



Implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Church in Nigeria

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Abstract: Management of virus and disease outbreak has always been an issue. This is shown by the outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) which has affected the totality of human society. This study aims to assess how the church significantly view, approach and handle COVID-19 situation in Nigeria. The methodology used is qualitative and interview methods. The paper observed that the church because of its symbiotic relationship with the government is pivotal in management of the virus outbreak and regulation of human attitude regardless of the role of Legislators, executive and institutions, such as National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Through the religious philosophy of Kierkegaard, it was also shown that the COVID-19 has pointed the need for personal relational relation with God as a way of reducing anxiety and stress.

Keywords: Church, Human Existence, COVID-19, Nigeria, Kierkegaard

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Introduction

The Church in the 21st century experience Coronavirus (Covid-19) in a time when the world is faced with economic cum socio-political challenges. The disease which originated in Asia continent from the Hunan seafood market at Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Jabbar and Makki, 2021) has spread across the globe and birthed economic, religious, political and educational lockdown. Nigeria as a country tried to curb the rapid spread of Covid-19 through immediate lockdown of all sectors including the church. Eventually, several safety guidelines were stipulated according to the National Centre for Disease

Control in line with World Health Organization preventive measures against Corona Virus. The virus has subsequently spread to almost all the countries worldwide, having 438,968,263 confirmed cases and causing 5,969,439 deaths (WHO 2022). The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was confirmed at Lagos State on the 27th of February 2020 (NCDC 2020) whereas total cases in Nigeria as at August 1, 2022 is 261,473 with 3,147 deaths and 496 new confirmed active cases (NCDC, 2022). These statistics shows Nigeria's unpreparedness for such situation hence the need for this paper which examines how a well-planned and coordinated response approach from the church and the government can ensure adequate and efficient results in times of challenges and uncertainty. Globally, there is currently a total of 583,309, 091 confirmed cases and 6,422,511 deaths (Ukwuoma & Ugwu 2022).

Church leaders have played significant roles in national Covid-19 response. As a place and institution for refuge, safety, consolation, healing and transformation, the church have both physical and spiritual role because it understands the physical and spiritual need of the people. Being closest to the people or congregation in any particular area, it stands to be promoter and controller of human behaviours and practices that prevent the transmission of diseases (Wibisono, Truna & Rahman, 2021). Besides, the human being is a deeply religious being. If the information and laid down measures are not well managed and controlled, they might lead to anxiety, loss of faith in the government and religious leaders. Therefore, the paper intends to highlight church experience regarding Covid-19 and the measures adopted. This shall be done in seven sections. In the first section, we will seek to provide the reader with update on COVID-19 pandemic. In the second section, we shall highlight the interview sessions and in the third provide the implications of the COVID-19. In the fourth session, we shall relate Kierkegaardian religious philosophy to the events of the COVID-19 and fifth, state the positives strategies applied by the Nigerian church in curbing the disease. The sixth and seventh sessions shall entail the lessons and recommendation made by our study before a conclusive statement.

Understanding COVID 19 Pandemic

The word COVID-19 is an abbreviated word which stand for CO- Corona, VI- Virus, D- Disease, 19- 2019. The World Health Organization declared the virus a pandemic after it spread to different parts of the globe. It has its cause, transmission, symptoms, management, myths, misconceptions, prevention, how to limit transmission as services are going, and role of stakeholders in

the Covid-19 response. It was declared a disaster in South Africa through the guidance of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 (Kunguma, Ncube & Mokhele 2021).

