

NOT MY PORTION: AN APPRAISAL OF RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study focused on responses to COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria with specific reference to the attitudes adopted by Church members in Umuahia, Abia State, towards the spread of this virus. Employing descriptive, analytical, and sampling approaches, this study discovered that there is a poor quality of information available to Church members on the spread of this virus. Because of this many Church members upheld that the virus will not infect them because of their religious confession. With this mindset such would not take very seriously various precautionary steps towards reducing the spread of this virus, especially where it affects their religious gatherings. This study argues that while faith in God and prayers are indispensable during epidemics, it is equally important for Church communities to embrace quality information on such epidemics in order to apply their faith in the most effective way. This study recommends the need for Churches to have adequate information network that will enable them to overcome misinformation on public health issues. Church leaders are therefore encouraged to sensitise their members with quality information from experts on ways of preventing the spread of Covid -19 in addition to their religious profession and prayers.

Key words: Covid -19, Pandemic, Church leaders, Church members, religious gatherings

Introduction

This study focused on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Nigerian Christian communities. The responses of Church leaders to the ban on religious gatherings as a precaution against the spread of Covid-19 was analysed. A survey was carried out amongst Church members to discover how their faith as well as the information they have about Covid-19 affected their responses to the spread of this virus in their communities. Following the findings, this study encouraged the Churches to be well informed about this disease and how it spreads in order to collaborate effectively with WHO, NCDC and other stake holders in the campaign against the spread of Covid-19 amongst their members and the communities they serve.

Covid-19 A Global Pandemic

The novel coronavirus disease - Covid-19 - is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (WHO, 2020). This disease was first identified as a pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019 and

was first reported to the WHO Country Office in China on 31 December 2019. This outbreak was declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. On 11 February 2020, WHO announced a name for the new coronavirus disease as Covid-19 (WHO, 2020). The Covid-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Most people infected with the Covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, it can make some people very ill and, in some people, it can be fatal. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. This disease has spread very quickly across the world. Statistics available released by WHO as at 27th April shows that over 3 million people have been infected by this disease across the world, with over 211 thousand deaths recorded. USA Italy, Spain, UK and China are the first five countries with the highest number of casualties. The number of infection and deaths are still rising in many countries (WHO, 2020).

Studies in coronaviruses reveal that human coronaviruses, first characterized in the 1960s, cause a substantial proportion of upper respiratory tract infections in children. Since 2003, at least 5 new human coronaviruses have been identified, including the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS), which caused significant morbidity and mortality (Kahn, and McIntosh, 2005). An example of a recent coronavirus disease outbreak is the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) of which new cases were discovered in Qatar in 2019. MERS-COV was first identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012 (WHO, 2012; WHO, 2019). Drawing from previous experiences on coronavirus diseases, WHO has advised that the best way to prevent and slow down transmission of the current coronavirus outbreak is *to be well informed about the Covid-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads.* (my emphasis). WHO further advises that people should wash their hands, practice respiratory etiquette and maintain social distancing in order to curtail the spread of this virus (WHO, 2020). Adding to these, Kallon notes that testing, isolation and contact-tracing, which the Nigerian government adopted, is an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for strict adherence to social distancing and more testing in order to mitigate the spread of this virus (Kallon, quoted by Ajayi, 2020). Currently, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for Covid-19. However, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments. WHO will continue to provide updated information as soon as clinical findings become available. Without any verified treatment for this disease, it is especially important that people have adequate information about the virus and how it spreads so that they can prevent its spread in their communities.

Covid-19 and Church Gatherings in Nigeria

In order to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria, religious and social gatherings were restricted, first to 50 persons and later to 20 people. This had a big impact on the country's Churches and mosques. In a country where over 90% of the citizens profess to be religious, most Nigerians are accustomed to turning to their faith in times of crisis. The coronavirus pandemic is no exception (Ayeni, 2020). Buhari, justifying his decision to extend the lockdown imposed on Lagos and Ogun states and the FCT pointed out the impact of Covid-19 on religious gatherings across the world: 'It is a matter of life and

death. Mosques in Mecca and Medina have been closed. The Pope celebrated Mass on an empty St. Peter's Square. The famous Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris held Easter Mass with less than 10 people...We cannot be lax' (Buhari, quoted by Amaechi, 2020). This statement is used to draw attention to the fact that Covid-19 affected not only economic and social activities in the world but also religious gathering and Nigeria is not an exception.

