



**African Congregations  
Adapting to COVID-19:  
Conversations with African  
Christian nurses in Britain**

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## 6. African Congregations Adapting to COVID-19: Conversations with African Christian nurses in Britain

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**T**his article<sup>1</sup> is about COVID-19 and the African diaspora churches. It discusses the impact of COVID-19 on some African congregations in Britain, with a particular focus on the ways in which those congregations have adjusted to the scary reality of the coronavirus pandemic that started in the UK during the early months of 2020. The research that informs the article started out as informal conversations with African health workers in north-west England, most of them Malawian, Zimbabwean and Nigerian. Later, a two-phase formal research project was carried out in six congregations in Liverpool, using semi-structured interviews and participant observation as tools for data collection. The first phase explored the general adaptive changes that the congregations were making in response to the pandemic, especially when it became evident that Black and brown people were disproportionately affected by the virus. The second phase focused on the theological disruption caused by the virus among African Pentecostals, for whom God is believed to be *Jehovah Rapha – God, Our Healer*. We spoke to seven African hospital nurses and their pastors to hear about how they reflected on God in their preaching in the context of the virus. The choice to speak to nurses was very intentional – they lived at the intersection between the Pentecostal faith of an African Christian (which places a great emphasis on God’s healing power) and the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19 in

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hospitals where they see first-hand the havoc that was caused by the virus. This article is about the first phase – the shifting posturing of the African churches in the UK towards the pandemic. It is about the changes that African congregations made in response to the virus. For this reason, this article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the general theory of adaptive leadership as a basis for our discourse on the changes that the congregations have made to adjust themselves to the threat of the virus. The second section discusses the changes made by the congregations – reorganising themselves to meet online, silent prayer meetings in family bubbles, using face masks and hand sanitisers during their services – plus many more and how they have justified these among their members. The third section discusses the ongoing implications of these changes in African diaspora ecclesiology.

### **The Disruptive Challenge of COVID-19**

Coronavirus has been the greatest disruptive challenge of the century so far. It has touched the entire world and has fundamentally changed the way we live. When COVID-19 started out in China in 2019, long before it reached the shores of Britain, its implications on our Christian ecclesiology were clear. By the time Britain entered its first lockdown in March 2020, the challenge of not only the virus itself but also the threat of countless deaths among congregational members, and the challenge lockdown (with the subsequent limitations on fellowship) posed to African churches, were immense. The sense of despair was beyond anything we could imagine. Many of them feared for their congregations here in the UK while also trying to stay strong for their communities back in Africa. It was a scary time. Among their many concerns, they wondered how they could continue to be church during the lockdown. Would their fellowships survive the weeks or months of no physical meetings? How many of their members would still be there when the pandemic came to an end? Most importantly, how would their members continue to support their churches financially? In many ways, most of these concerns remain unresolved at the end of 2021. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that when the lockdowns lifted, the government discouraged congregants from singing. How could we have a singing and dancing congregation of the Church of Pentecost, for example, without music? How could they worship in a strange land without singing the songs of the Lord? For the African churches in

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general, prayer times are quite vocal, usually just as loud as singing, and therefore they needed to find new ways of praying. In addition, social distancing meant neither handshakes nor hugs were allowed and for Africans used to a communal culture, that was not a small challenge.

Between the first lockdown (March 2020) and the last one (May–June 2021), it became extremely evident that COVID-19 affected Black and brown people more adversely than white people across the country. Research upon research proved that African and Asian communities were often at the frontline of the battle against the virus, and many of them lost their lives in the process. The Government reports:

During the first wave of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (24 January 2020 to 11 September 2020), people from all ethnic minority groups (except for women in the Chinese or “White Other” ethnic groups) had higher rates of death involving the coronavirus compared with the White British population. The rate of death involving COVID-19 was highest for the Black African group (3.7 times greater than for the White British group for males, and 2.6 greater for females), followed by the Bangladeshi (3.0 for males, 1.9 for females), Black Caribbean (2.7 for males, 1.8 for females) and Pakistani (2.2 for males, 2.0 for females) ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup>

For Africans, most of those deaths disrupted congregational lives. Churches lost many leaders, pastors, mothers and fathers – most of whom were frontline workers like doctors, care workers, shop assistants and many others. For a community far away from home, all those deaths had massive implications. Each death, often buried in seclusion as it were, left unimaginable pain in congregations and communities and, for many of those, no possibility to find closure. Yes, coronavirus has affected everyone in the UK, having killed more than 130,000 people in 18 months,<sup>3</sup> but the African community has suffered the worst, and the African congregation in the UK has both taken the beating and been the mainstay of the African community, and, in a sense, has literally weathered the storm.

