

Framework for churches' response to pandemics: based on a case study on impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Christians in Zvishavane, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Following the sudden lockdown measures taken by governments all over the world due to COVID-19, churches, as well as other institutions, were caught unprepared to deal with the pandemic. This study was conducted when Zimbabwe was under Level 4 COVID-19 lockdown to investigate its impact on Christians and propose a framework for responding to future pandemics. Using SurveyMonkey, twenty-one Christian residents of Ward 5, Zvishavane, Zimbabwe voluntarily participated in the study through WhatsApp. Results showed that during the lockdown, most participants accessed church services online, mainly via WhatsApp. Participants mostly missed physical praise-and-worship-related activities and pastoral visitations. Participants failed to access physical support from the church, especially when their family members died or fell ill. Most participants preferred a church building to other church settings. The results indicated that participants experienced spiritual, emotional/psychological, and social challenges due to the physical gap created by the lockdowns; thus, physical church attendance plays an important role in the well-being of Christians. Based on these findings, we propose a framework for use by churches in response to future pandemics. This study is significant as it provides a framework for churches to respond to future pandemics.

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Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus that emerged in 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic, and all nations were encouraged to take drastic measures to combat the disease (Kasuso & Ngwenya, 2020). Zimbabwe introduced a national lockdown on all business activities except for those that are regarded as essential services. Section 102(a) of Zimbabwe's Labour Act defines essential services as 'any services the interruption of which endangers immediately the life, personal safety or health of the whole or any part of the public'. These essential services include health care services, designated transport services, supply and distribution of electricity, supply of water, sewerage and sanitary services, fire brigade, coal mining, and distribution of fuel and food, among others. Thus, churches¹ were excluded; in fact, worldwide, churches were among the first organisations to be closed to curb the effects of the pandemic (Adegboyega et al., 2021). However, the services deemed essential during the lockdown were mainly catered to physical needs, but a human being also has social, emotional, and spiritual needs, among others. Hence, this study aimed to investigate the broader impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Christians.²

This study was conducted in March 2021 when Zimbabwe was under Level 4 of the COVID-19 lockdown, under which gatherings for the purpose of worship were banned, the maximum number of individuals gathering at a funeral was limited to 30, and a curfew was imposed from 1800 hours to 0600 hours the following morning (Statutory Instrument 10 of 2021, 2021).

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The restrictions on church gatherings were in sharp contrast with Hebrews 10:25, 'Let us not neglect meeting together', which Christians generally use to encourage one another to attend church regularly. In addition, the Greek word for church, '*ekklesia*', implies 'gathering' (Zizioulas, 2002). In light of COVID-19, Adegboyega et al. (2021) asks an important question: 'Is this perception of community or Christian gathering practice applicable to the contemporary church irrespective of their socio-cultural environment or during adverse conditions'. This question speaks to the church's dilemma regarding church gatherings during pandemics such as COVID-19.

The present case study aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Christians, focusing on Zvishavane, Zimbabwe and propose a framework on how churches should respond to future pandemics.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What church setting did participants resort to during the lockdown?
2. What church activities did participants miss the most due to the lockdown?
3. What experiences did participants encounter when the church was physically unavailable due to the lockdown?
4. What church setting would participants prefer during pandemics?
5. How should the church respond to future pandemics?

Theoretical framework

This study was based on Osmer's (2008) four core tasks of practical theological interpretation. Osmer's model was chosen as it adequately addresses the questions raised in this study. The four core tasks are the descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks. The descriptive task asks the question: What is going on here? This task seeks to describe the situation. The interpretive task seeks to answer the question: Why is it going on? This task interprets the situation. The normative task asks: What ought to be going on? Finally, the pragmatic task asks: How might we respond?

Under the descriptive task, the study describes the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Christians in Zvishavane, Zimbabwe (What is going on?). Under the interpretive task, the study explains the spiritual, emotional/psychological, and social challenges experienced by the participants due to the physical gap created by the lockdown (Why is it going on?). Under the normative task, participants express their preferences regarding how church services should be conducted (What ought to be going on?). Under the pragmatic task, the study proposes a framework for churches' response to future pandemics (How might we respond?).

