

An analysis of COVID-19 and spirituality among African Christian women

**Author:**Benson O. Igboin^{1,2} **Affiliations:**

¹Department of Religion and African Culture, Faculty of Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Nigeria

²Research Institute of Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Benson Igboin,
benson.igboin@aaua.edu.ng

Dates:

Received: 31 Jan. 2023

Accepted: 17 Apr. 2023

Published: 11 July 2023

How to cite this article:

Igboin, B.O., 2023, 'An analysis of COVID-19 and spirituality among African Christian women', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(3), a8504. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i3.8504>

Copyright:

© 2023. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

There has been increasing research into the COVID-19 pandemic and the theological responses to it. However, not much research has been done on the COVID-19 and how women, particularly in Africa, utilised spiritual resources to respond to the pandemic. This article sought to bridge this gap. The article utilised both descriptive and analytical methods, and argued that many African women were more concerned about the health of the community than their male counterparts who concentrated more on arguments about the pandemic. Gleaning from our ethnographic data carried out from the Christ Apostolic Church and the Spirit and Life Family Bible Church in Nigeria, the article used Galen Watts' theory of 'spirituality of and for' to analyse how African Christian women deployed their spirituality and resources to address the existential challenges the pandemic posed. It argued that the African Christian women shunned the 'spirituality of' argument that relates with discursive functions of being spiritual, which does not correspond to its practical application, and adopted 'spirituality for' which resonates with how spiritual resources are deployed to (re)solve existential challenges towards human flourishing. This, it argued, aligns much with the theology of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

Contribution: The article concluded that most women were accentuated towards 'spirituality for' because it is compassion-driven and responds to the existential quest for the health of the community.

Keywords: African spirituality; Christian spirituality; COVID-19; faith; health; human flourishing; spirituality for; spirituality of.

Introduction

African Christian women's spirituality has been an interesting area of theological discourse. This is because it resonates more with lived experience than abstract, text-based theology that has, for a long time, reflected Western epistemology. Although several commentaries have been had on how Christian theology has responded to crises in the past, the COVID-19 pandemic has afforded a critical opportunity to assess the extent to which African Christian women's theology and spirituality has been applied in the current situation. The pandemic's sudden irruption and its devastating effects required urgent and critical understanding and responses. In order to aptly respond, it became necessary to establish context, hence African Christian women spirituality.

The article argues that although they might not have been in the political leadership space, African Christian women were at the forefront of finding and providing care and healing during the pandemic. Despite being the most hit in several ways, it is argued that the African Christian women showed resilience through spiritual and secular means to confront the effects of the pandemic in the community. This is established by utilising ethnographic data sourced from the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) and Spirit and Life Family Bible Church (SLFBC). The article is divided into six sections. Apart from the introduction, the second section provides a context for the assessment of African Christian women's spirituality. It argues that they were affected differently. The third section conceptualises spirituality in general as a foretaste to the understanding of the theoretical anchorage, 'spirituality for'. 'Spirituality for' explicitly states that African Christian women were more concerned about practically addressing the critical situation the pandemic imposed on humanity. The fifth section shows practical ways the African Christian woman understands, expresses and intervenes during the pandemic. The final section concludes that the African Christian woman showed uncanny resilience despite how she was

Note: Special Collection: African Women, Pandemics and Religion, sub-edited by Sophia Chirongoma (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Linda Naicker (University of South Africa, South Africa).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

adversely affected by the pandemic by deploying both spiritual and secular resources to address it.

The experience of the African Christian women during the pandemic

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late December 2019, women and children have been affected differently from men. According to Stiebiert (2021) who studied the early consequences of the pandemic on African women:

Where women and girls are concerned, the bulk of caregiving and home-schooling has fallen to women; most of the children no longer receiving an education and forced into marriages are girl-children. With domestic abuse accelerating, the majority of victims are female. Hence, COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic, but it is also a pandemic with particularly severe consequences for the economically vulnerable and for women and girls. (p. 11)

Malinga (2021) adds:

The stories carry audible voices of women's pains and trauma of living in fear of violence in their homes – for themselves and for their children, fear of illness and death by the virus, and loss of loved ones. The truth is that poor women have suffered the effects of the pandemic the worst. Their stories are hardly told by the mainstream media. Who wants to hear the pain of a woman front line worker whose daughter was raped by her father or brother while she had to work during lockdown? Women's realities do not make it to the news! Some of these stories reveal women's resilience and 'stubborn faith' in God. (p. 4)

Juma (2022) and Mombo and Joziase (2022) also note that in Kenya, where gender violence against women was already very high, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the situation. They argue that getting justice for human rights violations has been problematic in Kenya because of patriarchy and corruption. The COVID-19 lockdown order literally locked down women and children for more domestic abuses. They contend that violence against women during the period was grossly underreported, which further drowned the voice of women in the Kenyan society. In addition, they pointed out that the pastors of megachurches that ought to vehemently speak against gender-based violence and other vices did not do so. Not only did the World Health Organization predict a gloomy situation for women, the pandemic was a double tragedy for women. As Dekel and Abrahams (2021:1) argue, because of the acuteness of gender-based violence, which in 2014 had been designated as 'a pandemic' that is now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In spite of these adverse effects on African women, Olufemi and Labeodan (2021:15) note that women were not 'locked out' of their daily administration of faith and spirituality to contend with the challenges posed by the pandemic. Igboin and Adedoyin (2021) argue that women were the foremost set of people who shunned arguments bordering on the provenance, political and conspiratorial theories of the

