

Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) and New Means of Grace in a Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

Towards the end of 2019, the global community came under the havoc of the dreaded Corona Virus pandemic known as COVID-19, which affected every aspect of human life, institutions and organizations, and received different responses from developed and developing nations. Scholars have discussed a lot, especially the socio-economic impact of the pandemic without paying close attention to the opportunities it provides. Hence, the need to investigate the opportunities provided by the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper seeks to highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with special reference to the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) and to examine the new means of grace that abound for her in this post-pandemic era. The paper stems from the observable loss of hope that accompanied the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic among members of the Church of Christ in Nations. The paper adopts documentary and historical survey methods to generate data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data are generated through interviews with key church leaders, while the secondary data are sourced from published materials on the COVID-19 pandemic. These methods provide in-depth and comprehensive data leading to valid and reliable outcomes. The study reveals that although the pandemic impact is overwhelming, especially in the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN); new means of grace however abound for her to utilise to forge ahead. The paper makes recommendations for COCIN to properly appropriate the new grace that abounds for her in this post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

Keywords: Church of Christ in Nations, COVID-19 Pandemic, new means of grace, post-pandemic era

Introduction

Throughout human history pandemic, outbreaks have decimated societies and wiped out significant human populations. These intermittent outbreaks of infectious diseases have impacted the economic, political, and social aspects of human existence leaving profound and devastating effects which often last for centuries.¹ This implies that the pandemic outbreak is not new in the history of the world. Recently, towards the end of 2019, the global community came under the havoc of yet another dreaded pandemic outbreak called ‘Corona virus’ also known as ‘COVID- 19.’ The history of the virus is traceable to Wuhan in China which came to bear on December 8 2019.² Although the epicentre of the outbreak was initially China, the entire world became overwhelmed by its rapid spread.³ The pandemic was trailed by devastating effects which overwhelmed every aspect of human life, institution and organization. In an attempt to curb the spread of the virus, the government of different countries rolled out different responses with the development of COVID-19 safety guidelines or protocols such as wearing face masks, regular washing of hands under running water, avoidance of handshake, social distancing and banning of public gatherings.⁴ Nigeria recorded her first index case on February 27 2020 when an Italian citizen on a business trip to Nigeria tested positive for the virus. This development brought a turnaround in the story of events in the country in subsequent days, which caused serious obstruction to every aspect of human life.⁵ The devastating effect of the virus prompted the World Health Organisation (WHO) to declare it a public emergency of international concern and also a pandemic on December 30 and March 11 2020 respectively. The appearance of the pandemic sparked interest in the world of scholarship. Although many works have been published on the pandemic, especially on its socio-economic impact, the new means of grace provided by the pandemic has continued to receive little or no attention in the world of scholarship. Thus, there is a great need to examine the new means of grace that abound for the church of Christ in Nations to utilize for her continuity and sustainability in this post- COVID-19 pandemic era. This is necessitated by the observable loss of hope that trailed the COVID-19

experiences of COCIN members. The paper, therefore, seeks to highlight the impact of the pandemic on the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) and to examine the new means of grace that abound for her to utilize in this post-pandemic era. To make this achievable, data are generated from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are generated through interviews with key church leaders, while secondary data are sourced from published materials on the COVID-19 pandemic which provides in-depth and comprehensive data leading to a reliable result. The paper adopts documentary and historical survey methods. The significance of the paper cannot be overemphasised, especially for the Church of Christ in Nations, as it establishes that in every devastating situation, God always provides a new means of grace for His people. This is particularly true for the Church of Christ in Nations, that despite the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of hope that trailed such experience, new means of grace abound for her to utilize to forge ahead in this post-pandemic era.

