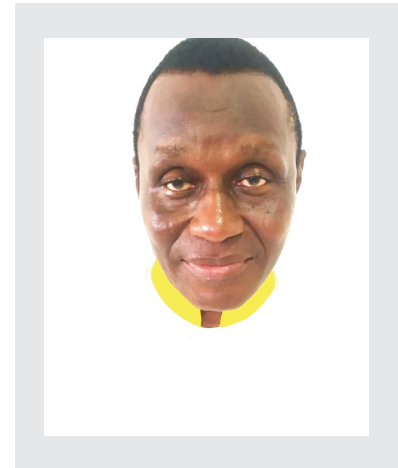


CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 ON CHURCH GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT



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nation. There was a consequent emergence of a new set of attitudes and ways of interacting and transacting business ("new normal") that was alien to the traditional ways practised in the pre-COVID 19 era.

The focus of this presentation is to highlight some of the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has created particularly in the church setting, how the church has coped, and how the church can leverage on the new realities of the emerging "new normal" and forge ahead to attain enhanced growth and development during and in the post-COVID era

2.0 SOME CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE CHURCH

Generally, the church refers not only to the building where Christians worship God, it also refers to a gathering of people worshipping God in the Christian faith. A beehive of activities, which encourages intrinsic passion and crowd participation, take place in the church setting. It was therefore no wonder that churches were among the places that came under the hammer of lockdown, not only in Nigeria but the world over.

2.1 Traditional Church and Pastoral Activities

The major traditional Church and Pastoral Activities normally carried out before COVID-19 (in descending

infected). The 30,526,596 concluded cases are made up of 1,104,185 (4%) deaths and 29,422,411 (96%) recovered.

The seriousness of the situation led many countries, in the absence of any known medication,

to adopt and implement preventive protocol to contain its spread. This included mandating every citizen to maintain social distance of at least 2 meters, regular washing of hands, wearing of face masks and using alcohol-based hand sanitisers. To optimize the COVID-19 Safety Protocol, many countries invoked movement restrictions and gathering of people larger than 20 individuals. In Nigeria, there was restriction on inter-state movement while globally, there was ban on movement from country to country. The resultant lockdown had serious toil on places where large people gather or transact businesses such as shopping malls, markets, banks, schools, airports, offices, and indeed churches. These caused significant distortions and disequilibrium in the political and socio-economic order of every

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus otherwise known as COVID-19, which took the world by storm, is responsible for highly infectious respiratory distresses including flu, cough, fever and in severe cases, pneumonia. As a result of its novel nature since the viral strain is new, there is yet no known cure or medication. This has led to high mortality rate all over the world. The COVID-19 pandemic disease started in December 2019 in Wuhan China and its debut in Nigeria was recorded on February 27, 2020; and by March 2020, it has started having great toil on human health. The current worldwide coronavirus infection statistics is quite alarming. As at 16 October 2020, there were 39,261,100 recorded cases globally, out of which 30,526,596 cases have been concluded while 8,734,502 cases are active (i.e. currently

order of priority) include: Regular Church Activities, Preaching from the Pulpit, Use of some Technological Tools, Use of Social Media & Internet, Bible Study & Teaching Sessions, Printing of Religious Literatures, Prayers from the Pulpit, House Fellowship & Cell Group sessions, Evangelism, One-on-one Discussions, Open Air Services/Revivals and Counselling. Other traditional activities (in further descending order of priority) include Discipleship programmes, Visitation, Text messages, Telephone Calls, Mission Trips/Outreaches, Seminars, Writing Religious Materials, Classroom Activities, Letter Writing, Homecare Ministry to the Elderly & Needy, Training Sessions, Physical Presence at Members' functions, Retreat Sessions, Vigil Sessions, Sports, and Drama/Short Playlets. All these activities require high level participation of people coming together.