By using Osmer's model of practical theological interpretation, this paper demonstrates a systematic and practical approach to addressing the impact of pandemics on church congregants.

Literature review

Several studies have been conducted on the physical, social, psychological, economic, and spiritual impact of COVID-19, including its impact on the Christian church (Bentzen, 2021; Chu, 2021; Mahiya & Muri, 2022; Regus, 2022; Sukamto & Parulian, 2020). The modern church has various activities that take place during church gatherings, such as reading the Bible, praying, singing, eating, and preaching (Alikin, 2010). The COVID-19 lockdowns meant that churches could no longer gather to conduct such activities together. However, some churches resorted to virtual services, including social media-based sermons, television services, and livestream (Zoom) church services. Isiko (2020) suggests that the pandemic has 'revolutionized worship... putting emphasis on online churches and social media preaching'. While these strategies may help address some issues, such setups have been found to have some disadvantages. Hollar (2020) argues that in online services, 'congregants are likely not going to see anyone but their clergy on a screen on Sunday mornings', those who are not online might miss 'the social benefit of being involved in church', and 'social capital might be lost'. In addition, the shifting of 'church' to online services resulted in churches competing with other streaming media for the attention of congregants. The banning of church attendance also negatively impacted megachurches, which are normally funded through high attendance (Hollar, 2020).

Pillay argues that ‘congregating to pray, to worship and celebrate is an integral part of the Christian faith’ (2020, p. 267). In a study by Redjai (2020), churchgoers complained that classifying marijuana dispensaries and liquor stores as essential services while imposing lockdowns on churches infringed on their right to the free exercise of their religion.

It is noteworthy that Ireland and the UK declared clergy and religious staff key workers during the pandemic, ‘signalling their important role in burying the dead, comforting the grieving, and providing focal points for communities’ (Gledhill, 2020).

In contrast to the complaints about placing the church under lockdowns, Simson (1999, p. xxiv) laments that Christianity has moved away from the family towards ‘organised artificial performances in sacred buildings far from the atmosphere of real life’ and according to Pillay (2020, p. 268), the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the church to return to its roots; ‘in essence churches have not closed but come home: a church in each home.’ In the heat of COVID-19, denominational boundaries were crossed, as worshippers were no longer restricted to church affiliations (Pillay, 2020). Pillay (2020, p. 268) argues,

If God’s primary desire was for a church with full seats and never-ending activities, we would focus time, effort and resources on making our congregation more attractive and appealing than any of the neighbouring churches, yet some churches do this. But Scripture reveals that God’s singular desire is the redemption of the world and that Christ has commissioned the Church to continue his work on earth in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians view the church as essential to the health of local communities (Redjai, 2020). Pillay adds that during the COVID-19 pandemic, churches needed to make a ‘missional shift’ and ‘become centres for solidarity, networks of compassion, empathy, healing and emotional support in the face of sickness, fear, pain and hunger’ (p. 269)—thus becoming an essential service—and a ‘theological shift’, as COVID-19 has ‘flattened the curve’ on hierarchical church structures and proved that faith can survive without pastors, priests, and bishops (p. 272). Horst (2020, p. 243) cites the Roman Catholic Church, where ‘Pope Francis granted permission to all priests to celebrate the mass *alone* and without the procession’. Pillay (2020, p. 273) adds that some Anglican and Reformed churches had resorted to celebrating the Holy Communion online, with the priest consecrating the bread and wine virtually while the participants were in their homes.

Pillay (2020, p. 273) stresses that ‘When things happen suddenly and unexpectedly, as in the case of COVID-19, the church needs organisational structures that are flexible and flat—that is, capable of adjusting to changing needs and circumstances to allow for timely and appropriate responses.

COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines increased the cases of stress in families (UNWomen, 2020). In another study, outpatient visits declined by 67% from April 12 to June 18, 2020 compared to the same period the previous year (Thiga, 2021). Thiga’s study found that the bans on social gatherings resulted in a lack of fellowship among members (46% agreed) and a lack of corporate prayers (53% agreed), and that spirituality was affected (47%); although some churches introduced online services, some of their members had moved to other churches who already had those systems in place.

The above literature shows that COVID-19 had a social, physical, social, psychological, economic, and spiritual impact on church congregants. During the period under study, the Government of Zimbabwe ordered religious gatherings to be closed, which resulted in a radical shift from gathering to ‘please join us on YouTube or other electronic platforms’ (the ‘digital church’) (Pillay, 2020). Thus, the present case study aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Christians, focusing on Zvishavane, Zimbabwe and propose a framework for how churches should respond to future pandemics. Our study is significant in that it uses WhatsApp to collect data from participants from diverse Christian denominations during a COVID-19 pandemic and proposes a framework to respond to pandemics. To our knowledge, no similar study (using WhatsApp and proposing a framework for churches) has been conducted.

Methods and materials

Population and sample

Zvishavane is a mining town in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe, with some 36,000 residents (World Population Review, 2021) and several churches located in different areas. It comprises 15 political ‘wards’. Our study focused on Ward 5, in which the two researchers reside.

The population included church-going residents of Ward 5, Zvishavane, who were in the Ward 5 WhatsApp group. At the time of the study, there were 150 residents in the WhatsApp group. One of the researchers was a member of the group. We requested the Ward Councillor for permission to create a link on the group to invite willing Christians to join our study group. Those who joined our group (21 people) became the sample for the survey.

Research design

An exploratory study was conducted using a WhatsApp-based survey. Since COVID-19 was a new phenomenon and little was known about it at the time the study was conducted, an exploratory design was suitable in order 'to use the empirical situation existing at the time of the disease' and to describe experiences 'according to the subject's viewpoint' (Isiko, 2020). We designed the study questionnaire using SurveyMonkey, the link of which was distributed to the participants on the WhatsApp group. We chose WhatsApp for three reasons: (1) Physical distancing considering COVID-19 regulations; (2) Easy accessibility and ease of use; (3) Popularity in Zvishavane; and (4) Low cost. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020) concurs that a WhatsApp survey is cost-effective and convenient and has less interference by the researcher. Participants were refunded 1 USD per person for using their data. We held three interviews with key participants.

Data analysis

We used Microsoft Excel to analyse the data. We chose Microsoft Excel as it was sufficient to yield the required information regarding frequencies, descriptions, and percentages, as shown in the Results section.

Ethical considerations

We obtained permission from the Ward Councillor to use the Ward's WhatsApp group to invite only Christians in the community to participate. The Councillor informed the group that this was a voluntary study and only those who claimed to be Christians and had indicated their willingness to participate in the study by joining our WhatsApp group were included in the study. The objective of the study was explained in the top-most message in the newly-created WhatsApp group, and the participants were informed that the study was voluntary and that they were free to leave the group at any time. The names and phone numbers are anonymous in the report.

Results and discussion

Demographic data

This study included male (57%) and female (43%) participants. Although the proportion of male participants was slightly higher, both genders were significantly represented. We had included 'Other' as a gender option, but none of the participants indicated any other gender.

The ages considered in this study were 18 years and above. Therefore, children did not participate in the study. The highest number of participants (44%) were in the 18–29 age group. This indicates that most of the participants were youths.

In terms of marital status, 57% were married, 33% were single, 5% were widowed, and 5% were divorced.

Church affiliation

Table 1 shows the church affiliations of the participants.

The table shows that the church affiliation spanned across different faith allegiances, including Pentecostal churches, mainline churches, African independent churches, and others. It should be noted that the distribution of church affiliation was not predetermined, as participation was voluntary.

Table 1. Participants' church affiliations.

