

CHOIR REHEARSALS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MOUNTAIN OF FIRE AND MIRACLES MINISTRIES (MFM), LAGOS

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria is part of the worldwide pandemic of corona virus disease of 2019 (COVID-19). The pandemic was caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus². Based on the evolution of the pandemic in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, many lives had been claimed and many are still infected on daily basis. The first confirmed case in Nigeria was announced on 27th February, 2020 when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. On 9th of March, 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, by a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen.

Corona virus disease is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered corona virus. Most people infected by the virus experience respiratory illness and recover without any special treatment while others with underlying medical problems like cardio vascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease and cancer are likely to develop serious illness. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes (WHO, 2020). Common signs and symptoms of COVID-19 virus can include fever, cough and tiredness. Early symptoms may include a loss of taste or smell. Other symptoms can include shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing, muscle aches, chills, sore throat, runny nose, headache, chest pain, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea (Mayoclinic, 2020). The list of symptoms is not all inclusive as it ranges from very mild to severe. Some may have only a few symptoms and some may not even have the symptoms.

By a way to regulating the spread of the virus and also to ensure a healthy environment free of the virus, both the federal and state governments initiated various containment methods through the basic tool of preventive measures by individual and communities at large. On the 13th of June, 2020, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), developed guidelines for places of worship in Nigeria as the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 announced the relaxation of the previous ban placed on religious settings. There is no doubt that COVID-19 outbreaks have been linked to large gatherings, especially in places of religious worship. The following are the guidelines NCDC offers to reduce the risk of infection in churches. (NCDC, 2020).

- There should be no entry without face masks. All attendees and religious leaders must wear a face mask.
- People who are sick should not go to places of worship. There should be temperature screening on entry.
- Hand washing facilities and sanitizers should be provided at point of entries and strategic points.
- Attendance at religious settings should not exceed $\frac{1}{3}$ of sitting capacity.
- Religious centres should be clearly marked such that people sit and maintain two metres distance from each other.
- There should be no form of direct contact practices such as handshakes as peace signs are discouraged.
- Religious centres should be disinfected routinely, before and after worship.
- Limit or avoid the use of shared items. Such items include but not limited to Bible, hymn book, microphones etc.

The above guidelines pose some challenges to Christian worship and by extension the liturgy of the church. For example, music – vocal or instrumental is an essential component of Christian liturgy and it is largely human-based in execution. Music making in Christian worship is participatory by everyone even though the level of participation varies. The choir section of the church is responsible for providing music during worship services and at special occasions as the need arises. These group of singers meet from time to time to rehearsal songs under the direction of a choirmaster. Church choirs vary in size depending on the numerically strength of the church. One of the major difficulties that Covid-

COVID-19 present to music-making groups including church choirs is the restriction placed on large gatherings and the social distancing protocol. Choral music may be performed by a small or large group and it involves human interaction such like proximate positions by performers and sharing of music sheets among others. In order to comply with the COVID-19 protocols, many churches had to cut down the number of worshippers during their services and this affected the number of choristers that could participate in the services. Consequently, many church choirs had to scale down singers to accommodate social distancing regulations. Large choirs could not afford to have all the singers at the same time. Performance stage became scanty. Older members in the choir were restricted from attending choir rehearsals and choristers were mandated to use face masks.

Studies have suggested that singing activities could aid the spread of COVID-19 and that singing in large gatherings may be a “super spreader”. The news of a church choir with high rate of infection after a choir practice is in the public domain (See Hammer, 2021 for details). Since it is unsafe to sing in-person at close range, choir rehearsals as well as performance were greatly affected. During the lock down when religious and social spaces were shut down, many choirs took their music making activities to the virtual space. Virtual rehearsals and performances were rife during the lockdown. As the rate of infection reduces to reasonable number, the Nigerian government relaxed the restriction on gatherings thus allowing for physical music activities though with stipulated number of singers.

Since the pandemic broke out, there has been several scholarly investigations on its social, economic and psychological implications on the society. Extant literature on how the pandemic impacted whether favorably or otherwise on the artistic and creative orientation of people have largely been explored within a secular context. However, yet is much to be known about the impact of the pandemic on music making within religious setting in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, sets out to explore music making in Churches during the pandemic by focus on choir rehearsals in Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM), Lagos. Specifically, it asks: how were the choir managers in MFM able to organize and manage choir rehearsals during the pandemic? What method(s) was/were employed in adapting to the challenges posed by COVID-19 protocols and in what ways did the pandemic positively or negatively impacted on the rehearsal setting of the choir?

