



CENTRAL ASIAN JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

Volume: 02 Issue: 03 | March 2021

The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Local Churches in Nigeria

¹ *Rev Revd Iroegbu Samuel Enyioma Ezechimere*

² *Ogunode Niyi Jacob*

³ *Jegede Deborah*

¹ *Ph.D Veenstra Theological Seminary, Donga
Taraba State Nigeria*

Email: samuelenyiomairoegbu@gmail.com

² *Calvary Tabernacle Seminary, Gwagwalada, Abuja.
Post-graduate Students.*

E-mail: Ogunodejacob@gmail.com

³ *Post-graduate Student, University of Abuja, Nigeria
Email: Jegededeborah30@gmail.com*

Received 22nd February 2020, Accepted 12th March 2021, Online 19th March 2021

Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has disturbed the World's political, social, economic, religious, and financial structures. The COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 30th January 2020 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). On 27th February 2020, the Federal Ministry of Health announced the confirmation of the first case of Coronavirus disease in Lagos State, Nigeria. To prevent the spread of the virus the federal government issued a directive on lockdown of all official and unofficial programme. These actions affected all organizations and institutions include the local churches in Nigeria. The article discussed the impact of COVID-19 on local churches in Nigeria. Secondary data were sourced from print material and online publication by recognized institutions and individual authors. The article identified; suspension of corporate worship, suspension of sacramental activities: (Baptism, marriages, confirmation, Holy Communion, suspension of crowd, revival programme, reduction in the income of the church and suspension of rural

evangelism and increase in the welfares packages of the local churches as the impact of COVID-19 on the local churches in Nigeria. To ensure the continuation of worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, the article recommended the following: pastors should adopt the use of the ICT facilities and other technological tools in reaching to their members and sharing the word of God While the traditional physical means of pastoral ministry should be continued as much as possible, pastors should the use of Internet facilities to alternate ministry, as supplementary to the traditional ways (Adebayo,2020), the local churches should diversify revenue generation to create more income generation apart from offerings, and government should distribute palliative using the local churches.

Keywords: COVID-19, Impact, Local, Church

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), coronaviruses are a family of viruses that

cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). These viruses were originally transmitted from animals to people. SARS, for instance, was transmitted from civet cats to humans while MERS moved to humans from a type of camel. Several known coronaviruses are circulating in animals that have not yet infected humans. The name coronavirus comes from the Latin word corona, meaning crown or halo. Under an electron microscope, it looks like it is surrounded by a solar corona. The novel coronavirus, identified by Chinese authorities on January 7 and since named SARS-CoV-2, is a new strain that had not been previously identified in humans. Little is known about it, although human-to-human transmission has been confirmed (Ogunode, 2020). On 27 February, Nigeria confirmed its first case in Lagos State, an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria had returned on 25 February from Milan, Italy through the Murtala Muhammed International Airport, fell ill on 26 February and was transferred to Lagos State Biosecurity Facilities for isolation and testing. The Nigerian government joins the rest part of the World to officially lock down the country by directing all public and private institutions to shut down their operation and stay back at home to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The reason for this directive was to curtail the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Jacinta, (2020) observed that the government has rolled out a set of guidelines to help prevent the spread of the virus, including: lockdowns; stay-at-home orders; closure of government schools, borders, and domestic and international airports; wearing of face masks; social distancing; and restriction of social activities, including religious gatherings. However, some restrictive measures, particularly the ban on religious gatherings, have not been well received by many Nigerians. Adebayo (2020) submitted that as part of the efforts to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, governments throughout the world started to restrict gathering of large number of people in public places and movements from one place to the

other, especially interstate and cross-border movements, and advocate stay safe or stay at home. It also involves what is termed social (or preferably physical) distancing – “a way to keep people from interacting closely or frequently enough to spread an infectious disease” where “schools and other gathering places such as movie theaters may close, and sports events and religious services may be cancelled.”¹³ This restriction is popularly known as lockdown. With the advent of a COVID-19 case in Nigeria on February 27, 2020, the Nigerian governments at the federal and state levels started imposing series of lockdown measures. ¹⁴ Undoubtedly, this lockdown affected churches in Nigeria. This article discusses the impact of COVID-19 on local churches in Nigeria.

