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An Exploration of Selected Pandemics from an African Perspective with Implication to World Christianity: Lessons from COVID-19

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Abstract

The world has always been threatened with the spread of diseases. These bitter experiences have affected the peace and stability of any society. This study evaluates some devastating pandemics that befell humanity with its effect on the growth of Christianity in Africa. Every time the world faces pandemics, the Christian church is the most affected; nevertheless, such periods also help shape the Christian approach in expanding the Gospel. This study seeks to investigate the challenge that the spread of coronavirus has upon the growth of Christianity. Beginning from the time that COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, Christians around the world, especially from Africa, are uncertain about what will become of the Christian church. Others see it as the end of the church due to government decisions to stop large gatherings, which seem to have some consequences to Africans that are religious conscious. This research tends to ask, will the aftermath of the pandemic strengthen or weaken Christianity in Africa? Learning from history, what will be the possible effect of the COVID-19 epidemic upon the Christian church, especially in Africa, which tends to offer a prospective future of the growth of Christianity? The uncertainty of these realities necessitates the need for the church to examine its present predicament from theological, ethical, and missional viewpoints.

Keywords: Africa, COVID-19, Exploration, Global Pandemics, Implication, World Christianity

Discussion

Pandemics spread rapidly and often come unannounced, unnoticed, and mostly inflicting dead and leaving devastating consequences. In the early centuries, these viruses were commonly referred to as plague or endemic diseases. The outbreak of pandemics throughout history plays a significant role in changing and shaping the development of society. Notably, the emergence of infectious diseases characterizes the demoralization of society, which could lead to economic crises, wars, revolutions, and demographic vicissitudes. It also changes how people perceive the world around them. Pandemics do impact individuals or nations and religion, politics, arts, science, and the rise of medicine, public health, and intellectual history. May I also affirm that in the modern era, the spread of infectious diseases threatens the stability of nations and shake the loyalty of citizens because of the fear and anxiety it raises that could end in social disorder, severe suffering, and death.

This study's geographical focus is the devastating effect of the pandemic on the everchanging society, especially in Africa. Little impact of the upshot of infectious diseases has been examined in developing nations like Africa. Most importantly, this continent has unique problems related to civil unrest, economic dependency, political porousness, religious extremism, and the belief in traditional spirits. For instance, the African perception of the recent coronavirus outbreak and their approaches in responding to the epidemic will vary significantly from the western nations due to the clamor of inadequate healthcare infrastructure. Considering Nigeria, for example, the political class and the elites are known for traveling overseas for very little medical treatment with no improvement in the domestic healthcare substructure. However, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 has pinned everyone down, forcing them to remain at home. Recently, the secretary to the Nigerian government lamented with great dismay the poor healthcare infrastructure of the nation, a call that has

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longed been echoed with no government response. However, the reality of the pandemic necessitates a rush approach, which indeed is too late. The consequence of the unruly government approach to healthcare puts the lives of many at risk. Consequently, the effect of the outbreak amidst such a porous healthcare institution could be devastating.

Meanwhile, religion and Christianity, in particular, plays a tremendous role in shaping the moral and societal growth of Africa. In Africa, Christianity has influenced people's everyday political and social life, and the formative influence of African Christians is deeply rooted in Christian traditions and culture. Historically, the African heritage wrestles tremendously in the shaping of the Christian creed and the Christian doctrine. Costen submits that nine Africans were among the prominent leaders in the struggle to shape Christianity: Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Dionysius, Athanasius, Didymus, Augustine, and Cyril. This religious heritage goes back to include the direct involvement of Africa in the shaping of the Judeo-Christian worship tradition.

Consequently, religion is vital to Africa as Africans are born and raised religiously. Hence, in unusual circumstances, the African mind is thoroughly conscious of what becomes of his/her belief. In the study of world Christianity, the Christian approach to religion has taken a more inclusive approach – theology, mission, and application to everyday life. It considers the total human need demographically, anthropologically, and sociologically. Therefore, theologians and clergy must ascertain the reality and effect of the pandemic upon the cost of spreading the Gospel.