As we write this article in the summer of 2021, Britain has been on and off in lockdowns for more than one year. The social climate of the country seems to be changing, with the economy opening up again, and congregational life in



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all churches slowly returning. The true image of the African church in Britain after COVID-19 is yet to emerge. Summer holidays affect church attendance; many pastors are not sure who is coming back and who is not. As will be argued later in the article, it appears to us that the pandemic has left the African church, in general, feeling isolated and vulnerable. This is also the general feeling among Black people, especially those of middle age and older. In addition, there is a wider-spread pandemic fatigue among African church leaders and their members in Britain. Our interviewees were clear on this, and that they needed to find new ways to energise their congregations for life after COVID-19.

### Engaging Adaptive Challenges

One of us (Harvey) has argued elsewhere that migration itself is a form of adaptive challenge that many African pastors leading churches in Britain never get to process well.<sup>4</sup> Adaptive leadership theory understands problems to be either technical or adaptive challenges though, of course, sometimes, problems can be both technical and adaptive.<sup>5</sup> Technical challenges are complex problems, but which are easily diagnosed and addressed through an organisation's existing repertoire of skills. They are those problems that the leader's authoritative expertise or the routine operating procedures of the organisation can handle.<sup>6</sup> Adaptive challenges are often complex multilayered problems with no clear-cut definitions or easy identification. Unlike technical challenges, adaptive challenges lack straightforward solutions. Organisations facing them have to look beyond their structures, procedures or resources. In fact, the task of dealing with such problems lies beyond the leader alone; they must be shared with whomever they are leading. Adaptive challenges, by definition, have no known solution readily available and, thus, demand experimental behavioural or core value changes in an organisation, often leading to new discoveries. As Richard Pascale *et al.* put it,

[Adaptive] challenges often demand a leap in capability, and solutions are unproven or unknown.... Facing such an adaptive challenge, we must throw out... familiar organizational principles and processes and adopt strange and unfamiliar ones.<sup>7</sup>

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They are different from *technical* challenges for which leaders already possess the skills needed to find an applicable solution.<sup>8</sup> Rather, they reveal the weaknesses of an organisation's once-effective values, practices and survival strategies, which are now rendered ineffective in the organisation's current context.<sup>9</sup> They require organisations to reimagine themselves into new being – new knowledge, new habits and new practices – from both the leader and their staff. They are not easy to tackle. In fact, resistance often arises due to the sacrifices, trade-offs and changes in people's beliefs, values, priorities and roles that these challenges require.<sup>10</sup> This process of directly confronting difficult issues leads the people to make critical and uneasy adjustments that are often “value laden and stir up people's emotions”.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the changes may involve the preservation of some organisational heritage while trading off certain legacy practices, traditional values or professional identities. As such, adaptive changes are tough and require sacrifices.<sup>12</sup>

Tackling adaptive challenges is a major rationale behind the development of adaptive leadership. This kind of challenge is not easy to spot and defies solutions within current organisational structure, knowledge or resources.<sup>13</sup> Although Ronald Heifetz's *Leadership Without Easy Answers* was the foremost literature to express the basic idea of adaptive leadership,<sup>14</sup> and his theory was to a considerable extent informed by Margaret Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science*,<sup>15</sup> it was in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* that the scholar and colleagues developed a framework for the concept.<sup>16</sup> Drawing from systems and service orientations, and biology, Ronald Heifetz and colleagues speak of adaptive leadership as the “practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.”<sup>17</sup> Thriving, here, comes from evolutionary biology, in which an effective adaptation involves three processes: preservation of essential DNA for a species' survival, doing away with non-essential DNA for the current needs of the species, and development of DNA arrangements that best serve the species' present realities. Successful adaptation—*thriving*—would involve taking the best from history (whether living systems or organisations) into the future.<sup>18</sup> Again, adaptive leadership is never an individual adventure. By implication, the leader is never solely responsible for providing solutions to challenges. Indeed, responses to challenges are jointly discerned by both the leader and the people.

