

# The role of transnational churches in response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis in South Africa

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused unprecedented suffering and death among the people of South Africa. The epidemic is associated with great fear experienced by the infected, affected and the general population. This article focuses on the role played by South African transnational churches in response to the COVID-19 crises and measures taken by the government. The article is anchored on Foucault's theory of biopolitics in which he explains the emergence of new political strategies implemented to regulate the lives of the species being. Foucault's account as applied to the context of this article serves as an overture to his depiction of panopticism as a system of governance. In South Africa, the haunting memory of COVID-19 and the chaos associated with it has paved the way for 'biopolitics' as a system of constant surveillance to citizens and transnational churches. Stringent lockdown regulations have been implemented in this regard after COVID-19 was declared a national disaster. A qualitative research method and an interpretivist research paradigm were adopted. Data was collected using telephone interviews with 5 transnational churches located in Durban. Key findings show that transnational churches in Durban have adhered to lockdown regulations in multifarious ways. They have continued with the theology of ministry in an attempt to replace the message of fear with the message of hope. Many have recommended their congregants to stay at home and attend church services via radio and online live streaming. It recommends religion be accommodated and coexistence with scientific knowledge systems in fighting the pandemic. Science, biomedical and clinical approach is not enough to explain the behavior and illness of human beings.*

**Keywords:** biopower, biopolitics, Coronavirus (COVID-19), lockdown, transnational churches

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## **Introduction**

The unfolding global disaster prompted by COVID-19 has led countries to struggle as they impose national shutdowns, national quarantines, social distancing, and close off of borders in an attempt to slow transmission of the virus. Churches across the globe have played an important role in the fight against the pandemic. In these difficult times, churches have continued with the message of hope in times of extreme distress that is exacerbated by COVID-19. However, there is a dearth of literature that has examined the role played by transnational churches in South Africa in the fight against COVID-19. A significant strand of scholarship on transnationalism and religion concentrates on diasporic experiences, remittances, homeland engagement, social development, immigrants and refugees, displaced workers, and informal economic activities (Garbin and Vasquez, 2013; Garbin, 2014; Burgess, 2015). There is no study, best known to the researchers, that has explored the role played by transnational churches in response to the recent COVID-19 disaster and lockdown regulations imposed by the state. This article discussed the role of transnational churches in the fight against COVID-19: as providing spiritual and psychosocial support during the crisis.

This article appropriately focuses on unique ways of thinking about transnational churches. It provides novel ideas about transnational churches in Durban and what they bring South African communities in times of COVID-19 disaster, lockdown regulation, social distancing, and physical distancing. The article is primarily anchored on telephone interviews conducted with churches leaders of identified transnational churches in Durban. The study focused on 5 transnational churches which are Devine Victory international, Dimension Embassy, Methodist Church in Zimbabwe South African Fellowship (MCZSA), New Life in Christ International Church and Platform Ministries International. These churches extend or grow beyond their national boundaries. Operating outside the country of origin. Transnational churches are

heavily nationalistic in that they are exclusively oriented to the needs of local communities. Garbin (2014:365) notes that transnational churches “share a core belief in the power and embodied gifts of the Holy Spirit”. Garbin and Vasquez (2013) reiterate that the size of transnational churches ranges from small to large and they have established branches in their home countries. In addition, these churches depend on a centralized structure, bureaucratic networks, and media strategies to sustain the church (Garbin, 2014). They keep ties with branches established in the home country and in most instances, the head office is in the country of origin.

Many aspects of the belief systems of transnational churches, some discussed in this article, have been scrutinized by a plethora of scholars such as Adedibu (2015) and Gerloff (2010). The growth of these transnational churches in South Africa has led to a new transition that provides sufficient space for intercultural discourse. The main argument herein is that South African Christian space, particularly Durban, has a conclusive pattern of transnational churches characterized by their unique social and religious ethos to deal with the challenges associated with migrating into a new cultural boundary. Upon settling in Durban, transnational churches have created faith-related communities. Through different community church programmes, practices and rituals, transnational churches serve as socioeconomic and psychological anchors (Gerloff, 2010). According to Adedibu (2013; 2015), a key trademark of transnational churches is consistent membership and intercultural engagement.