pandemic. Rather, many women deployed spiritual and medical resources towards either curtailing the spread or tending those who contracted it. Aluko (2022:6–7) notes that a good number of men were overly concerned about conspiracy theories in their attempts to win people to their own side of the explanation rather than proffer solutions to the devastating effects confronting humanity. Aluko examines how male political and religious leaders engaged in conspiracy theories that left the people more disinformed about the reality and gravity of the pandemic with dire consequences. Adelakun (2023:61) underscores the point that some women were seriously involved in conspiratoriality – convergence of conspiracy theories with spiritual warfare. According to her, while men dominated the sphere of conspiracy theories, women dominated the sphere of conspiratoriality, which they used as a counterpoise to the scaring predictions that Africa would be the hardest hit by the pandemic. The idea of conspiratoriality, Adelakun (2023) argues, does not completely fit into the paradigm of New Age Spirituality from which it was initially derived; conspiratoriality within the context of spiritual warfare falls within the ambit of how Christian women (in fact, spiritual warriors), who are also medical experts, challenged the scientific explanations for the pandemic. The conspiratorialists argued that simple medications could cure the virus and not vaccines, which they insist, have negative spiritual and eschatological implications on those who are vaccinated (Adelakun 2023:88). In fact, some African Christian women like Stella Emmanuel have been at the forefront of the campaign for de-vaccination of the vaccinated through aggressive or violent prayer. Emmanuel, a Pentecostal Christian and medical doctor, has consistently challenged the use of COVID-19 vaccines. She claims that the vaccines are against Christian spirituality, and they have adverse eschatological consequences on Christians who are vaccinated.

Igboin (2022a), Adelakun (2022), among others, have examined the predictions by the West and also the World Health Organization (2020) that the streets of Africa might be littered with corpses as a consequence of COVID-19. These predictions were predicated on the lack of modern health facilities, poverty, conflict, and political corruption that characterised the continent. Previous pandemics and epidemics like the Spanish flu of 1918–1920, Ebola of 2014 and the scourge of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) are also reasons for the prediction of a terrible experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. An estimated 3.3 million people were expected to die as a result, while 1.2 billion people were to be infected with the virus (Igboin 2022a). Scholars have also come to realise that those experiences had prepared Africa to confront the threat the COVID-19 posed. Among the reasons adduced for the low rate of COVID-19 mortality in Africa include: high rate of youth population, climate and geography, low inter-border travels and so on (Baker 2020). Interestingly, the role of African Christian (women) and spirituality in general, is omitted from the

factors that accounted for low mortality rate in Africa. In fact, many African governments had recourse to spiritual intervention in addition to medical protocols prescribed to combat the pandemic (Igboin 2023).

The predictions were frightening. However, according to Olufemi and Labeodan (2021:34–35), African Christian women were resolute and firm. Armed with the belief that God was in control of the world, most women were not apprehensive, but became intentional in their walk and relationship with God. According to them, the COVID-19 pandemic afforded them the opportunity to rediscover their spiritual vibrancy and relevance to themselves and the society, drawing from their cosmological and cultural context.

In essence, religion, theology and spirituality are a pivotal part of an African woman's everyday life. The African life is intensely interlocked with the spiritual dimension of existence such that the spiritual explanation and solutions frequently enjoy a pride of place in the community. To ignore this aspect of the African is to undermine the core of her being. It is with this in mind that this article examines how African women utilised African Christian spirituality as part of the resources to respond to the pandemic. In this respect, Igboin and Adedoyin (2021:77) note that women showed more deep concern about practical spirituality, family and welfare because they share more in the nature of God than men. The virtues such as compassion, love, mercy, blessing and empathy are attributes of God, that are apodictically lived and displayed more by women.

Spirituality in the context of African Christian women spirituality

Scholarly attention to spirituality is a recent development. As Olupona (2008:xvii) puts it, 'the rise of spirituality' must be placed 'within the context of crisis, or perhaps the mood of crisis'. The context or mood of crisis, he argues, entails such everyday experience as environmental, social, gender discrimination and violence, political, health, economic disaster that calls us to pay close attention to the meaning of life. The rising inequality, political oppression, violence of all sorts Olupona (2008:xvii) summarised as 'the phantoms of materialist culture' clearly calls for deeper reflection on human life beyond the structure of religion because the existing ideologies, science and even Christianity and other organised religions have tended to undermine the spiritual dimension of our global crisis. Thus, contemporary scholarship has subjected the relationship between spirituality and religion to critical scrutiny. While some argue that both are related and even intertwined, some do not subscribe to it.

Roof (2003:138) provides some insight into spirituality as an expression of the life of faith, where such expression is subjective and significantly opposed to religion. Spirituality, he argues, should be understood more in the context of how

it helps to construct the meaning of life and experiential wholeness. Roof describes spirituality within a religious tradition as 'dwelling' and an individual's role in it as 'seeking'. Thus, the same individual can dwell and seek serially or simultaneously. Roof adds that there is a 'spiritual marketplace' of various religious traditions and beliefs from which a seeker can conveniently tap with the belief that the spiritual product 'enters you and lifts you up and moves you to be a better person' (Roof 1999:137). The marketplace is what Salazar and Nicholls (2019a:3) describe as 'living in an age of resurgent spirituality'. For Olupona, the idea of spiritual resurgence does not apply to African indigenous spirituality because Africans do not conceive the world as just a material object devoid of spirit as the Enlightenment has thought, rather the world is a composite one that embraces both matter and spirit in an intense relationship. Spirituality inspires meaning of life and also gives meaning to the cosmos.

Salazar and Nicholls (2019b) argue that in trying to understand spirituality, evidence abounds to suggest that both theists and atheists have expressed similar spiritual mood, mode and satisfaction. They also raise metaphysical, normative and epistemological questions that obviously could not have been raised by sociologists like Roof who have worked on spirituality. Okoli (2008) also postulates that spirituality tentacles extend to philosophy in general as it explores its ontological dimensions, comprehends its 'human existential experience', generates sense of purpose in life, and increases awareness of connection to self and others, including God. Okoli further articulates the ontological dimensions of spirituality to cover religious beliefs, rituals, myths, doctrines, ethics, social relations and experience; psychological, which pertains to sanity, mental and attitudinal well-being as well as transcendental, which encapsulates self-awareness and relationship with God.