Given the dominance of religion in the public domain in Nigeria as well as the high level of illiteracy and lack of trust by masses in the political class, many people are more likely to listen to and believe the words of their religious leaders. So, when the Lagos state government, acting on the advice of the NCDC following the developments in many other countries proscribed mass religious gatherings, many Church members looked unto their Church leaders to direct them on how to respond. While some Church leaders headed the directive, others rejected it.

Few examples: on March 21, Adewele Martins, the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos suspended Sunday Masses for one month following this directive. Prior to this directive, upon confirmation of the index Covid-19 patient, the Catholic Church in Lagos on February 29 banned shaking of hands as a sign of peace during Mass, and suspended some services (Lichtenstein, et al, 2020). Enoch Adeboye, the general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, held a service on Sunday 22 March, but it was a congregation of less than 20 in compliance with a Lagos State directive. In addition, those at the service observed social distancing by sitting apart from each other. On their part, the Methodist Church Nigeria sent a letter to archbishops and bishops on March 18 directing all branches to continue holding services, despite the Nigerian governments' advice against large gatherings. By March 20, they reversed course, directing compliance with the directive (Ayeni, 2020; Uma and Abiaziem, 2020). The Winners Chapel and COZA in Abuja went ahead with services. Pastor Paul Eneche of Dunamis International Church, Abuja, held regular service at his 100,000-person-capacity auditorium (Ayeni, 2020; Uma and Abiaziem, 2020). Oyedepo of Winners Chapel, after he was criticised severally by Nigerians for flouting government's order on social distancing gave his stand. He stated:

This plague is the work of the devil targeted at world leaders, and the only solution is to return to God and call on Him. I am not against government policies aimed at controlling the spread, but schools are a safe place to detect who has the virus or not just like the Churches and mosques, where who has the virus can be detected, because in these places, people can easily be controlled and checked. (Uma and Abiaziem, 2020 p2).

Otoibhi, General Overseer, Temple Rebuilders Ministry, voiced his belief that coronavirus will disappear if governments and religious leaders will work in synergy to combat its spread. He argued that instead of the social distancing advocated by experts there should be mass prayer gatherings to rout out the spread of the infection. He said that Nigeria needs cooperate prayers as most diseases in the past that defied solution were solved with prayers:

... Pastors should speak the Word of God to produce faith and dislodge fear from their congregations. Please, as partners, let governments cooperate with religious leaders to gather for prayers, intercessions, and supplications, because

we need these corporate prayers now than ever before. (Otoibhi, quoted by Uma and Abiaziem, 2020 p3)

This practice of people acting in line with the information they got from their Churches rather than from experts would have empowered Church members not to discontinue holding mass religious gatherings but for the intervention of law enforcement officials (Ayeni, 2020; Olarewanju, 2020). This shows that while many African governments have taken stringent measures to slow the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus that causes Covid-19, including school closures, travel bans, social distance mandates, and contact tracing, not all religious leaders agree with banning one kind of public assembly: faith-based gatherings. Such invoked religious ideology to confront the virus, assuring followers and devotees that faith offers adequate protection (Lichtenstein, et al, 2020). The same response was also found amongst Muslims. While the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) urged Muslims to comply with the ban on congregational prayers, some Muslim leaders continued to share misinformation that Muslim believers are immune to the contagious disease (Lichtenstein, et al, 2020; Conversation, 2020)

In each case above, it is worthy to note that Church members followed the directive or information from their leaders or Churches. The information most Churches passed on how to respond to Covid-19 was based on their teaching that God can handle every situation that befalls humans. All that is needed from the devotees is faith and commitment in worshipping God. With this mindset, the initial response of many Church leaders was to ask their members to continue to hold their Church gatherings. As long as Church leaders told their members that they can continue with their mass worship gatherings, many of them complied, in spite of the warnings from WHO, NCDC, state governments and other collaborators in the campaign against Covid-19, that these gatherings portends a high risk to public health.

This underscores the role Churches play in the dissemination of information to the masses, and in this case, information on public health issues. It shows that the Church is a strong platform from which information is passes to the masses. It also shows that Church members, to a great extent, take the information passed through their Churches as authentic. With these in mind, there is strong need for Churches to pass on qualitative information to their members on issues as they arise.