In this study as well as related research conducted by Burgess (2015) and Biney (2016), there is a growing consensus that transnational churches are regarded as a way for helping migrant Christians to cope with cultural and religious expressions, ethnic, social and economic challenges in the host country. What is unique about transnational churches is their ability to cater to the needs of

migrant populations and local citizens hence they are characterized by a conscious missionary agenda. In a classical sense, the missionary agenda has been understood as a transition of Christianity from the global North to the South. However, now churches have moved to 'reverse mission', that is, from the global South to North and South to South (Burgess, 2015; Biney, 2016). In light of the above, this article views South Africa, Durban in particular, as a potential mission field that requires re-conversion. In this respect, transnational migration appears to create an opportunity to bring Christianity. What is apparent in this article is the idea that transnational churches are growing rapidly in a time when the world is affected by the global pandemic of COVID-19. They have positively responded to the pandemic, national lockdown, national quarantine, and other measures imposed to slow down the spread of the virus. It is against this backdrop that the ongoing article attempt to locate the role played by transnational churches in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the role of transnational churches in the fight against COVID-19 in Durban.
2. To investigate different ways in which transnational churches provide spiritual and psychosocial support during the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Theoretical framework**

This article is anchored on Foucault's theory of biopolitics in which he explains the emergence of new political strategies implemented to regulate the lives of the species being. According to Foucault (1998), biopolitics is political rationality that aims to administer the life of human beings and to put this life in order. To put it in plain words, Foucault's notion of biopolitics denotes politics that is concerned with life. Biopolitics is linked to the politics of saving and protecting human life. Biopower explains how biopolitics is exercised in society and involves the

transformation of mechanisms of power (Foucault, 1998; Senellart., et al. 2009). In this respect, biopower entails power that employs a positive influence on the life of the species being. This type of power is different from juridico-discursive power that is seen as repressive and negative. Foucault's biopolitics and biopower can be understood within an expansive framework and lineages of power and governmentality. His notion of government does not denote merely the management of a country or political structure. Similarly, the concept does not only cover constituted forms of political subjects. Instead, governmentality as Foucault (1998) admits and as applied to the context of this article explains how the state controls the field of action and the lives of the species being.

Thus, biopolitics and biopower function together with the abovementioned ideas related to governmentality developed by Foucault in the 1970s. According to Foucault (2007), biopower is a series of events in which the state (re) shapes the biological and social elements of human life. Confronted with the COVID-19, South Africa has implemented strong sanitary, population control measures and other strong actions to prevent the spread of the virus. Such biopolitics motivated this article to draw insights on Foucault's discourse in an attempt to provide a theoretical explanation on the state's population management systems that are aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19. The main aim herein is to reflect on the transformative role of transnational churches in South Africa and how they are responding to COVID-19 and the population management system implemented by the state. Foucault's account as applied to the context of this article serves as an overture to his depiction of panopticism as a system of governance. In South Africa, the haunting memory of COVID-19 and the chaos associated with it has paved the way for biopolitics as a system of constant surveillance to and transnational churches. Building on Foucault's theory of biopolitics, this article opines that the lockdown regulation in South Africa did not only govern

the general citizens and political subjects of law but also that population infected by COVID-19. The position taken by this article is that Foucault's idea of power is relevant and it provides a theoretical lens to the role played by the South African government in response to COVID-19. In respect to lockdown restrictions, it is evident that Foucault's biopolitical power mainly operates in a (un)conscious and (in)visible way. With South Africa under lockdown, this article employs the Foucauldian discourse of biopolitics to analyze the responsive role played by transnational churches in this crisis. As discussed above, biopolitics explains security governance in which transnational churches work within the ambits of this framework.

