

The Confronts of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Church in Nigeria

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Corresponding Author: Jando FS : Received: 26/7/2022 | Accepted: 28/7/2022 |

Published: 30/7/2022

Abstract: *Corona virus pandemic has impacted so much challenges around the world. It has not spared any strata of the social and religious sphere in Nigeria. The situation has greatly affected the activities of the Church and pastoral work. The severity of the pandemic left much dread and nervousness. As a result, desperate measures were taken to curb the virus. In response to the lockdown, most Churches in Nigeria adopted other ways of preaching the gospel. The paper employed phenomenological method while data is sourced through primary and secondary fonts. The findings reveal that most of the Churches adapted home services, house fellowships and media in order to reach their targeted audience. The paper recommends that COVID-19 should never keep them away from God but to exercise more faith in him than preventive protocols.*

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Church, Nigeria

Publish by IJAH 2022.

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus pandemic otherwise known as COVID-19 emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei province of China. In just three months, the virus was able to cut across the whole world, prompting the World Health Organisation (WHO) to declare it a threat to world health (Madubuk, *et.al*, 2020). Virtually no area of human life has been spared by the challenges posed by the deadly virus. The pandemic brought about multi-dimensional disruption of every facet of the society. Covid-19 also affects people of all ages, thus greater severity and mortality is recorded among the aged people. Particularly those with other immune – compromising diseases (Lai *et. al*, 2020). It is on record that patients suffering from severe acute respiratory distress syndrome were often needed to be isolated and placed under a ventilator. There is likelihood of survival but its slim, if such patients have underlying health issues (Ruan, 2019).

The transmission of the virus is through human interaction and contaminated finites. Travellers from other countries with reported cases have aided the virus to spread rapidly like wild fire throughout the globe. For the fact that coronavirus spread at a fast rate, individuals on vulnerable health care and poor socio-economic background are mostly at risk (Madubulk, *et al.*, 2020). Besides, when Nigeria as a nation started recording cases of coronavirus, President Muhammdu Buhari

ordered the immediate restrictions to the movement of citizens in some states within the country were those cases were found but later on, the lockdown affected the whole country. The airport too was later closed to cut all the increase spread of the COVID-19 virus.

In response to the Lockdown, various leaders largely supported it. Both the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) supported the government's decision. These groups also worked with the local and state government in disseminating accurate information and encouraging compliance to the lockdown as well. It is expected that these religious group will stand their ground and pray for the healing of the nation, but no, they rather closed down their worship centres (Campbell and McCasun, 2020). The massive lockdown weighs heavily on the people especially the poor, both spiritually and materially. They had no access to church where they can receive spiritual encouragement. These group of people are also part of informal economy and thus dependent on face to face contact. For most of them, a day without work means a day without food (A. Binga, Personal Communication, March 3, 2020).

Virtually, no area of human life, have been spared by the challenges posed by the deadly virus. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about multi-dimensional disruption

of every facet of the society. From economic, politics, education, health care, national and international travels, from social gatherings through sporting/recreational activities down to religious life. Everything was on a stand still.

To support the above view, Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020) avers that:

The COVID-19 pandemic has an extremely significant impact on the functionality of societies, as well as many sectors of economic life. It is very difficult to forecast the directions and depth of necessary changes during the development of pandemic... The Coronavirus pandemic is developing very rapidly on a global scale. It is understandable that it has a very significant impact on the whole social life, including religious life. Religious practice which have by their very nature, a community dimension in almost all religions, in Christian denominations, as well, are also changing under the influence of pandemic (1-2).