In addition, there are arguments that border on cultural contexts and utilisation of spirituality. Thus, the questions such as whose spirituality and who is defining spirituality are critical to understanding spirituality itself. The first borders on the religious, historical, cultural or generational contexts of understanding spirituality. In this regard, Biney (2019) argues that:

[E]very culture and every generation profess and practice spirituality in their own different ways. Nonetheless, the definition of dominant groups and cultures often gain more prominence over others. Western understandings and descriptions of spirituality for instance have, for generations, enjoyed prominence and have been imposed on other cultures. (p.138)

(Walinga 2015:201) points out the difference between African and Western by arguing that the former is imbued in communal and cosmic harmony while the latter is individualistic.

African indigenous worldview is an interconnection between the natural and the supernatural, physical, and metaphysical as well as human and non-human beings. The ancestors and

the yet unborn are an integral part of the family setup. The person is not just a disparate individual; they are persons in relation to others. It is only then, that is, in relation to others, that they can become authentic persons in the community (Graness 2019:152). Nyarwath (2019) succinctly summarises it thus:

[A] human being who seems to be free from the chains becomes less 'human' or loses humanness completely in the social sense of the term *human* as exemplified by the case of a mad person. (p. 141)

Of course, in indigenous African setting, no member of the community wants to willingly ostracise themselves.

For the African Christian woman, spirituality is integrated and embodied. It encompasses a robust, convivial relationship with God, which is expressed in the community of inter-related persons. The community plays a prominent role in the formation of African spirituality generally. It is a spirituality grounded on African epistemology and ontology, making sacrality its pivotal point (Amenga-Etego 2012; De Backer 2021). The African cosmology resonates with the formation of her Christian spirituality. In plain words, the Western text-based Christian spirituality loses much of its salt in Africa simply because it hardly relates with the African lived experience. Fubara-Manuel and Fretheim (2023) explore this theme among West African Christian women spirituality. According to them, African Christian women spirituality speaks to the woman in her context – stressing the power of orality – and not text whose interpretation has followed the trajectory of patriarchal and colonial nuances. The orality of African Christian women spirituality thus provides them the opportunity to not only define spirituality for themselves, but also utilise it to meet the yearning of their souls. Oladipo et al. (2022) corroborate this view when they argue that African culture forms an integral part of how African women generally conceive and deploy spirituality. For them, the question about the meaning of life does not hang in abstract epistemological debate that loses touch with lived, expressible experience. African Christian women's spirituality is not isolated from the present experience as the COVID-19 pandemic has apodictically demonstrated.

The second question has to do with the discursive, academic study of spirituality, which has taken a multi-disciplinary approach. Here, methodological and theoretical discourses on spirituality are engaged in order to better appreciate or tease its dynamics and dialectics. But since different disciplines have continued to define and operationalise spirituality, it has become pretty difficult to define spirituality in absolute terms. Thus, some scholars such as Holmes (2007) and Watts (2017) have suggested that we should avoid essentialising spirituality and concentrate more on its study in particular fields and application in contexts. This understanding makes Biney's arguments critically important to underscoring Galen Watts' theory, 'spirituality for and of', which will be examined shortly.

In the meantime, Newman (2004:104) argues that faith, spirituality and religion are more often than not used interchangeably even though there are differences among them. Acknowledging the difficulty in defining each of them, Newman understands spirituality as an attempt by a person to live by the ethos or spirit of their faith. For him, a person can have faith (knowing) but not religious (doing) or have both, yet not spiritual (being). However, Fraser (2005:153) defines spirituality as 'the innate human aspiration to the ultimate', a description he argues is not in tandem with the Christian notion of spirituality. According to him, Christian spirituality is made possible in the baptism, a willing surrender to put off the natural birth and assume a new birth in the body of Christ. With rupturing of the past and assuming a new nature made possible by faith in Christ, the experience of Christian spirituality just begins (2 Cor 5:17). This understanding of spirituality is certainly different from the modern assumption that spirituality is subjective and private. In the early church, Christian spirituality was expressed in, and in response to, a community of persons:

The human orientation towards the divine was therefore not a matter of subjective experience or inner states of consciousness. Rather it concerned being the people of God, living a new sort of life, and thus was something fundamentally public, something shared with others and, in a sense that the modern understanding of spirituality is not, something open to view. (Fraser 2005:153)

In responding to the methodological and theoretical strictures that engross the study of African Christian (women) spirituality, Oliver (2021) pushes for the pulling down of institutional and hierarchical structures, which the COVID-19 pandemic has critically cracked. A theology of a living faith that aptly responds to the existential challenges posed by the pandemic demands a theological education for all irrespective of gender, class and denomination. This is akin to what Masuku (2021) calls African spirituality of liberation, which uses the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) as its interlocutors. The AICs make spirituality tangible by resorting to the use of material items such as water, oil, handkerchief and so on (Biwul 2021). According to Amenga-Etego et al. (2021), language, prayer, and music are the intangible sources of such spirituality. Through these media, African Christian women have been able to express their experiences of the pandemic. Amenga-Etego (2012:16) suggests that the underlying dynamic experiences of the women, different from men's must be countenanced in grasping the African Christian women spirituality. Such factors that have made the women unequal to men as patriarchy, belief, economics, religion and so forth must be addressed.

'Spirituality of' and 'Spirituality for' in the African Christian women context

Watts (2017:67) argues that the study of spirituality and how it influences life is controversial. For him, the study of spirituality falls within the ambit of discursive construct

within a cultural context; it critiques spirituality and raises normative questions associated with it. This approach takes a broader and theoretical look at spirituality, 'framing it as a socio-cultural and/or discursive construct that is everywhere and always political' (Watts 2017:67). This understanding of spirituality thus falls roughly within the reach of religious studies, cultural studies, or critical theory because of their less interest in praxis. This falls within the remit of what Watts calls 'spirituality of'.