Church affiliation	No. of participants (N=21)	%
Church of Christ	4	19%
Evangelical Lutheran	3	14%
Jehovah's Witness	3	14%
Evangelical Church of Zimbabwe	2	10%
Zion Christian Church	2	10%
Covenant Faith Ministries	2	10%
ZIOGA	1	5%
Seventh Day Adventist	1	5%
Healing Word International Ministries	1	5%
Reformed Church of Zimbabwe	1	5%
Latter Day Saints	1	5%

Note: The items are sorted by number of participants.

Table 2. Participants' church setting during lockdown.

Church setting	No. of participants (N=21)	%
WhatsApp	6	29%
Online church (e.g. Zoom)	4	19%
House Church	4	19%
Church building	3	14%
YouTube/videos/audio	2	10%
Home Bible Study	1	5%
No services	1	5%

In terms of the positions of participants in their respective churches, 67% were ordinary congregants, while 33% were either pastors (14%) or people in other leadership positions (19%). This representation is reasonable as pastors and church leaders are usually fewer than their congregants.

Church setting during lockdown

We asked participants to indicate the church setting they used during the COVID-19 lockdown. Table 2 shows the results.

The table shows that more than half of the participants (58%) used technological means (mainly WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube/videos/audio) to 'attend church'. Horst (2020) concurs that when things happen suddenly and unexpectedly (as in the case of COVID-19), the church needs to be flexible and capable of adjusting to changing needs and circumstances. Pillay (2020) reports that churches had to adjust to digital worship, digital sacraments, digital tithes, and digital mission (p. 267). Hollar (2020) concurs that churches, as well as businesses and schools, have moved online. While this may be true for town churches, rural churches would be less likely to have congregants with active internet access at home (Hollar, 2020). They may not have phones that can go on WhatsApp or they may lack the financial resources. Low connectivity may also be an issue for many mainline denominations, which have large numbers of older congregants. Such rural congregants may need training on how to access online transmission.

The American Psychological Association (2020), reiterates that regardless of how good online transmission may be, one cannot underestimate the importance of physical connection among church members to the development of a healthy society. A study by Thiga (2021) revealed that there were cases of psychological problems that resulted in increased cases of suicide and domestic violence among members of the Worldwide Gospel Church of Kenya-Githurai Presbytery due to COVID-19 lockdowns. Hollar (2020) argues that having less opportunity for spontaneous, in-person social interaction may weaken social bonds within the churches. This may explain the 38% who defied the social distancing regulation and congregated physically. Of these, 24% indicated that they met in their homes. Simson (1999, p. xxiv) views this positively, arguing that the COVID-19 pandemic caused the church to return to its roots, the home. However, congregants who are used to a church building generally find it awkward to hold church services in homes. In Sherwood's (2020) study in England, one pastor said, 'We've been holding clandestine services since this lockdown began. It feels weird for us to act this way. People have said it feels more like an underground church in China'. Thus, the pandemic caused

churches to behave 'abnormally'. It is noteworthy that 14% of the participants in the present study mentioned 'Church building' as their church setting during the lockdown. This also shows that even though it was illegal to attend church, some churches defied this regulation. This defiance was also observed in Sherwood's (2020) study, where churches conducted services on Sundays, arguing that going to a church building 'is safer than going to a supermarket'. Thus, churches regard the physical meeting of church members as critical for their social and spiritual growth. The American Psychological Association (2020) concurs that when believers come together, they sing, pray, read scriptures, eat communion and conduct other social events, which facilitate spiritual growth and enhance social connections among congregants. The lockdown resulted in the weakening of congregational and social ties, spirituality, and religiosity of some congregants.

The above results show that the lockdown had spiritual, emotional, social, and physical impacts on the participants. The findings and discussion address Osmer's (2008) descriptive and interpretive tasks: What is going on and why is it going on?

Church activity missed the most

We asked participants to indicate the activity that they missed most during the COVID-19 lockdown. Table 3 shows the results.

