


The ambivalent impact of COVID-19 on churches: The case of Nigeria

**Author:**George C. Asadu^{1,2} **Affiliations:**


¹Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

²Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

George Asadu,
george.asadu@unn.edu.ng

Research Project Registration:

Project Leader: Ernest van Eck 

Project Number: 2400030

Description:

The author is participating in the research project, 'Africa Platform for NT Scholars', directed by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

Dates:

Received: 21 May 2022

Accepted: 19 Sept. 2022

Published: 21 Dec. 2022

How to cite this article:

Asadu, G.C., 2022, 'The ambivalent impact of COVID-19 on churches: The case of Nigeria', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(3), a7763. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i3.7763>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) since November 2019 has increased the challenges of human existence. Before the pandemic there were the issues of insecurity, religious and racial bigotry, climate change, poverty and so forth, which to a large extent have affected humanity negatively. The lockdown, which was introduced as a measure to curb the spread of the virus, exacerbated the anguish of the already tense world. Suddenly, the government proscribed gatherings of people in large numbers, thereby suspending economic, cultural and social activities. The continued increase of the COVID-19 cases necessitated the shutdown of worship centres. It was the first time churches would be shut down in Nigeria. The incident provoked concerns and interests in public discourse and intellectual circles. Therefore, this study examines the effects of COVID-19 on churches, using a historical approach and basically depending on secondary sources from available literature and Internet sources of information. The findings show that it was the lockdown that affected the churches most, rather than the virus. The suspension of corporate worship, sacramental rites, evangelistic outreaches and pastoral visits posed a significant challenge to the churches, affecting members' psychology and leading to a decline in church revenue and an increase in charity services. The study therefore recommends that churches be digitalised and house fellowships be revitalised.

Contribution: Regardless of the impact the lockdown had on the churches, it conscientised them about the proper use of their personnel and material resources. Nowadays, churches do ministry differently, adapting to changing circumstances and harnessing divergent Christian concepts of faith and divine healing by combining science and faith in health-related theologies.

Keywords: ambivalent; churches; COVID-19; pandemic; impact; Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigerian churches have been severely affected by the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Initially, the pandemic triggered ambivalent feelings among the churches in Nigeria. While some perceived it as God's punishment against the wicked world, others regarded it as the devil's attempt to destroy the church. There was also a feeling of optimism that the decline in church attendance reflected the stabilisation of the healthy branches through the pruning of the unhealthy ones. Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to say that COVID-19 has had an ambivalent impact on Nigerian churches. The swift spread of the pandemic across the country was alarming, but those infected responded promptly to treatment, resulting in a lower death rate than in Europe and America. However, the challenges that arose as a result of the pandemic's containment have had a significant impact on every facet of human endeavours, organisations and institutions, including the local churches in Nigeria. The suspension of corporate worship, sacramental rites, evangelistic outreach and pastoral care posed a significant challenge to the church, affecting members' psychologically and leading to a decline in church revenue and an increase in charity services (Ezechimere, Ogunode & Jegede 2021). In fact, it was the lockdown that affected the churches most, rather than the virus. In this situation, the church kept its faith and prayed for God's help and encouraged people to trust in God, who alone answers prayers and grants healing to an illness that has no cure. It also taught people to maintain personal hygiene, keep a safe distance from others and obey instructions from medical experts.

However, the great need to continue to share the gospel in fellowship, in season and out of season, even during a pandemic, is the reason the study recommends the use of information communication technology (ICT) and other technical means to reach out to members (Adebayo

Note: Special Collection: Africa Platform for NT Scholars, sub-edited by Ernest van Eck (University of Pretoria).

2020) but not ruling out completely the traditional physical forms of worship and pastoral care where possible (Falaye 2020). The pandemic highlighted the significant difference of Christian ideas about faith and divine healing, as well as the importance of effective integration of science and faith in health-giving theologies (Ireoba 2022). While Onyekachi's (2021) article on the impact of COVID-19 on churches in Nigeria examines the outbreak of the pandemic and the adjustments that churches made to their doctrine and liturgy, this study inferred that it was the lockdown that affected the churches most, rather than the virus.

This study therefore investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic spread, its consequences and the church's response, and it suggests recommendations on how the church should plan for the future in light of changing circumstances. To achieve these aims, a historical method was employed, drawing critically on available literature and Internet sources of information to develop a broad overview for effective presentation of issues, supplemented with oral materials gathered from some of the members and leaders of the churches in south-eastern states, from different churches who understand the predicaments of the churches in their various churches (see Table 1 for interviewee demographics).

