

Ecclesiastical Impact of The Covid-19 Pandemic in Selected Churches in Oyo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), which caused untimely deaths and disrupted the social, religious and economic life of the people, has posed a great challenge to the Christian faith, especially in Nigeria as it affected the physical gathering of Christians for worship and other ecclesiastical practices. Scholars have focused largely on the religious, social and economic effects of COVID-19 in Nigeria, but with little attention paid to its ecclesiastical impacts, especially in selected Protestant denominations in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The paper, therefore, discusses the ecclesiastical impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Christ Apostolic Church, in Ibadan, Oyo State. The choice of the scope is due to the proximity to the researcher. Primary data was gotten from key informant interviews of selected respondents from the selected contexts, while secondary data were gathered from relevant books, journal articles, and newspapers on the subject matter. The data were descriptively analysed. The findings revealed that attendance in church services decreased tremendously because many members were used to online service, hence, some become cold spiritually. Besides, believers' social interaction in the church was also affected as some other ecclesiastical practices. The paper recommends that church leaders should pay attention to discipling members because when members become disciples, they would grow to spiritual maturity and advance the kingdom of God wherever they find themselves, no matter the situation.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Ecclesiastical impacts, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Christ Apostolic Church, Southwestern Nigeria.

Word Count: 235

Introduction

There is no doubt that the emergence of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) in the world is a great challenge because of its effects on virtually every facet of life such as the economy, health, education, and so on. While the world is facing many security challenges, Nigeria as a nation is not excluded; many people lost their loved ones, and jobs during the pandemic, and it has also resulted in economic hardships for many, while many businesses were paralysed. Of course, the aftermath effects of the pandemic cannot be ignored. Besides, a gathering of a large number of people in public places such as churches, mosques, markets, banks, etc. was restricted by the Nigerian government to curtail the spread of the virus. Alternatively, social distancing was introduced and it became necessary for people to converge for any reason. The gathering of people for religious purposes became a big challenge because many church congregations that usually gather in their campgrounds or large auditoriums for various church programmes could not do so. Hence, these affected the ecclesiastical processes after the pandemic in the selected churches.

Many religious fundamentalists have publicised different opinions on the cause(s) of the pandemic. Some posited that the pandemic was a punishment from God for the numerous sins and disobedience of people to God's commandments such as homosexuality, rape, killings, kidnapping, and abortion, just to mention a few, while many of them viewed it as one of the apocalyptic signs, believing that the second coming of Christ is imminent.¹ Though these opinions could not be justified empirically, there may be an iota of truth in it. Many church leaders in Nigeria have said repeatedly that God wanted people all over the world to trace their steps back to Him and reconstitute their ways, hence the pandemic. No doubt, the pandemic dealt a big blow to Nigerian churches in many areas which brought about obvious changes in the liturgy of many churches.

Many scholars have focused their attention largely on the religious, social and economic effects of COVID-19 in Nigeria, but with little attention paid to its ecclesiastical impacts. Olawale Olonade, Christiana Adetunde, et al comment on the religious effect of the COVID-19

pandemic in that it compelled many religious organisations like mosques, churches and synagogues to devise alternative ways of conducting online services through radio, television and live streaming on social media platforms to keep in touch with their members. They further opined that it affected the religious practices of many mainline churches like the Roman Catholic church which instructed their elderly members to desist from attending the obligatory Sunday mass. Also, some of their bishops suspended their abstinence from eating meat during Lent on Fridays during the pandemic.² In a similar perspective, Onyekachi Chukwuma opined that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic compelled many churches to suspend or modify some of their long-standing traditions such as the solemnization of Holy Matrimony, Holy Communion, baptism and sharing of peace commonly practised among the mainline churches.³

Valeria Saladino, Davide Algeri, et al observed the social effect of the pandemic such as distance from loved ones, loss of freedom and feeling of helplessness which might have some psychological effects on the people. Their research findings revealed some emotional and behavioural changes in Spanish and Italian children which manifested in restlessness (38.8%), nervousness (38%), boredom (52%), sense of loneliness (31.3%), uneasiness (30.4%) and worries (30.1%). Hence, the pandemic affected the interpersonal relationships of these people.⁴ Commenting on the economic effect of the pandemic, Maria Nicola, Zaid Alsafi, et al observed that various sectors were affected by the pandemic – primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. In the primary sector, the agricultural sector was mentioned. In the agricultural sector, the prices of agricultural products dropped by 20% during the pandemic because of the crash in the demand for dairy products and others, especially from hotels and restaurants. Besides, travel restrictions affected the agricultural perishable goods making many farmers record losses. Many manufacturing industries experienced a decline in their turnover due to disruption to supply chains and self-isolation policies because the ‘working from home’ policy could not favour them. It also affected many businesses and organisations globally resulting in the loss

of jobs, business opportunities, and income, and thus constituted economic hardships in various forms for many people.⁵

