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THE CHURCH UNDER THE COVID-19 ERA: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper investigates the Church under the Covid-19 era the Nigerian experience. Since the confirmation of Covid-19 index case in Nigeria on February, 27, 2020, a lot has changed. The pandemic has disrupted numerious practices and activities of various religious orgnizations both orthodox and pentecostal churches. The long-standing traditions such as Holy Communion, Baptism, holding of hands to pray and the solemnization of Holy matrimony.The study explores how religious leaders conduct their ministry under the Covid-19 pandemic. The research method is used to analyse the data collected from both primary and secondary sources (Internet materials and journals). Findings highlight that religious leaders got accustom to the situation by exploring other feasible means to conduct religious activities via the internet.

Keywords: The Church, Covid-19 Era, Religious practices, Nigeria, Experience.

Introduction

COVID-19 also known as the novel coronavirus is a viral disease caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The disease originated from Wuhan Hubei Province, China on December 8, 2019. And has snowball to almost all part of the globe. The disease has incite a devastating shock to the health systems of most countries especially the western world. Presently, worst hit are the developed nations with aged demographics. Developing nations, mostly those with current weak health and economic systems will be inevitably submerged.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus disease outbreak, a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on the 30th, January 2020 (WHO, 2020). With over seven million cases globally as at June 7 (2020). Following the WHO declaration; the Coronavirus Preparedness Group (CPG) was constituted on January 31, 2020 in Nigeria. The World Health Organization categorized Nigeria as one of the 13 high-risk countries in Africa with reference to the spread of COVID-19. Nigeria is also among the Vulnerable African Countries, given a weak state of the health system (Marbot, 2020). The Coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 by the World health Organization (WHO).

The pandemic's devastating consequences in terms of the constant statistic rise in the number of reported cases and death propelled World Health Organization (WHO) and worldwide political leaders to take rigorous steps. Other efforts at mitigating the spread of the virus globally have been in the areas of collating data daily, developing efficacious vaccines and preventive measures to curb the surge in effected cases. The strict procedures introduced to

protect lives and contain the spread of the viral disease denote a major shift in the global lifestyles of the people in terms of social relations, economy, political, religious and education to mention but a few.

Nigeria too has her share of this grevious pandamic. Ebenso and Otu (2020) avouch that news broke on the 27th February that an Italian citizen from a business trip in Milan was Nigeria's first case of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The individual had landed at the Lagos airport two days earlier on a flight from northern Italy, and had later made a travel from Lagos to Ogun State, western Nigeria where he became ill and was tested for the virus and was confirmed positive and was promptly isolated. The Federal Ministry of health announced the confirmation of the first case of Covid-19 in Lagos State, Nigeria, in the same communication, the minister of health announced that the multi-sectorial coronavirus preparedness group led by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) has with immediate effect activated its emergency operation centers. The federal and state governments began to intensify efforts to contain the contagion by March, 2020, but it was late because by then, there were already 27 confirmed cases in the country. There is deep concern that the vulnerable public health system in Africa' most populous country will be unable to cope with the tempo at which the pandemic is spreading.

The coronavirus pandemic is developing very rapidly and its effects are felt in all strata of the society on a global scale. It is understandable that it has a very significant impact on the whole social life, including religious life. Religious practices, which have by the very nature, community dimension in almost all religions, in Christian denomination as well, are also changing under the influence of the pandemic. The common view of churches with regards to the coronavirus outbreak is that the end of the world is looming. Most Christians regard it as one of the signs of the second coming of Christ. They regard it as a divine punishment of our sinfulness. Christians understood it to be a call for repentance and honest commitment to God.

The objective of this article is to investigate the covid-19 in the christian era. In addendum, it examines the various responses of churches towards containing the spread of the virus. Unequivocally, the viral disease has orchestrated enormous changes in the religious observances of churches in Nigeria. Various aged long traditions of the church are no longer observed as a result of the deadly pandemic. As a result of fear of contracting the virus, it has brought about observable decline in the attendance of members to church services and its consequential dwindle in financial returns via tithes and offerings.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Church

