

IMPACT OF THE 2019-20 CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC ON THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) that started out as an epidemic in Wuhan, China in December 2019 has become a pandemic, affecting the whole world. The first confirmed case of the disease in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the viral infection. Since then, Nigeria has witnessed the spread of this disease across the different states of the country. The pandemic has impacted both global and local economies in several ways along with other implications. In Nigeria the disease has impacted areas such as economy, health, social, religion, and others. This paper using critical analysis of observations of events within the church in Nigeria and other publications from written and online sources, examines the effects of COVID-19 on the Christians and their churches in Nigeria. It argues that the pandemic has impact on the church. It highlights the negative and positive impact of the pandemic on the church. The negative impacts include loss of human lives, church closure, trauma, and decline in church finance. The positive impacts include survival strategies, promotion of unity, enhanced church/government co-operation, and spiritual revival. The paper recommends that the church should innovate ways for survival such as virtual services, collection of church funds through modern banking transactions. These strategies will help the church during the COVID-19 infection period and beyond.

Key words: Impact, Coronavirus, Church, Christianity, Pandemic, Fellowship

Introduction

Today, Coronavirus (COVID-19) has become a pandemic affecting the whole world. When the novel Coronavirus started in the Chinese port city, Wuhan in December 2019, many never saw a virus with the power to disrupt the global economy and health. The disease was seen as a local Chinese problem probably restricted to Wuhan. However, the disease within a short period has spread almost all over countries of the world. For example the disease has been confirmed in 188 countries with more than 4.8 million confirmed cases, and more than 300,000 people who have lost their lives (BBC News, 2020). All the 56 countries in Africa have reported confirmed cases of coronavirus infection (WHO, African Region, 2020). The first confirmed case of the pandemic in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus, (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), 2020).

As at May 21, 2020, Coronavirus disease has spread to 34 states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) with 7,016 confirmed cases, 4,898 active cases, 1,907 recovered and discharged cases, and 211 deaths (NCDC, 2020). This pandemic has impact on Nigeria in several ways. The areas of impact include economy, social, health, education, religious, and others. Some scholars such as Lateef O. Akanni and Samuel C. Gabriel (2020), Justice Nwafor (2020), and Ruth Olurounbi (2020), have written on the socioeconomic impact and other related effects of corona virus in Nigeria. However, the effect of this pandemic on the church is yet to be fully probed. This paper examines the impact of this infection on the Christians and their churches in Nigeria. This is done in three parts. The first part analyses the negative effects of the pandemic. The second part interrogates the positive or constructive response of the Christians to the pandemic. The paper ends with a conclusion.

Negative effects

The pandemic has negatively impacted the church in Nigeria in some ways. However, four of the effects are examined. They include loss of human lives, psychological impact, closure of churches and church finance. These are discussed in details below.

Loss of human lives

The outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria has resulted to the death of about 211 people as at May 21, 2020 (NCDC). This is not the first time lives are lost to a disease of this nature. Ohadike D. C (1991) reported that the global total death recorded during the 1918-19 Influenza pandemic was about 21 million people within a 12-month period. The total death for Nigeria due to the disease was about 500,000 people, out of a population of 18 million, who died in less than 6 months. Although the NCDC report on the COVID-19 does not provide information on the religious affiliations of the 211 dead people, there is no doubt some of them are Christians as well as people of other faiths. Before this pandemic is brought under control, many more lives are likely to be lost. Death can be devastating. It is painful, and may bring hurt; anger, depression, and sadness to people that have lost their loved ones as well as the church family. This is because the church family has to accept the reality that it is never going to see their dead members again.

Trauma

The psychological impact of the pandemic can never be underestimated. As at May 21, 2020, the 40,043 people that had to be tested, isolated, and 6,401 admitted for treatment experienced psychological trauma. Church members in Nigeria have been socially isolated and have experienced dramatic and rapid losses in their lives, all while having little preparation for a crisis of this magnitude. Michael J. Salas (2020) has noted that the rapid shift people have to make from a "normal life" to extreme uncertainty a few days and weeks gave a little time to adjust to changes that were coming. The trauma and lack of social support and services are harmful to people and may have lasting effects on their physical and mental health. In addition, other losses in terms of businesses and redundancies make many individuals and families to become destitute through the material and economic devastation of the pandemic therefore increasing stress. In others, the stress from the pandemic may manifest in various forms such as increase anxiety, sleep disturbances, and nightmares.