On the other hand, 'spirituality for' encapsulates those who self-identify as advocates of spirituality, adducing practical reasons, showing personal interests and advocating the positive benefits of applicative spirituality. Such professionals as in health, management, leadership or education are more inclined towards 'spirituality for'. As Watts (2017) argues, these professionals:

[G]enerally do not study 'spirituality' in order to better understand what it is, or what it does, in the existing social world, or what it signifies in the popular or academic discourse(s), but rather to find out what a specific *kind* of spirituality that they usually endorse (or disparage) might do in their workplace. (p. 67)

In this regard, Katongole (2017) argues that the Christian discursive spirituality imported to Africa and the social ethics that derive from it are not only abstract, but also unable to meet the existential realities in contemporary Africa. He articulates the point that it is only when the African story is performed in the African context that a new way of enlivening Africa can emerge. He calls for revolutionary and pragmatic spirituality that will change Africa's present predicament. Wariboko's (2014) articulation of lived spirituality can be understood in this way because of its emphasis on the performative, which results in visible miracles for the supplicants in the case of Nigerian Pentecostals. There must be a shift from 'the line of discourse from an analytical-political science emphasis [...] to that of practices of and what virtues for creating and sustaining a Pentecostal form of community' (Wariboko 2014:167). Applicative spirituality is thus grounded on the local context where people utilise spirituality to address their everyday challenge. Even though they may not be able to conceptually or rationally argue or defend their position, or even concern themselves about discursive spirituality at all, that is, the spirituality of, they certainly can point to the results of the influence of spirituality in their lives and communities.

Even though 'spirituality of' and 'spirituality for' might sometimes overlap, that is, one can hold a discursive and constructive form of spirituality and yet endeavour to understand how it operates in specific contexts and circumstances and vice versa, there is usually a difference in their goal (Watts 2020a, 2020b). What is thus implicated here is that 'spirituality for' tends towards applicative or lived experience of spirituality as embedded and yet revealed in everyday life, which resonated with how African Christian women responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sundberg (2020) explains how Christians in Africa seek to restore and

maintain their health as part of their everyday concern. He posits that religious traditions utilise their resources, sometimes overlapping resources, to restore individual and community health. This understanding is important for us in this article because many women in Africa were concerned about 'spirituality for' as it manifests in everyday life, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concern of African Christian women for COVID-19 cannot be over-emphasised. The argument that women are more religious or spiritual than men has continued to arouse interest. Several positions have been canvassed just as different studies have had controversial conclusions. Variables such as culture, socialisation, orientations, social status, religious tradition, emotionality and such theoretical issues as feminism, patriarchy, and so on have been adduced to account for women's disposition to spirituality (Jensen 2019; Yi et al. 2020) Jensen (2019) categorically concluded that women are more religious than men given their tender nature and socialisation. However, many studies in Nigeria as elsewhere in Africa have shown that 'women constitute the largest congregation in all prayer programmes' (Omomukuyo 2014:42). In the CAC and SLFBC both in Nigeria where we carried out our fieldwork, we can confirm that women have a greater demographic presence in these churches than men. It is also indisputable that the passion women demonstrated in spiritual matters in relation to the pandemic cannot be equated with men's. In the SLFBC, for instance, which has over 70% women population, 'spirituality for' that manifests in prayers, care, solidarity and so forth is easily noticeable.

During the lockdown, the late Apostle and General Overseer Mrs Debrah Eunice Osagiede (died on 07 December 2020) of the SLFBC did not only pray, but also empowered women and children through various means such as provision of food, money, medical kits and so on. In fact, during the lockdown, the church expanded its orphanage centre and admitted more children into it. The monthly prison ministry was intensified to cater for the severe need of the inmates during that period. It was at the same period that the church launched 22 luxurious buses to ameliorate the transport challenges in Edo state. The buses commute school children to and from their schools every day without cost implications to them. The church also strongly emphasised the need to obey all medical protocols enunciated by the government in the absence of vaccines. To demonstrate this, the church, promptly obeyed the lockdown order and reverted to online services. The messages of the period resonated the need to watch and pray; this was interpreted to mean both secular and spiritual resources were needed to combat the virus. According to Osagiede, the gospel in peace and crisis is best preached in word and empowerment. Hence, the church has established a number of faith-based organisations to minister and cater to the spiritual and economic needs of the people.

In Christ Apostolic Church, in Akure, Ondo State, the leadership strictly complied with the government order to

shut down the church. However, utilising the window of opportunity for a smaller cell meeting, we observed that women quickly formed themselves into groups. The groups met regularly for prayers and also shared testimonies. The CAC donated huge sums of money to the government to combat the pandemic, while also praying for God's intervention. Our respondents revealed how the women in various groups shouldered the responsibility of the immediate need of the vulnerable among them and the society by distributing food items, face masks, hand sanitisers and other safety kits.

CARE (2020) reports that women were conspicuously absent in responding to the pandemic, in terms of leadership, and humanitarian responses. CARE also notes that women constitute the majority of those who suffer the consequences of the pandemic in the form of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence. The excruciating economic hardship that resulted from the pandemic also hits women more than men. In reality, COVID-19 is not first and foremost a medical situation, it is indeed a political issue (Igboin 2022b). This is because political decisions globally affected how medical procedure could be carried out. The examples of denial in China and American assertiveness and the global lockdown are all political decisions that affected the medical aspect of the pandemic. These political spaces are largely occupied by men; hence, it appears that women's voices were not as loud as they ought to be. In addition, the media played prominent roles in whose voice should be heard. Despite this, CARE (2020:2–3) discovered that 'women leaders have been more successful than their male counterparts at reducing COVID-19 transmission'. However, CARE (2020) did not take as part of its variables, the spiritual roles women played in addressing the pandemic. The next section addresses this gap.