Brief Historical Overview of the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN)

The Church of Christ in Nations is a regional church denomination with its headquarters in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. Its emergence is traceable to the missionary work of Sudan United Mission (SUM), a British branch which arrived in Wase on Saturday the 8th of October 1904.⁶ Sudan United Mission was an interdenominational Christian organisation whose membership was drawn from various denominations in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.⁷ Sudan refers to the great region of Africa between the Sahara desert and the forest area to the south, and from the Atlantic to the Red Sea.⁸ Therefore, it is the outcome of the missionary effort of humble and dedicated children of God from another continent to Africa that gave birth to the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN). It has been observed that the vision carrier was the young Dr Herman Wilham Karl Kumm who found the support of 3 other committed friends that accompanied him on the missionary expedition to Africa. The friends were Dr Ambrose Bateman, Mr John G. Burt, and Rev. John Lowry Maxwell.⁹ They left Liverpool on 23rd

July 1904 and arrived in Wase on October 8, 1904. From that humble beginning, the Church of Christ in Nations is today established in over 8 African countries and the United Kingdom.¹⁰

The Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) and the Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-COV-2). The virus started in December 2019 in Wuhan China. The transmission of the virus was initially linked to direct exposure to the human seafood wholesale market of Wuhan.¹¹ Covid-19, therefore, was first a China shock, and within a short time, it became an Asian regional shock and later a common shock in which the entire globe was overwhelmed by its attendant effect.¹² Transmission is believed to be through respiratory droplets from coughs, sneezes and contact with infected persons or surfaces. The incubation period ranges between 2 to 14 days.¹³ While commenting on the change in nomenclature of the disease, Koirala *et al* note that at the beginning of its emergency, the disease was known as the '2019 novel Coronavirus,' later, the World Health Organization (WHO) named it as covid-19. "CO" stands for "Corona," "VI" 'virus' and "D" represents 'disease' while "19" represents the year of its outbreak.¹⁴

The term pandemic refers to a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly among people and occurs at the same time around the world.¹⁵ A disease that is referred to as a pandemic is, therefore, characterized by a wide geographical coverage and a high population of people affected. In the history of the world, an outbreak of different pandemics has been recorded such as Influenza, Human Immune Virus, Swine flu, Ebola and the recent Coronavirus.¹⁶ Post-pandemic era, therefore, is the period following the outbreak of a particular disease with wide geographical coverage and a high population of victims. In this context, it is the time when the rate of infection by the virus has waned significantly, although not completely eradicated and normal life has resumed.

Many impacts trailed the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN), which manifested in different dimensions in the church's life.

Spiritually, many members of the Church became disillusioned. The ravaging effect of the pandemic seemed to them the end of the world. While attesting to the spiritual impact of the pandemic one of the interviewees responded thus:

The spiritual life of our members became weak because it seems God had abandoned them. Even the pastors who were supposed to provide a spiritual solution to the virus through faith healing were themselves looking for help. Some of the members gave in to fallacies that the virus is allergic to alcohol, and therefore resorted to drinking as an antidote to the virus; while others adopted a syncretistic lifestyle as a survival strategy.¹⁷ From the above response, it is clear that the loss of hope by some members of the Church of Christ in Nations led to godless lifestyles which undoubtedly resulted in the spiritual downturn or decay of such members. The suspension of spiritual exercises led to spiritual backwardness.

Another major impact of the pandemic on the Church is the suspension of the long-standing tradition of Christian fellowship, where the members of the church come together physically for service and other activities. The social interaction among Church members was paralysed by the lockdown, social distancing and prohibition of a handshake and hugging each other. Thus, the social interaction among COCIN members was characterized by fear, suspicion and mistrust.

The Church of Christ in Nations' missionary mandate was also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The mandate of the church is soul winning without which the church is empty.¹⁸ This is done through evangelistic groups such as the Prayer and Revival Unit (PRU), New Life for All (NLFA), and other subgroups that traverse across the length and breadth of the entire country and beyond. Besides, the church has Missionaries in many African countries and the United Kingdom. The Director of Mission and Evangelism notes that mission outreaches and evangelism which are the primary means of recruiting new members

into the church came to a standstill. Some of our mission fields were closed for months, especially in South Africa, Kenya and Uganda.¹⁹

