

**COVID-19 Pandemic Experience and Digital Technology
Application in a Post-Pandemic Era in the Context of the Church of
Christ in Nations (COCIN) Headquarters**

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, COCIN Headquarters Compound Church was forced to evolve and seek out ways to operate without barriers by utilizing the power of digital technology in its rapidly changing environment. In COCIN Headquarters Church, the traditional mode of worship ceased to fill the vacuum of many members during the lockdown. Previous research has primarily relied on broad themes such as the impact of COVID-19 on numerous churches across Nigeria and globally. However, there are disparities in church and societal traditions and what is perceived to be the norm from one church to another. Hence, this study focuses on the effect of the pandemic on the COCIN Headquarters Church and its assimilation of digital technology into its activities. The quantitative research method is used to analyze the data collected from primary sources (digital questionnaires). Results from this study point to the essence of digital technology in the positioning of COCIN Headquarters Church as a church accessible to everyone and without borders in a post-pandemic era.

Key Words: COVID-19, Church, Digital, Technology, COCIN, COCIN
Headquarters Church

INTRODUCTION

The gospel, over the years, has not changed. However, its presentation can and has changed significantly in the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) Headquarters Church. The interactive and participatory nature of digital media adopted in recent times by the church has infused dynamic, focused, pastoral and passionate communication in the gospel of Christ.

With a congregation of about five thousand members, COCIN Headquarters Church is continuously evolving to meet the diverse needs of congregants. During the pandemic, many congregants were cut off from corporate worship in the sanctuary of COCIN Headquarters Church, challenging congregants to rethink the fundamental focus and practices of Christianity and the purpose of religion.

How can we worship together without necessarily coming together in a physical gathering? How can the church maintain its regular liturgy in worship and fellowship in an environment where sickness, security, poverty and other social factors are hindering the traditional physical gathering?

The need for unrestricted corporate worship is as old as time. Paul, in one of his letters, expressed his longing to physically see fellow believers. He wrote, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— 12 that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. 13 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) so that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles."(Rom. 1:11-13, NIV) The availability of digital technology in present times is rapidly changing the way the gospel of salvation is shared. To maximally utilize its potential, the capacity of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) unit at COCIN Headquarters Church in developing strategies for evangelistic growth in the church will be assessed in this study.

The present need for this study is due to global trends affecting COCIN Headquarters Church and the propagation of the gospel. Digital technology is in its prime at COCIN Headquarters Church. If used effectively, digital technology will be the beginning of a new post-pandemic era in the Church where the faith and hope of many believers will be restored and strengthened.

Questionnaires were prepared and distributed electronically via email and messaging apps amongst members of COCIN Headquarters Church. Data received from members was anonymous to eliminate bias. The information compiled from the responses received forms the basis of this paper. This paper is divided into six sections. The first section is the introduction which brings to light the importance of digital technology in the wake of a global pandemic in COCIN Headquarters Church. The second section, the COVID-19 pandemic and ecclesial experience explains the changes that were encountered during the pandemic in the church. COCIN's usage of digital technology in pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the third section, is about the rapid inclusion of digital media in the activities of the church. The fourth section discusses the application of digital technology in Post Pandemic Era in COCIN Headquarters Church, then lastly recommendations and conclusion.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ECCLESIAL EXPERIENCE

COCIN Headquarters Church has a membership of about five thousand people who are residents of Jos North, Jos South, Bassa, Riyom and Barkin-Ladi Local Government Areas, Plateau State, Jos, Nigeria. It has over fifty-two cluster groups that are referred to as "Zonal Fellowships." Each zone is managed by a committee answerable to the Church's leadership. The Congregation has local mission stations in Kagu, Lycheap, and Wuyil in Kanke Local Government Area, Plateau State; and a mission station in Karim Lamido, Taraba State. It is supporting the church's foreign missions. The Congregation has students in Seminaries nationwide. It has a Pre-Primary, Primary, Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary School. The Congregation is led by the President of the Church-Rev Dr Amos Musa Mohzo, assisted by the Vice

President. There is a Senior Pastor who oversees the daily responsibility of the congregation. He is assisted by two other Ordained Pastors and two intern Pastors.

