Religion, Development and Covid – 19: Role of the Church

By

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Abstract

The "coronavirus disease of 2019" popularly called "Covid 19" pandemic is not the first pandemic the world has faced and we have been told to learn from history to prepare for the future. The devasting effect is still being felt in most countries of the world; worse still it has led to death of millions the world over. This reality is clear in the present hardship and lack of access to means of livelihood by the masses. The Covid 19 saga has revealed how unprepared a lot of people are in all ramification, despite all teachings and discuss on saving for the rainy days. Even the church that has been preaching the imminent coming of Christ and inevitability of death seems to be taken unawares. The churches are supposed to give back to the people, unfortunately, the same people are abandoned to their fate even as most of these churches have gone bankrupt as a result of the lockdown. This paper then tries to answer these questions: How can the Church prepare for days and times like these in the future? What should the church do as the pandemic persists? What are the roles of the Church in both personal; and national development in realities like this? Is there any religious connotation to this pandemic? Can the church survive this onslaught against humanity? Has the church any role in curbing the spread and possibly halting this pandemic?

Introduction

The case of Corona Virus or COVID-19 grounded almost all activities and all sectors in all continents of the world. The socio-economic and religious implications of this pandemic on both human and nature can never be over emphasized too. Owing to the complex nature of Nigeria with a large population majority of whom are ignorant of this pandemic, due to several factors, including socio-cultural and religious biases; lack of adequate information in their local dialects and access to correct information on this pandemic. Other factors that are increasing the risks for Nigeria include citizens' refusal to adhere to instructions; lack of basic medical supplies and hard resistance shown towards the vaccine and ways to curb the spread of the virus.

Sometime in the month of March 2020 the world woke up with the reality and the consequences of deadly infectious viral disease known as Corona Virus otherwise referred to as COVID-19. This viral infectious disease is allegedly believed to have originated from China- one of the Asian countries of the world which has resulted to the claim of so many lives. as at 17th May, 2021, globally, we have 164,150,922 cases, 142,840,219 recoveries and 3,401,067. (www.worldometers.info>com). In Nigeria we have 165,709 case and 2,066 deaths (ncdc.org). The first confirmed case in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus, caused by SARS-CoV2. On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen (Elemile 2019:17). The rate of death and infection by these virus remains unabated and has becomes a daily discourse on the media. Effects of Covid 19 on the masses cannot be over emphasized. It includes: hunger and increased poverty; looting; Immorality and of course the almighty lock down, etc. To start this paper, which is divided into seven major sections, I will like to give a little discourse on this virus; by first looking at the definition, mode of transmission and symptoms of the disease.

1.1 What is Corona Virus (COVID 19)?

The coronavirus (so-named for its 'crown-like' appearance) is a virus that causes respiratory problems related to one's sinuses, throat, lungs, and nose, among other respiratory areas. Covid-19 is a human disease caused by a pathogen called "corona virus" (www.who.int/heath). According to National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), it "is a group of related RNA viruses that cause diseases in mammals and birds. In humans, these viruses cause respiratory tract infections that can range from mild to lethal. Mild illnesses include some cases of the common cold which is also caused by other viruses, predominantly rhinoviruses…and a sore throat from swollen adenoids…direct viral pneumonia or secondary bacterial pneumonia. This virus varies significantly in risk factor as some…can kill more than 30% of those infected, and some are relatively harmless, such as the common cold." (ncdc.gov.ng).

1.2 The Mode of Transmission and Symptoms

The mode of transmission of this virus is through contact with the droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales. These droplets are too heavy to hang in the air, and quickly fall on floors or surfaces. You can be infected by breathing in the virus if you are within close proximity of someone who has COVID-19. It is also, spread by contact with contaminated surfaces and objects (ncdc.gov.ng). There is no known cure for Covid-19 as at the time of this paper. But some preventive measures that can reduce the spread of the disease includes: vaccine, disinfect frequently touched places at home, wearing of

face mask while in public places, not touching your face, nose or mouth with your hands, covering coughs and sneezes with your elbow or tissues, maintaining social distance or keeping safe distance from others, avoiding shaking hands or going to crowded places, regular washing of hands with soap and water, and regular use of hand sanitizers (www.who.int/heath). The symptoms are that, most people infected with the COVID-19 virus experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness.

