

Invisible War: Faith in Liberia and the Fight Against Ebola

Adolphus My name is Adolphus Scott and I'm sitting in my living room watching Al Jazeera, although it's muted.

Zoe Adolphus is calling me from his house in Monrovia. I'm Zoe, calling him from Virginia. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I wanted to talk to Adolphus about his experience with an earlier pandemic: Ebola.

Adolphus Now I'm the acting director for the Rural Electrification Department at the Liberia Electricity Corporation

Zoe Before directing Liberia's rural electrification project, Adolphus worked for UNICEF. In 2014, he was about a year into his new position as a communications specialist when the first cases of Ebola surfaced in the country.

Adolphus It was pillaging communities and ruining households. And we had thousands of people dying from the virus. And you hear in the night, you hear ambulances all through the night, all through the day. You see bodies lying in the communities and nobody to pick these bodies up. It was frightening. But all the same, I had to be resolute because I was on the frontlines working with a lot of other strong people. Working to fight this virus that we just couldn't see. But it was a war, it was actually total war. And I think from a psychological perspective, if you look at it from that angle, you tend to fight a bit harder. So sorry. A war is a bit of a harsh word, but I think it's good to look at it that way sometimes.

Zoe The Ebola outbreak certainly left warlike damage. Besides the long-term effects of economic collapse and an overwhelmed healthcare system, the virus killed almost 45% of people infected in Liberia. That's 4,810 confirmed deaths from 2014 through 2016. War was not an abstract concept for Liberia either. From 1989 to 2003, it faced two back-to-back civil wars that claimed an estimated 250,000 lives. A lot of Liberia's population was familiar with living in a state of emergency before the Ebola crisis began. Most deaths from Ebola happened early on, when information about the virus was more difficult to access and accept. Adolphus' job helped disburse public health announcements and prevention methods. This was crucial to saving lives and slowing the spread.

Adolphus We carved out those messages, we pretested them. We started to roll them out into communities using radio and television, town criers. We use door-to-door communication, you name it.

Zoe Did you know it was Ebola right away or did you think-?

Josephine No, no, no, no. I didn't know because at the time the entire community was in denial. So I didn't actually know that it was Ebola. But after I started getting sick, when I had severe joint pain... I could not walk, my mother too was sick in the house, and my father, my sister, too, to my little sister, sick in the house. Even the baby. We were like six persons sick at the same time. It was very, very a terrifying to know that you have Ebola. Because at the time, the radio would say if you have Ebola, you would definitely die. So it was like a death sentence for me because I was already six months pregnant and I was positive with the Ebola virus as well, so I felt that I was definitely going to die.

Zoe This is Josephine. She's calling from a shared office space in Monrovia. Josephine is a nurse, a medical student, and a volunteer for a Christian organization named Young Life. She's also an Ebola survivor.

Josephine My experience during Ebola actually started from the church. My uncle was a pastor at Better World Cathedral Church. A church member went to a funeral, and right after the funeral where this person died from Ebola. When she came back, she took sick. So my uncle, being the overseer of the ministry, he went to pray, to lay hands. Because in Liberia, it's common when you are ill, your pastor will come and pray for you, most of the time, this is our belief. So he lay hands on her and he prayed for her.

Zoe Josephine thinks that her uncle caught the virus from that congregant and transmitted it to her father, who then gave it to her and the rest of her family. At that time, a lot of Ebola cases could be traced back to funerals and prayer meetings like the one that Josephine's uncle conducted. At many mosques and churches in the region, laying hands on the sick, or washing the body of a deceased loved one are practices that are common and sacred, especially in times of mourning. Physical contact, however, is also the primary way that Ebola is transmitted, which makes these kinds of practices particularly dangerous. Giving up these traditions even temporarily was frightening for a lot of people.

Zoe So going back a little bit, why do you think there was unbelief about the virus originally?

Adolphus I think it boils down to denial. Hoping that it's not there, that it will all go away. And from the beginning, people started to think that the government was lying. People felt that the government was making this up in order to to get money to solicit funds from donor countries

Zoe And what were the main voices that were against the virus?

Adolphus We had people from all walks of life. We had these talk show hosts on the radio who would stir up discussions and people would listen. And then all kinds of comments will come up that the virus was not true and people were lying in order to generate money from wherever, and even some pastors and imams, you know, had this belief. And some of them stood on pulpits, you know, hoping that all will go away.

[Recording: Imam Kabbah's Prayer]

Zoe Adolphus says it became clear that they had to fight Ebola denial everywhere they could. Catchy songs and town criers could help spread the message. But they also had to turn to leaders that people could trust in their own communities. This is how they came to the Interfaith Council of Liberia and the National Imam Council.

Adolphus The religious leaders in the time of the Ebola conflict played a pivotal role in the fight against Ebola.

Adolphus In Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, where I come from, religion is everything. So I'm talking about for Liberia, Christians and a Muslims. They make up over 90% of the population in Liberia. So having the religious leaders on board was a major asset in our fight against the virus. Because when the religious leaders came on board, things kind of took a different turn where you have a lot of these of faith-believing churches and mosques come on board. And that was very, very important.