With the advent of COVID-19 and the attendant restrictions, it became apparent that the traditional ways of mass participation in church activities could no longer be appropriate. It is no longer business as usual. Since the impact of COVID-19 is likely to remain even after the cure is found, Churches need to brace up to the new realities. It is important to note that only Churches that are strategically proactive and responsive to the trending changes will excel and remain relevant. The focus of Churches should therefore be hinged on regular appraisal of the emerging "new normal" and their impacts on the listed church activities, as well as adapting, projecting and/or adopting new strategies to produce quality results

2.2 Emerging 'New Normal' of COVID-19 on Church

The COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging "new normal" ways of doing things is likely to persist beyond the post-COVID era. Some of

the emerging "new normal" include but not limited to the following:

a) Use of Internet-based Technology

The emergence of Technology as a veritable tool for Church activities in complementing the traditional physical operational mode has become obvious. It typically involves what can be termed "Internet or Virtual Ministry", where internet-based social media platforms are used to propagate church activities to members and the public. The common methods currently in vogue and which may linger on beyond the post-COVID era include but are not limited to the following: WhatsApp Groups, Facebook (including Live Streaming), Zoom, YouTube, Telegram Messenger, Online Sunday Service, Email, Teleconferencing, Recorded Messages and Songs, Website postings, Instagram, Twitter, Webinar, Online Class Sessions and Recorded Prayer Ministration. Other modes that can be linked to internet use include: House/Family Fellowship, Telephone calls especially for Prayers & Counselling, Periodic Radio Broadcast, Multiple Sunday Services and Visitation.

The Church needs to re-orientate its operations towards being technology compliant, if they want to remain relevant in the post COVID era. The strategy should leverage on optimizing social platforms to reach out, even when physical attendance improves. The implication is that all operatives of the Church including the leadership, elders, church workers, ordained Ministers, etc. should be subjected to training and retraining programmes in ICT. This will equip them with appropriate proficiency in effectively driving their respective Ministries towards achieving the "new normal" corporate objectives of the Church, and meeting the demands and aspirations of members, as created by the COVID-19 challenges

b) New Worship/Interaction Order

Fellowshipping, worshipping, praying, praise singing, etc. cannot be done as usual because of the need to observe the COVID-19 safety protocol. Many members are likely to opt for virtual services, watched from the comfort of their homes on laptops, television sets and phones, even in their pyjamas! Churches should therefore brace up and cater for the increasing virtual worshippers. For those in physical attendance, extra care and safety measures should be taken to ensure that equipment and gadgets handled by many people during services, are adequately and frequently sanitized or handled with sanitized hands

c) New Order of Community Social Responsibility and Evangelism

Social Responsibility of the Church to its immediate Community will experience a new trend and boom in the wake of the pandemic. Churches may need to promote new levels of interactive engagements with small groups and community cells that do not involve many people. These cells should be properly coordinated to increase membership & bring more people to know God. Holding well-structured Prayers & Counselling sessions with cell community groups can be very productive. Regular and structured visitations should be encouraged to earn the love and confidence of the communities. Periodic distribution of Relief Packages should become part of the "new normal". Indeed, churches should evolve and embrace a deliberate policy of periodically reaching out to the Cell/Community Groups, not only to arouse their interest but to enable the community cell groups to grow. These can metamorphose into church planting, if well managed. They can also effectively compensate for the gaps created by the lack of open air revivals and outreaches occasioned

by the COVID-19 protocols

d) New Financial Order

It is expected that fund generation in church through tithing, offerings, vows, etc. would experience a quantum shift from the traditional ways as a result of COVID-19 safety protocols and the reduced physical presence of worshippers in Churches. It therefore behoves on churches to devise new strategies for constructive engagements with congregants in meeting up with their scriptural obligations. This may include encouraging electronic tithing and offerings, etc. through virtual banking operations.

There is a postulation or school of thought which believes that the net income of churches increased as the COVID-19 situation progressed. The reasons proffered for this assertion was that, as church members fulfilled their spiritual obligation of tithing and offerings, church overhead expenditures on traditional and sundry issues generally fell. Furthermore, as the lockdown becomes relaxed, gradual restoration of jobs and employment opportunities are expected to rise. The expected increase in obligatory tithing, offerings, etc. compared to the reduced overhead expenditure, would lead to higher net income for church especially in urban areas. This scenario may not be applicable to churches located in semi-urban and rural areas because of the low earning capacity of congregants.

