

ICT: A Coping Strategy by Nigerian Churches amidst Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The main thrust of this paper is to examine the coping strategy churches in Nigerian employed amidst covid-19 pandemic. The ripple effect of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria and around the globe necessitated certain preventive measures taken by the government to curb its spread. Some of the measures imposed by the federal government of Nigeria in the wake of covid-19 in the country includes lockdown of all socio-economic, political and religious activities, ban on air, land and sea travel except for those on essential assignments, compulsory wearing of face mask and hand sanitizing and maintaining of social distancing. In the face of the pandemic which resulted to ban and lockdown of all socio-economic, political and religious activities. How did the churches in Nigeria carry out their sacerdotal services to their adherents? Were places of worship totally shut down and revelation from God's word scarce? What were the strategy the churches employed to meet the daily and spiritual needs of their congregation? Were offerings, tithes and other donations ignored within the period? This is the focus of this paper. The paper employed the phenomenological method and maintains that though covid-19 resulted to stringent measures to be taken by the federal government of Nigeria which led to economic crunch in the nation and even the world at large, the Nigerian churches were not totally out of service to their members. Most churches resulted to the use of modern technological gadgets and information and communication technology (ICT) devices and applications to survive within the period. The paper recommends that apart from acquiring theological education which is necessary for church leadership and growth, church leaders and members must seek to be compliant with ICT devices and applications.

Key words: Covid-19, Coping strategy, Church, ICT, Pandemic

Introduction

The outbreak of covid-19 pandemic in the global community necessitated world leaders, government of the world and Health regulatory organizations such as World Health Organization (WHO) to impose a range of prevention and containment measures against the spread of the virus. In Nigeria, some of the prevention and containment measures issued by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) through the presidential task force headed by the secretary of the federation, Boss Mustapha against the spread of the virus includes a total lockdown of all socio-economic, educational, political and religious activities in areas such as Lagos State, Ogun State, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja and a partial lockdown on the rest of the federation. Others include restriction on air, land and sea travel except for those on indispensable duties, compulsory wearing of face mask and hand sanitizing and also maintaining of physical distancing. Institutions such as Churches and Mosques, stakeholders and other organizations as a result of the ban and lockdown had to re-strategize in order to survive and sustain their ventures. How did the Nigerian churches carry out their sacerdotal services to their devotees in the face of the lockdown? Were places of worship totally shut down as requested by the government and revelation from God's word moribund? What are some of the proactive strategy most Nigerian churches employed to meet the daily and

spiritual needs of their congregation? This is the focus of this paper. The paper employed the phenomenological method. Phenomenology is a composite word from two Greek nouns; *phenomenon* meaning something seen and *logos* meaning word/study/enquiry. Hence, phenomenology refers primarily to the study of that which is seen (Christopher I. Ejizu, & Julia F. Awajiusuk 2013). Thus, the Nigerian churches use of information and communication technology (ICT) devices and its applications amidst Covid-19 pandemic as a strategy to propagate the word thereby meeting the sacerdotal services to their adherents will be examined in this paper. The paper will also ascertain whether the strategy was effective and efficient? In addition, the challenges of the strategy as employed by most of the churches in Nigeria during covid-19 pandemic are germane issues that will be addressed in this paper.

Clarification of terms

The operative terms of this paper are “ICT, Coping strategy, Church, Covid-19 and Pandemic”. ICT is an acronym which means Information and Communication Technology. It is a joint term given to the second and third generation of information technology generated by the combination of computer and telecommunications. Information and communication technology is an overall term that refers to any communication devices 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 (Johnwealthy J. Wobodo 2020). Information and communication technology is a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, create, disseminate, store and manage information. In the context of this paper, information and communication technology implies the means, channels or mediums through which and by which communication is achieved and information disseminated. Coping strategy refers to the methods or activities that individuals (in this case churches) employs to enable them manage a disturbing situation. The mention of the word ‘church’ suggest myriads of ideas to people. To some, it means a building that is St. Peter’s church. Others think of the church as a denomination. Often times questions are asked, which church do you belong or worship? The answer comes as Anglican, Methodist, Living Faith, Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Protestant Church, African Independent Church, Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal Church and many others. Moreover, others speak of the church as the ordained ministry comprising of the Bishop, Priest and Deacon. However, the word church is derived from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning “a called out assembly” or “belonging to God” (W.O. Wotogbe-Weneka 2009). The church also represents the people called out from the crowd, separated from sin and commissioned to declare the undiluted word to the entire nation. In the 21st century the church could be understood as the individual believers, the congregation of people from different denominations or communities, the richly decorated buildings and the whole body of Christ in the global community. The acronym Covid-19 is derived from coronavirus disease 2019. Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) is an illness caused by a novel coronavirus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2 (SARS-COV-2) formerly known as 2019-nCoV. The virus was identified first in Wuham city, Hubei province, China. The acronym Covid-19 was preferred by the World Health Organization (WHO) to avoid stigmatizing the virus origins in terms of populations, geography or animal association (David J. Cennimo 2021). The foremost confirmed case of covid-19 in Nigeria was on 25th February, 2020 when an Italian national who tested positive to the virus arrived Lagos by air. On the 9th March, 2020 the second confirmed case of the virus was registered in Ewekoro, Ogun State through a Nigerian national who had contact with the Italian citizen. As at 3rd January, 2021 the Covid-19 weekly Epidemiological report 12 shows that the number of confirmed cases in the federation is 90,147 while total recoveries is 75,044, with 1,311 deaths while testing and active case are

