



# Religious and Theological Responses to the Phenomenon of Pandemics in Nigeria

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## **2. Religious and Theological Responses to the Phenomenon of Pandemics in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The onslaught of pandemics has been greeted with different responses by Nigerians, particularly Christians. Pandemics such as the Spanish flu of 1918/1919, HIV/AIDS, plagues of Ebola virus, Lassa fever, and COVID-19, shook the country due to their deadly nature. Apart from governmental efforts in curbing the spread of these sorts of infections, people tend to look to the church for solutions. Of course, Malachi 2:7 states that the mouth of the priest ought to preserve knowledge; hence, there is the popular notion that church leaders should declare the mind of God to the people, thereby charting the course of their thinking and supporting informed response to situations. Among the different schools of thought which have emerged about pandemics in Nigeria are those linking the plagues with scientific manipulations as well as the political agenda of Islamizing the nation. Some others opine that these infections are divine punishments occasioned by the wickedness of people while there is also eschatological interpretation of the phenomenon. Since no consensus exists on the interpretation of the pandemics, different responses have also emerged. For instance, some gospel ministers have been preaching repentance, believing that the end of the world has come. Others have taken to prayers, and positive confession of faith while

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there are those who are indifferent to the situation. The study employs a descriptive survey to sample the impact of pandemics on people's thoughts in Nigeria. Many Christians hold that repentance is the immediate need to attract divine help since there seems to be no proven medical intervention in view. Faith in Jesus Christ, for healing and deliverance from pandemics, by appropriating His promises in the Bible, is proposed for salvation.

**Key words:** *religious, theological, response, phenomenon, pandemics, Nigeria.*

## Introduction

**T**he Bible declares that “there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>1</sup> Pandemics are not new phenomena in the history of humans. Indeed, historical records reveal how pandemics devastates lives and depletes resources that could have been used for the development of nations. In fact, one may argue that “pandemics have killed more than natural disasters or wars.”<sup>2</sup> COVID-19, a recent viral infection which came like a flash flood sweeping away lives and properties, is just one of those pandemics, and it may not be the last. Michael Ogunewu, a Church Historian, in agreement with other scholars, identifies two earlier deadly pandemics: the Asiatic cholera pandemic of 1817 - 1824, and the Spanish Flu (Bubonic Plague) of 1918 - 1920.<sup>3</sup> These undesirable occurrences have continued to beg for responses from both individuals and corporate bodies such as the Church. Some of the emerging responses have sporadically linked political and religious challenges in the country (Nigeria) to the pandemics. Apart from HIV/AIDS, social media has widely promoted COVID-19 such that unverified reports are common and influence people's responses to the pandemic.

## Past Pandemics in Nigeria

Nigeria has had her share in both epidemics and pandemics in the past which claimed many lives. The country has also responded in different manners that were “conditioned by a number of factors ranging from spiritual, cultural, political, social and circumstantial factors.”<sup>4</sup> The major infections covered by this study, excluding the most recent COVID-19 pandemic, are the 1918 Worldwide Influenza (Spanish Flu or Bubonic Plague), HIV/AIDS, and Ebola virus epidemic. The worldwide influenza wreaked havoc globally carting along

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millions of souls to their untimely graves. “This disease afflicted nations at a time when they were barely recovering from the devastating effects of World War II.”<sup>5</sup> The sudden surge of the pandemic on African soil had a devastating impact on the continent with “poor sanitary conditions, low level of nutrition intake, endemic malaria affliction and in some cases, widespread famine. The flu pandemic was the single largest demographic disaster of the twentieth century.”<sup>6</sup> It was called “*lukuluku*” to describe its calamitous effects. *Lukuluku* is the kind of disease that plagues fowls by killing them en masse, thus revealing that a greater number of people died of the influenza. The other word used for the influenza among Yoruba people of Nigeria is *ajakale arun*, translated as widespread pestilence. Modern History professor, David Killingray, reports that in southern Nigeria, as many as four hundred and fifty thousand (450,000) people died of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Information on people’s response to the influenza pandemic is scanty compared to the current COVID-19 probably because the Church in Nigeria was still relatively young and under the leadership of missionaries in addition to poor literacy level at the time.