Origin of COVID-19

In December 2019, precisely in the city of Wuhan in China, a novel disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) emerged. It was declared COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO). The acceleration of the spread of the virus shocked the world. Within a month it quickly spread across the globe, overwhelming the health systems of even the developed world, with a high death rate in Europe and America. It was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020 by the WHO (2020). It immediately prompted social and medical responses from the public and governments, respectively (Amzat et al. 2020). In Nigeria, response teams were trained in December 2019. According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) report on 28 January 2020, a coronavirus group had been set up to activate its incident system to respond to any emergency. On 09 March 2020, President Buhari inaugurated the presidential task force (PTF) for coronavirus control. With all these measures on the ground, the Minister of Health declared that Nigeria's health sector was prepared to tackle the virus.

The virus spread to Nigeria through Mr David, an Italian citizen working in Nigeria. According to the Minister of Health, Dr Osagie Ehanire, Mr David travelled home and on his return from Milan to Lagos on 25 February 2020, he tested positive for the disease. His case was announced a few days after his arrival on 27 February 2020 by the NCDC after he was confirmed positive for the virus by the Virology Laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, part of the Laboratory Network of the NCDC. The patient was treated at the Infectious Disease Hospital in Yaba, Lagos, and

had no life-threatening symptoms (Ehanire 2020). It became the first official case in Nigeria. The minister's concluding remarks helped to assuage any fears that these developments may have caused. In Ogun State, a neighbouring state to Lagos, another patient was identified and was discovered to have been in contact with the first patient (Kalu 2020). Some weeks later, the number of clinically confirmed cases rose to 81 in 10 states; all were imported by returning travellers. Thenceforth, the situation has developed with more cases occurring in various states of the federation.

Several high-profile political figures in Nigeria have contracted the virus; some survived while others died. The chief of staff to the president, Abba Kyari, contracted the virus while attending a meeting in Germany. On his return to Nigeria, he was diagnosed with the virus on 23 March 2020 (Akwagyiram 2020). Atiku Abubakar's son who came back from abroad, tested positive to the virus; Bala Muhammad, who had contact with him, became infected and was quarantined. Seyi Makinde of Oyo State and Nasir El-Rufai of Kaduna were also infected. Yet there were predictions about the severity of the calamity, which the virus would unleash on the most populous black nation. For instance, Bill Gates (Wasserman & Moynihan 2020) predicted that the novel coronavirus could hit Africa worse than China and that it could evolve into a pandemic. His opinion was based on the poor healthcare facilities, the scarcity of health workers and the high-level of poverty in Nigeria. Amzat et al. (2020) corroborated this fact when he said that there are still communities without healthcare facilities. Not even the presidential clinic in Aso Rock, Abuja, has the necessary medical equipment. Therefore, the WHO (2020) categorised Nigeria as one of the 13 high-risk African countries with respect to the spread of COVID-19. The deplorable state of the healthcare system in Nigeria lent credence to the fact that Nigeria is among the vulnerable African nations. In view of this situation, the best Nigeria could do was to prevent the importation and the spread of the virus by restricting the movement of people.

Restriction of movements and its consequences

Restriction of movement was indeed a better approach to situations like this. Human Rights Watch (2020), on 11 March 2020, declared that an outbreak of the viral disease COVID-19 had reached the level of a global pandemic and called on governments to take urgent and aggressive action to stop the spread of the virus. It also cautioned all countries to 'strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights' (WHO 2020). Therefore, various governments responded differently. Their actions varied from place to place. It was not until the case of Abba Kyari that Nigerians became apprehensive about the alarming rate of the spread and severity of the virus. If Nigeria had taken the pandemic seriously, its citizens would have maintained COVID-19 protocols, and Abba Kyari and other government officials

would not have travelled to Germany at the time. Soon after Kyari's case, Nigeria's airports, seaports and land borders were closed. Furthermore, an interstate lockdown was employed to limit movement to one's own state.

Nigeria's institutional impoverishment was exposed by the lockdown. The poor condition of Nigeria's health institutions and the rot in the Nigeria police force became vividly evident. According to a Dataphyte report cited by Akpede (2020), the federal government purchased only six ventilators in 2019 at N77.6 million. The six ventilators listed in the daily payment report for 2019 are allegedly intended to meet the needs of 200 million Nigerians. According to Ibekwe (2020), the country's estimated number of operable ventilators is less than 100. Imagine a country with around 200 million people having fewer than 100 ventilators. 'Not even the Aso Rock clinic in the presidential villa Abuja has one' (Onyedikachi, Iheonu & Ololo 2021:2). The Nigerian government has remained deaf to the outcry of its medical practitioners concerning the deplorable state of the health sector, thereby perpetuating the inefficiency of the health sector. This accounts for the reason why the rich and the government officials would always travel abroad for medication. Unfortunately, the restriction of movement denied them the freedom to travel out of the country. Some of them who were infected were admitted in the isolation centre at the University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Gwagwalada, a suburb of Abuja, where commoners are also treated; others were admitted in Lagos. Consequently, some of them who had complications and could not travel abroad died. It would be no exaggeration to say that Nigerians' penchant for foreign trips, products and services is responsible for its underdevelopment, which prompted Trump to call Nigeria and indeed Africa, 'a shithole' [sic] (Ali, Kasie & Frank 2018).

