



The impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on religious practices of churches in Nigeria

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Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the churches in Nigeria contended with Boko Haram insurgency which mainly affected the churches in Northern Nigeria. However, COVID-19 affected various churches in all the nooks and crannies of the country. It brought about obvious changes in numerous practices of churches in Nigeria. Long-standing traditions of churches such as solemnisation of Holy Matrimony, Holy Communion, baptism, prayer and sharing of peace (This practice is commonly observed by the orthodox churches and entails shaking one another's hands in the course of a communion service) have been modified or suspended. Whilst this article appreciates the efforts of the federal and state governments, it investigates the implications of COVID-19 outbreak on traditional religious practices of churches in Nigeria. It also examines the responses of churches towards controlling the pandemic. The phenomenological method is used to analyse the data collected from both primary (semi-structured interview) and secondary sources (journals and internet materials). Findings from this work indicate that COVID-19 outbreak is a challenge to the purpose of the institution 'church'.

Contribution: The article investigated and examined the changes which churches made in their doctrine and liturgy with respect to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria. It discovered that many traditions of the church have been modified or suspended as a way of curtailing the spread of the virus.

Keywords: implication; COVID-19; religious practices; church in Nigeria; church practices.

Introduction

In the past years, churches in Nigeria have passed through a lot of challenges arising from the inhumane activities of Boko Haram insurgents and other groups of terrorists. In Northern Nigerian states, a number of Christians have lost their lives from the attacks of these groups of people. Christians have faced difficulties such as loss of properties, persecution, bodily injuries, rape and internal displacement. Consequently, a number of churches in Northern Nigeria are no longer operating. However, to a large extent, Christianity in Nigeria has thrived amidst all these challenges (Ozor 2019).

Churches in Nigeria are contending with the novel pandemic known as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). According to Eke, Jummai and Onoja (informants, see Table 1), the outbreak of COVID-19 reveals that the end of the world is imminent. Most Christians regard it as one of the signs that the coming of Jesus Christ is at hand. They also regard it as a divine punishment for ungodliness. It is understood to be a call to repentance and sincere commitment to God. It is an instrument for bringing back the people of God to godliness and creating awareness of the vanity of material possessions. It is a call to earnestly seek the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. It is a call to amend one's ways and get ready for the inevitable second coming of Jesus Christ.

This article investigates the effects of COVID-19 on the practices of churches in Nigeria. Data were gathered mainly in South-eastern states from about 49 churches. This article further examines the various responses of churches towards containing the spread of the virus. Obviously, the pandemic has orchestrated numerous changes in the religious observances of churches in Nigeria. Various age-long traditions of the church are no longer observed as the result of the deadly pandemic. As a result of fear of contracting the virus, it has brought about observable decline in the attendance of members to church services and its consequential reduction in financial returns through tithes and offerings.

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TABLE 1: Personal communication (pseudonyms are used for the names of informants)