Methodology

Survey research design was used to assess how Church members in Umuahia, Abia State were responding to the novel coronavirus global pandemic and the involvement of Church leaders towards giving their members the right information on how to prevent the spread of this virus. The target population for this study was all selected Churches, which cuts across different denomination in Umuahia North and South LGA's, namely – Assemblies of God World Bank International Church, the Presbyterian Church World Bank Parish, All Saints Anglican Church World Bank, Christ the King Catholic Church World Bank, St. Silas Church Old Umuahia, Church of Good Shepherd, Ehimiri. The total average numbers of adult worshippers at these Churches on a Sunday are as follows: Assemblies of God Church. World Bank - 360, Presbyterian Church, World Bank - 260, Methodist Church, World Bank, 400, All Saints Anglican Church, World Bank -400, Christ the King Catholic Church, World Bank, 380, St Silas Church

Old Umuahia 200, Church of Good Shepherd, Ehimiri120, making a total of 2,120 adult worshippers. With the above statistics, the target population for this study is 2,120 worshippers.

Stratified random sampling was employed to select 1,146 subjects from the target population of 2,120 worshippers, which is 54.06 % of the projected number of adult worshippers. The Questionnaire constituted the fundamental instrument for the collection of information on the responses of Church members to Covid-19 issues. This questionnaire was made up of 19 items that reflected the research questions. These questionnaires were distributed randomly to the members of the Churches during Sunday services on 8th and 15th March, when the number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Nigeria were still 3. This was before the numbers rose and the consequent introduction of lockdown by Federal government and various state governments in Nigeria. The items in the questionnaire were constructed around two options – Yes and No.

The research questions are as follows:

1. The level of information as well as the quality of information Church members have about Covid-19 are inadequate for them to understand fully the nature of this virus and how it spreads.

2. Church members believe that they will be shielded from contracting Covid-19 through their persistent prayers and faith in God. With this belief Church members will normally continue to organise large gatherings for prayer convocations against this virus without realising that such gatherings could lead to more spread of this virus.

3. Church members have loyalty to the information they receive from their Churches and therefore Churches can serve as strong organs in the dissemination of quality appropriate information on Covid-19 to Church members and the masses.

Data from the questionnaire was coded and the responses from the subjects were analysed. Percentages and mean were utilised in this research in analysing the responses of the respondents.

Results, Analysis and Discussions

This aspect indicates the result of the data collected and analysed in this research. The responses are grouped under the two options – Yes and No. Percentages and mean scores aided in organising, arranging, and summarising the data.

Research Question 1

The level of information as well as the quality of information Church members have about Covid-19 are inadequate for them to understand fully the nature of this virus and how it spreads.

Table 1

s/n	ITEMS	Frequency and percentage of respondents				
		Yes	%	No	%	TOTAL
1.	Have you heard about Covid-19 (Coronavirus)	1140	99.48	6	0.52	1146
2.	Have you heard that Covid-19 has come to Nigeria through an Italian?	1122	97.91	24	2.09	1146
3.	Do you think that if Covid-19 spreads quickly in Nigeria the way it did in China	390	34.03	756	65.97	1146

	the Nigerian government will tackle it head on like China did?					
4	Do you think that we have good medical facilities in Umuahia to tackle Covid-19 if it gets to Umuahia?	96	8.38	1050	91.62	1146
5	Are you afraid that we don't have adequate medical facilities to tackle Covid-19 if it spreads in Umuahia?	822	71.73	324	28.27	1146
7	Pastors and Church leaders say that if we pray hard, this epidemic will not come to Umuahia, it will not even spread in Nigeria. Do you agree with this?	960	83.77	186	16.23	1146
13	Do you know of any Church where Church members contracted Covid-19 through their Church gatherings?	60	5.24	1086	94.76	1146
15	Do you think that all the members of your Church have enough information on what you can do to avoid being infected by Covid-19?	306	26.70	840	73.29	1146
	TOTAL & AVERAGE %	4,896	53.41	4,272	46.59	9,168

Table 1 above indicates the level of information as well as the quality of information people have about Covid-19. Analyses of items 1 and 2 show that 99.48% and 97.91% of the respondents have heard about Covid-19 and its entrant into Nigeria. Analyses of items 3, 4 and 5 show that 65.97% of the respondents do not trust that the federal government will be able to tackle the pandemic if it escalates in Nigeria. In the same vein 91.62% hold the view that there are not adequate medical facilities in Umuahia to tackle this disease. With this common knowledge 71.73% are afraid that they would not have access to adequate healthcare if the pandemic spreads to Umuahia. These responses correspond with the confessions of Boss Mustapha, the secretary to the Government of the federation (SGF) and chairman, Nigerian presidential task force on Covid-19. He states: 'If developed countries of the world are stretched despite their good capacity, then Nigeria needs to improve its own' (Mustapha, quoted by Amaechi, 2020, p 1; see also Akor and Igidi, 2020). Items 7 and 13 reveal the palliatives that Church leaders in Umuahia are using to calm the fears of their members to make them not to fret over this pandemic. 83.77% hold on to the comforting and prophetic words of their priests and pastors that the virus will not get to Umuahia if they keep on praying. This is strengthened with their ignorance that this virus has spread in places of worship in other countries (Farrer and Tondo, 2020; Steger, 2020). 94.76% respondents were unaware that this virus has spread amongst people who gathered for worship. Item 15 reveals that actually a good number of worshippers do not have much information on how to prevent this virus from spreading at this time as much as they believe that it would not get to their vicinity. 73.29% of the respondents said that they do not have adequate information on how the spread of this disease can be halted.

