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THE CHURCH UTILITY OF ICTS IN NIGERIA AMID COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The Church in Nigeria has responded to the Covid-19 global pandemic via Information and communication technology (ICT) devices and applications. ICTs have changed, the old ways of doing things in all sectors of human endeavour. The church has since shared in the benefits and challenges that are associated with the utility of ICTs; but this has been increased with the upsurge of Coronavirus disease around the world. Covid-19 is a contagious disease which currently ravaging the world over. The findings showed that churches around the world are using ICT platforms for worship, prayer, and dissemination of information among her members and non-members, particularly on issues of Covid-19, which aim at maintaining physical distance and control the spread of the disease. This paper used historical and phenomenological methods of research. This paper determined the extent to which churches in Nigeria are effectively utilizing ICTs in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic. The paper also revealed the obvious constraints face among many churches and Nigerians on the use of ICTs in the fight against coronavirus disease; as many of churches and persons in Nigeria would not afford the ICT devices and applications. This paper therefore proffered recommendations on how Nigeria's churches would contribute to curb the spread of Covid-19, and the same time, worship their God.

Keywords: **Church, Utility, ICTs, Covid-19, Nigeria.**

Introduction

The outbreak of corona virus around the world has raised a great concern for institutions and organisations across the globe on how to manage their businesses, suppress and mitigate the virus. The Church and other institutions amid Covid-19 have responded quickly by using ICT devices and applications as a remedy in the control of the pandemic. The church before the upsurge of Covid-19 has responded to innovations in divers ways. As observed by Iheiirika (2008) The Catholic and Orthodox Churches 'exhibited ambivalent attitudes towards the media' vis-a-vis ICTs, which have bordered more on the negative. He stated that the Evangelical and Pentecostal strands of Christianity in Nigeria, appropriate the use of ICTs as part of their religious ritual practices. In the same vein, Hunt (2008) affirmed that "The Evangelical preachers have long made extensive use of ICT devices such as radio broadcasts, and during the 1970s evangelical programs on television proliferated, reaching an audience of more than 20 million" .However, in recent times the narrative as Observed by Ihejirika (2008)and Hunt (2008) on the utility of ICTs for church activities and programmes is no more appropriated to any particular denomination, as the Catholic and Orthodox churches have all embraced the ICTs (Ihejirika 2008) . Ihejirika (2008) rightly observed that "within the past decade, the religious application and implication of these new technologies have attracted a

lot of scholarship, especially in America." However, in Africa, Ihejirika (2008) work on "'In-line Religion' ...New information and communication technologies" (NICTS), Wobodo (2020) Ph.D thesis on "The Contemporary Church and Information and Communication Technology..." and other researchers of religion and ICTs are clear examples of African scholarship in the aforementioned area of studies in Africa. It is against this background that the paper examines the church utility of ICTs amid Covid-19 global pandemic, especially Nigeria. In furtherance, we will explain the terms such as the Church, ICT and Covid-19 global pandemic. On the other hand, this paper investigates the church utility of ICTs before the outbreak of Covid-19 disease; the church utility of ICTs amid Covid-19 global pandemic and obvious challenges of the churches via utilisation of ICTs in Nigeria amid Covid-19 global pandemic.

The Church

The word "Church" stems from the Greek word ecclesia, which simply means the church (Wotogbe-Weneka 2009). The word church has metaphor to diver meanings in the history of Christianity. According to Boer (2003) "It was in Palestine, the historic land of Israel, that the church of the new testament first appeared in history." From the Old Testament (in Hebrew) the word Church is translated *qahal Yahweh* means the community of God. In the Jewish background it is *edhah* which translates assembly like synagogue where people congregate for purposes of worship (Achunike 1996) . In furtherance the Greek word "Ekklessia" is a synonym of the Hebrew word "*qahal* Yahweh" and Jewish word "*edhah*" which simply means Church today. Achunike (1996) affirmed that the use of the Church is now extended to concrete buildings instead of people gathered for worship. According to Adetumbi (2017) the church is a congregation of people who share the same faith and fellowship together that have faith in Jesus Christ. As he opined the word church as used in the New Testament did not present church building, but seen as a concept of the universal community of believers. Scholars have argued the Church to be assemblies of the brethren or individual Church or group of Churches rather than just a building. The Catholic, Mainline Churches and other denominations believe that the church is composed of humans gathered together to confess their faith in Jesus and Worship God (BCP...pdf).

