

Covid-19 Pandemic and the Church in Kenya in the Context of Modern Information Communication Technology

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Abstract

Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic has had devastating effects as well as positive lessons: socially, economically, and spiritually on the church, going forward. Social media or modern technology came in handy to enable the church activities go on during lockdown. This study was premised on the following objectives: to discuss the negative effects of Covid-19 on the church, socially, economically, and spiritually, to examine positive effects of Covid-19 on the church, socially, economically, and spiritually, and to explore solutions of Covid-19 and other pandemics on the church in the era of ICT. Hypothetically, the church has what it takes to provide solutions to pandemics because God has the will power to save his people. This notwithstanding, the problematic question was to find out how ICT was used as an enabler during the pandemic and why a loving God allows calamities to befall his people yet he can avert them. The research methodology was historical discourse analysis of library and archival data which was employed to describe, collect, collate, and to discuss data findings. Discourse analysis was also used to draw summaries, conclusions, and recommendations. The main findings and implications were that the pandemic led to believers' faith relaxation, low church activities as they hoped in God's salvific ability and yet questioned why he allowed these prolonged suffering on the church. Conclusively, God in His will power can rescue his people and as well allow them to experience calamities as part of the way of the cross. The lessons of pandemics positively prepare the church for its second advent among others.

Key words: Covid-19, Pandemic, Salvific, Church, Terrorism, Impact

1. Introduction

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic has had an extremely significant impact on the functioning of society's social, economic, and cultural life. It is very difficult to forecast the directions and depth of necessary impact of the pandemic between 2020 and 2021 during its height due to its multidimensional nature (Ragheb 2020; Sułkowski 2020). Observably, the church in Kenya just like everywhere else is struggling to maintain the traditional beliefs and ways of worship and at the same time to fit in the new Normal that the Pandemic has put us into. The pandemic has radically changed every aspect of life as we know it, presenting a threat to long-established and cherished patterns but also offering opportunities.

In Kenya, the pandemic led to the banning of all religious gatherings including celebrations such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, the hallmarks of the church. The ban was resisted but later adopted for survival as believers were also beginning to get affected. Dreyer (2015: 1) points out that 'the actual crisis of the church is not only to be found in external circumstances and influences but is primarily a question of the church not being able to "be church"' even theologically. This called for re-theologizing about the power of God over pandemics and his love for faithful. The church leadership had to realize that the church building is not just the only meaning of the church and the only place to gather. Gathering for the people of God can be done online or at home in a family set up during this modern technology era:

What we see in Christianity so often is a move away from family (often as a place of spiritual defeat) on towards a move of organized artificial performances in sacred buildings far from the atmosphere of real life. Therefore, with the Covid-19 pandemic is the church returning back to its roots – back to where it came from. It literally comes home, completing the circle of church history at the end of world history. So in essence, churches have not closed but come home: a church in each home. (Simson, 1999: xxiv).

This reversion has brought adventures, opportunity to choose from a variety of online channels flipping and exposure to other forms of worship and different cultures worldwide. The 'church' must be understood as referring to a people rather than to a place, and a congregation represents not just a weekly gathering that people are a part of, but a community in which each person actively belongs, receives support, and is encouraged to make their own distinctive contribution. It consists not of passive consumers, but of creative participants. The church is not primarily a place of refuge,

but a community of people on pilgrimage (Gibbs, 2009: 54–55). This study set out to establish both the positive and negative impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya with a view to understanding global perspectives and God’s will as the general objective. The disruption of church activities has been the greatest negative impact on the church in Kenya. Kenya being a third world developing country, most of the new normal requirements by the Covid-19 pandemic was beyond the reach of many smaller churches and organizations.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Church threatened to shut down the Church. This study sought to establish why the pandemic and how modern technology was used to mitigate it during the lockdown? Therefore, this study contends that ICT came in handy to leverage on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic as an enabler. It also sought to establish the positive and negative impacts of this pandemic? But some theological questions also arose as to whether the virus, “was a punishment for sins or not”? This question arises out of the fact that some church members believe that God has the ability and power to deal with such calamities so that his worship is not interrupted by any force. Hypothetically, this study affirmed that from the introductory information attested above, such pandemics have happened in the past and God in his will and power may or may not allow such suffering to befall his people and therefore not every suffering is because of sin or retributive.