| Informant number | Name of informant | Informant's Christian denomination |
|------------------|-------------------|--|
| 1 | Abel, V. | End Time Bible Ministry |
| 2 | Ade, N. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 3 | Adebisi, T. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 4 | Adeboye, E. | Catholic Church |
| 5 | Adejor, S. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 6 | Adekunle, P. | House on the Rock Ministry International |
| 7 | Adenuga, R. | Assemblies of God Church |
| 8 | Adesiana, M. | Catholic Church |
| 9 | Ajala, T. | Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) |
| 10 | Anorue, F. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 11 | Aru, E. | Presbyterian Church of Nigeria |
| 12 | Asadu, U. | Catholic Church |
| 13 | Asegbe, J. | Catholic Church |
| 14 | Asogwa, G. | Christ Ascension Ministry |
| 15 | Attamah, E. | Potter's House |
| 16 | Ayo, A. | Dunamis International Gospel Centre |
| 17 | Chibuikwe, Q. | Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) |
| 18 | Chika, A. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 19 | Didiugwu, Z. | Living Faith Church |
| 20 | Dike, W. | Mount Zion Ministries |
| 21 | Dioke, S. | Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) |
| 22 | Echeme, X. | Presbyterian Church of Nigeria |
| 23 | Echezona, E. | Catholic Church |
| 24 | Echezona, D. | Covenant Christian Bible Ministry |
| 25 | Edozie, C. | Living Faith Evangelical Ministries |
| 26 | Egwu, R. | Unity Church |
| 27 | Eke, F. | Pneuma Domain Ministry |
| 28 | Ekwulu, V. | Catholic Church |
| 29 | Ese, T. | Living Faith Church |
| 30 | Esehi, G. | Covenant Christian Bible Ministry |
| 31 | Eya, B. | Presbyterian Church of Nigeria |
| 32 | Ezeagu, Y. | Catholic Church |
| 33 | Ezebuike, H. | Catholic Church |
| 34 | Ezema, N. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 35 | Ezike, U. | Living Faith Church |
| 36 | Fakae, J. | Methodist Church of Nigeria |
| 37 | Funke, M. | Deeper Life Word Ministry |
| 38 | Idowu, I. | End Time Bible Ministry |
| 39 | Ifedinachi, K. | Covenant Christian Bible Ministry |
| 40 | Igwe, M. | The Apostolic Mount Olive Church |
| 41 | Ihechukwu, I. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 42 | Imabong, K. | Word of Life Ministries |
| 43 | Inyang, L. | Presbyterian Church of Nigeria |
| 44 | Iro, P. | The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Renewal Ministry |
| 45 | Ivoke, Y. | Overcomers World Ministries |
| 46 | Jummai, U. | Deeper Life Word Ministries |
| 47 | Kayode, I. | Voice of the Cross Evangelical Ministry |
| 48 | Mba, R. | Christ Church |
| 49 | Mefela, D. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 50 | Mmecha, A. | Catholic Church |
| 51 | Ndubuisi, U. | Deeper Life Word Ministry |
| 52 | Nduka, G. | Domain of Praise Ministry International |
| 53 | Ndum, P. | New Life in Christ Bible Church |
| 54 | Nebo, E. | City Takers' Assembly |
| 55 | Ngwoke, K. | City of Purpose Ministries International |
| 56 | Niyi, L. | Fountain of Life Bible Ministries |
| 57 | Njiofor, D. | Evangel Pentecostal Church |
| 58 | Nkpugo, I. | New Fountain of Life Ministry |
| 59 | Nkwuda, K. | Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries |

Table 1 continues on the next column →

TABLE 1: Personal communication (pseudonyms are used for the names of informants) (Continues...)

| Informant number | Name of informant | Informant's Christian denomination |
|------------------|-------------------|--|
| 60 | Nwokeocha, S. | Fountain of Life Ministry |
| 61 | Nzewi, J. | Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) |
| 62 | Obafemi, T. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 63 | Obafemi, E. | Synagogue Church of All Nations |
| 64 | Obayi, E. | Deeper Faith Ministry |
| 65 | Obichukwu, A. | City of Purpose Ministries International |
| 66 | Obiefuna, R. | Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) |
| 67 | Odionye, G. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 68 | Ojike, U. | Faith Tabernacle Ministry |
| 69 | Okechukwu, K. | God of Possibilities Ministry |
| 70 | Okechukwu, R. | Catholic Church |
| 71 | Okpenyi, A. | Christian Pentecostal Church |
| 72 | Olaniyi, J. | Maranatha International |
| 73 | Olisaemeka, O. | City of Purpose Ministries International |
| 74 | Olorunfemi, D. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 75 | Olushola, S. | New Fountain of Life Ministry |
| 76 | Omojala, U. | Evangel Pentecostal Bible Church |
| 77 | Omotosho, A. | Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries |
| 78 | Onoja, C. | Assemblies of God Church |
| 79 | Onuigbo, I. | DayStar Church |
| 80 | Onwubiko, G. | Word of Life Ministries |
| 81 | Orizu, D. | Mountain of Grace Ministry |
| 82 | Orji, U. | City Takers' Assembly |
| 83 | Oruchukwu, U. | Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) |
| 84 | Osagie, C. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 85 | Ozioko, T. | Deeper Life Christian Ministry |
| 86 | Ozioko, E. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 87 | Segun, E. | Dominion City |
| 88 | Temi, S. | Christ Apostolic Church |
| 89 | Toye, K. | Christian Pentecostal Bible Based Church |
| 90 | Tunde, D. | House on the Rock Ministry International |
| 91 | Uchechukwu, E. | Maranatha International |
| 92 | Udechukwu, Q. | Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) |
| 93 | Udo, E. | Domain of Praise Ministry International |
| 94 | Uduak, U. | Redeemed Christian Church of God |
| 95 | Ufere, L. | Potter's House |
| 96 | Ugwu, T. | Deeper Life Word Ministry |
| 97 | Ugwunodo, E. | Assemblies of God Church |
| 98 | Ugwunodo, J. | Christ Embassy |
| 99 | Ukama, A. | Holy Ghost International Arena |
| 100 | Ukwa, H. | Unity in Christ Bible Church |
| 101 | Ukwuoma, D. | Living Faith Evangelical Ministries |
| 102 | Yemi, S. | Dunamis International Gospel Centre |

The increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in Nigeria led to an initial lockdown of churches following the directive of the Federal Government which was re-enacted by various state governments. Irekamba (2020) agrees that in compliance with Lagos state government's advisory on religious gatherings to curb the spread of the dreaded COVID-19, many churches have suspended their major and weekly activities, including Sunday services, which usually attract thousands of worshippers. However, despite the lockdown directive, some churches still observe their services skeletonally. On the other hand, many church leaders resorted to live-streamed services through various social media platforms as a way of engaging their members and giving hope to them in these perilous times. Furthermore, the directive of the Federal Government for its citizens to stay at home propelled many

church leaders to distribute food items and other palliatives to their members, especially the less-privileged.

In this study, the researcher employed the semi-structured interview method to gather data from both church leaders and Christians in Nigeria. These two groups were chosen because they are the categories of people who as a matter of their participation in church affairs observe the actual changes in the religious practices of churches. Being the primary informants, the views of 102 church leaders, workers and members from 49 churches (both orthodox and pentecostal) in Nigeria were critically analysed and presented in the article. The data were analysed using the phenomenological method of data analysis also known as the descriptive research method. This methodology brackets a researcher's bias in analysing and presenting data elicited from informants. It gives room for a detailed analysis of the phenomenon under discourse. Suffice it to note that as a result of the need to maintain social distancing, lockdown order and its inherent challenges on movement, the researcher partly made use of various social media applications to disseminate the interview questions and also elicit information from informants.

Outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria

The first COVID-19 case to be reported in Nigeria was confirmed on Thursday, 27 February 2020. Ehanire (2020) notes that the index case is an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria. He returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos, Nigeria on 25 February 2020. He was confirmed positive by the Virology Laboratory of Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), part of the Laboratory Network of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

Unfortunately, the number of COVID-19 cases has continued to increase. Between February 2020 and February 2021, Nigeria recorded a total of 146 928 confirmed cases. Out of these, 123 009 persons have been discharged whilst 1761 persons have died. In all the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), deaths have been recorded. Lagos state has the highest number of confirmed cases whilst Kogi state has the lowest: 53 292 and five cases, respectively (Rahman 2021).

Effects of COVID-19 outbreak on the religious practices of churches in Nigeria

The outbreak of COVID-19 heralded changes in the religious observances of churches in Nigeria. Some long-standing traditions of the church have been discontinued or modified. According to Adebisi, Chibuike and Ezeagu (informants), very few of these changes were last observed in 2014 when there was an outbreak of Ebola virus disease (EVD). However, these changes were short-lived because EVD was contained within few weeks of its outbreak in Nigeria. The outbreak of EVD did not lead to lockdown of churches; the major precaution which was taken by churches was with respect to

Holy Communion; some churches purchased multiple chalices for their members whilst others suspended the celebration of Holy Communion. Another preventive measure which was taken by churches in order to control the spread of Ebola virus was suspending of 'sharing of peace' which involves handshaking amongst congregants. N dum (informant) notes that unlike COVID-19, the outbreak of EVD did not cause prolonged commotion in the country. In fact, many Nigerians did not hear about EVD till the early hours of 10 September 2014 when it was widely circulated that people should drink and bathe salt solution (water mixed with salt) as a way of preventing the disease. Unfortunately, some people who drank salted water later developed health complications, N dum concludes.

After the initial shutdown of churches was relaxed, the Nigerian government directed that religious gatherings should be restricted to 20 persons, in an effort to stop the spread of the virus. As the virus continued to spread to other parts of the country, the federal government re-directed that all places of worship should be on a total lockdown (Ayeni 2020). Consequently, some churches completely suspended all services whilst others defied the lockdown directive and continued observing services though skeletally and with modifications. However, some church leaders utilised the media to engage their members in live streamed services. Some also made their services available through various radio and television channels (Obafemi and Obiefuna: informants). The modifications in the religious practices of churches in Nigeria are as follows:

Modifications in the celebration of Eucharist

Eucharist (Holy Communion or Lord's Supper) is a central rite of the Christian religion, in which bread and wine are consecrated by an ordained minister and consumed by the minister and members of the congregation in obedience to Jesus' command at the Last Supper, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. In the Roman Catholic, Anglican and many Protestant churches, it is regarded as a sacrament, which symbolises the union of Christ with the faithful (Price 2008). Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, in most churches, the Holy Communion was administered with the use of one cup for drinking wine (blood of Christ); in such churches, the practice was that ministers use towels to clean the upper layer of the cup before giving to another communicant. More so, the common practice was that communicants queue up in rows and the ministers administer the Lord's Supper to them.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, some churches suspended the celebration of Lord's Supper whilst others made some adjustments such as providing individual cups for communicants and the ministers coming to the pews to serve members instead of members clustering in queues. Asogwa, Eya, Igwe, Njidiofor and Okechukwu (informants) note that in their churches, the celebration of Holy Communion was suspended because they usually made use of a single chalice for sharing the wine (blood of Christ). Ojike (informant)

discloses that their pastor instructed them to observe the Lord's Supper at home. They were given some Bible references to read and prayers to say before taking the bread and wine (symbols of the body and blood of Christ). Similarly, on Thursday (02 April 2020), the general overseer of Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (Pastor Enoch Adeboye) celebrated the Lord's Supper via Dove Television Channel; members were directed to connect to the said channel and observe theirs at home. Ade and Odionye (informants) lament that staying at home to observe the Lord's Supper diminishes the sacredness of the institution. They add that it is better to completely suspend the celebration of the Lord's Supper till the Federal Government directs that church services should be resumed.

Modifications in child dedication, solemnisation of Holy matrimony and funeral mass

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, some church leaders adjusted the service liturgy for child dedication, solemnisation of holy matrimony and funeral mass. These services usually bring together a number of persons such as church members, family and friends. During the lockdown, some church members were eager to carry out some of these services. Dike (informant) notes that a certain man in his church was very anxious to dedicate his child so that his wife can resume their eatery business which was their main source of income. He accepted to carry out the dedication service on the condition that the service should be attended by only members of their immediate family. Dike concludes that the child dedication was conducted on Saturday (04 April 2020) with only seven persons in attendance and that the usual procedure was not followed; rather, he briefly prayed for the baby and her parents and in a space of about 15 min, the service was over. Similarly, Asadu, Inyang and Oruchukwu (informants) disclose that within the period of lockdown, they conducted infant baptism for 4, 3 and 1 of their members, respectively.

According to Nwokeocha (informant), his wedding ceremony had earlier been scheduled to hold on Easter Monday (13 April 2020); his pastor agreed to go ahead and conduct the wedding service on the scheduled date with the condition that those to be present would be only the intending couple, their parents and five other persons. Nwokeocha adds that he hopes to organise a reception party as soon as the restriction on a large gathering of people is relaxed. Didiugwu, Echezona, Kayode and Olaniyi (informants) observe that they have conducted wedding ceremonies and marriage blessings for their members, although they did not strictly follow the protocols guiding wedding ceremonies in their churches. In fact, Kayode adds that for the ones he conducted, he followed the order: blessing of the rings, exchange of vows and rings, brief admonition and prayers for the couple. For Echezona and Olaniyi, they did not exceed about 45 min in the wedding services they conducted.

On a similar note, Adeboye (informant) narrates that the funeral ceremony of his late father was earlier scheduled to hold on 04 April 2020. Consequently, he proposed to his

parish priest that the funeral mass should still be carried out even if it was to be witnessed by only the deceased man's immediate family members. On the agreed date, three of the church leaders and eight family members of the deceased assembled at the grave side, prayers were said for the deceased and the family members after which the corpse was lowered. Adeboye adds that he does not intend to carry out any other funeral rites for his late father owing to the fact that he spent so much on his father's medical treatment before he eventually died.

Poor attendance to church services or financial depletion

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria led to a decline in the number of persons who attend services in various churches. Ugwunodo (informant) notes that in his church of about 200 members, he recorded an attendance of about 36 members on Sunday (22 March 2020). He adds that to his utmost surprise, on Sunday (29 March 2020), only nine persons attended service. Similarly, Ivoke (informant) avers that even though God does not only demonstrate his power in the midst of multitudes of people, one tends to find more happiness in highly populated services. He adds that he decided to stop attending services till the pandemic is over after being present in a Sunday service which was only attended by 14 persons. Furthermore, attendance to weekly services in various churches in Nigeria became nothing to write home about. According to Echeme and Orizu (informants), prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, attendance to weekly activities in their churches was usually very poor because during weekdays, some church members are heavily engaged with their jobs and businesses whilst others feel satisfied with attending only Sunday services. As a result of COVID-19, it declined more to the extent that there were weekly activities attended by only pastors and their family members. Consequently, not more than 1 h is spent during Sunday services. All members are expected to leave the church premises once the service is over as group meetings are no longer scheduled to hold after service (Nzewi: informant).