The first diagnosis of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria was in 1985. By the following year, its report was in Lagos (a metropolitan city in southwestern Nigeria)<sup>8</sup> and has since been disastrous in lives and families. Systematic Theologian, Emiola Nihinlola, postulates that “it is no longer news that HIV/AIDS have moved from epidemic to pandemic level.”<sup>9</sup> Initially, AIDS was a strange illness since it was uncommon. Indeed, “in the early 1980s AIDS first appeared as a real danger to the health, development and survival of millions of individuals, families and communities throughout the world.”<sup>10</sup> This virus is found in humans, reducing the defence ability of the immune system, and responsible for different illnesses like common cold (catarrh), measles, hepatitis A, B, and C, chickenpox, polio, and rabies.<sup>11</sup> HIV/AIDS is popular for being principally transmitted sexually, although the virus could also be contracted by other means. According to Nihinlola, “in the Western world, AIDS transmission has taken place more through homosexuals, peno-anal process. However, in Africa, it is passed most commonly through multiple hetero-sexual partnership.”<sup>12</sup> Different researchers have found that the ravaging effect of HIV/AIDS has resulted in millions of people being infected and others lost to the world beyond. Some hold that the AIDS pandemic is God’s punishment on homosexuals, illicit drug users, and promiscuous people. As such, the stigma that

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goes with victims of HIV/AIDS has made many to hide and die in the silence of an “unknown sickness.” Sometimes, the viral infection has even been associated with witchcraft attacks on families. So, even when people are aware of their HIV status, and despite the Nigerian government’s encouragement to step out for treatment, many prefer to remain hidden for fear of stigmatisation.

The scourge of Ebola is another threat to life in Nigeria. The disease was brought to Nigeria through a Liberian. Unnati Patel, et al reported that the first case to reach Nigeria occurred on 20 July 2014 when a patient hospitalised in Liberia flew to Lagos against medical advice. The patient was symptomatic in transit and ill at the time of landing.<sup>13</sup> The confirmation of the Liberian’s positive test to Ebola Virus Disease made the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Health declare “an Ebola emergency” and opened the Emergency Operations Center. The centre initiated an Incident Management System to centralise the Ebola response in the country.”<sup>14</sup> The Centre constituted a team of one hundred and fifty (150) “contact tracers” of epidemiological investigators who tracked down and identified eight hundred and ninety-eight (898) contacts linked to the index case. These individuals were under surveillance and had a total of eighteen thousand-five hundred (18,500) face-to-face visits to check for fever and other symptoms of the Ebola disease. Symptomatic persons were swiftly isolated for further testing.<sup>15</sup> The swift intervention of the Federal Ministry of Health in isolating the victims dealt the final blow to the epidemic. “The epidemic lasted for a total of 92 days from the day the first case was reported (20 July 2014) till the day the country was declared Ebola free by WHO (20 October 2014).”<sup>16</sup> The precautionary measures in place were hand washing and other hygienic cultures promoted by the government.

## Reflections on COVID-19

COVID-19 is relatable to a battalion of soldiers without physical weapons. It emerged to demobilise highly sophisticated armies. Indeed, the entire global armies put together has been unable to withstand it. Professors of virology find it difficult to control this deadly virus – a virus that has stirred up different theories, political enmity, and various restrictive measures such as social distancing, wearing of face coverings, and others. This “infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus,”<sup>17</sup> continues to disrupt families and

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communal living, driving away victims whose loved ones watch helplessly as they are ebbed away. The audacity of the disease was immediately obvious at its emergence when it sent everyone off the streets and locked up schools, businesses, and religious centres. The virus that claimed millions of lives without gun or bomb, really declared a war against human health worldwide. “COVID-19 pandemic has affected every country of the world as both developed and developing countries were brought to their knees. Countries with the best health facilities are grappling with the fatalities of COVID-19.”<sup>18</sup> It is teaching the entire world that no one is sufficient on his own. One would have expected that Nigerians, in a country with poor health care delivery, would have been dropping dead on the streets, yet God showed the nation mercy.