2.1 Roles of the Church as the Epidemic Persists

In Matthew 5:13-16, the Bible metaphorically refers to Christians as the salt and the light of the world. The world is quite aware of the functions of these inevitable elements and concepts. In the face of COVID-19 the world is looking up to the Church to display her relevance as the salt to this ugly situation of COVID-19 and to also be the light to show the way out of this ravaging menace.

The church exists in a time like this to be a solution to the crisis as the salt and the light of the world. as salt to bring succor and comfort, to show love of Christ and to preserve the society from putrefaction. As light to give direction and dispel darkness and to proffer solution to the needs of the world (look for the person who went into the lepers' camp or when the people were under a plague to rescue them. - also, Aaron with the censer. (Hoekendijk 1966:13)

Invariably, general wellbeing or approach to issues is what characterized the lifestyle of Jesus Christ while in His earthly ministry. In Matthew 14:14 when He saw the dire needs of the people, He had compassion on them and He healed among them those that were sick. He also provided the economic needs of the people by providing them with food. That is what Damap meant by saying: "Jesus provided food for them even when His disciples suggested that they should be sent away to their homes because of the lack of food. He first gave them the spiritual food and afterwards the physical was given to them (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13; Matthew 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-9)" (2019: 22). The above Christian virtues shown by our Lord Jesus Christ are open to the contemporary Church today to emulate if the Church must grow both numerical and spiritual as seen in the case of the early Church.

Bachalor asserts that "Jesus did not only preach the gospel but He accompanied it with compassion, thus He gave support to those that were suffering from physical disability

and other needs of life" (1976: 25). Thus, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic the Church must be proactive in identifying the spiritual, political, environmental, economic, cultural and social needs of people within her reach and be willing to approach these needs with gladness and sincerity of hearts in solving them just as it was the custom of Jesus Christ and the early Christian Church in the first century. Henri Nowen while discussing his experiences and conclusions that challenges are actually opportunities said, "…my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." (1998:30). This situation also is an opportunity for the Church to be used positively

Fellowship for encouragement: In the early Church, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47 NIV). In the above quotation we understand that the numerical as well as the Spiritual growth or strength of the early Christian Church came from the wholistic approach method and the good characters exhibited by the disciple of Jesus Christ to their immediate community. Such should be emulated today

Words of encouragement and support to people from men of God as could been see in the life of prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 6:24 -7:1-20 who spoke prophetically in the face of the ugly situation of lockdown experienced in Israel during the time of Ben-Hadad king of Aram who laid siege on Samaria affecting the spiritual, political, economic, environmental, cultural as well as the social life of the people of Israel resulting into a total change in the then prevailing situation.

Send help even as people are still in need within and without the country. The Church leadership should make palliatives available through donating and contribution of food items and other support from the congregation to the weak, the less privilege and the venerable in the Church and the society at large, to meet all dimensions of their needs. The Church to be and encourage obedience to every preventive measure taken by the constituted authority, in order to curtail the further spread of the deadly infectious viral disease otherwise known as COVID-19.

3.1 The Role of the Church in Curbing the Spread of the Virus

The following are roles of the church in stemming the spread of the virus:

i. To teach her members how to stay healthy.