### **History and origin of Coronavirus: Setting the context**

Corona is not a recent virus that surfaced in 2019. The disease was first discovered in 1931, with the first virus (HCoV-229E) isolated from humans in 1965 (Korsman et al., 2012). According to Kumar et al. (2020), the first case of coronavirus in humans was identified in 1960 as cold. Korsman et al. (2012) concur and add that only two human coronaviruses (HCoV) namely HCoV-229E and HCoV-OC43 were identified. Until 2002, corona appeared to be a non-fatal virus as it spread to other countries such as Taiwan, the United State of America, Vietnam, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Singapore in 2003 (Peiris et al., 2003; Tsang et al., 2003; Kumar et al., 2020). Kumar et al. (2020) confirms that approximately 500 people tested positive of a Flu-like system. In a study conducted by the World Health Organisation (2004) and another reported in Hong Kong, both cited in Kumar et al. (2020), a total of 8096 patients were confirmed with coronavirus in 2004 and 50 patients with severe acute respiratory respectively.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Kurma et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). An unidentified *betacoronavirus* was discovered using unbiased samples from patients diagnosed with pneumonia (Zhu

et al., 2020). The authors add that many local health facilities in China reported groups of patients with pneumonia of strange causes that were “linked to seafood and wet animal wholesale market in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China” (Zhu et al., 2020:727). A rapid response was then dispatched by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) to conduct an epidemiologic and etiologic investigation. A novel Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was identified. Evidence for this virus includes the identification in *Broncho alveolar-lavage* fluid in the first three patients tested (Zhu et al., 2020). Molecular techniques were used to identify their infectious agents. Since the first infection in China as outlined above, COVID-19 has continued to rapidly spread across the world and no continent has so managed to escape the virus. To date, there are thousands of deaths, hundreds of thousands of recoveries, and millions of infected people. These figures are increasing daily. On 11 March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (African Union, 2020). Given its impact on the whole world, COVID-19 has become a global emergency. The virus is mainly spread through direct contact with an infected person or through cough and sneezing.

In South Africa, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 5 March 2020. In the country, the virus has created a concealed severe situation in recent memory (Health Professions Council of South Africa, 2020). There has been a steady increase in the number of positive cases ever since the government implemented lockdown measures in fighting the pandemic. According to the South African Gazette on lockdown regulation (2020:6), the following are regulations on the movement of people and goods for the period of lockdown:

- i. every person is confined to his or her place of residence unless strictly to perform an essential service, obtain an essential good or service, collecting a social grant,*

- pension or seeking emergency, life-saving, or chronic medical attention;*
- ii. *every gathering, as defined in regulation 1 is hereby prohibited, except for a funeral as provided for in subregulation (8); and*
  - iii. *movement between provinces and between metropolitan and district areas is prohibited except for funerals as provided in the regulations*

This is part of the lockdown regulations implemented by the South African government in response to COVID-19 and as set against the background of section 3 of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act No. 57 of 2020). In addition to the lockdown regulations that are enshrined in the South African government gazette, the government also emphasized social isolation and physical distancing. The main aim of the lockdown regulations, social isolation, and social distancing was to disrupt the chain of Coronavirus transmission in South Africa to save lives. To achieve this, the South African Gazette on lockdown regulation (2020) advised people to stay at home unless it is necessary or in an emergency. In the context of the COVID-19 state outlined above, the current study established the positive role played by transnational in Durban in the fight against the virus. Insights are drawn from the perspectives of leaders in identified transnational churches.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this section is to discuss the methodological process of this article. The article adopted a qualitative research method and an interpretivist research paradigm. Taking a cue from Stake (2010), qualitative research is suitable when the study aims to explain a phenomenon from the perspectives and experiences of the participants. In addition, Perren and Ram (2004) are of the view that every research should be positioned in a paradigmatic framework. Data was collected using telephone interviews only.



