



African Pentecostal Church Life in the Post- COVID-19 Era: Analysis and Proposals

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Abstract

At the peak of the pandemic, there seemed to be no neutral middle ground as far as the virus was concerned. While countries like New Zealand, South Korea and Taiwan were able to manage cases of the COVID-19 to the barest minimum, others like the USA, Brazil and India experienced extremely high infection rates. All nations were wrought with untold suffering because of this strand of the coronavirus family. As in all disasters, Christians all over the world have contended with many questions including what God is saying through these difficult times and what should be the response of the church. Among the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in most parts of Africa, one question that has frequently come up in discussions and sermons is what should be the face of the church in the post-COVID-19 era. This article is therefore an attempt to look at how the church in Africa should respond to the effects of the pandemic. The critical questions raised are: What does the church do after the period of COVID-19 has passed? What should be the face of the church after the pandemic? The article concludes that in the aftermath of the pandemic, the church in Africa should continue to deploy digital ministry along with in-person church services; adopt an intentional holistic pastoral care for its members and the wider community; empower small

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group meetings and reduce emphasis on big Sunday services and enhance its pastoral formation and leadership development strategies.

Key words: *Pentecostalism, Pandemics, Post-COVID-19, African Christianity, Digital Mission, Pastoral Care, Leadership Development*

Introduction

As I write in March 2021, several vaccines have been developed and approved by various regulatory bodies, perhaps the biggest vaccination campaign in history is happening in about 121 countries across the globe. There is hope of the global economy improving as the path to immunity against the virus becomes increasingly clear around the world.¹ Despite the logistical challenges of delivering the vaccines worldwide, the situation today is in stark contrast to a few months ago when the pandemic was at its peak when all nations were wrought with untold suffering because of this strand of the coronavirus family. The virus has exacted economic toll on the nations of the world with people losing jobs, church gatherings either controlled or completely banned, and all forms of social mingling replaced with social distancing protocols.

As in all disasters, Christians have grappled with many questions such as, *What is God trying to tell us in all of these? What is happening? What are we expected to do?* These and many questions have also engaged theologians in their quest to explore the time-honoured question, “Why does God allow suffering of this magnitude?” In some African indigenous religions, disasters are mainly interpreted as the anger of the gods. For example, in the *Kpele* religion of the Ga of Ghana, this scale of suffering would normally be attributed to the neglect of the deities, wrongful sacrifices offered to the deities or moral decadence of the Ga people and their priests (Wulorme).² For African Pentecostals, over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic period, there have been about four dominant views expressed in theological circles regarding the reasons for the outbreak.

First, some believe that what is happening is basically the signs of the end times. Thus, the coronavirus is a sign that the Armageddon will happen.³ Second, for others, the pandemic has happened as a welcome opportunity to evangelise the lost because many people come to terms with the reality of

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death in difficult times. So, for them, God is using this moment to bring the entire world to Himself.⁴ Third, there are those who believe the COVID-19 is God's way of calling people to repentance.⁵ Thus, disasters such as famine, blight and pestilence are all seen as God's way of calling people into repentance. Fourth, there is another group who believe that rationalising 'pain', 'evil' and 'suffering' to analyse this pandemic is a view that must not be entertained because there is so much we do not have access to in order to come to these conclusions. This group avoids rationalisation of the pandemic and lays everything squarely on human responsibility.⁶

Undoubtedly, a theological and biblical explanation of an ongoing suffering is not an easy endeavour to pursue, thus leading to these various views. All four positions have roots in Scripture and could be the reasons for the pandemic – only God knows. Of course, no Christian group or theologian can claim to have a monopoly over the details and purpose of this pandemic. Clearly, as Christians we can take consolation in the words of Paul, the apostle, that “For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect...”⁷ Therefore, all the above-mentioned views and many more could be the purpose for which we are encountering the pandemic at this period. The critical questions for this paper are: Where do we, as a church, go from here? What does the church do after the period of COVID-19 has passed? What should be the face of the church after all has been said and done?⁸ I am going to first consider responses from church history in the form of the early church epidemics, 1918 Spanish Flu, 1957 and 1960 pandemics and the face of the church thereafter. Then, using empirical data, I will explore how the church should respond to the current pandemic.⁹