From the above, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the smooth implementation of COCIN's mandate, because of the prohibition of a physical gathering of the people in large numbers in a crusade or prayer and revival. In the words of the Director "during the pandemic churches that were on radio and television continued with evangelism via those media, but Church of Christ in Nations could not, because of the absence of those platforms."²⁰ Thus, the impact of the pandemic on mission and evangelism was, therefore, greater on churches which were operating the traditional analogue evangelism method of meeting the people through physical contact, a category to which the Church of Christ belonged. The Church of Christ in Nations experienced a financial meltdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sharp decline in church attendance as stated by one of the respondents also came with the consequential dwindling financial strength of the church. goods during the lockdown. Thus, the major sources of income of the church which are offering and tithe experienced a sharp drought. One of the directors lamented the inability of the church of Christ in Nations to provide palliatives to the members no matter how little unlike other churches. He said, "Church of Christ in nations had no financial reserve to provide palliative to our members."²¹ Besides, the few members who were still buoyant financially interpreted the suspension of public worship and other activities to be synonymous with the suspension of giving offerings and tithe, as many members believed that such can only be given during conventional Sunday services. Thus, the absence of tithe and offering plunged COCIN into a financial drought.²² The pandemic, therefore, exposed COCIN's poor economic diversification.

From the above one can conclude that the unilateral measures of government in a bid to curb the spread of the virus plunged the Church of Christ in Nations' members into serious untold hardship, which consequently affected the entire church as an institution. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus resulted in significant economic disruption occasioned by quarantine, restriction of movement factory closure and a sharp decline in services.²³ Responding to the questions concerning the

financial constraint of the church, one of the interviewees said “the financial experiences of the church during the COVID-19 pandemic, meeting the financial obligations of the church become a herculean task.²⁴ Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the economy and social life of the entire world.²⁵

Physical gatherings for public worship have been a long tradition of the church right from inception, which is a time for fellowship, celebration and renewal of faith and hope as members draw encouragement from one another.²⁶ During the pandemic, physical gatherings were replaced by virtual services while corporate prayers were substituted with individualistic prayer. "Thus, worship was reduced to nothing more than a solemn assembly since coming together which is the bond of Christian fellowship became disintegrated."²⁷

Another great impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Church of Christ in Nations is in the aspect of communication. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic hyped unprecedented reliance on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) among a large segment of the world's population. This is because the government of different countries put many of their citizens under the sit-at-home order popularly referred to as lockdown.²⁸ However, for COCIN the story was different, it was one of the worst-hit churches by the pandemic. It became a victim of communication paralysis because of its heavy reliance on an analogue communication system. If not for Short Message Services (SMS) and phone calls, COCIN would have been in a total communication blackout during the pandemic. This is because hitherto, COCIN operated the analogue communication system where information dissemination to the Regional Church Councils (RCC), Departments and Units was based on a hard copy communication system, where hard copy letters and circulars were written and deposited in pigeonholes of the respective RCC's, Departments and Units. The impact was almost a total communication blackout for the Church since the letters and circulars remained unpicked due to movement restrictions.

New Means of Grace in the Church of Christ in Nations in the COVID-19 Pandemic Context

Embedded in every calamity that befalls humanity, God has always opened new insights or opportunities for the continuity and sustainability of life.²⁹ No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the Church of Christ in Nations negatively in many ways; however, such experiences have also provided new opportunities for the church referred to in this paper as 'New Means of Grace.'

Means of grace is a perennial debate in the history of the church, especially as it relates to the Eucharist. However, the new means of Grace in this paper is a complete departure from the Eucharistic controversies. It is contextually referred to as the coping strategies and opportunities that abound for the Church of Christ in Nations to utilise in this post-pandemic era for her continuity and sustainability. This definition suggests that God is never absent in a human storm, but his grace is always available to provide new opportunities for his people to move on. Thus, despite the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of COCIN, opportunities abound for her to utilise to move ahead in this post-pandemic era, which is tagged 'new means of grace. Challenges, therefore, have their concomitant opportunities.

