

## The Marriage of Religion and Public Health

By Emily Wallen

In Ghana, religion is paramount; it is taught in schools, it is included in national broadcasts, and it is a very common point of conversation among strangers in a trotro (I can't even count the number of times I have been asked how church was by someone I don't know). Regardless of what religion you adhere to, the simple act of being religious is key. And so, when the President announced the closing of churches and the banning of mass gatherings on a Sunday night, WhatsApp groups across the country went wild. By the following week, many churches and mosques in the country had begun to stream services, and the President had announced a national day of fasting and prayer to take place on March 25th. It was as if there was an instantaneous and unanimous decision that, in the face of COVID-19, religion was needed more than ever before.

For most of the global north, religion and public health find themselves to be in fierce opposition, but that is far from the case in Ghana and elsewhere on the African continent. In a place such as Ghana that has been shaped by centuries of abuse and subjugation, it is incredibly important for government officials to be able to meet the public where they stand. The average resident will be much more susceptible to understanding something that is presented to them in a way they can easily relate to. As a result of this fact, the government and religious leaders alike realized that the way to share this vitally important information was through the lense of the religious institutions. If a pastor in Accra shows how to properly wash your hands and social distance in an online sermon, it is likely to reach a much wider audience than the same message being presented by government officials.

The reaction quickly became one that involved outreach and donations, through systems that were already in place. For example, rather than traditional offerings the church I attended in Accra now uses the money to create food hampers to distribute to individuals in need in the community. This reaction spread like wildfire as a result of the marriage of religion and public health that has been long standing within Ghanaian society, but it was born out of generations of colonial oppression and violence that created the current systems. COVID-19 has changed the reality of the world around us in incredible ways and in the case of Ghana, it has emphasized the

importance of empathy and meeting people where they stand in the management of public health.