

The Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown on Nigeria Churches: The Philosophical Interpretation of Hebrew 10:25

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Abstract- Hebrew 10:25 says: “Do not for sake the gathering together of the brethren, believers----.”, but Covid-19 named by (WHO) as: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2019-contravenes this traditional worship of the Church. Physical assembly for worship could no longer hold because a good way to prevent Covid-19 is practicing social distancing. Congregations of the faithful at the local, national and international levels are strongly recommended by several world religions and religious orders to adhere to this, because the gathering of large numbers of people in close approximation could be fertile ground for the spread of this virus. The refusal to suspend such gatherings could lead to potential widespread dispersal of infections. Many churches and other public places in Nigeria and other places throughout the world experienced lockdown as a result of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic. These affected church activities and pastoral work globally, Nigeria not excepted. In response to this lockdown and its effects, many pastors in Nigeria start to explore other means to perform their pastoral functions to reach their church members. This study explores how priest are performing their priestly activities to their church members during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Many clergy in Nigeria resorted in using ICT. (Information Communication Technology), such as WhatsApp, Text messages, telegram, Instagram etc to send biblical messages for the spiritual growth of their members. The work applied historical & analytical methods for its findings

Indexed Terms- Religion, Covid-19 pandemic, Lockdown, Nigerian Church, Internet ministry

I. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease (also called COVID-19, is an infectious disease caused by a new virus that had not been previously identified in humans and causes respiratory illness (like the flu) with symptoms such as a cough, fever and in more severe cases, pneumonia¹ – started around December 2019 in Wuhan, China. ² It ravaged the world unabated in the year 2020 as the pandemic spread like wild fire to every part of the world within months of its outbreak. As parts of efforts to curtail its spread, churches and other public places were locked down in the late March 2020. When this took place, little did the church leaders and other people know that it would take months for churches in particular and other public places in general to be opened again for large gathering. Church leaders with the cooperation of their church members started looking for alternative ways of worship and doing other church activities. Against the backdrop that the lockdown of churches and other public places have prevented pastors from performing their pastoral ministry in the traditional ways through physical contacts, churches had to find other means of holding their church activities, and pastors had to explore alternative means of performing their pastoral ministry. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to find out the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown and how the church can move forward, especially how pastors can be more effective in their pastoral ministry, particularly to find a way of overcoing challenges post by covid-19 on traditional way of Christian worship.

II. COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN

Currently, the world is facing an unprecedented global medical emergency in modern history, the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus seems to hold no bar and continues its relentless march across the globe.

COVID-19 is spread through droplets; the basic reproduction rate, a measure of transmissibility of the virus is so rapid³. Public gatherings evidently increase transmission, and therefore social distancing was touted as the foremost preventive strategy.

As part of the efforts to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, governments throughout the world and in Nigeria in particular started to restrict gathering of large number of people in public places and movements from one place to the other, especially interstate and cross border movements, and advocate stay safe or stay at home. It also involves what is termed social (or preferably physical) distancing – “a way to keep people from interacting closely or frequently enough to spread an infectious disease. Where “schools and other gathering places such as movie theaters were closed, and sports events and religious services were be cancelled.”⁴ This restriction is popularly known as lockdown. With the advent of a COVID-19 case in Nigeria on February 27, 2020, the Nigerian governments at the federal and state levels started imposing series of lockdown measures.⁵ Undoubtedly, this lockdown affected churches from holding their traditional way of worship. Coming together of Christians physically for worship became impossible⁶. Churches banned assemblies of its adherents at local, national, and international levels as part of obedience to covid-19 protocol. This mobilization and gathering could serve as a potential focal point for dispersal of the virus, especially those transmitted through the respiratory route.

It is also imperative that all possible preventive measures be exercised during ordinary times to reduce the chances of cross infections during christian services and ceremonies. The religious assemblies needed to keep strictly to Covid-19 protocol. It has a direct bearing on the extent of epidemic diseases and their global spread. COVID-19 should serve as a game changer in the manner in which we deal with infectious disease outbreaks from the perspective of religious assemblies and their suspension. In South Korea for example A Christian congregation Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Believed illness is a sin, and the sufferer must attend congregational prayers to atone for the sin. This church refused medical test but rather belief in prayers, hence motivated its followers to attend to Mass Service. By April 8, 2020⁷, large

member of the congregation tested positive. Also in Israel, COVID-19 infection rates high among the ultra-orthodox Jews Assemblies in Israel compared to other Israelis who kept Covid-19 protocol. Many as 40% of residents in the ultra-orthodox neighbourhood were infected, besides big families and crowded living, unflinching observations of Christian coming together for religious prayers were considered important causes⁸.