The COVID-19 experiences of COCIN led to the discovery of the significance of home cell fellowship which is also known as 'family worship.'³⁰ The church rediscovered the true meaning of the church of Jesus Christ which is where two or three people are gathered in his name.³¹ Those who hitherto saw the church as far away from them now have it at their doorsteps. It is said that 'if the church were to wait for the society to come to it, it might wait forever.'³²

The full utilization of lay ministry is another opportunity for the COCIN unveiled by the pandemic experience. The number of pastors could not match the worship centres, lay people were responsible for leading worship and preaching in most of the worship centres.³³ This implies that the church had the opportunity to fulfil Jesus' instructions to all believers to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). The many responsibilities are given to lay people owing to the fragmentation of worship services during the COVID-19 pandemic led to the discovery of many talents

that were hidden in the crowded pre- pandemic church. "It was at this time that the pastoral calling of many members became fully manifested."³⁴

Another opportunity created for the members of the Church is the discovery and development of new entrepreneurial skills. The economic meltdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic affected many COCIN members which manifested in many areas among which are job loss and salary cuts. While some are still struggling with the impact of the pandemic, others have since come out of it by discovering and developing new entrepreneurial skills. Thus, the pandemic experiences triggered creativity and innovation of new ways of earning livelihood by COCIN members such as the establishment of a tailoring unit by the church, which is an opportunity that must be sustained. In the pre-pandemic era, many members were employees, but in this post-pandemic era, many are not only self-employed but employers of labour as they gradually expand their creative and innovative skills.

The pandemic experiences also allowed the Church of Christ in Nations to be Information and Communication Technology (ICT) compliant. Today, the church has fully embraced digital Communication Technology systems in its overall operations. Hard copy analogue communication system is now replaced by digital communication system unless where both are necessary for documentation purposes. One of the interviewees' states thus:

The Central Management Committee (CMC) and the Executive Council (EC) of the church now have digital communication platforms where information is accessed easily by members within the shortest time possible. It has also propelled COCIN personnel to wake up to technological communication systems because the pandemic has ushered in a new platform that could be properly utilised.³⁵

This new opportunity is utilized at all levels of the church as the regional church councils, departments and units of the church now make full use of the digital communication system. This development is so significant because it defies the challenges of time and other physical factors that could inhibit smooth and effective communication. Delays and missing letters and circulars for whatever reason are no longer

communication challenges in the face of this new development. Stepping down information is now faster and easier, and it also limits physical risks such as road traffic accidents, armed banditry and kidnapping for members of the church. In addition, the entire clergy of the church now has a digital communication platform tagged 'COCIN Ministers' Forum' which is used to share all ministerial concerns for prayers and encouragement.

In the aspect of evangelism and mission, there is also unprecedented utilization of information and Communication Technology. The Director affirms thus:

Our missionaries are been trained in ICT, and we now have zoom meetings with them in all mission stations without visiting them physically as we did in the pre-pandemic era which mounted pressure on the church finances. Today, our mission field in the United

Kingdom is fully equipped with ICT facilities where live steam services and other church programmes are held.³⁶

The education department is not left out of this new wave of opportunity, for instance, in Gindiri Theological Seminary (GTS) COCIN's Seminary, the pandemic experiences led to the full utilization of the digital communication system. There are both undergraduate and postgraduate communication platforms where all academic matters are communicated. Currently, the school website places the school in the same ICT space as other institutions that are ICT compliant.

From the foregoing, the pandemic has opened up new operational opportunities for the Church of Christ in Nations which proper utilisation is helping to come out of the pandemic waters. Despite the utilization of the above opportunities, more modalities are being explored for virtual assemblies and conferences of the church to curb the recurrence of the pandemic.³⁷

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic, so affected the Church of Christ in Nations which was trailed by a loss of hope on the part of the members. The [paper has however established that despite that, there new means of grace abound for the church to properly utilize to forge ahead in this

post-pandemic era. Thus, the devastating effects of the pandemic created a shift from what COCIN was in the pre-pandemic era to what it is in this post-pandemic era.³⁸ This proves that even in the fiercest storm of life, God always provides an alternative escape route for the preservation of humanity. In the words of COCIN General Secretary, “although the pandemic affected the global society negatively, it was loaded with concomitant blessings.”³⁹

Recommendations

The church of Christ in nations should as a matter of urgency consolidate the new means of grace to cushion the impact of the pandemic. The Church of Christ in Nations should avoid over-dependence on tithes and offerings as its only source of income; by diversifying its income sources, through the formulation of microeconomic policies and the reactivation of its defunct economic establishments such as the 'faith and farm project.'

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