

Coping Strategies of the Church during Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Many churches were apparently shut down during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, It is not too certain what challenges some students faced during the lockdown, such as alleged incidence of rape, domestic violence, hunger, deprivation. Moreover, COVID-19 did not only affect students, but their respective local churches in rural and urban centres. Furthermore, there seems to be inadequate systematic evidence-based research reports on coping strategies of some of the churches attended by students as members. Therefore, this paper asks this question: What coping strategies do Roman Catholic Churches and Anglican Churches adopt during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria? The work is a qualitative research which adopts case study research design, with emphasis on the use of open-ended questionnaire and online key informant interview to collect primary data and the use of content analysis of secondary data such as internet materials, research reports, journals and text books. Findings are namely; churches were shut down during lockdown associated with COVID-19, churches faced the challenges of poor income due to relatively little tithe and offering, lack of physical contact in the church, escalation of impoverished church members, low level of personal spirituality in contrast to lively spirituality usually enhanced by physical contact in church fellowship. Similarly, the findings show that churches adopted these coping strategies: online interactive prayer programme, online bible study programme, live streaming of worship service through facebook, youtube, zoom, skype and google meet, distribution of audio and video records of live services and palliative to church members. This paper recommends the following: integration of virtual technologies into church activities, on line giving mechanism of tithe and offering, digital management information system in church administration as pro - active measure ahead of disaster period.*

Keywords: Church, COVID-19, Students of Christian Religious Studies, Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church

Introduction

Coronavirus pandemic, otherwise termed COVID-19, invaded Nigeria in February 2020. COVID-19 started in Wuhan, China in late 2019, therefrom spread globally and subjecting the global community to lockdown, shut down of schools, market places, public spaces including mosques and churches (National Centre for Disease Control, NCDC, 2020). The church and Christian leaders, historically, had always adopted coping strategies during disaster, economic recession, plague and pandemic over the years, for instance, adopting praying as coping strategies (Bentzen, 2020), demonstrating charitable acts as love of God, and providing home for the homeless; but not much has been reported about the coping strategies of Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church in Nigeria, hence the need for this work. In other words, the church from the beginning that had to contend with various difficulties for survival. Overtime these difficult times come to include persecutions, hunger, financial difficulties, apostasy and heresies, internal disputes wars and natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, outbreak of diseases like the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Each challenge had been met with peculiar strategies peculiar to it (Egwu, 2020).

Indeed, COVID-19 brought calamities of unimaginable magnitude resulting in alleged incidence of rape, domestic violence, hunger, and deprivation (Adegboye, Adekunle, & Gayawan, 2020; Chukwuebuka, 2020). Unfortunately, it does not seem the government of Nigeria put up adequate measures (Anyanwu, Festus, Nwobi, Jaja, and Oguttu, 2020) to address the consequences of COVID-19 in Nigeria, in other words, private sector such as non-governmental organisations, organized private sector such as business communities, religious organisations would be expected to respond to the challenge of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Such expectation is idealistic since little or nothing is known from empirical study on responses of the church to COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. In fact, many churches were apparently shut down during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and it is not too certain what challenges were encountered during the lockdown. Furthermore, there seems to be inadequate systematic evidence-based research reports on coping strategies of the church in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper asks this question: What coping strategies do Roman Catholic Churches and Anglican Churches adopt during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria?

Mention of student-members of Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church is easily noticed in this work, a readily asked question is why? Justifying the choice of student-members of churches in Nigeria is rooted in the fact that during lockdown experience, the current targeted population of students in this study were undergoing online teaching and learning through Google

Classroom platform, as such their online contacts were readily accessible for online key informant interview. It further implies that primary data of their lived experience is readily available for systematic research study of this type. Furthermore, the student-members are both victims of COVID-19 and beneficiaries of any palliatives and coping strategies of their respective churches, hence, it is obvious that such targeted population has apparently rich primary data for collection and analysis in a study of this nature.