ii. Through live streaming on social media and other means, teach members the guidelines provided by World Health Organization (WHO) on how to avoid contracting the virus.
iii. Involve any health personnel within and outside the Church on health matters.
iv. Members be encouraged to engage in other profitable spiritual activities such as prayer, learning of songs, Bible reading and general fellowship and carrying the children along.
v. Games and other physical recreational activities and exercises should be encouraged among family members. But walks and jogging around the neighborhood are profitable exercise the whole family can engage in with great physical and relational benefits. While people are expected to maintain regular sleep pattern, they should also be encouraged to keep normal everyday routine as much as possible for all these releases the feel-good hormone -endorphin- which helps bolster most people's attitudes towards life's challenges.
vi. Period of lockdown should be seen as a time for greater family bonding and development, and also individual development. The opportunity should therefore be seized for all such activities that will help in achieving these objectives.
vii. Educate members regarding their health particularly on the preventive measures for covid-19 because our body need to be healthy to allow the Holy Spirit to dwell in there.
viii. Encourage effective prayer: The greatest weapon that the Church can used to overcome difficult times as in the case of lucked down period due to covid-19 pandemic is prayer. Also, the prayer should be accompanied with fasting as Jesus said: "This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29). This implies that situation like that of the Corona virus Pandemic can be unfold by an intensive prayer and fasting.
ix. Teaching members to be obedient to safety rules and protocols by the government: The bible pointed that we must obey and respect constituted authority. It is the responsibility of the Church to ensure that members act in accordance to what the NCDC directs.
x. Encourage people to get plenty of fresh air and sunlight into your home. When it's warm enough, open the windows. Sunlight and fresh air can help to reduce the amount of the virus that stays in your home. By this they can maintain physical activity & keep their immune system boosted

4.1 Roles of the Church in both Personal and National Development in realities like this

The nation Nigeria, no doubt is in a state of chaos. The security challenges which though outside the scope of this paper cannot be over emphasized. Particularly when the lockdown due to the outbreak of the COVID 19, was put in place, the masses suffered. It was so because of the level of poverty in the country. Many people earn their daily meal by daily jobs or sales. So, with the lockdown, no selling or buying and it was so sudden that many had no arrangements put in place and so they were caught unawares. (UNESCO) Even to date, neither the people nor the country has recovered fully from that effect. Therefore, since the church is also part of the society and is affected by what affects the society and as the "conscience of the society", the church has roles to play for national development in times like this.

i. Teaching and preaching on the causes, effects and dangers of sin. More so, on the way out of sin which has affected man and his relationship not only with his Creator but also with other humans, and all of creation. The church is called to help transform our values from those of this culture to those of the Kingdom. Within society, there is corruption, unjust market ethics, examination malpractice, environmental pollution and many traditional/cultural practices, etc. If the church does not provide a lead in teaching about such contemporary issues, it cannot be relevant to society. Only Christians can teach stewardship - this is unique theology to Christians. We have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to challenge others to handle all of God's resources (including money) in a responsible way.
ii. Speaking Out: The church should prophetically speak against all forms of injustice and oppression. Proverbs 31: 8 says "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute." The church can speak up for the poor as the Old Testament prophets did. The church can do this through encouraging its members to be conscientious citizens who are informed about general issues and speak out: if national resources are poorly managed, if projects are poorly executed, and if things are not as they should be. The church should be the voice of the powerless, the poor, the voiceless, the defenseless against the powerful and tyrant rulers of our communities.
iii. Christian Welfare and Relief Work: Just as the ministry of Jesus was devoted to works directly related to welfare, relief, and development work, evident in the healing and sustenance of the poor, the sick, and the destitute, so must the church do and be. Jesus makes it clear that only those of His followers who have shown a loving character to those in need will be rewarded at His Second Coming. (Mt. 25:30ff).

