



The Impact of 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 on Christianity in Nigeria and the Response of Christians

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Abstract

The year 2020 was a challenging year worldwide because of the spread of COVID-19 that brought the globe to a standstill. Various world powers have tried their best to curtail the spread of the virus by putting restrictions such as lockdown, social distance, wearing of face masks, and washing hands with sanitizers or water. But the experiences vary from country to country. Nigeria is not left out in the fight to stop the spread of the virus because the country has faced such a challenge during the 1918 Influenza. These pandemics have impacted the country in all spheres of life (religion inclusive). In most cases, the impacts are negative, leading to the loss of lives, economic hardship, and other restrictions causing more suffering. It is from this backdrop that this paper aimed at doing a comparative study on the impacts of 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 pandemics among Nigerian Christians. This paper employs a comparative analysis of the pandemics and a Biblical response for Christians in Nigeria to see the need for not spiritualizing pandemics/epidemics but obeying the instructions from the ministry of health. Such comparative analysis will help the Christians in Nigeria deal with the pandemics' negative impact socially, spiritually, physically, and psychologically. Knowing that

together, Christians can overcome the negative impacts of such pandemics for future occurrence to stop the spread of the virus and save lives.

Key words: *1918 Influenza, COVID-19, pandemics, Nigerian Christians*

Introduction

Nigeria has experienced many challenges even before its independence in 1960. Such challenges range from social, economic, ethnic, political, and religious, among others. Some epidemics/pandemics have also affected the country and are not something new in the country's history. The country has faced pandemics/epidemics such as Ebola, monkeypox, Lassa fever, Polio, and Avian Influenza. These diseases always pose a threat to human life.

There are several ways in which the citizens of the country approach the situation of epidemics/pandemics, ranging from scientific, religious, and cultural, among others. But this paper will consider the religious approach to the epidemics/pandemics that have befallen Nigeria, more specifically how Christians were affected and approached the situation.

Throughout the history of the Bible, several illnesses affected the Israelites and other nations surrounding them; they were faced with epidemics/pandemics, as the case may be. The word pandemic/epidemic may be new to the Bible, but the idea is the same considering the diseases they encountered and was documented for us to learn. Likewise, Nigeria is not new to pandemics/epidemics such as 1918 Influenza and COVID-19, which this paper aims to do a comparative analysis.

However, there are very few written documents addressing 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 impacts on Christianity in Nigeria, as discussed below. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the negative impacts of the two pandemics on the Christians in Nigeria through a comparative and contextual analysis. This aims at showing how Christians and the government approach the situation and then offer a contextual Biblical response to the pandemics for Nigerian Christians.

1918 Influenza & COVID-19 in Nigeria

The year 1918 witnessed an outbreak of a virus known as the “influenza virus,” which began from 1918-19. It was one of the most pervasive and devastating biological disasters ever recorded on the globe. Even though there were arguments concerning how the influenza virus originated from 1918 to 1919, its spread was typical of human travel; human beings happen to be the virus carriers from place to place. According to Adebowale (29 March 2020), “the 1918 Influenza pandemic was one of the deadliest in world history. An H1N1 virus caused it with a gene of avian origin. It spread worldwide between 1918 and 1919.”¹ Major diffusion began in Europe to the rest of the world, with the total number of deaths of the pandemic being at least 50 million worldwide.² Africa recorded its first hit from a ship docked in a British port from where it carried people (slaves included) infected with influenza to Freetown, Sierra Leone, in August 1918.³ Furthermore, an American vessel *Shonga*, which made a brief stop in Freetown, carried influenza victims from Freetown to Cape Coast. Anchored for a few days in Cape Coast, the ship continued its journey to Accra with virtually all its crew down with influenza.⁴

According to the Public Record Office London, the influenza virus hit Lagos on the 14th of September 1918, four years after the Amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by Lord Fredrick Lugard. The spread in Lagos was fast and devastating such that in the first two months, the casualty figure was enormous; Lagos lost 1.5% of its 81,941 population.⁵ The influenza virus hit Lagos through Lagos seaports by an ocean liner, *S.S. Bida*, which carried already infected passengers from Accra, Gold Coast, who, on arrival in Lagos, passed the disease to Lagos residents.⁶ The virus is transmissible from human to human, making it easier and faster to spread from person to persons. Even though the colonial government swung into action by creating different means of spreading information, educating people on how to best stay healthy. House-to-house disinfection was also done to ensure the safety of the people of Lagos. Still, with all the government’s measures, the virus spread to residents nearby the seaports of Marina and Apapa, especially seamen working on ships docked on harbour ports were one of the first sets of people to be infected with this virus. The epidemic spread quickly into the hinterland, especially the Lagos mainland, and then followed trade routes, such as railway lines, motor roads, rivers, and caravan routes. The spread of the