1.2 Objectives of the study; this study set out;

1. To discuss the history and theology behind the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. To establish both the positive and negative impacts of Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya.
3. To establish the role of modern technology or ICT as an enabler within and after the pandemic.

1.3. Methodology

The study used library literature based with qualitative approaches in which relevant literature from across the world were reviewed descriptively to obtain study themes using Content and discourse analysis methods. It was guided by three main objectives that run across the entire work thematically as the main focus of the study; to discuss the positive and negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the church and to assess the history and theology behind the pandemic.

Data on Covid-19 was collated and thematically broken down using these objectives. Historical discourse analysis of library and archival data was employed to describe, collect, collate, and to present discuss data findings because it was the most suitable for qualitative design. Discourse analysis was also used to draw summaries, conclusions, and recommendations.

2. Literature review

The term ‘pandemic’ means a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly between people and occurs at the same time not only in one country but around the world (Crowther, 1998; Hawker, 2005). The root pandemic outbreak refers to a new infectious viral lung disease which began in Wuhan, China, towards end of 2019. It is probably a disease associated with the coronavirus crossing the interspecies barrier. From China it spread rapidly to South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Europe, the United States of America (USA), and other parts of the world. The current outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has similarities and differences to previous acute respiratory syndrome. Significant transmission occurs between close contacts (Wu & McGoogan, 2020). One of the fundamental methods of limiting the spread of Covid-19 is social distancing, washing of hands, quarantine of the infected among other measures. It’s this scenario that caused a crisis for church activities worldwide and led to congregations resorting to online/Information Communication Technology (ICT) services.

The history of church encounter with pandemics is an important learning point in this study. In history, including the recent one, religious communities had to seek answers about the importance of pandemics and adapt their religious practices and behavior to those affected (Simonsen et al., 2018). Europe was affected in the 14th Century and Pope Clement VI forbade the practice of self-flagellation and raised charges against Jews for spreading it (Poliakov, 2003). In the first half of the 20th century, the influenza virus and encephalitis affected churches and they were closed (Starr 2006; Gamble 2010). In the second half of the last century the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) /Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), emerged is still a menace. In the first decade of the 21st century, we had swine flu pandemic (Barry, 2004; Crosby, 2010; Vilensky, 2011; Honigsbaum, 2020). By 2000, over 36 million people in the world had been infected with HIV, resulting in 22 million deaths (Citation). The Roman Catholic Church and other Churches on the question of how to deal with pandemics have disagreed before on the best practices of sex life to deal with HIV/AIDS. The Catholic Church postulates against the use of contraception, such as

condoms, which may significantly reduce the risk of HIV infection during sexual contact (Potter, 1999; Padovano, 2001; Nelson, 2002; Bate, 2003; Oduyoye, 2004; Mantell et al., 2011; Pillay, 2015). The Catholics had little choices or no arguments when it came to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The emergence of Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown and social-distancing that has come with it has affected every church across the world (Dorothy, 2021). The church members were no longer able to meet frequently, fellowship was through online worship services, including bible studies and courses.

With conferences, festivals and events cancelled, there was a proliferation of webinars and seminars and ‘Zoom-fatigue’ for many church leaders. In general, like society at large, the Church sought to follow official advice, (Bryson, 2021). The emergence of Covid-19 pandemic has presented a number of challenges, but also opportunities for the church to respond proactively. It is against this backdrop of these concerns that this study sought to determine the socio-economic and cultural (negative and positive) impact of Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya. The Kenyan scenario is examined alongside other global cases and impacts. The church in Kenya learnt from other religious practices and we cannot afford to study the Kenyan context in isolation. Historical and global references are therefore meant to construct a seamless chain of argument.