This postulation notwithstanding, churches should strategically encourage increased revenue generation by exploring investment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

e) Investment and Entrepreneurship

It may be ideal for churches, as they grow, to plough back some of their net resources or income to generate business concerns that will service

and offer employment opportunities to their members and the immediate communities. Businesses such as bakeries, pure water plants, block making & construction outfits, retail shops, etc. could be considered. But like the Apostles did in Acts 6: 1-7, the running of the businesses should not hinder the primary mandate of the church which is the Ministry of the Word

3.0 DISSENTING OPINIONS ON COVID-19 SAGA

It is not unlikely that some people including some Christians still feel unconcerned with the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic. Some believe that the pandemic is a hoax, not real and therefore the fears expressed both nationally & internationally are exaggerated and unnecessary. Some hold the view that even if the pandemic is real, its eradication should not be a problem in the church environment where God answers all prayers. Some other Christians believe, and rightly so, that every disease can be cured through prayers and miraculous power of God. Indeed, God has the power and authority to bring such faith-based assertions and beliefs to reality. But in the absence of any known medication for COVID-19, it is not out of place to exercise caution on the side of safety, while still holding on to the tenets of faith. In other words, medication backed by faith and vice versa will work wonders. After all, only the living can serve God!

4.0 RE-STRATEGIZING AND RE-DEFINING CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

COVID-19 Safety Protocol that promotes social distancing and prevents large gathering of people in an enclosed space, has brought in its wake a dramatic shift in the conventional ways of operations in the Church. Churches are gradually adapting to the new realities. The implication is that for Churches to be relevant in the post-COVID era; they

should frequently re-assess and re-define their operational protocol, with the sole aim of developing strategic corporate objectives that incorporates the "new normal". Without prejudice to their primary mandate of soul winning and bringing succour to troubled souls, Churches should become more dynamic, generate and implement innovations to squarely address the emerging challenges.

5.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant effects on the socio-economic world order has changed the way things are usually done to a "new normal". The situation in churches is not different. Churches should therefore continuously reassess their traditional modes of operations and embrace the trending realities, if they are to remain relevant and grow in the post-COVID era. Churches should become more dynamic, more innovative and more strategic in responding to the COVID-19 challenges. To respond positively to the new normal in the church settings, the following recommendations are proffered:

a) Churches should make its operations very dynamic in the post-COVID era. Innovative ideas should be generated from time to time, critically assessed to meet local peculiarities & applied to achieve optimum results. Not doing so may make the church irrelevant in the post-COVID era

b) Churches should come to terms with the fact that virtual operations have come to stay. Large physical presence in Church auditoria may dwindle or may become de-emphasised. Virtual or Internet Ministry may be embraced by more congregants in the post-COVID era. Churches should therefore brace up for this.

c) The operations and activities of a dynamic Church in the post-COVID

era will be dependent on Information & Communication Technology (ICT) to complement traditional "physical" modes of operations. Churches should be alive to this new realization & adapt appropriately.

d) Church Workers including ordained men of God (Pastors, Apostles, Evangelists, Prophets, Elders, etc.) should be retrained to embrace ICT to drive their various ministries. To do otherwise is to make them irrelevant in the new world order.

e) Churches should re-strategize and revise its outreach programmes to

encourage seamless soul winning. To compensate for gaps arising from inability to conduct open air revivals and outreaches, emphasis should be placed on the establishment and nurturing of community cluster cell groups with proper coordination. This will encourage church planting where physical attendance may not be a problem.

f) Churches should re-strategize on its welfare and social responsibility programs as part of regular "new normal" to its communities. This will engender fellowship, followership and comradeship among

congregants and the communities.

g) Churches should re-strategize on having frequent and ordered visitations to individuals and cell groups.

h) In the uptake of these recommendations to address the COVID-19 challenges in the Church, caution should be exercised to ensure that the primary spiritual and scriptural mandate of the Church which is the Ministry of the Word to populate the Kingdom of God, is not compromised.

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