A Historical Reflection of Global Pandemics

There had been several pandemics that had hit the world with devastating consequences upon church and society.

Throughout history, the church has been caught at the center of several diseases like the Antonine Plague (154CE), the Plague of Cyprian (250-271CE), the Justinian plague of 541-542 (CE), the Black Death (1346-1353 CE), the Cocoliztli Epidemic (1545-1548 CE). Others include the American Plague (16th century), the Great Plague of London 1665-1666 (CE), the Great Plague of Marseille (1720-1723 CE), Russian Plague (1770-1772), Philadelphia yellow Fever epidemic (1793 CE), Flu Pandemic (1889-1890), and American Polio Epidemic in 1916. Additionally, there was the Spanish Flu Pandemic (1918-1920), Asia Flu (1957-1958), AIDS Pandemic and Epidemic (1981 to present day), H1N1 Swine Flu (2009-2010), West African Ebola Epidemic (2014-2016), Zika Virus (2015-present day), and now, the China COVID-19 Pandemic.

Considering the numerous pandemics that had affected humanity, this study provides an overview of a few that have impacted the global society, especially Africa. The research does not provide an explicit or detailed history of these pandemics but a synopsis. Understanding the effect of these diseases could help enlighten the 21st-century church on how to respond to current threats.

Accordingly, Stark opine that a devastated epidemic swept through the Roman Empire, which could be described as the emergence of smallpox in the West. This smallpox pandemic started during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 165CE and lasted for fifteen years that left a quarter of the Roman population dead, including the

emperor himself. The smallpox epidemic is sometimes referred to as the Antonine Plague or the Plague of Galen. It was characterized by fever, inflamed mouth and throat, vomiting, diarrhea, a dry or pustular eruption, a black exanthem covering an entire body, and many lesions that changed into ulcers. The spread of the Plague contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire because of its devastating impact.

Horgan alleged that the disease emerged from China and spread to Rome through the troops who returned from the wars in the East, which spread northward to Gaul. Manders contends that the Antonine Plague had a long-term consequence on human resources, the leasing of agricultural land, the erection of public buildings, and the production of Bricks, coins, and inscriptions. Foremost, the pandemic gave free passage to bandits to roam around, and brigandage became widespread, and most famous rubbers were recorded within these periods. What also characterizes the period of the pandemic was dynasty instability and leadership struggle because of the spread of usurpers everywhere. Indeed, disorder and the killing of leaders described the aftermath of the epidemic. These internal and external problems that led to instability in Rome contributed to its downfall. According to Concannon, the vivid description of suffering because of the Antonine Plague by *Historia Augusta* suggests that the pestilence was responsible for the economic, political, and military crisis of the third century. Meanwhile, during this devastating experience, the church strived by providing and demonstrating the real character of love by not deserting the sick. Christians provided care and nursing to the infected. This show of love undoubtedly produced some conversions.

Another plague of interest is the Great Plague of Marseille, also called the "Bubonic Plague." Accordingly, the London Bubonic Plague came through Amsterdam and was spread through trade rather than war. The Bubonic Plague was an infectious disease that affected the lymph nodes, i.e., some parts of the body meant to help protect the body against infections. It was called bubonic because its symptoms include large swellings called buboes, which could appear on the neck, armpits, and inner thighs. Those who suffer this plague had fevers, headaches, chills, and felt tired and weak. Before the coming of modern medicine, 50 to 70 percent of those infected with the pandemic died.

Evaluating the impact of the plague, Throp submits that it soon became impossible for people to be buried in a usual way because there was not enough space and time. As a result, plague pits were dug, and mass burials were carried. Bodies were piled on top of each other, and children were placed in the space between adults. Echenberg noted that the bubonic plague was a global medical disaster that affected Hong Kong, Bombay (Mumbai), Europe, South American cities of Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Cape Town, claiming estimated lives of 15 million. Fear and anxiety characterized the spread of the bubonic disease. For instance, in Europe, people were carried away by seeming beliefs of mysterious origin. Benedict asserts that people held simultaneous views as infected families might visit a doctor and consult a spirit medium. Communities carried out neighborhood cleanup campaigns along with ritualistic exorcisms. Officials provided charitable relief and appealed to local plague gods. This kind of uncertainty defines the society of the bubonic period.