The submission of these scholars is highly commendable having exposed us to the religious, social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but in their works, little or no attention is paid to the ecclesiastical impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in selected churches in Oyo State, Nigeria; hence the gap the paper has attempted to fill. The paper discusses the ecclesiastical processes in the Early Church which had been the same in the selected churches before the pandemic. The changes the pandemic brought to these processes are therefore highlighted in this paper. The key Informant Interviews method was adopted to sample the opinions of selected respondents from the selected contexts, while secondary data were gathered from relevant books, journal articles and newspapers on the subject matter.

Brief Overview of Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)

According to World Health Organisation (WHO), coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) which emerged in Wuhan, China in 2019, hence, it is called COVID-19.⁶ The virus can cause respiratory illness to the people infected and they can either recover without any medical attention or some infected persons may need medical treatment for quick recovery. However, older people who have some medical issues such as diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are most vulnerable to the virus. The virus is said to spread easily through the mouth or nose when the infected person cough, sneezes or speaks. Hence, it is recommended that one should always put on a face mask when among many people and when conversing with another person.⁷ World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. According to WHO, “a pandemic occurs when a disease that people have no immunity against begins to spread across large regions.” Hence, SARS-CoV-2 spreads from person to person through close communities becoming a global challenge.⁸ However, the most common symptoms include; fever, dry cough, and tiredness, while less common symptoms include; aches and pains, sore

throat, diarrhoea, conjunctivitis, headache, loss of taste or smell and a rash on the skin, or discolouration of fingers or toes. Serious symptoms are difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath, chest pain or pressure and loss of speech or movement.⁹ Given these, social distancing, wearing of face masks, and other preventive measures were encouraged to curtail the spread of the virus. Besides, large gatherings of people in public places such as churches, mosques, markets, banks, etc. were restricted.

However, the first emergence of COVID-19 in Nigeria was confirmed on Thursday 27th of February 2020 in an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria but just returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos, on 25 February 2020. The man was diagnosed positive by the Virology Laboratory of Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), part of the Laboratory Network of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.¹⁰ Hence, the Nigerian government took some decisive measures to curtail the spread of the virus in the country. Both total and partial lockdowns were introduced but allowing each state government to decide the method that would be suitable for them depending on the number of cases of affected people recorded per day in their states. This flexibility made some states impose a night curfew only from 7.00 pm to 5.00 am the following morning like Oyo State, while in Ogun State, there were alternative visiting days to markets and banks for economic transactions spacing between Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; but at other times, there was an extension from Monday to Friday to allow those who survive on daily livelihood from markets to be able to earn a living, but restricted their movement on weekends. However, there was a total shutdown of schools, churches and businesses except for healthcare centres or hospitals.¹¹

Meanwhile, when there was a rapid increase in the number of infected people with the virus, the Federal Government introduced a total lockdown of churches, mosques and other public places but allowed markets and banks to open about two or three days a week alternatively. This action was intended to curb the spread of the virus. Hence, many churches had to suspend their weekly and monthly programmes and

resorted to holding such programmes online and streaming them live on some social media platforms to maintain fellowship with their members. Most churches that usually hold their monthly programmes at their campgrounds closed down their campgrounds for that reason. Therefore, that decision brought some changes to the worship services and activities of many Nigerian churches which even persisted after the lockdown.

Ecclesiastical Processes in the Early Church

The church is a community of believers who confess Jesus as the Christ and worship God in the Spirit (Philippians 3:3). The Greek Word *ekklesia* is used to describe an organised community that acknowledges Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, and they come together for fellowship and religious worship. This community is described as the community of believers otherwise known as the New Testament church.¹² Christian fellowship was a cardinal principle of the Early Church. The physical fellowship involves all the members irrespective of their social status, economic status or gender because it is believed that Christ has united them as one; hence, there should be no discrimination (Gal. 3:28). In fact, Paul writes to condemn any form of division or discrimination that seems to manifest among the Corinthian Christians during the celebration of the Eucharist, especially between the well-to-do and the poor brethren (I Cor. 11:17-22). Besides, a Christian gathering is understood as a cultic gathering of believers that should be filled with meaning and profound significance. The physical gathering of believers for worship on the Lord's Day, (otherwise known as Sunday, because Jesus' resurrection is on the first day of the week) was regarded as an important part of the community's life. Every believer is expected to participate in the service.¹³ Hurtado argues further that the early Christians did not see worship service as a mere religious exercise but as an opportunity to "reaffirm their beliefs and to engage in ritualised behaviour." Hence, it was a regular event where they experience the presence and power of God.¹⁴