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Treating adaptive challenges as technical problems remain the most common cause of failure in leadership.<sup>19</sup> In other words, *nothing fails like success* for when organisations leverage on past successes, failing to sustain invention and creativity in responding to newly emerging challenges of different nature, doom is most certain.<sup>20</sup> Hence, adaptive leadership must be meticulous enough to differentiate between technical problems and adaptive challenges when addressing tough situations. Of course, more often than not, a blend of the two kinds of challenges could occur. In this case, problem definition is clear but no direct solution is available from the existing repertoire of resources and skills.<sup>21</sup>

Again, leadership failures often occur when adaptive problems are treated as technical in nature.<sup>22</sup> Of course, adaptive challenges require new learnings from both the leader and the people; hence, tackling this sort of problem becomes difficult.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, as the forms of changes needed in adaptive leadership process are often “value-laden, and stir up people’s emotions”,<sup>24</sup> the changes could involve sacrificing legacy practices or traditional values around which people have developed strong connections. Nonetheless, if these new learnings are permitted by both leader and the people, adaptive work is achieved. This is the goal of adaptive leadership. The leader mobilises the people to define and directly confront adaptive challenges towards this end.<sup>25</sup>

### COVID-19 as an Adaptive Challenge

The pandemic is an excellent example of an adaptive challenge. To begin with, it has radically changed the way congregations behave, forcing them to shift some aspects of their worship services to online platforms. For instance, many African congregations in Britain have continued to do their Bible study or conduct their prayer meetings online or, where possible, using a hybrid platform. When they meet for worship, many are still practising social distancing in church – the members sit in family bubbles with minimal contact with other families. Family visits are yet to resume for most pastors and, when pastors visit their members, extreme care is taken to make sure everyone is safe. Thus, COVID-19 is not a technical challenge. By all means, it has been an adaptive one and the African church’s response in the UK has comprised letting go of what used to be and learning new skills, habits and practices for the new context. Our research brought to our attention many surprising

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themes related to African congregations' response to COVID-19 in the UK. For the remainder of this article, we will focus on three key issues:

1. theology (and this includes their sermons and their talk about mission and evangelism);
2. aspects of their communal life as a fellowship; and
3. their response to government guidance on the pandemic.

### Theology

We learned about the theological convictions of our research participants largely from the members of the churches themselves, in addition to the pastors' sermons (which we sampled mostly from their websites and by attending their online services (via Zoom or Facebook Live). Right from the start, these theological convictions were very evident to us as we heard congregational chatter about the virus. Most African pastors and church members did what they best do when helpless – turn to prayer and spiritual warfare. They were not flippant about it; they knew it was real. Unlike others who believed COVID-19 to be a conspiracy, and that it was simply about population control,<sup>26</sup> our participants did not think of the virus as a hoax. They took it rather seriously, but they believed it to be a spiritual problem that could be resolved through prayer (that includes fasting and binding of the demon of coronavirus). Our participants reported hearing both from their own pastors and from many other African leaders a theological thought that said all that was needed to defeat coronavirus was spiritual warfare. For example, Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo of the Kingsway International Christian Centre (in London), one of the most popular African preachers in the UK, posted several statements on the pandemic during the first lockdown (March–April 2020) that indicated that COVID-19 is not only a *medical* challenge but essentially a *spiritual* challenge of eschatological significance. Using images on Facebook, Ashimolowo added that COVID-19 was inferred in the reference to the “evil one” mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 3:3 and as being part of the eschatological “birth pangs” of Matthew 24. As soon as the first lockdown was imposed, Ashimolowo established a daily prayer meeting with his church members and social media followers from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. every Monday to Friday. His wife, Yemisi, also began an online gathering for women once every week tagged



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“When Women Wait” (WWW). Other churches, like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the Church of Pentecost (COP-UK), responded in a similar manner. The RCCG’s Central Office hosted a series of conversations to explore various implications of COVID-19 to church life. In addition to prayers, the COP encouraged its members to adhere to the government’s policies, celebrate the NHS and frontline workers, and publicised how they had been helping various communities in the pandemic crisis. They encouraged people to pray for George Floyd’s family, for the prime minister and for those who are sick or lonely.

This belief in waging spiritual warfare against coronavirus was, for our participants, based on two theological convictions that, we believe, are characteristic of African Christianity. There was the belief that God has power over all things, including viruses and that, therefore, through the prayers and supplication of God’s children, God could break through into the world to stop the pandemic. This belief is rather common in African Pentecostalism and is used against all types of problems. Several nurses repeated a dictum that was a mantra in some churches in the north-west, saying, “Jesus defeated death, what can ‘corona’ do?” They were all quick to acknowledge that while they were singing “What can the ‘rona’ do?” at church, they were witnessing what it actually did in the hospitals, and that it did not discriminate according to religious beliefs. It affected Christians and non-Christians alike. They all admitted to being unsettled though when they realised that, as suggested earlier, the virus was significantly discriminating against Black and brown people.

