

THE CHURCH AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic originated in China in 2019 and spread to various parts of the world in 2020. The disease affected every aspect of human life including the religious. The focus of this study is on the Church, an aspect of man's religious life in Nigeria. These effects include both the desirable and undesirable ones. On one hand, the pandemic stimulated fear and strong desire for survival in many church goers, which made them to seek for spiritual solutions in their churches. On the other hand, the pandemic also affected the church, by reducing the attendance during the lockdown period, limiting the participation of members, and lowered the income of churches. Still in the same vein, the ban on religious gatherings and the violation of this by some churches had a negative impact on their image. The paper also suggests ways in which the church could handle the covid-19 pandemic in the future. This includes proper and regular education and counselling of members on preventive measures such as maintenance of hygiene, hand washing, use of nose masks, maintenance of social distancing and proper nutrition.

INTRODUCTION

It is believed that the corona virus pandemic originated from China in 2019, although its exact origin has not been established. Some theories have been advanced to explain its origin. The first theory holds that it was transferred from animals to man, and it was first discovered in a fish market there. The second theory is that it escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, China where it was kept. The third one is that it is not actually a virus, but it is the result of the introduction of 5g communication technology in some parts of the world. The aim of this is to implant microchips in people through the resultant vaccinations and eventually control them. This is a preparation for the introduction of one world government and the Anti-Christ that is mentioned in the Bible. However, these theories have not been fully verified, hence this paper does not quite hold on to any of them fully, as the authentic one.

The pandemic has affected the world severely, including the church, and the last theory on the Anti-Christ connection, has raised an alarm and great concern among many church members.

Thus, this paper is necessary to explore and examine the effects of Covid-19 on the church in Nigeria, and the way the church should handle the pandemic in the future.

2. THE CHURCH

It is necessary to clarify the meaning of the church in this context. It has various meanings as follows: firstly, it means a house set apart for public worship. Secondly, it refers to the whole body of Christians. Thirdly, it refers to a particular denomination of Christians and fourthly to any group with a common creed which may not necessarily be Christian (Kirkpatrick 225).

Smylie adds that the word 'church' is derived from the Greek word 'Kyriakon' which means belonging to the Lord; it originally referred to a place where the disciples gathered the believers for fellowship and worship (696).

It also refers to the Christian community as a whole, or a body of Christian believers. This is derived from the Greek word 'ekklesia' which originally meant an official assembly of citizens (church, Britannica 304).

Asuquo adds that the church is a body of believers which are called out and they exist in various parts of the world and in different generations. Some have departed from this world. He adds that the church can be viewed in two ways, the invisible and universal church on one hand and the visible congregation of believers that meets in a particular place (93).

In the context of this paper, it refers to a group of believers in a particular area (Acts 5:11), in this case Nigeria.

3. THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON THE CHURCH

a. Desirable Effects

The pandemic has some desirable effects on the church. For instance, it somehow strengthened the faith of some members, it aroused their zeal, desire and effort to seek healing, deliverance and spiritual solutions to Covid-19. During the peak period, many people started holding religious fellowships and gatherings secretly. Many embarked on fastings, prayers and religious assignments in their homes and other secret locations.

Secondly, according to Asuquo, some churches like the Apostolic Church, Nigeria, in Calabar, report that the pandemic was prophetically revealed to them by God beforehand, with promises of protection and deliverance. Many members testify that, when the disease came they have been protected and immuned from it, this has greatly strengthened their faith (Asuquo, NASR Conference paper).

Thirdly, the pandemic has enhanced the introduction, adoption and improvement of information communication technology by many churches. This is as a result of the ban or restrictions on social gatherings. This made many churches to adopt and introduce internet or online worship services, fellowships and the use of online financial transfers and transactions for offerings. The attendant training of members and church workers on information and

communication technology is beneficial and desirable to the church (Adighibe, Guardian, Jul. 2020).

Fourthly, the economic hardship and shortage of funds has encouraged many church leaders and members to be prudent in funds management. Many have learnt to manage funds economically and to avoid wasteful spending. This has helped to improve the church finances in the post covid-19 period.

Closely related to the above is the provision of welfare assistance and palliatives to several church members due to the hardship, hunger and sufferings from the lockdowns. This act by the church has been very useful and helpful to members.

Fifthly, the pandemic also reduced the workload and stress of many church leaders, workers and members. For instance, the bans on social gatherings, movements and the lockdowns, gave many church workers and members the time to rest, take care of themselves and their families. In this way, the pandemic indirectly reduced stress, improved the health and family lives of members.

b) Undesirable Effects

On the other hand, the lockdowns, movement restriction and ban on religious gatherings, greatly impeded religious activities. This reduced attendance, and even when they took place, they were hastily and improperly done due to the fear of apprehension by security agents.

During the peak of the pandemic in 2020, many aspects of religious activities were disrupted. These included pilgrimages, suspension of services, baptisms, communions, confirmations, weddings, funerals (Zammit, 85-92). These were suspended with unpleasant effect on the church members.

Secondly, the bans, lockdown and restrictions also limited the earnings, economic power and investments of church members. This in turn reduced the tithes and income of the church.

Thirdly, many church members experienced embarrassing and humiliating experiences in the process of seeking for religious solutions for Covid-19 pandemic. These included assignments, taking of concoctions, expenditures and deceptions by fake religious leaders.

Fourthly, the inability of Pentecostal preachers and miracle workers to deliver people from Covid-19, is a greater challenge. Critics have questioned why the preachers and miracle workers could not deliver people from Covid-19 and its effects. Hence, the undesirable impact of Covid-19 on the health of the people and its mortality rate is a challenge to the healing and deliverance messages preached by Pentecostal preachers. It appears as if the preachers and the church are unable to overcome Covid-19.

COVID-19, THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE CHURCH

In view of the fact that the virus is still present, and newer strains have been identified, the church should endeavor to protect her members from infections and bad effects of the virus.

This could be done in the following ways: there should be a continuous enlightenment campaign by various churches on all aspects of Covid-19, including how to prevent it.

In addition, various preventive measures should be re-introduced and enforced in various churches, these include, hand washing, use of hand sanitizers, social distancing, use of nose mask and avoidance of overcrowding.

The utilization of online religious activities should be encouraged and used by side with other methods. This will serve as a complement and reduce stress.

The church should prepare for future emergencies such as a spike in infections and lockdowns, by saving funds for palliatives and relief packages for members.

CONCLUSION

Covid-19 which originated from China and spread to all parts of the world, has affected mankind in various ways. This also includes the church. A look at these effects shows that they include the desirable and undesirable ones.

On one hand, the pandemic aroused and strengthened the faith of some members to seek for spiritual solutions to it. It encouraged the adoption of internet and other aspects of information and communication technology in religious activities, it also encouraged prudence in financial management, the provision of welfare assistance and palliatives to members in critical periods and the reduction of workload and stress due to lockdowns and bans which gave people the chance to care for their families.

On the other hand, the pandemic has impeded or reduced religious activities; it has reduced their income and finances due to the bans and lockdowns. It has subjected many members to nasty experiences in the process of seeking for spiritual solutions to the pandemic. The inability of many Pentecostals and miracle workers to overcome Covid-19 is a big challenge.

In view of the fact that the pandemic has metamorphosed into another phase and other variants of the virus are reported to have come into existence, the church needs to prepare to withstand and survive any future onslaught by the virus. Suggestions and guidelines that could enhance these are included in the previous section. It is hoped, that if they are adopted, and implemented, the church will be able to withstand the challenge of Covid-19.

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