Arifin, Wicaksono, and Sumarto (2021) asserted that Black and Asian people globally are more at risk from contracting COVID-19 because of deficiencies in Vitamin D. However, reality indicates that Europe and the West have higher cases till date. The disease is caused by a virus which could be found in both animals and humans. It also affects all ages. However, older people are at much greater risk of getting infected and experiencing more severe symptoms. The symptoms include: fever, tiredness, Aches and pains, sore throat, diarrhea, fatigue, dry cough and breathing difficulty, leading to death. One can contract the disease through direct physical contact with affected persons or indirectly through contact with patient respiratory secretions, contaminated surfaces and equipments. Direct method of transmitting the virus are nasal or throat droplets and hand contact while the indirect are tables/chairs, clothing, toiletries, sharing eating plates and spoons, computer, handkerchiefs, telephones doorknobs and so on. Looking at the symptoms, one finds similarities with HIV, malaria and Flu. Test conduction is the best way to confirm if one is infected even though transmission of the virus begins even before symptoms appear. It is only when a test is carried out in an approved government laboratory by an authorized government worker and it comes out positive that one can be properly said to be diagnosed as having COVID-19. Prevention is the key to fight the disease because there is no cure at the moment even though there are approved vaccines and doses for the virus. The strategies for the prevention of COVID-19 are respiratory hygiene, hand hygiene, social distancing and use of facemask (Adhikari, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a unique humanitarian and public health crisis (Dong and Bouey 2020). The pandemic did not only confine itself as a mere health emergency or crisis but also impacted European security and defense (Meyer, Bricknell and Pacheco 2021) as well as Chinese economy (McKibbin and Fernando 2020). Similarly, in Nigeria, it has affected all sectors of the economy. The formation of Disease Control Task force was a proactive measure taken by the Nigerian government. Their impact is well felt in Nigeria (total lockdown and observation of COVID-19 protocols, ban on public gatherings including religious gatherings) (Ukwuoma & Ugwu 2022).

There are rumours about the COVID-19. First, some argue that it is the rich people's disease; that it is not real (Ogunbiyi, 2021). Secondly, there are opinions that it does not survive in hot environments; that it can be spread through

mosquito bite; that it only affects older people; and that it has natural remedies like garlic, palm oil or lemon which could be used to prevent or treat infected people. Thirdly, there are speculations that rinsing the nose and gargling with warm salt water prevents contacting of the virus; and that spraying alcohol or bleach over one's body will kill the coronavirus. Four, that chloroquine and antibiotics are used to prevent and treat COVID-19. However, the responses of the government and nations of the world prove that COVID-19 is real and it kills. Regarding the use of herbal cures for COVID-19 scientists have made a breakthrough in herbal remedies for COVID-19 with the discovery of green seaweed, licorice, gum laced with plant-grown protein, and anti-malaria plants. This is coming on the backdrop that current antiviral drugs for the treatment of COVID-19 are neither broadly accepted nor highly effective (Muanya, 2021). The vaccines are available in various health centers.

Interview Records

We interviewed a Catholic priest under the Diocese of Nsukka in Enugu State of Nigeria (Rev. Fr. Jude Ugwueke) in his parish home on March 2021. He stated that COVID-19 was a horrible experience not just for the church but the entire world. He noted how the climax of the Catholic Church activities (Easter celebrations) was for the very first time not celebrated (no Palm Sunday, no Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday- the Triduum). Also, there was a stop to celebration of mass everywhere following the order from the Bishop of the Diocese of Nsukka, Bishop (Prof.) Godfrey Onah causing a devastating experience for the priests who went into isolation. narration, due to the Catholic Church hierarchy, the priests had no powers to act individually or on the guidelines given by government until the Diocesan Bishop corroborated with the government that such guidelines (such as suspension of masses and church activities) became effective and strictly adhered to. The priest also mentions that the Bishop directed that masses should not exceed one hour, a measure which was also sustained by the God's Kingdom Society as narrated by one of its Ministers (Min. G. O. Nnadi). In stating further implications of the COVID-19 on the church in Nigeria the priest mentioned that the usual August returns/ meetings from which the Catholic Church get revenue was suppressed for two reasons. One, the August activity entailed people travelling from one place to another, and as such going ahead with it was going to increase the chances of the virus transmission. Thus, the suspension of the August activity was an act to curtail the spread of the virus. Two, the activity was called off because of its financial burden on parishioners.