iv. Development: Seek the general welfare and wellbeing of the society through social actions, education, etc. as this is a good avenue for such as postulated by John Daniel.
v. Advocacy: this involves visitation for training, conferences, seminars etc. for people to be informed. This goes beyond the four walls of the classroom to the communities, and government agencies. This seeks to further advocate for Theological proponents and Community development, etc.
vi. Mobilization: stir the hearts of people/members to be involved in holistic development. Let people give if they can, others can go for distributions/awareness, while others can pray for provision and safety of all.
vii. Community based support- One of the emphases of Holistic Development is that whatever program of development the Church engages in should be community based. This being so, it follows that whatever aid is offered by the Church during this period of covid-19 pandemic ought to be community based. If it is, it will serve as a witness to non-believers and may bring a harvest of souls to the kingdom of God thus a means of Church growth.
viii. Provision of a relief program- One of the holistic roles of the church is the provision of a relief program. The Church should have a relief program through which it stores food against a time of scarcity and demand, such as during epidemics, pandemic, security crisis (wars and communal clashes) and natural disaster such as flood and fire outbreak. This stored food will then be given by the church, free of charge, to both church members and non-church members. Widows and indigent persons can be reached through these acts of charity of the Church. These acts of sharing of food to non-believers who are in dire need of it during the pandemic will pass on the message of the love of God which will draw men and women to the kingdom of God. This way, there will be church growth as a result of these acts of hospitality.
ix. Palliative care- The offer of palliative care during this pandemic is a viable instrument for Church growth. The Church can offer palliative care to patients of the dreaded disease directly through her Welfare Department or to the relatives of the patients. This is an outreach of love by the Church and it would draw recipients to faith in Christ leading thereby to Church growth. Encourage members to donate financially and materially to provide relief materials to the members that are really in need.
x. Provision of isolation facilities- The Church can provide facilities for government to make use of as isolation centers. This also is a form of holistic outreach when and wherever it is possible. Also, church can give volunteer members for the service of containing the virus during which, such serving members can pray and

share the Word of God with the patients. That is what the Roman Catholic Church in Lagos did.

xi. There are a lot of online training and online educational programs going on. Church members should be encouraged to enroll into such educational programs and obtain certificates in relevant fields that will add to the employability of the person.

xii. Church members who can coach students, secondary school students for such exams as WAEC and NECO should organize small indoor classes for students in the neighborhood who might be interested. This will be a useful engagement of the time as well as a source of income for the people involved.

xiii. Farming activities like the keeping of domestic animals, poultry and rainfall season farming should be engaged in church members would be encouraged to seize the opportunity for farming in order to generate income for the family.

5.1 Religious Connotation to this Challenge

It is usually believed that God created the universe and would not abandon it except when certain laws are broken, God made man and gave him freewill to choose how he would want to leave. The choices man makes is most times responsible for the happenings around him. See human activities on the environment as an example. These activities have destroyed the ozone layer thereby exposing man to many hazards and diseases. There are several arguments surrounding the origin of Corona virus in the world. However, the researcher argued in line with Scholars that affirmed that Covid-19 Pandemic is biblical when traced from biblical history of the Old and the New Testament, although, God does not cause evil, but He allows it for his own good and pleasure. The scripture says "far be it for God to do evil" (Job 34:10 NIV) and every good and perfect thing comes from God (Jam. 1:17).

We have similar incidences during the reign of Pharaoh, where God allowed ten different plague to afflict the land of Egypt (Ex. 7:1-14-11:1-10). The theology behind the plagues was to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians so they could allow the Israelites go out of Egypt. Many Egyptians died including their livestock and their first-born sons (Ex. 9:1-7, 11:1ff). The OT also records that the LORD through His servant Moses promised to allow the Israelites to be destroyed with terrible disease if they disobey His commandments. The scripture says "The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to do, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of evil you have done in forsaking Him. The LORD will plague you with diseases until He destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess" (Deut. 28:20-21). Some scholars

believe that Covid-19 pandemic is one of the diseases that the Lord promised to plague the Israelites (us) with, for our disobedience in forsaking Him.