Another pandemic to consider is the 19th-century cholera pandemic, which can be described as the curse of the nineteenth century. This pandemic occurred seven times in history: 1817 and 1826, 1829, 1852, 1863, 1881, 1899, and 1992. Peters opine that cholera victims waste away until their faces are death masks. The story of the pandemic is said to begin from the Gang Rivers in India, a place that was the focal point of social gathering and the primary source of water to the people. According to Echenberg, the new modern cholera pandemic coincided with the transformative era of the economic world system characterized by the defeat of France by Britain. In such epoch, Britain, the economic hegemony of any nation depended on Britain's guiding commercial policy, which held domestic wealth on the condition of import of essential goods and the export of newly manufactured commodities. This narrowed the reordering of the political institution and the dependence of existing powers to look up to Britain's emerging superpower. Still, it ignited the emergence of a charismatic response in Africa, especially concerning the slave trade. By implications, the pandemic crippled the income of many kingdoms and the ruling elites who depended on slave income. For instance, Rodney contends that some African domains grew stronger economically and politically due to the trade with Europeans. Still, the cholera pandemic crumbled the income of many kingdoms.

Meanwhile, the impact of every epidemic has always been on the poor and the vulnerable. At every time that there is a pandemic outbreak, there seems to have political and economic implications. Nations or societies are forced to depend on more influential countries for medical and Commodian aids. Such situations could lead to the rapid spread of disease, shortage of essential commodities that could lead nations into making national compromises and increase inflation. Also, outbreaks of global pandemics lead to the disintegration of health and education infrastructure and fuel political turmoil and violence. For instance, Chigudu submits that Zimbabwe's experience of the cholera pandemic led to an epochal transition from a modernizing development to a crisis, which recorded a shift in the social and political forces in the country. Thus, one can rightly assert that, in every outbreak, there are designated organizations, people, nations, or institutions who take advantage of the epidemic to promote individual or communal agendas; more so that it challenged the existing superpowers and the emergence of new once.

The cholera pandemic had continued to affect developing nations. For instance, in the 1940s public health was not an essential topic in Egypt. At the end of the decade, it became an integral component of the national political agenda. Pandemic provides a new dimension to medical institutions around the world. The outbreak challenged many nations to institute and improve the needed infrastructures for its populace or faced the danger of lawlessness and increased mortality. Henze argues that the most long-lasting legacy of the cholera pandemic was its effect on the sphere of physicians. The medical profession failed and instilled mistrust and misunderstanding from the side of the population. Nonetheless, the physicians ought to be commended as they patriotically availed themselves in the effort to save humanity despite the immense obstacles. Thus, the pandemic also recorded a new down to medicine with a new zeal for medical research, which had challenged

worse hit regions like north Africa to improve its passion for medicine.

Also, the cholera outbreak offered a social, economic, and religious ideological shift. Cholera emerges in poorly developed regions where there is little access to sanitization or the emergence of devastating healthcare effects. The impact of cholera in northern Sudan in 2006 or the Haiti earthquake in 2010 is a practical demonstration of these realities. While such periods draw support from global communities and non-governmental organizations, the little narrative is given in literature about the church's contribution. Foremost, some non-governmental organizations that belong to Christian establishments are often accused of ineffectiveness or betraying its core goal of supporting the affected communities of these pandemics. Many influxes of people to such affected areas are described as seeking monetary benefits and how to extort resources from foreign bodies.