When asked how the church managed to survive the lockdown since tithes, offerings and thanksgiving donations formed the bulk of priests' and church sustenance; the priest stated that they received lots of charity from individuals and bodies. Also, the Bishop gave palliatives to parishes. He then noted that the COVID-19 is a challenge to the church as it asks it can survive without offerings and collections from members. The priest also noted the symbiotic relationship that exist between the church and the government in that by using the church to provide palliatives for the people, the church ensured such got to the poor of the poorest or the targeted audience. He shared out how the Bishop on his own gave out palliatives including food items and money to be distributed to the parishioners. As a priest, he opened a Whatsapp page where he reached out to the rich to help the less privileged and how these class of people responded probably out of fear that perhaps the world was coming to an end. Thus, perhaps the rich are only stingy because they think the end of the world is still way far away or that they shall never die. The priest also mentioned how the words of encouragement to the parishioners went a long way in reviving dampened spirits and asking them to continue in their prayers to God for interventions. During the course of the pandemic the priest also acquired a public mass speaker so that during Sunday Mass celebrations people can be in their homes to follow the activities.

In the second interview we conducted online via Whatsapp, a minister of the God's Kingdom Society in Enugu State (Min. G. O. Nnadi) narrated how the COVID-19 is clearly an act or creation of the Devil. His reasons were that it affected the good, the bad and the ugly and that the Almighty God would never punish both the righteous and the wicked together (Genesis 18:25). With this he thrashed the claim of certain pastors that the COVID-19 is an act of God to call the nations to order and to warn them of their wickedness. The clergyman went further to state that God has blessed man with the attributes of wisdom and power to enable him withstand, manage and solve his problems, the COVID-19 inclusive, hence, the invention of the various vaccines and guidelines which has helped in the reduction of the spread and contacting of the virus.

Having stated the above fact, the clergyman noted the several ways the Church was affected by the COVID-19. These include the fact that its congregation were unable to assemble at a stage for worship and when they did they sang praises with mouths covered; restriction of movement and great fright. For the clergyman, the outbreak of the COVID-19 also showed that there are true churches, true men of God and false churches, false men of

God (Matthew 7:13, 14, 21-23, Jeremiah 3:15). Other implications he mentioned include the loss of jobs suffered by adherents, stress and anxiety, shutdown of businesses belonging to adherents resulting in little or no tithes and offerings. Also, the church was unable to carry on with its evangelical works in the form of proposed public lectures in designated areas at Enugu (Akaeze and Amodu communities) in like manner the 'doctrinal services' for Abakpa Nike and Nara branches in Enugu zone of the church could not be conducted. The clergyman further described the effect of the virus on them in the form of a man who sharpens his cutlass only to keep it under the bed but however lauded the fact that virus caused members and branches to purchase equipment to enable them stream and watch online the activities of the church from the headquarters, Warri, Delta State, Nigeria in a show of great faith. The minister also narrated how the COVID-19 caused a stop to its major activities and celebrations including the yearly Christian Feast of Tabernacles, Freedom Day, and Youth Assembly and so on.

Implications of COVID-19 on the Church in Nigeria

Having reported the interviews it is obvious that COVID-19 has disrupted many aspects of life, such as the health sector, economy, and education (Li *et al.*, 2020). Educational institutions saw forced closures, and students were required to remain at home which has led to procedural changes in the day-to-day operations of academic institutions. Because of the pandemic, digital advances have been made in the global higher education sector (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020). Colleges and universities have canceled classes, and administrators have struggled to convert courses into an online format in a matter of days or weeks. To efficiently deliver this online content, educational institutions have created official websites and applications to enable students to continue their education. Several academic institutions have implemented "e-learning," a web-based learning ecosystem for the dissemination of information and communication to support instructors in their transition to online learning (McMurtrie, 2020).

In like manner, the Church faced the challenge of understanding how people perceive the virus and how to change certain attitudes to combat the virus. Despite the fact that the virus has done a whole lot of harm, it has also done the church and the world at large some good and these are what the paper refers to as implications. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the church in various ways, including the cancellation of the worship services of various religions and Christian denominations and the closure of Sunday schools, as well as

the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals (Burke, 2020). Many churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples now worship through livestream amidst the pandemic (Parke, 2020). Other churches offer free COVID-19 testing to the public and many even encourages its adherents to take the vaccines and doses (Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, 2021). Some went as far as liaising with health officials to come to their worship centers to carry out these activities like the God's Kingdom Society. In respect to this point, the Executive Director of the National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA), Faisal Shuaib, expressed his thanks to the Christian leaders who have given the vaccination team access to their churches and their members to receive COVID-19 vaccine during Sunday services. This is not a new thing as noted by Faisal because Christian leaders across the country have been formidable pillars of support in all primary health care interventions and also in the elimination of the polio virus (Adebowale, 2021). Below are some of the listed implications of the COVID-19 on the Church in Nigerian.

