



THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 TO THE CHURCH: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON TO NAVIGATE THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

The spread of COVID-19 across the world compelled many governments to take stringent measures to protect their citizens and prevent the further spread of the disease. The measures saw many organizations and their services halted. The church was one of the institutions that were affected by the pandemic. The church being a pillar of hope could not sit back as the pandemic ravaged the world. The church adopted technology such as online services instead of in-person services to reach out to the worshipers and deliver services to the people. This study seeks to interrogate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the church and its contributions in addressing the cultural divide during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted the Online SurveyMonkey platform due to its increased response rate, real-time access and convenience in investigating online accessible population. A sample size of 40 respondents was selected using the convenience sampling technique. Primary data was obtained using online surveys while secondary data was obtained from online journals. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS and presented using frequency tables and cross-tabulation. Qualitative data obtained was scrutinized and then compared with past data from secondary sources. Findings indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the halting of in-house worship services, a move that ushered in the use of technology in the church services. Amid the pandemic, the church provided relief food to the poor and the needy donated protective kits to the less fortunate and provided shelter to the homeless. The church championed for economic empowerment of the vulnerable and marginalized groups to support their livelihood during the hard times occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a voice of solidarity and support from all leaders of goodwill across the globe in consolidating skills, expertise and synergies required to overcome the disease. The church called for unity of purpose from all the nations to pray, carry out research, observe COVID-19 preventive protocols and protect others irrespective of their gender, race creed and or cultural diversities. The study recommended the Church to work with the government in addressing the following issues during pandemics; technology enhancement, effective information sharing, promoting global unity and solidarity as well as economic empowerment of vulnerable people in the society.

Keywords: Church, pandemic, Navigate, Divide Culture

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the world in various ways since its outbreak in Wuhan, China in 2019. The pandemic has contributed to massive loss of lives, affected the livelihood of the people, lifestyle, businesses, governments and various local and international organizations and institutions. Religious organizations, in particular, the church is among the institutions which have been affected by the pandemic. In response to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the governments of the affected countries had to enforce containment measures and health protocols to prevent the further spread of infectious diseases (Wyatt & Tim, 2020). These containment measures impacted the churches in various ways including; cancellation of the worship services by the closure of places of worship, banning all gatherings including faith-based gatherings, closure of Sunday schools as well as cancellation of church ceremonies and festivals (Solovy & Alden, 2020). Additionally, in most countries, there was the closure of border points, lockdown, imposition of quarantine and also cancellation of international travel (Solovy & Alden, 2020). There were limited movement and interaction of people of different races, religion, traditions and culture resulting in culture divide. All these measures were largely aimed at preventing the further spread of the pandemic. The strict enforcement of the containment measures by the government suddenly changed peoples' way of life across the divide hence creating a "new normal" where people had to cope with challenges occasioned by the disease (Doody & Cameron, 2020).

As COVID-19 created a "new normal" for all the people particularly those in affected countries, the church faced serious challenges with the financial impact of the pandemic being profound. Churches faced a unique set of challenges (Showalter & Brandon, 2020). They experienced low income due to lower giving resulting from fewer in-person services. This resulted in the suspension and termination of several church projects and programs. The Church staff and members had serious difficulty transitioning to virtual ministries and technology, which were not fully understood during the unprecedented times (Showalter & Brandon, 2020). However, these challenges presented an opportunity for churches to join the rest of the world in the use of established and emerging technologies to expand their reach and share the word of God with larger audiences (Wyatt & Tim, 2020). Tech-

nology became the central part of church life, and churches were increasingly using unified platforms with integrated solutions for online and recurring giving, media and mass communications, church apps, live streaming, event registration, and church applications.