The participants indicated the church activities that they missed the most during the lockdown. A significant number of participants (63%) indicated that they missed activities related to physical worship (praise and worship, mass prayer, dancing, and all-night prayers). Pillay (2020, p. 267) concurs that worship is an integral part of the Christian faith. The American Psychological Association (2020) confirms that these activities are important as they facilitate spiritual growth and social connections among congregants. In addition, Thiga (2021) suggests that when people come together as a group, cases of psychological problems such as suicide and domestic violence decrease. Pastors should take note that when people come to church they place a high value on music and prayer. Isiko (2020, p. 95) argues that COVID-19 challenges the theology behind communal prayers. Thus, its impact on the participants of the present study was evident.

It should be noted that participants were asked to indicate the one thing they missed the most. Therefore, the low rating of, for example, preaching, does not necessarily mean that congregants did not value it. Another reason for the low rating of preaching could be that they were able to access it through online means as indicated earlier.

Nineteen percent of the participants indicated that they missed activities related to visits (e.g. visiting each other at home, door-to-door sharing of God's word, hospital visits, and youth outreaches). Hollar (2020) reiterates that social distancing may translate into reduced social benefits of belonging to a church and less opportunity for in-person social interaction by church members, which may weaken their social bonds. Interestingly, in Mahiya and Murisi (2022) study, some participants supported social distancing and isolation as a positive Christian principle, following Jesus' teaching to 'go into your inner house, close the door behind you and pray'. However, this Scripture was meant to be a teaching against the

Table 3. Church activities participants missed the most.

Activity	No. of participants (N=21)	%
Praise and worship ^a	6	29%
Visitations	4	19%
Mass prayer	3	14%
Dancing ^a	2	10%
All-night prayers	2	10%
Preaching	1	5%
Sacraments	1	5%
Giving	1	5%
Church services	1	5%

^aWe separated 'Praise and worship' from 'Dancing' because dancing was only mentioned by participants from the Zion Christian Church, where dancing (in a particular fashion) is one of the main activities of the church.

hypocrisy of Pharisees rather than a discouragement of praying together with others. The findings and discussion here address Osmer's (2008) descriptive and interpretive tasks: What is going on and why is it going on?

Experiences where the church was physically unavailable

Table 4 summarises the experiences in which participants needed the church but it was not physically available due to COVID-19.

Most participants (57%) indicated that they needed the church when they encountered funerals in their families but the church was physically unavailable due to the COVID-19 lockdown. During the period of this study (March 2021), the number of deaths in Zimbabwe due to COVID-19 had risen to more than 1,500. (It should be noted that many more people were also dying from other causes). The COVID-19 period, therefore, put a great strain on the lives of people. Results of a study by Duke University (2016) revealed that 83% of church congregations contribute to some social and human services even to those outside of their congregations. Hollar (2020) argues that if the pandemic continues, some critical social capital might be lost, which may affect churches when the social restrictions from the pandemic lessen. Normally, in Zimbabwe, the church plays a big role in comforting bereaved families; including burying family members, conducting services, and providing psychosocial and spiritual support by visiting the bereaved families. Therefore, the absence of the church during the COVID-19 lockdown was a difficult reality. In this study, participants indicated that they lost close family members (father, uncle, mother, aunt, etc.) and needed the church, but due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the church was physically unavailable. Some participants (19%) expected their pastors or church members to visit them in the hospital or at home when they were not feeling well. Others (14%) simply needed encouragement and fellowship but they could not receive it due to the lockdown. Only a few (10%) indicated that they did not experience any such need. These results show that death in the family had a serious impact on Christians during the COVID-19 lockdown. Therefore, there was a need for emotional/psychological and social support.

Hollar (2020) further asserts that the less successful churches are at providing a genuine sense of community, connectedness, and support during this crisis, the more they will find themselves competing with other streaming media for the attention of believers. Hollar (2020) reiterates that while virtual services may be helpful, the lack of physical interaction among believers may weaken their social bonds.