1. Socio-economic Implications: COVID-19 is affecting the global economy as there are restriction on the movement of people and businesses which involves exchange of goods and services. The administration, operation and management of industries, companies and business organization experience some losses in income and jobs which significantly affect the economy of countries worldwide. The pandemic affected foreign investors from moving from one country to another (WHO, 2020). These were businesses from which church adherents supported the Church of God. Besides, the revenue of the church is driven by the finances of members. The incidence of the COVID-19 stopped closer interaction and meeting between adherents, and prevented gatherings in order to hear the gospel of truth and as well had a negative effect on the major revenue of the church which is payment of offering and tithes as people stayed back in their homes struggling to even feed themselves. Again, Nigeria is well known to be a place where many church leaders portray themselves as miracle workers and the COVID-19 was a time for them to prove their powers. Unfortunately, they could not proffer solutions to the disease instead some used it to exploit their vulnerable members and even created online platforms for offering and tithe collections. A certain pastor was reported to have even boasted that the COVID-19 was a blessing to him as it enabled him to acquire another private jet while it lasted (Vanguard, 2021).

2. Socio-cultural Implications: COVID-19 has redefined the world, its social life and every facet of human way of life. This is because people's belief and way of life also affects the regulation of isolation, quarantine, and distancing

from sick people. Thus, the deadly effects of a disaster such as COVID-19 can be reduced by implementing the following vital strategies: anticipating, educating, and informing those at risk (Rambau, Beukes & Frazer 2012). What about burial and wedding ceremonies. It is found that during this period a lot of burials and weddings which usually attracted much crowd and expenses, especially in the Igboland were carried out in the attendance of few people wearing their facemasks thereby curtailing the squandermania mentality as shown by Chukwudum Okolo (Okolo, 1994). The COVID-19 has thus helped the church to pass across a cultural change which it has been advocating for in years as cultural events that were considered sacrosanct were cancelled. More luring is the fact that the preference for the seeking of traditional healers and taking of herbal concoctions, belief that illnesses are as a result of direct actions of supernatural powers were called into question.

3. Socio-religious Implications: The COVID-19 created a face-off between the government and some religious leaders who perceived the outbreak as Satan who is attempting to stop Christians from going to praise God (Hans 2020; Manyathela 2020). Some religious groups viewed this regulation as a provocation. For instance, Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Amichi, His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Ephraim Okechukwu Ikeakor condemned clerics who shut doors of the church in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, wondering why shepherds would abandon their sheep at a critical period like this (Chukwuebuka 2020). In defiance of the order of the government a pastor in Abuja was even arrested in front of his congregation for failing to observe the ban on religious gatherings (Adebowale, 2021). After several consultations and debates between the Nigerian Government and some religious groups and churches, a concession with specific regulations was reached. A maximum of 50 people were allowed at church services/gatherings. Many churches followed strictly the regulations provided by the government (Chukwuma, 2021). Thus, the COVID-19 redefined religious practices like the observances in Christendom such as holy kisses, shaking of hands, celebration of Christmas and so on.

Some religious priests even saw the COVID-19 campaign as a conspiracy theory against the church of Christ. The late T. B. Joshua is one of such who encouraged his congregation to continue coming for gatherings stating that by the end of March 27, 2020 the dreaded disease and all the vaccines produced for it will go away the way it came. When the disease remained after the given month the pastor was debunked for giving a false prophecy prompting him to say that he meant was that the disease would be halted where it began and

that was in Wuhan (Adekanye, 2020). Other pastors have also been accused of capitalizing on the situation to spread fake news and utter false prophecies. For example, pastor Chris Oyakhilome in a video post that went viral linked the virus to 5G networks and alleged that it was part of a plot to create a “new world order”. It should be clear that notable scientists have condemned such connection between COVID-19 and 5G network tagging it “complete rubbish and biologically impossible” (Adebowale, 2021). Also, for some Nigerian pastors, the virus is as a result of wickedness in the world and as such it is God’s way of punishing the world that are expected to seek God’s righteousness as the world draws to its end (Owolabi, 2020).