One of the most devastating pandemics that this paper ought to mention is the AIDS Pandemic and epidemic discovered in 1981. This disease has continued to affect the lives of modern society. Momentarily, the AIDS epidemic had claimed an estimated life of 35 million people worldwide and continue to do. Though it is hard to put statistics into perspective, Smith contends that the pandemic had claimed more than 25 million lives in sub-Saharan Africa. This pandemic/epidemic has continued to affect the developing communities to the present day. Affectively the AIDS pandemic has led to the evolution of clinical care and medicine. It has depopulated many societies, destroyed homes, and increased the number of orphans and widows. Alarming, the lingering of the disease has changed human connectivity and the social wellbeing of individuals. Foremost, the pandemic has promoted distrust, fear, and hate from innocent victims and deepened the evil of revenge.

One characteristic of the AIDS dilemma is that it has instituted stigmatization. The AIDS pandemic and epidemic provided the Christian church with a new demographic scene. The problem with the AIDS pandemic was the confusion among Christian institutions on an ethical approach to the disease. Different denominations adopted various means to respond to the epidemic. For instance, at the onset, the mainline church leadership denied the pandemic and considered it the consequence of gay sin. However, others like the Pentecostal churches responded with compassion and provided resources to victims, which led to the spread of the Pentecostal churches with enormous vigor that shook the already established faith communities at their roots.

Though many church denominations were reluctant and had a bad reputation in responding to the AIDS pandemic, this perspective had considerably changed. Responsively, the Christian church came up from behind to offer the lead to the fight on HIV/AIDS. Lancaster and Walle opine that the Christian church was first to respond to the mysterious, incurable illness, which painfully killed people in their prime of life, including infants, and could affect the unborn child. They allude that the vast diversity of religious actors cannot be overemphasized, noting that pastors, members, mothers, Christian groups, and many more reached out to care.

In Nigeria, for example, the model of having an HIV test by an intending couple was introduced by the Evangelical

Church Winning All (ECWA). This decision drew criticism from other mainline churches and the Pentecostal churches too; nevertheless, this idea was soon adopted by the federal government of Nigeria and all other church institutions. Pocock and others assert that the Christian church, changing its approach to the AIDS pandemic, instituted tremendous zeal Christian preventive programs and care models for the disease victims. While the church, through the Pentecostal arm, rapidly grew because it welcomed those considered as worse sinners, the mission churches and non-profit organizations recorded stability, more so that the response of the Christian church could be characterized as the epochal breakthrough in world Christianity in the Southern hemisphere.

COVID-19 and the Global Response

COVID-19 is a virus discovered first in China in November 2019, known as “2019 novel coronavirus” (2019-nCoV). The novel stands for the strain within the coronavirus family, and 2019 stands for the year it was discovered. The World Health Organization named the coronavirus disease “COVID-19” on 11 February 2020. However, after examining its spread and its deadly effect on humanity, it was declared a global pandemic by the WHO on Wednesday, 11 March 2020. Since then, the perspective on the disease has changed and continues to receive a newer approach from different nationalities. The virus has created fear and anxiety and has disrupted the social life of society. It is also one of the most devastating diseases that pauses health crises in the 21st century. Lennox characterizes the period as an “era-defining period.” The period made people feel vulnerable because it has taken the lives of both the rich and the poor and societies’ livelihood.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 outbreak has received intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual interpretation. Indeed, the pandemic is described by some as the end of the world or a conspiracy of a selected few individuals or nations. This perception has triggered accusations and promoted blame-game theory and xenophobia against individuals and societies. This opinionated perception has occasioned the submission of this study and its impact to world Christianity. Such inexhaustible absurdity makes it imperative to reawaken and concretize the effect of the global pandemic on world Christianity. It is also necessary to rediscover the historical epoch in the conceptualization of the reality of the epidemic.

In the meantime, the COVID-19 pandemic has created fear and angst. It has also caused uncertainty and frustration of what tomorrow holds. Social lives in the world and globalization are put to a halt. Lennox further observed that news broadcast had featured empty streets, empty shelves in supermarkets, empty sports stadia, and empty churches, while hospitals are filling up and extra beds in higher demands in Europe [among other nations]. Indeed, countries are in crisis with rapid change, amidst confusion, death, and widespread anxiety. Kayode avers, the reality of what this pandemic enfolds is too big, too complicated, to sinister, too evil, too bizarre, and extraordinary for the average mind to comprehend.