The utilization of technology platforms by the church during the COVID-19 pandemic period contributed to a significant impact on the ministry. With the increased use of technology, church members too were inspired to follow suit resulting in increased use of online giving among church communities across all denominations (Sheva & Arutz, 2020). Churches and parishes which had already established robust online giving options before the pandemic showed great improvement in giving while those who were using online giving for the first time, had an obligation to help members better understand the importance of making online and recurring gift. Despite the financial uncertainty, churches continued to show determination and resilience (Sheva & Arutz, 2020). In some countries, churches held a combination of online services and in-person worship, mass and sacraments but with strict adherence to the local and state COVID-19 guidelines. The churches seize new opportunities to use technology and digital innovation to enhance communication and stay connected with church members. While conducting in-person services, the worshipers observed social distance guidelines as well as other state guidelines. Many Catholic and protestant churches recommended older Christians to stay home rather than attending mass on Sundays. The churches of all Christian denominations aired church service on television, radio or *online live streaming while others offered drive-in services in church parking lots. Alternatively, some Christians used online apps, which contain prayers and daily devotion to remain engaged with their faith. The church being a pillar of hope to the world, inspired confidence that they would overcome the predicaments occasioned by the pandemic.*

The church plays a fundamental role in advocating for the respect of human rights and social justice (Dias & Elizabeth, 2020). According to Dias and Elizabeth, (2020) this is expressed by championing the rights of the poor, weak, oppressed, marginalized and the disenfranchised in society. In light of this, the church and other faith-based humanitarian organizations provide humanitarian aid and relief to various marginalized groups including persons living with disabilities, migrants, refugees and displaced people as a show of compassion (Dias & Elizabeth, 2020). The enforcement of COVID-19 containment measures such as border closure and lockdown adversely affected Church's humanitarian aid response causing more havoc on marginalized groups, even as the disease spread in some of the vulnerable regions worldwide.

The problem statement

The spread of COVID-19 ravaged the world causing massive deaths, loss of jobs and disruption of livelihoods of millions across the world. Several economic activities and businesses were disrupted causing devastating impacts including hunger and starvation among many communities, particularly in Africa. Services by several organizations and institutions such as schools, industries and places of worship were paralyzed further escalating the catastrophic effects occasioned by the pandemic. The church is one of the institutions which were affected by the containment measures adopted by governments across the globe (Wyatt & Tim, 2020). The church being the pillar of hope could not remain silent in the face of challenges caused by the global pandemic. The church was expected to pray for the world to get healed and also to show compassion to the poor and the less fortunate in society. The effects of COVID-19 prompted the church to adopt the use of technology instead of in-person services during church programs. As a result of the pandemic, there was a general realization that despite limited movements, the use of technology enhances sharing of ideas and information among church leaders across the world on how to overcome the pandemic. This also facilitated the church to extend the heart of empathy to the most affected groups, provide economic empowerment to the marginalized people in the communities and also hold a virtual meeting of world religious leaders to provide solutions and strategies for combating the virus. Therefore, it is against this backdrop that this study investigated the effect of COVID-19 to the church: a global phenomenon to navigate divide culture.

Purpose of study

- i. To find out the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the church
- ii. To examine the contribution of the church in addressing the cultural divide during the COVID-19 pandemic

Research questions

- i. What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the church?
- ii. What are the contributions of the church in addressing the cultural divide during the COVID-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies show that for almost a hundred years, churches have used various communication methods to reach their audience including television, radio and online media. The outbreak of COVID-19 and its rapid spread suddenly changed the way of life altogether. The Gallup report by Frank Newton indicates that the quick shift of religious services from in-person to online worship was the most dramatic religious result to be witnessed in the history of the United States (Solovy & Alden, 2020). According to the Gallup report, the halting of in-person worship was one of the most significant sudden disruptions in the practice of religion in the United States of America's history (Solovy & Alden, 2020). The pandemic resulted in a significant change in the religious habits of the worshipers with a majority of them attending religious services online and on television. The report also notes that, in some states, the drive-in church services had achieved a great level of attendance in the COVID-19 outbreak as the containment meas-

ures were strictly observed.

In the United Kingdom, Christian denominations such as the Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptism, Anglican and Reformed churches published a guideline on worship in light of the pandemic (Wyatt & Tim, 2020). This was a move geared towards sensitizing the public on the significance of containment measures in combating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Christian denomination supported the government efforts in protecting the lives of the people as well as preventing the spread of the disease to other regions.