Kabbah When the pastor speaks, the Christians obey. And when the imam talks, the Muslims listen to it. Most especially when you bring references from their religions. They see you performing it, obviously they'll accept it. So initially, people were denying and that even caused more casualties. Many people died. But later, they got to understand after we'd gotten on our feet, you know, going not only to the mosque. We're going from community to community in a vehicle, in the walking sometimes and then it starts to handle.

Zoe Imam Harouna Kabbah was one of the leaders that partnered with the humanitarian response. In the early stages of the Ebola outbreak, most of their efforts were directed towards countering the messages of fear and denial.

Kabbah We were getting the denial and it created some problems. Firstly, the chief imam called an emergency meeting. We said, "What we do? Let's try to get on our feet."

Not only the mosques. Let's try to go to the community, more specifically the religious community-dominant area. We'll explain to them that this has happened during Prophet times. We can call it *Ta Un* in Sharia. Ebola. *Ta Un*. It's in the book.

Zoe *Ta Un*. What does that mean?

Kabbah Ebola. It's what happened during Prophet *alayhi wa-ala alihi wa-salam* period. called it as *Ta Un*. And he said exactly what happened. If it is this *Ta Un* comes into a community, *alayhi wa-ala alihi wa-salam* told the people, "You in this community don't move and go to the next community. And, you in this community, don't come to this community." So a similar thing we told them. We said, "it happened to *alayhi wa-ala alihi wa-salam* and was killing people.

Adolphus We gave them messages. And we had posters. We had fliers. We had stickers. And we actually trained these religious leaders in going to their followers and informing them of actually what was happening. And this sent out the messages quicker and people bought the messages quicker because they were being rolled out by these religious leaders.

Zoe Besides looking to the Koran for inspiration on how Muslims had handled dangerous disease, Imam Kabbah met with other members of the National Imam Council to research and write Ebola-aware messages that aligned with the Islamic practice *and* with public health measures. Sometimes, that meant asking people to change tradition, at least until the outbreak was under control. For many Muslim communities in the region, one important change was in how people were handling the dead. Traditionally bodies would be buried quickly, which is good in an outbreak. But another common tradition is for the community to bathe and shroud the body of their loved one, which could easily spread the Ebola virus further. Here's a clip released by UNICEF of many of the top religious leaders at the time.

[0:27 "Those who are saying they must bury their body, they must bathe their body...you can bless the body without touching it...anytime you want to remember your dead person, you can pray..."]

Kabbah The ministry, the health and the government, they were baffled how to bury. You know, and then because the Ebola disease would be in a dead body, so if we just trash that away, it may affect others. So our Mufti quickly sent a statement that it didn't go well down with many of the religious people where he said the government will go ahead to burn the disease, the dead bodies. We all unanimously agree, no embalming and no bathing. But initially that is what was happening and that's what caused more

casualties and more death. But for that, finally now we abolish that. That any Ebola body should not be touched, not to embalm or bathe the body. No. The only thing, they had to be wrapped in plastic. They were having special plastic for that. And we'd follow it. Nobody can even touch it. They will carry it. The only thing we might know is where it is buried.

Zoe Messages from imams and Christian leaders helped to change behavior, and slow the spread of the disease. But not all religious leaders believed that the government's measures would stop the spread of Ebola. In August 2014, in the early stages of the pandemic, a council of over one hundred church ministers released a statement claiming that "God was angry with Liberia" and that Ebola was a plague meant to punish the country for its leniency towards issues like, quote "homosexualism" unquote. This put Ebola survivors at risk of severe stigmatization upon their reentry to society. If the virus was a punishment from God, then those who had gotten sick deserved it - and might still be a danger to others. Even though they are deemed immune to the virus, people did not all treat them that way. Many survivors were the only people in their families to survive, meaning they had no home go back to.

Josephine The community they stigmatized me highly.

Zoe Josephine actually tried to return to the Ebola treatment center after days of being harassed and outcast from her community while she was still weak and recovering.

Josephine So I packed my things, on September 10, one o'clock. I packed my things. I was just waiting for daylight to come up so that I could go back to the treatment center because I feel that when I was there it was okay. Since I came home, even to get food, to get food, it was not easy. I could not sleep. I could not eat since I came back because of how the community treated me, I could not eat. So I told them that I would want to come back to the treatment center and stay. Yeah. That's what I told them.

Zoe Another survivor, Massah, experienced lasting hostility from her church.

Massah The church should have been the last place of refuge. When I was sick during the crisis. If I had run to the church, the church should have been the one to accept me. But not so. Knowing the terrible situation I went through, which I couldn't infect anybody anymore. Oh, they rejected me. That was rejection. That was an actual form of discrimination. So when I got out of church, I just went straight home. So that was complete stigmatization for me, so actually I didn't feel good about it. It broke me down, it made me to feel that the Ebola had changed me into something else. Sometimes I'd tell the mirror, I look at myself and say, though my appearance changed a bit, but I said

with time, I will be all cured of that sickness. When we got rejected from our very churches and our communities, some people their workplaces. Since we all went through the same things, felt the same pains, we tried to come together as a group under the banner of the National Ebola Survivor Network of Liberia. Under this banner, we came across Young Life that decided to work with us. Young Life was the first organization to get involved with survivors, Ebola survivors to be precise. When I got the message that Young Life wanted to work with people like us, I wasn't sure. But who am I and where am I going? I don't go to any church, I mean I don't even go out of my house.