Foremost, the economic, moral, and religious structure of the world is altered due to the stricture measures to curb the spread of the virus. The reality calls for the immediate intervention of all to contribute their best to safe humanity. Consequentially, human response and approach to this

pandemic as a people, nation, community, or instituted organizations and authorities will define what the future becomes and will remain in the pages of history for the next generation to judge or praise us. Alarmingly, many Christians and stakeholders have been swayed with all kinds of propaganda information from social media, religious leaders, politicians, activists, socialists, conservatives, medical practitioners, together with non-governmental organizations, which are not contributing to the fight against the pandemic.

Noteworthy, the experience of the West is different from Africa. Moreover, it is considerably true that the approach to the fight against COVID-19 varies from nation to nation. For instance, the current coronavirus pandemic has caused fear of economic stalking and pauses the danger of global hunger. Evidence of the epidemic is the disruption of national and international travels, economic uncertainty, shortage of food, and the collapse of many African nations’ fragile medical institutions due to the virus’s overwhelming effect. There is the fear that history will repeat itself to depopulate the world and disrupt social order. Indeed, the measures of maintaining social distance are causing cultural and religious anxiety. While all these are evident to the global society, its overwhelming consequence is far felt in Africa because of the unique challenge of staked development. Meanwhile, the pandemic is raising new questions and challenging the political supremacy of leading nations. Consequently, how these leading countries respond and proffer solutions to the epidemic could characterize the emergence of new superpowers and the opening of new boundaries.

The Implication of Global Pandemics upon World Christianity

In the past two or three decades, nearly every Christian literature narrates the explosion of Christianity. Scholars and Christian leaders are amazed at the rapid growth of Christianity, especially in the Global South. Jenkins asserts that by 2050, 72 percent of Christians will live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, noting that the gravity of Christianity has shifted from white domination to a global reality. These developing nations constitute most of the Christian community globally. Indeed, Christianity has taken a new dimension, and the late 1800 to early 1900 CE can be characterized as the century of Christian revitalization. Thus, the last century is known as the period of Christian expansion. For instance, the late 18th and early 19th centuries recorded the rise of interdenominational faith mission organizations that took the theology of mission seriously. These faith mission agencies adopted some radical approaches to missions that transformed the world.

Consequently, Africa, which was known as a “Dark Continent” and the “white man’s grave” in the 1900s, now constitute one-third of the Christian world. Indeed, among other developing nations, Africa is radically engaging themselves in global missions and the re-evangelization of Europe and America through migration and immigrant churches. It is right to note that the effort of these mission organizations is not the only means that help distinguish Africa and other developing societies.

Meanwhile, from the time of the Christian missions, Christianity has taken different dimensions of growth reflected in the whole inhabited world in its cultural and linguistic diversity. Jenkins argues that the reality of

Christian growth, especially in developing nations like Africa, results from the impact of the Bible among the people; take the Bible from the people, and you deny them of their heritage. In exploring the dynamics of Christian growth in Africa, it is imperative to consider the Pentecostal revival that impacts the world. Also, the increase in denominational disengagement and decentralization contributes to the growth of Christianity in Africa. While others may see the proliferation of autonomous Christian ministries as the contributing factors to Christian pluralism and hyper-spiritualism, the rise of these independent ministries and churches could be examined differently. These ministries have helped spread Christianity to places that Protestant and other mainline churches are unwilling to reach. It has challenged mainstream denominations to reexamine and re-strategize its approach to world mission. Moreover, the independent ministries and churches are providing a dynamic and contextual approach to the Gospel. Benke and others observed:

There are new visions and motivations like understanding the everchanging society and new spiritual and social needs of the people, which typically informed the establishment of new churches. The swift action of these independent churches and para-church ministries seems to explain the rapid decline that mainline denominations experienced. In contrast, these nondenominational or independent churches have remained the primary area of church growth. Considerably, any church that seeks to be relevant in the contemporary environment must respond quickly to change and adopt a much more organized and flexible approach than it was in the earlier era. Mainline churches need to understand better each generational group and how to relate and communicate with them. They need denominational restructuring that promotes active, innovative, and inclusive ministries without compromise; this implies purpose-oriented ministries.