Another consequence of the poor attendance to services is poor financial remittances. Churches execute projects mainly through the tithes, offerings and donations from members. Many churches have been able to build standard well-equipped worship centres through the money realised from members. According to Ozioko (informant), the outbreak of COVID-19 reduced the financial capacity of many churches. Most priests emphasise that one's financial prosperity is determined by how one gives financial support to the church. During church services, members are reminded of the importance of giving tithes and abundant offerings. Special prayers are made for those who pay their tithes and donate money to the church. During church services, some church members also make big donations as a way of showing off their wealth. Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 kept many people away from church and the incessant sensitisation on giving; hence, many church members ceased from giving. The loss of jobs

experienced by some members was also partly responsible for the financial depletion in churches.

Some churches notified members of their bank account details through various social media platforms for those who may wish to pay tithes and give offerings through mobile banking applications; however, the efforts proved abortive. During church services, some people pay their tithes, give offerings and make donations in order to please the priest who is physically present with them. The outbreak of COVID-19 prevented many people from attending church services; therefore, there was no urge to give. Ukwu (informant) discloses that they usually realise not less than 150 000.00 weekly through tithes and offerings but following the outbreak of the pandemic, they realised only N11 580.00 in the third and fourth weeks of March.

In addition, as a result of the financial decline, some churches found it difficult to pay the salaries of their pastors and workers. Obayi and Omojala (informants) disclose that since the outbreak of COVID-19, their salaries have been unstable. Toye laments that as he became a pastor, he has shown his total commitment to the ministry by leaving off other businesses and as a result, it is a challenging time for him because he does not have other sources of livelihood. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria, some churches were not able to pay the salaries of their workers because of their involvements in building projects, let alone now that many churches are financially incapacitated (Edozie and Ukwuoma: informants).

Modifications in Sunday services

The outbreak of COVID-19 signalled significant changes during services in various churches in Nigeria. One of these changes is with respect to 'sign of the cross' (a gesture in form of cross). In Christianity, 'sign of the cross' is a movement of the hand as if tracing a cross on the body, usually by touching the forehead, chest and shoulders in turn. The gesture is made mainly by Roman Catholics as a way of invoking the blessings of God or as a declaration of Christian faith. Granted that one of the preventive measures of COVID-19 is to avoid touching one's face, many Christians suspended making the sign of the cross (Mmecha: informant). Adesiana (informant) asserts that he did not suspend the sign of the cross in his parish, rather, he cautioned his members to avoid touching their foreheads when they do the sign of the cross.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, it was a practice in many churches for members to have handshakes with one another as a sign of peace after the celebration of Holy Communion (Ezike: informant). Also, in many churches, ushers usually welcome people with handshake and thereafter, carry their bags or Bibles whilst leading them to where they can sit down (Ayo, Okpenyi and Temi: informants). Often times, during church services, pastors order their members to go around and welcome one another with handshakes as a way of ensuring a lively service atmosphere. Some members go to the extent of hugging themselves (Attamah: informant). Furthermore, pastors usually welcome first timers with

handshakes after which they lay hands on them and pray. All these customs have been suspended as a result of the outbreak of the novel deadly disease.

Another custom which was disrupted in many churches is that of pastors laying their hands on the foreheads of those who in the course of the service gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Similarly, many church leaders have suspended 'anointing services', a special service whereby the priests or pastors make prophetic prayers and anoint their church members by rubbing some oil on their foreheads. According to Tunde (informant), their anointing service is usually observed on the last Sunday of every month. He adds that their anointing services are usually well attended which is evident in the over-crowded church auditorium.

In many churches, there is a type of prayer commonly referred to as 'agreement prayers' whereby church members hold one another's hands and say certain prophetic prayers as directed by the pastor or prayer leader. Segun and Yemi (informants) observe that in their places of worship, there is barely any Sunday service where the pastor does not instruct people to hold one another's hands for prayers. Yemi adds that this practice is common in Pentecostal churches and that it encourages people to pray fervently during prayer sessions. It also enhances unity in the body of Christ. This practice has been suspended in churches as a result of the outbreak of the novel deadly disease.

In addition, some other practices which largely promote happiness and togetherness have been suspended in churches in Nigeria. Udechukwu (informant) asserts that in his place of worship, there are two songs which they usually sing (whilst holding one another's hands) before dismissal from Sunday services but they suspended the routine following the outbreak of COVID-19. The songs are as follows:

'My hands are filled with the blessings of the Lord,
my hands are filled with the blessings of the Lord,
anyone I touch, he must be blessed,
my hands are filled with the blessings of the Lord'.

