

December 9, 2020

RE: Temporary suspension of Jummah and any in person religious gatherings at ICOI

Assalamu alaykum,

May this letter find all of you in a state of iman and good health.

We are writing as concerned physicians of the local Muslim community in Orange County and worshippers at the Islamic Center of Irvine.

We appreciate the thoughtful approach to reopening of outdoor Jummah prayers and understand this has been undertaken with careful planning. It has been reasonable, with appropriate precautions, to conduct outdoor Jummah services during the pandemic if local community transmission rates and hospitalizations remain low.

However, as you are probably aware, there has been a sharp and significant increase in the number of statewide cases of COVID 19 in the last several weeks. Moreover, several of us with local office practices, as well as those of us working in Orange County hospitals, have seen an alarming increase in COVID 19 cases, many of whom are gravely ill.

Specifically, we feel that the following recent developments now call for suspension of Jummah:

- 1) Orange County, and all of Southern California, are experiencing a surge that is far surpassing the cases seen in July, during our last surge.
- 2) There is an immediate threat to the healthcare system's ability to handle the latest surge with several local ICUs at less than 15% available beds. The number of patients on ventilators and flooding the Emergency Rooms is rising steeply with no end in sight.
- 3) In Orange County, we have had a 379% increase in hospitalizations since Nov 1 and the number of people in the ICU has far eclipsed the numbers we saw in July.
- 4) In Kaiser Permanente Orange County, we estimated that 1 in 300 of our members was infected with COVID this past weekend. As of last night, this estimate is down to 1 in 150 members infected, and we know for sure this number is even higher.
- 5) Suspension of all gatherings of those not living in the same household will be more in alignment with the Emergency Stay at Home Order issued on December 6.

We understand that the recent Supreme Court ruling and current OC Public Health Department guidelines allow for religious gatherings outdoors. However, just taking the Kaiser Permanente data for Orange County, it is reasonable to assume that even with a gathering of only 100-150 worshippers, at least one if not more individuals will be infected with COVID and either be in the pre-symptomatic phase, have asymptomatic infection, or have very mild symptoms and still come to prayer.

In this setting, we believe that the potential risks for disease transmission, even if outdoors, do not justify the benefit. There are promising vaccines in the pipeline and may start to be administered in the next couple weeks to high risk individuals. The actions we take now as a community can insha'Allah prevent catastrophic illness and save lives until the vaccines become more widely available.

While we too share a desire to perform prayers in congregation, we feel the best course would be to postpone all daily congregational and Jummah prayers (even if outdoors), out of an abundance of caution. This can certainly be re-evaluated when community transmission rates and hospitalizations decrease.

Despite the inconvenience and disappointment the community may feel, we feel compelled to urge the Board to place the health and well-being of the community before all other considerations.

Thank you for your consideration. Jazak Allahu Khayran.

Sincerely,

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Shadia Ahmed, M.D.

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