Even in Nigeria, cases of Covid-19 virus increased in some big cities like Lagos, Abuja, Port-Harcourt, Ilorin etc. Where Christian Assemblies continue holding physical worship services. The spread later became controllable, when all kept to Covid-19 protocols

III. CHRISTIAN TRADITIONAL WORSHIP & COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Hebrew 10:25a reads: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another”. According to David Matthis, corporate worship play an indispensable role in rekindling our spiritual fire, and keeping it burning. Corporate worship brings together God’s word, prayer, fellowship and so makes for the greatest means of God’s ongoing grace in the Christian life⁹.

The outbreak of corona virus its containment and preventive measures, such as social gathering and lockdown, caught everyone unaware. Majority of Christian cannot physically attend church services, which is quiet contrary to the command given by God for believers to keep and obey

Inability to fellowship with other believers has its implication on the personal life of a believer, as well as that of the church. David Robertson saw the effects when he wrote “We need to consider carefully the cost of closing churches. Not the financial cost only but rather the psychological, philosophical, emotional and spiritual cost of the people. There are many people for whom the weekly gathering of the Lord’s people is a real strength, peace and encouragement for them. The mental harm caused by the fear of pandemic and the constant 24/7 media and online hysteria should be factored in as well.¹⁰ Although, it is true that the lockdown of Christian by Government was

necessitated by the Corona virus pandemic and it is for the collective good of all. But it must also be stressed that the effects of the closure of Churches on Christians cannot be overestimated. This paper considered both the positive & negative effects.

IV. COVID-19 & NIGERIA CHURCH INTERPRETATION

There have been so many theories around the world with regards to COVID-19 since the outbreak of the pandemic in China. Like every nation of the world, Nigeria has its own fair share of these theories. In Nigeria, there are many versions of interpretation, but two are the most prominent. The two views have to do with source of the pandemic and people's perceptions of the disease. Many Nigerians viewed it as an elite disease only for the wealthy and those in the corridor of power¹¹. This view was further compounded by the fact that some of the first set of people who tested positive to the disease were elites and Nigeria's top-ranking politicians. Some of them Included: Mr. Abba Kyari, the chief of staff to President Muhammadu Buhari; Mr. Bala Mohammed, the Governor of Bauchi State; Engineer Seyi Makinde, the Governor of Oyo State; Mallam Nasir el-Rufai, the Governor of Kaduna State; Mr. Okeziel kpeazu, the Governor of Abia State; Mr. RotimiAkeredolu, the Governor of Ondo State; Dr. Ifeanyi Okowo, the Governor of Delta State and his wife; and Senator AbiolaAjimobi, former Governor of Oyo State; etcetera. With the exception of Mr. Bala Mohammed and a few others, the public opinion held that these governors contracted the disease on a trip to a meeting that was held in March 2020 in Abuja¹². Mr. Bala Mohammed made his COVID-19 status known to the public on March 23, 2020 shortly after returning from a trip to Lagos where he had been in contact with Mr. Mohammed Atiku Abubakar (son of the former Nigeria's vice president) who had tested positive to COVID-19 after returning from an international trip through Lagos. Ever since, many public officials and politicians have come down with or lost their lives to the disease. While some of the governors came out to the public about their COVID-19 statuses, the majority of them did not but were believed to have quietly gone into self-isolation. This development caused many members of the public to assume the disease came only for the rich in our society. According to a BBC report, "The Nigeria

Centre for Disease Control has recorded more than 600 cases since the end of February - most of them people who had been abroad, and those they had interacted with upon their return to Nigeria¹³. Meanwhile, most Nigerians view anyone who travels abroad as privileged and rich. This perception was partly why the efforts of the government to contain the spread of the disease became more difficult.

The worst came on the April 17, 2020 when Mr. Abba Kyari died as a result of COVID-19 complications. Public opinion held that the fall of Mr. Abba Kyari to COVID-19 was from God, and that it was a signal to corrupt politicians who failed to invest in the country's healthcare system before the outbreak of the pandemic. According to BBC: Nigerians spent more than \$1bn on treatment in overseas hospitals in 2013. President Buhari promised to end "medical tourism" when they took power in 2015, but he himself spent more than four months in London in 2017 getting treatment for an undisclosed illness and subsequently returning to the UK capital for additional care. But with borders closed and each country haunted by its own COVID-19 nightmare, Nigeria's big men and women are now forced to use their country's hospitals, prompting many a stream of taunts and jokes.