Statement of the Problem

Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) came with unimaginable negative consequences globally and Nigeria in particular. Government and people of Nigeria had made various attempts aimed at preventing, containing and combating the pandemic, but it seems the efforts of government is inadequate, inefficient and ineffective. Historically, the church is known for interventionist roles over the years, yet not much is known in literature about the coping strategies adopted by Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church in Nigeria. Considering online contact availability and accessibility to students who participated in online teaching and learning through Google Classroom platform during lock down and closure of schools, and taking advantage of such students who doubled as members of Roman catholic Church and Anglican Church as research participants, this work asks this question: What coping strategies do Roman Catholic Churches and Anglican Churches adopt during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria?

Purpose of Study

This work is guided by the following aims and objectives:

1. To determine percentage of 200 level N.C.E. students of Christian Religious Studies who attend Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church as members respectively.
2. To ascertain challenges faced by the church during COVID-19 in Nigeria.
3. To present interpreted descriptions of coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What percentage of 200 level N.C.E. students of Christian Religious Studies attend Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church as members respectively?
2. What were the challenges faced by the church during COVID-19?
3. What were the coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

Ejiogu, Okechukwu, and Ejiogu (2020) examined Nigerian budgetary response to COVID-19 pandemic and found out that increase in borrowing to fund COVID-19 by Federal Government of Nigeria does not directly translate to social and economic improvement in the lives and livelihood of the people living with poverty. This goes to show the gap between what government is doing and conditions of the people government is elected to serve in a critical period such as COVID-19 era. Of course, it is among these same Nigerians living with poverty that the church draws membership, as such, the church will most probably be contending with the challenge of appropriate strategies to alleviate the sufferings and hunger of some members of the church.

Bentzen (2020) did a study on religiosity during crisis, using COVID-19 pandemic era as a focus, and found out that, humankind adopts prayer as a coping strategy. This is illustrative of the contention of this paper, for instance, what are the coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria? Is prayer one of the coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Ibeh, Enitan, Akele, Isitua, and Omorodion, (2020) appraised the global impacts of COVID-19 and Nigeria responsiveness to it, the appraisal presented lamentable scenarios globally and Nigeria inclusive namely; global locked down as strategy to contain the spread of the virus; adoption of quarantine mechanism to combat the pandemic; closure of borders in many countries of the world and consequent cancellation of travel plans, workshops, conferences, trade fairs and tourism; in some countries, their responses included proclamation of public health emergency. Nigeria shared in all of those experiences and many more, for instance, at a stage, public health workers were almost overwhelmed going by the population of people who needed testing and treatment simultaneously; worse still, amidst this fight against COVID-19, some health workers were infected with the coronavirus disease while some others lost their lives.

Balogun (2020) drew attention to disturbing situation of persons infected with COVID-19 in United States of America and the general characteristics of the situation namely; shortage of testing equipment at the initial stage, under reporting of confirmed cases of people infected with COVID-19, uneven lockdown across the country, shut down of schools and necessity of social distancing. By implications, the developed countries of the world were not left out of the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly,

it appears at the initial stage of the pandemic, efforts of governments of developed countries could not readily tackle the challenges associated with COVID-19 pandemic. This is a pointer to the early findings reviewed that efforts of some governments of developing or under developed countries could not tackle the problem of COVID-19 pandemic.

Anyanwu, Festus, Nwobi, Jaja, and Oguttu (2020) examined preparedness and response of Nigeria to challenge of COVID-19 and strategies adopted for mitigating the spread of the pandemic in Nigeria, the study discovered that healthcare system in Nigeria is weak and ineffective even before the advent of COVID-19; there was evidence of several years of neglect of healthcare infrastructure, Nigeria was seriously vulnerable to the pandemic, worse still, compliance with social distancing as coping strategy may be grossly violated in rural areas and even in urban centres in Nigeria. It is obvious that government alone may not be able to tackle the challenge of COVID-19 pandemic, which is why this work seeks to examine the coping strategies of the church amidst this scenario of ineffective healthcare system in Nigeria.