The result from this survey as displayed in table 1 above shows that majority of Christian worshippers in Umuahia do not have adequate and quality information on Covid-19 as at this stage. This implies that they have not benefited from the advice of WHO which stipulates that the best way to prevent as well as slowdown the transmission

of this virus is to be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. At this stage, many of the Christian worshippers in Umuahia looked unto God to prevent the spread of this disease in Umuahia. They held on to their faith that this virus will not get to their vicinity and cannot be contracted through their religious activities. The result of this survey equally show that Church leaders at this stage were not taking practical pro-active steps against the spread of this virus as advised by experts but were rather perceived the news of this pandemic as a call for them to profess their faith in God the more. The approach of many of the Church leaders as this stage showed some high level of ignorance on the nature of Covid-19. Otherwise, if they are aware, one would expect that they would teach their congregations to heed the advice of WHO in order not to spread the disease and loose members of the Church to illness and death. These responses therefore highlight the need for Church leaders to reassess the quality of information they pass on to their congregations about Covid-19 in order to help stem the spread of this virus and the disease it causes.

Research Question 2

Church members believe that they will be shielded from contracting Covid-19 through their persistent prayers and faith in God. With this belief Church members will normally continue to organise large gatherings for prayer convocations against this virus without knowing that such gatherings could lead to more spread of this virus.

Table 2

s/n	ITEMS	Frequency and percentage of respondents				
		Yes	%	No	%	TOTAL
6	Have your Church/pastors/priests encouraged you not to be afraid of Covid-19?	876	76.43	270	23.57	1146
8	Do you join your Church in praying against Covid-19?	1068	93.19	78	6.81	1146
9	Covid-19 is NOT MY/OUR PORTION IN JESUS' NAME, AMEN! Have you made this faith declaration to protect yourself and your loved ones?	1062	92.68	84	7.32	1146
10	Will the above faith confession keep Covid-19 away from you and your loved ones as well as other Christians who make this faith confession?	888	77.48	258	22.52	1146
11	Do you think that any strong prayerful Christian can be infected by Covid-19 in Church if this virus gets here?	522	45.54	624	54.46	1146
12	Do you agree with those who claim that prayerful Christians cannot be infected by Covid-19 from a place they gathered for worship/prayers?	612	53.40	534	46.60	1146
	TOTAL & AVERAGE %	5,028	71.12	1848	26.88	6,876

Table 2 above indicates how religious teaching influences people's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Analysis of item 6 shows that 76.43% of the respondents agree that they have been encouraged by their clergy not to be afraid of Covid-19. But

from the analysis of item 15 above, it is obvious that such encouragement is not matched with the requisite information on how to prevent the spread of Covid-19, which includes social distance. With this encouragement, many Church members are motivated to join their Churches in their prayer gatherings against Covid-19. This pattern of response is robustly reflected in item 8, which has 93.17% confirming they joined their Churches to pray against Covid-19. This is a common practice because during times of crisis, Church members are called upon to gather in large numbers to pray and seek divine intervention. During such prayer gatherings, worshippers are encouraged to hold hands together with each other as a mark of solidarity and unity of purpose. Worshippers are encouraged to shout aloud and cry unto God during such gatherings. What makes this pattern of religious gathering in large numbers and often holding hands with each other as a mark of solidarity and unity of purpose a problem is the nature by which Covid-19 spreads.

Church members are often taught to accompany their prayers with faith declarations. Item 9 showed that people responded this way to Covid-19. 92.68% made the faith declaration that Covid-19 is 'NOT MY PORTION IN JESUS' NAME, AMEN!' With this declaration, such will hope that this virus will not affect them or their loved ones. A further test on the value Church members place on their religious confession shows majority believe it will be according to their confession. Hence, item revealed that 77.48% persons maintained that their confession that Covid-19 is not their portion will protect them and their loved ones from being infected by the virus. These responses reflect the teachings of some notable Church leaders in Nigeria. For example E. A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), posted a message on Instagram to reassure his followers that they are protected from Covid-19: 'I want to assure you that so far you are in the secret place of the Most High, no virus can come near your dwelling' (Adeboye, Quoted in Oxfam, 2020).