Even the Secretary to the Federation, Mr. Boss Mustapha was on record for publicly admitting that he did not know that the Nigeria's health sector was in such a deplorable state until he was made the Chairman of the Presidential Task Force on COVID19¹⁴. He and other public leaders were criticized for their insensitive medical trips abroad to the detriment of the country's health sector. Many Nigerians concluded that the COVID-19 disease was God's punishment for the Nigerian elite and politicians for not putting the interest of the country at heart. Senators Adebayo Oshinowo and AbiolaAjimobi are few out of notable Nigerian politicians who have died as a result of COVID-19 complications, after the demise of Abba Kyari. Besides the above, there were those who erroneously tied the COVID-19 disease to the 5G expansion. (Powerful nation of the world).

There was also a theological dimension to the matter. The perceptions highlighted earlier were further reinforced by the then logical perceptions of some evangelical leaders in the country on the COVID-19

disease. Notable among these leaders were Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the President of Believers Love World, also known as Christ Embassy and Bishop David Oyedepo, founder of the Living Faith Church, also known as Winner's Chapel of the largest evangelical mega churches in Nigeria. Oyakhilome linked the coronavirus pandemic and 5G network to the biblical antichrist and part of the signs of the end of times. Bishop David Oyedepo was arguably the most audible voice among the evangelicals against government restrictions on religious gathering. In his words, "The church is God's banquet hall where we are fed with spiritual food to keep us alive and strong. So whatever stops the church, from fellowshiping is out to destroy what God is building ... There must be a devil behind it. It is not a virus; it is a demon. There is a demon at work behind the scene¹⁵.

Both Oyakhilome and Oyedepo's views have three implications. Firstly, they suggest that COVID-19 is not natural. Rather, it is a man-made disease that is traceable to the 5G network. Secondly, they imply that the closure of churches is tantamount to crippling the Christian faith or exterminating the spiritual lives of Christians. Thirdly, they submit that Satan is responsible for the outbreak of COVID-19 in the world and that it has eschatological implications. Experts claim that COVID-19 has nothing to do with 5G. In spite of all the attempts made by the authorities of the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) to debunk the 5G myth, many members of the public held tight to the views expressed by these prominent evangelical leaders on the disease¹⁶. Both Oyakhilome and Oyedepo have millions of followers across the world, and one can only imagine the impact of their views on those followers. While telecommunication experts may be able to dissuade many from following this view on COVID-19 and 5G, very little can be achieved when it comes to the impact of Oyakhilome and Oyedepo's theological influence on their mammoth admirers across the world. Meanwhile, in the Muslim Hausa community, there is a fatalistic attitude and a refusal among the talakawa to take any precautions. These perceptions affected the general response of the public to the disease.

Obviously, many Nigerian Christians believe in these misconstrued theories being floated across the country, and sadly, this is against the teaching of the Bible.

Daniel Gachuki warns that "Christians would be naive to think that wrong theories have no consequences¹⁷." He stresses further: 'Conspiracy theories were a potent tool in the hands of Emperor Nero as he sought to exterminate early Christians. Adolf Hitler used them to incite hatred against the Jews. And Satan also used it to turn Adam and Even against God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3).'"The Bible warns Christians against making wrong claims or propaganda and spreading falsehood (Exodus 23:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

V. COVID-19 & LESSONS

There are lessons to be learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown for governments, individual as well as national and international religious & health organizations. The response of Christian assemblies during pandemics cannot be ignored. Prompt responses such as suspension of communal gatherings and of the social distancing was commended. Reconciliation between the practice of Christian programmes and preventive measures has to be introduced as is been done by health sector during calamities also reduced the spread of the virus. Hence Churches, social, and political leaders to further be encouraged to exhibit sagacity and adopt a pragmatic approach during epidemic and pandemic to prevent causalities. The clergy may need to be sensitive in suspending church activities/programmes during emergency that may bring disaster on the church and the society.

The development and the exposure brought about by the experience of COVID-19 has obviously created a shift from analog to digital life style." Any pastors that are not ready to adapt with this shift may be overtaken by time and become irrelevant in pastoral ministry after the post-COVID-19-pandemic.