Concept of COVID-19

On December 31st 2019, China alerted World Health Organization (WHO) to several cases of unusual pneumonia in Wuhan, a port city of 11 million people in the central Hubei province on January 1st 2020. On January 7th 2020, officials announced they had identified a new virus, according to the WHO. The novel virus was named 2019-nCoV and was identified as belonging to the coronavirus family, which includes SARS and the common cold. On January 30th 2020, the WHO declared coronavirus a global emergency as the death toll in China jumped to 170, with 7,711 cases reported in the country, where the virus had spread to all 31 provinces. On February 1th 2020, the WHO announced that the new coronavirus would be called "COVID19" (Ben, 2020).

Concept of Local Church

Church –from the root and the biblical stand as the word "church" means a "called-out group." In the New Testament of the Bible, the term is used in two specific ways: (1) a local church or single organized group of Christians and (2) the universal church or body of Christ worldwide. The universal church is made up of all believers in Christ, from the day of Pentecost in Acts to the end-times of Revelation. The local church is a visible and temporal representation of the universal church (Sunday, 1998). The Church

is the congregation of the living God assemblies, about His living Messiah, Jesus Christ, (Aiyedun, 2012). The Church is God's Spiritual family through the testimony to God's highly acts in Christ Jesus. The one Church of God is not an institutional, but a Supernatural, entity in the process of growth toward the world to come. It is the sphere of the action of the risen and ascended lord. All its members are in Christ and are knit together by a supernatural Kinship (Aiyedun, 2012). Yong, (2005), observed that the Church was a "mystery" hidden throughout the Old Testament of the Bible. Later, Jesus first prophesied the coming of the church when He spoke to Peter and declared, "On this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). Here, Jesus is making a play on words, since he earlier changed Peter's name from Simon to Peter, which means "rock." The traditional view of when the Christian Church actually started was the Day of Pentecost (50 days after the Passover during which Jesus was crucified). It was at this time that Peter gave his great sermon, and in response, "about 3,000 souls were added to them [the apostles]" (Acts 2:41). This group of believers was first called "the church" in Acts 2:47, as "God added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Just Disciple (2020) Opines that the local church goes from singular to plural; it is a coming together of individuals who pursue Christ in the secret of their home, it is going from private worship to corporate worship. The Local Church is a community of worship and fellowship of believers who share mutual belief, faith, and surrender in and to Christ. It manifests itself in many forms, and especially today, we are seeing the diversity of the church be transformed and explode. It is also imperative to understand that the Church is not defined by the building, but rather, the people who come together, wherever and whatever setting that may be. Jonathan (2014) observes that the Church gathering is important for a number of reasons. One is that it's where we Christians "go public" to declare our highest allegiance. It's the outpost or embassies, giving a public face to our future nation. And it's where we bow before our king, only we call it worship. The Pharaohs of the world may oppose us,

but God draws his people out of the nations to worship him. He will form his mighty congregation. Jonathan (2014) also stressed that the gathering is also where our king enacts his rule through preaching, the ordinances, and discipline. The gospel sermon explains the "law" of our nation. It declares the name of our king and explains the sacrifice he made to become our king. It teaches us of his ways and confronts us in our disobedience. And it assures us of his imminent return. Through baptism and the Lord's Supper, the church waves the flag and dons the army uniform of our nation. It makes us visible. To be baptized is to identify ourselves with the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as to identify our union with Christ's death and resurrection (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:3-5). To receive the Lord's Supper is to proclaim his death and our membership in his body (1 Cor. 11:26-29; cf. Matt. 26:26-29). God wants his people to be known and marked off. He wants a line between the church and the world.

The features of the local churches includes: they meet every Sunday for corporate worship; they preach the word of God; they performs the sacrament services; they observes fasting and prayers for themselves and the country; they conduct delivering services for their members that are sick; they collect offerings and tithe from the members of the church to finance the church programme and they have ordained pastors, either, deacons and assistance pastors.