Similarly, it was observed that many churches and public places were closed down in Nigeria as a result of the devastating effect of the pandemic. This seriously affected the activities of the church and pastors were rendered helpless. In response to the lockdown and its negative effects, most pastors adopted other means of performing their pastoral work. This paper seeks to investigate the challenges as well as the responses of the church in Nigeria to the Coronavirus. To do this, the paper proceeds from preliminary on COVID-19 and its impact on the church to the discourse on the response of the church to the pandemic during the lockdown and the post lockdown era.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and its Impact on the Church in Nigeria

Coronavirus also referred to as COVID-19 is an infectious disease which is spread by getting in contact with a contaminated air space, COVID-19 is caused by a new virus that had never been previously identified in humans. It causes respiratory "illness such as fly with symptoms like dry cough, fever, sore throat, dyspnoea, body pain, and diarrhoea (Adrhikari et al, 2020). Coronavirus immersed in late December 2019 in Wuhan, in Hubei province of China. In just three months the virus spread all over the world. This prompted the World Health Organisation (WHO) to declare coronavirus a threat to world health (Gbergal, I. & Bulai, M., 2020). The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS – COV-2), the causative agent of the coronavirus disease -2019 belong to a large family of virus. Joseph and Joseph (2020) says that COVID-19 is "an infectious disease caused by severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2(SARS COV2)".

SAR-COV 2 is a novel coronavirus but shares some communalities with other family of coronaviruses such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The fatality level of SAR-COV2 is currently at 2% and it is lower than

that of MERS (37%) and SARS (19%). The coverage of SAR- COV2 is thus higher than previously reported coronavirus. The total number of confirmed cases as of 14th April 2020 was 1,197,8769 and deaths cases that were reported stands at 125,196 in 213 countries (WHO, 2020). Aside from that the mortality rate varies from country to country but the exact reason for the variation is not certain (Baud, *et al*, 2020). In whatever way, the high mortality rate is based on age, the aged are more vulnerable in most countries. In other words, coronavirus affects everybody but greater severity and death occur mostly among the aged that are already suffering from other comorbidities like hypertension, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and other immune compromising disease (Lai *et al*, 2020). Observation shows that the virus seems to affects men more than woman. On the other hand, children tend to exhibit milder symptoms of coronavirus. Although, there is no clear evidence to show why it is so (Okayay *et al*, 2020).

The severe form of coronavirus comes in three stages, from viral to pulmonary and final hyper-inflammatory phase. The last stage usually leads to severe acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), impaired cardiac function and death. Patients suffering from severe form of coronavirus normally need to be intubated and placed under a ventilation. People from 60 years of age has 95% chance in the absence of comorbid conditions, however, if the patient has some underlying health challenges then the chance decreases (Ruan *et al*, 2020).

The coronavirus spread primarily through contact with an infected person either coughs or sneezes openly. Also, when an individual touches a surface or object which is affected and touches the nose, eyes or mouth, the person will contact the virus too. Experts are trying to figure out a permanent cure but as for now there is no standard vaccine or cure yet, therefore, its prevention is strongly recommended. In addition to that during the peak of COVID-19 World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended some preventive measures, against COVID-19 which includes general isolation, self isolation, frequent hand-washing for at least 20 seconds; with soap and running water or alcohol based hand sanitizer should be used. Also, nose and mouth should be covered with face mask, dissolvable tissues or elbow when coughing or sneezing to avoid touching of nose and mouth with dirty hands. Apart from that people are to avoid close physical contact (1 meter or 3feet) also referred to as social distancing (WHO, 2020).

Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) also issued practical consideration and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19. The reason for this is that WHO acknowledges the special role of religious leaders in the Coronavirus' education and preparedness through:

- Sharing evidence-based information about COVID-19

- Avoiding large group gathering and conducting rituals and faith related activities remotely/virtually as required and whenever possible
- To ensure that accurate information is shared with communities; counter and address misinformation
- Addressing stigma, violence, and the incitement of hate
- To ensure safe faith-based gatherings, ceremonies and rituals when they do accrue
- Strengthening mental and spiritual health, well-being and resilience, through individual contact (while observing the appropriate physical distancing) and through other social communications media
- And of course, to ensure that human-rights based approach to advocacy, message and service delivery is systematically upheld. The above is the purpose of the guidance and not to watch hunt anyone but to protect people from falling victim of the pandemic. According to the recommendations, church leaders were to always educate and encourage members about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from the above, religious leaders in this case, church leaders also have the responsibility of making sure that members are protected from the pandemic. In order to maintain a safe distance or physical distancing, Terwase Aver in (Personal Communication 10/3/21) says that most pastors and church leaders discouraged physical gatherings and rather the organization of virtual gatherings through live-streaming, television, radio, social media and so on. They follow the recommendation which states that any planned gathering should be done outside, if it is not possible then the organizers should make sure the venue is fully ventilated or it has adequate ventilation. According to WHO (2020), members should ensure to follow self-distancing protocols at all times whether entering or departing. Church leaders also considered multiple services with few attendances. And participants of the faith in services should be at least 1m (3 feet) apart, if possible there should be a fixed seating sign to maintain distance. There should also be an isolation room for the sick.