Epidemics and Early Christians

There are two significant epidemics that struck the Roman Empire. The first one began in 165 AD during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. This second century epidemic¹⁰ is sometimes referred to as the “Plague of Gale,” which is believed to be smallpox.¹¹ It was so devastating that entire towns and villages were deserted because of the high mortality rate. Many soldiers died on the battlefield without any wounds as they bowed to the devastating effect of the epidemic. An estimated quarter of the population in the Roman Empire was believed to have died.¹² Almost a century later in 251 AD, another devastating

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epidemic swept through the Empire. McNeil asserts that, in Rome alone, about 5000 people reportedly died per day at the peak of this epidemic, which is known today to be measles. Even more staggering is that about two thirds of the population of Alexandria in Egypt perished from this epidemic.¹³

The human experiences and responses in these two plagues have been of interest not only to church historians but also public health experts and city planners because they have had enormous inputs into how these professions have developed over the years. As in most of human history, these disasters are framed as crises of faith to which religions ought to muster a response. Specifically, the disasters placed a demand on the predominantly pagan religions in the Roman Empire, but they could not respond to them. First, the pagan religions could not offer an adequate explanation to the conundrum of the epidemics. Second, the pagan religions proved ineffectual just as the science at the time did. To add to the already dire situation, many of the pagan priests fled the cities and towns at the height of the epidemic. These deficiencies led the adherents of the pagan faiths to evolve and adopt Christianity, the new religion in the empire, thus culminating in the significant increase in the number of Christians after the epidemic.¹⁴

There are several reasons for the numerical growth of Christianity at the time. Central to this is that Christianity offered a better explanation to the people's plight and proffered a projection of hope for the future despite the present devastation. McNeill sums it up as follows:

Another advantage Christians enjoyed over pagans was that the teaching of their faith made life meaningful even amid sudden and surprising death ... Christianity was, therefore, a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed.¹⁵

This indicates that when all the other faiths were presented with a conundrum, Christianity offered comfort and a better explanation. Christian doctrine engendered a call to action which was unprecedented within the empire.

Similarly, according to Dionysius, the then bishop of Alexandria, the Christians basically put into practice the biblical injunction in Matthew 25:35-40

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which enjoins the believer to take care of the poor and needy. Thus, values like love and charity were literally translated into social services and community solidarity. Stark also emphasises the solid nursing efforts even in the face of death while pagan priests and medical personnel left the scene.¹⁶ Despite taking care of the sick at the expense of their lives, it is generally reported that in the face of these two disasters, Christians were better able to cope than the rest of the population, albeit with significant loss of lives. The substantially higher rates of survival were not only considered a miracle but, in the aftermath of the epidemics, Christians constituted a greater majority of the population.

As a result of the significant loss of life, many pagans had lost their previously held interpersonal attachments. Therefore, in the aftermath of the two plagues, new bonds were formed which were mainly with the Christians who had cared for the poor during the epidemic. This shift in social networks led to a considerable increase in Christian conversions. The church's actions during the epidemics culminated in the growth and acceptance of the early church. More importantly, the persecution of the church ceased for some decades.¹⁷

The Church's Response to Key 20th Century Pandemics

In the twentieth century, there have been several pandemics but there are three major ones that had a devastating effect on a global scale. These are the global influenza pandemic of 1918 (H₁N₁) also known as the Spanish Flu,¹⁸ the Asian Influenza of 1957 (H₂N₂) and the Hong Kong Influenza (H₃N₂) pandemic of 1968. I have selected the 20th Century pandemics because they had a similar effect on the global scale like COVID-19. Of the three, my concentration will be on the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 because there are some parallels with the 2019 novel coronavirus.