African Christian women's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Earlier, we stated how African women were prime victims of COVID-19. But we also noted that they were the first to take steps on how to curb the pandemic. Their attempts, it should be sounded clearly, were not prompted by their painful experiences only, but much more because of their nature. Attempts at solving the human problem might start at knowing: the epistemology of a problem. This philosophical methodology revolves around abstract debates that do not immediately resonate with the practical demand, a situation that the pandemic requires. Although this is not to suggest that women are less interested in epistemology or less epistemologically endowed, 'The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) in South Africa started a conversation on how best to respond to the multiple crises COVID-19 has caused for women' (eds. Hadebe et al. 2021:6). According to The Circle, abstract epistemological debates built on Western methodological paradigms, exclude a huge part of the female population, and loses touch with practical solutions that the excluded people can bring forth to address human challenges. The Circle's argument finds

expression in Wariboko's (2020) alternate epistemology that challenges the traditional Western epistemology that prides itself as an exclusive way of knowing. This is what Wariboko refers to as the Pentecostal hypothesis, which we will use more broadly beyond Pentecostal conceptualisation. Wariboko (2020) defines Pentecostal hypothesis as:

The capacity to constitute alternative ways of knowing. Broadly conceived, it is the way by which Pentecostals engage the world (their social realities) and the depths of their religious existence. It is a form of interpretation that enables Pentecostals, amid multiple options, to know what is the most fitting decision (action) relative to their interest and commitment to Christ. This interpretation is put into play every day and it is either confirmed or disconfirmed, reinforced or corrected. (p. 2)

The significance of Wariboko's argument is that in life, all things cannot follow the Western philosophical rudiment in order to be adjudged reasonable and meaningful. Hence, 'if it does not make sense, it makes spirit' (Wariboko 2020:ix). Sense and spirit in Western epistemology may be antagonistic, but they both lose their relevance if they do not serve towards human flourishing. Sense data and spiritual data might have different methodologies, but the creative way African women weaved them together in addressing the reality of COVID-19 is salutary. Given this, storytelling forms a critical part of The Circle's sense data and spiritual data in its members' attempts to know and respond to the pandemic:

One of the unique features is the different writing styles and forms the stories have taken. The unique choice of expressions has been retained as the aim is to let the stories be heard as told by women – with no demand for adherence to formal literary styles. It was felt that the demand for particular types of writing would exclude rather than include all. (eds. Hadebe et al. 2021:7)

Affording one the opportunity to express one's painful experience in a free, unrestrained and empathetic environment is not only therapeutic, but also spiritually rejuvenating. This kind of oral spirituality or narrative therapy is demonstrative, and expresses 'spirituality for'. The book, *A Time Like no Other: COVID-19 in Women's Voices* (eds. Hadebe et al. 2021), is a powerful example of oral spirituality; the contributors narrate their experiences, pains, challenges in stories, prayers, songs and poems. It is at this point of oral spirituality that healing, starting from their hearts, expressed their resilience, courage, strength, restoration and human flourishing. Dickson (2021) brings home the significance of storytelling as a spiritual demonstration thus:

The idea that we live multi-storied lives is a familiar one in Narrative Therapy. We speak of the 'single story', the 'problem-saturated story', the 'dominant story', the 'alternative story', 'restorying', and 'thickening preferred stories'. Stories help us make meaning of the world around us and connect our past to our present and serve as a guide for the future. This year, the year 2020, we have added Corona (also called Pandemic) stories – stories of living in lockdown, of illness, of loss and grief and of living in liminal space. (pp. 109–110)

Prayer as a form and expression of spirituality functioned during the COVID-19 era, not only as a powerful device to

disentangle the forces believed to be responsible for the pandemic (Adelakun 2023), but also as an opportunity to create a safe community where women engaged with one another in solidarity, reflection, hope and anticipation (Tom 2021). Although not everything can be uttered in prayer (Fitzgerald 2012:19), in their groaning and musing, Bigirimana (2021:76), a human rights activist and counsellor in South Africa, recounts how in prayer, women celebrate loss and deal with its pains during the pandemic. In other words, 'Prayers of praise and thanksgiving likewise name their situation in supplying reasons to render thanks or praise' (Fitzgerald 2012:19). Adebisi (16 October 2021), one of the leaders of Christ Apostolic Church's Women Prayer Group, in an interview, recounts how the group met regularly to pray extemporaneously, quoting relevant verses of the scripture to confront 'the spirit of COVID-19'. According to Adebisi (2021), recourse to violent or warfare prayer was important because most men were concerned more about the politics of the pandemic than solution to it. She states:

When we realised that the lockdown was affecting us (women) badly, we decided to find a way to pray. We believe that it is only warfare prayer that can heal the land because the virus is not ordinary [...] Whether the virus came from China or not, the fountain can be healed and the world can know peace again. [...] Those who don't believe that COVID-19 is a spirit are just deceiving themselves; but for us in my prayer group, we pray fervently, and the results and testimonies are there to show the power of God over COVID. (Adebisi 16 October 2021, Interview)

Adebisi emphasised the point that their prayers were mostly intercessory. By this, she meant that they prayed not for themselves but for others and the world. This type of prayer, she adds, means that one empties oneself on behalf of others who may not even know that they are being prayed for. Their devotion to intercessory prayers expresses deep compassion at a time when most individuals could be self-centred. Gyamfi (2021) from Ghana elaborates more when she recounts that being a health worker and an intercessor made her realise the need to not only care medically for patients but also pray along with them and on their behalf. The Jesus Women group of the SLFBC entirely devoted hours to intercession, comforting, and exhortation. The fervency and conviviality of their intercessory sessions in themselves exuded a kind of spiritual elixir needed to revive hope in a trying time. The dose of messages of hope and the zeal that each prayer leader raised usually, literally electrified the space, and members could pray untiringly in faith and hope.

Oyelade and Akintunde (2022) also believe that COVID-19 has a spirit, and dealing with the spirit is one sure way of healing the land of the pandemic. In their fieldwork among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, they discovered that most women they interviewed believed that the pandemic was spiritually caused and must be engaged spiritually through warfare prayers. The women also claimed that it was as a result of warfare prayers that the predictions that Africa would be the most hit did not come to pass. Their belief in the transgressive power of prayer is expressed thus:

'Prayer could transgress the pre-eminence of biomedical interventions and the common mechanical view of life and death, where life is evaluated by biometric readings of body function' (Reimer-Kirkham et al. 2020:109).