'Hold somebody, tell him that you love him,
lift your hands together and praise the Lord'.

Some other informants who share Udechukwu's view are Adenuga, Nebo and Olisaemeka. Nebo adds that this practice which is commonly associated with Pentecostal churches is also fast spreading amongst orthodox churches, but, in both denominations, the practice has been suspended.

Modifications in Holy Week and Easter celebrations

Holy Week, in the Christian liturgical year, is the week immediately preceding Easter, beginning with Palm Sunday and including Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. In Holy Week, solemn rites are observed commemorating the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ. Palm Sunday is a Christian religious day which commemorates Jesus Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem through a crowd waving portions of palm branches in procession. It is usually observed on the Sunday before Easter. The custom may be traced back at least to the fourth century (Bruce 2019). On Maundy Thursday, Christians carry out special observances recalling the institution of the Last Supper. Scripture readings, solemn prayers and veneration of the cross recall the crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday. Holy Saturday commemorates the burial of Christ. According to the 2020 Christian liturgical year, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday were on 05 April 2020, 09 April 2020, 10 April 2020 and 11 April 2020, respectively. Easter is an annual festival commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the most important feast in Christianity because on this day Christians celebrate Christ's victory over death. Easter also symbolises Christians' participation in Christ's death and rebirth to a new life. In the 2020 Christian liturgical year, Easter was on 12 April 2020.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted the Holy Week celebration in many churches. Whilst some churches did not participate at all in Palm Sunday, others observed it without carrying out the associated rituals such as congregants moving out to the streets to worship Christ with palm branches in their hands (Ajala: informant). Egwu, Fakae and Okechukwu (informants) note that they observed Palm Sunday in their respective churches but they did not carry out the usual procession; they sang and worshipped God inside the church auditorium. Likewise, Aru (informant) observes that in his parish, the few persons who attended Palm Sunday Service only processed around the church compound whilst waving their palm branches. In the same vein, Easter Sunday was not accorded its usual liturgy in many churches. Easter Sunday had very low attendance in many churches. According to Mba and Omotosho (informants), only members of the church council were invited to Easter Sunday service and the service was conducted in a space of about 45 min. Similarly, Ifedinachi (informant) reports that when he arrived his church on Easter Sunday, an usher turned him down as a result of the parish pastor's instruction not to allow more than 30 persons into the church building so that social distancing can be easily maintained.

Indefinite postponement of open-air Crusades organised by churches

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, some churches planned to hold crusades as part of their annual church programme. According to Ndu (2017:38), 'unlike door to door evangelism, crusades provide ministers of God an opportunity to evangelise a large number of people from various faiths at the same time'. More so, crusades are viable instruments for promoting a particular Christian denomination. As a result of its significance in church growth and expansion, some churches in Nigeria hold crusades annually or biannually. The city-wide crusade which was to be hosted by the RCCG on Tuesday (24 March 2020) at Enugu was indefinitely postponed as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19. According to Anorue, Chika, Olorunfemi and Ozioko (informants),

unfortunately, much money had already been spent during the preparation processes. Ezema (informant) laments that the pandemic deprived him the opportunity to see Pastor E.A. Adeboye (General Overseer of the RCCG). Similarly, Iro (informant) discloses that his church had already spent over N100 000 000 preparing for a crusade which was to take place on Saturday (28 March 2020); however, the crusade was indefinitely postponed.

Responses of the church to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria

The outbreak of the novel COVID-19 in Nigeria elicited some significant actions from various churches in Nigeria. Whilst some of the responses were aimed at preventing the further spread of the virus, others were targeted at supporting people with palliatives in order to push on with life in these times of economic turbulence. As revealed by the informants, the researcher discovered that a common response amongst all the Christian denominations is prayer. Christians believe that the outbreak of the virus in Nigeria can be averted by prayers and trust in God. It is a period where churches all over the country seek the face of God. The leadership of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) directed that all members should engage in a 30-day personal prayer retreat, beginning from Sunday, 22 March to Monday, 20 April 2020 (Nkwuda, informant). Similarly, members of DayStar Church, House on the Rock, Word of Life Ministries amongst others embarked on fasting and prayers for God to deliver Nigerians from the raging storm (Onuigbo, Adekunle and Onwubiko: informants). Other responses are:

Sensitisation campaigns

One of the earliest actions taken by many church leaders was to sensitise their church members on the preventive measures of COVID-19. It was a very significant action as there are members of various churches who do not have access to modern sources of information. During both Sunday and weekly activities, many church leaders do not hesitate to inform their members of the basic preventive tips such as maintaining social distancing, avoiding shaking of hands and regular washing of hands. Ese and Niyi (informants) note that there is barely any church service in which their pastors do not remind them of the preventive measures they should carefully observe both at home, church and other public places. Ese adds that the last word of his pastor before every service closes is 'stay safe; COVID-19 is real'. According to Nkpugo (informant), the administration of his church produced and distributed handbills whose contents are the basic preventive tips of COVID-19. Banners were also mounted at strategic positions in the church compound. Ekwulu and Osagie (informants) report that the drama group of their churches did playlets aimed at educating members on the preventive measures of COVID-19.