The response of the church during a crisis may shape the public perception of religion. For example, in the United States, there have been several examples of religious services turning into 'super-spreading events'. A choir practice in Washington state turned deadly as 45 out of 60 people present at the practice were confirmed positive for COVID-19 and two died (Richard Read '80, 2020). A South Korean church in Daegu originally tried to defy the government and refused to share its attendance records, which slowed the government's response to a COVID-19 outbreak in the country. Such stories may negatively affect society's view of the church. However, many churches have complied with government requirements for social distancing and have been instrumental in helping community members physically, mentally, and spiritually during their time of isolation. Positive stories of church involvement during the pandemic help enhance the public's positive perception of the church.

The church has a long history of believers risking their lives during pandemics to minister to the needs of others. There are many areas today that churches also help, but much of the aid given by Christians in the past is now provided by governments. During the pandemic, healthcare workers were

Table 4. Experiences When Participants Needed the Church during COVID-19 Lockdown but the Church was Physically Unavailable.

Experiences*	No. of participants (N=21)	%
Funerals	12	57%
Sickness	4	19%
Fellowship needs	3	14%
None	2	10%

*Note: The items are sorted by number of participants.

the ones who were seen risking their own lives for others. These ‘crowding out’ effects may reduce the need for individuals to rely on churches to help them through times of crisis and rely more on the government. However, as stated earlier, government measures focus more on the physical aspect of human needs, but the church seems to have a holistic approach to human needs.

Churches usually help their congregants financially when in need. However, because of the lockdowns, churches that rely on high attendance to raise funds through offerings, tithes, and other methods were negatively affected, causing them to be unable to provide the needed financial support for their congregants and communities. This shows that COVID-19 had an overall negative effect on societal religiosity. Forsyth (2014) concurs that ‘groups not only satisfy the need to belong, they also provide members with information, assistance, and social support’. The findings and discussion here address Osmer’s (2008) descriptive and interpretive tasks: What is going on and why is it going on?

Preferred church setting after COVID-19

Table 5 shows the preferences of participants in terms of church settings after COVID-19.

The majority (62%) of participants indicated that a church building would be the best church setting after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy that although most participants used online/digital-based platforms (WhatsApp, online church, YouTube) during the lockdown (Table 2), they still felt that a church building would be the best church setting after COVID-19. This means that the availability of online platforms did not change their preferred church setting. Participants who selected ‘TV church service’ were more than those who selected ‘Online church’ and WhatsApp. Although it was not specified in this current study which TV channels or programs were being referred to, it is commonly known that various channels air Christian programs, both local and international. Some such channels are easily accessible without paying subscriptions, whereas attending an online church and accessing WhatsApp require data. The COVID-19 lockdown generally saw an increase in house churches, which Simson (1999) terms ‘returning to the roots’; however, very few (5%) participants viewed the house church as the best church setting after the lockdown. During the lockdown, YouTube videos/audios were used by some participants (10%) as an option for church service; however, no participant indicated that they would prefer it as a church setting after COVID-19. A Queen’s University Belfast study on behalf of the Irish Council of Churches found that 70% of faith leaders said they ‘would retain aspects of their online ministries when restrictions on public gatherings are lifted’ (Gledhill, 2020). The findings and discussion here address Osmer’s (2008) normative task: What ought to be going on?

Responding to future pandemics

Seven suggestions emerged from the participants’ responses regarding how the church should respond to future pandemics (Table 6).

Acquiring technology

The highest number of participants (36%) mentioned the need for technology in the church. The issues mentioned concerning technology included putting technological systems in place (having a dedicated

Table 5. Preferred church setting after COVID-19.

Church setting	No. of participants (N=21)	%
Church building	13	62%
TV church service	3	14%
Online church	2	10%
WhatsApp	1	5%
House church	1	5%
Open space	1	5%
YouTube videos/audios	0	0%
Other (please specify)	0	0%

Table 6. Suggestions for response to future pandemics.

Suggestion	No. of mentions	%
Acquire technology	9	36%
Set money aside	4	16%
Follow existing regulations	4	16%
Improve infrastructure	3	12%
Do research	2	8%
Educate congregants	2	8%
Trust God	1	4%
Grand Total	25	100%

TV channel, having an online church system with online programs and platforms), acquiring technological skills, and then teaching and empowering congregants on how to use the technology (e.g. how to interact with others online). The use of WhatsApp as an alternative way to run church activities should be encouraged because it is easily accessible and affordable to many.