On the other hand is corruption. The magnitude of the corruption found among the Nigeria police force was a huge surprise. While the police were fraternising with motorists who flouted the interstate lockdown order, the same police molested the hungry citizens who walked the streets to buy food. During a time when the police should have shown patriotism and professionalism, they disappointed Nigerians by collecting bribes from the rich and brutalising the poor. For instance, Ishaq (2020) reported that '[d]uring the current lockdown, the police in Lagos arrested an officer who was seen in a video extorting about \$110 (£90) from a motorist'. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) added that law enforcement officers have killed 18 people in Nigeria since lockdowns began on 30 March 2020. This uncouth behaviour of the Nigerian police and some other irritant practices subsequently triggered the #EndSARS protest in October 2020. Musa (2020) observed that some churches initially saw the virus as a purely 'spiritual problem of people who have sinned, prompting leaders to provide theological and pastoral guidance'.

The social disruption occasioned by the lockdown paralysed the economy. People whose earnings were made only

through cash transactions, which warrant personal interaction with others, became penniless and famished, particularly as they were not given palliatives in the first 6 months of the lockdown. While in the United States of America (USA), Saudi Arabia and England, governments paid varied sums of money to their citizens through their banks, as a palliative to cushion the effects of the lockdown; this was to keep them safe at home. Such care was given to the Nigerian citizens belatedly. In fact, it was a bizarre situation that those who were locked down had nothing to eat. It was a hopeless situation that went beyond the victims' ability to handle. Bill Gates foresaw it when he said that millions more would die before the COVID-19 pandemic was over and that these deaths would not be as a result of the disease itself but a result of the excessive burden on healthcare systems and economies worldwide.

When eventually the palliatives were made available by both government and nongovernment agencies, Nigerians became suspicious of the government's intention to disburse cash to individuals. The hoarding of food and materials in government and private warehouses, some of which were burglarised by #EndSARS demonstrators, justified their suspicions. Even the leadership of the National Assembly chastised the implementation approach and demanded that the Ministry of Finance and the Office of the Accountant General account for how the funds/monies were dispersed and who received them. Few days after, precisely on 08 April 2020, it was reported that the office of the accountant general was gutted by fire. Nigerians believed that it was a ploy to cover up their shoddy business activities (Ikeji 2020).

Impact of the lockdown on the social life of the churches

The church is a component of society, and whatever affects society also affects the church. This is especially true because the church membership is drawn from individuals within the society. The effects of COVID-19 on the churchmen and women were obvious. Piety deserted some of them, as was clearly noticed among the low-income earners who could not manage the turbulent situation. The confinement of family members in the house without enough food and financial security heightened household tensions, which intensified in the face of economic reality. The situation was exacerbated by the disengagement of workers, some of whom were members of the church from their job. The circumstance necessitated that the church pray for them and financially assist them, but alas, the church was not meeting. The animalistic instinct in humans, otherwise known as 'Adamic nature', resurfaced in that situation. One of the most terrible features of the scenario was domestic violence. Moskovska (2021) agreed that '[t]his correlation between the pandemic and the rise in domestic violence had to do in part with financial insecurities'. Umokoro (2020) mentioned that the leader of the Lagos State Domestic and Gender Violence Response Team, Vivour-Adeniyi, stated that during the lockdown in Lagos, her organisation received 13 new instances every day. In March

alone, it received 390 reports with a 60% increase in domestic violence.

Impact on church worship

Churches are holy places, where religious activities are carried out daily without interruption from secular powers. In more than a century of Christian missionary enterprise in Nigeria, churches have never been shut down. Unfortunately, in 2020, churches were closed down abruptly due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not even the Nigerian civil war could shut down the churches in the manner that it was done during the outbreak. Not even the influenza of 1918 had the kind of effect the COVID-19 had on churches in Nigeria. The effect of the influenza on the churches in Nigeria cannot be fully ascertained, as it happened in the ancient time when social media was not rampant and the number of churches in Nigeria were very few, so that it held little or no attraction for journalists.

