

## THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the prevailing impacts of the dreadful Covid-19 pandemic on churches in Nigeria during and most especially in the post Covid-19 period. The paper adopts descriptive and analytical approaches in its studies. The study has carefully unraveled some negative and positive practices either already accepted or are gradually gaining entrance into churches in Nigeria as the ostensible aftermath of the Covid-19 lockdown period. While leaning on previous existing research work centred on revealing the economic, social, spiritual and moral impacts of the disease on churches in Nigeria, this research asks pertinent questions concerning the present and future status quo of Nigerian churches. The study submits that the pandemic period had both positive and negative impacts on the church which in one way or the other aid church's advancement and expansion.*

### **Introduction**

Corona viruses belong to a family of viruses that can cause diseases in both animals and humans<sup>84</sup>. The viruses are common in such species of animals as cattle and camels<sup>85</sup>. They are said to be "zoonotic" because they are first produced in animals and can be transmitted to humans only through contacts with infected animals<sup>86</sup>. Person-to-person transmission occurs when the virus develops in an

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<sup>84</sup>Kandola A. (2020), "Coronavirus: cause, origin and how it spread", retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:32am. [www.medicalnewstoday.com](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com),

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Who Health Organisation, Regional Office for Africa, "Coronavirus", retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:40am.

infected person and is released into the air as tiny droplets<sup>87</sup>. This happens when an infected person "coughs, sneezes, sings, talks or breathes"<sup>88</sup> and the droplets enter an uninfected person's nose or mouth<sup>89</sup>.

The name "corona" itself emerged from the discovery that spikes of crown-like-shapes exist on the surface of the virus<sup>90</sup>. It is a Latin word which simply means "a crown" or "halo"<sup>91</sup>. Typical examples of these viruses are: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and the Common Cold. The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) a new strain of the Coronavirus which hitherto had remained unidentified in humans causes the coronavirus disease - Covid-19<sup>92</sup>. Research shows that this particular new strain of virus probably formed in bats or pangolins<sup>93</sup> was first transmitted to humans in Wuhan, China in December 2019<sup>94</sup>. Since then, the virus has spread through all the continents in 2020 like wild fire.

Covid-19 is a highly infectious disease<sup>95</sup> which causes mild to severe respiratory illness<sup>96</sup> and manifests such symptoms as "cough, fever and in severe cases

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*Afro.who.int/publication/coronavirus#:~:text=Coronaviruses%20are%20Zoonotic%2C%20meaning,not%20yet%20infected%20human.*

<sup>87</sup>Kandola A. (2020). Op. cit.

<sup>88</sup> Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19), retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:20am, *mycleverlandclinic.org*.

<sup>89</sup>Kandola A. (2020). Op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19), retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:20am, *mycleverlandclinic.org*.

<sup>91</sup>Iroegbu S. E., Ogunode N. J. and Jegede D. (2021), "The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Local Churches

<sup>92</sup> Adebayo O. A. (2020), "The Effects of Covid-19 Lockdown of Churches in Nigeria on Pastoral Ministry: Matters Arising", *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)*, Vol. 6, No. 6. He adds that the Coronavirus causes respiratory illness similar to Flu and most cases manifest such symptoms as "cough, fever and in more severe cases pneumonia"

<sup>93</sup>Kandola A. (2020). Op. cit.

<sup>94</sup> Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19), retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:20am, *mycleverlandclinic.org*.

<sup>95</sup> Who Health Organisation, Regional Office for Africa, "Coronavirus", retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:40am.

*Afro.who.int/publication/coronavirus#:~:text=Coronaviruses%20are%20Zoonotic%2C%20meaning,not%20yet%20infected%20human.* WHO had on Feb. 11, 2020 announced the name the disease as "Covid-19". The disease is variously referred to as "2019-nCov" and "2019 Novel Coronavirus".