Touching of People and Sacred Objects during Worship

Many churches in Nigeria involve physical contact during worship, as members are allowed to hugs or shake hands with others. However, it is not safe now as respiratory droplets from contaminated persons could be easily spread, contacting COVID-19 can settle on somebody's hands and can be transferred to another person through contact. So Christian leaders should find a way of avoiding physical contact during service (WHO 2020). Most churches in Nigeria has adopted new ways of greeting as follows:
Handshakes, hugs and kisses are replaced with a bow,

peace sign or using sign language while maintaining physical distance. Sometimes greeting is in a form of smiles rather than handshake. Like the Catholic church who share a sign of peace during mass with a hug or handshake are replaced with:

- A response and eye contact "peace of the Lord be with you, while staying in a safe distance place
- People no longer touch status but rather bow before it
- The containers of holy water have been emptied to avoid dipping of fingers into the common bowl (WHO 2020).

Besides, WHO encourage health hygiene among participants in faith services and other activities when gatherings are permitted should do the following:

- a. The church should provide hand-washing facilities for the congregation before and after the mass or service; or feet washing bowls where worshippers enter barefoot; or alcohol-based hand-rub at the entrance and within the church. For instance, before going for holy communion in the Catholic church, people should rub the hand sanitizer.
- b. They should keep disposable tissues within easy reach and closed bin for quick disposition of dirt.
- c. Worshippers should bring their own prayer rugs to place on the carpet for daily prayers.
- d. There should be a visual display of advice on physical distancing, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- e. Members should avoid attending masses or services if they have any symptoms of COVID-19 or if they happen to have travelled recently to an area that is affected with the pandemic
- f. Worship centers should establish routine cleaning with disinfectant of worship space and other building where people gather, to remove any virus from the surfaces. It should be done before and immediately after all the gatherings
- g. Objects like doors, knobs, light switches and stair railing should be frequently cleansed with disinfectant.

Apart from the above, Abuludu, F.O and Abuludu I.O says that both the state and federal government, announced during the lockdown that no religious activities or gathering above twenty members are allowed and each gathering must comply with COVID-19 rules. Few complied but the rest of them that went against the rule were sanctioned, arrested and duly punished by the task force set to monitor religious activities. Thus it became so difficult for some churches to meet up the rules and therefore close down their churches for a while, depending when the lockdown will be lifted. During the waiting period, church leaders had no idea of when the churches will be reopening for all members. Therefore, they sought for alternative ways of reaching out to the people with the gospel as well as the much needed message of hope in the face of adversities.

The Response of the Church to the Covid-19 and its Challenges

The surge of COVID-19 pandemic according to Philips, H. (2020) was received with mixed feeling by the Nigerian church. Some argued that the virus was as a result of sinful nature of mankind and a harvest of our sinfulness. For example, the 2019 biggest gay parade in Italy was seen as the reason why the country was the worst hit at a time. Other people subscribed to the scientific dimension that was originated from Wuhan in China. Regardless of the two positions, the church believed that prayer and repentance should be sought for God's intervention. Not only were they mainstreams, the Roman Catholic and protestant churches were willing to conceive God's hand in COVID-19 but both agreed unlike in 1918, to re-emphasize the social gospel which they implemented during the lockdown.