Moses Iliya Ogidis and Akarama Dan Jr

epidemic was based on the speed of normal transport prevailing on each highway.⁷

Hence, the train was the major means of local transportation back then, locations such as Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ilorin, Bida, Jebba, Zaria, Kano, and Bauchi, which were linked to the existing rail lines, were quickly affected by the pandemic because of movements of infected persons. While populations along the Western railway continued to be stricken by this disease, passenger vessels continued to bring infected people into other coastal towns of Nigeria.⁸ On October 14, 1918, the influenza virus was detected in Onitsha, where several people got infected and died due to the dangerous nature of the virus, with insufficient health care to combat it. By December 1918, it had spread all over the country. Right from the first outbreak in Lagos, the colonial authorities worked hard to combat it and migrate people from infected areas to other parts of Nigeria. The spread during that time was also done through the seaport since that is the significant means of transportation. For instance, by 28 September 1918, another vessel called *S.S. Batanga* arrived at Calabar port with a man suspected of being a victim of influenza. Also, *Forcados* was not spared as ocean liner *S.S. Ravenston* brought crew and passengers already infected by the disease to *Forcados* on 27 September 1918. Other ports affected included Burutu, Warri, Port-Harcourt, and Bonny, with this pandemic penetrating various residential districts and neighbouring towns by roads.⁹

Similar to the Influenza flu of 1918 is the outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019, which ushers another pandemic in the history of the globe again. The outbreak of COVID-19 from Wuhan in China brought a lot of challenges to the entire world. It originated from the Hunan seafood market in Wuhan, China, where animals like bats, snakes, raccoon dogs, and wild animals were sold alive in December 2019,¹⁰ before the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 declared the illness a pandemic.¹¹ COVID-19 pandemic took the world by shock even though the influenza flu did the same in 1918. The first documented case was in December 2019, but it took three months before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that COVID-19 was a pandemic. First, it was said to be an epidemic because it has not spread to most parts of the world yet was later declared a pandemic.¹² Even though the virus came with some controversies concerning its origin, leaving many people to

The Impact of 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 on Christianity in Nigeria and...

deal with the reality and its effects on humanity. However, this is not the focus of this paper.

COVID-19 is similar to the influenza virus of 1918 because they are both an infectious disease, which causes respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe respiratory difficulties. As of 24th March 2021, the total confirmed cases in the world are 124,859,833 with a total recovery of 100,880,783, while total death is 2,747,6098 and total active 21,231,441, with the USA leading in the confirmed cases.¹³ In Africa, the case seems to be different considering the lack of high medical facilities.

Hence, in Nigeria, the first case was an Italian man who arrived in the country on 25 February 2020. He was admitted to the Isolation Centre in Yaba Lagos after showing symptoms of the virus.¹⁴ As of 23rd March 2021, Nigeria had confirmed cases of 162,076 total discharged 148,530 and 2,031 deaths.¹⁵ The virus later spread to virtually all the states in the country, with Lagos leading in the confirmed cases. However, the outbreak came with its effects on all spheres of life: ranging from economic, physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental, among others. The effects cannot be over-emphasized because they created more suffering than good for Nigeria's poor people.

Similarly, within the religious sphere, the effects are also felt by the three major religions in Nigeria (ATR, Islam, and Christianity). The pandemics impacted the religious practices and the communal life of the people due to the restrictions placed on citizens by various governments of the states. Considering both pandemics (influenza flu of 1918 and COVID-19), it is imperative to say that they came from the same origin having similar signs and symptoms because both are respiratory diseases, which lead to death in most cases. Nonetheless, there is a need to consider the impacts of the virus on Christianity within Nigeria and the response of the church during pandemics like this at present and in the future. Many Christians tend to be over-spiritualizing the virus, thinking it is not real, praying, and casting it in the pit of hell without observing the ministry of health guidelines. Therefore, scholars such as the once mentioned above, T.T Sar, P.T. Aernan and R.S Houmsou (2010), Omololu Ebenezer Fagunwa (2020), appear to have given less attention concerning the impacts on Christianity in Nigeria and how they responded.

The Impacts of Pandemics on Christianity in Nigeria

The pandemics have brought significant costs for societies across the globe (negative and positive). This paper discusses the impacts of the influenza flu of 1918 and COVID-19 on Christianity in Nigeria. It is important to know that data are scarce regarding influenza 1918 on Christianity in Nigeria. However, the impacts include:

Closure of Mass Gatherings

The outbreak of the pandemics led to the closure of mass gatherings of people whether religious or not.¹⁶ Public gatherings, particularly those involving worship, are a fundamental part of everyday life for faith communities (Christianity, ATR, and Islam) and help maintain morale during a pandemic. Even though the foundations of the eventual rapid growth and spread of Christianity in Nigeria were still being laid during the 1918 influenza pandemic (which coincided with the beginning of the Aladura movement), both Christians and traditional Nigerian communities were affected and similar restrictions of stoppage of mass gatherings and church services introduced during COVID-19 were observed.