<sup>96</sup> John Hopkins Medicine (2021), "What is Coronavirus?", <https://hopkinsmedicine.org/health/condition-and-diseases/coronavirus>, retrieved October 12, 2021, 1:30pm.

pneumonia<sup>97</sup>. It has higher chances of leading to death especially in cases where the infected are old and suffer from diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases<sup>98</sup>. The first medically recommended preventive measures were frequent washing of hands, social distancing, keeping away from sick people, keeping one's hands away from their faces, having good rest and adequate nutrition<sup>99</sup>. At the initial spread of the disease, there were no cures. However, vaccines and other drugs produced much later are meant to contain and curb the further spread of the disease. Infected persons are isolated and administered the requisite treatment and could be discharged and reunited with the society only if found to have recovered fully.

No doubt Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the social, economic, political and religious activities of the world as from the end of 2019 and down through 2020. In a bid to curb the further spread of the disease, the Federal Government issued a total lockdown directive prohibiting all public activities and movements. Earlier in February 27, the Federal Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of the disease in Lagos. This index case was that of an Italian national who arrived Nigeria on February 25, 2020 from Milan for a brief business. He fell ill and on February 27 at Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) he was confirmed to have contracted the disease. Days after, LUTH reported that this man had recovered and showed no signs of the disease after being placed in isolation<sup>100</sup>.

As afore-stated, the lockdown directive was a restriction meant to contain and prevent the further spread of the pandemic. This directive restricted public and social gatherings or activities, interstate and cross-border movements<sup>101</sup> except when embarked upon for official or indispensable assignments<sup>102</sup>. Thus, it

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<sup>97</sup> Adebayo O. A. (2020). Op. cit. p. 164.

<sup>98</sup> Who Health Organisation, Regional Office for Africa, "Coronavirus", retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:40am.

*Afro.who.int/publication/coronavirus#:~:text=Coronaviruses%20are%20Zoonotic%2C%20meaning,not%20yet%20infected%20human.*

<sup>99</sup> Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19), retrieved, October 2, 2021, 12:20am, *mycleverlandclinic.org*.

<sup>100</sup> Ezeamalu, B. (2020), "Nigeria Records First Coronavirus Case", Premium Times news of February 28, 2020. [www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/379432-nigeria-records-first-coronavirus-case.html](http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/379432-nigeria-records-first-coronavirus-case.html). Retrieved, October 2, 2021, 3:30am.

<sup>101</sup> Adebayo O. A. (2020). Op. cit. p. 165.

<sup>102</sup> Amadi-Nche, C. (2021), "ICT: A Coping Strategy by Nigerian Churches amidst Covid-19 Pandemic", Research Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies, Vol. 7, No. 1, [www.iiardpub.org](http://www.iiardpub.org), p. 13

enforced a compulsory social or physical distancing<sup>103</sup>, the use of facemasks and frequent hand sanitizing<sup>104</sup> and also advocated for “stay safe or stay at home”<sup>105</sup>. This means that all socio-economic, political, religious and educational activities were indefinitely banned. These conditions greatly affected churches in Nigeria. For this reason, we shall revisit discussions on the effects of the lockdown period on churches in Nigeria. We shall also push this academic discourse further by analysing recent discovered trends in these churches in the post-covid-19 lockdown period. We shall bring this discussion to an end with salient recommendations on how the pandemic period experience can either benefit Nigerian churches at all fronts or truncate their general advancement.

### **The Covid-19 Period and its Impacts on Churches in Nigeria**

Unarguably, scholarly research works identified two major impacts of Covid-19 on churches in Nigeria. These include: the suspension of various physical church meetings and activities<sup>106</sup> and the reduction in church incomes.