On the other hand, the word church would be better referred to various strands of Christianity. Church in this sense referred to churches and denominations such Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Protestant Church, African Independent Churches, Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal Churches (Wobodo 2020). The church in the history has continued to be an important and influential institution like other sectors on the utilization of ICTs amid Covid-19 global pandemic.

What is ICT?

The acronym ICT means the Information and Communication Technology. It is the collective term given to the (second and third) generation of information technology spawned by the merge of computers and telecommunications. ICT is a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, to create, disseminate, store and manage information. On the other hand, Information communication technology simply refers to those channels or media, through which or by which communication is made, and information circulated (Osbert and Osajie 2011; Walter Ihejirika 2008; Ilechukwu and Uchem 2014). As observed, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is an overall term that refers to any communication

device or application, comprising of radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network, hardware and software, satellite systems, as well as the various services and applications related to them such as video conferencing and distance learning (Wobodo 2020). In the same vein, Rouse (qtd in Johnson 2016) argues that ICT is a communication form which contains communication devices or applications like radio, television, cellular phones, computer networks (hardware and software) and satellite systems and the various services associated with them such as video coverage and distance learning. No doubt that ICTs have influenced various sectors of human endeavour including the church, called for the discourse on 'The church utility of ICT amid Covid-19 global pandemic.'

History of Covid-19 Global Pandemic

Covid-19 is a disease that currently ravaging the countries around the world. The coronavirus began in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Residents who lived in Wuhan had some link to a large seafood and live animal market, which suggest that the mode of transmission of coronavirus was from animal to person. The virus has been named "SARS-CoV-2" and the disease has been named "Coronavirus disease 2019" (abbreviated "Covid-19"), (Ozili 2020; Wikipedia). The first known patient of Coronavirus started experiencing symptoms in Wuhan, China on 1 December 2019. As of 23 July, 2020, coronavirus cases have affected 213 countries and territories around the world and 2 international conveyances. The coronavirus cases as at the above date is 15,400,761, with 630,781 deaths and 9,377,142 recovered around the World (Wikipedia; ncdc.gov.ng; www.worldometers.info).

In Africa, as of 28th July, 2o2o, the confirmed cases of Covid-19 from 55 African countries have reached 860,541; with 18,176 deaths and 506, 825 recovered across the continent. As observed a number of African countries have imposed a range of prevention and containment measures against the spread of pandemic(allafrica.com; www.africanews.com).

In Nigeria the first confirmed case of coronavirus disease was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus, caused by SARS-CoV-2 (Wikpedia). On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, and a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen (ncdc.gov.ng). In Nigeria as of 22nd July, 2020 , 38,344 cases have been confirmed by Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), 15,815 discharged cases and 813 deaths; as Samuel Oyekanmi observed the spread of novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) in Nigeria continues to record significant increase as the latest statistics provided by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control revealed above (nairametrics.com).

The Church Utility of ICTs in Nigeria before Covid-19 Global Pandemic

Religious institutions, especially the church in Nigeria before the upsurge of corona virus were committed to the use of ICTs in her religious activities and programmes. As observed in Wotogbe -Weneka (2012) " it is said that prior to the clampdown on Religious programmes in March 2004 by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, the African Independent Television (AIT) Chief Operating Officer (Chief Tony Akiotu) was said to have revealed that the station earned about N30 million every quarter from four (4)churches alone which present their religious programmes on the station, while Channel TV realized 20% of her annual income from three (3) churches that air their programmes on the studio. " Apart from Radio and Television stations, other ICT devices and applications are used by churches across the globe.