4. Health Sectors: The outbreak of COVID-19 calls on people to ensure that their environments are clean including the church. The church should emphasize the saying that “cleanliness is next to godliness”. Perhaps, when this is done the public will begin to not only keep their homes and environments clean but also the streets and towns. The COVID-19 has brought into the church the need to apply public measures even in church gatherings since the act of shaking of hands as an activity has been suspended and replaced with waving in the Catholic Church. As noted even by the priest interviewed humans carry bacteria in their hands which could easily be transmitted during the activity of shaking hands. Again, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the Holy Communion used to be administered by the priest directly into the mouth of the members, but today this activity has been suppressed and the priest now places it in the hands of the member who in turns uses his or her own hand to put the holy communion into his or her mouth. This reduces the risk of the priests’ hand touching the saliva of one and dipping same hand into the vessel from which another holy communion is taken and given to another. Where one member has an infectious disease this act could easily be a medium to spread such disease. Thus, the COVID-19 has done the church some good as regards health sector.

The COVID-19 and the Religious Philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard

Soren Kierkegaard was a profound and prolific writer in the Danish “golden age” with work cutting across theology and philosophy. Mixing these two and others he offered a social critique for the purpose of renewing Christian faith within Christendom informed by the dour values of suffering and individual responsibility. For Kierkegaard, man must therefore realize that he is always in suffering and believe only in God (McDonald, 2017) and that one’s humanity is dependent on the humanity of those around him. Through the account of the “good Samaritan” Kierkegaard argues that human beings have a duty to

perform towards others in community thereby placing moral responsibility on all (Kierkegaard, 1995). His philosophy is a pointer to the capacity for religious and spiritual beliefs to provide a powerful lens through which individuals and families can make meaning of the events that occur in their lives, the COVID-19 inclusive (Walsh, 2020).

His philosophy is also making humans recognize that they live in an uncertain world and that everything in our lives is subject to sudden and arbitrary reversals. For example, we can lose our jobs, our health and relationships, both during a pandemic and in a non-pandemic season. It also shows that death could come at any time even though we try so much to escape this knowledge. It teaches humans to be more earnest thinking about their living instead of living like they are never going to die or can predict all happenings. Indeed, no one predicted the COVID-19 occurrence. The COVID-19 also teaches humans how to cope with their personal and collective anxiety, which is the feeling that something terrible might happen. Thus, the feeling of anxiety and stress brought about by the COVID-19 is not unusual. For Kierkegaard, living responsibly in the moment before God involves turning our anxious thoughts into intimacy with God, a personal encounter. Man needs to find joy in the midst of anxiety by exercising faith in God (Christoffersen, 2020).

Kierkegaard's philosophy has been reignited by the outbreak of COVID-19 teaching us as the religious clerics pointed out that individuals need to develop personal relationship and intimacy with God and not necessarily coming to services. Thus, people can stay in their homes and hook up through online mediums with masses, services and all religious activities. God can access men anywhere they are and not only in the halls as long as their hearts are clean and they exercise faith in the Maker. Besides, salvation is a personal race (Philippians 2:12). This does not take away the fact that it is essential to have true religious clerics who can teach, motivate and pray for us or even gather together as one (Hebrews 10:25). Just as the condition of the times of Kierkegaard necessitated his theory of the 'leap of faith' so also the present times calls on individuals to awaken and rejuvenate their spiritual lives by believing in God the more, with regards to the Last days as spoken in the bible. The church has this role to play in the lives of people: teaching right doctrines (2Timothy 3: 1-5, 12, 13).