### **The Suspension of Various Physical Church Meetings and Activities**

The lockdown directive proscribed all social gatherings in the country as a preventive and precautionary measure against the further spread of the ravaging Covid-19. A "social gathering" is a group of people who come together in one place to promote companionship<sup>107</sup> and fellowship<sup>108</sup> and in order to achieve some desired goals. Birthday parties, wedding ceremonies, send-off events and religious gatherings are all examples of social gatherings. Thus, the directive passed by the Government required all places where people visit or gather for one reason or the other to close indefinitely. These places included but were not limited to schools, markets, football-viewing centres, cinemas, shopping malls,

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<sup>103</sup>Falaye, T. A. (2020), “Impact of Covid-19 on the Church of God in Nigeria”, *Journal of Humanities*, Kampala International University, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 320.

<sup>104</sup>Amadi-Nche, C. (2021). *Op. cit.* p. 13

<sup>105</sup> Adebayo O. A. (2020). *Op. cit.* p. 165.

<sup>106</sup>Irekamba, C. (2020), “Covid-19: How churches cope without regular services”, *The Guardian Newspaper* publication of May 2020, 3:25am, Retrieved October 10, 2021, 12:34am.

<sup>107</sup> Collins Dictionary, “Definition of ‘Social gathering’”, [www.collinsdictionary.com](http://www.collinsdictionary.com), October 10, 2021, 12:00pm.

<sup>108</sup> Vocabulary.com, “Social gathering – Dictionary Definition”, [www.vocabulary.com](http://www.vocabulary.com), October 10, 2021, 12:30pm.

restaurants and all religious centres. As such, church activities which include Sunday worships and weekly programmes, evangelistic missions and crusades were suspended. The Christian faith was placed in a delicate situation.

Unfortunately, there were several cases of non-compliance to these directives. Some churches held their normal Sunday services secretly. There were reported cases of how security agencies had to thread with caution in dismissing church gatherings<sup>109</sup> in order to avoid being accused of committing sacrilege. Sacrilege is a sin. It is a conscious act of irreverence committed against a Holy place, person or thing<sup>110</sup>.

These acts although reflective of the zeal and burning passion evinced by these churches, in actuality left much to be desired about the Nigerian Christian faith. Since the church teaches good morals and lofty virtues it was highly inappropriate for her to engage in such acts of insubordination especially when the issue at stake was dicey. Worst still, the gullibility of most Nigerian Christian followers who are likely to do anything at any time without asking questions provided they are directed to do so by their spiritual leaders, was further exposed. All these birthed but one burning question: can a disobedient church teach the truth? Also, cases of false prophecies in that period either concerning the early disappearance of the pandemic<sup>111</sup> or on underscoring the pandemic as a divine punishment leading to the early end of the world, flew around. These prophecies were eventually recanted or redefined.

Most importantly, due to the ban on religious activities, sacraments could not be administered. Sacraments are "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give

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<sup>109</sup>Orjinmo, N. (2020), "Coronavirus: Nigeria's mega churches adjust to empty auditoriums", BBC News publication of April 8, 2020, Retrieved October 11, 2020, 1:00am. She notes that security agencies particularly in Lagos had to arrest pastors as that will deter other church ministers from flaunting the ban on religious activities.

<sup>110</sup> Oxford Dictionary, Android Phone Application.

<sup>111</sup>Gabriel, C. (2020), "What Nigerian Pastors said about COVID-19", Vanguard Newspaper publication of May 23, 2020. She notes that Prophet TB Joshua redefined his prophetic revelation which stated the Covid-19 infection will end March 27, 2020. When the said date arrived and disease persisted, she observes that the Prophet maintained that the prophecy was with regards to the end of the pandemic in Wuhan China, where it started. On the other hand, according to her Pastor Chris oyakhilome of Christ Embassy had in a video post connected the virus to 5G network, alleging that it was part of the plans to create a "a new world order".

grace"<sup>112</sup>. They are items or activities considered as "possessing a sacred character or mysterious significance"<sup>113</sup>. The number of sacraments recognised and accepted in Nigerian Christian denominations depends on the doctrines establishing these denominations. Regardless, there are seven sacraments. These include: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, marriage and holy orders<sup>114</sup>. These seven sacraments are recognised and accepted in the Catholic Church. Other denominations reject a few while redefining the ones they accept.