Closure of Churches/Suspension of Church Gatherings

One of the major steps taken by the government to slow down the spread of corona virus was the suspension of all forms of religious gatherings. Surely closing churches will help limit social interaction and thus reduce the number of transmissions. Many churches have suspended their major and weekly activities, including Sunday services, which usually attract thousands of worshippers. This is not the first time church services are suspended in Nigeria. Sam Adeyemi, the senior pastor of the Daystar Christian Centre, says churches, mosques, schools and markets were shut in Nigeria during the influenza pandemic which hit the world in 1918 (Mayowa, 2020).

Although Lagos State government was the first to suspend religious gatherings, it has become a national action. Several Christian denomination leaders issued instructions to their members to abide by government's instruction. For example, Pastors Paul and Ifeanyi Adefarasin of House on the Rock Church, Pastor William Kumuyi, Leader of Deeper Life Bible Church and other Church leaders issued statements stopping church services (Chris, 2020). Similarly, Samson Ayokunle, leader of the Nigerian Baptist Convention and the President Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), instructed all Baptists as well as Christians in Nigeria to abide by government directives. Every state in Nigeria has issued guidelines or orders limiting social interaction. But these rules do not always apply evenly when it comes to in-person worship services and other religious gatherings. For example, while Lagos state gave opportunity for 50 worshippers in a service, Nasarawa state gave room for 20 worshippers. In some places such as Lagos and Abuja it took not only threats, but force and arrests of some pastors and church leaders for the message to get across.

While there are good reasons for closing churches, and that we should follow government guidelines, we also need to be aware of the potential consequences. The suspension of in-person church services has denied several Christians the opportunity of congregational fellowship with other church members. We need to consider carefully the cost of closing churches. Not the financial cost, but rather the psychological, emotional and spiritual costs to people. There are many people for whom the weekly gatherings of the Lord's people are a real strength and community to them. These fellowship meetings provide support for those who are lonely and isolated. The gatherings give the word of God and hope to the people (David Robertson, 2020).

From biblical perspective, the term church or 'ecclesia' means 'gathered assembly'. This connotes that Christianity involves the gathering of people. Where there is no gathering, there is no church. Physical people gather to fellowship, observe the sacraments, pray together, worship, sing and dance together. When meetings do not hold, then we may not say the church exists (Robertson, 2020). The interaction that we have with one another when we fellowship at church services helps us to develop the fruit of God's Spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Paul shows that the church is truly Christ's body, and like the human body, each part depends upon the other parts.

Furthermore, if the pandemic persists for a longer period, some Christians may not see again the relevance of congregational worship. Some may even scale back their attendance of Church services because of the Coronavirus – in many cases, presumably because churches and other houses of worship have cancelled services. But this does not mean they have disengaged from collective worship entirely. They would have become familiar with watching

religious services online or on television instead of attending in person. Therefore, these regular worshippers would have *replaced personal* attendance with virtual worship. However, we argue that when the pandemic is over, regular congregational services will resume. This is because Nigerians, and indeed Africans generally like to congregate. Again, the church may not be the same as it used to be after the Corona pandemic. Some churches may witness a big reduction in their membership as many members might just want to continue worshipping God from homes.

Church Finances

Coronavirus pandemic has implications for reduced financial giving through tithes and offering for the churches. In a research done by the authors on giving in 20 churches of different denominations in Keffi, Nasarawa for the months of March and April 2020, all the churches reported decline of about 50 per cent of their average weekly collection prior to the period of the coronavirus pandemic. Researches also done in the United States of America on giving in churches showed that there was significant decline in giving when the pandemic started (Jessica Mouser (2020) Adelle M. Banks (2020), Michelle Boorstein (2020), Meagan Clark and Liza Vandenboom 2020).