Admittedly, there is a need to diversify the Christian approach to the Gospel without compromising the basic tenets of Scripture. This zeal for rebranding and reasserting Christianity ought to continue growing uninterrupted. Noteworthy, each institution within the Christian church grew in response to one issue or the other that affects the social, economic, moral, and spiritual lives of these developing nations. While the church has always been relevant within the apparent challenges that confront society, many contemporaries who examined the reality of the recent COVID-19 pandemic seem to be pessimistic about the continuous growth of contemporary Christianity in the global South.

Furthermore, at the center of all the realities of global pandemics is the Christian church, which makes up one-third of the world population. The global epidemic redefines the theological, social, and religious beliefs of people. The threat that society faces are integrated and defined differently within the complex of a contemporary phenomenon. Its approach and response would be based on demographic forces, cultural and economic structures, and the way of life of people. Within Christendom, challenges are approached with denominational and contextual convictions. Such dynamics makes it complicated for a regular assessment by observers and church historians. Nevertheless, there are apparent realities of global challenges that affect every society, especially Africa. This

study considers three dimensions; (theological, ethical, and missional) relating the impact of the COVID-19 on world Christianity.

Theological and Religious Implication

Throughout Christian history, there are essential characteristics that make Christianity attractive. For instance, in the early Christian centuries, women made up a proportionate number because of the dignity that Christianity accorded the married life and the Christian home. The demonstration of love, mutual affection, and openness between Christian husbands and wives distinguished and attracted new converts from the pagan religion. The church has always taken advantage of pandemics to grow; nevertheless, these challenges often time open new chapters, raised further questions, and challenge traditional belief systems. Hence, in an ever-increasing and hostile society, the church is continuously facing new and more enormous challenges than before.

Consequently, in the reality of COVID-19, the Christian world, especially the global South and Africa, in particular, are faced with fear and uncertainty. Church leaders are afraid of spiritual laxity and boredom or lukewarm attitudes in believers. Many are concern and uncertain of what the church is presently going through or will become after the pandemic. For instance, in Nigeria, the determination to curb the spread of the virus has shot down church gatherings, which has affected institutional structures of churches, especially concerning finances. Many mainline churches do not have a longtime investment that can sustain their denominations; thus, what becomes of these institutional organizations cannot be readily ascertained.

Additionally, the theological questions COVID-19 pandemic has raised is about the efficiency of the clergy. Prior to the epidemic, there is the proliferation of clergy parading themselves as “men of God,” or “prophets,” etc., because they are seen performing healings on television. Christians and society are questioning the authenticity of these so-called men of God. For many Christians, theology can only make meaning to Africans when it addresses their everyday need. In the global South, people ask questions about the reality of God amid their challenges, in which contemporary Christianity should strive to contextualize biblical truths without compromise. For the religious setting of the global South, the Christological question remains relatively fresh and ever-asked. Who do people say I am, especially in times of intimidations like the COVID-19 pandemic? To the global South, Jesus must be a Christ of faith but also of meaning. As Schreiter asserted, one can argue that the relevance of God’s reality should seek to reflect the religious consciousness of the people who are looking for a God that mediates humanity with divinity, socially, economically, politically, and religiously. Ogbonnaya opines that the church’s position as salt and light of society is shaped by its impact on people of faith’s minds and morals.

From Africa’s viewpoint, Turaki submits that the African worldview is close to Biblical times, noting that human history is placed within the cosmic framework. Thus, to make any meaning, it must strive to deal with the people’s everyday theological and spiritual needs, making it culturally and religiously relevant to its people. Therefore, it is essential the Christian church work towards offering convincing proof of the reality of COVID-19.

Unfortunately, Christianity lacks an in-depth and severe inculcation, nor does it tend to impact the day-to-day life of the people's social structure, this poses a threat to Christian growth. Thus, contextualization is fundamental in putting Christianity at the helm of societal transformation.