The lockdown prevented the administration of sacraments to church members. This scenario can be termed "ecclesiastical retardation" because church growth is often measured by the number of sacraments administered. If a church were to expand numerically, it means that there must be new converts and newly-born to whom the sacraments will be given gradually, beginning with the rite of initiation, which is the baptism. The other sacraments are administered based on spiritual growth and conscious indication of interest. Given this, one can rightly argue that there is a connection between church expansion and spiritual growth both of which are reliant on the administration of sacraments.

More so, the restriction on religious gatherings also affected two paramount Christian religious activities: crusades and evangelism. These activities are occasionally organised to reach out to a larger group of people of other faiths or denominations in order to cause them to accept Jesus as the only way to salvation. They are seldom held in locations where church branches exist. Thus, rural communities and distant towns are always set as main targets. The programmes are carefully planned and near-perfectly held. The sole intention behind them is to have more converts with whom a new branch of the church would be set in the location. The lockdown prevented all these.

In most urban settings, learned church minister devised various means of preaching to their followers. Televised ministers maintained active presence on television ministration. These ministrations were streamed to Christians across various social media platforms. Most churches also preached and held prayer

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<sup>112</sup> Scott, P. R. (2019), "What is a Sacrament?", The article is based on "A Lesson Inspired by the Baltimore Catechism", Retrieved on October 12, 2021, 1:15pm.

<https://www.learnreligion.com/what-is-a-sacrament-541717>.

<sup>113</sup>Oxford Dictionary, Android Phone Application.

<sup>114</sup> Felix Justus, S. J. (2006), "The Seven Sacraments", Retrieved on October 12, 2021, 1:20pm. <https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/Sacraments.htm>.



meetings, Sunday worships, Bible Study and other church activities on Zoom, WhatsApp etc.

These online meetings were very helpful but cost implicative. They did not favour the disadvantaged and the digitally-ignorant. Besides having a tiny pool of followers in addition to facing the challenge of fixing a convenient time, online meetings excluded members' resident in rural places where there is no internet connection. Similarly, church members who cannot afford the gadgets required to partake in these online meetings could not take part in them. Nevertheless, some churches responded to this challenge by initiating house fellowships<sup>115</sup> where a cluster of church members on a street or location rotated Sunday worships round among themselves taking turns to host the worships. This too was not without its own challenge. The worships were often very brief and summarised and often bereft of the usual qualities expected of such celebrations under normal circumstances.

It is also pertinent to state that the lockdown deprived churches of great festivals and celebrations. For instance, the 2020 Easter was not observed in the usual way. Revivals and other spiritual exercises engaged in to herald the Easter were only passively observed. All these challenges were faced by churches in Nigeria as a result of the ban on social gatherings.

### **Decline in Church Revenue**

Church revenues within the period were drastically reduced. Owing to the ban on social gatherings, church offerings, tithes, thanksgiving, seed-sowing and other major means of generating incomes could not be used. Offerings are a primary source of church income. They are collected during Sunday worships and at meetings and fellowships. Offerings provide members the chance to frequently contribute financially to the growth of the church. On the other hand, thanksgiving offerings, seed-sowing and tithes are often collected separately. These forms of offering can be clearly understood in the Nigerian and African context. Thanksgiving offerings are offered to appreciate God for certain unexpected blessings. These blessings include divine healing from diseases, divine protection from accidents or evil attacks, success in exams and interviews, conceiving after several years of marriage, getting married, employment opportunities etc. Tithes are the normal ten percent part of the incomes realized monthly or yearly either from salaries or businesses which all Christians are

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<sup>115</sup>Irekamba, C. (2020). Op. cit.

expected to give to the church. The practice of tithing has its origin in the Old Testament<sup>116</sup>. Seed-sowing are personal donations made by church members towards financing church events or projects.