The abrupt closure of churches and other religious worship centres was alien to Nigerian society. Therefore, many Nigerians found the attitude of government toward the churches and places of worship to be quite repugnant, and they vehemently criticised it. Church leaders cautioned the government on the implications of the complete shutdown of churches. They reasoned that the church is a place of refuge for the despondent and that it should be allowed to open. Bishop Oyedepo was among the church leaders who agitated for the reopening of churches when he felt that the lockdown was overdone; he perceived the lockdown as the devil's attempt to paralyse Christianity (Folarin 2020). Oyedepo opined that the church is God's banquet hall, where people receive spiritual nourishment to keep them healthy and robust. Therefore, anything that hinders Christian fellowship is attempting to undermine what God is edifying (see Krippahl 2020). Nwachukwu (2020) reported that the Archbishop of Enugu Ecclesiastical Province, Emmanuel Chukwuma, challenged the government on Sunday, 06 April 2020, by leading a regular church service and declaring that the province will not close any of its churches because of the coronavirus outbreak.

The archbishop believes that God has answer to any human problem. Therefore, it was not right to stop people from 'running to God in worship in a time like this when the whole world is in confusion'. Donald Trump also supported this opinion when he announced that churches are 'very important essential places of faith' and called on them to reopen (Colvin & Miller 2020). Chris Okotie frowned at the Christian Association of Nigeria, clearly annoyed, as for accepting all the COVID-19 protocols, which according to him negated the potency of the gospel (Eyoboka 2020). The reactions of church dignitaries indicated that the lockdown was impacting the churches negatively.

Furthermore, Nigerian Christians have been taught to believe in the Almighty God, in whose service there is perfect freedom. It is therefore disconcerting to observe how, during

the outbreak of the pandemic, this belief was reduced to a mere recital of a religious act, rather than being all that it appears to be. The faithful were denied public worship of this Divine Being at a time when they most needed him. Ogbunyama perceives this action as a jettison of the Africa thinking mentality that religion brings consolation and encouragement in times of danger. This was a notion that has over the years spurred African believers to maintain an inalienable relationship with the Supreme Being. Pastor Valentin sees it as a disregard to the biblical instruction 'do not neglect the fellowship of the believers', and to a great extent, Christian worship was affected. Although Christians were encouraged to worship at home, the majority could not because they were not used to such a practice.

The matter was exacerbated by the fact that it happened within the Lenten season through the Easter season, which is the busiest period in church life. It was very difficult for Christians to stay away from these usual practices. Hence, many of them openly defied COVID-19 protocols. Government had to use the police to enforce the complete lockdown. Some pastors who conducted public worship were arrested and charged for breaking COVID-19 restriction orders. Ajayi (2020) reported that a Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Mobile Court sitting in Jabi had ordered an indefinite closure of the Shakina Glory Church, located opposite to Citec estate, Jabi, for holding church worship on Sunday. The arrest of pastors and the forceful closure of the churches in Nigeria had a negative effect on the image of the church as lawless.

Scoffers mocked the pastors and prophets who had performed miracles in the past, asking them to heal the COVID-19 patients, if they were actually genuine men of God. Interestingly, the failure of science and technology to cure the COVID-19 patients, who were dying in the thousands at that critical time, even in the developed countries, reinvigorated humans' faith in God. Given the substantial difference between the Christian concept of faith and divine healing, combining science and faith in health-related theologies is critical.

Effect on church ministry

Because no personal contact was permitted throughout the period, the sacerdotal functions of the priests, which include performing baptism, holy communion, marriages and funerals, were prohibited, depriving the faithful of the opportunity to participate in sacramental rites. 'The word sacrament is derived from the Latin word "sacramentum" meaning "oath of allegiance"' (Brand, Drape & England 2003). It is 'one of certain religious acts, ceremonies, or practices distinguished from all others in Christian rites as having been observed or recognized by Christ and given a certain character by Him' (ed. Pfeiffer 2005).

Christ instituted it as a means by which believers can receive grace from God. Jesus instructed that '[n]o one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit' (Jn

3:5) and that 'unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life' (Jn 5:53). His instruction to his disciples to do this often in his remembrance makes it imperative that sacraments should be observed regularly. Unfortunately, the lockdown prevented the regular observance of the sacraments, and the church members' spirituality was affected, which was the reason for the uncouth behaviour displayed in different households during lockdown.

As the members could not go to church, so the church could not reach out to them. Pastoral care, visits and counselling were also suspended, as the clergy could not have physical contact with members. Archdeacon Anwasia opined that the incident left the priest unfulfilled because when a priest is not engaged in sacerdotal duties, he is not living. On the other hand, the needy families and individual Christians who were supported by the churches could not receive such support during the lockdown. The lonely and the distressed, the sick and the bereaved, whose conditions the church would have strengthened through fellowship and visitations, were lacking. Certainly, it had the most atrocious negative impact on the church's life, to the point where pastoral ministry was restricted. New converts who needed constant admonitions and teaching of the word of God were left alone to grapple with the issues of life, even in such a harsh situation as occasioned by the lockdown. In fact, the gap created by the stay-at-home order was difficult to fill. The usual physical interaction of members, which has always provided encouragement to the weak and emotional support to the despondent, ceased, thereby exposing such members to depression and eventually death.