Many churches across the world supported individuals and hospitals with various protective and testing kits to prevent the spread of the deadly virus. The Church of Highlands, an evangelical Christian megachurch offered free COVID-19 tests in their parking lots (Sheva & Arutz, 2020). In the United States, The National Cathedral Church donated over five thousand surgical masks to hospitals in Washington D.C., which were in shortage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other church leaders chose to remain on call 24/7 to assist COVID-19 patients (Doody & Cameron, 2020). The World Council of Churches indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic period was unprecedented and called for solidarity, care, wisdom, accountability, hope and love for others (Gryboski & Michael, 2020). Amidst the pandemic, some churches offered food and other basic needs to needy families (Dias & Elizabeth, 2020).

The social-distancing guidelines prompted churches to shift to digital church as an alternative to face-to-face church services (Heren & Kit, 2020). Heren and Kit (2020) noted that on Easter Sunday, Pope Francis live-streamed mass from an empty St Peter's Basilica in Rome. In rural churches where access to technology was more limited, some local churches needed to be more creative, including practices such as drive-by processions of the Blessed Sacrament (Abellanosa et al., 2020). Some studies in digital theology noted increased interest in watching and participating in online church services under lockdown (Showalter & Brandon, 2020). According to Chow et al (2020), the interconnectivity promoted by digital technologies helped promote the ability for individuals to participate in religious activities despite physical distance, including those who previously had never stepped foot in a church (Chow et al., 2020).

In China, whence COVID-19 originated received donations from Lutheran Disaster Response, a relief wing of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The donations were in form of disinfection supplies, face shields, gloves, powered air-purifying respirators, ventilators, coronavirus nucleic acid detection reagents, patient monitors, syringe pumps, infusion pumps, and food to affected areas (Sheva & Arutz, 2020). Lutheran Disaster Response and Lutheran World Relief had consistently been sending resources to Africa particularly in crowded urban slums where people were at high risk of getting COVID-19 infections (Wenger & Yvonne, 2020). They supported congregational feeding ministries by providing the needy with food and medical supplies in particularly in Italy and African countries. In Kenya, officers of Lutheran World Relief clinics located in Nairobi educated the people on the importance of hand-washing and proper use of COVID-19 protective equipment.

In Italy, Catholic dioceses and religious institutes offered church facilities to accommodate healthcare operations and provided housing for the needy and the high-risk residents who were more susceptible to develop complications of COVID-19. Pope Francis asked the church to welcome and provide refuge to the homeless amidst the pandemic. When morgues ran out of space in the hardest-hit city of Bergamo in Italy, the church leaders ordered the churches to be used as mortuaries as an act of tenderness towards people who die alone and whose bodies were likely to remain piled up.

Across Europe, church leaders urged the population to observe prudence and solidarity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In some European countries, Catholic masses were completely halted while in others smaller groups continued to congregate. In Germany, while leaders expressed their disappointment over the church service ban, the head of German's bishop conference emphasized the need for religious freedom. The head expressed his confidence that the matter would be resolved upon discussing them with the federal government on protocols for conducting church services.