Further on the role of faith in the response of Church members to Covid-19, item 11 revealed that 54.46% percent of respondents believed that Covid-19 will not be contracted by a prayerful Christian. In the same vein, item 12 shows that 53.40% of respondents believed people cannot be infected with Covid-19 virus from a place they were gathered for worship. By this they affirm that those who gathered for Christian worship and prayers cannot contract the disease. This response shows that these respondents may not be aware that there are news reports dating back to 8th February showing that Covid-19 has spread among Christian worshippers while they gathered for worship in some other countries where Covid-19 virus has spread to leading to a ban on Church gatherings (Farrer and Tondo, 2020; Siqui, 2020, Chiang, 2020; Loh, 2020). Information on the rapid spread of Covid-19 during Church gatherings strengthens the ban on mass religious gatherings in Nigeria in order to keep social distancing rules. This measure that coerced Church members to adopt precautionary approach to handling this pandemic could be seen as a correlation between faith and works amongst as espoused in Christian teaching.

Research Question 3

Church members have loyalty to the information they receive from their Churches and therefore Churches can serve as strong organs in the dissemination of quality appropriate information on Covid-19 to Church members and the masses.

Table 3

s/n	ITEMS	Frequency and percentage of respondents				
		Yes	%	No	%	TOTAL
14	Do you agree with people who say that keeping the preventive measures is more effective than holding more and more prayer convocations gatherings against Covid-19?	786	68.59	360	31.41	1146
16	Do you believe it would be helpful if Church bulletins carried information on preventive measures against Covid-19	1086	94.76	60	5.24	1146
17	Would you like your priests/pastors to organise teaching on preventive measures against Covid-19 to complement your prayers?	1092	95.29	54	4.71	1146
18	If Pastors/Priests/Church leaders reminded their members to keep the preventive measures against Covid-19 every Sunday, do you think it will help Church members to try and keep these measures?	1086	94.76	60	5.24	1146
19	Should the Church be part of the campaign on educating people to adopt preventive measures to combat the spread of Covid-19?	1104	96.34	42	3.66	1146
	TOTAL & AVERAGE %	5,154	89.95	576	10.05	5,730

Analysis of table 3 demonstrate the importance of adopting preventive stance on Covid-19 and the need for adequate information and collaboration between the Church and relevant agencies to achieve this. It has been noted in the analyses of table 1 that many Church members lack adequate information on the nature of Covid-19 and how it spreads. Item 14 reveals that 68.59% agree that it is more important to apply preventive methods rather than relying on conducting more and more prayer convocations. This is remarkable given the fact that many worshippers believed that Covid-19 virus cannot be transmitted through Church gatherings. It should be noted that at this stage many of these respondents did not realise that part of the precautionary steps includes a ban on their mass religious gathering. If they were aware, the result could have been different. would eventually include not coming together to hold their Church services and other religious gatherings. However this stance reflects the stance taken by some of the Churches from the very beginning when Covid-19 was reported in Nigeria as discussed under Covid-19 and Church Gatherings in Nigeria above (Oxfam, 2020; Abati, 2020)

Items 16, 17 and 18 reveal that Church members will like their leaders to use the Church as a medium of passing on important information on issues that affect the health and general wellbeing of Church members and the society. They would like their

Churches to give them quality information on how to prevent the spread of Covid-19. In this light, Item 16 reveals that 94.76 agree that highlighting preventive steps on Covid-19 in Church bulletins will make a positive difference in the fight against Covid-19. Item 17 reveals that 95.29 worshippers would like their Church leaders to organise teachings and seminars on how to prevent Covid-19 to complement their prayers. Item 18 showed that 94.76 are of the opinion that if their clergy keep reminding their members to keep the preventive measures every Sunday, that it will make a great difference as such members will take observing these precautions more seriously. Item 19 reveals that 96.34 of worshippers agree that the Church should participate in the campaign for people to take preventive approach seriously in order to combat the spread of Covid-19. What this implies is that Church members expect their Church leaders to collaborate with other agencies that are engaged in fighting against the spread of Covid-19 and take them along this path.