Drawing on the historical and analytical concept, the paper discusses, though briefly, the history of MFM. It examines the operational and administrative structures of the music ministry of the church as well as the nature and methods of choir rehearsals before the pandemic. Using qualitative methods of research, primary data for the study were gathered through interviews with leaders of the church's Central Choir and secondary data were sourced from archival materials. The church is known for having a very large choir among the neo-Pentecostal mega churches in Lagos. Interviews were content analyzed and inferences were drawn. This study adds to the growing body of scholarship on COVID-19 and musical practices, arts and public health, choral music in Pentecostal Christianity and Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries.

Brief History of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries

Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries started in 1989 at Dr. Daniel Kolawole Olukoya's house with just 24 members. This was in the staff quarters of Nigerian Institute of Medical Research (NIMR), Yaba, Lagos State. The Church later moved to 60, Old Yaba Road, Ebute-Metta, Lagos. In 1994, when there was need for bigger space, the church finally moved to 13, Olasimbo Street, Onike, Yaba, Lagos which now became the Church's International Headquarters. The first service at the International Headquarters was held on the 24th of April, 1994. According to Olukoya (2019), the Church has thousands of branches across Nigeria. It has over two hundred branches in Lagos and also springing up all over the world.

Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) is known as a-do-it-yourself Gospel Ministry – this means that individual's hands are trained to wage war and fingers to do battle in prayers and supplication. All the activities of the Church are based on its primary identity as a Ministry that is devoted to apostolic signs and Holy Ghost fireworks. The church belongs to many Christian associations such as Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Christian Association of Nigeria and Bible Society of Nigeria.

Music Ministry in Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM)

The high standard of the Church's music ministry has to do with the musical experiences of the General Overseer and his wife. Dr. Daniel Kolawole Olukoya is an experienced organist, choirmaster, composer and (contralto) singer and his wife, Pastor (Mrs.) Folashade Olukoyahas been a soprano singer before the establishment of MFM. At the inception of the Church, the duo usually rendered seasoned music needed to edify their congregation on every service day.

The opportunity to recruit choristers came up, after the Church had relocated to 60, Old Yaba road. These choristers became the first choir of the Church in 1990. The recruitment exercise was conducted by the first choir master of the Church, Pastor Sam Oloyede. The choir was re-organized in 1994, when the Church moved to its permanent location now known as the International Headquarters. Pastor S.M. Adesanya and Pastor Agbaje became the choir coordinators.

Olukoya (2019) opined that excellence in the music of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) is acquired through training on musical instruments and choral groups under the tutelage of music lecturers and professional gospel musicians who instruct in various conservatories of music. The Church also enrolls MFM musicians in music theory and practical examinations such as ABRSM – Associated Board of the Royal School of Music and Music Theory Examination of MUSON – Musical Society of Nigeria. The essence of these examinations is to improve individual musical performances.

There are a good number of proficient musicians as a result of the music training the Church offers the choir members. The music ministry of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) has several musical groups with diverse musical roles. The music ministry is under the leadership of a spiritual leader, followed by the director of the music school and then the other sectional heads.

The Senior Choir/Mass Choir

The senior choir is a group with a population of over 300 singers at the International Headquarters having the longest years of experience in singing among other choir members. Many choir leaders emerged from this group,

including senior pastors who are highly placed in the ministry and many of their wives.

It was in the year 2004 that the General Overseer instructed that the choir membership should be extended to the regions and branches. This led to the formation of the mass choir of the ministry. The mass choir was founded in year 2014 during the music ministry solemn assembly. The choir was commissioned in September, 2014 at the Power Must Change Hands Service. Membership is restricted because of distance to choristers in Lagos State and from Ogun State.

From teenager age upward can be members of the senior choir but majority are adults. This is because other musical groups have the younger ones such as the youth choir, teenage choir etc. The mass choir unit usually organizes training session tagged “Train the Trainers” for regional choir leaders at the international headquarters. The training comes up every second Sunday of the month. The essence of the training is to coordinate the affairs of the mass choir with less stress and to further help the choir masters in training their choirs at the regional level before they converge at the international headquarters for combined rehearsals.

Secondary Roles of the Senior Choir

The senior choir members are like watchmen over the branches and regions choirs before the COVID-19 emerged. They perform this role by sending representatives to their branches and regions to coordinate the choir’s activities. Presently, the coordination is done online through branch and regional leaders. They were music instructors to branches and regional choirs before the COVID. They usually conduct the ABRSM mock examinations for churches (branches and regions). It has been suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recruitment of Choristers in Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM)

Before anybody can be admitted into the choir and any choral or orchestra group in the ministry, the person must be a bona-fide member of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) and must have gone through the foundational class where all the doctrines of the Church are taught and after which the person be baptized by immersion at the International Headquarters. The candidate must

have basic knowledge of music rudiments to at least be able to sing different genres of music. In addition, new members are enjoined to write the ABRSM theory of music examination, starting from grade one.