The current pandemic has altered many activities, businesses, academic calender, soco-economic and religious activities round the nation. Religious activities were greatly affected because it has prevented members of various assembly from worshiping together. Most religious centers turned ghost centers. Many of the church member do not have a formidable spiritual stability to stand on their own. Most members rely on the spiritual vibrancy of other members to run their religious race. The announcement made by both Federal and State government during the lockdown, that no religious gathering or activities of more than twenty (20) persons should be observed and every gathering must comply with safety guildline; in an effort to curb the spread of the virus. Wearing of facemasks, washing of hands

with soap and water or any alcohol base hand sanitizer. As the virus continued to spread like wide fire to other part of the country, the federal government re-directed that all places of worship should be on a total lockdown (Kunle,2020). Some churches complied to the suspension of Church activities and those who flouted the rules were sanctioned and duly punished by the mobile taskforce set to supervise religious activities. In Lagos state, during a church service, the pastor of the church and four others were arrested for violating the Covid-19 regulation (Alabi, 2020). Due to the upsurge of Covid-19 outbreak, there was conspicuous decline in attendance to service for fear of contacting the disease. In furtherance to religious activities, during the Covid-19 pandemic some church leaders utilized the media to engage their members through live stream services like Instagram live, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom. While some also made their services accessible through Radio house and television channels. (Praise, 2020).

The infringement of COVID-19 pandemic on religious rites, Charitable works by religious groups, the congregation and pastoral care. All these go to show how the unilateral action of government has affected the religious community and by implication, the society at large. But it has also reveal the tenacity, generousity, and creativity of religious leaders who have invented new ways to practice their faith and to serve the community under the lockdown, occasion by the novel coronavirus. (Marshall,2020).

Readjustment in Sunday Services: The Coronavirus outbreak incited significant changes during church services across churches in Nigeria. One of these changes aacording to Christianna (informant) is shaking of hands amongst members as a sign of peace and welcome gestures after a welcome remark by the pastor or priest. Also in most churches, ushers usually welcome people with a handshake and thereafter navigate them to their seat. Often times, during the course of the service, pastors order their members to move around and welcome each other with a handshake along with positive affirmention as a way to stimulate a vibrant ambiance. Some members even go as far as hugging each other. In furtherance to this, new members are usually welcome with a handshake from ministers and fellow members afterwards, the pastor lay hands and pray for them. All these traditions has been suspended due to the deadly viral disease.

Another tradition which was disorganized in most churches is the suspension of anointing service by church leaders. Its a special service were by the pastor or priest make prophetic prayer declaration and anoint the foreheads of their members. Similarly, laying of hands on members who gave their life to Jesus Christ. Joshau (Informant) also adds that, healing and deliverance service was cancelled which is mostly packed with crowded people and over floaded auditorium. It a special service were the minister of God lay hands on people who are believing in God for one miracle or the other. This service according to Joshau (Informant) is well attended by people from all works of life.

There are some Pentecostal churches who usually pray by holding of hands in agreement and it usually called "Agreement Prayer" were the church members hold the hand of one another and pray a prophetic decree as instructed by the pastor or prayer leader. According to Grace (Informant) this kind of prayer is necessary to spur the members to be fervent during prayer sessions. It also enhances togetherness in the body of Christ. This exercise has been halted as a result of the deadly disease outbreak.

Poor Attendance to Church Services/Financial Depletion: The coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria led to a rapid decline in the number of people who attend church services in different churches. However, the decline in church attendance made it easier for churches to practice social distancing as a preventive measure to curb the spread of the deadly virus. Based on the information gathered from Joyce who is an ursher in her Church, attest that a church of about three hundred and thirty six (336) members, she recorded about sixty two (62) members in attendance on Sunday (5th of April, 2020). And the number keeps declining on weekly service as well. The house fellowship or home cell as it is commonly called, was nothing to account for. Immediately after close of service, all members are expected to leave the church premises at the end of church activities.

Another ripple effect of poor attendance to church services is the depletion of financial remittance through tithing, offering and church donations. Most church project are executed through tithes, offerings and donations from members. Some of the well furnished and equipped worship centers were constructed from the proceeds actualise through offerings, tithes and donation from members. The corona induced Lockdown has tremendously decapitated the financial muscle of most churches. Beside the financial situation of the church, some churches provided palliative for distribution amongst members, especially the less-privileged ones.

Some religious leaders like the Pentecostal churches, admonished their congregate not to interpret the absence of physical church to mean the suspension of their payments of tithe and offering. They urged their member to pay into the church account some even went to social media to call for the continuous payment of offering and tithes despite the droplet of income during pandemic. Udochi divulged that they usually realize nothing less than two hundred and thirty thousand naira (230,000) on a weekly basis through tithe and offerings but following the coronavirus pandemic. They realize a modicum of fifty thousand naira (50,000) in the second and third weeks of March. In addendum, as a result of the financial decline, some churches are faced with the challenges of paying their pastors and church workers. Kunle avouch that prior to the pandemic outbreak in Nigeria, some churches were unable to pay the salaries of their staffs as and when due let alone now that numerous churches are fiancially incapacitated.