With these new trends of event, pastors need to understand the current trend in the society and take advantage of every resource at present to serve as platform of progress for his pastoral ministry. Pastors can do this by improving and developing themselves to be relevant in the current trend. The knowledge of the new trends is informative & educative. The contemporary world is ICT driven¹⁸. Another lesson is that the pandemic has revealed that pastors should be more concerned about the needs and situations of his

church members, apart from the traditional weekly messages during Sunday worships. Church members are going through a lot of challenges occasioned by the pandemic and the church leadership must be sensitive to this ¹⁹ This is the time that pastors should be more passionate to show that they really care for the church members. This care can be in form of visitation (if possible), phone calls, sending encouraging text messages to members, leading the church to give monetary or material tokens to the needy (church members), and other ways that will make the church members to feel the positive impacts of the church welfare package at the critical time. Pastors are enjoined to be more dynamic in the way they are conducting their church activities and other aspects of pastoral ministry. The age of parochialism is over. New innovations are needed in pastoral ministry to combat the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed to the world.

VI. NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF COVID-19

1. It affected the economy of the church, offering and tithes were no longer turning in as it used to be before Covid-19
2. It affected capital projects of the church, such as physical building etc.
3. It affected church workers allowances and salaries which eventually led to the layoff of church workers. Relief them of their jobs for lack of adequate fund.
4. Lack of physical worship gradually gave way to the dwindling of church membership, hence the physical growth of the church was highly affected
5. Immoral practices increased because of the lockdown which led to unethical behaviour of some church members i. e. Unwanted pregnancy, increasing family members, hardship of feeding and family up keep.
6. Members refused the traditional hand shaking to waving of hands. Traditional warm greetings (urging) and embracement forsaken.
7. Many house fellowships died a natural death due to the lockdown
8. Sitting arrangement during worship service gave way to social distancing in order to keep the Covid-19 protocol system. Communal fellowship no longer observed
9. It is expensive to maintain ICT tools and more difficult when there is lack of electricity and network facilities.

VII. POSITIVE EFFECTS OF COVID-19

1. Pastors now moved from analogy to digital system of worship
2. Many pastors were forced to know and be trained about Information Communication Technology (ICT) which now empowers minister of the Gospel to reach out to their far & near members, through virtual worship, some Churches today hold their meetings virtually.
3. The sending of Gospel truth (messages & sermons), and prayer are made possible through ICT transmission e. g sms, whatsapp, telegram, instagram etc, became the order of the day.
4. Christian meetings and services become very easy through Information Communication Technology (ICT) meanings, you can be in the corner of your room and hold meetings with other members far off. (Even outside the Country).
5. It makes the whole world a small village.
6. With the lockdown measures, families were perfectly knit together. The Biblical family standard which the church has been advocating for became a reality. Family members were forced to stay safe, hence, stay at home and discuss family issues together, prayer and fellowship together.

RECOMMENDATION

The study revealed that Internet (ICT) ministry – the use of the Internet and other technological tools in Christian ministries has become an alternative avenue for pastoral ministry. However, the study also revealed that there are others means of pastoral ministry that are needed to be more encouraged while some are needed to be less encouraged. As enumerated above, pastors are advised to tackle the challenges of the COVID-19

pandemic dynamically. The following are the recommendations to church leaders in handling the challenges of Covid-19

1. Every pastor should study the uniqueness of his congregation and locality in order to fashion out the way to respond to Covid-19 Pandemic challenges and to help him handle the peculiarity of his congregation & locality.
2. Pastor should embrace the use of the Internet and other technological tools in their pastoral ministry. Pastors should think of how to make Internet ministry not only an alternative ministry, but also as supplementary to the traditional ways of worship.
3. Pastor should consciously teach his church members to hold unto the Lord, particularly at the trying period for solution.
4. Less emphasis should be placed on large congregational gathering, emphasis should be placed on small groups in forms of cell churches, house fellowships, home fellowships, and the likes.
5. Less emphasis should also be placed on constructing large auditorium while more emphasis should be placed on activities that will build the church members up spiritually.
6. More efforts should be given to visitation and caring of church members through phone calls and sending of text messages. More efforts be made to encourage pastors and his associates to make use of ICT tools for better productivity.

CONCLUSION

Just as health officials try to improve the health condition and situation of its society, at the face of sudden pandemic, so experts in the scientific study of religion need to surface religion-abetted value judgments that impact behaviours relevant to viral spread. Experts need to explain where religion is causing problems and find creative ways to communicate alternative ways of thinking.

Covid-19 lockdown has provided the opportunity for Christians to retreat to Christ for the renewal of their commitments to righteous living.

It is also important to note that, the church needs to relocate from analogy to digital in order to meet with

the requirements of the modern world, the contemporary society. The world is not static but progressive, hence the church must be progressive in thinking and action.

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