementary guidance across all social media platforms including WhatsApp. This guidance included easy to understand info graphic posters and multi-language formats, easily accessible and thus enabling immediate implementation by all. (5)

The MCB hosted over 50 webinars with partners across sectors, with hundreds of attendees (in one case over a thousand). These sessions covered issues from improving health and safety standards in mosques, combating vaccination fake news, hajj and umrah updates, to advice for parents in lockdown. (6)

A particularly difficult time for Muslims, myself included, was during Ramadan 2020 - the first Ramadan in history where we could not go to the mosque, meet our families, and break the fast with neighbours and friends. This of course also meant the Eid ul Fitr festival was also impacted with last-minute changes to government guidance resulting in local lock downs in some areas just hours before celebrations were to begin. (7)

The opportunity for good

Despite these challenges, British Muslim communities continued to show great resilience. Although Mosques were physically closed to their congregations, they continued to serve their communities in even more ways than before. Muslim communities still found ways to share in charity - thousands of hot meals distributed, food hubs set up to support the poor and vulnerable, meals provided for key workers on the front line, whilst providing essential counselling and spiritual guidance.

There are many stories of forgotten communities, from the refugees living in hotels like prisoners to hundreds of international students without recourse to jobs or food. It was down to foodbanks in local mosques and other places of worship to be a lifeline when it mattered most.

Imams and scholars also helped to promote the campaign for vaccine uptake and NHS plasma donation - producing videos in different languages and utilising inter-generational homes to convey key messages to encourage the elderly to get vaccinated.

Innovation with the use of technology has also played a great role in widening access and helping mosques provide essential pastoral care and support. Talented Imams and madrassah teachers switched to online services (e.g., up skilling and training to use Zoom/Teams/YouTube etc).

Moving Forward

The prevalence of large-scale and institutional racism and inequality have been further highlighted during the pandemic. The death of George Floyd sent ripples across the globe and awoke a new conversation about the society we wanted versus the one we had. Now young people are demanding a more equitable future, one in which diversity is embraced.

It was also quite apparent, how COVID-19 highlighted prevailing health inequalities with the disproportionate deaths of ethnic minorities from the virus. These are also

related to social and economic barriers; Muslim communities are in some of the most deprived areas, lowest income jobs with large families often living in cramped accommodation. It is one of the MCB's key priorities, as we come out of this pandemic, to help address these legacy inequalities by working in partnership with decision makers to effect the change we need. (8)

The role played by Mosque, imams and communities has been truly remarkable. Without these efforts and sacrifice, we could not have achieved as much progress as we have done in both the vaccination effort but in also taking care of the most vulnerable in our society. This partnership will be essential with the surge of mental health and the ongoing healing from bereavement and loss. (9)

Finally, our government and decision makers have much to heed. They must work with local communities who understand how to effect change and not continue to cherry-pick "community representatives" who do not have local credibility. They must appreciate the importance of tackling structural barriers and inequalities and create policies where the most marginalised are not left behind. Further they must acknowledge the role that Muslim communities have played not just in relation to the pandemic but for the future of the country. We need inclusive politics and leadership that speaks for the diversity of communities they represent.

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