975,786 and 13, 792 respectively (covid-19.ncdc.gov.ng). Pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of a new disease. Pandemic of a disease implies that such disease is widespread over the world. Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the world Health Organization on 12th March, 2020 (Kimberly, Hickok 2021).

The Nigerian Churches and ICT amidst Covid-19

The Nigerian churches has been committed to the use of information and communication technology devices and its applications in teaching and also carrying out other ministerial assignments before the upsurge of covid-19. Prior to the clamp down on religious programmes in March 2004 by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, the chief operating officer then Chief Tony Akiotu was said to have revealed that the station earned about 30million naira every quarter from four churches alone which present their religious programmes on the station while Channel Television realized 20% of her annual income from three churches that air their programmes on the station (Wotogbe-Weneka 2012). Apart from television and radio stations, Nigerian churches amidst covid-19 migrated to a new brand of information and communication technology devices and applications such as streaming live on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google plus, Skype, Websites, Blogs, WhatsApp and Messenger through internet technology (Wobodo 2020). Through these technology worship, sermons, teachings, prayer sessions, soul inspiring music, evangelism and awareness on the destructive effect of covid-19 were made available to church members and the society at large. Consequently, members were employed to join worship services, teachings and prayer sessions online to keep their spiritual tempo unlike the conventional method of meeting together weekly for worship, fellowship and discussion of doctrinal issues in the church. In order to minimize the spread of covid-19 and to ensure her pro-activeness, the umbrella body comprising of all Christian denominations known as Christian Association of Nigeria also directed all churches to conduct services online or use house cell based service in order to curb the spread of the virus. In order to sustain the finance of the churches, most Nigerian churches and pastors like UK based Nigerian senior pastor Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) has requested his members to drop their tithes, seed of faith and other offerings online through electronic transfer into the church account number or better still make a visit to the designated bank for the transactions (pmnewsnigeria.com 2021).

The use of information and communication technology amidst covid-19 also enabled religious leaders in and around the world to air their views and convictions and also the latent idea surrounding the deadly virus. For instance, pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the senior pastor of Christ Embassy surprised the global community in a homily which he delivered on April 8, 2020 using the information and communication technology platform. In the sermon, he claimed that Covid-19 is connected to 5G technology which is aimed at enslaving the African populace. He maintained that “there is no need for a vaccine, adding that these are part of the Antichrist’s plan for a new world order where some figures of authority in the world were trying to build a religion, economy and government of the entire universe” (Williams P. Awoshiri 2020). The sermon of pastor Chris Oyakhilome triggered serious global concern such that Ofcom the broadcasting authority in London sanctioned the Loveworld channel that enabled viewing of the programme in the United Kingdom claiming that the sermon included potentially harmful claims about the causes and treatment for Covid-19 (www.vanguardngr.com). Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, the senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) swiftly responded to the message of pastor Chris by strongly disagreeing with his views and claims, asserting that covid-19 has nothing to do with 5G or the anti-Christ. While Apostle Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministries International claimed that coronavirus is a chemical disease pastor E.A. Adebayo the senior

pastor of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) avowed corona virus as a compulsory public holiday from the divine. He maintained that the spread of the pandemic is God's mode of showcasing his power and dominion over the affairs of human beings. He also stated that the progressive increase in the number of victims from all walks of life suggest that no one regardless of socio-economic, political and religious affiliation is secure from the deadly virus apart from the intervention of God (Awoshiri 2020). Although the restriction and lockdown of religious centres were keenly observed as attested in this paper in Lagos State, Ogun State and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja during the first wave of covid-19 in Nigeria, it is important to state that religious leaders queried the closure of all religious worship centres and allowance of all socio-economic and political activities amidst covid-19. Hence, pastors like David Oyedepo in one of his services used the ICT platform to request for the reopening of churches in Lagos State since markets and political activities are held without any adherence to covid-19 prevention and containment measures.