According to JustDisciple (2020) the purpose of the local church is to come together and worship Christ in unity, but also to utterly transform the community around them, to care for widows and orphans, and be the standard by which the community and world look for direction. The local church is also for teaching sound doctrine and is a training ground for Christians. The local church should be alive and active, a place where all Christians in the congregation are using their gifts and contributing in the capacity they have been given. The Local Church is a place of accountability, discipleship, and encouragement. It is a place where believers come together to share in love and support, and it serves so many purposes. Therefore it is

imperative that Christians understand the value in the Local Church, and that out of all of these things—out of a strong and unified body of Local church, believers are able to be sent into the nations. Just Disciple (2020) submits that the local church speaks to spiritual, physical and practical issues of human life. It serves the local community of believers as well as the extended family of believers who are either nationwide or worldwide. The Local church is dynamic and connected, reaching beyond human capacity by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. The local church is called to completely change the spirituality and morality of the community through faithfulness to God. Our pursuit of God utterly transforms us and makes us stand out from the rest, and like a catalyst, neighborhoods, communities, and the world are changed. The local churches are the closer forms of churches to the local people. The local churches are found in almost everywhere in Nigeria.

Impact of COVID-19 on Local Churches in Nigeria

The following have been identified as the impact of COVID-19 on local churches in Nigeria: suspension of corporate worship, suspension of sacrament (Baptism, marriages, confirmation, Holy Communion, suspension of crusade, revival programme, and reduction in the income of the church and suspension of rural evangelism as the negative impact of COVID-19.

Suspension of Corporate Worship

Due to Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria and the ban on social gathering, corporate worship has been stopped in all local churches across the country. The Nigerian local churches are known for observing corporate worship every Sunday, Wednesdays and Friday for Bible studies. Corporate worship is the gathering of different people to worship God in praises and prayers. Jacinta, (2020) submitted depending on the state guidelines for social gatherings, including religious congregational worship, have limited attendance to between twenty and fifty persons, as well as requiring social distancing. In the case of Kaduna, a city in north-

central Nigeria, religious congregational worship was suspended. In reaction to the banning of religious congregational worship, some religious denominations, in compliance with government directives, adopted new modes of practicing their faith. While some have resorted to online worship services, others have developed home cell worship services, splitting their members into smaller units. Some split their worship services across numerous buildings, parking lots, and fields at various intervals. Those with very large congregations, who deemed it impossible to adhere to the rules, have suspended all religious gatherings, enjoining their members to pray at home.

Suspension of Sacrament (Baptism, marriages, confirmation, Holy Communion)

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and the close down directives have led to the suspension of sacrament in all the Churches in Nigeria. The word sacrament means “a sign of the sacred,” which is fitting as they are all outwards signs from God to us. Sacraments is also celebration of a continued journey and relationship with God, teachings to help live out His word and ceremonies to show devotion to Him. In the Bible, Christ gives his followers clear instructions on how to administer and receive each of the sacraments. This is seen through his work with the Apostles, healing the sick, parables, giving his body and blood to nourish our souls and forgiving sinners. The Church administers these holy sacraments as instructed, in order for all to worship God and receive His salvation. Each is meant to strengthen faith and forge a deeper relationship with God.

The outbreak of COVID-19 over the World and the sit at home order given by the various government across the World and in Nigeria in particular have led to the suspension of these holy sacrament services in all the local churches in Nigeria. Research has it that many marriages, Holy Communion programme, child dedication, baptismal services that have been planned was suspended due to COVID-19.

Suspension of Crusade and Revival Programme

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ban on social gathering (religious gathering) in Nigeria have affected the crusade and revival programme of all the Nigerian local churches. Crusade and revival is an evangelism strategies employed by local churches to win souls into the kingdom of God. Adebayo (2020) submitted that many churches and other public places in Nigeria and other places throughout the world experienced lockdown as result of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic. These affected church activities and pastoral ministry of many church pastors greatly. In response to this lockdown and its negative effects, many pastors in Nigeria start to explore other ways to perform their pastoral ministry to their church members. Nduka (2020) observed that the auditoriums of Nigeria's mega churches are empty and their gates are shut as they are forced to observe a government ban on large gatherings to halt the spread of coronavirus.