The responses on items 16-19 highlight the need for the Church to be involved in the fight against the spread of Covid-19. These responses show that weekly Church bulletins could be used as a tool to reduce misinformation on how this virus spreads. Churches could get information direct from the WHO and other collaborating agencies and make this information available to their members through their bulletins. If such news were on the bulletin, it could have been easier for people to appreciate why religious gatherings were asked to stop as part of social distancing by the time it was introduced in order to curb the spread of this virus.

Church bulletins will be relevant in the fight against Covid -19 when ban on religious gatherings will be lifted because there will still be need for proper information on how people will continue to protect themselves from the a second wave of spread of Covid-19. This is important because people will still need to have the right information on how they will continue to protect themselves from Covid-19 even after the virus has been stemmed down to prevent it from resurfacing as is usually the case with the spread of viral infections. Such information can also extend to other infectious diseases such as Lassa fever, yellow fever and tuberculosis, etc. This is important at a time when the country is recording high rate of cases and deaths that are linked to Lassa fever (Owoseye, 2020; NCDC, 2020; Oluwole, 2020)

Previous studies have shown that notices during Church gatherings have been used as mediums to disseminate information on vaccinations by the primary health care units and this has been effective. During vaccinations health centres have written Churches about the exercise. Many Churches have participated in this exercise by allowing health workers to come to their Churches to vaccinate their children during their Church gatherings. This has helped health workers to reach the masses much more easily (Antai, 2008; Ophori, et al, 2014; Falade, 2014; Anyene, 2014 Oteri quoted in WHO, 2019; The Conversation, 2019). Also using the Church as a medium of disseminating information helps the primary health care to combat various fake news and misinformation that are carried against various vaccines as unsafe.

Implication of Findings: Establishment of Church Information Service (CIS)

Foregoing discussions show that Churches command the audience and confidence of their members to a large extent. Many members perceive their Church leaders as the oracle of God and custodians of wisdom and knowledge. Many resort to their clergy for

advice and guidance when facing difficult life situations. This study has shown that in times of pandemic, people resort to their Churches for prayers, encouragement, and guidance. This study has equally demonstrated that Church members hope to get quality information from their Churches through their clergy. Unfortunately, leaving the individual clergy, in some cases, to be the ones who provide all the answers to issues of public health have great limitations to the detriment of the Church members.

Despite the limitations of the expectation that people should get the right information on issues mainly from their clergy or Churches, it is indisputable that the information people derive from their Churches can easily be taken by majority of the members as the appropriate information. Bearing this in mind, it becomes even especially important that Churches as Christian religious groups should strengthen their information systems. In doing this, the Church should realise that there is need to engage with people who are experts in other fields outside the fields of religion. Fortunately, the Church is gifted with vast human resources comprising of people who operate in different fields of human endeavour; people who have other bodies of knowledge outside the common religious beliefs. It is important that the Church take advantage of the knowledge that such specialists can contribute to the Church by creating a hub that enables such people to collaborate with various relevant agencies to develop verified appropriate information on issues that affect the society. This will make it easier for Church members to make a differentiation between the subjective religious interpretations of their pastors on issues of social and health concerns and that of experts.

This study is of the opinion that one way to achieve this is by constituting Church information think tank, which could be called Church Information Service (CIS), by groups of Churches on issues of social and health concerns. It is the responsibility of such think tank to issue verified information on issues. Information is power. The right knowledge is a strong force. The Bible acknowledged the importance of knowledge to the survival and wellbeing of God's people; hence, the scripture admonishes: my people perish for lack of knowledge (Hosea 4.6)

The way information has been disseminated during this pandemic show that it is important for Church establishments like dioceses, circuits, councils, provinces, etc, to constitute a think tank on verified information made up of knowledgeable people and experts who will relate with WHO, NCDC and other relevant agencies to provide their Churches with verified information on health issues and disease control. Such groups will be able to ensure that the information disseminated through their unit Churches on health issues are verified information. During a pandemic like Covid-19, where such service is in place, a section of the weekly bulleting could have used to disseminate verified information to the worshippers as the pandemic developed and progressed in other countries. This will keep them appropriately informed as they prayed for God's intervention.