Ogunewu observed that “while the responses of some have been through caution and observation of rules of hygiene, there are others who are responding by panicking.”<sup>19</sup> Initially, Christians’ response to the pandemic is likened to the bereaved person who passed through different stages of grief. The first response is that of denial or rejection. The common statement among Nigerian Christians whenever they heard any bad news is “I reject it in Jesus’ name.” Making positive confession has greatly influenced the thought pattern of every Nigerian (including non-Christians), coupled with the fact that the blood of Jesus Christ is efficacious to ward off every evil. This made many Christians to deny the presence of COVID-19 in the country. The second stage of grief is anger, “as one begins to accept reality.”<sup>20</sup> Many were angry at China where the virus originated, then at the WHO that was too slow to declare the virus attack as a global problem. However, Nigerians’ anger became pronounced when the country went into lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus and there was no provision for palliatives to keep them from hunger.

Bargaining is the next stage when “the grieving person tries to make bargains with a greater force, asking, “If I do this, will you take away my loss.””<sup>21</sup> Prayer mobilisation through social media became prominent at this stage particularly as NCDC (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control) gave statistics of daily rise in infection rate. Fear of being infected led to a certain level of compliance and there were suggestions of homemade cures of the virus. Steaming, use of spices, bitter herbs, hanging of *akoko* leaves (*newbouldia laevis*) at doorsteps and windows to ward off the spirit behind the virus, while some literally

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delved into offering sacrifices to idols to ward off the evil. Acceptance, which is the final stage of grief, is when the bereaved accept the fact that their loved one is dead. It took time before some Christians believed that coronavirus is a reality. Despite its devastating effect on Western nations, some Nigerians still refuse to accept that the pandemic is real, probably due to the political manipulations as well as their religious leaders' influence. Some accepted the fact reluctantly when it became difficult to attend church services because of the lockdown.

The 'hot weather and herbs' theories were factors to reckon with in the fight against the pandemic in Nigeria. The argument was that since Nigerians have been fighting malaria fever without going to hospitals, with herbs such as neem (*dongoyaro*), pawpaw leaves, mango leaves, lemon grass leaves, and a host of others, coronavirus is only another malaria that could be treated the same way at minimal cost. Steam inhalation of boiled herbs settled in the minds of the people as a potent provision in killing the virus as with the hot weather in the environment which many believed prevented further spread of the virus. This was why the government's campaign for COVID-19 testing had been falling on deaf ears.

## The Theology of Pandemics

In layman's language, theology is man's response to issues from a religious perspective. Responses to COVID-19 pandemic have not come from clerics alone but also from the general populace, whether Christians or non-Christians. The pandemic has raised different questions ranging from metaphysical, theodicean as well as eschatological. For average Nigerians who do not pay attention to news either in print or electronic media, the scourge of coronavirus came suddenly and questions such as "What is this?" "Why is it happening?" filled the air. "One of the basic reasons for the pandemic is the fact that men and women are far from God, and are often not acting according to His plan. Unless men and women know God and His saving power in their lives, they are bound by sin." <sup>22</sup>

Among the ancient Yoruba of Nigeria, whenever there was any unusual event that occurred, such as famine, drought, epidemics, or pandemics, the natural step they took was to turn to the divine. In most cases, their diviners (*babal-*

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*awo*) or herbalists would consult with their oracles and decipher the hand of the gods in the unpalatable occurrences. It was not uncommon to hear them say ‘the gods are angry’ and they should be appeased with sacrifice in order for the problem to go away. They would stipulate conditions for the acceptance of the sacrifice which in most cases rested on the obedience of the people. The worship of the gods of pandemics is to stem the tide of the anger of the gods. Some Nigerians have responded to COVID-19 this way while some professing Christians have sought solace from syncretic practices.

The Church in Nigeria has been responsive at denominational or local church level, but not yet with one voice. Church leaders are teaching their followers based on ‘divine revelation.’ While the commercially-oriented church leaders are using the occasion to make ‘quick’ money through the sales of symbolic elements such as water, anointing oil, and candles, to ward off evil spirit attached to the pandemic, most responses to the virus have been prayer – for safety and also to destroy the activities of demons associated with the plague. Some other church leaders are using the occasion to call people to repentance. It is obvious that every pandemic has its own theology; however, the common denominator is generally sin, guilt, and people’s responsibility for their misdeeds.