Besides, the early Christians worship at homes, especially homes of well-to-do members of the community who have sufficient economic

means to accommodate them and they share common meals as a family. They expressed their intimacy by sharing a loaf of bread as part of a common meal. The Eucharist was considered a part of a larger meal otherwise known as *agape* or "love feast." The meal was regarded as a ceremony that unites the community together. It was taken by love. By sharing communion or eucharist, believers demonstrate their love, common faith, and their membership in the community.¹⁵

Another important feature of the New Testament church was regarded as "the kiss of Christian liturgical fellowship."¹⁶ In many of Paul's letters, he mentions "holy kiss" which was seen as a sign of intimacy among the early Christians (Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; II Cor. 13:12; I Thess. 5:26). Of course, Paul expressed it as a gesture to be given and received by the brethren during the worship service. Apostle Peter refers to this gesture as the "kiss of love (I Peter 5:14)." Garland asserts that the "holy kiss" is an outward act that affirms a common bond among Christians. It is a form of greeting, love and reverence. He argues further that in the Old Testament, kissing is seen as a gesture given to a close relation (Gen. 27:26; 29:13; 31:28; Ex. 4:27; Ruth 1:14, etc.), to close Friends (I Sam. 20:41). No wonder Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss.¹⁷ Klassen opines that the kiss is what believers give to one another when they meet.¹⁸ Garland says that it is called a "holy kiss" because it goes beyond an extension of social custom but is seen as "a sign of mutual fellowship" among people of different backgrounds, ages, statuses, and genders who are united together as a new family in Christ Jesus.¹⁹

Brief History of The Selected Churches

- The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)

The founder of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Reverend Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi a.k.a. "Baba Alakoso" was born into a typically Ogun worshipping family on July 5, 1909, at number 12, Odo-Alafia Street Odojomu area of Ondo town, Ondo State, Nigeria. According to Oleleru, around 1927, his natural hunger for God got him involved with the CMS Church, now known as the Anglican Communion where he learned the rudiments of the Christian faith called

catechism, baptism by immersion and was christened Josiah Olufemi, as he was originally named Ogunribido Ogundolie. In 1931, he left the CMS for the more vibrant and fervent Cherubim and Seraphim Movement Church (C&S). The major attraction that pulled Reverend Akindayomi to the C&S Church those days was the fact that, besides the obvious presence of the power of the Holy Spirit, the worship at the (C&S) was truly African with vigorous clapping, dancing, heavy drumming, high praise and much show of emotions. With his wife and partner, Pastor (Mrs.) Esther Eghedire Akindayomi, they both came to Lagos in 1941 and got married that same year at the C&S church. Because of his hunger and thirst for the true living God, Reverend Akindayomi and his wife left the C&S Church in 1952 and started the 'Ogo Oluwa Society' that met weekly for prayers, worship and Bible study. In studying their Bible, they found out about restitution and Reverend Akindayomi who once had three wives was, with the help of the Holy Spirit, able to handle marriage restitution by retaining only the first wife.

Reverend Akindayomi, a man of prayer, miraculously received the name "The Redeemed Christian Church of God" through a vision and the Holy Spirit enabled him to scribble the name of the Church. Olaleru wrote: "When the name 'The Redeemed Christian Church of God' was revealed to Rev. Akindayomi, it came with a mandate from the Almighty God that the church should go to the ends of the earth. God had commanded his servant, 'Prepare people for the Lord.'"²⁰ God confirmed His call upon Josiah's life through the scriptures in Jeremiah 1:4-10; Isaiah 41:10-13 and Romans 8:29-31. He opened his Bible and could read and understand what he read. It was a miracle for a man who knew neither how to read nor how to write.

The man of God committed that command to heart and set his mind squarely on fulfilling the mandate. It was a determination that cost blood and sweat. Members of the church sold their T.V. Sets because the church opposed it. The 'Ogo Oluwa Society' took on the banner divinely revealed to Reverend Akindayomi, who was also given the revelation that the church would go to the ends of the world and that the Lord Jesus would meet the church at His Second Coming. Reverend

Akindayomi took the heavenly mandate with all seriousness and a sense of urgency as if his very life depended on it. He immediately went to work by fashioning the church in the style of the early Church as recorded in the Acts of Apostles. He instituted severe discipline and church doctrines were strict and highly monitored.