However, African Christian spirituality cannot be fully and exclusively couched in terms of warfare or violent prayers against the pandemic. Sundberg's (2020:335) anthropological investigation among the Kongo reveals that there are Christians who claim that herbs are revealed to them by the Holy Spirit to cure sicknesses. These charismatic Christians have over the years used their spiritual healing gifts to administer to the health challenges of the people. They do not only pray, but also, in many instances, prepare herbs – 'Revealed Medicine' to use Sundberg's exact words – to cure sicknesses. Even though many Pentecostals will deny having the same methods of healing as with the indigenous believers, Sundberg argues that he could observe identical patterns. Nel (2019) and Ukah (2020) argue that African Pentecostalism borrows heavily from African Indigenous Spirituality, and in fact, many of the borrowed items are sanctified in the name of Christ to ensure that they are dispossessed of indigenous spirits. The survival and continuous relevance of African Pentecostalism largely depend on its persistent borrowing and utilisation of the indigenous cultural idiosyncrasies, contexts and resources. Sundberg also reacts to the elitist Pentecostals who readily condemn the utilisation of herbs by charismatic Christians as a way of aiding indigenous spirituality to flourish. He reminds them that 'the same Holy Spirit fuels other expressions of Christianity' such as the revealed medicine (Sundberg 2020:352). Thus, to confine the Holy Spirit to one mode of revelation or manifestation is to play God; in fact, it is a display of unhealthy Pentecostal fundamentalism.

Igboin and Adedoyin (2021:75–76) analysed five videos circulated via WhatsApp in 2020 in which women expressed their concern for the healing of the world. Two out of the five videos pointedly addressed how women prayed on materials or herbs for their families and also advised others to reproduce same in their families to cure or prevent the virus. Prophetess Dupe Oluwaniyi claimed that God revealed to her 'a herbal plant called siam leaf, whose botanical name is "*Chromolaenaodorata*" to prevent people from contracting the virus. Oluwaniyi quoted some verses of the scripture to back up her claim that the leaf had been specially revealed to her to cure the virus when administered in faith and prayer. The second video analysed how a Catholic woman held a small statue of Mary and rosary, and prayed over some herbals, which she administered to her family. 'Thus, for a woman to show concern for healing is not just significant, but praying to a higher woman (Mary) to intercede for her is more of a demonstration of faith' (Igboin & Adedoyin 2021:76).

The story of Miss Sophie Odunlami, described as a 'God-gifted divine leader raised in an outbreak of influenza', (Igboin 2022c:42) has served as impetus to many Nigerian Christian women. Odunlami was infected with the Spanish

influenza in late 1918, which caused her to stop her teaching job. On the fifth day of infection, she claimed to have received revelations that there would be a divine cure and the First World War would end soon. She was miraculously healed, and the war ended as she had predicted. She also claimed to receive other messages from God that those who would rely on orthodox medicine (which of course was exclusively administered by the colonial personnel) or African traditional medicine would die. She claimed that God revealed to her that rain-water could cure the flu, and the outburst of healing that followed would later lead her to establish a prayer band. Although it was during the dry season, immediately after she released the prophecy, rain started to fall, and those who applied the rain-water got healed (Babatunde 2021). The CAC prayer group followed Odunlami's pattern by fervently interceding and using water as a cure.

Critical spiritual leadership was provided by women in their homes to ensure that spiritual fervency was maintained. According to Aryeh (2021), the home is usually the worship centre during pandemics, especially when there is the need to lock down. Analysing how women kept their spirituality during COVID-19 pandemic in parts of Ghana, Aryeh (2021) points out how the homes were organised to stimulate the presence of God, and join e-worship in which they avidly followed the preacher by opening and reading the verses referred to, and participating in and responding to prayers:

Since the Charismatic Churches do not frown on the leadership of women in the Church, it is hoped that the effort of women during the pandemic period will be honored by making them the leaders of the home cell meetings. This will emphasize the position of women in the Charismatic Churches as being able just as men to be used by the Holy Spirit to lead. (p. 203)

Conclusion

This article argued that African Christian women conceived spirituality on the basis of their lived experience, epistemology and ontology. The Christian faith is not merely a text-based theological ambiguation that ousts the context, prevalent existential reality or the cosmological context that births human experience of life. It is a practical response through faith to the challenges of life in order to ensure human flourishing. Human flourishing, as has been demonstrated, is the goal of African Christian women's spirituality because it strikes at the core of their being. Their forbearance and expression of their theology and spirituality are portrayed in their display of affective compassion during the COVID-19 era, even though they were the most hit by the devastating effects of the pandemic. Their resilience, courage and selfless love towards humanity in general, overshadowed the pain and suffering that the pandemic imposed on them. It is within the context of the reality of the pandemic that they resolved, earlier than anyone else, to spiritually respond in what has been called 'spirituality for' approach. Their interventions do not only make sense, but also make spirit (Wariboko 2020). In making sense and making spirit, it is showed that the African Christian women responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in three principal ways: through prayer

and comfort, economic empowerment, and administration of medicine. This three-pronged approach clearly defines the practicality of their spirituality.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

Authors' contributions

B.O.I., is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received a grant from the John Templeton Religion Trust/Nagel Institute for Study of World Christianity at Calvin University, Michigan, USA with Grant Number EAR600.