Given that physical church attendances were suspended; it was difficult to collect all these collections. During the period, a low response and poor commitment towards giving was witnessed with regards to church members fulfilling their financial obligation to the church. The prevailing harsh economic realities affected everyone greatly. Feeding in some homes was an issue let alone giving to the church. Note that all movements were banned. There were no businesses. This meant that tithing for most people was nearly impossible. Besides, questions on how to send the tithes across to the right persons and on what media to use may have remained unanswered. Digitally, nearly 7 out of every 15 Christians are illiterate. Only a tiny percentage of church members could access church Bank Account Details on social media platforms via smart phones and very few can even effect transactions. This coupled to the unwillingness of some members to cooperate affected churches financially.

Likewise, churches could not generate incomes from their investments since all businesses were closed. Thus, churches where such investments as hospitals, schools, event halls and transport businesses are counted upon as tangible sources of revenue only lost more money paying their staff when nothing was actually being realised. The cost of maintaining these facilities also brought great losses to churches.

It was also discovered that full time pastors and ministers of churches faced great challenges. They had no extra jobs. Their only source of livelihood was the monthly salaries and donations they receive from the church and its members. A recent research reveals that many pastors and church workers' salaries for that period were slashed down to cut down church expenses. In some cases, salaries were not paid because churches were incapacitated financially.

More so, to cushion the effect of the pandemic on members, some churches distributed palliatives to members and to poor people in rural communities. All these were at the expense of the church. Nevertheless, the integrity of most Christians failed in that period. There were Christians among those who broke into warehouses and residential buildings to cater away "supposed palliatives".

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<sup>116</sup> "Tithing: almsgiving", Retrieved October 13, 2021, 1:48am.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/tithe>



Several Christians also took to crimes in order to weather through the storms of the period.

### **Post Covid-19 Period**

In this segment, we shall turn our attention to the changes observed in Christian churches at the end of the lock-down. We shall talk on both the negative and positive changes at a time.

### **Church Attendance**

At the beginning, church attendance soared in spite of the requirement that only 20 persons could attend a religious gathering. A huge percentage of the congregation hung outside and followed the worships either projected on projectors or amplified via loud speakers. Hand sanitizers are provided at the entrances and gates of most churches for members to use before being allowed in. Some churches made provisions for water and soap instead. Ushers or wardens depending on the denominations are stationed at the entrances of churches to ensure full compliance to all Covid-19 safety rules.

In most churches, seats are numbered with a six-foot minimum distance in between and tallies are produced according to the number of sitting places realised at the end of the day. The ushers or wardens issue the tallies and people are expected to sit according to the number on their tally. Any one intending to participate in any church activity was required to wash their hands or use the hand sanitisers at church entrances and wear their facemasks before being issued a tally. This meant that being able to sit in the church main building for Sunday worships was strictly based on "first-come-first-served". In some cases, the ushers or wardens use the infrared thermometer to check members' temperatures before letting them in. The infrared thermometer is a tiny pistol-like instrument handled with the right hand and used in determining one's temperature by focusing light rays on their eyes.

Through the worship certain practices were stopped. These included the practice of welcoming new members and greeting one another through handshakes; the age-long tradition of exchanging the "peace of Christ" practiced in the Catholic Church, where shortly before the Holy Communion is administered, the congregants exchange handshakes with one another; and the administration of the Holy Communion on the tongue etc. The Holy Communion was then

administered on the right palm. The culture of exorcism and laying on of hands was also stopped in most churches.

During offering collections, congregants were expected to move to the foot of the altar where the collection boxes are stationed while maintaining significant distances between each person. When Thanksgivings were brought, the officiating priest or pastor stands away, prays and blesses the congregants presenting the Thanksgiving and returns to his seat. Sprinkling of Holy Water was also stopped, although in some places, this may not have been adhered to. In most Catholic churches the Holy Water fonts at church entrances even till date are left empty.