It is estimated that over fifty million people died from the 1918 influenza pandemic around the world. It remains the most severe pandemic in modern history. This pandemic took place during the latter stages of the first world war when soldiers were returning to their home countries, including many African countries, after fighting mostly in Europe. This movement contributed to the spread in places like North America, Africa, Asia, South America, the South Pacific and Europe itself. While its origins are still in dispute, the high

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mortality rate and its devastating effect are not in doubt. For example, people felt symptoms in the morning and by night they were dead. Hospital facilities and staff were stretched to the limit to the extent that medical students were in frontline services in many western countries.¹⁹

As in the case of COVID-19, during the Spanish flu pandemic protocols were put in place in the absence of a vaccine. These interventions included closing churches, schools, restaurants, restricting transportation, banning public gatherings, enforcing social distancing as well as wearing masks. Fines were imposed on people caught not wearing protective gear. The pandemic was so serious to the extent that an American health officer shot three people for refusing to wear protective gear.²⁰

In Africa, health facilities were overwhelmed as the impact of the pandemic was especially significant, killing almost five percent of the population of South Africa – one of the five worst affected parts in the world. In Sierra Leone, it was estimated that about four percent of the population of Freetown lost their lives from the Spanish flu while approximately six percent of Kenya's entire population perished within a nine-month period.²¹ The pandemic was carried by ship along the West African coast from Sierra Leone to Ghana hitting Cape Coast and Accra with an estimated five percent of Accra's population losing their lives.²² It is interesting to note that clergy and churches responded to the closure of churches in similar fashion as the COVID-19 period. There were churches who supported the move by governments to ban public assemblies and some that protested against such actions. Some church groups framed the pandemic as signs of the end times, others as God's punishment for sin, while others read it as a medical emergency devoid of any spiritual connotation.

In the 1918 pandemic, churches were transformed into hospitals when they realised there was overcrowding in the hospitals. They ministered particularly to the poor – they took them, cleaned them, and fed them. Several churches also provided transportation and financial donations to address the pandemic head-on. After the pandemic, churches grew in leaps and bounds because of their service to the community. It also led to new churches being planted in the 1920s. The episode gave the church a new lens. In Africa, the aftermath of the 1918 pandemic brought about dozens of African Initiated Churches and movements such as the *Aladura* movement in Nigeria, the Twelve Apostles

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Church in Ghana (1918) and Simon Kimbangu's miracle services which were to culminate in the Kimbanguist Church in Democratic Republic of Congo in 1921. It was also a time when Pentecostal revivals made inroads in the West African region.²³ History shows clearly that in moments of crisis, when Christians step up and serve others at the expense of their lives, doing it with energy and a sense of love and vocation, it impacts the course of history.

When we compare the responses in church life during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and COVID-19 in 2020, from a theological and a historical perspective, the differences between the two are striking. Moreover, when the responses to the different pandemics are approached from a sociological perspective, the picture changes. Unlike the early 20th century when the church – consisting mainly of the mainline historical churches - was significantly in the minority and simply obliged, the situation is different today. The change in society with its increase in the number of churches and the diversities within Christianity have contributed to some of the resistance to the temporary closure of churches during the pandemic. Also, technologies that enable church services to be broadcast or streamed live did not exist during the 1918 pandemic.

Visions of the Future

Thus far we have considered the pandemics and the responses of the church from a historical perspective. However, due to sociological changes over the course of time, it is imperative to consider the face of the church in the aftermath of COVID-19. The changes that society is constantly undergoing places a demand on the church to become strategic in its missional agenda in the post-COVID-19 era. In this section we are going to consider some of the key areas the church should pay attention to: such as sustaining digital ministry, strengthening intentional pastoral care, empowering small group meetings and re-examining leadership development strategies.

Sustaining Digital Ministry

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, when church buildings in most African countries were forced to temporarily close and public assemblies were banned by legal instruments, one of the main means through which the church continued to serve was a massive deployment of digital technology.

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Many pastors and congregations were moved from a prior lack of technological skills to fully embracing these tools within a short period. Churches employed digital tools like Zoom, Cisco WebEx, Facebook Live, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, etc. for online church services and prayer meetings. In addition, some churches adopted TV and radio broadcasts for the very first time to reach their members and offer encouragement to people stricken with fear of the 2019 novel coronavirus. Prior to this, some churches had been sceptical and, in some cases, suspicious about churches that deployed online tools.