2.1 Negative Impact of Covid -19 Pandemic on the Church

Noticeably, many churches suspended the presence of the faithful in their Masses, and resorted to virtual services for broadcasting the celebrations, such as live online streaming through YouTube or Google meets, or others like television (TV) and radio. A case in point was affirmed by (Mares, 2020) that the Vatican announced that the Holy Week celebrations in Rome, which take place at the end of Lent—Christian penitential period—were to be canceled. The Catholic, Protestants and Pentecostal churches in Kenya followed suit and closed doors following the presidential directive. Some Dioceses ordered their churches to be closed to the public, while in others, although they canceled the Masses, their churches remained open for prayer and meditation unofficially. According to the media (American Magazine, 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2019 significantly impacted liturgical celebrations of the Churches worldwide. This impact affected the finances and peoples economies, social relationships, education among others as follows:

On finances, most actions the Catholic Church took in Kenya were tailored to what was happening to the mother church in Rome. The finances dwindled downwards. For example, the 2020 fiscal report for the Vatican, (Brookhaus, 2021) showed a decrease in revenue of about 50%, but the Institute for the Works of Religion contributed more income. Expenses were reduced by \$3.88 million. In the same breath, Churches in Kenya too, felt the negative financial impact of Covid-19 pandemic, with less income, churches couldn't survive financially; some had to cut down development projects, charity to the poor, some closed down, ministers lost jobs, exposing the gap between the rich and the poor and between committed Christians and weak ones (Dorothy, 2021).

Family relations too, were and still are affected by lockdowns, economic turmoil and the consequences of falling ill. In Kenya, over 50% of the Christians were hit hard by initial waves of infections and deaths. Those who could not afford medical bills or lockdown vagaries suffered most. Family bonds broke down due to sexual and gender-based violence, including incest, and mental illnesses among others due to Covid-19 pandemic. Religion is one of the means that people depend on to cope with crisis. Family relationships are often a bulwark of support. And as many families in Kenya remained confined to their homes because of mandated work from home and closed or virtual schools, some people said their relationships with immediate family members become stronger but for others, their relationships weakened (Dorothy, 2021).

In the education sector, learning was disrupted in Kenya because schools were closed indefinitely. When the schools tried to open, the workload became unsurmountable and programs crowded. The pandemic increased exclusivity in education. Online learning was for the rich who could afford it while the poor were excluded. Today, learning in the Universities and colleges has been blended for virtual and physical modes of learning and teaching. These were not the only spheres of life that were affected. Besides other causes, it has been a nightmare for persons with low income as food prices skyrocketed, jobs lost, and many forced to vacate urban life forcing them into prostitution and crime (Dorothy, 2021).

It is undeniable that with all these negativity, the Covid-19 pandemic shook the very Christian fibre in terms of faith. It led to the questioning of why God would allow such horrible disease to ravage his people. Could it be because of sin? According to Phiri (2004), Christian communities do not see the Covid-19 pandemic as a punishment for sins, but rather as a call to stay at home, a sign of the times that cannot be clearly read and a call to help the sick and lonely. It must be

acknowledged that the Churches refrained from looking for those guilty of the pandemic, as was the case in medieval Europe, where Jewish communities were accused of plague pandemic decimating Europe (Slavicek, 2008). They also did not see the pandemic as punishment for sins or human infidelity, although such attitudes could be encountered among the parishioners. Attitudes like these occurred towards people infected with HIV (Harris, 2010). According to Phiri (2004), if the pandemic was to be seen as a punishment for committed sins, as was in the case of those infected and affected by HIV, what should, in this regard, be the attitude towards people infected and affected by the pandemic? However, not all was lost according to the positive lessons from this pandemic.