In various churches, sensitisation is carried out through various social media platforms such as telegram, whatsapp

and facebook. Mefela, Nduka and Ugwunodo (informants) affirm that members of their churches get COVID-19 updates and preventive measures through their church Whatsapp groups. Members of various churches in Nigeria are also informed of the COVID-19 preventive measures through the means of bulk SMSs by their church authorities (Esehi, Imabong and Ufere: informants).

Provision of sanitary bucket and hand sanitisers

All the informants to this research affirm that one of the earliest actions carried out by churches in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 disease was the provision of sanitary buckets and hand sanitisers. The ushers ensure that members washed their hands before entering the church auditorium. Obichukwu (informant) notes that his church leaders purchased seven sanitary buckets and some hand sanitisers which were kept at different positions in the church. Two sanitary buckets and a hand sanitiser were kept at the entrance of the children's and teen's hall. Asegbe and Dioke (informants) disclose that their churches put into use the sanitary buckets which were purchased in 2014 when there was an outbreak of EBD. Various church leaders also encouraged their members to observe regular washing of hands at their homes. According to Funke (informant), their church authorities distributed 100 mL hand sanitisers to their members. They also distributed sanitary buckets to all pastors and ministers. Some other churches which distributed hand sanitisers to their members are Synagogue Church of All Nations, End Time Bible Ministry, Maranatha International and Voice of the Cross Evangelical Ministry (Obafemi, Idowu, Olaniyi and Kayode: informants).

Some church leaders instructed their altar ministers to purchase their personal microphones as a way of curtailing the spread of the virus (Kayode, Olaniyi and Idowu: informants). According to Ndubuisi (informant), the microphones in his church were sanitised and labelled with the names of altar ministers; during church services, the ushers distribute the microphones to the ministers accordingly. Similarly, the choristers who were able to purchase their personal microphones made use of them whilst those who could not sang without microphones. In addition, hand gloves were provided for ushers and those who handle musical equipment (Kayode, Olaniyi and Idowu: informants).

Social distancing or increase in the number of Sunday services

Another common response of churches is the enforcement of social distancing in their services. Social distancing is easily practised in churches with very large auditorium and many seats or pews. Before church services (especially Sunday services) start, ushers arrange seats in a way that worshippers do not sit close to one another. For churches that use pews and benches, ushers direct members to sit at each end of pews or benches whilst one person sits at the middle (Imabong and Udo: informants). During the pandemic,

observing social distancing in weekly activities was not worrisome because weekly activities were not heavily attended in many churches. In fact, poor attendance to weekly activities was a common feature in many churches before the outbreak of COVID-19.

Churches with a very huge number of worshippers are able to observe social distancing by increasing the number of services held on Sunday. According to Uduak (informant), her church usually holds one service on Sundays but the outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated an increase to three services. She adds that even after the pandemic is contained in Nigeria, it is better to continue observing three services so that people can attend church services when it is convenient for them. Likewise, Ezebuike, Ngwoke and Olushola (informants) note that the number of services conducted in their churches increased from two to four; each service lasting for about 1 h and 30 min rather than the usual 3 h observed before the outbreak of COVID-19.

Revitalisation of house fellowship or live-streamed services

House fellowship refers to a religious service conducted in a person's house by a group of persons from the same church who live close to one another (Echezona: informant). It provides an avenue for familiarising with people who attend the same church with you. House fellowship centres usually have leaders who act as intermediaries between church management and church members. In many churches, members get in touch with their pastors through their house fellowship leaders. According to Ihechukwu and Orji (informants), if a member is hospitalised, bereaved, puts to bed or wants to carry out a special thanksgiving, he or she informs his or her house fellowship leader who then communicates the pastor for further actions. Some churches observe their house fellowship meetings once in every month whilst some observe theirs bi-monthly.

