

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

PHILIP TACHIN

The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic provoked different reactions all over the world. In Nigeria, fear enveloped everyone as all public places, including churches, were shut down. From medieval times to the present, deadly pandemics have afflicted humanity with devastating effects. Many questions sprang up: Is the pandemic of divine origin or human made or both? Is it a sign of God's judgment upon the sins of humanity? Is it a sign of the end times? In what ways are we able to see God's sovereignty in times like this? There have been a variety of theological responses and actions from churches and individuals. For contemporary believers, the experience of the global pandemic poses a challenge to church participation and response to the needs of those affected.

The global COVID-19 pandemic had devastating economic and psychological effects upon humanity, including on their healthcare and church participation. The Nigerian government ordered the closure of public gatherings, which consequently affected churches. This brought new challenges and new norms and necessitated an all-inclusive rethink of the role of the church and of strategy for its fellowship, discipleship, and evangelism. Many economic activities crumbled under the weight of the pandemic. Most businesses folded up and many people lost their jobs. Many were without food and money to meet their basic daily needs. All kinds of human relationships suffered when people became isolated from their families, relatives, and friends because of concerns that the disease

Philip Tachin is an associate professor of systematic theology at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Lagos, Nigeria, and director of the university's study center in Jos.

would spread. How did the church in Nigeria respond to this situation, especially in terms of reaching out to its members and encouraging them?

Church responses to the pandemic varied in interesting ways. Many churches, especially Pentecostals, believed more in the protection of God against infection than in any other human prevention or medication, and many stories of divine protection were circulated in social media to encourage believers.¹ This made some churches to initially be unmoved by government warnings against gatherings of believers. Some believed that the outbreak of the pandemic was divine displeasure over the sinful lives of the people, while others linked this to an end-time context in which the mark of the beast in Revelation 13:18 would be placed on people using 5G technology.² Many churches were not happy that physical church participation was suspended, one reason being that it would affect financial giving to the church.

The digital world has allowed our contemporary society to respond to situations like this in many ways that are different from what was possible in the sixteenth century. The church leadership in Nigeria introduced innovative ways of reaching out to followers using unconventional ways of rallying financial resources from the congregation. The shutting down of places of worship made churches use numerous media platforms like television to reach out to their congregations. Media were used more efficiently to reach out to believers. The concept of online or internet church became invigorated in Nigeria on a scale never seen before. Facebook Live, YouTube, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp became the most commonly used social media platforms for preaching.³ The pandemic has pushed the church in Nigeria to begin to consider the training of church leaders in information and communications technologies (ICT) and multimedia.

At times like these, it is important to emphasize digital ministry, though as an adjunct and not as a substitute for the traditional church gathering and physical pastoral outreach to members.⁴ Times are changing, and everything is changing with it, including methods of service delivery, whether

¹ Oluwasegun Peter Aluko, "COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: The Response of the Christian Church," *African Journal of Biology and Medical Research* 3.2 (2020): 112–13, <https://abjournals.org/ajbmr/papers/volume-3/issue-2/covid-19-pandemic-in-nigeria-the-response-of-the-christian-church/>.

² Ibid., 114, 118.

³ Ibid., 116.

⁴ Adebayo O. Afolaranmi, "Towards the Possibility of Internet Ministry as an Alternative Pastoral Ministry in Nigeria during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Information Technology and Language Studies* 4.2 (2020): 24, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343904627_Towards_the_Possibility_of_Internet_Ministry_as_an_Alternative_Pastoral_Ministry_in_Nigeria_during_the_COVID-19_Pandemic.

spiritual or secular, though the Word of God remains unchanged. Therefore, as Paul admonished Timothy in his time, men of God and church leaders should be prepared in season and out of season for effective delivery of the gospel (2 Tim 4:2). This means complete preparation so that no matter what event takes place in the world, ministers must not be lacking in preparedness to preach the gospel.

Nevertheless, village churches could not afford to conduct online services, lacking access to technology, the internet, and power. They were incapable of having their services on radio and television stations because they could not pay for telecast time. Village churches implemented the practice of family churches, as it was in the apostolic era, involving prayers in the company of only household members.

In the struggle with the pandemic, Rev. Soja Bewarang encouraged believers, saying, “But we are to be encouraged by our trust and faith in God to hold on and, praise His name, even more than ever before. He has never let one of His children down, not one of them has ever been forsaken and at the appointed time we shall not only be more conquerors but even more than conquerors.”⁵ One of the positive things during the lockdown is the understanding that the “main church is the people and not the church building itself, which is to help them increase their personal relationship with God.”⁶

The material response of the Nigerian church to the pandemic has been mixed. Many churches that joined in the fight against the scourge made donations to the government instead of directly to their own affected members. The Anglican Communion of Nigeria donated cash to the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19. The head of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, Most Rev. Henry Ndukuba, also stated that the church “will intensify prayers on behalf of the country to ensure the healing of the land”; he directed “parishes to build food banks for distribution of food to indigent people” and “medical consumables which have been procured and are being released to both federal and state governments.”⁷ Donating to the government rather than directly to individuals was criticized as popularity seeking.⁸

When trouble comes, the church’s response should be to innovate and be different from everyone else, and she should expect, with Christ in view, to

⁵ Rev. Dr. Soja Bewarang, “Lockdown: CAN Advises Christians to Live Wisely,” *Today’s Challenge* 16.5 (May/June 2020).

⁶ Aluko, “COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria,” 122.

⁷ Willie Bassey, “Anglican Communion Partners PTF on War against COVID-19,” Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, 2021, <https://www.osgf.gov.ng/news-media/news/post/anglican-communion-partners-ptf-war-against-covid-19>.

⁸ Aluko, “COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria,” 121.

help more people. In doing so, it will shine its divinely given light in a dark world that is ridden with fear and trembling. Though we may not be able to explain why terrible things are happening, we are called to live our lives in the presence of God as we gaze upon the promises of a better world where such ugly events do not exist (Rev 21:4, 27; 22:3). While the world spreads messages of fear and uncertainty, we are coached not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). That entails that we not let the world dictate to us how to respond, but we let Scripture be our guide. Instead of hoarding resources, we can invent ways to reach out to the community. We can pray for supernatural understanding and policymaking ability concerning COVID-19 and the rekindling of resources for the protection of jobs and human sustainability.