Adeola Akinremi asserts that in the early years of the church, with doctrines that spelt harsh social consequences and some authoritarian tendencies, the church carved out an image of what Roy Wallis (1984) characterises as a "world rejecting religious movement." The church (i) segregated women from men, (ii) insisted that men must never shake hands with women, (iii) a man must not sit on a chair just vacated by a woman (because the chair could instigate impure thoughts), (iv) forbade a woman from using chemicals to change the style of her hair to create curls or visit the salon, (v) forbade a woman from riding on a motorcycle. It does not appear likely that a church with these features appealed to many people. Furthermore, a church that did not clap hands during worship services or use musical instruments and also insisted that members must cry during prayers was not a particularly attractive place for many city dwellers. A church that was nick-named *Ijo elekun*, "the weeping church," could not have been the favourite of many city people.²¹ The cumulative effect of all this is that eight years after its inception, the RCCG had less than a hundred persons at its 1960 convention!²²

However, Akindayomi passed on to glory on the 2nd of November 1980. The covenant God made with him influenced the founder throughout his life and ministry. He would not compromise the twin virtues of holiness and righteousness. For him, the standard of righteousness was Matthew 5:20 which says: "For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." On the 20th of January 1981, Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, a PhD holder in Applied Mathematics and a Senior Lecturer at the University of Ilorin then, was divinely chosen to take over as the General Superintendent of RCCG with a total number of forty (40) parishes. A new chapter was opened and a new era was born.

- **Christ Apostolic Church (CAC)**

Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) is distinctly an indigenous African Church. Its structure, beliefs and practices show that it is an independent Pentecostal Church. The history of the Church is traceable directly to the founding fathers, namely Oba/Pastor Isaac Babalola Akinyele, Pastor David Ogunleye Odubanjo, Joseph Sadare, Miss Sophia Odunlami and Evangelist (late Apostle) Joseph Ayodele Babalola who was called to the ministry by the Lord on 11th October 1928. Apostle Babalola's calls subsequently led to the great revival of 1930.

Before the great revival of 1930, there was the Faith Tabernacle era between 1918-1928 characterised by the formation of praying groups such as the Precious or Diamond Society. The group was coordinated by Joseph Sadare (a.k.a. Esinsinade), D. O. Odubanjo, I. B. Akinyele (late Olubadan of Ibadan) and Miss Sophia Odunlami. The majority of the members of the first group of Diamond Society were worshipers at St. Saviour's Anglican Church, Ijebu-Ode, where they began meeting regularly for prayers and spiritual guidance in 1918. Mr D. O. Odubanjo soon developed contact between members of the 'Praying Band' and Pastor A. Clark, the leader of Faith Tabernacle in Philadelphia, United States of America (USA), through correspondence and receipt of tracts and magazines such as 'The Sword of the Spirit.'

However, the practices of divine healings, opposition to infant baptism, reliance on dreams and visions, abstention from dancing, drumming, debt-owing, drinking alcohol, gambling, and mixing with non-Christians later caused disagreement between the group and the Anglican Church which led to the removal of Mr Joseph Sadare in the Synod and others were forced to resign their jobs and to withdraw their children from the Anglican School. Fortunately, it led to the establishment of the group in Lagos, Ibadan, Ilesa, Oyan, Ile-Ife, Minna, Jos and Zaria, and their members comply with the beliefs in the power of prayer and divine healing.

The Great Revival of 1930 with Apostle Joseph Ayo Babalola as its medium, emerged in July 1930 at Oke-Ooye, Ilesa, with the company of people who assisted him such as D. O. Odubanjo, Oba I. B. Akinyele and J. A. Babatope, as well as some of his followers like J. A.

Medayese, A. O. Omotoso, John Oye, and others. The Great Revival did not only embrace all the beliefs accepted by the Faith Tabernacle group but also went further by embracing the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual manifestation of seeing visions, prophesying, speaking in tongues and dreaming. However, as a result of the disagreement over the issue of “divine healing,” two groups emerged. The pro-European group was led by Pastor S. G. Adegboyega while Apostle Joseph Babalola, Pastor D. O. Odubanjo and Pastor (Oba) I. B. Akinyele led the Nigerian Group.