During the 2008 financial economic downturn many community churches were placed in financial difficulty which had a disproportionate negative effect on churches (Benming, 2009). This is because their income relies primarily on voluntary contributions. In a phenomenological study to explore lived experiences and perceptions related to church leaders' strategies for coping with the economic downturn, Williams (2013) recruited a purposive sample of 20 church leaders from Tennessee to explore the changes made in church operational strategies to cope with the recession. Strategies identified to helped church leaders cope were as follow:

- (a) implementing cost reduction efforts and increasing the reliance on volunteers for facility upkeep.
- (b) collaborating with other church leaders for assistance referrals and fraud detection
- (c) sharing facilities and dividing expenses

The COVID-19 pandemic is one difficulty the church had had to deal with in modern times that has threatened Christian fellowship. Afolaranmi (2020) opines that many churches and other public places in Nigeria and other places throughout the world experienced lockdown as a result of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic. These affected church activities and pastoral ministry of many church pastors greatly (Amunnadi, & Ezeugwu, 2020); in response to this lock down and its negative effects, many pastors in Nigeria started to explore other ways to perform their pastoral ministry to their church members. In a study to explore how pastors are performing their pastoral ministry to their members during the lockdown, Afolaranmi (2020) found out that while some of the pastors were still using some of the old traditional means of pastoral ministry like house fellowship/cell church, telephone calls for counseling and prayers, weekly radio broadcast, physical ministrations to limited member of people, multiple member of services per Sunday, visitation, distribution of relief packages and others, modern strategy to cope with pastoral ministry during the lockdown were mainly internet-inclined. Some of these internet-inclined ways include creating of church WhatsApp groups, Facebook and other social media platforms, telephones, zoom meetings, YouTube media channels of the church, text messages, Facebook live streaming, telegram messenger, Sunday online services, e-mail, teleconference. Others include online prayer sessions, typing of messages, website posting, twitter, Instagram, video recording, webinar and internet radio.

Methodology

Research Design: The work is a qualitative research which adopts case study research design, with emphasis on the use of open-ended questionnaire and online key informant interview to collect primary data and the use of content analysis of secondary data such as internet materials, research reports, journals and text books. Qualitative approach was chosen so as to explore the lived experience of students in phenomenological term rather than mere numerical aggregation of opinions of participants in the research.

Instruments for Data Collection: Open-ended questionnaire was designed and developed to facilitate collection of verbal data reflective of the lived experience of the students. Section A comprised demographic characteristics, Section B focused on research question 1 and 2, while Section C focused on research question 3. This was followed up with Key Informant Interview (offline and online).

Participants Recruitment/Sampling Technique: Considering the lockdown phenomenon during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, and the criteria set for choice of population, sample and key informants for this study, entire 200 level N.C.E. students of CRS, FCEE were used as case study. The criteria for choice of population, sample and research participants for this study are as follow: contact for online open-ended questionnaire administration; contact for online key informant interview; lived experience as victims of COVID-19 lockdown; lived experience as beneficiaries of palliatives from church and other coping strategies of the church. Hence, purposive and accidental sampling techniques were used because students had not fully resumed when data was collected. Accidental sampling was first adopted to administer the open-ended questionnaire, out of 76 student population, 59 students responded accidentally. Secondly, 15 students (10 from Roman Catholic Church and 5 from Anglican Church respectively) were purposively sampled for online and offline Key Informant Interview method of data collection.

Data Analysis

Responses of participants were subjected to interpretive phenomenological analysis, because of the nature of the research question, aims and objectives and the phenomenological nature of exploring coping strategies of the church as lived experience, meanwhile, percentages and frequency count techniques were applied to research questions 1. However, since coping strategies of the church is considered as lived experience, which demands bracketing against the prejudice and bias of researcher, onsequently, the transcripts of responses of participants were condensed, coded, categorized, and placed in thematic framework as shown below. Due to ethical consideration and confidentiality assured respondents, the 15 participants were assigned these identifications; CRS-SOS-01 and CRS-SOS-02, POL-CRS-03 to POL-CRS-06, ENG-CRS-07 to ENG-CRS-12, IGBO-CRS-13 and IGBO-CRS-14, and finally, KEY-INFO-15 (the gatekeeper in field work).

Research Ethics and Consent Form: Participants in this research were given information on the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, right to discontinue their participation at will, and allowed to freely consent as evidenced in consent form signed by each participant.

Results

Research Question 1: What percentage of 200 level N.C.E. students of Christian Religious Studies attend Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church as members respectively?