Similarly, Oga, A. points out that most churches in the country and Benue state in particular cancel their services and other gatherings for some months in the peak of the pandemic. But in order to maintain connection with their members, they resolve to high and low technological means. Some of them are as follows:

WhatsApp Group: some church leaders created WhatsApp group chat where they communicate with their members daily. Sermon messages were sent to members and prayers are offered through this channel too. Individuals who have problems and needs counselling also reach them through WhatsApp chat. Some churches used as many groups that can contain their congregation. For instance, House of Mercy Church had four WhatsApp groups, one for women, youths, men and non-English speaking people.

Facebook: It is another social media platform that was used by so many people. Here they meet individuals that are not even members of your church but need to hear the word of God in their lives. Through this way many are saved. Other ways of pastoral ministry during Covid-19 pandemic were:

Video or Audio-tape of Worship, Services and Ceremonies are posted on the social media. Some conducted individual pastoral and care visits by phone or through social media and video chat platforms. While other churches were using virtual meeting platforms or teleconference facilities for meetings or small groups interactive prayers.

Apart from the above, Wobodo (2020) opinions that religious institutions particularly the church in Nigeria were using television and the radio for the propagation of the gospel. Before the upsurge of the Coronavirus.

However, the use of Information Communication Technology was intensified during the lockdown for the purpose of evangelism, outreach, activities and programmes. Wobodo also says that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) aimed an upsurge of COVID-19 directed churches in Nigeria to conduct

services online. The ministers of the gospel responded quickly to the directives and turn to the use of media for their teaching and activities across the country. The outlets of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have a phenomenological influence on the fight against Coronavirus across the globe in the dissemination of information about its crunch and havoc to almost all human sectors. The church like other sectors have responded to the fight against Coronavirus through the use of ICT devices and applications.

Dzawua, S.D. (Personal Communication 10/4/21) asserts that the Pentecostal denomination's response to the prevailing realities that has come to play with the Coronavirus now have setups such as televisions production where they have Sunday service online. Others are database portals, web portals, web servers and wireless networks. They also use telephone, zoom, YouTube media channels of the church through which they stream their programmes and services live to their social media followers and WhatsApp group chat. They also share materials ranging from resources in their archives, sermons, bible studies, soul lifting music, prophetic declarations of their leaders, daily devotions, to counselling prayers and testimonies of God faithfulness to be downloaded by members. Dzawua further says that Pentecostal uses text messages (SMS), telegram messenger, Email, recorded messages and songs, multiple number of service per Sunday and online prayer sessions. All of the above were done in order to meet the spiritual needs of the people in the face of the uncertainties and difficulties that came with the Coronavirus. The truth is that many people turn to God for solution during hard times. Even those who are not in the habit of going to church before, usually turn to God for help in the face of the pandemic and the various ICT outlet becomes helpful and handy as well. Also, believers are strengthened and backsliders are restored to God in the process too.

Kegh J.M (Personal communication 12/3/2021) says, through the social media and ICT infrastructures, prayer meeting as well as night vigils were held, seminars and conferences and live transition of messages form pastors to members to the comfort of their homes, musical concerts too are not left behind but were also held to strengthen the faith of believers. For instance, Worship Without Wall 2020 concert by Sabbath Embassy of Christ (internet church) had twelve (12) hours straight internet concert with fifty (50) gospel artists from Pentecostal circles was held on May 31st. Pastor Ope Banwo one of the organizers points out that the concert is to demonstrate the unstoppable Worship of the king of kings regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also shows that the pandemic has only shutdown the various places of worship but not Christian's mouths, so believers can still praise God using other means.

Apart from the above, other mainline churches too engaged in the use of information technology to spread

the Good News of Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind. In agreement with the above, Wobodo (2020) points out that:

Church ministers nowadays have evolved to brand and that it was made possible through science and technology via internet technology (Facebook, Twitter, Google, Plus, Skype, Email, Yahoo, Google mail), Websites, Blogs, Instant message (Blackberry messenger; WhatsApp) among other ICT platforms are used by churches in Nigeria. ICT devices and applications are used in areas of church administration and management, mission, evangelism, prayer, music, discipleship, security, welfare, ecumenism, dialogue, worship, education, sermon etc. for example, ICT platforms have made Christian music available to people around the world despite space and time.