Those who lost their loved ones to the cold hand of death during lockdown missed the care and consolation of the church. As the bereaved were compelled to remain at home indefinitely, they mourned the deaths of their loved ones in seclusion. The few corpses that were buried had neither the church members nor church dignitaries in attendance; only a few relations of the deceased were involved. No sermon, no choir rendition, no offering for the bereaved. Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to say that church members who died during the lockdown were not given the supposed burial rite. A perfect illustration of this issue is the death of Mr Jude, a native of Ogbaru in Anambara State, who died in Nsukka, his place of work. His wife Juliet laments that neither the church in Nsukka nor the church in their hometown cared. They were forsaken instead.

Impact on mission and evangelism

On this globe, the fundamental task of the church is to be a missionary body of Christ. Hence, its spirituality is characterised by active engagement in mission or evangelism. Evangelism, which has always provided the opportunity for the church to go out to minister to the needy, could not hold during the lockdown. Crusades, retreats and conferences were shelved. According to Archdeacon Emeka Ezea, the Anglican Diocese of Nsukka was preparing for its Sonship Manifestation Youth Conference (SOMAYCO), an annual

international youth programme which is usually held on Easter week; some of its resource persons were drawn from Kenya, Uganda and the USA. Consequent upon the outbreak of the pandemic, the conference was suspended. The popular Redeemed camp in Lagos was unusually empty. It was like a shipwreck. Nevertheless, the church's adherence to health guidelines is necessary in carrying out God's purpose; otherwise, church members' health, and possibly others' lives, would be jeopardised. Holding church services in members' homes as recommended by health experts does not reflect a lack of faith. Rather, it portrays the church's affection for and responsiveness to those entrusted to its care.

Effects on church finances

The church is not established with money but with faith, yet money is used to grow the church. Thus, money is raised during Sunday services and other weekly activities through offerings, tithes and donations from the believers. Funds are also generated from occasional services like harvest thanksgiving services, conferences, workshops, crusades and so on. In fact, there is always a heavy cash inflow during Easter season following the richly packed programmes that are organised within the period. Alas, none of these activities were held during the outbreak of pandemic. Hence, within a month of the complete lockdown, the income of churches diminished, particularly that of the indigent churches. This affected the church adversely. Moreover, the clergy were famished as they could not receive their stipends because of the pause in cash inflow. Some churches had spent money preparing for Easter programmes before the complete lockdown was enforced, only to be disappointed.

One other negative impact of the pandemic is the loss of jobs, suffered all over the world. In Nigeria, banks, private schools and some other institutions disengaged their workers; thus, many of the church members lost their jobs. It has been hard for them to fulfil their obligations to the church and their families. Some of these disengaged workers are breadwinners in their families. The loss of their jobs brings untold hardship on them and their dependents. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a big setback in all facets of the church. It is

TABLE 1: Oral interviews.

S/N	Names	Status	Church	Domicile	Date
1	Ozioma Uzoma	Member, church committee	Methodist Church	Isoochi, Abia State	2022
2	Aloysius Agbo	Bishop	Anglican Diocese	Nsukka, Enugu State	2022
3	Emeka Ezea	Archdeacon	Anglican Church	Alor-Uno, Enugu State	2022
4	Grace Ogbunyama	Member, PCC	Roman Catholic Church	Owerri, Imo State	2022
5	Pastor Valentin Oga	Pastor	Presbyterian Church	Abakaliki, Ebonyi State	2020
6	Samson Anwasia	Archdeacon	Anglican church	Asaba, Delta State	2022
7	Juliet Izukanne	Member, CWO	Roman Catholic Church	Ogbaru, Anambra State	2022
8	Casmir Mbaegbu	Secretary, PCC	Roman Catholic Church	Idoato, Imo State	2022

PCC, Parish Church Committee; CWO, Catholic Women Organization.

a storm the church should face with faith in order to overcome. Ozioma argues that the church will only overcome this predicament by applying the principle of being a 'brother's keeper' which is clearly expressed in 1 Corinthians 12: 'if one part of the body suffers, every part feels it'. Physical distancing should be applied rather than social distancing, as the church will not stop helping the needy.

Some of the churches that have been online have maximised their usage to reach their members. For instance, Pastor Adebayo, who presented his Easter programmes online, made a good bold advertisement of it online, where he encouraged his members to pay tithes or give offerings. He (2020) urged them to make a direct payment to their GTB account or to visit the church website, after which he prayed for them.