The widespread theology that was aided by social media is the conspiracy theory. This is the teaching of unverified news or reports about the virus. Some of these teachings unfortunately came from church leaders who should be well informed to properly guide their congregants. The eschatological dimension of Pastor Chris Oyakhilome who linked the pandemic and the lockdown to ‘new world order’, the 5G communication, and other frightening teachings, fueled the theology of conspiracy theory.

When there was famine during the reign of David, he inquired from the Lord the cause of the problem. That should be the beginning of whatever flows about the plague. Theologian, Fisher Humphreys, defines theology as “thinking about God, not just learning about God.”<sup>23</sup> There should not be a disconnect between God’s view and the Church’s perspective on the pandemic. Swords, famine, and plague – epidemic or pandemic – are some of the weapons of God’s punishment for nations’ disobedience. Prophet Jeremiah centres on God’s use of plague to punish the Israelites in chapters fourteen to forty-four of the Old Testament book that bears his name. When



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people repent and return to God, there is always forgiveness and God's visitation, bringing about a change of situation. Can the Church in Nigeria as well as her global counterparts look up to God for mercy and eradication of the unseen enemy that has ravaged the entire world?

### **Pastoral Response to the Pandemics**

A right theology will lead to the right response to the virus. One may wonder how the early church would have responded to coronavirus? Perhaps their response to the famine that ravaged Judea provides some insight. Here, the early church responded with care towards the victims. Paul mobilised believers to contribute towards the needs of their fellow Christians who had been affected by the drought (1Corinthians 8: 10-15). Paul's perspective about suffering was that it should be taken with gladness for being partakers of Christ's suffering (1 Pet 4:12). James added that the church should pray for the sick, both for healing and forgiveness of their sins.

King Solomon in his dedicatory prayer in 1 Chronicles reveals what people's attitude to either epidemic or pandemic should be.

When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when enemies besiege them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, and when a prayer or plea is made by any of your people Israel, each one aware of his afflictions and pains, and spreading out his hands toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive, and deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart (for you alone know the hearts of men), so that they will fear you and walk in your ways all the time they live in the land you gave our fathers (2 Chronicles 6:28-31 NIV)

God's response to Solomon's prayer revealed what the church should do during critical moments, be it nationally or internationally. In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God declares: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (NIV). One of the best responses to the challenges of our time is to seek the face of God in prayer of repentance. Once people repent, God promises deliv-

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erance. Unfortunately, most prayer meetings being organised do not reflect confession of sins and repentance; rather, they are about positive confessions, curses on *enemies*, and “back to the sender” activities. This sort of approach is not making people see any involvement in the problem. Christians should pray that “the people of our nation will humble themselves before God, and seek His face, as we try to stop this pandemic.”<sup>24</sup>

If the scriptures have been suggestive of what our response should be to plagues, what then, is happening with Nigerian church leaders? Yes, there have been pockets of pastors taking time to lead their members to God in repentance and seeking the face of God at these critical moments. Sadly, not a few prominent church leaders are also misleading their congregants through their teachings and pronouncements. Conspiracy theories and mistrust in the leadership of the country have fueled fears of Islamization of the nation as well as injustices associated with the pandemic. During the lockdown era, people were locked indoors with neither salaries nor palliatives to cushion their pains. Of course, palliatives became politicised as only those who belonged to the ruling parties seemed to have access to it. It is perhaps not surprising then, that during the “#EndSARS” protest of October 3 to 20, 2020,<sup>25</sup> stores housing palliatives were burgled by aggrieved citizens, and looting became an open show.

The influence of social media in peddling unverified news – which, unfortunately, many gospel ministers have swallowed hook-line-and-sinker and fed to their members – has equally contributed to the different reactions from Nigerians. The commonest of these responses have been anger and further spread of rumours engendering confusion and fears. Nonetheless, individual prayer movements are gaining more popularity in alleviating tensions as well as news of fewer deaths in the country compared with many western states.

Teachings on the efficacy of the blood of Jesus have become a strong weapon in fighting the virus among Nigerian Christians. Of course, the blood of Jesus is efficacious, and it is a popular belief among the people that Jesus’ blood immunises us from all evils, and Satanic attacks, including COVID-19. Hence, believers are encouraged to *cover* themselves with the blood of Jesus. In fact, “Some pastors believe that they are inoculated from the virus because putting their faith in God guarantees their safety and the possibility of not contracting the virus.”<sup>26</sup> However, this *exercise of faith* is against the government’s guide-

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lines in safeguarding the health of her citizens and mitigating the spread of the virus. Ultimately, while some church leaders have responded positively to the bout of COVID-19 in the country, others have succumbed to unverified news and become antagonistic of the government.