Abellanosa et al (2020) hold that the Church has the responsibility to preach the gospel of love and compassion to the people. In exercise of this duty, the church inculcates these values to the people through teaching and practice. Through love and compassion, the church preaches the need for brotherhood and sisterhood of all people which is a true bond that unites all world communities into one community of God. Amid the pandemic, the church played an important role in fasting and praying for the world to be healed, providing food to the poor and the needy, economic empowerment of the less privileged and providing refuge to the homeless in the society. In this regard, therefore, Abellanosa et al (2020) indicate that Christians are called to such love because of their common human origins who is God himself. Therefore, people who believe in God should consider all others as their brothers and sisters and should practice brotherhood and sisterhood in their communities and nations irrespective of their differences in age, gender, race creed, educational status and cultural diversities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the Online SurveyMonkey platform to understand the effects of COVID-19 on the church. McManus and Tracey (2020) assert that the online survey is fast to conduct due to the increased response rate and real-time access. Additionally, it is convenient and efficient in investigating online accessible populations. McManus and Tracey (2020) further stipulate that the design is used in obtaining information from the respondents at a time that is convenient for them and provides an environment free from pressure to provide answers to the questions that would otherwise make them feel uncomfortable to answer in a face-to-face interview. The study targeted the pastors, Bishops and laity leaders from various churches in Kenya. The study utilized the convenience sampling technique to identify a sample of 40 respondents from the targeted group. The primary data was obtained using online surveys which collect both qualitative and quantitative data from the respondents. The study also utilized online journals to get secondary data related to the effect of COVID-19 on churches across the globe. Some of the materials used included; literature materials from peer-reviewed journal articles and publications from religious institutions and faith-based organizations. The infor-

mation obtained was the key backbone in providing conceptual grounding of the effect of COVID-19 to the church and which supported the findings. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS and presented through frequency tables and cross-tabulation. The qualitative data obtained was explored and scrutinized and then compared with past data from secondary sources. The information obtained was used to support the findings, summary, conclusions and recommendation.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The study objective was to find out the effect of COVID-19 on the church across the globe and to investigate the contribution of the church in addressing the cultural divide during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found out that the church services were affected by the containment measures that were enforced by the government in efforts to prevent the spread of the deadly virus. The containment measures prompted many churches to adopt in-person worship services in compliance with the preventive guidelines while others shifting to the use of technology in the delivery of the services. Technology became the game changer of church services during the pandemic. The study indicated that the church expressed love and compassion to the poor and less fortunate in the society by providing them with food, protective kits and also shelter during the pandemic. The church supported institutions such as hospitals with protective gear to enhance capacity building and also to protect health workers, who were the frontline soldiers in the fight against the disease. The study found that the church played a key role in enhancing communication and sensitization of the public on how to overcome the pandemic. This complemented the government efforts to fight the common enemy. According to the findings, the church called for solidarity and support from leaders of goodwill across the globe in consolidating skills, expertise and synergies required to overcome the disease. The study also noted that the church championed for economic empowerment of the vulnerable and marginalized groups in the society to support their livelihood during the trying times occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

According to the study, COVID-19 resulted in the halting of in-house worship services. This prompted the use of technology such as online services and live-streaming of church services. Technology became the central part of church services. Amid the pandemic, the church provided relief food to the poor and the needy. Additionally, the church donated protective kits to the less fortunate and also provided shelter to the homeless. The church also donated protective equipment to the hospital and other humanitarian support agencies. The church championed for economic empowerment of the vulnerable and marginalized groups in the society to support their livelihood during the hard times occasioned by the pandemic. The church was identified as a voice of solidarity and support from all leaders of goodwill across the globe in consolidating skills, expertise and synergies required to overcome the disease. The church called for unity of purpose from all the nations to pray, carry out research, observe COVID-19 preventive protocols and protect others irrespective of their gender, race creed, educational status and cultural diversities.

Recommendation

The study found the church to be the embodiment of hope, faith and resilience during the pandemic. The church did not sit back during the pandemic despite the stringent containment measures imposed by the government such as lockdown, cancellation of international travel and halting of in-person worship services. Instead, the church took a decisive action of adopting technology to remain relevant and to deliver its services even in the face of the pandemic. This was a bold move that changed the lives of many people particularly the needy, poor and the less fortunate in society. The study recommends the Church work very closely with the government in finding solutions to the global pandemic and other humanitarian crises in the future. The church should advocate and address the following as a matter of priority

1. Technology enhancement in communication during the pandemic
2. Effective information sharing to enhance research for vaccines and treatment
3. Promote unity of purpose across the globe irrespective of race, creed or cultural differences in the fight against diseases
4. Promote solidarity, support and protection of one another at all times and during the pandemic as well
5. Economic empowerment of the vulnerable at all times and during difficult times.

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