This data collection tool assisted the researchers to gain nuanced information on the role played by transnational churches in the COVID-19 disaster. Data were collected when the country was on lockdown alert level 5. The lockdown regulations did not allow the researchers to do face-to-face interviews. For this reason, the researchers choose telephone interviews and were able to get contextual qualitative data. 2 non-probability sampling techniques viz purposive and snowball were used to get a representative sample. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify transnational churches in Durban. Other churches that are not transnational were deliberately excluded. Snowball sampling was then used to identify participants from the 5 chosen transnational churches. Data was collected from 5 transnational churches in Durban namely; Devine Victory international, Dimension Embassy, Methodist Church in Zimbabwe South African Fellowship (MCZSA), New Life in Christ International Church and Platform Ministries International. A network of connections proved to be very important in identifying these participants. All the participants of this study are leaders in these transnational churches.

The study was conducted in Durban. The researchers played an important role in the data collection process. They acknowledged the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research. To this effect, researchers constantly checked their actions and role throughout the data collection process. Since the effects of COVID-19 are emotional, the researchers employed a non-judgemental approach even though they displayed empathy and compassion with the emotional undertones of participants' reactions. Each telephone interview took place in a single session and all interviews were conducted in English and transcribed by the researchers. The researchers sampled approximately 20 participants. As determined by data saturation, the final number of participants was 15, that is, 3 participants from each transnational church in Durban. The study utilized thematic analysis and data was coded

manually.

Owing to the sensitivity of COVID-19, the researchers ensured that ethics remain a top priority of the study. In so doing, the researchers ensured that all the participants are over 18 years of age. Pseudonyms are used to disguise the identity of participants. The pseudonyms used are Pastor and Lay, leader. Pastor refers to the minister in charge of the transnational church. A lay leader refers to a member chosen by the congregation to be a church leader. All recordings of telephone interviews are kept in a password-protected file only accessible to the two researchers. Data will only be destroyed after 5 years. However, due to lockdown regulations implemented by the South African government, all participants were not able to physically sign the informed consent form. The informed consent was read before the interview process and all the participants verbally agreed to participate in the study. The main reason was to adhere to social distance regulations and to take precautionary measures against the spread of COVID-19. Following Bryman (2012), credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were important in this study to establish trustworthiness.

### **Presentation and discussion of findings**

The following sections present and discuss key findings on the role played by transnational churches in Durban in the fight against COVID-19 and lockdown regulations implemented by the government. In some instances, the section draws parallel lines with existing literature. Also, the theoretical gist of Foucault's theory of biopolitics is used to back up the analysis throughout this section. As outlined in the methodology section, this study was conducted in 5 transnational churches in Durban namely; Devine Victory international, Dimension Embassy, Methodist Church in Zimbabwe South African Fellowship (MCZSA), New Life in Christ International Church and Platform Ministries International.

## **Transnational churches as key agents in the fight against COVID-19**

Anecdotal evidence provided in this article reviews that transnational churches in Durban play an active role in the fight against the COVID-19 disaster. To ensure safety and health, precautions are followed in different communities, transnational churches in Durban have taken strict measures, cancelling operations, complying with lockdown restrictions, and social distancing measures. Some have gone further to continue working with online programmes. One of the most informed measures reiterated by the majority of participants in education and awareness campaigns. These churches attempt to educate people and raise awareness on how to tackle COVID-19 and the reality of this virus. Commenting on the importance of education and awareness in the fight against COVID-19, the following participants had this to say;

*Some of our congregants are misinformed about the virus. They think that COVID-19 is like the normal flu and they underestimated the impact of the virus on their lives and the world at large. On our WhatsApp platform, I have seen many people questioning the lockdown regulations and blaming the government for some of the measures taken. As a church dealing with such kinds of people, we have to raise awareness campaigns on COVID-19 and how to tackle the virus. So, we educate and communicate with these people on the aspect of social distance, lockdown measures, use of water and soap to wash hands and the need of covering the nose and mouth [Telephone interview, Pastor 3:*

07/05/2020]

*We educate our congregants as we are educated by the government and that expertise in the subject. So, we try to explain COVID-19 and its impacts on them through various platforms. Remember we did not stop preaching. We do that through social media. What we have done is that we make sure that our scriptures and teaching are in line with natural disasters such as this. We already have people who have testified that they have benefited from our teachings and awareness. [Telephone interview, Leader 1: 06/05/2020]*