Over time, God revealed to Apostle Ayo Babalola to name the Revival Group “Apostolic Church.” About 1939, the Church changed its name to Nigerian Apostolic Church. This name was again changed to United Apostolic Church until 1942 when God specifically revealed that the name of the Church should be Christ Apostolic Church. It was thereafter that the name was registered as No. 147 of May 4, 1943, under the Lands Perpetual Succession Ordinance. Apart from the belief of C.A.C. members in prophecy, visions, divine healing and holy living, the focal point of all tenets and practices of the Church is prayer. And when accompanied by fasting, it could accomplish the impossible. The C.A.C. has a strong belief in the efficacy of prayer and that no divine healing could be achieved without faith and trust in Jesus Christ. These two religious virtues are the bedrock of the Church’s spiritual power.

Ecclesiastical Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Selected Churches

Congregational Worship was Disrupted

Fellowship, from the Greek word *koinonia*, implies ‘communion,’ ‘fellowship,’ ‘mutuality,’ ‘participation,’ ‘togetherness,’ ‘union,’ and ‘unity.’²³ Bock argues that *koinonia* (fellowship) is used in the New Testament to “underscore the personal interactive character of relationships in the early church at all levels,” which denotes a real sense of mutual connection and togetherness.²⁴ However, as a result of the pandemic, this fellowship has been affected in many ways.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria led to a decline in the number of persons who attend physical fellowship of brethren in the selected

churches. Some members of these churches do not appreciate believers' fellowship again. The stay-at-home (lockdown) that was observed during the pandemic seems to have affected the faith of many of them, especially young believers for they were used to online worship. Hence, many of them alternate their attendance in the church services, while some have not even shown up till now. Consequently, church attendance both during weekly services and Sunday services has decreased drastically.²⁵ During the lockdown, RCCG made use of social media platforms and Television stations (Dove & RTM) to transmit their services to sustain the fellowship of brethren. The resultant effect of this after the lockdown is that many members have gotten used to that. Hence, they prefer to watch church services at home, since the same is transmitted online via YouTube, or on Dove TV and GoTV. This has given them the freedom to watch church services on their schedule. They could even watch other churches' services online, hence, they become less active in church activities physically. Therefore, the physical fellowship which is a significant aspect of Christian fellowship even in the Early Church is neglected. This results in the spiritual coldness of many members who used to be fervent in the church before the pandemic and the process of discipleship training in the physical church for young believers is altered.

Besides, as part of the characteristics of believers' fellowship, handshakes and hugging one another in the church are suspended. RCCG adopted these as a substitute for the "holy kiss" commonly practised in the Early Church. Hugging one another is a gesture of mutual intimacy among RCCG members when gathered together for worship. Christ Apostolic Church also has the attitude of asking two or more people to hold their hands and pray for one another during a prayer session, otherwise known as "prayer of agreement;" this has also been suspended because of the preventive measure of COVID-19 says one must not handshake another. The custom of ushers welcoming members to the church with a warm handshake and then assisting them to carry their bags or Bibles to where they would sit for the service has also been suspended.²⁶ Many times, during church services, pastors ask members to exchange pleasantries with one another in the spirit of

fellowship, shaking hands and hugging sometimes before the pandemic, but this has also been put to hold as a result of the pandemic because many members are still keeping the memory of the pandemic and being scared of being infected. In RCCG, first-timers (people who are attending Sunday service for the very first time) are welcomed by the pastor and church members with a warm handshake as their token of love to the persons, but the pandemic has also put a hold on this custom.²⁷ All these comply with the COVID-19 guidelines for the mass congregation after the restriction was lifted.

Also, it is the usual practice of these churches for pastors to lay hands and anoint members during the 'Anointing Service,' especially the sick as supported by the Bible (James 5:14-15). However, the pandemic has cautioned many pastors from doing this. They only stretch their hands towards their members and pray for them from distance. Alternatively, the pastor would ask each member to touch the anointing oil poured on a small plate during the service and anoint themselves as he prays for them afterwards.²⁸

Change in Holy Communion Service

Eucharist (Holy Communion or Lord's Supper) is a central rite of the Christian religion, in which bread and wine are consecrated by an ordained minister and consumed by the minister and members of the congregation in obedience to Jesus' command at the Last Supper, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' With the COVID-19 pandemic guidelines, the selected churches, though did not suspend the celebration of the Lord's Supper, they made some little adjustments by allowing ministers to come to the pews to serve members instead of members clustering in queues. During the lockdown, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Pastor Enoch Adeboye, celebrated the Lord's Supper via Dove Television Channel; members were directed to connect to the said channel and observe theirs at home. To many, staying at home to observe the Lord's Supper diminishes the sacredness of the institution, for each member has to provide the elements by themselves using any available things like biscuit, coke, water, malt drink or whatever, just to be part of the service and connect by faith.²⁹