The Ethical and Moral Implication

In antiquity, societies are defined by people living in towns and cities characterized by trade and manufacture, which sets the tone of life with various religious and educational settings offering different kinds of services while walls provided safety. Throughout Christian eras, Christian spirituality and identity are rooted in the community life of people, which seeks to address itself in the socio-political life and seeks to liberate people from the agony of poverty and other miseries. The global South is known for its social, political, economic, and moral life of society. It is noteworthy that its beliefs and moral values provide guide to culture and its community, together with convictions, character, and behavior, shaped by the biblical, religious, social, ethical, and cultural values of the people. Christian ideals are defined based on the cultural values rooted in traditions and customs.

Meanwhile, constant threats challenge our beliefs and practices, and Christianity must strive to offer relevant paradigms amidst these challenges. Turner argues that what the global North enjoy tends to deaden their perspective to the precarious structure of the society, which seems to be characterized by poverty and suffering. Indeed, at the emergence of threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the social life of the South is threatened because of its fragility. As a result, the unfriendliness of such environments does not provide the idea of God's preferential option for the poor.

Affirmatively, 2020 and the spread of COVID-19, has halted the social life of society. For instance, the observance of basic hygiene and adhering to social distance has ushered something new entirely. People are advised not to shake hands, a practice that defines the basic tenets of Africa. Close relations cannot express warm affection by hugging and having an intimate relationship. Foremost, Christianity is a communal religion that enhances humanity's wellbeing and encourages gatherings of believers, sharing things in common, and practicing of a holy kiss as described in Hebrews 10:25; Acts 2:44, 4:3; and 2 Corinthians 13:12.

Meanwhile, times of pandemics promote stigmatization of victims and injustice. It introduces hunger to society and challenges the healthcare system of society. For instance, many developing nations do not have confidence in their government institutions and turn to the Christian church and non-governmental organizations to seek assistance. How the Christian society responds to these eminent realities defines the future of the church. Bongmba contends that Christian communities must learn to maintain a critical stance towards a global economy that affects societies. Consequently, in many African nations, Christians possess a significant percentage of the infrastructures, and Christian organizations play a vital role in the socio-economic and socio-political structures of many instituted governments. In nations where people have migrated to, they need the care and love of the church against stigmatization, Xenophobia, and other forms of rejections. How these folks are treated could impact world

Christianity. Thus, Christianity should use all available resources, human or natural, to respond to global challenges that pose a threat to society's immediate survival.

Missional Implication

What opportunity does the Christian church have to spread the Gospel? Historically, the impact of pandemics opens new frontiers for the Christian mission. Strachan examines the influenza pandemic noting that:

The epidemic claimed millions of lives within six months because of the inability to control its impact. The pandemic spread across Africa, Europe, and America and rapidly penetrated other continents through railways and trade routes. Sickness and death were almost sudden and inexplicable. South Africa was the worst hit because of international shipping and an extensive railway network. Throughout Africa, many people responded to the unexpected and disastrous impact of the influenza pandemic by turning to religion. Revivalism occurred among Christians and Muslims and those who adhered to indigenous beliefs. The epidemic led to the rise of Christian movements like the Watch Tower movement in Europe, and both the war and influenza had loosened the spread of Christian mission to Africa. Accordingly, the influenza pandemic ignited African interest in western education. More Africans were interested in the western-style of education by 1918 than in 1914, an opportunity Christian mission utilized to grow.

Accordingly, pandemics provide the Christian church with the opportunity to go to new places that Christianity has never been before or receive a passive response. It is an opportunity for the church to engage society on suffering, eternal hope, and mortality. Indeed, pandemics are formative moments of Christian mission. The scale of epidemics requires a serious review of strategic missional responses through hospitals, clinics, schools, and other social and financial palliatives. "While Christians have a vital part to play, engaging in established programs of governmental and non-governmental organizations may be more effective than attempting a renewal of the practice of establishing Christian institutions." Thus, churches are to support the effort of world visions and give significant attention to the spiritual and physical needs of victims, which could serve as preparatory for the reception of Christian missions.