Scholars in Wobodo (2020) observed that church ministries nowadays have evolved to a brand, and that it was made possible through science and technology via internet technology (Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, Skype); Email (Yahoo, Googlemail); Websites, Blogs, Instant Message (Blackberry Messenger; WhatsApp) among other ICT platforms are used by churches in Nigeria .Wobodo (2020) observed that ICT devices and applications are used in areas of church administration and management, Mission, Evangelism, Prayer, Music, Discipleship, Security, Welfare, Ecumenism, Dialogue, Worship ,Education , Sermon etc. For example, ICT platforms have made Christian music available to people around the world despite space and time. As Wotogbe -weneka (2012) rightly averred that "Many Nigerians earn their living today through religious music by gospel musicians who produce these music in CDs/cassette and through instruments; and because music appeals to emotions, such music are in high demand..." The Church before the outbreak of Covid-19 used ICTs to improve her worship experience and for evangelism. According to Ogedegbe and Idemudia (2012)" Many people now hold the view that the idea of televangelism has been reduced to a mere avenue of advertisement and popularization of individual Church." We rather agree that churches in Nigeria have and used ICT's environment such Television, Radio, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. in their activities and programs. As Ogedegbe and Idemudia (2012) observed, Television (ICT) is no doubt an Avenue and a platform to reaching wide audience across the globe. Of course, Idahosa World Outreach (IWO), an ICT platform of the Church of God Mission; The Redeemed Television Ministry (RTM), an ICT evangelical platform of the Redeemed Christian Church of God(www.recg.org-); and The Anglican Cable Network, an ICT platform of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) are few among others church ICT platforms in Nigeria.

The Church Utility of ICTs amid Covid-19 Global Pandemic

As we observed, the church quickly responded to the coronavirus outbreak by practicing and teaching her doctrines and faith via ICTs. As we opined "The wheels of ICT have a phenomenological influence on the fight against corona virus across the globe, in the dissemination of information about its crunch and havoc to almost all human sectors. The church-like other sectors have responded to the fight against Corona virus through the use of ICT devices and applications" (Wobodo 2020). As we observed many of the Churches in the World have responded to the upsurge of Covid-19 by asking their members to joint their services, activities/programmes via ICTs. Casey Cep On 29 March 2020(www. Newyorker.com) wrote "The Gospel in a time of social distance: Turning Outward to one another as coronavirus locks us down." She observes how "Many years ago, there was a debate in my rural church about whether the pastor needed a cellular telephone for his ministry." In the midst of lockdown of cities and nations; closured of churches amid Covid-19 global pandemic, ICTs have been one of the answers in the world, called it websites, e-mail, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, all have enhanced physical distancing and the preaching of the gospel. On the other hand, with ICTs the church is ever open, socially and spiritually connected; as observed "The church does not close, only the building because we are the church, the living body of our Jesus and we are everywhere"(www.anglicancommuion.ng).

As we observed,"In Nigeria, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) amid an upsurge of Covid-19 directed churches in the country to conduct services online. Nigerian churches responded to the directive as they used ICTs to reach out to their members across the globe with the gospel"(Wobodo 2020). In Nigeria ICT devices and applications have been used for

different purposes such as teaching the gospel, addressing issues of Covid-19 disease, denying the existence of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, and asking for financial responsibilities from the public among others. For instance, Anglican Cable Network Nigeria (ACNN) an ICT platform of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) is used to reach out to the public on the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic and faith. Pastor Isaac Oyedepo (www.today.ng) on 14 Mach 2020 wrote "we are all encouraged to join a live broadcast streamed from our website and YouTube page. We are already victorious, although we are God's children; we are still housed in a physical body. The health and safety of everyone who walks through our doors are of priority to us at winner."