In addition to the bulletins and bulletin digests, verified information can also be made accessible online in various Church online platforms and websites. It is important that Churches adopt the above practice of getting verified information to the grassroots of worshippers because during epidemics, a lot of misinformation circulate. This has become even more rampant because many people now have access to the social media. One of the dangerous misinformation during the early days of confirmation of Covid-19 cases in Nigeria was the news that chloroquine can be used to cure as well as prevent

contracting this disease. This misinformation developed from Donald Trump's announcement that FDA has approved Chloroquine for clinical treatment of Covid-19 in the USA. This announcement was countered by the FDA who announced that there are no proofs that Chloroquine could be used to treat or prevent Covid-19 (Gilbert, 2020; Salo, 2020). The Nigerian social media went agog with the news that chloroquine can be used to prevent as well as cure Covid-19. Within seconds, this news hit the Nigerian masses, and in a matter of minutes most pharmacies sold out their chloroquine stock. Armed with this fake news, some people took chloroquine as an antidote for Covid-19. This led many people into health complications. There were claims that chloroquine was approved by the ministry of health for the treatment of Covid-19. This claim was quickly countered by the ministry of health and NCDC (Ihekweazu, NCDC 2020; Onyendinefu, 2020; Toromade, 2020). To combat misinformation, CIS can produce a catechism of questions and answered from the frequently asked questions from Church members who are searching for information and clarification on the information they have.

It is important to point out that the Church leaders and Church members are both perpetrators as well as victims of misinformation. Some Church leaders as well as many other religious leaders make unverified claims during pandemics. Some of these claims are detrimental to the public health. Such claims have led to the perception that 'Perhaps the biggest problem facing Nigeria in containing the virus is religious leaders' (Enahoro, 2020, p2). There are many examples of claims made by notable Church leaders that could lead to misinformation and negatively affect the cooperation of Church members in the fight against Covid-19. For instance, the news about the origin of Covid-19 and its purpose attributed to one of the popular Church leaders is Nigeria – Apostle Johnson Suleiman, the general overseer of Omega Power ministries had many unverified claims. In this prophetic broadcast credited to him, China purposefully invented the virus in order to embarrass Donald Trump, the US president. He added that the disease is spread through testing and hence, Christians should not go for testing or use any Corona vaccine, lest they are turned into slaves under a New World Order (Abati, 2020). This claim was trending at a time when there is emphasis by both WHO, NCDC and various corroborating agencies are encouraging the government to step up their testing of this virus as a way of controlling the spread of the disease. (Kallon, quoted by Ajayi, 2020). Such prophecy could make Church members to play down on the need for testing and contact tracing.

In a similar vein, Pastor, Chris Oyakhilome, the founder and leader of Believers Love World (Christ Embassy) stretched the New World Order Theory further by announcing that there is a connection between 5G technology and Covid-19 and that the Nigerian Government is laying 5G fibre cables in Abuja and Lagos to promote an anti-Christ agenda (Abati, 2020). On his own part, Prophet Goodheart Val Aloysius, popularly called - "My Father, My Father"- who is the Metropolitan Senior Pastor of Father's House International Church in Calabar called on the Nigerian government to gather all Covid-19 patients in the country together in one place and on Monday, April 13, he will pray for them and they will all be healed (Abati, 2020). On his part, Prophet T. B, Joshua, founder and leader of Synagogue of All Nations predicted that Covid-19 will disappear after a heavy rainfall on March 27. Many Nigerians looked forward to that rainfall on March 27 (Abati, 2020). On March 27, there was no heavy rainfall, and the number of Covid-19 cases in Nigeria increased geometrically since then.

These prophecies are sources of misinformation to the Church members, many of whom have been indoctrinated to believe that their leaders are the custodians of knowledge, wisdom, and solution over all situations. Whatever may be the purpose for these claims, they have not clarified the nature of this disease and how it spreads. So a well-established verified information think tank that operates independently from the subjective spiritual claims of such notable Church leaders could help people to have a verified information rather than those projected by Church leaders. Such information organ advocated here could go a long way to whittle down the impact of misinformation carried by powerful Church leaders when they make unverified claims.

One of the reasons that make CIS especially important in the fight against pandemic is because many Church members tend to hold strongly to an information when it is endorsed by their Church organs. With this mindset, it would be more effective if Church leaders conveyed to their members the need to maintain social distance in order to curb Covid-19, especially where it involves not holding Church services. In this case, Church members would not perceive it as a clampdown on religious worship by the federal and state governments, but rather a necessary practice for the wellbeing of all. This mindset of Church members taking information passed through Churches seriously is corroborated in a similar survey that was aimed at reducing indiscriminate dumping of refuse (Igwe, 2012). It is also evident in the discussions under Covid-19 and Church Gatherings in Nigeria above.