As weeks of the pandemic piled up into months, and it became clear that the pandemic would keep devastating the world, our African congregations did not stop praying. However, the theological implications of God seemingly not answering their prayers to stop the virus were immense. They all knew of preachers, prayer warriors and healing prophets who died of COVID-19 in Africa. How could this be? How could God not heal? How could God let millions of people die simply because of a virus? Most importantly, many wondered how God could let this *small* virus close churches and disrupt worship. Nevertheless, their general response shifted from “What can corona do?” to following all government guidelines, and some more, in order to stay safe. Many of them realised the threat of loss of life, either theirs or that of

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their friends, was real and serious. As such, they all became protective of their own – several nurses said they forced their families, especially husbands, to stay in isolation for most of 2020. In addition to being as cautious as possible, many of them used herbal concoctions, both to ingest and inhale, as a preventive measure.

### **Fellowship**

Africans are notoriously communal. Social distancing and isolation are strange concepts that would make even the most selfish African feel lonely. Yet, the virus made it necessary that people, including Africans, in the UK avoid physical contact with others. The implications of social distancing went against what is African about these African churches. How could they come together without shaking hands and hugging? How could they worship without singing? Pray without shouting? Fellowship without sharing meals? The chaos that followed the start of the first lockdown was extremely disorienting to even the most experienced African pastor. They all had to find ways to stay connected to their members during the lockdown – YouTube, Facebook Live and Zoom provided a temporary way out. Many ran their services just as they had done before, with little regard to the change of medium. This time around though, their members could choose from thousands of other services being streamed online and, before long, congregational engagement dwindled for many. Of course, a bad sermon preached online is still a bad sermon. A bad sermon delivered online with bad audio needs a special anointing for it not to chase listeners away. The same goes for worship music. In this age of Hillsong, Bethel and Maverick City dominating Christian worship on YouTube, it was rather a surprise to us how many African churches were unprepared for online delivery of their services.

Some congregations found a way and played to their strengths. Many of those churches used their online time more for connecting, catching up and praying, not singing or preaching. They also added onto their online fellowship an open access platform for constant communication, especially on WhatsApp and Facebook. Our nurses were confident that WhatsApp was their congregation's best surviving strategy during the pandemic. One called it their congregational lifeline. They were in constant touch with their leaders and were all kept abreast and involved in caring for the vulnerable—those who were old,

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sick or needy—among them. Their congregations continued to share meals online, and for those in need, meals were delivered to their doorsteps with no contact at all.

One nurse in a Nigerian congregation in Liverpool talked about how her congregation grew during the pandemic. In her words, her pastor realised early in the lockdown that what the congregation needed was not an online version of their usual church service but a fellowship space where they could get together to see one another. They did not need online sermons. They could get better sermons from many other platforms. They did not need worship music either. YouTube has numerous worship videos. As a result, they shaped their online fellowship primarily as a place where they could attend to each other's well-being. They cared very little for the normal churchy stuff like sermons and worship. Because of this, the fellowship attracted many new members to the church, most of whom are not in Liverpool at all. It doubled in size in the 12 months between March 2020 and March 2021. When we asked her for her explanation of this miracle, she said this was most likely because many Africans felt isolated and lonely and, therefore, needed an online place to connect. Some who joined their fellowship were of other faiths—Muslims, Baha'is and many others. This was the only congregation in our research that grew during the pandemic.

### Government Guidelines

African churches in Britain have an ambivalent relationship with the government. On the one hand, they have to live with the need to constantly negotiate their *immigrant-hood* and everything that the status of being an immigrant entails. As they are immigrants, the government has a lot of power on their livelihood. Many members of African churches have issues with the Home Office. Some live with the fear of being deported. Others live with the threat of racial profiling by the police. All of them have to make a living in the context of constant systemic racism. The lingering damage caused by the Windrush Scandal and Theresa May's *hostile environment* policies made Black people even more suspicious of the government. We still had almost all COVID-19 restrictions at the end of May when George Floyd was killed in Minnesota, sparking a worldwide protest movement against racism. Thus, Black Lives Matter shaped a great deal of African perception of the govern-

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ment in the UK in 2020. Overarching all this is the story of the brutality of British slavery and colonialism in Africa and Central America as well as the racist anti-immigrant rhetoric that forms the backdrop to Brexit. As such, there is always a general suspicion that the government does not have the interests of its Black subjects in mind when making policies and issuing guidelines. Thus, it took a long time for African churches to trust that the government cared for the struggles they went through in the pandemic. The most difficult concern was the fact that most of the key workers who needed to continue working in the pandemic were Black and brown people. Thus, generally speaking, it did appear for a while like white people were able to shelter in while Black and brown people kept on working, serving others (the white people who were sheltering) and putting their own lives and families at risk. Our nurses testified that it did seem, at times, to them that Black and brown people had been thrown to the frontlines and left there while white people withdrew to the safety of their homes. Across the Atlantic, Trumpian politics seemed to confirm the conspiracy theories of intentionally sacrificing Black and brown people (and the old) for the sake of the economy.