From 1973, when the first congregants gathered under an Acacia Tree, to 2020 when the Federal Government of Nigeria implemented a lockdown in Nigeria due to the pandemic, members of COCIN Headquarters Church had been meeting physically in the Church Sanctuary. The pandemic, however, forced the church to look at other avenues to meet. The scourge of COVID-19 has had dire consequences on the world in variegated ways. While the socio-economic impact is obvious and widely discussed, its impact on other areas of society appears to be shelved or ignored. One such institution is the church as a religious organization (“Social Distance Impact on Church Gatherings: Socio-Behavioral Implications” n.d.)

In the first few weeks of the lockdown, when stringent measures were still in place and movement was highly restricted, information was passed from the church leadership to the elders, zonal leaders and then members of the church. Information was mostly passed via WhatsApp, a social messaging application. Members were encouraged to conduct worship services with their families or alone where applicable.

When lockdown restrictions were relaxed and smaller gatherings were permitted, the leadership of COCIN Headquarters Church had members meet in their respective zones for Sunday worship. For several weeks, the various zones of the church conducted services and held teachings on a central theme given by the leadership of the Church.

When religious gatherings were permitted in Plateau State, COCIN Headquarters Church resumed activities while enforcing strict COVID-19 sanitary protocols. Facemasks were mandatory for the duration of the service, hand sanitisers and hand wash stations were strictly regulated by the health committee and non-compliance with the sanitary rules was not tolerated. Social distancing was maintained during and even after the restrictions had been lifted. Offering bags were no longer passed from person to person. Each row was systematically led to various

collection points by the ushers. The same strategy was used in exiting the church at the end of the service. The Holy Communion Service routine was also altered. For example, the passing of cups from person to person was stopped and the wafer was served with a spoon. Individuals were instructed not to drop off empty cups used by others as well. These measures were taken in a bid to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Frequent health talks and programs were organized in the church and live streamed and this was also replicated in zonal groups within the Church in a bid to enlighten congregants on the severity of the virus and also for precautionary measures.

COCIN'S USAGE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN PRE- AND DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

From the early century when the church came to be, the focus of Christian gathering was for the ministering of the word and breaking of bread, the book of Acts has it that all the members of the church shared their possessions in common. Worship, therefore, became a weekly routine where believers created time to come to the Church to fellowship with one another and to study the word. This tradition became so strong over time that some members considered it a grievous sin to miss Sunday worship. This was the state of COCIN Headquarters Church before the pandemic. Young and old from far and wide gathered in the sanctuary and mostly relied on personal writing and electronic materials for records. Although the church had a media team before the pandemic, the need for live streams and downloadable content was not as urgent as it was during and after the pandemic. Select sermons were previously produced in limited quantities and sold on compact discs. Audio tapes and discs were also produced in limited quantities. Alas, the inadequacy of this practice was exposed when the gates of the Church were shut for weeks in 2020.

During the pandemic, COCIN Headquarters Church started to live stream services on YouTube and Facebook. Electronic payments were encouraged and members were encouraged to connect with the Church on Telegram for real-time notifications as well. The live streams were

not only limited to Sunday Service. Weekly activities were also streamed from the Church. It seems the pandemic opened up the barrier to universal worship in COCIN Headquarters Church. For the first time in the Church adverse conditions such as poor health, old age, distance and so forth were and still are inconsequential.

APPLICATION OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA IN COCIN HEADQUARTERS

Before the pandemic, COCIN Headquarters Church has always had physical meetings. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, members of COCIN Headquarters Church are embracing a major shift in the way physical meetings and corporate worship are perceived in the Church. In the COVID-19 era and its post faces, technology has added another dimension to how worshippers come together and experience worship services. With digital technology, worshippers at COCIN Headquarters Church can experience God's grace and presence alongside other believers irrespective of time and location. This has proven helpful in the delivery of the gospel in the wake of the pandemic. Currently, digital technology is increasing efficiency and productivity and reaching even more people in COCIN Headquarters Church.