In some churches, families are allowed to occupy a pew. After the worship, congregants were expected to keep the rules. It was recommended that people should revisit the church entrance to wash their hands before leaving. This was meant to serve as a safeguard against being exposed to the disease through contacts with one's seat. Also, when people exchange pleasantries after worships they kept away from one another.

However, this compliance soon dwindled. For instance, in most churches in the North, church buildings began to fill up beyond capacities. Holy Communion were administered on the tongues rather than in one's palm and handshake rituals in church worships were allowed. In the East and West, it took a bit longer to relax these regulations. That aside, far less has been told about whether churches recorded a reduction in their sizes or had new converts in the post lockdown period. This itself is a subject of another research.

The administration of sacraments has since increased astronomically. Crusades, revivals and other salient church activities have continued. These activities as said earlier have higher prospects of propelling church growth. Unarguably, church incomes should have also increased because people have commenced their normal lives as usual and church Sunday worships are held and offering collections, tithes and other donations are collected. Hence, church members may not have tangible reasons for not meeting up with their financial obligations. On the other hand, church investments are now counted upon as some means of generating incomes.

## **Recommendations**

- i. The lockdown reveals the need for stable weekly or monthly house fellowships among church members who live on the same street. This will

- unite members and increase their commitment in church activities. It will further lessen the heavy burden of visiting church members often shouldered by pastors and priests. It also has the capability of attracting Christians of other denominations and believers of other faiths to either join a church or repent of their sins and convert to Christianity.
- ii. It is recommended that priests and pastors should find alternative income sources. This will require them to combine their jobs at the church with other employments. Although doing this may not be easy it is not impossible. Depending hugely on the church alone has great disadvantages for both the priests/pastors and their members. As observed, church salaries often cannot cater for the ministers' needs and those of his immediate families and dependents at a time. The constant appeals for helps from church members in order to augment ministers' salaries and better their welfare are greeted always with silent complaints. Members have problems in the same way church ministers do and should not be bothered unnecessarily to support always. To change the narrative, church ministers should find other employment which they are to attend to during the day and spearhead church activities in the evenings and on weekends. Being actively involved outside the church can be another way of evangelism.
  - iii. Churches should continue to maintain required hygiene principles. These include: social distancing, washing of hands before worships, not being jam-packed in churches, avoiding handshakes and holding of hands during prayer sessions and stopping the administration of the Eucharist on the tongue. These will help prevent the easy spread of other communicable diseases.
  - iv. Churches are advised to reduce the number of weekly church activities to enable church members to be more committed and diligent in the discharge of their responsibilities both at home and at their working places.
  - v. Churches are also encouraged to welcome technological growth and developments and to use the social media to check up on members and preach to them at all times. This will prevent circumstances from halting the work of evangelism.
  - vi. We recommend also that churches should try to diversify their sources of income by shifting attention from tithes, offerings and donations, to such investments and businesses as farming, transportation, schools, hospitals

- etc. This has the virtue of providing for church needs in dire periods and reducing church over-dependence on its members.
- vii. Churches are encouraged to adhere to rules and regulations at all times and to ensure that their members do the same. In the Covid-19 lockdown period some churches held services secretly. Others failed in ensuring that their members stuck to recommended preventive measures. These acts are totally unchristian. The Bible states clearly that the church must obey rules and respect government authorities because they have been ordained by God. In failing to comply with laid down regulations, the church would only be training disobedient Christians who will commit all crimes without compunction and soil the image of the Christian faith wherever they go to.

### **Conclusion**

This paper revisited the salient topic of discussing the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on Nigerian churches. Through a step-by-step approach, the paper began by explaining the Covid-19 and its origin. It explored the damages caused by the Covid-19 pandemic particularly on churches in Nigeria. It agreed with and supported claims on the advantages provided the church by the period to redefine and modify most of their practices. The study submitted that the pandemic period had both positive and negative impacts on the church which in one way or the other aid church advancement and expansion.