Positive strategies adopted by Nigerian Church to Curb COVID-19 Pandemic

The church plays significant role in mitigating and preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Church's role is essential, the effectiveness thereof in

changing attitude towards risk avoidance is important. In the aspect of the vaccine intakes, the Catholic Church, the Anglican and the God's Kingdom Society were in agreement that since all vaccines have side effects, all members were encouraged to follow their consciences after proper knowledge and education on the vaccines. The God's Kingdom Society worked with the government health officials in creating an enabling environment within its premises for interested members to be vaccinated.

The Church as the Gospel of Hope and Instruction- The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of hope to the people and not exploitative message. Currently, there is no cure for COVID-19, the message of Jesus stand to be a word of consolation and healing unto the people. Christian leaders encouraged Nigerians to live in faith and righteousness and to observe all the safety guidelines. The church helped to ensure adequate comprehension, accurate perception of the disseminated information concerning COVID-19.

The Church as machinery where less privileged are taken care of: Each community has influential people or organizations. If these influential people are credible and trustworthy, they can influence behaviours that could save lives (Reynolds, 2005). In Nigeria, some influential or philanthropists have donated some palliatives to churches in order to reduce hunger in the land. The church became machinery through which less privilege could be taken care of. Pastor Enoch Adeboye, head of Redeemed Christian Church of God, for instance donated 200,000 hand gloves, 8,000 hand sanitizers, 8,000 surgical facemasks to the Lagos state government. Similarly, David Oyedepo, the General Overseer of Living Faith Church Worldwide donated ambulances, test kits, personal protective devices to the Lagos and Ogun State government (Eyoboka, 2020). The authors' religious affiliations (the Anglican Church and God's Kingdom Society) also distributed palliatives to its congregations at several branch levels. Some members of the God's Kingdom Society even created online platforms where needy members could speak up genuinely and receive financial aid.

Recommendation

1. Nobody can tell what happens tomorrow. People should be weary of prophecies flying around because the bible stated that there shall be false prophets (Matthew 7:15-23; 24:11, 24).
2. There is need for self-reliance of the church and reduction of reliance on collections, offerings and tithes. Churches should develop businesses, either agriculturally or otherwise that can generate money as well as allow their priests, pastors, reverends, and such like to open outlets in the name of the church that yield dividends.

3. There is need for people to have personal relationship with their Maker because attendance to church cannot save anyone.
4. The government should utilize the church to distribute palliatives to the people instead of politicians who will end up politicizing the matter with the result of giving certain wards and people and not giving the other or even hoarding the goods.
5. Churches should work with communication agencies with the objective to advise the government and create awareness of the virus.
6. The public should be empowered with information that will enable them to practice necessary precaution measures. Misinformation is the most significant barrier. Infodemics needs to be regulated. The government ought to work with influential leaders like church leaders to enable them sensitize their members.

Conclusion

It is evident that COVID-19 is a global disaster which has led to loss of lives and many have been affected. The church that is known to be carrier of the gospel of light has done greatly to rescue the situation through awareness, prayers, instructions, stress and anxiety management and reduction and palliatives. In the area of dissemination of risk reduction messages and risk reduction regulations, the church has role to play owing to the symbiotic relationship it has with its host community and the government of the day. The outbreak of the virus teaches all people and bodies the lesson to save without neglecting their obligation to give to the needy. It also teaches us that challenges must always come and that it is the ability to manage these challenges that determines our results. The COVID-19 has also shown the world that long standing traditions and dogmas such as receiving of the Holy Communion can be taken by hand and not only the priest administering direct into the tongue of the receiver and that where one does not even receive it for a short time or long time it carries no dangerous implication. In fact, that a time may come when it will be done away with as some Christian denominations (God's Kingdom Society, for instance) do not partake in its observance. Finally, that the Church has a pivotal role to play in world affairs such as praying for the leaders (2 Thessalonians 3:1-3) and scientists that they may be enlightened to discover the root causes of diseases and viruses that spring up from time to time; have the right knowledge and expertise to manage such situations well for the better wellbeing of the world. The church is under the government and thus should continue to partner with

the government so that the good policies will be practiced for the good of the entire humanity.

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