Several factors are responsible for this poor giving. One of the reasons is that some of the church members who are artisans, taxi drivers, work daily to get money are not able to work due to lockdown that has affected economic activities. For example, some commercial tricycle riders interviewed on their giving to churches since the start of the pandemic reported that they have not given anything to the church. Their inability to give was because they were not working. Therefore, such categories of members do not have any money to give to the church. Another factor identified by a pastor was that most of his church members, especially the older generation, and the less educated or illiterate were more comfortable in giving cash as offering during in-person church services. Only the younger people use modern banking facilities. Therefore, because congregational services do not hold, the opportunity of giving is affected negatively. In addition, only well-educated as well as young church members who have embraced modern banking technologies are able to make their contributions to the churches without any difficulties. Furthermore, congregational church services in Nigeria have certain programmes targeted at generating money. Such programmes include monthly birthday thanksgivings, marriage thanksgiving, child dedication, and other special events. The cessation of church services automatically stops these programmes thereby blocking church income from these sources.

Reduced giving to churches has implication for the smooth running of its ministries. One of the pastors of a Baptist church in Keffi, Nasarawa State, interviewed about his church finances for the months of March and April 2020, reported that it “has been difficult and we have been unable to pay the salaries for church workers as well as make contributions to other sister denominational bodies that we belong to.” The implication is that these other bodies referred to, are also affected. Poor church finances have affected some churches and church related organisations. For example, the Conference President of Benue-Nasarawa Baptist Conference (a third Baptist denominational of organisation), reported that they have not been able to pay their workers' salaries since February, 2020. He attributed the reasons to the failure of many churches in the conference to send money to the office due to the Coronavirus crisis. One pastor also stated that since the pandemic started, the church building project has been

affected. The work was stopped in the month of March 2020 due to lack of funds. There is no doubt, inadequate funding will affect different aspects of church ministries and activities.

Positive Impact

The positive impact of the pandemic discussed in this section is in the context of unintended outcomes of the disease. This does not in any way justify the occurrence of infection for the benefits it brings. Rather, this is understood in the Christian context of the Bible verse of Romans 8:28 which states that: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (New International Version).” Some of these positive impacts include survival strategies and innovations brought into church life, determination and commitment, co-operation and support to government among others.

Survival Strategies

Jenkins (2008), opines that faiths are dynamic, and periods of difficulty or persecution can have the effect of forcing believers to evolve some ideas and practices that enable them to adapt and survive even in the new world that they have found themselves in. This we can say is the situation that applies to the Christians in Nigeria in relation to the novel corona virus pandemic. Some of the coping methods adopted include modifications of church services and other activities, ways of giving, and others.

In response to governments at different levels banning church services, different church denominations and groups adopted different models of worship services. For example the Nigerian Baptist Convention instructed its churches to meet in house fellowships/cells or units. In a letter dated March 19, 2020, Samson Ayokunle, the leader of the Baptists issued advised all churches of the convention that: “All services and gatherings at church base should be in small cell groups not more than 40 in number or as decided by the state government”. A prominent leader, Pastor Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) also advised his churches to adopt house cell method. Adeboye held a service on Sunday 22 March, but it was a congregation of less than 20 in compliance with a Lagos State directive (**Tofe, 2020**). The house cells and fellowships fixed their meetings as agreed by the members of the groups. These meetings usually held in private residences. The reversal to house fellowship meetings, although robbed members of the fellowship of a larger congregation, brought members closer together as in the early church in Acts of the Apostles.

Apart from the use of house cells, some churches have adopted online services. For example, Sam Adeyemi, the senior pastor of Daystar Church, is holding online services. Various other churches are doing the same across the country (Toye, 2020). Samson Ayokunle of the Nigerian Baptist Convention advised his pastors to preach and disseminate information online to members and use Skype or any other online service provider to conduct services like naming or any similar functions. A number of Nigerian churches today use some of the modern technologies to minister to their members virtually. Although these are good alternative innovations, the older people and the not well educated people are not able to handle such technologies. In addition, the use of online services may only be suitable for churches in urban centres. Michelle Boorstein (2020), argues that the virus may speed up a cruel evolution — the end of congregations that have not embraced technology for functions such as streaming

services, paying bills and using cloud computing. That includes congregations with members who can't afford devices or connectivity.