Data availability

The data that support this article are available with the article and reference section.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Adelakun, A.A., 2022, *Performing power in Nigeria: Identity, politics, and Pentecostalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Adelakun, A.A., 2023, *Powerful Devices: Prayer and the political praxis of spiritual warfare*, Rutgers University Press, London.
- Aluko, O.P., 2022, 'The Christian church and conspiracy theories during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria', in Igboin, B.O. & Adedibu, B.A. (eds.), *Nigerian Pentecostalism and COVID-19: Dynamics, worship, and creativities*, pp. 1–22, Galda Verlag, Glienicke.
- Amenga-Etego, R., 2012, 'Gender and Christian spirituality in Africa: A Ghanaian perspective', *Black Theology: An International Journal* 10(1), 8–27. <https://doi.org/10.1558/blth.v10i1.8>
- Amenga-Etego, R.M., Kwakye, A.N.O., Emeka-Nwobia, N., Onovoh, P. & Fretheim, S., 2021, 'Language, literature, prayer, and music repertoires as sources of African Christian spirituality and values', *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45(2), 111–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939320961100>
- Aryeh, D.N.A., 2021, 'The ancient world: The role of women in e-worship at homes by Charismatic Churches in Ghana due to COVID-19', in H.A. Labeodan, R. Amenga-Etego, J. Stiebert & M.S. Aidoo (eds.), *African women and the will to survive*, pp. 201–214, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.
- Babatunde, T.S., 2021, 'Odunlami, Sophia', *Dictionary of African Christian biography*, viewed 30 January, 2023, from <https://dacb.org/stories/country/odunlami-sophia/>.
- Baker, A., 2020, *Why Africa's COVID-19 outbreak hasn't been as bad as everyone feared*, viewed 03 April 2023, from <https://time.com/5919241/africa-covid-19-outbreak/>.
- Bigirimana, E., 2021, 'Physically distanced but socially close', in N. Hadebe, D. Gennrich, S. Rakoczy & N. Tom (eds.), *A time like no other: COVID-19 in women's voices*, pp. 74–77, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Biney, M., 2019, 'Spirituality from the margins: West African spirituality and aesthetics', in H. Salazar & R. Nicholls (eds.), *The philosophy of spirituality: Analytic, continental and multicultural approaches to a new field in of philosophy*, pp. 122–142, Brill, Leiden.