## **Methods**

The following research questions were drawn to obtain firsthand information on people's responses to the pandemic:

1. How did Christians respond to the virus in their talk and actions?
2. How is the virus reshaping African Christianity?
3. What are the common questions asked by people?
4. How did church leadership respond to the pandemics?

## **Data Collection**

Four hundred participants across ten denominations completed a fifty-item single-answer questionnaire that addressed the research concern.

## **Data Analysis**

SPSS 21 was the computer-aided tool for data analysis. There was a generation of descriptive characteristics of the sample. Ranking of participants' responses was also possible through standard deviation (SD) and Mean score analysis.

## **Results**

To the first research question which queried Christians' response to the viral attack on humanity (both in talk and actions), the response that the pandemic is a result of people's sins ranked first with a Mean score of 2.29 and SD 0.90. That God is angry and must be appeased to avert further deaths emerged second with a Mean score of 2.22 and SD 0.94. The opinion that COVID-19 reveals stronger nations' desire to rule the weaker ones came up third with a Mean score of 2.20 and SD 0.88 while the perspective of most pandemics being coincidental and not from God, ranked fourth with a Mean score of

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2.11 and SD 0.84. Other responses ranking fifth to thirteenth respectively, are as follows: prayer is the only solution to immune us against the virus; the end of the world has come; the blood of Jesus has made us immune to any pandemic; people will die regardless of the pandemic; death is death; whenever people fail to heed God's warning, they should be prepared to suffer the consequences; death is imminent, it can come anytime, and one should prepare for it; God will definitely keep those who belong to Him; and God is in control of the events of the world.

In response to the second research question on how the virus is reshaping African Christianity, that many people have lost faith in the word of God because it seems to have failed them, ranked first with a Mean score of 2.60 and SD of 0.98. The belief that "the pandemic has come to stay and we'll live with it" was second with a Mean score of 2.27 and 0.96 SD. The thought of many Christians becoming individualistic at the expense of communal life ranked third with a Mean score of 2.07 and SD 0.79. The response of the challenge of faith over facts affecting reopening of churches, and that of the imperative for churches to embrace new ways of worship, such as house groups and online, both rated fourth with a Mean score of 1.97 and SD 0.76. Other opinions ranking fifth to eleventh respectively, are: The necessity of evangelism and revival, the need for congregants to be tested for HIV and COVID-19 infections, cutting down on excessive church programmes, emphasis on intention discipleship, revitalization of care ministry, the rise of prayer groups which mostly focus on praying for Nigeria, and the possibility of divine healing through faith in God – the absolute Healer.

The third research question was based on common queries raised by people during the pandemic. The first for the respondents with a Mean score of 2.22 and SD 0.92 was: "How can an all-powerful God allow the pandemic to wreak such havoc across the world? The second, with 2.03 Mean score and 0.84 SD, was, "where is the demonstration of God's power as taught by the church?" The question "why can't the church pray and stop it as in the days of old?" was third as reflected in a Mean score of 1.97 and SD 0.97. "Has the end of the world come?" was the next in line in fourth place with a Mean score of 1.96 and SD 0.80. The inquiry "where is God in the middle of this global pandemic?" was fifth showing a Mean score of 1.95 and SD 0.89. The last question

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which ranked sixth was, “Is the church still relevant in contemporary times?” Corresponding Mean score was 1.90 and SD 0.85.

The fifth research question on church leadership’s response to the pandemic revealed the following: The belief that the use of symbols can safeguard against the virus was foremost with a Mean score of 2.39 and SD 0.90. That many pastors have become anti-government due to the pandemic was the next popular observation with a Mean score of 2.21 and SD 0.90. Responses about pastors preaching on end time events at least once a month since the viral outbreak, and some others encouraging their members to go syncretic to be protected from the pandemic, tied up in third place with a Mean score of 2.13 and SD 0.81. That churches are engaging more in prayer against the pandemic rather than teaching, ranked fourth with a Mean score of 2.04 and SD 0.84. The fifth rated response with a Mean score of 1.95 and SD 0.84 was that the commonest sermon on the pandemic implicated sin as the cause of the problem. In sixth place and with a Mean score of 1.88 and SD 0.75 was the fact that pastors are not united in their views about the virus. Lastly, and with a Mean score of 1.66 and 0.72 SD, that the current global pandemic has created interest among Christians about the position of the Bible regarding pandemics ranked seventh.