In order not to starve churches of funds, deliberate steps have been taken by some denominations to ensure that churches make their contributions. The leader of the Baptist denomination advised that members should be faithful in their giving. Such offerings and donations should be done through the small groups and sent to the appropriate persons handling church funds. Some churches had to encourage members to embrace online banking, which may pose a problem to older people. Nigerian churches everywhere now know that they must use multiple avenues to reach their communities, and not just large corporate gatherings. In today's world any model can fail overnight. Even now, if the Internet was to shut down (and it could), the online ministries would end immediately.

Promotion of Christian Unity

The issue of denominationalism among Christians is very strong in Nigeria. Christians in Nigeria have denominational divisions: however, all Christians see themselves as brothers and sisters. In 1976 the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was founded by the Christians in Nigeria to foster unity among the various denominations in the country. With this association the Christians are able to present a common front on issues that affect them in the country. Therefore, during this pandemic denominational differences were put aside while Christians jointly prayed together for the healing of the country and the world. As a matter of fact Samson Ayokunle, the CAN President sent out letters to Christians in the country to pray for God's intervention on the pandemic crisis. A number of Churches responded positively to his appeal. In addition, when churches started house fellowships, some people did not consider denomination as an issue. They joined the group meetings within their neighbourhood in spite of their denominational differences. For example, some house fellowships of a Baptist Church in Keffi, Nasarawa State reported that members of other denominations joined them in their meetings since they did not have their own denominational home churches within the community. Such interdenominational fellowships can contribute to strong Christian unity.

Enhancement Church/Government Cooperation

The church has been playing a great role in supporting the government in Nigeria, especially on issues relating to human wellbeing. This act of giving support is being played out since the outbreak of the deadly (COVID-19) pandemic in Nigeria (Uma and Abiaziem, 2020). Some churches have donated to government to ease the effect caused by the pandemic. Different types of contributions have been made by the churches. They range from the contributions of buildings, ambulances, equipments, consumables and food items. For example, The Catholic Bishop of Yola Diocese, Most Rev Stephen Mamza says the Catholic Church has made available 100 rooms in the Pastoral Centre in Yola, Adamawa State to be used by the government in its fight against COVID-19 (ADAMAWA Times, 2020). The Catholic Church in Nigeria pledged to make available all its 435 hospitals and clinics in Nigeria's dioceses and archdioceses along with other services that may be needed by the government (Peter, 2020). The presiding Bishop of the Upper Churches Worldwide, in Adamawa State, Bishop Peter Makanto, also donated a hundred-bed capacity hospital to the state government to be used as isolation centre for Coronavirus suspected cases in the state (FRCN, 2020).

In addition, the RCCG made a donation of 11 Intensive Care Units, ICU, beds fully fitted with ventilators in Lagos, Ogun and Plateau states to contribute to the improvement of healthcare facilities in Nigeria, which is now found to be very useful as the government works round the clock to curtail COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the church has donated some medical supplies to the Lagos State Government to support its efforts in equipping medical staff with necessary protective gears needed to contain the coronavirus pandemic. The items include 8,000 hand sanitizers, 8,000 surgical face masks and 200,000 hand gloves (Eyoboka, 2020).

Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners' Chapel International) equally made donations of ambulances, test kits, personal protective equipment (PPE) to the Lagos and Ogun State governments, to assist in the fight against the coronavirus (COVID-19) scourge in Nigeria. The church also donated medical resources and food items as part of its phased and continuous support to the Nigerian authorities in taming the COVID-19 pandemic and the biting effects of the lockdown on poor citizens of the country (Uma and Abiaziem, 2020). In addition, the Deeper Christian Life Ministry (DCLM), has donated food items which included hundreds of bags of rice in palliatives to the Lagos State Government. The Foursquare Gospel Church Nigeria also donated foodstuffs to the Lagos State Government to assist in providing palliatives to cushion the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown in the state. The donation, which included 500 bags of rice, packed in 5 kg bags and 200 cartons of noodles (Uma and Abiaziem, 2020). Several church groups have made contributions towards the coronavirus pandemic. These contributions have no doubt supplemented governments' fight against COVID-19.