Some of the churches that were not operating online before the pandemic hurriedly went online. That was a desperate attempt to salvage the situation. Members were encouraged to give their offerings electronically.

Churches without meaningful investments which depended absolutely on offerings and tithes were worst hit by the lockdown. Their pastors received meagre financial aid. Such pastors, prompted by the pangs of hunger, wrote their members to pay tithes and church offerings online. They were criticised for asking members to give offerings to the church during the lockdown. The critics were of the opinion that churches should send aid to members who were locked down, rather than the other way around. For instance, Pastor Ashmolowo's instruction to his members to pay offerings online was greeted with opposition on social media; one of those from @McbenSnow said: 'Governments are giving bailout funds, philanthropists are giving cash, landlords are waiving rents, then there's Ashimolowo, telling his crowd to subscribe to his only fans'. Another person asked Pastor Ashimolowo what he thought Jesus would have done in this situation if he was to be around. Would he have asked for offerings from the victims of the pandemic, or would he have donated from the storehouse so as to help the downtrodden in society? The request for online donations and the reaction to that effect on social media demonstrated that both church officials and members were having difficulties. However, some churches were set up to support congregations facing unprecedented challenges as a result of pandemic.

Church responses to the outbreak of COVID-19

The response of the church began from within. Swiftly, churches experienced rapid changes in their ministerial approaches during the lockdown, although the ministry remained the same. The churches have demonstrated that the salvation of human souls is a top concern in their ministry. They were devoted to putting on that spectacle regardless of the threat. The fear of COVID-19 could not stop the church from showing genuine concern, offering fervent prayers and giving care to the needy and vulnerable.

Only the method of operations was modified to avoid the spread of the virus. When the lockdown was relaxed, the church began its activities in a modified way. Firstly, there was a reduction in the number of worshippers in a given service to avoid crowding. By implication, some churches that normally provided one service could have up to five services in one Sunday, depending on the population of members. Secondly, there were adjustments to the sitting arrangement. A long pew that normally contains seven persons would now take two persons at a time. Thirdly, hand sanitisers were given to members to always rub their hands, and sanitary buckets were kept at all the entrances of the church for washing of hands. Members were only allowed into the church with their nose masks worn over their faces. The campaign for neatness and cleanliness became the order of the day.

The worst-case scenario was changed as churches responded quickly to the problems of COVID-19. Some members, in spite of their own challenges, willingly contributed to that programme. Churches with substantial investment running into millions of dollars gave palliatives not only to their hunger-stricken members but also to the government's effort in cushioning the effect of the lockdown. For instance, Orjinmo (2020) observed that the Redeemed Christian Church of God donated 200 000 hand gloves, 8000 hand sanitisers and 8000 surgical face masks to the Lagos State government. Pastor Odumeje of the Mountain of Holy Ghost Intervention Church shared not less than 500 cartons of Indomie, 3000 tubers of yam, rice and other food items, not only for his church members but also for others, regardless of their religious affiliation. As good as this programme was, its main challenge was that it was not enough for the teeming needy population across the nation. Although not all the hungry members received palliatives from church or government, people who had strong connections with the church during the lockdown endured it best.

The restriction of people from large gatherings made the church adjust its ministerial activities in order to align itself with the new order of the Nigerian government. Churches began to reinvest in small groups where they could have one-on-one ministry to sustain relationships for better discipleship. For instance, some churches' income was growing even when the attendee numbers were down. This suggests two things, firstly that those who are properly disciplined remained committed and secondly that the church had invested in income-yielding projects that were sustaining its financial prowess. The drop in the number of church attendance represents the pruning of dead branches for the healthy ones to stabilise (Jn 15:1-2). Hence, it is not out of place to suggest that more attention should be given to the people through good human relationships than just focusing on structural development. Thus, the relationship which was witnessed during the abrupt lockdown should continue.

In essence, the lockdown conscientised the churches about the proper usage of their available human and material

resources. Over-dependence on foreign resource persons was almost becoming a norm until the outbreak of the pandemic, when it virtually became impossible to move from one city to another. Bishop Agbo remarked that some vicars were of the habit of abandoning their presbytery for preaching appointments outside their domain. These types of workers are nicknamed workaholics. But COVID-19 has shown that it is not about human effort but about Divine willingness. Humans were chased inside during the pandemic but the finger of God protected and directed the body of Christ. No doubt the churches have learnt to reshape their role within the changing society. It was dawning on the churches that they should do ministry differently by planning for the future in light of changing circumstances.