6.1 Can the Church survive the onslaught of COVID 19?

Truly this pandemic and the resultant lock down dealt a heavy blow on the church: No offerings, no tithes, no other contributions were received as the churches were closed and people seek to survive with what they have and so could not give to the church, and no fellowshipping with the brethren and the joy that accrues to it. However, the church has succeeded in learning other methods of doing church: online and WhatsApp bible studies, teachings, sermons, etc. Even in the face of persecution the church survived, therefore, pandemic cannot destroy the Church even Jesus said that nothing will prevail against the church. (Mt. 16:18). Therefore, in spite of the disadvantages, the pandemic was of relevance to Church growth because:

i. Spiritually, when the total lockdown was ongoing, many churches started conducting services online just to be able to meet up with the spiritual need of their members. If not as a result of corona virus, people did not know the Church could conduct services online, and have church WhatsApp platforms. Today, the situation is of great help now in reaching out to the members even contributions/donations are made on line. Furthermore, it got the capacity to reach more audiences than is usually the case when worship services are confined to the four walls of the Church auditorium. This brought a harvest of souls leading to an explosion in Church growth.
ii. Some churches were able to distribute palliatives to their members that are in need in order to reduce the hardship on their members and as a result the members were happy with this act.
iii. Every household became a Church: Due to the lockdown every household was transformed to a Church unit, to provide both spiritual, physical, and material help to neighbors and others within each neighborhood. This was a sort of replication of the mother Church in all households and serves as an effort for geometric Church growth.
iv. The unity of members further leads to the growth of the Church in the area of home fellowship, were brothers come together to pray, share from God's word, encourage one another. This form of home fellowship was the kind of the fellowship observed by the early Church. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 24:2 NIV).
v. Some members of the Church at this period of covid-19 pandemic learnt how to share their resources in terms of food and money, materials, emotions, feelings etc.

to those in need. This is one of the great practices of the early Church that seem lost from the contemporary Church, but covid-19 helped to revive the practice. This was practiced in the early Church as the scripture said "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they share everything they had" (Acts 4:32 NIV). The scripture says "Do everything in love" (1 Cor.16:14). The Church swing like pendulum to the place of brotherly love as a result of the tension that griped the entire world, hence Corona virus became the common enemy of the Church and not members as it used to be.

vi. Increase in love: Covid-19 pandemic kills both the rich and the poor, educated and non-educated, young and old, and so on. This single act caused the Church to improve in expression of loving towards others members around them. This was seen in members constant phone calls and issuing of food stuff and financial assistance with others.

vii. The Church became serious with things of God: Most Christians lost their zeal for studying and obeying God's word because of their engagement in their business, office work and other personal schedules, and such Church members do not have time to fast, and pray. With the advent of covid-19 pandemic people are restricted from their business, office and travelling hence provide an ample opportunity for them to be more serious with studying of their bible, praying.

viii. The Omnipotence of God: God allows the covid-19 pandemic as a way of bringing the Church back to faith. This can be affirmed through several efforts made by scientist and health experts such as the virology, but there is not vaccine for corona virus. This implies that God expected the entire world to put their trust in him rather than their technological and scientific advancement because he alone is the omniscience God.

ix. It encouraged prudent spending: Most of the Church members spend extravagantly, and lack the principle of prudent spending because they believe in going out to their businesses and offices to have money daily. The sudden incidence of corona virus serves as a great lesson for many who could not have control over their expenditure were able to control their finances and their spending. People get to think and spend their money on things that benefit them most.

x. Some families were experiencing challenges as a result of the commitment of couples to their work. Similarly, most families do not fellowship together in studying and praying together as family. But Covid-19 forced them to remain at home with their families, this enhance sweet fellowship and many Christian spouses are now living happily, as such there is an improvement in their spiritual relationship with God and each other. Furthermore, there are Christian couples

who use this opportunity to seek forgiveness from one another hence providing a platform for a lasting relationship.

7.1 How can the Church Prepare for Days and times like this in the Future?

Though this is not the first time the world is being hit by pandemic, but this pandemic or epidemic as some tends to describe it, has brought several lessons for the church to learn from and so put modalities in place so that she will not be taken unawares again.

i. Proactive measures need to be inculcated in the life of a Christian as an agent of change to affect the lives of others through the supply of their spiritual, political, economic, environmental, cultural and social needs. This involved making ready donations of food-stuff This is the same lesson to be learnt from the early church as Paul asked for such in Romans 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-3.