According to Abel and Ugwu (informants), prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria, various churches were not fully committed to house fellowships meetings. Likewise, Adejor (informant) notes that in his church, members have never been committed to house fellowship meetings even though it is always emphasised during announcements. He adds that in the fellowship centre where he leads, not more than four persons attend. However, the pandemic and its attendant lockdown prompted many churches to revitalise their house fellowship centres. During house fellowship meetings, centres connect to church headquarters service via live-streaming through various social media platforms. In fact, many church leaders have employed various modern technologies to keep in touch with their members and also to give them hope that the pandemic will soon be contained in the country. According to Uchechukwu and Ugwu (informants), the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria provided an opportunity for many pastors in Nigeria to engage in frequent media evangelism. It provided an opportunity to ministers not only to one's church members but also to people of other faiths all over the world.

Provision of palliatives

Amidst the financial challenges occasioned by the lockdown, churches in Nigeria practised 'social action evangelism' which is commonly regarded as an effective way of propagating the good news of Jesus Christ through welfare actions. According to Ononogbu (2011), social action evangelism is a social theology which includes everything the church does to create justice in the public space because evangelism is about creating a world which cannot deny the reign of God. For instance, when a hungry person is given some bread to eat, it is not only attractive to them, making them ponder over such an act of compassion, which also brings the reign of God over them. Social action evangelism encompasses a declaration of God's kingdom in words and deeds.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic and its attendant lockdown heralded financial hardship for many people, especially those who totally depend on daily earnings for sustenance and those who are employed in private establishments. As a result, many churches in Nigeria provided their members with palliatives such as food items (rice, noodles, yam, tomato paste, cooking oil and other food items) and cash gifts. The General Overseer of the RCCG (Pastor E.A. Adeboye, RCCG) mandated every parish pastor to share palliatives to its church members from church fund (Adejor and Ihechukwu: informants). Likewise, members of House on the Rock, Dunamis International Gospel Centre, Deeper Life Bible Church, Abiding Word Assembly, Jesus Reigns Ministry, Synagogue Church of All Nations, New Life in Christ Bible Church, Mount Zion Battle Axe, The Apostolic Faith and a host of others received palliatives from their church authorities (Ameh, Aduba, Chiebonam, Chukwuka, Adams, Kayode, Mba, Nnachi and Olawumi: informants). Interestingly, some churches such as Holy Ghost International Arena and Voice of the Cross Evangelical Ministry also extended their hospitality to non-members (Ukama and Kayode: informants).

Recommendations

The thrust of this article is to investigate the effects of the outbreak of COVID-19 on the religious traditions of churches in Nigeria. Based on the discussions and findings, the following recommendations are proffered:

- Churches in Nigeria should wholeheartedly embrace technological advancements because they are a viable tool for proclaiming the good news (message of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ) in times such as these.
- Those who do not utilise various media applications should do so rather than suspending all forms of religious observances till the pandemic is completely contained.
- Churches should strictly observe social distancing and other preventive measures in their services.
- After COVID-19 is contained, churches should endeavour to maintain some hygiene principles (such as washing of hands and use of hand sanitisers) during their services as

a preventive measure of other communicable diseases. Highly populated churches that increased their number of services should maintain the increase even after the pandemic is controlled.

- It is also recommended that after COVID-19 is contained, churches should modify some of their practices which predispose members to infectious diseases. For example, holding of another person's hands whilst praying and sitting very close to one another during services.
- Churches should not totally depend on tithes and offerings for paying the wages of their pastors and workers. It is recommended that they diversify their means of income so that they move on in cases of eventualities.
- They should also encourage their pastors, workers and members to have diverse means of income so as not to totally depend on the church for their sustenance.
- In as much as ceremonies still successfully take place (on a low key) during the pandemic, it is recommended that (even after COVID-19 is contained in Nigeria) people should lessen the amount they expend on unnecessary ventures during ceremonies such as wedding, child naming and funeral.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the outbreak of COVID-19 heralded obvious changes in the traditions and practices of churches. Some long-standing traditions of the church such as Holy Communion, baptism and sharing of peace have either been suspended or modified. The joy and unity shared by Christians in various churches have been tampered with as a result of the need to maintain social distancing and other preventive measures. Notwithstanding, this season has provided churches an opportunity to explore other means of engaging with and propagating the good news to their members and non-members. It has also been a time of deep reflection on supremacy of God over all creatures.

The article established that the church has made some commendable marks with respect to controlling the spread of the virus by encouraging her members to meticulously observe the preventive measures as laid down by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Through palliatives, the church has ameliorated the lives of some people. Therefore, alongside the concerted efforts of the federal government and various state governments to control the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria, academic contributions aimed at investigating the implications of the pandemic to the religious customs of the Church and also the responses of the church are apt.

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Author's contributions

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