In the post-COVID-19 era, one of the things the church must endeavour to retain is a deployment of digital platforms along with in-person church services. The church cannot afford to discard the gains made or make redundant the skills acquired during the pandemic. The church needs to integrate every tool to reach the lost and serve her members. Perhaps, the world as we know it has gone forever and the church needs to discern what the Spirit of God is saying. The obvious question that calls for a deeper reflection is, What does the changing circumstances across Africa mean for the church?

For years, many Pentecostal/Charismatic churches have become used to people coming to them, to the extent that they have become accustomed to this type of attractional model. This model has led to a massive investment in infrastructure such as large church buildings and related facilities. The mega church concept has become part and parcel of the church in Africa. While this attractional model has had its advantages, at this moment in time its strengths are being challenged by the pandemic and other events. Thus, a deeper introspection ought to take place where the megachurch concept is considered in the light of the Matthew 28 mandate of “Go ye”. With the experience of COVID-19, the hard reality is that some people are going to feel reluctant to come to brick-and-mortar church buildings. Accordingly, this is the time to ask questions like, How does the church reach this constituency that will not come to her? How does the church reimagine her gatherings, as equipping forums to hear from God? and How does the church plant more missional churches through community engagement?

COVID-19 has come with increasing needs for people. For the church to come to terms with the diverse needs of people, it is imperative that it starts going to them rather than wait for people to come to her. Within the post-

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COVID-19 context, the church has a responsibility to frequent places where people are already congregating. One of such places is digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube just to mention a few. The church needs to frequent these spaces to understand what people are discussing (trends) and search what is on their heart in order to fulfil what God wants to do through the body of Christ. Accordingly, combining digital ministry with in-person church services is critical in maintaining the church's holistic missional agenda in the post-COVID-19 era.

These are uncharted times which call for a rethink of how the church in Africa has approached ministry over the years. For some churches, it will be theologically difficult to imbibe this new normal but that is not novel. It is said that when the Wright brothers conceived the idea of the aeroplane as a faster means of travel, there were Christians who found it difficult to embrace the very idea. They demonised it to the extent that some even argued that if God wanted man to fly, he would have given him wings.²⁴ With hindsight, this argument looks untenable as the aeroplane has opened the world up for the gospel to reach remote areas.

Fortunately, there are several 'new normal' ways in the Scriptures, in which the church had to refocus its strategies to engender growth. For example, in Acts 8:1-5, when the apostles appeared reluctant to leave Jerusalem, Luke records how the persecution of the church led to the spread of the gospel in different parts of the Greco-Roman world.²⁵ We can see that the persecution meant that they had to adopt different ways and methods of spreading the gospel. The resilience of the early church was incredible as they had to adapt to the changing circumstances of their world.

Also, if we consider how information was disseminated in the early persecuted church, we can appreciate what they went through to ensure the Scriptures, as we know them today, came into being. For example, Paul wrote letters from a gaol cell in Rome, which were circulated to various churches in different contexts. Although Paul was limited by the prison walls, he still found a way to impact and attract people who needed the gospel.²⁶ Similarly, this pandemic has brought about untold limitations to the world we are used to, and we must find different ways of communicating the gospel – ways that people can identify with Jesus. If persecution could lead to church growth because they were forced to change their methods and Paul could defy the limitations of the

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prison walls to disseminate the epistles, then the contemporary church has a responsibility to find new ways of keeping to its missional mandate post-COVID-19.

It is interesting to note that digital platforms are significantly populated and offer a stage for the missionary agenda of the church. Ignoring these channels amounts to leaving a particularly important constituency out of the Great Commission. Overlooking these media sums up to the church not functioning to its full capacity or utilising all its arsenals to win the lost. These platforms are being frequented by people, almost every second, which works in tandem with what Jesus said, that ‘the harvest is plentiful.’²⁷ Facebook alone has over two billion users in addition to other channels like Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Google and YouTube.