The Challenges of Ministering during the Lockdown

Besides, the difficulties in ministering the word of God to the scattered congregation, (Bam, V. Personal Communication, 12/3/ 2020) opines that it was hard to forestall the financial lapses caused by the lockdown and restriction of movement. However, some religious leaders came up with methods of collecting tithes and offering. Many pastors and clerics encouraged their members to send in the tithes and offerings through mobile money networks. This became necessary because the Lord said in Malachi 3:10-11 that:

Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and try now in this, "says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fall to bear fruit for you in the field, says the Lord of host.

As the above verses said, tithes and offerings are meant for ministers who are working in the house of God the Lord said, bring your tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Then it was food items but now it is money which is used for their (ministers) needs. Therefore, it should not be ignored at any time.

Isiko, A.P. (2020) observes that the demand for offerings and tithes was well crafted by all denominations that this occupied debate in the religious space during the initial response to the pandemic. However, others gave out their bank accounts and created online applications for the payment of tithes and offerings through bank transfer. While some ministers advised that members should pass by the church individually and pay their tithes and offerings.

Also, as successful and acceptable as the ways of pastoral ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Nigerian church, as part of her response to the lockdown and restriction of movement and religious gathering may

seem; it must be noted that not all members of the church have smart phones and cable televisions in order to follow the new normal. Besides, the cost of data and the absence of constant power supply have been seen to have limited the coverage of the churches and the ability to reach the people. Similarly, the village churches according to Isiko (2020) could not afford opportunities to conduct online service due to lack of access to technology, internet, and power supply. They did not neither afford the opportunity to hold services and activities on television and radio stations due to lack of financial resources to pay for the telecast time or to buy airtime. Thus, the village churches and even urban small churches adopted the practice of House Service/Fellowship involving few people in different homes. And in case of large family, only members of the family are involved.

Another challenge was that of law enforcement of social distancing. There were cases of attacks resulting into death of people in the hands of law enforcers. It was reported by a Nigerian television station on April 7, 2020 that six persons were killed in Kaduna State by suspected law enforcement agents. There was also a similar case in Delta state where there was an altercation between the natives and soldiers resulting to death of one of the natives. Also, there were instance of defaulting, defence and violence which brings to mind some questions whether the lockdown was for protection or for destruction or whether it is serving its purpose at all. The harsh socio-economic situation in the country may have contributed to the unrest and resistance of some people (Supplement article 2020).

Despite the lockdown, the commercial activities at a neighbourhood market in Kaduna persisted. In attempt to enforce the stay at home order at one of the markets, it resulted into the killing of four youth by law enforcement agents. Last but not the least is the effect on religious activities generally, throughout the nation, religious activities were greatly affected. Most of the worship centres were turned into ghost centres as they were shut down. The government at both the federal and state level made announcements during the lockdown that no religious activities or gathering above twenty members are allowed and each gathering must comply with the use of face mask, washing of hands with soap and water and use of sanitizer. Some churches and mosques complied but those who went against the law were sanctioned, arrested and duly punished by the task force which was set-up to monitor religious activities in each state. For instance, three Imams in Bornu state disregarded the law and continued with their Friday mosque service. They were arrested and sanctioned duly. In Lagos state, it was reported that a pastor and his four members were arrested for violation of the Covid-19 rules too (Dominic 2020). Consequently, ministry work was generally expensive and all the churches could afford to feature on air.

CONCLUSION

Foregoing, attempts have been made to account for the response of the Nigerian church in the face of the dreaded Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The paper looks at the rules and regulations to be followed by religious leader in the hit of the pandemic. It proceeds to the various methods used by ministers to preach the word of God in the face of Coronavirus. This led to the use of information communication and technology and the use of social media to carry out church programmes. It was at this point that the concept of church online gained prominence more than ever in Nigeria. While this was largely successful in the urban areas, the paper also argued that village churches were unable to have access to information communication and technology or internet facilities to enjoy service online. The paper finally discussed the challenges encountered by Christians generally during the lockdown which makes preaching and evangelization difficult.

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