*First and foremost, we encourage our people to respect authorities, stay informed, and follow advice regarding COVID-19. We work with pastors and church executives to make sure that our members stay informed. So we always to awareness using social media platforms. Creating awareness is very important and as a church, we strongly support awareness-raising and health promotion strategies integral part of the COVID-19 prevention and control program. These awareness campaigns have helped our people understand the catastrophic nature of the virus. [Telephone interview, Leader 6: 11/05/2020]*

The three narratives above suggest that when church leaders are involved in education and awareness programs, they appear to be transformational due to their long-term presence in the church, trust, and ability to contextualize the impact of COVID-19 transnational churches. Also, the three narratives above show that educational intervention and awareness campaigns significantly

changed the way people perceived the pandemic and its treatment. The importance of education and awareness is not a new finding in infectious disease research. It confirms many studies done on infectious diseases. As an illustration, the key findings on the importance of education and awareness confirm a study done by Solhi et al. (2017). The authors opine that awareness and education is the best way to fight infectious diseases such as AIDS, and COVID-19 is not exceptional. Thus, the re-emerging of COVID-19 as an infectious disease is greatly influenced by individual behavior. To this effect, education and awareness campaigns utilized by transnational churches appear to be the best prevention methods and successful ways to fight the pandemic and restore South Africa to its old healthy days. The main argument herein is that behavior education and awareness are the best principles of disease prevention in all respect.

As the article continues to explore the role of transnational churches in the fight against COVID-19, it does not detach from the theoretical acumens of Foucault. Although Foucault's theory of biopolitics does not extensively speak about religion, this article draws insights into his discourse which views religion as an example of institutions that produce truth, and discipline. In this respect, the current article notes that Foucault's theory of biopolitics demonstrates the innermost discipline that has a greater civilizing effect on the species being. The abovementioned inner discipline does not surface in a vacuum but is a product of group activities and customs that are the trademark of religious life. To this effect, transnational church members appear to accept and conform to awareness from their church leaders as an absolute solution to the COVID-19 disaster bedeviling the country. Reasons for such levels of understanding and conformity could point to the fact that religion, Christianity in particular, instills an innermost discipline to respects views that emanate from their leaders. The creation of awareness is, therefore, vital in safeguarding the lives

of church members who respect any views emanating from the church. This article, therefore, augments the narratives of Pastor 3, Leader 1, Leader 6, and the views of salient Foucault on how the individual is civilized through institutions. The main idea herein is to provide a bona fide explanation of the role of education and awareness played by transnational churches in the fight against COVID-19.

### **The position of transnational churches on lockdown restriction and social distancing**

All transnational churches that participated in this study are positively responding to lockdown restrictions and social distance measures imposed by the state under the Disaster Management Act of 2002. They all confirmed that both lockdown restrictions and social distancing are necessary in reducing the spread of confirmed cases of people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They concur with the national government that lockdown restrictions and social distancing can slow but not necessarily cure or stop the spread of the pandemic. In other words, lockdown and social distancing reduce epidemic growth and infection cases. For this reason, all the church leaders interviewed agreed that the church has the mandate to make sure that lockdown restrictions and social and physical distancing are implemented. As an illustration, commenting on lockdown regulations, social and physical distancing, the following transnational church leaders had this to say;

*Remember the bible is clear that a good Christian is a good citizen. So, in the Christian community, we also abide by the rules and regulations of the state which also consider prevention and cure, protection, and security as well as the safety of our people. During the lockdown period, we managed to comply with the regulations especially considering that the facilities that we use cannot allow us to maintain*

*social and physical distancing. So as a church we strongly agree with the regulations imposed by the state. We make sure that we are responsible Christians we apply that philosophical idea which states that prevention is better than cure. [Telephone interview, Pastor 1: 05/05/2020]*

*However, we educate and give a message to the people that we need to respect the rules and regulations by the government and to make sure we stay indoors. We follow the rule to make the congregants healthy, Christians are not there to oppose the government but we are there to respect the leadership that God gave us. In this lockdown period, prayer is our daily life and we get more time to since people are indoors. [Telephone interview, Pastor 2: 06/05/2020]*