Table 1: Percentage of 200 level N.C.E. students of CRS who are Members of Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church (N=59)

CRS students	Roman Catholic Church		Anglican Church		Others		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No	%	No.	%
CRS/SOS	6	10	—	—	3	5	9	15
POL/CRS	10	17	2	3	3	5	15	25
ENG/CRS	13	22	4	7	8	14	25	43
IGBO/CRS	5	9	3	5	2	3	10	17
Total	34	58	9	15	16	27	59	100

Source: Author’s field work (2020)

Table 1 shows that 34 students (58%) out of 59 respondents are members of Roman Catholic Church, 9 students (15%) are members of Anglican Church. The percentage of students who are members of Roman Catholic Church is higher than that of Anglican Church.

Research Question 2: What were the challenges faced by the church during COVID-19?

Adopting case study approach through interpretive phenomenological analysis of condensed, coded, and categorized responses of participants (CRS student-members of Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church) on challenges faced by the church during COVID-19 in their lived experience, the following results emerged:

Case Study One: Roman Catholic Church

One research participant stated that, “it was not easy at all but we were able to celebrate mass twice in a Sunday to maintain social distance” (Key-Info-Pol-CRS-10). It appeared many church projects were disrupted as evidenced by a research participant who pointed to “non-completion of parishioner’s projects” (RCC-Igbo-CRS-9). For another participant, worship and liturgical activities were relatively hindered as hinted thus, “the first collection of offering during mass, preparation of thanksgiving offering, preparation of mass intention”(RCC-Eng-CRS-6).

It is striking to note the narrative of a participant who confessed about one of the major impacts of COVID-19 on spirituality in these words, “the most of the challenges that faced us during COVID-19 pandemic was that it weakened spiritual exercise [encounter] with God”(RCC-Eng-CRS-7). A female participant was worried over the challenge of disrupted worship activities as mentioned in these words thus, “I missed my programs in the church, I missed our Block Rosary crusade meeting and also missed our evening benediction every Sunday” (RCC-CRS-SOS-3. For yet another research participant, offertory was at risk during COVID-19, this was expressed in these terms thus, “there was little contribution because not everyone was allowed to open shop, so there was no money for contribution” (RCC-CRS-SOS-1).

It appeared church functionaries were subjected to some measure of stress as contained in the narrative of a female research participant who said, “the challenge is that of maintaining social distance, priest had to repeat mass up to 5 times a day to maintain

social distance”(RCC-Pol-CRS-4). A participant was concerned with impact of COVID-19 on funfair when asked, what are the challenges your church faced during COVID-19 pandemic, thus responded in these words, “lack of fun” (RCC-Pol-CRS-5).

Case Study Two: Anglican Church

Anglican Church faced related challenges during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria as seen in the complaint of a research participant thus, “as a result of COVID-19, Anglican Church could not maintain its church liturgical calendar” (AC-Igbo-CRS-15). In categorical terms, a participant lamented over financial challenge faced by the church and lack of opportunity for physical fellowship in these words, “the challenge that my church faced was that of money and the challenge of not meeting together” (AC-Eng-CRS-14). Brief time for worship was a concern to yet another participant as echoed in these words, “we were made to spend a little time during worship service because of COVID-19 pandemic” (AC-Eng-CRS-13).

Poor attendance to church service was a challenge during COVID-19 pandemic as expressed by a research participant thus, “lack of members coming to church, not allowed to shake hands”(AC-Pol-CRS-12). Poor attendance to church was re-echoed by another participant in these terms, “they (church) lacked members, they lacked money, they also miss worshipping together” (AC-Pol-CRS-11).

Research Question 3: What were the coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 pandemic?

Interpretive phenomenological analysis of condensed, coded, and categorized responses of participants (CRS student-members of Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church) on coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 in their lived experience are as follow:

Case Study One: Roman Catholic Church

A research participant has these words to say concerning the coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 pandemic thus, “it was not easy at all, we were able to celebrate mass twice on Sundays to maintain social distance” (KEY-INFO-10). In other words, worship service took place in conformity with social distance regulation which invariably required splitting population of local church parish into two or more for Sunday worship service. Closely related, a female participant responded to the question of how churches cope with COVID-19 pandemic by saying that, “the church cope with little effort made by the priest and church council, they provided face mask, hand washing materials and hand sanitizers”(RCC-CRS-SOS-10. This assertion implies both the commitment of the church and financial sacrifice of some local church parishes in Roman Catholic Church to non-pharmaceutical measures prescribed as coping strategies during COVID-19 pandemic.