Internet service providers should consider offering discounts to churches and increasing- their bandwidth to allow them to run church services online without connectivity hindrances and to download and listen to praise and worship songs and sermons.

Setting money aside

The issue of setting money aside was raised by 16% of the participants. This is understandable since the technological systems mentioned above require money. In addition, participants recommended setting money aside to help the affected people. Some participants said that such funds can be generated through projects and other fundraising activities.

Following government regulations

Others felt that churches should simply follow already existing local and international regulations (e.g. vaccination). Therefore churches should teach their congregants to adhere to such regulations. Around the world, some congregations defied the COVID-19 restrictions and continued to gather in their churches, with some moving to different premises and others meeting covertly in their regular church buildings (Sherwood, 2020).

Improving infrastructure

Some participants felt that churches should improve their infrastructure to accommodate unforeseen eventualities. This would allow services to continue without unnecessary hindrances.

Research

Others stated that churches needed to have researchers who study what is going on around the world and help the church understand the realities. Practical theologians should help 'create true praxis within the field of practical theology' (Corpuz & Sarmiento, 2021). This is possible when practical theology researchers put their minds to the practical issues in churches and make relevant recommendations that help to strengthen the church as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Educating congregants

Participants stressed that congregants needed to be taught/trained on how to use technology and how to implement government regulations.

Trusting God

One participant stated that Christians simply needed to trust God for protection during pandemics. However, it does not mean that people do not trust God when they talk of investing in technology for future pandemics. It is simply trying to be realistic with the situation on the ground because even in the use of technology, God must be trusted.

Framework on how churches should respond to pandemics

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that disasters can occur suddenly. The church has a mandate to take care of the Lord's 'sheep' (John 21:15-17) as well as to be the 'salt of the earth' and the 'light of the world' (Matthew 5:13-14), and both Christians and non-Christians look to the 'church' to provide solutions when disasters strike, thus making the church an 'essential service' in such times. It is, therefore, important for churches to be able to respond to disasters, which includes providing spiritual, emotional/psychological, social, and physical support to both their congregants and others. The findings of this study showed that during the COVID-19 lockdown, congregants experienced spiritual, emotional, social, and physical challenges. Based on these findings, we developed the following framework (Figure 1) as a reference for churches to respond to future pandemics.

The framework is explained as follows:

Trusting God: Overall, the church should prayerfully seek God and trust Him in its response to future pandemics.

Research: Churches should do proper research to acquire correct information regarding any pandemic. This may involve consulting the relevant authorities (e.g. Government, WHO), practitioners (e.g. medical doctors), other churches, and congregants and recommending the appropriate response. The research process will help the church to understand the government and international regulations regarding the pandemic. The research team should also conduct research on issues that are likely to affect the church and its congregants. The research also involves looking into what technological and infrastructural improvements may be required in dealing with a particular pandemic. When pandemics occur, this research committee should be ahead of the others in finding the necessary information and recommending appropriate responses.

Creation of a disaster fund: Churches need to be financially prepared to respond to future pandemics by setting money aside. A disaster fund would help churches to quickly respond when a disaster strikes. The research committee may recommend the nature of funding that may be required.

Development of a suitable church setup: Based on the findings and recommendations of the research team, churches should not only understand government and international regulations but also cooperate as they develop a suitable church setup. The research should assist churches to identify the kind of technological and infrastructural improvements necessary to set up a suitable church setup. A suitable church setup is one that supports the spiritual, emotional, social, and physical needs of congregants.

Educating congregants: Churches should teach their congregants to adhere to government/international regulations and train them to use the acquired technology and improved infrastructure. Teachings and sermons should also help congregants to know what to do in pandemic situations.