Fall in the Income of the Church

The outbreak of COVID-19 has reduced the financial commitment of many church members to the church. Even though the pandemic affected many people's businesses and jobs leading to low income for them that incapacitates many of them to give bountiful offerings, before the pandemic, the low attendance of worshippers in the church also contributed to the fall in the income of the church. Usually, during the service, Pastors would encourage people to give financially to support church projects and people would respond positively to such requests. In Christ Apostolic Church, various types of offerings are collected during the services, apart from tithes and special donations. However, after the lockdown, people's response to such request is low compared to what it used to be.³⁰

Change in Sitting Arrangement

The pandemic forced a change in the sitting arrangement of these churches, otherwise known as social distancing. This is one of the preventive measures for COVID-19. These churches have to instruct their ushers to arrange chairs in the church in such a way that worshippers would not sit very close to another, even family members, that is, there is a reasonable gap between one chair and the other.

Recommendations

The main thrust of this article is to explain the ecclesiastical impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Christ Apostolic Church, in Ibadan, Oyo State. Based on the discussion and findings of this research, the following recommendations are suggested:

Church leaders should encourage togetherness using various means to bring erring members back to the physical fellowship of the brethren in the church. This is necessary because it has many advantages for believers.

Christians should be encouraged to identify with a local church and become steadfast because of the underlying benefits. Besides, the Bible admonishes us "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves

together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrew 10:25).

There is no doubt that the virtual church has come to stay, therefore, church leaders are advised to embrace technological advancements of this present age to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ across the globe because they are established viable tools to reach the world for Christ.

Some of these changes may look negative going by the usual practice of the church in the past, but they tend to have their advantages. For example, holding one another's hands in the name of agreement prayer is not hygienic enough for it could predispose members to infectious diseases. You can agree with one another in prayer without holding hands.

Church leadership should learn to disciple members. The Early Church was not making members but disciples. This is in agreement with the command of Jesus in the Great Commission, "...Go and make disciples of nations...." When worshippers become disciples, it would be difficult for them to forsake the fellowship of one another because of their spiritual maturity. Besides, they would always work towards advancing the Kingdom of God. This would bring about the growth of the church and enhance the spiritual growth of the members as well.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has religious, social and economic effects on the world at large as it has been discussed by many scholars of which few of them are quoted in this work. However, this article is focused on the ecclesiastical effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Christ Apostolic Church in Ibadan Oyo State, Nigeria, an aspect which has not received proper attention by many scholars who have written on the COVID-19 pandemic. This aspect is very crucial as this research has highlighted the ecclesiastical processes in the Early Church which had been the same processes the selected churches adopted before the pandemic. Hence, attention is paid in this work to the changes the pandemic has brought to the said processes as the crux of this research.

ENDNOTES

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18. W. Klassen, "The Sacred Kiss in the New Testament: An Example of Social Boundary Lines" *New Testament Studies*, 39:122-35.
19. David Garland, *I Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 772-73.
20. Olanike Olaleru, *The Seed in the Ground: The Story of the Founding of the Redeemed Christian Church of God*. (Lagos: Father of Light Publications, 2007).
21. Adeola Akinremi, "Some Old Landmarks," *Redemption Light*, Vol. 7, no.7, August 2002, 36.
22. The entire "crowd" at the 1960 convention of the church was made up of thirty-six men, twenty-five women and thirty-six children and infants (those under 12 years of age). It was not all members of the church were present.
23. N. Sagovsky, "Covenant and Communion" in *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6, 10.
24. Darrell Bock, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 201-3.
25. David Adedugbe, Minister at the Redeemed Christian Church of God, was interviewed on February 10, 2022.
26. Olayinka Ojeniran, CAC Oke-Agbara, Ibadan, Oyo State, interviewed March 20, 2022
27. Victor Ogunniran, RCCG, Chapel of Praise, Ibadan, was interviewed on March 23, 2022.
28. Afolarin Akintunde, a Minister at the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Adegbayi Ibadan, was interviewed on March 25, 2022.
29. Afolarin Akintunde, 2022.
30. Olayinka Ojeniran, CAC Oke-Agbara, Ibadan, Oyo State, interviewed March 20, 2022.

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