2.2 Positive Impacts of Covid -19 Pandemic on the Church

According to several surveys but in particular the one by Church Executive Magazine (2021), the global pandemic brought about immense change, and many unfortunately felt the negative effects. However, not everything that come out of this is doom and gloom: some churches have seen positive impacts from pivoting their business strategies. This can be viewed in the following ways:

ICT as an enabler: Primarily, ministries were forced to turn to digital solutions (enablers) to maintain connection with their congregants and for some, this yielded positive results. One example is Connection Pointe Church in Indianapolis, who months after closing its doors saw the impactful, positive changes in its community, due in part to its shift to digital ministry. Many churches like Connection Pointe have realized or are realizing that leveraging digital opens new windows of opportunity to reach more people which can lead to increased engagement with younger congregants, expanded ministries beyond the church walls, and growth in donor giving.

Catholics, Protestants, and other churches had earlier on embraced the use of technology, but Covid-19 Pandemic only accelerated the process. For example, Protestant Christians were the early adopters of technology (Barret *et al.*, 2001 & Carrol, 2000). This is largely because they emphasize on evangelization and their cultures accommodated technology and innovation (Winston, 2007). This led them to adopt ICT more aggressively (Carrol, 2000). The early use of Gutenberg's printing press by Protestants is a sign of their desire to evangelize the world (Eisenstein, 1979). This became a catalyst that changed the entire culture of the world (Perky, 2014). It made it possible for the leaders of the Protestant Christians to share their ideas and teachings with a much

wider audience. It also allowed for mass printing of the Bible and facilitated taking Biblical message out of the pulpits.

Later, Christians adopted radio and TV as mediums of preaching the Gospel to broadcast worship services to the community and homebound members (Bruce, 1990). Christians also adopted technology to produce Christian films (Meyer, 2006). These made it possible to reach out more people (Perky, 2014). Additionally, Automobile contributed to more regional churches as people drove to churches outside their neighborhoods. In view of the foregoing statements, most Christians concentrated on preaching and listening the Gospel using various ICT tools.

Likewise, (Brink & Detterman, 2013: 35) argues that “worship of the Triune God will always be contextual. But drawing on the rich tapestry that is the body of Christ around the globe, vibrant worship also transcends, utilizes, and challenges the expectations, resources, and preferences of any one ‘culture’ to receive and respond to the good news of the Saviour.” It is further contended that Covid-19:

Strengthened the possibilities of spreading the gospel on a broader scale and reaching the un-churched, people of other faiths and people with no faith as we grapple for answers in the current struggles in the world and tune in to electronic platforms for encouragement and hope (Brink & Detterman, 2013: 35).

On engaging with the youth, on average, 260,000 young people walk away from the Church each year, creating a major strain on the future of giving and discipleship. Simultaneously, reports show that 98% of Generation Z currently owns a smartphone, showing the proliferation of technology among the age group. Technology offers a way for churches to bridge the gap with young people by meeting them where they already are with their phone. Ministry leadership created a new, digital-specific curriculum utilizing Orange, which is accessible on a mobile device. Connection Pointe also ensured that the program was personalized for its youth specifically, adding supplemental content like introductions, closings, and games. In doing this, the church has increased engagement with younger members. Beyond these larger programs, junior high and high school students even continued to meet online with their small groups — sometimes meeting as much as twice a week.

Connection Pointe Church recognized this opportunity and seized it. When the pandemic hit, the church’s digital plan for younger members was still in its infancy, but leadership rose to the challenge and was still able to deploy the program.

Missional: Covid-19-pandemic had the additional opportunity of making the church more accessible beyond its members, those with no faith notwithstanding though not always the target. The challenge by churches is how to reach out to those who cannot access the online platform. Thus, excluding many poor people who cannot afford to connect on the Internet. Churches have rethink on how to be 'present' in places where it matters the most-the poor and vulnerable (Jerry, 2021).

Women in Church Leadership: The theological challenge of Covid-19-pandemic on the church is the traditional understandings of church leadership. The curve' on hierarchical church structures has been flattened leading to the 'priest' in each home; someone in the home to provide spiritual guidance and nurturance for the family with most women also participating. In some ecclesiology, women leadership is not allowed in some churches. It can be said that the Covid-19 pandemic has resurrected the concept of the 'priesthood of all believers' and created new opportunities for the recognition and acceptance of women in church leadership (Gibbs, 2009: 11–12).