Intentional Holistic Pastoral Care

In addition to the digital ministry, intentional pastoral care is an area the majority of my interlocutors argued should be strengthened. Pastoral care in the sense of the practical outworking of the concerns of the church in relation to the daily and ultimate needs of its members and the broader community is critical for the church’s survival and growth in any period but even more vital in the post-COVID-19 era. Generally, this concern originates as a response of the love that God has for his people and the world at large. As an integral part of the general calling of God through his people, pastoral care should be given particular attention not only considering how the church as an institution attends to the needs of its members and the wider community, but also how individual members express the love of God to their neighbours in practical terms. Thus, there is a place for both individual and corporate aspects with respect to pastoral care.

In the New Testament, we see that pastoral care takes many forms including *kerygma* (preaching), *didachē* (teaching) and *paraklēsis* (practical application).²⁸ The paraclete ministry which includes encouragement, exhortation and consolation may be further broken down into pastoral (shepherding), prophetic, priestly and ‘physicianly’, which connotes healing. These different perspectives of the paraclete ministry have a common feature, which is that Christian caring always has a missionary thrust. For example, under the pastoral or shepherding perspective, we can speak of the parable of the lost

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sheep (Luke 15:4:7) and Jesus the good shepherd (John 10: 7-18); for prophetic, we can refer to Jesus and the woman of Samaria (John 4:15-32); for priestly, the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-21) and for *physicianly*, Jesus' healing of a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). In the context of the post-COVID-19 church, I am particularly interested in the shepherding perspective of pastoral care which implies the notion of leaders or pastors whose relationship with the members is close, trustworthy, self-sacrificing, nurturing, guiding, and protecting. Thus, I am here referring to the practical everyday care of members which is intentionally structured by the church – evidence of which can be seen throughout the New Testament (for example, the choosing of the seven in Acts 6:1-7 and Paul's collection for the poor in Jerusalem in 2 Cor 8:1-9).

In the post-COVID-19 era, one of the key things that needs deepening and strengthening is the shepherding aspects of the church's responsibility to the flock. The point has been made earlier that during the previous major pandemics across the world, the pastors (and churches), who served their flock and community, even at the peril of their own lives, resulted in numerical church growth after the pandemics. Also, during the COVID-19 period, pastoral care became a critical aspect of what the church did. There are several examples from the corporate level to the intentional practical outworking of love from pastors. In terms of the corporate examples, we can mention the role of the Ghanaian Pentecostal church, The Church of Pentecost in providing critical support to the state by turning their state-of-the-art international convention centre²⁹ near Accra into a recovery centre for COVID-19 patients. In addition to this, the church also provided several information vans to help with public education on the pandemic, especially to those in the rural areas.³⁰ Perhaps this could engender numerical church growth in the post-COVID-19 era, but even more vital is the idea of the church serving its shepherding role in the wider community as well as its members. This shepherding concept is what the corporate church should deepen post-COVID-19 era if the church is interested in affecting society because Christian caring should always have a missionary focus.

At the individual level, stories of local pastors providing critical pastoral care abounds. This included provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), essential food items, money, and other forms of support to their members and

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the poor in general. These were generally as a response to the rising needs of members brought about by the city lockdowns, the unfortunate loss of jobs and general hardship at the height of the pandemic. What happened was a conscious effort of pastors to meet the needs of their members as well as the wider community, especially to the vulnerable and the poor. This deliberate practical outworking of love towards believers and non-believers during the pandemic is something the church should continue to offer the world. The key point however is that every aspect of Christian care should have a mission orientation.

For the church to be effective in showing Christian care, she must learn from the experiences during the pandemic period. While the church did extremely well to show care both at the corporate and individual levels, the weaknesses in her welfare system were exposed. This can be seen in the varied concerns and proposals expressed by some pastors regarding finding new ways to express the shepherding role of the church:

As a Minister of the Gospel, I was overwhelmed by the pivotal role played by the Christian bodies during the peak of the pandemic, especially the Church of Pentecost. At most times, the Church was in the news for the good it did. However, in some local churches, there were concerns because not enough funds were available to cater for the needs of the people. Maybe COVID-19 is calling for a restructure of our church system to make, at each level, a robust stand-alone pastoral system.³¹

I believe that after this pandemic, there should be a shift in the church's focus from investing in physical properties to investing in people. We should provide opportunities for skills training, creation of startup capital and creative ideas for church members to revamp their businesses.³²