Indefinite postponement of crusades organized by churches: Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, churches were planning to organize church crusades and outreach as part of their annual church programme. Crusade provides ministers of God an opportunity to evangelized a large number of people from various faith synchronously. More so, crusade are viable means for winning soul for Christ and also promoting a particular denomination. Crusades play a pivotal role in church growth and expansion. Some churches in Nigeria holds crusade annually or biannually. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) was to host a citywide crusade on Tuesday (24th March,2020) at Enugu was postponed indefinitely due to the Covid-19 outbreak. According to Precious and Chidiebere a huge sum had already been invested in the preparation process.

Readjustment in the solemnization of Holy Matrimony and Funeral Mass: Following the spread of coronavirus disease, some churche leaders adjusted all kinds of ceremonial activities in the church, like the solemnization of holy matrimony, funeral mass, child dedication,

thanks giving et al. These type of services, usually bring lots of people together such as families, friends and church members. Even though there is a lockdown directives, some church members are ready to flout the rules to carry out some of these services. A family friend whose wedding ceremony was schedule to hold on the (21st April,2020); her pastor consented to officiate the wedding on the conditions that the guest would only be the intending couples, their family members, and few friends. While some churches according to Blessing (eyewitness) wedding service she attended was not conducted more than 30minutes. Clement narrated that his late father in-law's funeral ceremony, was fixed on the 13th of March 2020. He proposed to his pastor to conduct the funeral mass amidst the pandemic, with the exclusive presence of the immediate family members. On the agreed date, the funeral service was conducted, the pastor and the family members were present at the grave site, prayers were said to the deceased with the family present after which the corpse was lowered. It cannot be overemphased that large guest usually spice up ceremonies but the fact remains that there are church members who can not be patient enough till the pandemic is contained.

The Efforts of the Church in Mitigating the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Novel coronavirus pandemic outbreak in Nigeria reduce some significant actions from diverse churches in Nigeria. In the bid to prevent the virus from spreading further, some of the efforts were aimed at bringing awareness to the congregate on the severity of the disease, and how to keep safe inorder to mitigate the viral disease. Effort were targetered at supporting people with palliative to help reduce their economic hardship. The researcher observed that the unanimous efforts among all the Christian denominations is prayer. Christian believe that the COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria can be precluded through prayers and unwavering faith in God. It is a time where all Churches across the country earnestly seek the face of God. Dunamis International Gospel Center instructed that all memebers should engage in a personal prayer for God to deliver Nigerians from the raging storm (Nkechi. Informant). Similarly, the leadership of House on the Rock, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministry (MFM), DayStar Church admonished their members to embark on a 30days fasting and prayer retreat beginning from Sunday 22nd March to Monday 20th April, 2020. (Joseph, Phillipa and Adeleke: Informants). Other efforts of the Church were:

Sensitization of Church Members: Among the actions taken by Church leaders was the sensitization of their members on the preventive measures of Coronavirus. It is an indispensable action to take as their are some members of distinct churches who can not access modern source of informations. During Sunday service and weekly activities. Most Church leaders do not hesitate to inform their members on the basic necessary preventive tips to curb the spread such as; maintaining social distancing, avoid shaking of hands and constant washing of hands with soap and water or alcohol base sanitizer. According to Maryjane and Monday, there isn't any Church activities that their pastor don't remind them to keep safe, wash their hands and maintain their distance with other people both at home, church and public places. Monday also said that his pastor ends his sermon with "please stay safe, Covid-19 is very real".

In many churches, the sensitization of Coronavirus is carried out via social media platform such as: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and whatApp. According to David who opine that Church members get updated on preventive measures of coronavirus through their church WhatApp groups.

Provision of Palliative: Churches in Nigeria practiced social action evangelism through the financial difficulties induced by the lockdown. Regarded as an efficacious means to broadcast the good new of Jesus Christ. Social action evangelism is a social theology which incorporate everything the church does to create justice in the public space because evangelism is about creating a world which can not deny the reign of God.(Ononogbu, 2011). Social action evangelism encloses the declaration of God's kingdom in our words and deeds.

The coronavirus induced lockdown without a flich of doubt championed financial mishap for many people mostly those who are dependent of daily earnings from business and those working in private owned companies. Thus many churches in Nigeria provided both members and non members with palliatives such as food items and cash gifts. The General Overseer's of most churches mandated their parish pastors to distribute palliatives to church members churches like Living Faith Church (Aka. Winners) House on the Rock, Dunamis International Gospel Center, The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Synagogue Church of All Nations, Deeper Life Bible Church, Faith Tabernacle, Christian Worship Center and a host of others. (Jonathan, Chidiebere, Godwin, Akpa and Faith: members of some of these churches).