In the COVID-19 era and its post faces, technology has added another dimension to how worshippers come together and experience worship services. Before COVID-19, live-streaming services were only an option for congregations, but since the onset of the pandemic, live streaming is mandatory for their survival ("How to Set Up a Live Streaming Website in 6 Simple Steps | Dacast" 2022). There has been a debate on the contribution (or lack of it) of how technology is changing the method and extent of the gospel message in the pandemic and post-pandemic era, especially in Africa. Some scholars who have studied the impact of the internet on religious communities for nearly 25 years are interested in watching how churches responded to social distancing regulations during the pandemic area and the life of the church henceforth (Campbell and Evolvi 2019).

COCIN Headquarters Church has continued to seek out ways to operate without borders post- COVID 19. This is seen in the pace at which the leadership and members have embraced digital technology as an avenue to fellowship with God and one another. From Whatsapp to YouTube, Facebook, Telegram and Zoom, the Church has recorded larger audiences due to the different media options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sermons and programs are good but the aim and goal of the church is salvation through effective relationship building where connection, interaction and life transformation are to take place. COCIN Headquarters Church should continue to use media/technology to effectively engage communities around in ways that would draw would-be believers toward spiritual truth and the gospel in culturally relevant ways.

1. **The Church needs to examine the form and content of media** and it should spend more effort to understand the language of the media, the technology of the media, and the strength and weakness of media.
2. **The Church should agree to dialogue and communication.** While the Church is eager to evangelize and preach her propositional truth or faith story, the church is not only when it meets under one roof all the time. A church should be able to reach its members and would-be members in their homes, in their cars, and on their phones; and feedback communication should be in place.
3. **The Church needs to build a relationship with people.** The fact Jesus walked in sandals and among the people in concrete time and space will give a good example for Christian media people. We need to build a relationship with people in the real context in which they are living. It is not enough to send out the live stream messages but to consciously use the new means of grace to establish interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal engagement and the media can reinforce each other.

4. **The Christian message is for the godless and the godly (2004).** God has a plan and He is doing great things for us even before we were born and before we became Christians. Christian media should have a relevant message for those who do not know there is one true God and for those who are seeking to know if there is a God with whom one can relate (2004). Therefore, special messages for the unreached who are in the city but ignorant of Christ's salvation or those who are in one captivity or the other. For instance, those under substance abuse, those who sell alcohol, ladies who engage in prostitution, and those who do not pay their workers or underpay their workers amongst such things.
5. **The Church needs to take culture seriously (2004).** Media is a shaping force for contemporary culture. Christians should not forsake the marketplace of ideas. We must engage with the culture of the day, and invest resources in it.
6. **Christian communicators may have a painful road to success (2004).** It may be difficult to notice medical malpractice except when somebody has died unnecessarily. It is hard to assess the quality of a counsellor's advice except for a decline in the number of clients. However, a communicator is widely exposed. All his or her media works are open to criticism. Everyone in the audience can be taken to be an expert, expressing like or dislikes. This expression of criticism may be painfully heard by the communicator. Communicators want to please the audience by gaining market acceptance. However, the examples of Jeremiah and John the Baptist are sufficient to note that at the end of the day, we are called to be obedient to one master – God – and not the market.

The credibility of Christian media lies in the witness of the Christian population and both the message and personal lives of communicators. It is not the professionalism of the technique, nor the moving story of the content. It is not the coverage of the market or all the media technology. It is the lives of the Christians and communicators and the receivers which give credibility to the media message (2004).

CONCLUSION

Digital technology has strengthened COCIN Headquarters Church and added immense value to the lives of congregants through the use of diverse multimedia channels. Its use cannot be overemphasized in current times and its acceptance will be of great benefit to the Church. It is without a doubt that some aspects of the traditions of COCIN Headquarters Church cannot be harnessed digitally such as members of the congregation standing with parents during the dedication of a child, or extending a hand of fellowship to visitors in the church. Nevertheless, the collective good of having digital technology as an option for congregants means no matter the circumstance, fellowship with prayers and teachings, are always within reach. This study commends COCIN Headquarters Church for carrying out the great commission during great challenges and fostering the growth of zonal fellowships within the church.

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