The primary duty of the CIS, which I advocate here, is to provide verified information and make them easily accessible to Church members. This would enable Church members debunk misinformation that could be peddled in error through powerful religious leaders. This is important because these leaders have great number of followers beyond their Churches and so the information, which they project, influence other Christians who do not belong to their Church. Also, misinformation can be generated on the social media by some mischievous persons and tagged to emanate from notable Church leaders in order to facilitate the acceptance and spreading of such information. This way Church members and the masses, in error, will believe that such information is from these notable Church leaders and act on this information. Where CIS is fully in operation, people would be able to check the information attributed to some notable Church leaders to ascertain their authenticity. CIS can be made to operate in such away that it is able to provide verified information to vulnerable Christians whose peculiarities make them victims of misinformation during critical times. It will make Christians and other religious groups to be able to make a distinction between scientifically verified information and subjective spiritual claims made or attributed to Church leaders which cannot be verified. This way Christians do not need to live in fear of misinformation when epidemics strike because they have the requisite information from CIS.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings and discussions, the following recommendations are made for proactive and active participation of Churches in Umuahia in the fight against the spread of Covid-19 in AbiaState.

- Church leaders should maintain social distancing rules and strongly encourage their members to do so. This will send make a strong impression on the need for

members to do the same in their homes and communities. Church should not be afraid of losing their members or revenue because of ban on large Church gatherings. They should rather encourage their members to pray and worship in their individual homes. Church leaders can also use online platforms to reach out to their members who have access to such online services. The wellbeing of members should have priority over Church revenues.

- Officials of NCDC and other public health agencies who are involved in the fight against Covid-19 need to continue to engage with Church leaders in Umuahia and encourage them to be actively involved in the campaign for people to embrace precautionary measures against Covid-19. This will reinforce the information which are provided by these agencies through various media platforms. Engaging the Church leaders is necessary because their participation in disseminating this information give a strong reinforcement and could make those who may not take them seriously to have a rethink.
- Church leaders need to have quality information on the nature of Covid-19 and how it can be prevented from spreading so that they can pass on quality information to their members. This will sensitise the members to realise that adhering to the precautionary steps is for the wellbeing of everyone. This could go with the slogan – you protect me and I protect you and we all flourish – as the philosophy behind social distancing. This will reduce the suspicion some people have that banning large Church gatherings is a ploy used to clamp down on Christian propagation.
- Churches should liaise with federal and state governments agencies and collaborate with them in the distribution of relief materials to the poor, indigent and vulnerable members of the society without favouritism. This is especially important because if people have no food and lack access to medical care, they cannot obey the lockdown rules. As the saying goes, a hungry man is an angry man.
- Church bulletins should carry information on how to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Handbills that carry appropriate information on Covid-19 from NCDC and collaborating agencies can be made available to Church members through Church leaders. This will strengthen the campaign of NCDC when Church members realise that this campaign is a collaborative work for the good of everyone.
- The federal and state governments collaborating with relevant agencies should step up Covid-19 testing capacity so that people can know their status on time. This will help the government to plan an exit strategy for the lockdown in some places, which will reduce the economic hardship experiences by the people. This is important because many states claim not to have experiences any Covid-19 and hence question the wisdom of their being locked down in a climate of limited resources.

- CIS as discussed in this paper need to be formed by Church groups. This group will be tasked with the responsibility of making Church members to have easy access to verified information. There should a collaborative link between the CIS of different Church groups and relevant government agencies. This group will be responsible for providing verified information on issues when they arise. This will mitigate misinformation. It will also create room for people to make a differentiation between verified information on issues of public health and the subjective or prophetic opinions of notable Church leaders.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the quality of information on Covid-19 available to Church members in Umuahia was inadequate and this affected their compliance to the social distancing rules aimed at preventing the spread of this disease. Church members in Umuahia believed strongly that God will protect them from being infected by the Covid-19 virus. Because of this belief, Church members in Umuahia will continue to pray strongly against the spread of this virus. They might go against the rules on social distancing in their bid to organise more prayer convocations against the spread of this virus unless they are properly guided by their leaders and other relevant state agencies. Church leaders can make use of Church bulletins and Church notices to propagate quality information on Covid-19 to their members. Church leaders should strongly collaborate with various government and public health agencies to cater for the needs of their vulnerable members so that such members can cope with the impact of social distancing on their access to their means of livelihood, otherwise, such members will be unable and unwilling to comply with such preventive measures. Church leaders should also maximise the use of online platforms and various media outfits to continue to provide Christian worship to those who have access to such facilities. At this time of a global pandemic, it is especially important that precautionary steps are properly taken to stem the spread of Covid-19. This is especially the most practical and appropriate thing to do in a climate of acute shortage in medical facilities and resources. Prevention is better than cure.

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