Overall, the African church in Britain remained wary of the government's motives. A Malawian nurse stated that her church found its own ways of dealing with the virus largely by listening to Black and brown doctors and scientists in their own communities. They took the virus seriously not because of the government's directives, but because of the advice of fellow Africans in the medical profession. Another, a Zimbabwean male nurse, talked about the potential dangers of the vaccines on Black people – either to be used for population control in Africa by donating malicious doses to Africa in abundance (for instance, to make people impotent to slow down population growth in the continent) or withholding it, as we are witnessing now, to let the Africans die.<sup>27</sup>

As African researchers, we understood the trepidation. History makes it difficult for Black and brown people to trust the British government. However, we expected that the suspicion would subside as the situation with the pandemic changed. We were surprised to see that even as the vaccines reduced the number of COVID-19 deaths in the UK, Black and brown people continued to distrust the government. We perceived that the Black Lives Matter protests increased their awareness of the implications of their status as Black immi-

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grants in Britain and the Windrush Scandal made them realise that they could never be completely at home in UK. While we did not agree with everything that was said in this regard, we found the discourse quite informing. This state of unsettledness not only has great implications on how Africans establish their churches and participate in God's mission in Britain, but also how they respond to COVID-19.

### Implications

All in all, it appears to us that African churches in the UK have adjusted themselves significantly to the pandemic. They have figured out that the pandemic means that their worship services have to change. It may have been a difficult transition, but they all found ways to stream their services. They have understood that as streaming online means stiff competition, both the message and medium need to be on point. Their members have an endless pool of sermons and worship music to choose from. Some are yet to learn that relationships are key – that strong relationships will offset any shortcomings in the online delivery of their services and, to the contrary, that good delivery will not make up for weak or bad relationships. This is exactly why only one congregation in our study grew during the pandemic and the remaining five are still in decline.

Reflecting on the research, one of the key issues that stood out to us is that, overall, the pandemic has made the African church in the UK more African. We understand the social need for this – they had to dig deep within themselves in order to survive the pandemic. In situations like the pandemic where migrant communities find themselves feeling more marginalised than normal, they tend to huddle closer together. Our nurses said that their churches felt so much more isolated during the pandemic than before. In fact, one lamented, “Only God cares for us, the world is trying to throw us down the abyss.” A Nigerian nurse suggested in an interview that her congregation felt like they are all alone in the world. Their intracongregational talk reflected a sense of liminality. They believed only God could help them because everyone else is out to get them. While we understand the social need to huddle, we wonder how this cultural and social isolation will affect the African churches' sense of mission across the UK. Even more, we wonder whether their feelings of abandonment (not only by the British government but also by some British Christian circles) would also affect how they talk about evangelising in Britain. How



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do they evangelise those whom they believe abandoned them in the pandemic? We are yet to see how they will turn this around. God's love compels them to love, especially in situations like these.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we are confident that we have seen a great deal of adapting among African churches. A huge proportion of that adapting happened naturally, in a reactionary manner. Most of it was done in a haphazard manner. As such, there is still need for many of these churches to adapt intentionally for the mission that God has for them in the UK. Strategic adapting will ensure that whatever positive changes have emerged during the pandemic will be sustained. There is a real danger of them returning to pre-COVID-19 normal in a society that has forgotten how they lived before 2020. In this sense, we realise that adaptive leadership theory is helpful to African churches in the UK. Intentional forward-looking adapting is needed to help them thrive wherever God has planted them. That said, we also trust that the plight of migrant communities in the world during the pandemic moves Christian communities to compassion. Followers of Jesus have a call to be hospitable to strangers, and that hospitality is critical in times like 2020. God help us all.

### Authors Bio



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26. For instance, see André Gagné, "The 'Spiritual Warfare' Worldview of Trump's Conspiracy Doctor is Part of a Transnational Movement," *Religion Dispatches*, August 14, 2020, <https://religiondispatches.org/the-spiritual-warfare-worldview-of-trumps-conspiracy-doctor-is-part-of-a-transnational-movement/>.
27. As of 1 October 2021 only 4.4 per cent of the population of Africa are fully vaccinated <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/56100076>.