Reduction Church Income

Another area where the COVID-19 affected the Churches in Nigeria is the area of finance. The COVID-19 pandemic that led to the sit at home order and ban on all social gathering in Nigeria have led to the reduction of Church income. The Church source its finances from the offering, tithes and special thanksgiving offering from the members of the Church who come to worship God every Sunday. The church which is the body of Christ depends wholly on the offerings collected from the members of the church to finance the programme of the church. An offering is that which is freely given by Christians to the work of the Lord, the local church, and/or ministries and missions. But offerings are far more than simply the check we write on Sunday. The church offerings come in different forms. In Nigerian churches, we have different forms of offering. We have thanksgiving offering and special offering. Tithe is another sources of income to the church and others sources include donation, gifts and financial supports from the members. All these forms of offering normally come into the church during corporate worship or Sunday services. The advent of COVID-19 pandemic that led to sit down at home directives as a method of curtaining the spread of the

virus have affected the income of the local churches in Nigeria. Majorities of local churches depends on theses weekly Sunday service offerings to run the mission programme of the church. Some local Churches cannot pay their utilities bills and pay salaries of their pastors and church workers. In some local churches, pastors cannot even fund the rural missions again. Major projects of the local churches have been put to holds because of the lock down that prevented corporate worship. John (2020) submits that the COVID-19 have affected the Church finance to the extent that some churches have to start approaching their banks for loans to meet some financial obligation of the church.

Suspension of Rural Evangelism

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only stop corporate worship but also affected rural evangelism. All programme in respect of rural evangelism in Nigeria was suspended because of the compulsory sit at home order by the federal government of Nigeria to curtail the spread of COVID-19. The mandate of the Church as instructed by the lord Jesus Christ is soul winning for the kingdom of God. The local churches have adopted different method of preaching the gospel to the unsaved in the community. Some of these strategies include organizing crusade, revival programme, rural evangelism and house to house evangelism. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the close down of all economic activities across the globe and in Nigeria preventing people from moving from place to place have prevented the mission of the church. Many crusade, revivals and mission works have been put to hold due to the sit at home order to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading. According to Pastor David, COVID-19 has affected the expansion plans and programme of their church for 2020. The Church have planned to expand its mission and programme to many communities in Nigeria but the outbreak of the COVID-19 disrupted the Church plan and programme for the year.

Increases in the Welfares Packages of the Local Churches

The COVID-19 pandemic and the banning of social gathering which led to the closure of all local

churches in Nigeria have led to increment in the welfare packages for the poor and the needy in the local Churches in Nigeria. Covid-19 lockdown brought hardship to many people due to closure of economic activities. Many poor Nigerian: Christians and Muslims alike cannot feed their families and cater for the need of their loved ones as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is the culture of the Church as demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles, where the early Christians contributed and sent to others in need because of disaster. So, many local Churches have to source funds and materials to provide the poor in their local churches.

The sit at home order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have resulted to the closure of most economic activities in Nigeria which directly and indirectly affected the low income earners in the country. This may be part of the reason Nigeria is ranked as one of the poorest country in the World because the rate of poverty is high among the people. World Council of Churches (2020) submitted that Churches and faith communities are called to accompany the most vulnerable people and communities, as well as to be in solidarity with each other. Our Lord Jesus Christ shows us with his life, teachings and actions that concern, care and compassion surpass all boundaries, and in this moment of crisis, fear and division it is our calling as Christians to bring hope and healing, for the transformation of society. The local churches which are closer to the people have to come to the aids of their members who are not financially independents. This made the welfare packages of the local churches in Nigeria to increase while the church income is not forth coming as usual. World Council of Churches (2020) observed that in this pandemic, churches and their specialized ministries have continued to serve their communities, to accompany and support those in need, and to work with their constituencies and marginalized people to overcome the challenges they face. We have experienced how partnerships between churches in different parts of the world have strengthened in the face of this crisis, and how churches are striving to support people suffering extreme hardship in these circumstances. The actions demonstrated by the local churches in Nigeria by

providing welfare packages for the poor in their local churches have led to the increased in the welfare packages of the local churches during the COVID-19 period.

Way Forward for the Local Churches

To help the local churches prepare for the future and keep on the worshipping of God, the following have been recommended for the local church as the way forward:

- (1) The local churches should diversify the revenue of the church to create more avenues to generate income apart from the offerings.
- (2) The government should use the local churches to distribute their palliative since the majorities of the people worship in the local churches
- (3) The government should not sideline the church as it allots empowerment programmes to the citizens. When members who are part of the citizens are empowered, they in turn can support the church with financial aids to enable them pay bills and staff of the church
- (4) The use of home cell groups is an antidote to Covid-19 pandemic. The local churches should ensure their members are meeting through home cell. Even though members may not for the time being gather in large numbers for worship, they can always remember Jesus' words that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). However, it should be born in mind that smaller gatherings require by public health protocols, our Lord is present and at work. At many times during the history of the Church, Christians have been obliged to meet only in small groups, and have yet succeeded in spreading the gospel and continuing the faith. So too can we continue to worship and witness in these times.