Pre-COVID-19 Rehearsals in Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM)

Rehearsals of the senior choir and mass choir are always at the church's International Headquarters at Onike, Yaba, Lagos. It is always conducted on the last Sunday of every month at 1.00pm. Songs to be rehearsed are always sent to the regions and branches, at least, two weeks before rehearsals. This was usually done through sharing of music sheets in pdf file and audio recordings of same on members Whatsapp platforms. This enabled the choristers to understand the songs better before congregating at the International Headquarters for the general rehearsals. The role of digital technology in facilitating learning including choral music learning has been discussed in literature (Adler, 2014; Oikelome, 2019). Oikelome (2019: 16) found that Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube are the top three social media tools used by choirmasters of singing groups in Lagos. He argues that "WhatsApp tool comes easy to the choirmasters as a means of sending bulk messages, creating a group chat, holding conference meetings, attaching videos and audio songs, and sending choral sheets to members". Like their secular counterparts, MFM choir managers were able to maximum digital resources to improve their choral pedagogy during the pandemic. Choir leaders recorded and shared voice parts of each song for choristers to listen to and imitate and learn well ahead. These digital platforms offer ease of file sharing including audio, video and text, using digital tools like smart phones and portable computers. One concern one hand is, how many choristers have access to such hi-tech devices needed during rehearsals? Even though the shortcomings of digital technology have been observed, its merits especially in choral musical activities – rehearsals and performances have received commendation from other quarters. (Oikelome, 2019; Daffen, et al. 2019)

Before the COVID-19, the choir is grouped into four major parts (SATB) and part leaders are positioned strategically to enhance perfection in the singing process during the rehearsals. The choir sings classical and contemporary Western and African music. In some cases, the choir rehearses and performs musical works by Pastor Olukoya and other song writers in the church. During

rehearsals and Church services, the choristers sit together by occupying a larger portion of seats designated for the choir. Rehearsal sessions during pre- COVID-19 period were more rigorous because it involved recording in the studio, notation of songs and preparing choristers for theory and practical exams.

Rehearsals In COVID-19 Pandemic Era

Despite the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria that has placed restrictions to regular choir rehearsals in churches, the MFM senior choir still meets for rehearsals. Like Loko (2016) has pointed out that one of the factors responsible for good ministration by music ministers either in the Church or otherwise is rehearsals. The senior choir of the Church knows the importance of rehearsals to its ministrations in every service; therefore, it retains the weekly rehearsals. Before the choristers sit for rehearsals, they make sure hands are washed with soap and well sanitized.

The timing for rehearsals changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when the mass choir rehearsals have been suspended because of the pandemic. Rehearsals are restricted basically to senior choir with maximum number of thirty (30) choristers at the International Headquarters. The days for rehearsals are now Saturdays from 2pm to 4pm and Sundays from 1pm to 3pm. Like many choirs, the reduction in number of choristers in MFM is to adhere to the regulations and this has huge impact on the musical and social orientation of the choristers. Musically, the vocal ambience of large choral ensemble cannot be compared with that of a few voices. Choirmasters are now left with the option of performing songs that do not require so much voices and this was remarked by the choirmasters interviewed. Since choir rehearsals offer singers the opportunity to sharpen the singing skills, restricted attendance at rehearsals disenfranchises many of the choristers who are unable to attend. The social and psychological benefits of choral music-making among choristers is established in literature (Cliff & Hancox, 2002; Acquah, 2016; Chorus America, 2019). Choristers including church singers socialize during choir rehearsals as it offers them a place to learn, have fun, and relax as well as enhance spirituality. For a large choral community like the MFM choir, many singers were unable to enjoy these benefits because they were not allowed to attend rehearsals.

The choir still held physical rehearsals during the pandemic while adhering to the COVID-19 pandemic guidelines. During the rehearsals, their sitting arrangement observed the six feet social distancing and they also wore face/nose/shield, but when it is time to sing, some of them sing with their masks on while others remove their masks to enable them sing well. The choir makes use of condensed microphones during rehearsals and services thus drastically reducing sharing of handheld microphones. It is pertinent here to make few remarks on the appropriateness of face coverings for singers. Singing requires lots of breathing hence singers need uninterrupted flow of air. However, face masks make it very challenging for singers to acquire sufficient air for singing. While physical distancing is one of the safest means of spreading the virus, use of face masks are also considered important in curbing the virus. Face covers makes voice projection and clarity of words quite tasking for singers and this was mentioned by choirmasters during choir rehearsals.