Food and medical assistance and social justice work: The Catholic and Protestant churches in the spirit of cooperation, solidarity and accountability, mindfulness, care donated food, surgical masks free Covid-19 tests kits, clothes, and other items. This was done as a sign of faith

3. Findings and Discussions of the Study

This discussion follows the above literature themes hinged on the statement of the problem of study and guided by the objectives, (impacts and theological implications) to draw social-economic and theological implications as analytical findings. Notably, church congregations are social, economic, and spiritual gatherings with ritual practices: these include covenantal ones like Marriage and sacramental ones like baptism and confirmation which have financial and theological implications. The main impact that affected heart and main business of churches was the restriction or suspension of services, hence going against their traditions of gathering of the whole congregation at joint services, if not every day, then at least on Sundays, which is the essence of Christianity.

1. On the negative impact of the pandemic on churches and how they responded, the study found out that all churches were negatively affected and faced lockdown. Different denominations had similar approaches to the pandemic with a view that churches can close but worship ritual

continues at whatever cost. Therefore, the following responses and measures were replicated across churches in Kenya ICT as an enabler;

The Protestant traditions suspended their open and community religious activities during the pandemic. The Televangelist ministries initially continued still holding the services, kept a distance of two meters, no hand shaking during the service or goodbye' when leaving. Bible studies, and the General Assembly of the Congregation responsible for the organization of the entire community and its religious practices were too banned. Members were constantly encouraged to hold daily practice and prayers at home. Constant telephone contact was/is maintained. The actions taken aimed at 'minimizing the spread of the virus, it is the implementation of love of neighbor and concern for their welfare. Much was done to make the service a safe place for all gathered.

Presbyterians too closed their churches. 'All Sunday gatherings for worship also cease until further notice' (Moderator of the General Assembly). The Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand, in a letter to his faithful, stated that Government directives are quite clear on this matter. We must close our physical church buildings and worship centers for the duration of the pandemic (Henderson, 2020). Let us add that during the flu pandemic in the second decade of the twentieth century, churches, as well as cinemas and theatres, were closed (Hatchett et al., 2006; Starr, 2006; Gamble, 2010).

The study has confirmed that the cancelation of services limited contact with the faithful but did not make communication with them disappear. Some churches or Dioceses in Kenya used or still use modern technologies to broadcast their services on public television and on the radio. Other social media used by churches include: such as YouTube or Facebook. Sermons, catechetical materials, and services were regularly posted on the official websites of their parishes. The church services have been moved to the Internet. The faithful met online due to 'the aggressiveness of the virus, hence human health and life are more important. The research has confirmed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, pandemic prevention through education should be an ongoing exercise. Congregations were encouraged to seek creative ways to worship, even if not able to be in one place and to continue to serve those who are most vulnerable in their communities.

2. On the positive impact, the study has shown that the pandemic should be read as a call for churches to take action and join existing initiatives to stop the spread of coronavirus. There was

an increased interest in watching and participating in online church services under lockdown which has been extended to date. The interconnectivity promoted by digital technologies has helped promote the ability for individuals to participate in religious activities despite physical distance, including those who previously may have never set foot in a church. However, other studies have highlighted that Christians who regularly attended physical church services have been less keen to participate online, especially among millennials. The pandemic exposed the churches to utilize the main doctrine of the church, “love for the neighbors and for all” due to losses of jobs, finances, lives, and other vagaries of the pandemic, faithful became more caring to the vulnerable and shared resources than before the pandemic. Also those who could struggle to attend physical congregations could now watch at the comfort of their homes.