What this article retains from the above two descriptions is that transnational churches positively respond to lockdown regulation and social distance. Pastor 1's sentiments show that responsible Christians are guided by rules of the state's rules and regulations. Seemingly, Pastor 2 reiterates that the church is not there to oppose or to fight the government but to make sure that congregates follow rules imposed by the government. With the help of a Foucauldian interpretation, this article opines that church leaders are naturally drawn into the biopolitical space by the governments' management of the population in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. From the perspectives of transnational churches, ignoring the challenge posed by the pandemic would have severe effects on the congregant and the general population at large. As evidenced above, the idea that the church maneuvers in a biopolitical milieu do not mean that it is a puppet of the state. Rather, it is working with other organizations outside the church to that the pandemic and to make sure that the Covid-19 curve is

flattened. The main argument herein is that commitment to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is both an identity badge that marks the transnational church's involvement and a struggle. In the process of fighting the pandemic, the church has the mandate to make sure its identity is protected.

As the article continues to explore the position of the church on lockdown restrictions and social distancing, it draws parallel lines with the victorious views of Smith (2014). The position taken by Smith (2014) is that the difficulties in instilling conformity to congregants make various churches increasingly rely on the national government to impose discipline control measures and social order. Seemingly, anecdotal evidence of this study suggests that it appears transnational churches alone would not have made effective social distance measures without the involvement of this state. They had to conform to the national government's lockdown regulation imposed in line with the South African Disaster Management Act. From the foregoing, it can be argued that the church's response to lockdown regulations and social distance typifies a social institution that is characterized by conformity and influence rather than individuality.

Although the participants of this study showed conformity to the lockdown restrictions and social distancing, some state that the measure negatively affected the church. They reiterated that the measures imposed in the fight of the novel coronavirus in the country have disturbed the normality and shaken up churches' economies. This has forced different churches to find creative ways to cover financial costs and preaching of the gospel. In response to this, a leader who has been in the church for 8 years recounts that;

*Lockdown measures have affected our finances. Of course, the church is not a profit-making organization. However, the church requires money to pay bills, the pastor's stipends, to pay*



*people who maintain the church, and other related expenses. People's incomes were affected and this had far-reaching effects on their capacity to pay tithes. If you read Malachi 3:10, the bible tells us that people should bring full and not half tithe to the house of God, that there may be food in the house of God. Our church has been negatively affected by the lockdown restrictions and social distance measures. It stopped all our Sunday services and people could no longer bring their full tithes and offerings. [Telephone interview, Leader 4: 10/05/2020]*

In addition to the description provided by Leader 4, another who has been in the church since 2015 states that;

*Our church has been heavily affected by the lockdown restriction. The lockdown prohibited all churches to have gatherings including Easter conferences that different churches had planned for some time. In our church, COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions introduced by the government spiritually and financially affected our church. We had to move to online live streaming which is more expensive and data-consuming. It has also resulted in a few offerings. Most of our congregants are in the informal sector and I think you will agree with me that the informal sector was heavily affected by the pandemic. These people can no longer pay their tithes as they used to. [Telephone interview, Leader 1: 06/05/2020]*

The two descriptions above show how lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures negatively affected transnational

churches. For example, the two participants concur that measures imposed affected the congregants' capacity to pay tithes and Sunday offerings. What this article depicts from the key submissions of Leader 1 and Leader 4 description is that tithes and Sunday offerings are the main sources of revenue of transnational churches. The churches' income revenue dropped significantly. Practically, churches need to pay bills and some living expenses of their pastors although they are non-profit organizations. The discourse unpacked here directly speaks to the recent works of Foucault et al. (2008) in their groundbreaking text, *'The birth of biopolitics'*. In their text, the authors describe the neo-liberalism conception of social effect also, known as *'Gesellschaftspolitik'* in German. The main argument established addresses consensus in societies. What this article retains in the analysis is that the system of governmentality produces the willing actors and institutions who conform to the realities of the economic position on the state. As applied to the context of this article, lockdown restrictions and social distancing produced a regime of truth that disrupted the economic routines of transnational churches. Surprisingly, the failure of churches to raise revenue under this system is not taken as a clash, but the very same conditions necessary to flatten the curve of the pandemic.