ii. Furthermore, encourage the Church to embark on farming and food storage because there is possibility that there is going to be inflation of agricultural/farm product because the attention of the entire nation was shifted away from farming as a result of the lock down. Another serious benefit of the food storage is to enable the Church to help the needy and the weak in times of scarcity. This idea of food storage is likewise adopted by Joseph in the bible while he was in the house of Pharaoh in Egypt. The scripture says "Joseph stored huge quantity of grain, like the sand of the sea…When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph open the store house and sold grains to Egyptians…. And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grains from Joseph… (Exodus 41:49, 56-57). Therefore, embarking in farming and food storage by the Church will go a long way to save even the members and the society at large.

iii. Encourage the Church to Participation in learning of skills: One of the greatest Challenges of the cotemporary Church is lack of interest in learning skills. Members should be encouraged to learn skills like: tailoring, building, shoes and bags making, photography, radio and phones repairs etc. In this process, members will develop mentally and economically and they will also be of great benefits to the Church through tithes. The scripture pointed that Dorcas one of the disciples rendered help and assisted widows during her time because of her skills. She was a Cloth designer and that became her ministry which impact so much lives. When she died her skill spoke for her such that she was bring back to life (Acts 9:36-39). Therefore, learning skills will boast the economy of individual members and also cause social development of the Church. (McKensey 2021:100)

Recommendations

This paper would like to give the following recommendations to the church in order to help the church take her rightful place in bringing succor in hard times:

i. The Church should take teaching serious in order to build the life of the members spiritually.
ii. The Church should avoid extravagant spending but focus mainly on necessity.
iii. The Church should have a reservoir account against unforeseen circumstances such as covid-19 pandemic.
iv. The Church should consider farming and keeping of livestock a priority as well as focus on food storage in order to empower the needy.
v. The Church should invest money on building houses and shops for renting.
vi. The Church should devise a means of empowering the youth and the less privileged.
vii. Seminars should be organized by the Church on skills acquisition for the members.
viii. Loans should be given to widows and less privileged to empowered them economically.
ix. The Church should provide hand sanitizers and disinfect surfaces as a means of prevention against the spread of covid-19.
x. The Church should encourage her members to abide by the safety protocols laid down.
xi. The Church should ensure there is food and money to assist the needy if the lock down persists.
xii. The Church should pray and assist victims of Covid-19 infection in her congregations.
xiii. The Church should avoid discriminating people affected with corona virus but express deep love as it is in the case of Jesus and the sick.

Conclusion

I conclude with the word of Sine, the world in which we live is a fallen one. We see evidence of this every day in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. When we look more at the national and global level, we see the full extent of our fallenness in war, violence, natural and man-made disasters and pandemics (Corona Virus), destruction, manipulation, poverty, tribalism, terrorism, injustice, materialism and the universal desire for power and self. It is into this world that our Lord Jesus Christ was born and into this world we, God's people and God's church are also born. God is not fazed by the sin of this world, he is majestic, he is sovereign, he is sufficient for everybody and every situation, he is complete and whole there is nothing missing in God. God has a plan to redeem and

restore this world and this will culminate in a new heaven and a new earth when Jesus comes again. But in the meantime, the church is God's plan. (CRUDAN 89).

One major lesson all Nigerians and people the world over learnt from this pandemic is that, we can all be affected at the same time so we need to respect our common humanity. Although, some scholars argued that covid-19 had caused a lot of Church members to backslide because of the lockdown that stopped Sunday worship nationwide. But this paper tends to disagree with that opinion because Christians are not meant to worship only in the temple. Considering Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman "Jesus declared, believe me woman a time is coming when you will worship the father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (John 4:21). This paper noted that most of the Churches used their houses in place of the temple to worship and that exactly affirmed Jesus' statement. All we know is that people strive to meet together in spites of the lockdown rule and as such God intervened and the cases of corona virus had not been so serious as it was before, this brings spiritual development because the Church build trust and confidence in God. The paper also gave ways by which the Church can prepare against this challenge in the future and what she can do now that the Virus is still raging the country and other countries of thew world.

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