## Discussion

The goal of this paper is to find out people’s understanding of the pandemic given the religious worldview and theological interpretation of their experiences which have influenced their reaction to the pandemic in Nigeria. Findings, in relation to the first research question, reveal the generally held belief that sin engendered punishment of the entire universe by the angry God. Ezekiel Ajani, in his research on the global plague, suggests that some clergy and laity argue that the onslaught of the virus is God’s own way of punishing the sinfulness of humanity.<sup>27</sup> God severally warned His people through Prophets, in the Bible, before unleashing punishment on them. The possibility of sin leading to God’s punishment of the world implies that many are more likely aware that they have missed God’s standard for living and are in outright rebellion against the Divine. Others who are skeptics of the culpability of sin argue for a political agenda where China intends on proving to the rest of the world, particularly America, that she is a stronger nation. Propo-

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nents of this school of thought believe that China already has the antidote for the virus and could find it relatively easier to escape the devastation of the pandemic.<sup>28</sup> In essence, for those who are convinced of a political motive behind the rise of the virus, the pandemic is man's handiwork and not necessarily from God.

There are those who display a nonchalant attitude towards the infection, claiming that death remains death whether by the virus or not; it will always tie itself around any event whenever it is to come. According to Jean Garland, many people feel that death is unavoidable, destined and always close, especially with sickness and road accidents taking their toll. These individuals do not see the virus as any real threat.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps these sets of people are part of those resisting government's guidelines on the mitigation of the virus.

Most worship services now happen virtually and those who cannot afford this have revitalised house fellowships and individual family services. Long services do not cut it anymore. What used to be done in three hours is now achieved in one to comply with government's directives. Worship has become more quality-oriented and congregants' punctuality has improved knowing that services are now strictly timed. Contrary to the fear of dwindling church membership due to the lockdown, COVID-19 seems to have literally *forced* many back to church. Those who had abandoned the church are now returning to God for help and safety. It is just as Ezekiel Ajibade reminisces: "after the deadly plagues in 165 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and another one in 251 AD that was so serious as to weaken the Roman military and social structure, the response of Christians made their number to double in the Roman Empire."<sup>30</sup> Although there has been no deliberate survey of those returning to church in post-COVID lockdown in Nigeria, the increased determination with which people now seek and serve God, is however, glaring.

COVID-19 has challenged the "operational functions of the church,"<sup>31</sup> that is, "activities of togetherness in the church, which includes receiving vitality from God, sustaining and enriching its members, and reaching out to the unsaved in the world."<sup>32</sup> The new normal of online worship is fast becoming part of the worship life of the church. Kemi Adejuwon explains that the new popularity of virtual fellowship has come to show that the use of technology for worship was not a deliberate consideration for many churches until COVID happened. Now it has become a welcome alternative for worship, a

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necessary exercise for spiritual uplifting.”<sup>33</sup> Gideon van der Watt equally observes, “the way churches normally function in coming together, singing and dancing like one body, collectively listening to a sermon, jointly confessing our faith, worshipping and praying together, sharing our faith, bringing our thank offering offerings, what we confess as the ‘communion of the saint’ [have] changed dramatically.”<sup>34</sup> Worship services have, indeed, shifted from church buildings to houses and online.

Despite the technology-aided worship though, some people still “have their reservations for these platforms and technological innovations because of certain constraints and peculiar challenges or disadvantages.”<sup>35</sup> Of course, and for one, the bonding Christians used to enjoy through physical together is no more. Additionally, the lockdown has brought about a shift from large congregational worship to a reduced size. New house fellowships (Cell churches) have sprung up and dying ones are coming alive with house fellowship leaders carrying out the task of preaching the pastor’s sermon in different homes.<sup>36</sup> Some of these house fellowship leaders are discovering their potentials and gifts which are eliciting more commitment on their part. Some of them are receiving the call into vocational ministry and are enrolling for training at different theological institutions across the country.