- Biwul, J.K., 2021, 'The African Church's application of anointing oil: An expression of Christian spirituality or a display of fetish ancestral religion?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6266. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6266>
- CARE, 2020, *Where are the women? The conspicuous absence of women in COVID-19 response teams and plans, and why we need them*, viewed 29 January 2023, from https://www.care-international.org/files/files/CARE_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report_June-2020.pdf.
- Dickson, N., 2021, 'The midwife', in N. Hadebe, D. Gennrich, S. Rakoczy & N. Tom (eds.), *A time like no other: COVID-19 in women's voices*, pp. 109–117, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- De Backer, L.M., 2021, 'COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa: Addiction, Christian spirituality and mental health', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(1), a2135. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2135>
- Dekel, B. & Abrahams, N., 2021, "I will rather die by corona than by him...": Experiences of abused women seeking shelter during South Africa's COVID-19 lockdown', *PLoS One* 16(10), 1–15.
- Fitzgerald, W., 2012, *Spiritual modalities: Prayer as rhetoric and performance*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania.
- Fraser, G., 2005, 'Modernism and the minimal god: On the empty spirituality of the god of the philosophers', in H.A. Harris & C.J. Insole (eds.), *Faith and philosophical analysis: The impact of analytical philosophy on the philosophy of Religion*, pp. 148–157, Ashgate, Surrey.
- Fubara-Manuel, J.I. & Fretheim, S., 2023, 'Orality, gender, and West African Christian spirituality: Exploring women's voices', *Religion Compass* 17(1), e12453. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12453>
- Granness, A., 2019, 'Ubuntu and Buen Vivir: A comparative approach', in J. Ogude (ed.), *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*, pp. 150–175, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Gyamfi, S., 2021, 'COVID-19 pandemic: Reflections of a public health physician', in H.A. Labeodan, R. Amenga-Etego, J. Stiebert & M.S. Aidoo (eds.), *African women and the will to survive*, pp. 269–272, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.
- Hadebe, N., Gennrich, D., Rakoczy, S. & Tom, N. (eds.), 2021, 'Introduction', in *A time like no other: COVID-19 in women's voices*, pp. 6–10, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Holmes, P.R., 2007, 'Spirituality: Some disciplinary perspectives', in K. Flanagan & P.C. Jupp (eds.), *A sociology of spirituality*, pp. 23–42, Ashgate, Burlington, VT.
- Igboin, B.O., 2022a, 'Nimi Wariboko's The Pentecostal Hypothesis and African Pentecostalism during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103(2), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.103.2012>
- Igboin, B.O., 2022b, 'The rich man and Lazarus: Class and identity in Nigeria', *Theologia Viatorum* 46(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v46i1.134>
- Igboin, B.O., 2022c, 'COVID-19 and the Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity', in B.O. Igboin & B.A. Adedibu (eds.), *Nigerian Pentecostalism and COVID-19: Dynamics, worship, and creativities*, pp. 23–50, Galda Verlag, Glienicke.
- Igboin, B.O., 2023, 'COVID-19, food and freedom to worship: An analytic approach to Nigeria's religioscape', in F. Egbokhare & A. Afolayan (eds.), *Humanity and the COVID-19 pandemic: Philosophical and sociological challenges and imperatives*, pp. 401–425, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Igboin, B.O. & Adedoyin, O.W., 2021, 'COVID-19 and social media activism: An analysis of the (Com)passion of African women towards restoration', in H.A. Labeodan, R. Amenga-Etego, J. Stiebert & M.S. Aidoo (eds.), *African women and the will to survive*, pp. 67–80, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.
- Jensen, M.A., 2019, *Why women are more religious than men*, viewed 29 January 2023, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322642273_Why_are_women_more_religious_than_men.
- Juma, D.C., 2022, 'Tamar's voice in the context of Covid-19: Re-reading 2 Samuel 13 for the dignity of women's sexuality', in M.C. Green, F. Kabata & F. Sibanda (eds.), *Law, Religion, health and healing in Africa*, pp. 201–215, African Sun Media, Stellenbosch.
- Katongole, E., 2017, *The journey of reconciliation: Groaning for new creation in Africa*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Yi, L., Woodberry, R., Liu, H. & Guo, G., 2020, 'Why are women more Religious than men? Do risk preferences and genetic risk predispositions explain the gender gap?', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59(2), 289–310. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12657>
- Malinga, P., 2021, 'Foreword', in N. Hadebe, D. Gennrich, S. Rakoczy & N. Tom (eds.), *A time like no other: COVID-19 in women's voices*, pp. 4–5, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Masuku, M.T., 2021, 'African initiated Churches as interlocutors of African spirituality of liberation against colonial spirituality of the empire', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(3), a6682. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6682>
- Mombo, E. & Joziassie, H., 2022, 'Deconstructing gendered *vumilia* (perseverance) theology in times of the gender-based violence pandemic', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 24(4), 1–17.
- Nel, M., 2019, 'The African background of Pentecostal theology: A critical perspective', *In die Skriflig* 53(4), a2418. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i4.2418>
- Newman, L.L., 2004, 'Faith, spirituality, and religion: A model for understanding the differences', *The College of Student Affairs Journal* 23(2), 102–110.
- Nyarwath, O., 2019, 'Ubuntu and Oruka's humanitarian view of punishment', in J. Ogude (ed.), *Ubuntu and the reconstitution of community*, pp. 131–149, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Oladipo, S.E., Adedoyin, A.C., Owoyele, J.W. & Adeoye, H., 2022, 'Nigerian women, mental and physical health, COVID-19, and spirituality', in R.D. Smith, S.C. Boddie & B.D. English (eds.), *Racialized health, COVID-19, and Religious responses: Black Atlantic contexts and perspectives*, pp. 237–244, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Oliver, E., 2021, 'Aligning praxis of faith and theological theory in theological education through an evaluation of Christianity in South Africa', *Acta Theologica* 41, 25–47.
- Olufemi, O.A. & Labeodan, H.A., 2021, "'Locked-Down" but not "Locked Out": Experiences of Nigerian women during the COVID-19 pandemic', in H.A. Labeodan, R. Amenga-Etego, J. Stiebert & M.S. Aidoo (eds.), *African women and the will to survive*, pp. 15–38, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.
- Olupona, J.K., 2008, 'Sacred Ambiguity: Global African Spirituality, Religious Tradition, Social Capital and Self-reliance', in T. Babawale & A. Alao (eds.), *Global African Spirituality, Social Capital and Self-reliance in Africa*, pp. xvii–xxxii, Malthouse Press Ltd., Lagos.
- Omomukuyo, K.G., 2014, 'Organised prayer and the recontextualization of human development within the prayer sessions of Christ Apostolic Church, Oke-Agbara, Ashi, Ibadan', unpublished dissertation, University of Ibadan.
- Oyelade, O.K. & Akintunde, A.A., 2022, 'The context of COVID-19 and indigenous Pentecostal warfare prayer in Southwestern Nigeria', in B.O. Igboin & B.A. Adedibu (eds.), *Nigerian Pentecostalism and COVID-19: Dynamics, worship, and creativities*, pp. 105–122, Galda Verlag, Glienicke.
- Reimer-Kirkham, S., Sharma, S., Brown, R. & Calestani, M., 2020, *Prayer as transgression? The social relations of prayer in healthcare settings*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Chicago, IL.
- Roof, W.C., 1999, *Spiritual marketplace: Baby boomers and the remaking of American Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Roof, W.C., 2003, 'Religion and spirituality: Toward an integrated analysis', in M. Dillion (ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of Religion*, pp. 137–148, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Salazar, H. & Nicholls, R., 2019a, 'Introduction', in H. Salazar & R. Nicholls (eds.), *The philosophy of spirituality: Analytic, continental and multicultural approaches to a new field in of philosophy*, pp. 1–11, Brill, Leiden.
- Salazar, H. & Nicholls, R., 2019b, 'Understanding spirituality', in H. Salazar & R. Nicholls (eds.), *The philosophy of spirituality: Analytic, continental and multicultural approaches to a new field in of philosophy*, pp. 15–17, Brill, Leiden.
- Stiebert, J., 2021, 'Introduction', in H.A. Labeodan, R. Amenga-Etego, J. Stiebert & M.S. Aidoo (eds.), *African women and the will to survive*, pp. 11–14, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.
- Sundberg, C., 2020, 'Revealed medicine as an expression of an African lived spirituality', in K. Lauterbach & M. Vahakangas (eds.), *Faith in African lived Christianity: Bridging anthropological and theological perspectives*, pp. 335–354, Brill, Leiden.
- Tom, N., 2021, 'Death and mourning during a pandemic – The passing of Alease Brown', in N. Hadebe, D. Gennrich, S. Rakoczy & N. Tom (eds.), *A time like no other: COVID-19 in women's voices*, pp. 31–38, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Ukah, A., 2020, 'Prosperity, prophecy and the Covid-19 pandemic: The healing economy of African Pentecostalism', *Pneuma* 42(3–4), 430–459.
- Walinga, M.N., 2015, *African religions*, viewed from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280135224>.
- Wariboko, N., 2014, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, Rochester University Press, Rochester, NY.
- Wariboko, N., 2020, *The Pentecostal hypothesis: Christ talks, they decide*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR.
- Watts, G., 2017, "'Of or For": The study of spirituality and the problems Therein', *The Journal of Spirituality* 7(1), 64–71.
- Watts, G., 2020a, 'The Religion of the heart: "Spirituality" in the late modernity', *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 10(1), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-020-00106-x>
- Watts, G., 2020b, 'Making sense of the study of spirituality: Late modernity on trial', *Religion* 50(4), 590–614.
- World Health Organization, 2020, *New WHO estimates: Up to 190 000 people could die of COVID-19 in Africa if not controlled*, viewed 03 April 2023, from <https://www.afro.who.int/news/new-who-estimates-190-000-people-could-die-covid-19-africa-if-not-controlled>.