Some pastors in Nigerian have used ICTs to express their opinions or doubt on cause of Covid-19 global pandemic. On April 8, 2020, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome delivered a sermon with over 12,000 viewers on ICT platforms, in which he claimed that the introduction of 5G technology was responsible for the outbreak of the corona virus pandemic(globalvoices.org). He went on to alleged that the "administration of a Covid-19 vaccine will be used as a ruse to enthrone a 'New World'order by the Anti-Christ"(globalvoices.org). The Pastor's sermon has attracted mixed reactions, as observed, the UK authority had responded to this sermon as thus :"we sanctioned Loveworld limited, licensee of religious channel Loveworld ,for breaking broadcasting rules. A news programme and a sermon broadcast on the channel contained potentially harmful and unsubstantiated claims about the causes of and treatments for Covid-19" (www.bbc.com). Pastors Sam Adeyemi and Matthew Ashimolowo also have debunked Oyakhilome's claims. Ashimolowo dismissed the claims as conspiracy theories that had nothing to do with the anti- Christ (globalvoices.org). Amid this Covid-19 era, another Pentecostal Pastor, David Ibiyeomie has said that there is no coronavirus in Nigeria. According to the clergyman, governors and corporations are lying with the virus so as to get money from the federal government. In a video on social media, the pastor was spotted in his Port Harcourt church when he made his statement. The man of God revealed that malaria has killed more people in Nigeria than coronavirus." In his words as thus :

"I told the people, I said what is coronavirus? Coronavirus is only a virus that is the corona. People are making noise about coronavirus, to me, it's rubbish. Did we make noise about Malaria? Malaria kills more people in Nigerian than coronavirus. Every day, people die of malaria. In the villages, people die of malaria, so, why are we talking about coronavirus and closing borders" (www.legit.com). In as much as Pastor David Ibiyeomie claims are not totally truth, does not negate the fact that Nigerians are dying in their numbers as a result of other diseases and lagging health services in the country. His alleged corrupt culture in Nigeria's nation amid Covid-19 globalpandemic could be strengthened with the alleged misappropriation fund amounting to N40billion in the Niger Delta Development Commission NDDC (national new twists in nddc probe saga;m.guardian.ng).

Some Churches and Pastors amid Covid-19 global pandemichave used ICT platforms to pray and discuss other issues of church interests. As observed, Pastor Oyedepo in his service and prayer sessions via ICT platforms demanded for the reopening of churches, especially in Lagos State, amid the lockdown of the State as a result of the Covid -19 pandemic (m.dw. com). In the same vein, Mayowa Adebola (m. dw. Com) would not understand why the Nigeria government would close down churches, while allowed crowded markets to remain open. Some of the assumptions on the corona virus by Nigerian's pastors would have been

like what Apostle Paul described as "vain argument" (1Timothy 6:20). As observed, "Among Nigerian Christians, the resistance against government measures stems mainly from Pentecostal churches" (m. dw. com).

Financially amid covid-19 some churches and pastors have utilize ICT platforms to ask their members live, up-to their financial responsibility. for instance, asobserved, Mathew Ashimolowo, the senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), has asked members of the church to drop their offering online" (www.thecable.ng). Although, the use of ICT platforms for church financial transactions such as tithing, offering, seed of faith etc. are not new but it has been heighted with the outbreak of corona virus around the World.

The Church Challenges on the Utility of ICTs in Nigeria amid Covid-19 Global Pandemic