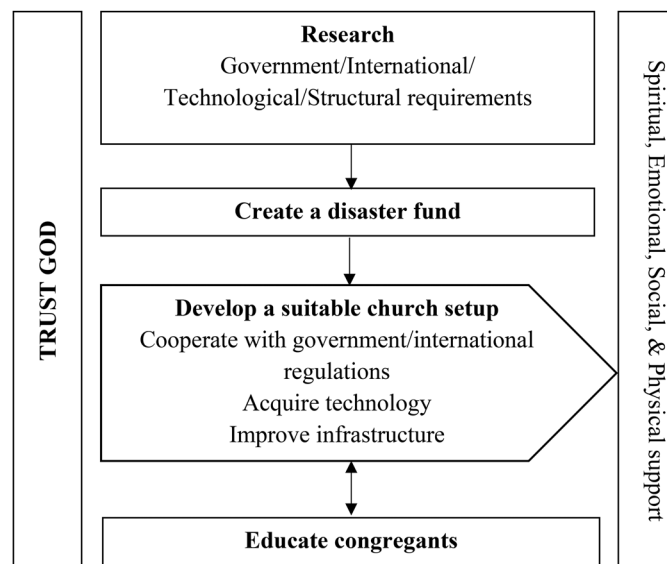


Figure 1. Framework for Church's response to pandemics.

This section and the proposed framework address Osmer's (2008) pragmatic task: How might we respond?

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of Christians used the WhatsApp platform to access Bible teachings and church services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other church settings that were significantly used include online churches and house churches. This indicates that alternatives can be found when people are faced with pandemics. However, the alternatives are not a preference for most congregants, as participants indicated that they missed several physical activities, even though alternatives were available.

Most participants stated that they missed praise-and-worship-related activities (singing, choir, etc.). Thus, during lockdowns, pastors should not simply post messages but ensure that good music videos are played or uploaded to allow those who want to join in the singing or dancing to do so. A significant number of participants stated that they missed activities related to visits (e.g. visiting each other at home, door-to-door sharing of God's word, hospital visits, and youth outreaches). Some missed praying together as a group.

The majority of the participants indicated that they needed the church when they encountered funerals in their families but the church was physically unavailable due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Some participants expected their pastors or church members to visit them in the hospital or at home when they were not feeling well. Others simply needed encouragement and fellowship but they could not get it due to the lockdown. Only a few indicated that they did not experience such a need. An overwhelming majority of participants indicated that a church building is the best church setting after the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants mentioned the need for technology in the church. The issue of setting money aside was also raised by the participants.

Others felt that churches should simply follow already existing local and international regulations (e.g. vaccination). Therefore churches should teach their congregants to adhere to such regulations. Still, others felt that churches should improve infrastructure to accommodate any unforeseen eventualities. Others stated that churches need to have researchers who research what is going on around the world. Another participant stated that Christians simply need to trust God for protection. Churches should not only put technological systems in place but also empower congregants, especially the older generation, with technological skills.

Based on these findings, we proposed a framework for churches to use as a reference in responding to future pandemics.

Limitations of the study

First, the sample size was small. The main disadvantage of a small sample size is that it limits the generalisability of the study findings. However, small samples are easier to manage and analyse as data collection is usually less expensive and less time-consuming. The selection criteria of using WhatsApp might have limited the number of participants in the study as only those who had shown their willingness were informed that their data would be refunded. If people had been informed prior to joining the group, we might have had a higher number of participants.

Second, not all church denominations in Zvishavane were represented, thus also limiting generalisability. This is because participation was voluntary and anyone who claimed to be a Christian and joined the WhatsApp group was allowed to participate. The researchers had no influence on the nature of 'Christians' who participated. However, the results indicate that all participants were 'churchgoers' who were affected by the COVID-19 lockdown.

Notes

1. In this study, the term "Church" includes all church formations found in Zimbabwe, that is mainline churches, evangelical churches, pentecostal churches, African independent churches, etc.
2. The term "Christian" was not defined to the participants; therefore, those who deemed themselves Christians and went to church, regardless of denomination or church formation.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, FM, upon reasonable request.

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