Adoption of mass media for live streaming worship service seemed to take centre stage in some churches during lockdown as asserted by a key informant, “celebrating mass and worship activities with mass media, spreading the news online” (RCC-IGBO-CRS-8). The use of mass media for broadcasting liturgical activities was a common thing during lockdown in many urban centres in Nigeria.

Case Study Two: Anglican Church

Research participants from Anglican Church tradition mentioned varied coping strategies of the church; for instance, a female participant stated the followings: “praying always without ceasing, preaching sermon on radio and television, standing afar from each other” (AC-IGBO-CRS-150). For this participant, Anglican Church adopted many coping strategies such as social distancing, praying without ceasing, sermon delivery on radio and television.

Quite striking is the response of a particular participant to the question of how churches cope during COVID-19, “how the church cope with the challenges was that members of the church took food to pastors in their residence” (AC-ENG-CRS-14). It is striking because it more or less a lone response that was almost totally opposite the responses on palliatives donated by some churches to church members. On the other hand, it is probable since some local churches in rural communities were pastored by seminarians, evangelists or young single pastor who were sometimes helped by church members even before the advent of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Discussion

Major findings of this study showed that Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church in Nigeria faced many challenges such as financial challenges, shut down of worship centres, escalation of impoverished church members, discomfort, poor attendance during worship service. These findings agree with Ibeh, Enitan, Akele, Isitua, & Omorodion, (2020) in terms of global impacts of COVID-19 and specific impacts on government and people of Nigeria.

The study found out the following coping strategies of the church namely; use of mass media for live streaming worship service; provision of face mask, hand washing materials, hand sanitizers to church members during church service; compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols such as social distancing; donation and distribution of palliatives. These findings also conform with the view of Afolaranmi (2020) who pointed to some of the coping strategies adopted by the church since the incidence of COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The paper examined the coping strategies of the church during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, considering the reported ineffectiveness of the efforts of the government in addressing the various challenges associated with the pandemic. The church and Christian leaders, historically, had always adopted coping strategies during disaster, economic recession, plague and pandemic over the years, but not much has been reported about the coping strategies of Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church in Nigeria, hence the need for this work. Adopting case study research design as a qualitative study, the work found out that churches adopted the following coping strategies: online interactive prayer programme, online bible study programme, live streaming of worship service through facebook, youtube, zoom, skype and google meet, distribution of audio and video records of live services and palliative to church members

Recommendations

Challenges faced by both the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches during the covid-19 period were seemingly similar. To keep their church doors open, worship and fellowshiping going, the following recommendations are made.

1. **Local Church Context** - Churches should study the uniqueness of their congregations and locality and fashion out how best to respond to the challenges COVID-19 posed in the context of the peculiarity of their congregation and locality.
2. **Adopted of Technology** - While social distancing regulation is still in force, the traditional means of church meetings or mass celebrations definitely have been minimized. Churches should explore the use of internet or other technological tools for mass celebrations or church services.
3. **Personal Spirituality** - COVID-19 is akin to war period when normal meetings are not possible. Church leaders should encourage members at this period to learn to be less dependent on the clergy for their spiritual upkeep. Christians after all are called kingdom of priests in New Testament tradition.
4. **Donation of Palliatives** - Lockdown, associated with COVID-19, affected many businesses especially those of the low-income earners, like artisans and subsistent farmers. This is a period that churches should give back to their congregations in terms of palliatives just as Jesus remembered to feed the five thousand people.
5. **Home Fellowship** - With the social distancing regulation in place, less emphasis should be placed on large church meeting while more emphasis should be placed on small group meeting like *block rosaries*, house fellowships or home fellowship. This is similar to the churches that were meeting in people's homes in the New Testament churches.
6. **Adopting Online Giving** - Churches of course need money to run and with the limited number of members meeting and hence affecting offertories including tithes, mobile transfer of money should be encouraged among members.

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