Moreover, there are Christians/church-goers who think this will change church activities entirely. While some believe these pandemics have ended the “consumer” models of the church, especially the mega-churches within Nigeria. But most of these churches ended up feeding their members spiritual food via digital platforms during the lockdown.¹⁷ Some think these pandemics will end Christianity, but if the influenza of 1918 did not, then COVID-19 will not end believers meeting together.

Household churches were re-invented

The lockdown during the pandemics has led to what happened in the book of Acts, the “household churches,” many church members decided to be having fellowships and services in homes.¹⁸ Even though many thought that the church was closed, the building was closed and not the church, as noted by Kristen Rogers.¹⁹ Going by Biblical definition of “church,” which is derived from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning the called out people from the world to follow Christ or an assembly of Christians that are gathered to worship. A company of Christian, or those who, hoping for eternal salvation through

The Impact of 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 on Christianity in Nigeria and...

Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs.²⁰ Considering how the church started in the book of Acts, the lockdown made people go back to how the first early Christians worshipped in the household even though it was because of fear of the Roman Empire.²¹ This situation is because of the pandemics (influenza flu and COVID-19) that made Christians go back to how the early church was meeting in houses and breaking bread (holy communion).

Rise in the Use of Technology

Asadu observes that the use of technology gives the Christians, especially the church leadership, the need to use platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook, and others for their service and meetings. Even though there were many Christians who said the use of technology was evil and should not be encouraged in the church.²² The lockdown made them realise that God can use any medium to reach out to the people depending on their circumstances. Even some Christians that were traditional in their way of thinking, the pandemics such as influenza and COVID-19 have changed their perception about life and God. Furthermore, Ngozika affirms that technology is a good method of reaching millions of people that physical service cannot; it connects people from different continents in a virtual service. Christians need to understand that everything in this world has its advantages and disadvantages, but they can be useful for expanding the kingdom of God here on earth.²³

Over spiritualizing the Pandemics

Benjamin Kirby *et al.* aver that spirituality is one of the most complex ideas to measure in Christianity because it varies and depends on how you define the word. For this paper, spirituality will mean that when you take away human reason instead of doing what the ministry of health is saying as a preventive measure, then claim that prayers and fasting will solve the situation.²⁴ This paper is not doubting the power of prayers, but faith without action is dead (James 2:14-18). Alao comments that spirituality is not the absence of doing the right thing as human beings and taking personal responsibility to take care of ourselves. In the context of the pandemics, most Christians have over-spiritualized the illnesses due to the misinterpretation of some biblical passages. For instance, many Christians like to quote the book of Psalms 46, Psalms 91

Moses Iliya Ogidis and Akarama Dan Jr

among others in situations like this because they derive comfort from the Bible.²⁵

Low flow of income to churches

Rita Sullivan notes that “many churches within Nigeria face financial crisis due to the pandemic (COVID-19).”²⁶ It should also be noted that during 1918 influenza, it posed economic challenges to the world and not Christians alone. Therefore, Churches now have to shift the way they handle their finances. The world after the influenza flu experienced a global recession which is happening now with COVID-19. Furthermore, Orjinmo argues that the country (Nigeria) just came out of recession, but the poor masses intensely feel the effects of the pandemics. The financial frugality of individuals influenced the financial frugality of churches.²⁷

Increased Gender-Based Violence

The International Growth Centre observes that “the outbreak of the pandemics has also impacted the morale of the societies; the high rise in gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigeria and other African countries is evident.”²⁸ Before the outbreak, the perpetrators were not constant at home. They go to work and come back. But the lockdown and loss of jobs have led to too many staying at home, and lack of income to manage the domestic affairs is also a reason for the increase in violence at home.²⁹ According to channels television, from March 2020 to April 2020 there is an increase of 129% of Gender based violence in Nigeria within two weeks of the lockdown during COVID-19. They are the only case reported (source: May 2020 Brief by UN and partners). Lack of coordination amongst key stakeholders and poor implementation of legal frameworks, combined with entrenched gender discriminatory norms, and has hampered government and civil society efforts to address gender-based violence, including the church.

Christian Response

Nigeria is a very religious country, and respect is given more to religious leaders than politicians in most cases. How should Christians respond to the impact of pandemics on human life? Since many Christians adhere to their “men and women of God,” whose words are consumed without critical reasoning. Then

The Impact of 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 on Christianity in Nigeria and...

church leaders must lead by example through correctly interpreting the Bible using contextualization with the impacts of the pandemics and how Christians need to behave in such situations. There is a need to balance the Biblical teaching and taking of our responsibilities regarding the ministry of health guidelines on preventive measures to curb the spread.