### **Providing material resources**

Despite their financial situation, transnational churches in Durban also assist their congregant and other members outside the church with the little they have. To this effect, the current study established a different understanding of ministry ranging from programs performed, pastoral identity, relationships, that arises out of a profound vision of Christianity. The main point which all participants agreed on is the fact that the ministry entails participation by faith in Christ. To show their faith in Christ, transnational churches have continued with the theology of ministry irrespective of the social and economic predicaments

posed by the novel coronavirus pandemic. Some participants highlighted that during lockdown restrictions they provide pastoral support in different ways. One way is the identification of members who need help and coming up with ways of assisting them. Some of the participants emphasized that they outsourced funding from donors and well-wishers to support those in need. Since in most churches, donations have plunged due to the coronavirus, some are still surviving to the extent that they have funds to support the affected people. The following two descriptions are an example of the role played by transnational churches in assisting those affected by the novel coronavirus;

*The majority of our congregants are migrants who work in the informal sector. The South African informal economy has been widely affected by the national lockdown. Remember coronavirus is a battle and we have to win it. Many of our migrants have lost their jobs. As a church, we have managed to get relief funds from well-wishers and external donors. This funding was distributed in 2 phases. In the first phase, we transferred money, R200 per individual through e-wallet service to those in need. In the second phase which was this week we bought food parcels that we managed to distribute to identify struggling congregants, although we did not have the permit to travel as per the government's regulations. We believe that in this time of isolation and social distancing, we should not isolate the needs of the poor but let our hearts share the warmth of the love of God. [Telephone interview, Leader 1: 06/05/2020]*

*A church is not a political party but a group of people who gather together in unity and exalting*

*and honor the same God that we worship. So, we take people as people not as transnational migrants. It doesn't matter that you are a foreigner, you are from Zambia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and so on. We contact everyone and make sure that everyone is safe and understands their situation we are just one big family. Everyone we assist has nothing to do with nationality. We also have a program that we introduced where we managed to reach out to people that do not have food. We are aware that not everyone has the same income and others are affected by the pandemic. We had a program that we did once to distribute food to those who cannot afford it. [Telephone interview, Pastor 2: 06/05/2020]*

The narratives of church leader 1 and Pastor 2 show how transnational churches have taken initiatives to give financial support and distribute grocery items to the stranded church members. What is central from the above sentiments is the idea that a church is not a political party that tends to assist in the political line. A closer introspection of Pastor 2's description shows that assistance in times of Covid-19 and lockdown restriction is given to everyone. On contrary, church leader 1 emphasized that only church members got financial support and food parcels. Another interesting fact is how Leader 1 explained how food parcels were distributed. According to the regulations of lockdown level 5 when this study was conducted, every person traveling or providing essential services was supposed to have a permit. Surprisingly, Leader 1 outlined that they distributed food around communities without a valid permit as per the regulations. A theoretical explanation for such actions can be found in the Foucauldian discourse of biopolitics. Foucault explored the concept of 'the care of the self' in which he explained a more 'active'

position concerning power. He addressed the theme of resistance whereby people exercise 'ethics of the care of the self' (Gallo, 2017:692) using the production of practices of freedom. The practices of freedom are often exercised for the good of the citizen, especially the deprived and disadvantaged in society. Although Foucault's notion of power is irresistible, this study posits that transnational churches are not '*tabula rasa*', but are active beings who sometimes can slightly act outside the structured norms and lockdown restrictions in an attempt to assist the affected people not reached by the government. This is the only explanation as to why transnational church leaders had to go an extra mile to distribute food parcels to the needy without a prescribed permit.