In as much ICTs have un-estimated influence in curtailing, suppressing and mitigating Covid-19 disease, there are challenges associated with its utility. The challenge of ICTs would have been first being blamed on the Nigerian government, as well as the good, bad and ugly situation of the country. The bad and ugly conditions of the Nigeria nation have been made worse amid Covid-19 pandemic. As the churches, other organizations and even the Nigeria government are struggling to curtail, suppress and mitigate the disease. The Church in Nigeria has been in difficulties in the case of efficient and effective utilisation of ICTs before the usurped of Corona virus. As observed some factors have hindered the call by Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and other institutions for efficient and effective use of ICT by churches in Nigeria. Of course, electricity supply has been observed to be one of the challenges the Church faces with regards to the use of ICT in Nigeria (Wobodo 2020).As Ampitan and Ige (2018) affirmed " electricity supply that used to be regular is irregular. Indeed, gone are the days when one can watch a programme on the television on weekly basis...But indeed, outage has become part and parcel of Nigerians." The assertion is a hatchback to effective and efficient use of ICTs by churches in Nigeria amidst Covid-19 global pandemic. As has been averred that ICT devices and applications cannot work without the aid of un-interrupted Power supply in Nigeria. In Nigeria, many churches and individuals have resolved into self-generation of power supply such as a big generator or small generator called "I big past my neighbour", solar panel, etc. but regrettably, many churches and individuals could not generate electricity vis-a-vis have access to ICTs in this corona virus era. Church-Hill Amadi, Kenneth Didia and David Chukwuigwe (personal communications 25th July 2020) Observed poverty, network signals, Data, ICT acknowledge, and aged of the user as the major challenges of church on the utility of ICT amidst Covid-19 disease in Nigeria. Poverty in Nigeria has been worsened in this Covid-19 global pandemic period, as a result, many churches and individuals would not afford to use ICT devices and applications. As observed before the outbreak of corona virus, "The people generally live in want and squalor in a land of potential plenty"(Uyanga 2018). According to World Bank Group, in 2004, 63.1 / of Nigerians were poor. Eboh (in Dimgba 2017) has that over 112 million Nigerians wallow in poverty. So, how would a person who live from hand to mouth access or have ICT devices and applications or listen and watch Church programmes.

Network signals and data have hindered many churches and individuals in Nigeria from efficient and effective utilisation of ICTs amid Covid-19 disease, as there are no network signals in some communities, localities or areas. As reported in Tribune online ng. Com "It was churches, especially those that don't have sophisticated offering facilities, would suffer

some monetary losses as the government 's pronounces might affect the Churches because of the low or non -payment of tithe and offerings while the situation last. Many churches and individuals cannot afford data neither do they have ICTs or network signals in their areas.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the Covid -19 global pandemic that is currently ravaging the globe and the World is still struggling with it. As we observed, the Nigeria church is part and parcel of the world system, and the church has shared on the havoc and the crunch of Covid-19 disease. The church, like other institutions have embarked on the utilisation of the ICTs amid Corona virus for the safety of her members, maintaining the physical distancing; and the same time preaching the gospel across the globe. However, we strongly posit that churches and leaders in Nigeria opt to use the ICT platforms to discuss substantial issues as regards to Covid-19 pandemic rather than making assumption on sissues of the disease. The church in Nigeria opts to use ICT platforms to direct the people alright about the coronavirus pandemic; teaching her members to obey all suppressive measures; the same time demand for modern health centers via good governance from the Nigerian's leaders.

Recommendations

In furtherance, there is a need for the church in Nigeria and Nigerian government to heed to recommendations as regards to the effective and efficient utilisation of ICTs in Nigeria, in this Covid-19 global pandemic era and beyond.

1. The church should align with the Nigerian government to provide electricity to communities and towns, which in turn will improve the church utility of ICT in Nigeria amid a Covid-19 era and beyond.
2. Nigerian's churches that are lagging behind on the utilisation of ICTs amid Covid-19 Global pandemic should awake and embark on the use of ICT for e-Sunday, e-Prayer, e-teaching, e-tithing and other programmes and activities; in turn maintain physical distancing.
3. The leaders and churches in Nigeria who are still doubting the existence of Covid-19 global pandemic should rethink, change and obey the government (NCDC, WHO) directive on coronavirus.
4. The church aligns with the Nigerian government to improve the living conditions of Nigerians, especially the Christian's churches who are wallowing in poverty, as a result would afford the ICT devices and applications; even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic.
5. Amid the fight against Covid-19 global pandemic, the Church should use ICT platforms to demand and ask the Nigerian government to build modern health centers quipped with modern technologies , beds, medical professionals and health Chaplains across the local government areas.
6. As we have observed in Wobodo (2020),'The church as an institution made up of professionals, should carry out researches through her experts such as medical doctors, pharmacologists, epidemiologists, traditional medical doctors (herbalists),etc. "not determining her spirituality, rather strongly anchor on God, might produce the medicine for Covid-19 cure.'

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