Zoe For both Massah and Josephine, the organization Young Life Liberia became the Christian community that their previous churches wouldn't provide.

Massah And I just love once again from the reception we got from Young Life. When we went to a camp it was the same: We played. We joked. We laughed, we ate together. I did just believe that I could be like this again, that I would be around normal people and do things normally. But with Young Life it was quite different with Young Life we got that encouragement. They played with us, they touched us. We ate together, we joked together. I mean we did everything together.

Zoe Young Life Liberia is not a humanitarian organization, nor is it affiliated with any specific church. Usually, volunteers focus on mentorship and Christian evangelism among youth, but during the Ebola Outbreak, James Davis, the organization's vice president for West Africa, had something else in mind.

James Davis The health workers, they were too afraid. Many health workers have been killed. So we decided, you know, when we got the information because, we do a lot of calls, we're doing calls, asking for stories about cases. Many times we're on a phone, we had our young life leaders in different communities. So we have the community structure, community mapping that we could call any volunteer leader to give an update on what is happening in communities.

Zoe James and his team of volunteers used their connections to locate people who were isolated because of the virus, whether they were sick, quarantined, or a survivor. They delivered food and medical supplies to families and tried to counter the stigma around survivors like Massah.

James Davis Some of them would take rocks and start chucking at them, throwing rocks at them. None of the community people who actually showed them any love.

Zoe When James and his team heard about Massah and her family they decided to visit her themselves.

James Davis We prayed and we wash our hands a lot. We carried Clorox bottles beforehand, washed, sanitized. And when we were getting to the yard people started saying all kinds of things, throwing talks at us. But we managed to talk to some of them. We said, Look, how is it possible? Can we as a people stop this virus from spreading from one place to another place, for from one house to another house, if we are not there as a community, and as a people to show love to these people, to encourage them?

Zoe Survivors were not the only ones who suffered stigmatization. And with rumors of plague and the wrath of God, Liberia's LGBTQ community was hit hard.

Karishma Okay, so I'm Karishma and I identify as a trans nonconforming person. And I am the founder and executive director of the Transgender Network of Liberia.

Zoe This network, TNOL for short, works to educate the population and support the trans community in Liberia. Being gay is illegal in the country and dangerous in some parts of society. During the Ebola Outbreak, members of the LGBT community often were blamed for either being carriers of the virus or for being the reason for divine wrath.

Karishma When the Ebola crisis came up to Liberia, it was really frustrating because the community did not even have access to healthcare services. Religious groups had already preached out to the general public that the Ebola was actually the cause of God being angry with Liberia. and then he was actually going to punish Liberia because Liberia was accepting gay people. And then people started to use people in the community to point out people who were LGBTQr so they could use that means of calling on the Ebola team to come and collect you. And, you know yourself, you do not have Ebola. If the team comes and it starts to spray you with some chemical and all of that making you to lost your breath and all of that. So those are the ways how they were getting people. So basically the Ebola virus actually took away the life of two of our friends who were actually Muslims. And their parents and family who we knew intentionally took them to the quarantine center because of their gender identity and sexual preferences. They did not have Ebola because I was friends with these people, they were around me. So if they had contracted Ebola, automatically I would have had Ebola. So basically, it was frustrating because they did not get to come back and we did not get to see them and bid them farewell.

Zoe Young Life as an international organization does not permit people outside of a monogamous, heterosexual partnership to lead in hired roles. The organization is currently in the middle of a social media storm under the hashtag #DoBetterYoungLife. I asked Imam Kabbah to weigh in, and he wasn't affirming either. But here's what he had to say about the Ebola outbreak. Do you think that Ebola was a punishment from God on the country?

Kabbah -For me personally, I think it's an epidemic. It's something that can come over after every four or five years. Obviously, sickness can come, drought can come. You know, the flood can take place quickly and it can destroy people. So we believe that in the Koran. But for me I can say it's not punishment, it's an epidemic, it happens. Even today we're talking about Covid-19, I believe, after this another may come. Because it's an epidemic. It can happen.

Zoe On 9 May 2015, the World Health Organization declared Liberia the first of the West African countries to be Ebola free. There was widespread celebration: singing, dancing, and worship. But a few cases continued, and Liberia is still recovering from the collective trauma of the Ebola Crisis. Now, with COVID-19, the work continues.

Adolphus Well, I see Liberians as a resilient bunch of people. Going through 14 years of civil crisis where everything was helter skelter, we lost over 250,000 lives. A lot of people, a lot of people were displaced. The people managed to survive. Even after the Ebola, Liberians decided to just pick up where they left off and move on. That's why I still find myself working in my country and not being anywhere else, and helping my people because I have faith in this country. And I know that. Gradually, things will get better and Liberia will be back on its feet again.

Audio Credits

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