Caring for seniors and the vulnerable should be a priority for the church after the pandemic. As churches make decisions about a return, it is important that those decisions also include the best ways to minister and reach out to their vulnerable population as well as those living in senior communities.³³

The church should have a critical look at job orientation. During the lockdown periods, it was observed that within a week some members did not

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have cash to sustain themselves and the church had to support them. This revealed that members need a good understanding of their job and how they can invest for the "rainy day."³⁴

The views expressed above show diverse need areas in which the church can fashion a new welfare system to intentionally perform its shepherding role. The call is clear that in the post-COVID-19 era, the church should continue to show Christian love to the poor, the vulnerable and seniors, looking beyond the regular welfare areas like marriage, death, and hospitalisation. This will mean finding new and creative ways to show practical everyday care to members. The most critical point, however, is that the shepherding role of the church in the post-COVID-19 era should always have a missional thrust.

Empowering Small Group Meetings

The need for a culture of empowered discipleship in local churches was critically discussed in theological circles at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵ The reason is that the implications of discipleship toward the betterment and success of the church cannot be overemphasised. Discipleship happens best in small group³⁶ settings where each believer can incorporate basic Christian principles into life transformation and be accountable to each other. Stuart Bowyer asserts that small groups are transcultural, transgenerational, and sometimes even birthed out of the very transcendental nature of God.³⁷ Bowyer's statement encapsulates the good intent of cell groups, whose primary functions are evangelism and discipleship within the context of the community. Also, Jesus' use of a small group to continue his mission and set-up an interlocking multigenerational chain of disciple making is a testament of the effectiveness of small groups. Additionally, research shows that the early church was a movement of small groups of about 10-15 people meeting in the homes of the wealthier Christians. While from time to time, they met in larger groups (Acts 20:7-8), this model of church life contributed immensely to the growth of the early church.³⁸

In the post-COVID-19 era, the church should envision a church without the big Sunday services, which for years have traditionally been the most important meeting. The big Sunday services have led to the putting up of megachurch building projects to accommodate as many people as possible in a centralised location. Although this has helped in so many ways, including the

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church's visibility in diverse communities, the whole idea of the big Sunday service was shaken by the pandemic when church buildings were closed down to prevent a further spread of COVID-19. Many churches, especially the ones built on large Sunday gatherings were affected, which had a negative impact on many Christians who depended on such gatherings for their fellowship and spiritual equipping. In fact Joel Comiskey has already pointed out the personal anonymity nature of megachurches, where individual members are likely to be swallowed up in the crowds, leads to a lack of accountability and close relationships as well as a clear lack of leadership development.³⁹ This is not to play down the role of megachurches to the body of Christ, but to reflect on how the church reimagine her gatherings as equipping forums to hear from God post-COVID-19? And how does the church plant more decentralised missional communities through her community engagement? I believe lessons can be learned from the pandemic period, where the emphasis was on small group meetings like covenant family meetings and family based devotional meetings. But can the contemporary church survive without the big Sunday services? These are the questions that should engage our attention as we move into a new phase in church life.

There are several advantages to building small missional communities which could be harnessed to engender both spiritual and numerical growth. Foremost, it is easy to build a discipling-empowered culture within the church where discipling converts becomes the emphasis of the leadership of small groups. In this case, the situation where some people found it difficult to fellowship when church buildings were temporarily closed during the pandemic would be drastically reduced. This would in turn address the challenge of members who have the tendency to overly depend on the 'anointing' of their pastors. In other words, an empowered missional culture will lead to the discipleship of converts. Additionally, it is easy to put in place a proper pastoral care regime when there are many smaller decentralised missional communities, rather than the emphasis on the big Sunday services.

Also, funds that were ordinarily allocated to build other megachurch auditoriums can be channelled into other projects including practical support for the small missional communities. Furthermore, it is obviously easy to follow the progress of new converts within the small group setting as discipleship is usually the emphasis of these family-oriented missional communities. Subse-

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quently, there can be more empowered Christian leaders raised within this setting because of the conscious discipleship process. Perhaps what the churches should reflect on is how to meaningfully network their missional communities within their specific contexts. This could vary from church to church or from one geographical location to another. This is critical for strengthening the church's mission and monitoring growth.

