

In the Name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful

The Coronavirus Conversation: The Role of Leaders

Since the beginning of the Coronavirus crisis early last year, we've seen people of varying authority offer their opinion on the permissibility of the use of the Coronavirus vaccine. While they may be well-meaning, this approach can have negative results and distracts from many important issues.

While we may be tempted by the pressing nature of the current coronavirus situation and extended lockdowns to offer guidance on the taking of the covid vaccine, doing so has the potential to unnecessarily alienate a segment of the community.

An appropriate approach to matters such as this is to inform the Muslim's response to crisis situations. Instead of telling the people: "Take the coronavirus vaccine," it is more appropriate to advise them on the importance of staying safe and ensuring the safety of others. Instead of trying to prove or disprove the dangers of the coronavirus or the ease of spread we can encourage people to seek their information from credible sources and show them how to be more critical consumers of information.

Community Challenges

Let us consider that we as a community are in distress, with individuals receiving information of varying quality about the matter of the coronavirus and the global effort to eradicate this virus. We are also being subjected to restrictions on movement as part of this effort. These restrictions affect the livelihoods of a large segment of our community; people who work in industries which are reliant on freedom of movement. This stress-inducing situation reminds the religious leader of the verse from the Quran:

((لَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِيصٌ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ)) – سورة التوبة 128

"There certainly has come to you a messenger from among you. He is concerned by your suffering, anxious for your well-being, and gracious and merciful to the believers" – Al Quran 9:28

Our messenger, peace and blessings upon him, carried great concern for his people. This concern was not only in relation to their salvation in the everlasting life, but also in relation to their welfare and success in this life. The current discourse to a large extent does not pay attention to the current welfare of the people. Let us consider some of the types of challenges our community will be facing:

Intrapersonal challenges: this includes consideration for the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of the people as mentioned in my previous article. We are starting to see now some more attention given to this matter. I believe this needs to be an ongoing focus for the religious leader.

Interpersonal challenges: Prior to the lockdown, people of the same household would enjoy some reprieve from each other due to school and work. Now they are in each other's company for most of the day, every day. Under ideal circumstances this would provide an opportunity to improve on the relationships between family members, especially if the home is spacious and allows for everyone to have a personal space. We are however experiencing strict and extended lockdown conditions in some of the most populous and densely populated Local Government Areas (LGAs) in New South Wales¹. This is an area for which I have not yet seen sufficient consideration.

Livelihood: This includes challenges for people whose work relies on movement such as those working in the construction industry, trades people, and businesspeople. It also includes the likelihood of losing your employment or having difficulty finding new employment. It includes, for business owners, difficulty in remaining productive and profitable, especially if the business is reliant on heavy foot traffic in the area.

Uncertainty: with so much happening around the world since the outbreak of the coronavirus in March last year, it is understandable that there would be a level of uncertainty and skepticism held by the people. I have not yet seen in the political or community discourse any reassuring voice during this crisis. Instead we are hearing rhetoric that increases fear, anxiety and uncertainty, and is causing people to be more suspicious. An area of exceptional concern under the present lockdowns is that Lifeline has recorded the highest number of calls in its 58 year history with 3345² people calling the "Crisis support, Suicide Prevention" hotline on Monday of this week.

The power of the leader

The power of the religious leader is in their reach and ability to inspire people to do what their Creator wants of them. They can inspire them to activate their empathy and sense of community. They can inspire them to be problem solvers and they can help their community to be strong and resilient despite what is happening around them.

Let's inspire people to think about how they can remain productive in these trying times; how they can ensure their own safety and the safety of the people around them. Below are just a few ideas:

- Brainstorm ideas to keep businesses going during restrictions.
- Encourage people to connect with the people they know, especially those who don't

¹ The Canterbury-Bankstown LGA alone has more than 361000 residents across 110 square kilometers: [Demographics and statistics \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.demographics.nsw.gov.au)

² <https://www.lifeline.org.au/media/yxab453i/20210804-lifeline-more-australians-than-ever-seeking-support.pdf>



- have family around them.
- Encourage landlords to show leniency with their tenants during these difficult times and advise lenders to be lenient with borrowers.
- Open up dialogue to address the concerns of the community on all matters relating to the coronavirus situation. There needs to be a space where people can openly say what's on their mind without being stigmatized, and the people need those in authority to take their concerns seriously and address them adequately and appropriately

This is not an exhaustive list. The community has dynamic and evolving needs, especially in times such as these, and I have concerns for what will happen if these needs are not addressed.

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