Provision of Hand Sanitazers and Sanitary Bucket: Sequel to the Federal government directive on preventive measures to contain the spread of the viral disease. Some of the effort carried out by churches are provision of hand sanitazers, sanitary bucket, soap and water which are positioned at strategic places in the church premises. Also users ensuring members adhere to the directives of washing their hands before entering the church building. According to Ruth, her pastor instructed his ministers to purchase their own personal microphones as a means of curtailing the spread of the virus. Similarly, some of the chorister who were able to purchase their personal microphones made use of them while those who could not afford theirs, sang without microphone. In addendum, Kayode and Victory opine that hand gloves were disbursed for ushers and those who handle musical equipments.

Social Distancing: Another efforts of Churches is the enforcement of social distancing in their services. Churches with very large auditorium with many pews or seat practice social distancing. Before the commencement of Sunday service ushers organises the seats two feet apart to create demarcations between worshippers. During weekly activities, social distancing are not strictly enforced because members do not attend in mass.

Churches with large members strictly adhere to social distancing by increasing the number of services held on Sundays. According to Esther, her church usually holds two (2) services every Sunday prior to the pandemic. But due to the coronavirus disease the number of church services has increased to 3 Services, each service lasting for 1hour than the usual 2hours observed prior to the pandemic. Even after the virus is contained in the country, the three (3) services is much convenient for members to enable them attend which ever sevices they deem well pleased she adds.

Live Streamed Services: Churches in Nigeria were committed to the conventional way of worship which is the physical church services because it bring members together and create a family bond between the congregate. Amidst the upsurge of covid-19 in Nigeria, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) directed churches across the country to conduct

services onlline. The church responded to the directives as they restrategize alternative means of worship and evangelism through the use of ICT device and social media platform to practice and teach their doctirnes and faith through applications like Facebook, WhatApp groups, Twitter, Instagtam live, Telegram. As well as Radio and Television station. Through this medium the gospel of God can be disseminated to their members to keep their faith and hope in God alive. With this platforms, the Church is ever open, socially and spiritually connected.

The church as observed; does not close, only the building because we are the church the living body of our Lord Jesus Christ and we are everywhere. (Wobodo, 2020) observed that ICT device and Applications are used in areas of church administration and management, mission, evangelism, prayers, music, dialogue, worship, education, discipleship, sermon et al. Infact, many church leaders keep in touch with their members and also give them hope that the pandemic Will soon be a thing of the past in the country. The outbreak of the virus in Nigeria paved way for pastors in Nigeria to engage in regular media evangelism. It provides opportunity to minister not only to one's church members but also to people of other faiths all over the world.

Recommendations

The fulcrum of this paper was to examine the church under Covid-19 era in Nigeria. Based on the discussions and findings of this work, the following recommendation are proposed.

Church leaders should incessantly bring awareness to their members on the various preventive measures to preclude the spread of the virus. And also support their members Financially and material in any way they can.

Churches in Nigeria should openly embrace technological advancement because it is a practicable tool for publicizing the gospel of Christ in perilous times such as these.

Churches across the country should strictly observe social distancing and other preventive measures during church activities.

The church should also spur their pastors, church workers and members to have diverse source of income so as not to solely depend on the church for their well-being.

Churches should utilize various media platform and applications rather than suspending all religious activities till the pandemic is completely contained in Nigeria.

During post-pandemic, churches should modify some of their practices which exposes members to infectious disease. For instance; Holding of hands whilst praying, sitting very close to one another in service, and hugging.

During post-pandemic churches in Nigeria should endeavor to maintain personal hygiene principles such as; washing of hands, use of alcohol base sanitizer before and after service as a preventive measure of other deadly disease.

Churches that are highly populated that increase the number of services held every Sunday should maintain the service even after the pandemic is contained.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria incited a tremendeous change in the practices and customs of churches in Nigeria. Some age long traditions of churches were either altered or suspended such as Holy Communion, Solemnization of holy matrimony, holding of hands to close the service as a sign of peace, Baptism et al. The togetherness and happiness shared by Christians in various churches has been meddled with as a result of the need to maintain social distancing and other preventive measures to curb the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, this daunting period has paved an opportunity for Churches to explore other means of engaging with and disseminating the Gospel of Christ to both members and non-members. It is also a time for sober reflection on supremacy of God over his creatures.

The paper introduced that the church has made some commendable marks with regards to curtailing the spread of the virus by spurring her members to conscientiously observe the preventive measures as laid down by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC). The Church has better the lives of majority. Subsequently, the collective efforts of the Federal government and State government to curtail the spread of the viral disease in Nigeria, academic contribution focused on investigating the Church and the impact of the Pandemic to the religious customs and age long traditions of the Church and the responses of the Church are appropriate.

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