Enhanced Leadership Development

Finally, the development of leaders should be aligned with contemporary events and biblical principles. Leadership development within the context of this article is considered as improving the capacity of ministers and lay leaders toward effective engagement of leadership roles. This deals with the process of influencing pastoral groups to facilitate the attainment of relevant goals for the church in the post-COVID-19 era. One of the cardinal principles of leadership development, therefore, is how the church trains its leaders to deal with unpredictable issues as well as being able to adapt to wide-ranging challenges spiritually, cognitively, and behaviourally.

The biblical perspective of leadership development essentially encapsulates the idea of discipleship.⁴⁰ For example, the Great Commission requires all believers to make disciples. Given this, both ministers and lay leaders have a mandate for leadership development. It is therefore the churches' responsibility to empower these leaders with principles that incorporate the essential contemporary and biblical elements of relational discipleship. This connects with the idea of the church remaining missional in everything she does after the pandemic is over.

All the three proposals mentioned above have implications on leadership development strategies the church should adopt in the post-COVID-19 era. This element is critical especially when dealing with the church's visibility on digital platforms as mission fields, use of small groups with missional orientation and offering a more strategic pastoral care regime to members. Accordingly, there must be a rethink of how the church develops leaders at every level - be they ordained ministers or lay leaders. This has implications for pastoral/ministerial and lay leadership training. Therefore, there should be a curriculum review of the various theological institutions for ministerial formation and lay leadership training specifically targeting the inclusion of tech-

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nology as a key element in pastoral training. This will facilitate the formation of ministers/Christian workers who are technologically well-informed to work in the contemporary church. Thus, there is the need to review the processes of selecting both candidates for pastoral ministry and lay leadership. The emphasis should include among other things producing church leaders who have the flexibility to employ different shepherding methodologies in the field, as well as to adapt to the constantly changing dynamics of ministry. In summary, leadership development that is strategic, intentional, multi-dimensional, all-encompassing, and targeted at producing Christian leaders for the contemporary church should be the focus of the church in the post-COVID-19 period.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to track pandemics from history and demonstrated how the church came out of these trying periods stronger and well placed to serve the community. There will be several opportunities for church growth, numerically and spiritually in the period after the pandemic. The church should reflect on new strategies and new fields to reach with the Gospel. While the pandemic brought untold difficulties in many aspects of church life, it also afforded the church the chance to reconsider her missional mandate and over-reliance on big Sunday services in order to find alternative ways to fulfil the great commission.

Essentially, the church in Africa has the opportunity to consider how she can sustain herself financially, and even be in the position to offer support to her members in circumstances where the tithes and offerings reduce or stop coming in, as was the case in some churches during the pandemic. Additionally, the COVID-19 period offers the prospect to revise her approach toward the use of data and record keeping. Despite the many opportunities, the period after the pandemic also presents the church with some challenges. For example, we should begin to contemplate how to bring the elderly and vulnerable back into fellowship after an extended time of staying away from church because of the pandemic. Also, how quickly churches can recover from the after-effects of the pandemic is a challenge to grapple with, as well as some welfare issues, particularly having to deal with members who feel the church was not supportive enough during the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, the

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church might have to consider ways of dealing with members who are still afraid of large gatherings and reluctant to come to fellowship.

Despite the opportunities and challenges, it is clear from history that the churches who played critical roles and cared for the wider community during pandemics grew in leaps and bounds after the crisis. Nevertheless, for churches to take advantage of this numerical and spiritual growth, each needs to pause and reflect in order to hear what the Spirit is saying in their specific contexts. These are not normal times, and the church must seek new fields in addition to the old ones to fulfil her mandate.

Author Bio



Dr. Justice A. Arthur holds a PhD from the University of Bayreuth in Bavaria, Germany. He is currently the head of the Department of Theology at the School of Theology, Mission and Leadership (STML), Pentecost University in Accra, Ghana. Prior to coming to PU, he worked as a research fellow at the Chair of Religious Studies (Religionswissenschaft) with special focus on Africa at the University of Bayreuth.