A few months after the lockdown came new opportunities for churches to service their communities through social care activities. Prosperity preaching, which had taken centre stage, dwindled and the true religion, which is the care of widows and the downtrodden, was revamped. Church leaders who were always at the receiving end for the first time were compelled by the circumstances to give help to the poor. Church members are now bonding and sharing; thus, cases of crisis in the churches have been whittled down for now. Attention is given to finding new ways of doing church business. In this regard, ICT has proven to be important. As a result of the huge success of using ICT to propagate the gospel, many individuals began to join in online activities. Hunter (2020) is optimistic that online church is not going away anytime soon. Online services will serve those unable to attend in person and retain the new evangelistic opportunities this technology allows. He also advises that pastors should continue to utilise the convenience of Zoom and other video call platforms. Certainly, the churches have learnt to reshape their roles within a changing society. Many Nigerians have appreciated the work and prayers of digitised churches for them and their entire communities. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world in all dimensions of human life. The world is not going to be the same anymore.

Recommendations

The above analysis of the impact of COVID-19 to date prompts the following recommendations:

- While the lockdown in Nigeria has been lifted, infection rates in other nations are still rising. Thus, the churches should not rest on their laurels. Rather, they should continue to respond to the pandemic's difficulties among the most vulnerable people, particularly refugees and displaced people who are in the Internally Displaced Persons' Camps, without abandoning other potentially life-saving measures that are already in place.
- Because the virus can easily spread within communities through traditional means used by churches and other religious bodies, new methods of pastoral ministry which would not involve large congregations should be adopted. There should be a review of members' hygienic

discipline and ethics, and teaching ministry should be intensified, not only on issues of faith but also on other topical and practical issues.

- Church services should go digital to enable participants at home to feel as if they are in church on Sunday and during other church services. For those in the decreasing pews of mainline churches, more needs to be done to weaken the influence of mega-preachers who prey on the weak. Important activities should be streamed online so that Christians will not miss them for whatever reason.
- People should be encouraged to make their financial contributions online, while prudent in financial management, and diversification of fund generation should be diligently employed, rather than the usual dependence on members' contributions. Members' welfare as well as family unit ministry should be reinvigorated so as to assist the needy and vulnerable.
- Nigerian churches should train and retrain their ministers and ensure that they are conversant with the latest ICT, and knowledgeable professionals should be engaged to assist the church in maximising its digital and online presence.
- They should engage in holistic mission, to give to the troubled people a holistic vision of a God who loves and cares for them always. Nigerian churches shall thus be part of the rebuilding of the economy, communities and cities and not abstain from any part of the development process.

Conclusion

One of the most striking outcomes of the pandemic is the unanticipated closure of the churches in Nigeria, which led to the transfer of religious activities from physical to online activities. The action ignored the fact that Christians are linked to other believers by the 'fellowship' of Christ's blood and flesh. The challenges are enormous but would be surmounted by the churches only through holistic mission that includes social action. This is particularly made possible as the churches make no hesitation in utilising technology that has become more readily available in many aspects of human existence.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