The pandemic has, indeed, come to reshape African Christianity beyond worship life to faith in God and His Word. That many people have lost faith in the word of God because it appeared to have failed during the height of the pandemic is an appalling spiritual condition of some Nigerian Christians. This loss of faith in the word of God may not be unconnected to biblical illiteracy of many Christians in the country as well as defective or in-existent relationship with God. The implication of this is that people would not mind seeking help from alternative avenues. Yet, the word of God is relevant to all situations and circumstances; it can never lose its veracity. “Though times and seasons are subject to change,”<sup>37</sup> God’s word cannot change due to the immutable nature of God. The pessimistic attitude of people that the pandemic has come to stay reflects helplessness. Those who hold this view maintain that since malaria fever has become an endemic problem people battle in the country, getting used to the virus is a matter of time. Notwithstanding, there is a ray of hope for the church in Nigeria because the pandemic has facilitated evangelism, intentional discipleship – which was hitherto neglected, and brotherly care.

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Common questions asked by people in the heat of the pandemic reveal how many persons connect their challenges to God. The questions are similar to people's experiences in the scriptures. For instance, Gideon asked the angel "if the Lord is with us, why has all these happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."<sup>38</sup> The popular query for many in Nigeria was: "Why could God not prove Himself in Nigeria as He did for the Israelites in Egypt?" Since there was no consensus from church leaders, people were left to their own conjectures, as sheep without shepherd, tossed to and fro by unverified news from social media. The challenge of theodicy sprung up as people wondered how a loving God, who cares for His universe, would allow a virus to destroy so many lives. Of course, these sorts of questions are not uncommon in expressing fear, bewilderment, and helplessness when people are in distress. Among Yorubas, a popular query in this regard is, "where is your face Lord?" The helplessness from the Church in the face of the pandemic has led to contemplations of her relevance in these times. The church is supposed to be the healing agent in the country; instead, her leaders are divided and not able to provide any clear-cut direction for the people.

The use of symbols has been encouraged by some church leaders as a means of protection from the pandemic in Nigeria. Of those symbols are anointing oil, holy water, soap, sponge, incense, candles, pictures of spiritual leaders, handkerchiefs, and certain herbs (*ewe akoko* with botanical name, *newbouldia laevis*). Sadly, when these church leaders advocate the use of symbols, they are often motivated by the economic benefits they stand to gain from peddling these elements. There is also the passion to satisfy the desire of their followers, whose faith rests on the tangible. Unfortunately, this move sometimes leads to syncretism. John Stott regarded this practice as temptation to church leaders to mute elements which give most offence<sup>39</sup> to their members whose faith rests on what they can see and touch. It remains sad that the use of symbols has gained ground amidst some sects of Christians who support their unchecked practices with biblical passages. The danger this poses is that syncretism is becoming more attractive that many more are buying into it.

The trend of some gospel ministers becoming anti-government activists is a significant contribution of the pandemic to Christianity in Nigeria. Interpre-



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tations of the times from a supposed scriptural lens, history, as well as the body language of the government, have fueled this development. As such, there is widened division among the church leaders leaving their followers confused on what to believe about the pandemic. Nonetheless, some gospel ministers hold that the pandemic is the finger of God on the wall of the entire world. Therefore, they have concentrated on their sermons on end time events and prayers against the pandemic.

## Conclusion

The current pandemic has left fear and death, loneliness, and stagnation in its trail. However, it has also directly and indirectly shaped Christianity in Nigeria. COVID-19 has forced some Christians who patronise prayer houses and prophets to reassess their activities. Churches whose events run all through the week have also had to rethink their approaches and programs. Contrary to the previous notion that the church could not survive without in-person gathering, coronavirus has revealed that this is possible. Most believers now have a more robust understanding of the church. There has been a mass turning to Jesus in repentance and the church has aroused herself to evangelism and intentional discipleship of those turning to Jesus Christ. While the pandemic has also affected Christianity in Nigeria negatively, there are those who are indifferent about it. Some are using it as a tool of exploitation; yet other Christians are becoming stronger in their faith and walk with the Lord.

## Author Bio



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