His areas of research include the use of the Bible in African Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity; Media and Material Culture of African Pentecostal/Charismatic churches; the encounters of other religious traditions with Pentecostals and issues of religion and development.

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1. According to the World Health Organization, the approved COVID-19 vaccines so far include Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine, Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine, Johnson & Johnson/Janssen COVID-19 Vaccine and the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine with many more at the final stage of the clinical trial stage.
 2. Justice Arthur, *The Politics of Religious Sound: Conflict and the Negotiation of Religious Diversity in Ghana* (Berlin: LIT, 2018).
 3. John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 1.
 4. Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*, 74-77; N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 1; Acts 8:1-4.
 5. Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*, 57-65; Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 1-3; Luke 13:1-5.

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6. Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 1-3
7. 1 Cor. 13:9-12 (RSV)
8. In this article, the post-COVID-19 era is taken to be the period after a vaccine is developed, when all the protocols are removed or generally a long-term period from 2021 and beyond.
9. This article employs a combination of historical and empirical data. The historical data is based mainly on secondary sources while the primary data sources were mainly observations and interviews. In all 80 Pentecostal/Charismatic ministers and theologians were interviewed.
10. I use epidemic, plagues and disaster interchangeably to refer to pandemics.
11. Rodney Stark. *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020).
Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. (Princeton, NJ: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997).
12. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 76.
13. William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976).
14. Stark, *Cities of God*, 82.
15. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 108.
16. Stark, *Cities of God*, 82.
17. Stark and Bainbridge, *Of Churches, Sects, and Cults*, 117
18. Spanish Flu because as a neutral country during the war, Spain did not impose wartime censorship, so the newspapers disseminated a lot of information creating the impression that the virus emerged from there or it was its epicentre
19. Wylie McLallen, "The Pandemic of 1918." In *After the Pandemic: Visions of life Post COVID-19*, by Lawrence Knorr, 24-30. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Sunbury, 2020).
20. Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*, 74-77; Wylie McLallen, *The Pandemic of 1918*, 25.
21. Fred Andayi, Sandra S Chaves, and Marc-Alain Widdowson. 2019. "Impact of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Coastal Kenya ." *Tropical Medicine and Infectious Disease* 4 (2):1-14.
22. K. David Patterson. 1983. "The Influenza Epidemic of 1918-19 in the Gold Coast." *Journal of African History* 24: 485-502.
23. Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Centre for Charismatic and Pentecostal Studies, 2001); Patterson, *The Influenza Epidemic of 1918-19 in the Gold Coast*, 406.
24. Myron Pierce, *Digital Ministry: Pastoring in a Pandemic*. (Omaha: MyronPierce Ministry, 2020).
25. Scott Moreau, Gary R Corwin, and Gary B McGee. 2015. *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
26. Paul wrote the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and to Philemon from the Prison Cell.
27. Matthew 9:37
28. Jacob J. Firet, *Dynamics in Pastoring*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).
29. For details on this story, see: <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/church-of-pentecost-offers-convention-facility-as-isolation-centre/>
30. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/pentecost-church-donates-10-vans-to-support-ncces-public-education-on-coronavirus/>
31. Asiedu, P. Interview with Justice Arthur. Personal interview. Accra, June 6, 2020.
32. Ampomah, Aba. Interview with Justice Arthur. Personal interview. Accra, June 1, 2020.
33. Kwakye, K. Interview with Justice Arthur. Personal interview. Accra, July 1, 2020.
34. Essel, G. Interview with Justice Arthur. Personal interview. Accra, June 10, 2020.
35. Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*, 57-65; Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 1-3.

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36. Small groups may be defined in the context of this essay as a face-to-face gathering of three to twenty persons aimed at the betterment of one another and the wider good of others.
37. Stuart W. Boyer *Biblical Leadership Development Principles for Developing Organizational Leaders at Every Level*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 7.
38. Stark, *Cities of God*, 86.
39. Joel Comiskey, 2016. *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church: New Testament Insights for the 21st Century Church*. Moreno Valley, CA: CSC Publishing.
40. Boyer, *Biblical Leadership Development*, 18