3. However, theological questions arose as whether God was punishing us because of sin. Reading the mind of God could be difficult without clear revelation though it could be the case in some circumstances and in others not. For some of the Pentecostals, the pandemic could be ‘an expression of the degradation of the world and the result of the sin of the first people.’ It is one of the ‘signs of the end of the world approaching. The pandemic is the result of human degradation of the Earth. It should, therefore, be understood as ‘a call to stop continuous degradation. The ‘pandemic is a consequence of sin, but it is not a punishment for sins. It is a sign of the times that cannot be clearly read because the pandemic ‘turned everything upside down.’ The situation enforces non-standard behavior. Instead of ‘calling to come to church, people are called to stay at home.’ Instead of ‘rejoicing that more and more people come to services, one should rejoice when fewer people come. It is also a sign that one should ‘take special care of the sick and the elderly.

Although the studied church communities are able to limit and even close their buildings, they are not able to change positions on doctrinal issues. It should be remembered, however, that the distribution of communion in two forms belongs to the important elements of Protestant teaching in Reformation theology. Departing from it would be a denial of the evangelical message and getting rid of their identity (Barth, 2003; Bayer, 2008).

Lastly, it should be remembered that cooperation between religious communities in a pandemic situation has never been completely satisfactory. It was difficult for some churches to oblige to the new way of worship services due to unpreparedness, Church traditions and lack of resources to adopt ICT. At world level, Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX), a body that was created

in 1968 to cooperate in social issues between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, is a good example. After twenty years of fruitful cooperation, divergences in the approach to the issue of birth led to the dissolution of a thriving body (Lossky et al., 2002; Oduyoye, 2004). Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and how to overcome it, however, the Churches do not differ in their approach, and there are no different positions in this regard.

Conclusion

This study set out to establish the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the church and how technology came in to help the church deal with it. From the above foregoing, the global pandemic has had profound impacts on everyone's lives, both positive and negative. Summing up, obviously the church was caught unaware hence the research confirmed that the churches limited or suspend their religious services and encouraged the faithful to stay at home. The positions taken by the churches in this respect do not differ from the standards adopted in many other countries from Kenya. Despite this, they have kept in touch with the faithful using modern technologies or online services. The use of technology had its own challenges, i.e. the use of online platforms disadvantaged the poor and all those out of internet connection. The closure of churches during the Covid-19 pandemic has forced churches to function in new ways of staying open and being church. On the other hand, Covid-19 has reaffirmed that the church is not just buildings but the people of God. The Pandemic has made churches to rethinking some of its long held theological views and practices. It has also provided a window of opportunity to a pragmatic theology for the church not based on institutionalism, structure, roles, and rites but being God's transforming presence in the world.

However, they are not able to change or depart from their religious principles determining their identity and theology. In their teaching, they have not blamed God or anyone for the occurrence of the pandemic but an opportunity for a greater call in a crisis. The main findings and implications were that the pandemic led to believers' faith relaxation and low church activities, and that Christians question why God allows these prolonged suffering on the church. Conclusively, God in his will power can rescue his people and as well allow them to experience calamities as part of the way of the cross. The lessons of pandemics positively prepare the church for its second advent among others.

Recommendations

Two valid recommendations: first on ICT use, the church should continue holding training forums to educate congregants on the proper use of ICT tools and platforms. As long as the Covid-19 pandemic or other pandemics are still with us, churches should beef up their preparedness kit or funding. During the Covid-19 pandemic, social media platforms were and are still necessary for livestreaming of worship and meetings yet not all Christians are ICT compliant. Churches have reached out to their members through phone calls, sending messages, WhatsApp groups for new converts, and Facebook. Some churches have active websites which they use to train new converts for baptism and mentor them for discipleship. Challenges such as lack of skilled ICT personnel, lack of ICT tools and internet connectivity within the church premises and without, exclusion of those who are not skilled in ICT should be fixed with time.

Secondly, on the spiritual/theological matters, this study recommends that despite calamities and suffering, believers should still abide in God's enduring love and should not give up or doubt God. He is always in control and does what He likes. A theology on pandemics should be offered in all institutions of learning to help people cope with pandemics from a knowledgeable point of view.

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