G.C.A. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Adebayo, O.A., 2020, 'The effects of COVID-19 lockdown of churches in Nigeria on pastoral ministry: Matters arising', *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 6(6).
- Adeboye, E.A., 2020, *April 2020 Easter service*, viewed 20 January 2021, from <http://rccggwc.org/april-2020-easter-sunday-service-with-pastor-e-a-adeboye/>.
- Ajayi, O., 2020, *Lockdown violation: Abuja pastors, deacons, ushers scale fence to evade arrest*, viewed 20 January 2020, from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/05/lockdown-violation-abuja-pastor-deacons-ushers-scale-fence-to-evade-arrest/>.
- Akpede, B., 2020, *COVID-19: Only one ventilator exist for every 1.2 million Nigerians*, viewed 30 July 2022, from <https://www.dataphyte.com/latest-reports/covid19nigeria/covid-19-only-one-ventilator-exist-for-every-1-2-million-nigerians/>.
- Akwagiyam, A., 2020, *Nigerian president's chief of staff dies from coronavirus*, viewed 17 January 2021, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-nigeria-idUSKBN220001>.
- Ali, V., Kasie, H. & Frank, T.V., 2018, *Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as 'shithole, countries*, viewed 22 January 2021, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946>.
- Amzat, J., Aminu, K., Okolo, V.I., Akinyele, A.A., Ogundairo, J.A. & Danjibo, M.C., 2020, 'Coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria: Burden and socio-medical response during the first 100 days', *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 98, 218–224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijid.2020.06.067>
- Brand, C., Drape, C.W. & England, A.W., 2003, *Holman illustrated Bible dictionary*, Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN.
- Colvin, J. & Miller, Z., 2020, *Trump declares churches 'essential', calls on them to reopen*, viewed 01 February 2021, from <https://apnews.com/article/8a34b6599602dbd751f2c1fcb93387fe>.
- Ehanire, O., 2020, *First case of coronavirus disease confirmed in Nigeria*, viewed 01 February 2021, from <https://ncdc.gov.ng/news/227/first-case-of-corona-virus-disease-confirmed-in-nigeria, 1/28>.
- Eyoboka, S., 2020, *COVID-19: CAN can't speak for Christians – Okotie*, viewed 01 February, 2021, from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/05/covid-19-can-can-speak-for-christians-okotie/>.
- Ezechimere, I.S.E., Ogunode, N.I.J. & Jegede, D., 2021, 'The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on local church in Nigeria', *Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Culture* 2(3), 36–43. <https://doi.org/10.47494/cajlp.v2i3.80>
- Falaye, T.A., 2020, 'Impact of COVID-19 on the Church of God in Nigeria', *KIU Journal of Humanities* 5(2), 319–330.
- Folarin, S., 2020, *Opening markets, closing churches for COVID-19 wrong – Oyedepo*, viewed 04 February 2021, from <https://punchng.com/opening-markets-closing-churches-for-covid-19-wrong-oyedepo/>.
- Human Right Watch, 2020, *Human rights dimensions of COVID-19 response*, viewed 04 February 2021, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response>.
- Hunter, A., 2020, *8 ways the pandemic has affected churches*, viewed 04 February 2021, from <https://fieo.org.uk/resources/8-ways-the-pandemic-has-affected-churches>.
- Ibekwe, N., 2020, *COVID-19: Nigerian govt. begs Tesla founder, Elon Musk, for ventilators*, viewed 22 January 2021, from <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/385537-covid-19-nigerian-govt-begs-tesla-founder-elon-musk-for-ventilators.html>.
- Ikeji, L., 2020, *Accountant general's office gutted by fire*, viewed 28 January 2021, from <https://www.lindaikojisblog.com/2020/4/accountant-generals-office-in-abuja-gutted-by-fire-photos.html>.
- Ireoba, P., 2020, *COVID-19: Its effects on church worship and ministry*, <https://guardian.ng/sunday-magazine/covid-19-its-effects-on-church-worship-and-ministry-ireoba/>.
- Ishaq, K., 2021, *Mixed message from the president*, viewed 28 January 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52317196>.
- Kalu, B., 2020, 'COVID-19 in Nigeria: A disease of hunger', *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* 8(6), 556–557. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(20\)30220-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30220-4)
- Krippahl, C., 2020, *Nigerian religious leaders demand end to COVID-19 lockdown*, viewed 28 January 2021, from <https://www.dw.com/en/nigerian-religious-leaders-demand-lifting-of-covid-19-lockdown/a-53499533>.
- Moskovska, A., 2021, *The rise of domestic violence in Nigeria during COVID-19 and how to mitigate it*, viewed 28 January 2021, from <https://guardian.ng/life/the-rise-of-domestic-violence-in-nigeria-during-covid-19-and-how-to-mitigate-it/2021>.
- Musa, P.F., 2020, *Redefining churches' role in post-COVID19 world*, viewed 28 January 2021, from <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/redefining-churches-role-post-covid19-world>.
- Nwachukwu, J.O., 2020, *COVID-19 lockdown: Bishop Chukwuma dares government, holds church service*, viewed 18 February 2021, from <https://dailypost.ng/2020/04/06/covid-19-lockdown-bishop-chukwuma-dares-government-holds-church-service/>.
- Onyedikachi, M., Iheonu, A. & Ololo, E.E., 2021, 'Post COVID-19 pandemic Nigeria: Implications for good governance', *Journal of Public Administration and Social Welfare Research* 5(2), 43–54. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3632039>
- Onyekachi, G.C., 2021, 'The impact of COVID-19 on religious practices of churches in Nigeria', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), e1–e9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6377>
- Orjinmo, O., 2020, *Coronavirus: Nigeria's mega churches adjust to empty auditoriums*, viewed 28 February 2021 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52189785>.
- Pfeiffer, H. (ed.), 2005, *Wycliffe Bible dictionary*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA.
- Umokoro, 2020, *Amidst COVID 19 lockdown Nigeria sees increased sexual gender violence*, viewed 04 February 2021, from <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/amidst-covid-19-lockdown-nigeria-sees-increased-sexual-and-gender-violence>.
- Wasserman, H. & Moynihan, Q., 2020, *Bill Gates warned the coronavirus could hit Africa worse than China*, viewed n.d., from <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-gates-warns-coronavirus-could-hit-africa-with-dire-consequences-2020-2?r=US&IR=T>.
- World Health Organization (WHO), 2020, *Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19*, viewed 28 January 2021, from <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--11-march-2020>.