Similarly, Egwu encouraged Christians in Nigeria to adhere strictly to the ministry of health protocols.³⁰ The virus has been ascribed to many views, and the correlation between the virus and several other phenomena has been made. Some churches have also devised conspiracy theories about the virus, the world, and the church, suddenly marking out the pandemic as a fight against the church; a clear instance is the virus's attribution to the recent technological advancement, 5G network.³¹

To balance biblical teaching with the ministry of health protocols, there is a need for a contextual interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 where it deals with obedience to constituted authorities that are made to govern society. In this case, it is the ministry of health in Nigeria that is saddled with curbing COVID-19 spread. Because the ministry of health in Nigeria holds no terror against its citizens, they are to handle the health affairs of all Nigerians. Therefore, Christians must adhere to the protocols and guidelines to help fight against the pandemics and not to over-spiritualize it as many of them are doing, claiming prayers will solve the problem.³²

The case of pandemics/epidemics or plagues as the case maybe is not something new as discussed earlier, Martin Luther in the 15th century wrote in 1527, which impacted the city both positively and negatively. There is a need to understand that pandemics are the test of our faith sometimes. We must give hospital care and be nurses for one another in any extremity or risk the loss of salvation and the grace of God.³³

Christians are known from centuries past to be law-abiding citizens that should not be different from the situation now in Nigeria. Therefore, Christian leaders have to adapt hybrid ministry models. Because the traditional model seems not to be working in this era of COVID-19, this paper uses the term "hybridization of ministry" by the Christian leaders. With the hard pivot to online church services and small groups, Christian and church leaders have overcome the hurdle of learning how to conduct ministry on a virtual plat-

Moses Iliya Ogidis and Akarama Dan Jr

form.³⁴ This paper is not aiming at replacing face-to-face gathering. Still, the impact of the pandemics led to such hybridization of ministry approach to virtual connecting people from all over the globe to listen to the Word. Christians need to leverage advancements in information and communications technology through such platforms as Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout, etc which can be used for counselling, preaching, Bible study, pre-/post-marital counselling. Christians should also welcome the use of technology for the propagation of the gospel. Church leaders need to be open-minded because, until the lockdown, many have no idea of virtual service, which some have even demonised. But now, the pandemic has opened their minds to the benefits that can be driven from its use.

The negative impact is on the rise of domestic violence within Nigeria; Christians need to understand the evil of domestic violence and its effects on the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental state of the victims. Prayer and meditation are good, but Christians must take action to accompany their Christian faith and conviction, especially during this pandemic, to reduce domestic violence to its minimum rates.

The role of church leaders is paramount in helping Christians respond positively. Even though many church leaders within Nigeria claim the virus is fake. Some Nigerians do not believe in the existence of COVID-19, leading to negligence by some Christians and over spiritualizing the virus. For instance, “the association of Pentecostal churches in Yaounde reported that at least 270 Christians left six churches that preached against the existence of COVID-19.”³⁵ It is possible that most of these churches did that because of fear of losing members and the financial hardship they may face. Many church leaders faced financial hardship, but that is not a guarantee to risk the lives of people. Christians in Nigeria need to know that it is their responsibility to take care of themselves, especially during this pandemic, and not over-spiritualize the illness. Until Christians in Nigeria understand that faith goes with action, their prayers will not work, but it will be perfect when you take your responsibilities coupled with prayers will lead to a breakthrough. This paper has shown how pandemics have impacted the Christians in Nigeria and how they need to respond to the situation because God did not give us the spirit of fear but of a sound mind to stand in a trying time like COVID-19.

The Impact of 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 on Christianity in Nigeria and...

Conclusion

This paper was able to do a comparative study of the 1918 influenza flu with the COVID-19 pandemics that hit the world at different times and years. There are similarities in how they spread, signs, and symptoms, including the impacts on Christians, specifically in Nigeria. The impacts of these pandemics are felt not only by Christians but by all; Christians need to understand that God can use anything for the glory of God. Christians in Nigeria need to take their responsibilities and diversify their approach in doing ministry in pandemics like COVID-19. This paper has shown that the impacts can be used positively for the glory of God and be useful to enhance the kingdom of God on earth. Christians should stop prohibiting when they cannot provide solutions or alternatives for people. Moreover, Christians need to leverage the use of technology to advance the mission of God on earth now more than in previous generations.

Authors Bio



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Moses Iliya Ogidis and Akarama Dan Jr

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The Impact of 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 on Christianity in Nigeria and...

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