Spiritual Development, Revival and Commitment

Despite the lingering uncertainty, COVID-19 pandemic offers us an opportunity for positive spiritual development as individuals as well as a community of believers and could even lead to the growth of the church (Solomon, 2020). With the closure of churches, the Christian congregations are determined to exist and function despite the challenges being faced. Getting through these testing times require a lot of 'spiritual innovation'. Amid this situation, Nigerian Christians were encouraged to stay back, pray from home, and using the prayer resources provided by their groups or denominations. For example, Samson Ayokunle, the leader of the Baptist denomination in Nigeria and the president CAN, in a letter to the Baptist churches in Nigeria advised them as follows; "Let all Baptist Churches join the rest of Christian Association of Nigeria to observe prayers against Coronavirus on Sunday 22 and 29, March" (Ayokunle, 2020). Different church groups organised prayers for the pandemic.

Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria ceased religious freedom but rekindled people's faith in God as they embarked on prayers. Human beings generally whether Christians or non-believers turn to prayers in a time of crisis (Sherwood, 2018). Often the pastors play a major role in conducting Church services. However, a call to pray from home transfers greater responsibility to non-ordained members. Praying from home will bring in a faithful realisation that all can have access to God through Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:18), and all have the priestly responsibility of interceding for other people to God (1 Peter 2:9). It will be a time for understanding that, similar to fellowships in physical Church buildings, family members praying together in their homes is also the real Church (Body of Christ) in a spiritual sense. The call to pray from home equally assures God's presence in line with what Jesus said in the

gospel of Matthew 18:20: 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'. Such a divine responsibility needs to be handled with faith. COVID-19 pushes us hard to rekindle our faith to see God's intervention in overpowering the disastrous effect of Coronavirus (Psalm 91) (Sherwood, 2018).

In other ways the Church is stronger and more resilient than many anticipated. Its ability to respond by the leading of the Holy Spirit is astounding. The true Church will not be diminished by crisis but empowered (Fred, 2020). Michelle Boorstein (2020) argues that some clergy see the virus as a divinely inspired challenge, a chance to refocus on the core of their faith, to purify, to pray in the quiet, to worry less about building funds and costly programming and to think more about getting out and helping the needy, about evangelising.

The pandemic has also brought about spiritual revival in peoples' lives. For example, during Holy Week this year, over 100,000 people came to faith in Christ thanks to a livestream event that was viewed by over 1.7 million people in homes around the world including Nigeria (Briggs, 2020). While other revivals in the past have been tied to a particular location, this overwhelming response is being called the "Great Quarantine Revival" and is not tied to any one place. There is an explosion of spiritual hunger across the Middle East and North Africa, Iran, Iraq and Turkey where people are seeking real hope and real answers by turning their lives to Jesus Christ (Rex, 2020).

Revivals and awakenings in the past have almost always occurred during times of great disruption and social upheaval. For example, Ayegboyin and Ishola (1997), opined that the rise of African indigenous churches in south western Nigeria as well Pentecostal revival is closely associated with the 1918-19 Influenza pandemic. It is possible that a revival would come out of this time of disruption and the church would emerge from it stronger.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the church in Nigeria both negatively and positively. One of the greatest negative effects is the shift of religious services to home fellowships/home cells, and gathering of persons to online worship. While many churches in Nigeria, especially the Pentecostal Mega churches and some mission churches in urban centres have used communication methods to reach their audiences, such as radio, television and online media, the cessation of congregational worship is one of the most significant sudden disruptions in the practice of Christianity in Nigerian history. The stoppage of in-person services has contributed to decline in church finance. The ultimate effect of this is that the church is put into financial difficulty of meeting the needs of its obligations. The pandemic has also brought about the loss of some members. These losses and the fear and anxiety of dealing with the pandemic have impacted members psychologically. In spite of these negative effects of the pandemic, the church has innovated ways of survival such as breaking into small groups and meeting in homes, holding of online virtual worship, encouraging online giving among others. The church supports the government in its efforts to curb the spread of the infection. The Nigerian Church is passing through a period of revival and will emerge stronger when the pandemic is over. To ensure its continuous survival, the church must adopt new strategies such as use of virtual services, house cells/fellowships, and encouraging church members to use modern banking technologies in giving money to the church.

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