The Nigerian Churches and challenges of ICT amidst Covid-19

The swift response of most Nigerian churches from the conventional mode of worship to the use of information and communication technology devices and applications in order to mitigate and curtail the spread of covid-19 during religious services among worshippers in Nigeria had a lot of challenges to both the religious leaders and congregations. Some of the challenges encountered by the use of ICT devices and application amidst covid-19 includes intermittent power supply thus impeding the participation in worship, prayer and teaching sessions. Nigeria, though acclaimed the giant of Africa is hitherto battling with the issue of un-interrupted power supply by the Power Holding Company Nigeria (PHCN). Amidst covid-19 which resonated to the restriction on air, land and sea travel except for those on essential duties, the total and partial lockdown of religious centres in States such as Lagos State, Ogun State, Federal Capital Territory Abuja and other states of the federation respectively, the power supply by the electricity distribution company in the major states which experienced total lockdown was summarily poor. Worshippers who could afford alternative means to power supply such as the use of generator or Sola energy were only privileged to participate in the worship, teachings and prayers sessions held by their various religious centres. Apart from intermittent power supply, poor network signals by various service providers in communities and localities within Nigerian posed another threat for a smooth worship session. Churches that do not have high-technological potentials and capabilities lose their tithes, seed of faith and other offerings since there was no means for such payment. Moreover, the high cost of smartphones and Data to access the sermons, teaching, songs, covid-19 precautions and many more were other challenges encountered amidst covid-19. Thus, effective and efficient communication of the gospel, prayer and teaching sessions were hindered as many worshippers were left to tend for themselves within the period. Other challenges encountered as a result of the use of ICT within the period is non-compliance with ICT devices and applications by both the religious leaders and members. With the directive of the Christian Association of Nigeria an umbrella body comprising of all Christian denomination to migrate to online worship, this created another impediment to some religious leaders and members who are not compliant with ICT devices and applications. Hence, church services and other religious programmes suffered some levels of setback.

Effect of Covid-19 on Nigerian Churches

The upsurge of covid-19 caused tremendous damages on the socio-economic, academic and religious spheres of the Nigeria nation. Religiously, most churches in the confines of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria which are the North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-

West, South-East and South-South with an increase in the case of covid-19 were under either total or partial lock down within the period. The churches in Nigeria were closed as services such as the Eucharist, baptism, churching and open air crusade/ evangelism were automatically suspended to curtail the spread of the virus. Moreover, since there were no worship sessions or any religious activities and the sources of most churches income depends on the free will giving of offerings, tithes, seed of faith etc of worshippers, the financial status of most churches in Nigeria declined drastically and in that most churches were unable to cater for the emoluments and stipends of their workers. Wobodo (2020) adds that as a result of covid-19 many churches in Nigeria and across the world could not carry on projects like church buildings, lock-up shops, run schools, other investments such as support to the poor and less privilege and even conferences. It is important to note that irrespective of one's religious affiliation, no institution can thrive without money and as such the church; family; school and government need money to function effectively and efficiently. However, the upsurge of covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria promoted hardship as a result of non-flow of money. Some early women, children and family members were seen moving from one house to another, one street to another in search of daily bread from well to do individuals. In addition to these effects, covid-19 reduced the free movement of religious adherents across faith and also led to the death of affluent members. Furthermore, it led to starvation, hunger and abject poverty of both the high and low income earners as sources of revenue reduced on a daily basis.

Recommendations

Nigerian churches and members should look beyond tithes, seed of faith and other offerings as a means of sustaining and surviving their livelihood and ministerial activities.

Religious leaders apart from having theological formation must as a matter of urgency be ICT compliant in order to acclimatise and flow with modern trend especially in the use of modern technological devices and applications.

Church leaders and members should create alternative means of surviving hard times rather than depend on weekly enumeration.

Nigerian churches should incorporate information and communication technology in their seminary curriculum to enable the seminarians to be ICT compliant since ICT is the current innovation in the 21st century.

Rather than criticise government at various levels be it federal, state or local in their decision to totally or partially lock down areas that are susceptible with cases of covid-19, religious leaders should encourage their members using ICT devices and applications to abide by government decision and also ensure that all precautionary measures against the contact and spread of the virus are upheld maximally.

Conclusion

This paper examined the strategy employed by most Nigerian churches to carry out their sacerdotal services to their members amidst the ban on religious worship centres as a result of Covid-19 global pandemic. The paper reveals that most Nigerians churches were proactive in that they were able to migrate to online worship services through the use of information and communication technology devices and applications to sustain and also quench the spiritual thirst of their members. The Nigerian churches use of ICT devices and application helped in the curtailment and spread of the virus within religious centres as most worship centres were closed and members encouraged to view live teachings, sermons, prayer sessions on YouTube, Facebook, Skype, Websites, Blogs, WhatsApp and other mediums. The paper maintains that indeed, information and communication technology devices and applications is a viable coping strategy employed by Nigerian churches amidst covid-19 pandemic.

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