Therefore, these additional recommendations by Adebayo (2020) are also relevant:

1. Every pastor should study the uniqueness of his congregation and locality and fashion out how to respond to the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed in the context of the peculiarity of their congregation and locality.
2. Pastors should embrace the use of the Internet and other technological tools in their pastoral ministry. While the old ways of pastoral ministry should be

continued as much as possible, pastors should engage improved method by the use of Internet ministry not only an alternative ministry, but also as supplementary to the old ways of pastoral ministry.

3. Churches should invest more in their multimedia ministry by training pastors on how to use several tools to enhance the multimedia ministry, and by training some church members to assist the pastors and the church in the use of technological tools for ministry.

4. Pastors should consciously teach church members to be industrious; this will make them be able to stand independent on the government or churches during trying times.

5. Pastors should train and engage in the development of lay-pastoral ministry of committed church members so that such trained people will be able to assist the pastors in the pastoral ministry as necessity calls for such.

6. Less emphasis should be placed on large congregational gathering while more emphasis should be placed on small groups in forms of cell churches, house fellowships, home fellowships, and the likes. This will help the church be able to curtail the spread of Covid-19 and manage such crisis situations.

7. Less emphasis should also be placed on constructing large auditoria while more emphasis should be placed on activities that will build the church members up in their spiritual lives.

8. More efforts should be given to visitation and caring of church members through phone calls and other viable means of social media.

References:

1. Adebayo Afolaranmi (2019). "Effective Use of Technological Tools in Building the Church's Educational Ministries". Retrieved June 10, 2020 from <https://www.academia.edu/40251074/>
2. Adebayo, O, A. (2020) Effects of covid-19-pandemic lockdown of churches in nigeria on pastoral ministry: matters arising. EPRA International Journal of

Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR).Vol, 6(6), P 45.

3. Barry, Y. (2014) Corporate Worship. <https://gentlereformation.com/2013/05/16/defining-corporate-worship/>
4. Ben Osawe (2020) Post-COVID-19 Nigeria Churches. Seven Characteristics of post-Nigerian Churches. Tearfund Nigeria, Jos, Nigeria/2020
5. Importance of Corporate worship (2017). <https://www.compellingtruth.org/corporate-worship.html>
6. JustDisciple (2020) Local Church:Definition, purpose and Importance. <https://justdisciple.com/what-is-the-local-church/>
7. Jerry W. Brown (1973). Church Staff Team That Wins (Nashville: Convention Press), 23.
8. Jacinta, C., N (2020) Between Religious Freedom and Public Good: Reaction to Religious Restriction to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 IN Nigeria. <https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2020/05/20/between-religious-freedom-and-the-public-good-reactions-to-religious-restrictions-to-prevent-the-spread-of-covid-19-in-nigeria>.
9. Jonathan, L. (2014) WHAT IS A LOCAL Church? <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-is-a-local-church/>

- the-context-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-love-steadfastness-hope-and-courag.
10. Ogunode N, J. (2020) Effects of COVID-19 Schools Close Down on Academic Programme of Senior Secondary Schools in Abaji Area Council of Federal Capital Territory Abuja, Nigeria. Electronic Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Vol 2: Issue II,P- 84-97
 11. Oyelola A. Adegboye, Adeshina I. Adekunle, and Ezra Gayawan (2020). "Early Transmission Dynamics of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Nigeria". International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2020, 17, 3054. Retrieved May 30, 2020 from <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17093054>, 7.
 12. Peterson Ozili (2020). "Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis: The Nigerian experience and structural causes". International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 2020. Retrieved June 7, 2020 from <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3567419>, 2.
 13. Tips For Social Distancing, Quarantine, And Isolation During An Infectious Disease Outbreak". Retrieved March 28, 2020 from <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/tip-s-social-distancing-quarantine-isolation-031620.pdf>, p. 1
 14. World Council of Churches (2020) Statement on the Role of Churches in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Love, Steadfastness, Hope and Courage. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/online-june-2020/statement-on-the-role-of-churches-in->