

Conditions for gatherings of faith-based organizations and funerals in the context of COVID-19

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When scaling down the current measures in accordance with Ministerial Regulation AB 1989 no. 78 General regulations for combating COVID-19, it is essential that everyone maintains their preventive measures with regard to social distance and hygiene. To this end, conditions with the minimum requirements have been drawn up by the Department of Public Health. This applies to everyone and will be checked.

Enforcement of all required measures is the responsibility of each religious leader and funeral owners can be checked upon by the task force. In this case, the task force will check on the measures listed below. In the event of non-compliance, the religious leader or funeral owner in question may be instructed to cancel the physical gathering in accordance with the above mentioned laws and regulations.

This document is based on guidance and recommendations developed by WHO and other Dutch guidance documents in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its purpose is to acknowledge the special role of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, faith communities and funerals in COVID-19 preparedness, and response through:

- Ensuring that any decision to convene group gatherings for worship, education, or social meetings is based on a sound risk assessment and in line with guidance from the Aruban authority.
- Ensuring safe faith-based gatherings, ceremonies, rituals and funerals when they do occur.

Measures for religious gatherings, funerals and ceremonies

During gatherings, religious leaders, faith-based communities and funeral owners/organizers should take the following steps to reduce the threat of COVID-19 in their community. If they are not able to perform these steps to keep their community safe, then the planned physical gatherings should be cancelled.

Maintain at least 1.5 m of distance between people at all times

COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks. These droplets can land on people or be breathed in by those close by. Religious institutions and faith-based organizations should protect their members by helping them maintain a safe distance between them (“physical distancing”).

- Discourage non-essential physical gatherings and organize virtual gatherings through live-streaming, television, radio, social media, etc.
- If a gathering is planned, consider holding it outdoors. If this is not possible, ensure that the indoor venue has adequate ventilation.
 - Regulate the number and flow of people entering, attending, and departing from worship venue or funeral to ensure safe distancing at all times.

- Gatherings with few people are better than crowded sessions. Religious leaders and communities of faith should consider multiple services with a few attendees, rather than hosting large gatherings.
- Seating or standing of participants in faith services and funerals should be at least 1.5 m apart. Where necessary, create and assign fixed seating to maintain safe distances.
 - The 1.5 m does not apply to participants living in the same household

Prevent touching between people attending faith services

Many faith traditions involve physical contact between worshippers. Respiratory droplets containing COVID-19 can settle on a person's hands and can be passed on to others through physical contact. Religious leaders and faith-based communities should consider how worship practices and community connections can be adapted to prevent touching between participants in services and other faith- or community-based activities. The same applies for funerals

Prevent touching or kissing of devotional and other objects that the community is accustomed to handling communally

The virus that causes COVID-19 can remain on such surfaces for hours or days. Religious leaders and faith-based communities need to protect their members from becoming infected by avoiding practices involving touching or kissing of such surfaces. Leaders should create and help community members accept new ways to reverence these objects and symbols safely including:

- Bow before sacred statues or icons, instead of touching them.
- Receive a blessing from at least 1.5 m away and avoid the distribution of Holy Communion that involves placing the wafer on the tongue or drinking from a common cup.
- Consider using individual pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious or ceremonial foods, rather than shared portions from communal containers.
- Empty fonts of holy water to prevent people from dipping their fingers into a common bowl.
- Eliminate rituals involving touching and substitute appropriate practices.
- Encourage worshippers to perform their ritual ablutions at home before attending the place of worship.

Measures to ensure good hygiene

Every religious organization/leader and funeral owner/organizer takes the necessary measures to facilitate and promote good hygiene in order to guarantee the safety and health of both staff and participants. Below are a number of measures that must be taken as a minimum to ensure good hygiene on the premise:

- Establish routine cleaning with disinfectant of worship spaces, pilgrimage sites, and other buildings where people gather, to remove any virus from the surfaces. This routine should include cleaning immediately before and immediately after all gatherings.
- Frequently clean often-touched objects such as door knobs, light switches, and stair railings with disinfectant.
- Place disinfectant hand hygiene dispensers in visible areas such as entrances, ensure these dispensers are used upon entry and refilled regularly.
- Provide visual displays of advice on physical distancing, hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette.

Other measures

- Inform staff and participants that anyone with fever or respiratory complaints (cough, shortness of breath, sore throat) is forbidden to enter the place of worship and must stay at home.
- The entry of a visibly ill participant with respiratory complaints (cough, shortness of breath, sore throat) should be refused.
- It is strongly recommended not to sing during religious gatherings¹. Singing seems to be a great source of COVID-19 transmission. There are several reports of outbreaks in choirs throughout the world despite social distancing. The Ministry of Health and Human Studies in the Netherlands is still investigating this and as long as the results are not known, singing during religious gatherings is not recommended.
- An attendance list must be kept and should include the name, address and phone number of at least one contact person per family. This is to facilitate contact tracing should it be necessary.

For additional information see the following WHO guidelines:

<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/advice-for-workplace-clean-19-03-2020.pdf>

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/guidance-for-schools-workplaces-institutions>

¹ <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/nieuws/zou-ik-niet-van-harte-zingen-waarom-zingen-echt-nog-niet-kan/>