### **Religion and science**

As the study continued exploring the perception and experiences of church leaders on lockdown restrictions and social and physical distancing, one participant provided a unique and interesting view on the debate. The participant highlights that to fight against COVID-19, religious institutions should work together with scientific researchers. Science alone cannot provide answers to the pandemic. Stretching the idea of religion and the rise of trust in science, Pastor 4 narrates that;

*We believe that as a church we were not given the platform to play a role in this struggle. The church operates in the spiritual realm whereas the country operates in a physical realm. The politicians gave us solutions that are based on scientific reasoning yet we as pastors believe solutions are more spiritual. So I believe the church was supposed to be incorporated in their decision-making process. Lockdown restriction, social and physical distancing will not work if operating outside the spiritual*

*realm. Only prayer and fasting can save the world. [Telephone interview, Pastor 4: 09/05/2020]*

The above narrative reflects that there is no conflictual relationship between religion and science. However, the main argument of the above narrative is that religion has hidden explanations for the pandemic, which might to some extent contradict scientific research. Despite these contradictions, religion and science are equally important in providing answers pertinent to flattening the COVID-19 curve. Instead, religion needs to be accommodated and coexist with scientific knowledge systems in fighting the pandemic. The sentiments of Pastor 4 advocate the coexistence of religion and science in the fight against COVID-19. This article concurs with the description of Pastor 4. Science, biomedical, and clinical approach are not enough to explain the behavior and illness of human beings. What is indisputable in social science research is the idea that human behavior and illness are experienced by people who are part of a wider society with unique economic constraints, religious, traditional, and cultural practices that influence the perception and experience of the disease. In South Africa, the percentage of people who believe in God is very high and possibly this is the reason why Pastor 4 is concerned that religious leaders should have been given an equal chance to participate in the fight against the pandemic. If religious institutions can accommodate scientific advice as evidenced by accepting social distancing and suspending church gatherings, then the national government should also equally incorporate them in the decision-making process. From the foregoing, this article recommends that future research should focus on connecting religion and science in fighting infectious diseases such as COVID-19.

## **The implication of the study**

The study is important for the following reasons.

1. It shows how transitional churches approached the pandemic more decisively. Providing, psychosocial support, material resources, and promoting lockdown regulations are important efforts to provide answers to questions of humanity.
2. To the South African community, the study has shown that churches must act to support the government's decision and stop the spread of the pandemic.
3. Since COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions resulted in the cancelation of church services to limits human contact, the study shows that this does not communicate among church members. Online platforms of worship are used in this regard.

## **Conclusion**

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has caused extraordinary suffering and death among the people in South Africa. This study has adequately explored the role of transnational churches located in response to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis in South Africa. Grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm, the qualitative study draws on telephone interviews conducted with 5 transnational churches in Durban namely; Devine Victory international, Dimension Embassy, Methodist Church in Zimbabwe South African Fellowship (MCZSA), New Life in Christ International Church and Platform Ministries International. These churches have a unique social and religious ethos to deal with the challenges associated with migrating into a new cultural boundary. Theoretical insights of this article are anchored on Foucault's theory of 'biopolitics'. This theory as applied to the context of this article serves as an overture to his depiction of panopticism as a system of governance. The haunting memory of COVID-19 and the chaos associated with it has paved the way for 'biopolitics' as a system of constant surveillance to citizens and

transnational churches.

Key findings suggest that transnational churches in Durban play an active role in the fight against the COVID-19 disaster. To ensure safety and health precautions are followed in different communities, they have taken strict measures, canceling operations, complying with lockdown restrictions, social distancing, and physical distancing. In response to the novel coronavirus, these churches have continued with the theology of ministry in an attempt to replace the message of fear with the message of hope. Although lockdown restrictions, social and physical distancing measures have disturbed the normality and shaken up churches' economies, transnational churches have continued to assist struggling communities, including those outside their church. They can give financial support and distribute grocery items to the stranded church and community members. However, leaders in these transnational churches believe that the Christian community has not been adequately consulted and/or incorporated by the government in the fight against the pandemic. Against this backdrop, this article concludes that religion needs to be accommodated and coexist with scientific knowledge systems in fighting the pandemic. Science, biomedical and clinical approach is not enough to explain the behavior and illness of human beings.



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