Rehearsals presently, does not involve any recording in the studio, as there was no need of sending songs to the regions and branches of MFM, since the mass choir rehearsals have been suspended because of the pandemic. The choristers still use the scored music for classical and contemporary western and African music during rehearsals. The choirmasters interviewed remarked that even though the rehearsals were no longer rigorous as before given the constraint of time yet they were still effective given that the few hours for rehearsals were well utilized by the choirmasters as well as the choristers.

Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Choral Music Activities

In COVID-19 pandemic era, choir rehearsals have witnessed some changes compared to what it used to be. Its effect can be paradoxical, that is 'sweet and sour'. While some choirs have maximized the positive gains of the pandemic, others simply took a 'what-shall-we-do' attitude. In church setting, given the restriction on worshippers, many choristers have either become lazy in attending rehearsals and even church services/performances since the re-opening of religious spaces. It takes a dedicated and committed member of the choir to resume back to the music ministry of the Church. During the period of lockdown, there was no form of activity for the choristers but many composers were able to compose songs as related to the period.

It was observed that the days for long rehearsals had gone. Now, the rehearsal for 4 hours is reduced to 2 hours. This is because the Government had warned that no religious gathering should exceed 2 hours. The senior choir rehearsal days were changed to Saturdays and Sundays, to ensure adequate rehearsals.

Many of the choristers did not resume to the music ministry of the Church, this might result in losing touch in the art of good singing. In some cases, roster was created to ensure all the choristers are involved in the rehearsals, although, not as effective as it was before the COVID. With the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, choristers don't sing out and loud during rehearsals, this is because there's limit to how they can open their mouths to prevent being infected with the virus. Also, the use of mask by some of the choristers affects the tone of the sounds produced when singing (muted sounds). The effect is that songs are not clearly heard, making their rehearsals unproductive. The usual organized musical performances / concerts by the various choral groups of the church have been suspended since the beginning of the pandemic. These are activities that attract guests from every part of the country.

Conclusion

The paper explores choral musical activities by examining how the choir managers in MFM were able to conduct rehearsals in a seemingly challenging situation during the pandemic. Creative methods deployed by these managers point to the fact that man will always find ways of mitigating life's challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic. Being a religious choral community, the MFM church choir considered the pandemic more of a public health matter than spiritualizing the virus hence they adhered to the COVID-19 protocols as relating to large gatherings especially in religious settings. The paper posits that the attendant effects of the pandemic on MFM church choir is mixed, that is, while offering new ways and strategies of conducting choir rehearsals on one hand, many singers restricted in attendance were not better for it on the other hand.

COVID-19 is a reality that has come to stay with man for a period no one can predict. All we need to do as choristers is to embrace all the protective measures recommended by health organizations and the government. The Church cannot

hide away from the fact that there is modern technology that would be of importance to their rehearsals. We are in the era of the new normal, the choir should be ready to explore and embrace any type of modern technology that would enhance effective rehearsals.

Recommendations

There are so many reports of a cluster of cases of the corona virus abroad that was traced to a choir rehearsal. From the report of David Waldstein (2020), more than 50 members of the Skagit Valley Chorale, in Mount Vennon, Washington, were infected with the virus. As Nigeria citizens look forward to when vaccine for the virus would be available for all, the following recommendations are necessary as protective measures against the virus during choir rehearsals. (In line with the guidelines of Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and European Choral Association).

- All the choristers should still follow the basic hygiene rules of washing of hands with soap and the use of sanitizers before and after rehearsals.
- The choir can purchase the new masks that are being developed now to make singing easier.
- Choristers with any signs of sickness should stay back at home.
- Choristers in the 'risk groups' have to be extra careful.
- The primary rule of the COVID-19 is 'social distancing' Choristers have to maintain the recommended distancing (spacing singers at least six feet apart).
- During the period of rehearsals, nothing should be shared-microphones, musical instruments, music scored sheets etc.
- After an hour rehearsal, there should be a break to air the room and the windows should be kept opened.
- Music Ministry should embrace the new normal. Arrangement can be made for online options for choristers who can't be physically present at the rehearsal. For instance, in Britain, choirs have been allowed to meet indoors since August 15, 2020, when the government released its guidance on the recommended distance between people in group settings.

- Choristers should also learn to practice respiratory etiquettes (for example, by coughing into a bent elbow or tissue) since the virus spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

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