A Biblical and Pastoral Lessons for Contemporary Christianity

Amid global challenges, the Bible remains the source of Christian inspiration. While the social structure of the worldwide society is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the Christian ritual of gathering for worship and fellowships, Christian leaders must strive from Scripture to offer a pastoral perspective on how to respond to the pandemic. A similar challenge that confronted the church in Acts threatened the fellowship of brethren when persecution broke out in Jerusalem. Responsively, the church resolved to house-fellowship, and the church grew. Throughout the first few centuries, until Constantine legalized Christianity, churches met in homes, usually in upper rooms, catacombs, and hollowed-out tunnels used for the burial of Jews; nevertheless, the church flourished throughout the Roman world even in times of

hostile emperors. The first few centuries were indeed challenging as Christians were faced with the risk of confiscation of property, imprisonment, torture, or execution. Building physical church structures were the last thing Christian would have done.

Also,

The fourth Fatimid Caliph, Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, who ruled in Tunisia between 953 to 975 CE, attempted to persecute the church and ordered the closure of all churches of Coptic communities and forbade the ringing of church bells. During that nine-year decree, church buildings grew rusty, and pigeons took over sanctuaries, but the church withdrew to deserts, those who could not walk stayed at home on Sundays. After nine years, the caliph thought the church had died and decided to see how the church had been crushed. While he walked the street in disguise on a Sunday, he heard the sounds of prayer and Bible readings and worship everywhere as he passed in Cairo's old city. He immediately ordered the opening of churches acclaiming that he had crushed the Church, only to find out that he had opened a church in every home.

Years have passed, and things have changed. The outbreak of COVID-19 may not be direct persecution of the church. However, the resolutions by nations and government institutions to allow some level of social gatherings like opening businesses and other government organizations without permitting few hours of church fellowship could imply a new approach to persecute the church. Nevertheless, contemporary Christianity must maximize every opportunity as modern society has provided the church the opportunity to improve Christian fellowship. Technology, such as Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft team, Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and many more, provides the church with a diverse approach to reach out. The church had never been suppressed, but to remain relevant amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it must seek new means beyond a physical meeting to reach out to the needy. Foremost, Christian institutions should commit their resources to develop technical human resources to provide an alternative approach to reach out.

The Obligation Before Contemporary African Christianity

Snowden argues that in the wake of COVID-19, the world was not prepared to confront a challenge long foreseen. By this assertion, the African church, which is part of the larger society, does not show an adequate level of preparedness. African Christians are overwhelmed and doubtful of the growth of the church. Though the world has continued to experience ever-rising cases of the pandemic, the church in Africa has been busy promoting institutional governance with less concern for what befalls the Christian populace. Many Christian organizations and denominations look up to the government to provide the basic needs of society, and many depend on the emergency response funds from the WHO and the CDC, making the church less impactful. While the church must continue to provide a prophetic voice in shaping the spirituality of communities, it should be obliged to offer tangible support to the citizenry. Metaphorically, Jesus must not weep again for the contemporary church because it fails to recognize the time of her visitation. Christian organizations must teach people how to Christianize their work. They must not seek their wellbeing or promote the cause of personal political

fragmentation. Foremost, there is a need to encourage small group strategies that seek to improve membership skills for active service to church and society.

Conclusion

The church lives in times of social challenges with spiritual and moral confusion. Globalization has a tremendous effect on the Christian religion and the Christian church. Pandemics are usually spread due to urbanization, and now that the world is becoming a global village, these threats are imminent. However, churches are becoming more seeker-sensitive. While many Christian organizations are struggling for relevance in a pluralistic and moralistic society, many of these Christian institutions are less concerned about the future of the church theologically, ethically, or missional. Their concern is the present. Christianity must be conscious of the church's immediate future and make necessary provisions to respond to these ever-increasing challenges. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic is eye-opening to contemporary Christianity. The epidemic also provides the church with opportunities to explore relevant areas of fulfilling the Great Commission.

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