

Rethinking Christianity in the Face of the Post-Pandemic Period for the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN)

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ABSTRACT

Rethinking, reevaluating and reassessing Christianity in the face of the post-pandemic impact of COVID-19 on the church has become imperative considering the devastating effect on the life and survival of Christianity. This paper is a clarion call on the church in Africa in general, and the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in particular to rethink, reevaluate and reassess its methods, and strategies for running the church, this is so that, it can survive in this post-pandemic era. Data was collected using secondary sources such as internet material, journals, research reports and textbooks, and were analyzed using the expository and analytical method of inquiry. The paper considered Christianity, the pandemic period, the post-pandemic period, the impact of COVID-19 on the churches, and the lessons learned. The paper concludes that for the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) to survive in the post-pandemic era, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) unit of the church must be functional. The proposed COCIN television and radio stations in the 7-point agenda of former President Rev Prof. Soja Bewarang should be revisited, for evangelism, missions and preaching of the gospel to a wider audience and members of the church. The Light Bearer magazine of the church should be online, instead of print copies only. Online means of collection of tithes, offerings are to be encouraged and implemented.

KEYWORDS: Christianity, Rethinking, Post-pandemic, Africa, Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN)

INTRODUCTION

The corona virus pandemic has developed very rapidly on a global scale. It is understandable that it has a very significant impact on the whole social life, including religious life. Religious practices, which have, by their very nature, a community dimension in almost all religions, in Christian denominations as well, are also changing under the influence of the pandemic.¹

The closure of churches during the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown has forced Christian Churches' to 'do' church differently and to re-imagine the future of the church. For a long time, many churches have resisted change and spoken against considering or even implementing different ideas of 'being' church today. The quest has been to maintain the traditional beliefs and ways of maintaining the practice of churches. And yet the pandemic is radically altering every aspect of life as we know it, presenting a threat to long-established and cherished patterns but also offering opportunities for significant, life-affirming change.²

The pre-COVID-19 world is gone, replaced by a 'new normal'. The new landscape calls for both resilience and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing things and of being church. Churches have to adapt; they have to ask themselves questions about the implications of being a church in this "new normal" context.³ Religious practices, which have, by their very nature, a community dimension in almost all religions, in Christian denominations as well, are also changing under the influence of the pandemic. The purpose of the article is to rethink, evaluate and reassess Christianity in the face of the post-pandemic period of COVID-19. It will be examined religious behaviour in different Christian denominations in general and the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in particular.

Pandemic: The term 'pandemic' means a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly between people and occurs at the same time not only in one country but around the world.⁴

Christianity: Christian theology works with tools in history, philosophy, culture, and language studies, as well as psychology to express this idea of the human, especially in its relationship with and understanding of God, as well as in its resultant moral life. Theology

works with both heart and mind, feelings and intellect. To do so, Christianity is aware of the centrality of the relationship with God in the disposition of humans to do good and to create healthy and fulfilling relations, and especially the place of Jesus Christ in one's life. An understanding of Jesus, known as Christology, distils the totality of faith in terms of the origins and destiny of the human (eschatology), as well as a tradition of thought and practice that is continuous with the mind of the earthly Jesus and the faith in the glorious and Risen Christ of the Trinity, and in the life of the historic church. Christian theology, it has been said, is first and foremost, about the human and the totality of human relationships. Contrary to what some might perceive, theology is not just preoccupied with death and obsessed with heaven and with the ultimate destiny of the soul. It is in seeking to be fully human that one seeks to understand what God wills for one's life. Theological inquiry is devoted to the totality of life and all that influences and shapes that life, and all relationships or community that gives meaning to that life (or robs meaning from that life).⁵

BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN ANATIONS (COCIN)

The Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) came into existence through the works of the pioneer missionaries Karl Kumm, Burt, Bateman and Maxwell who as visionary missionaries conceived the name Sudan United Mission (SUM). The work started in Wase in October 1904. At the moment COCIN is operating in 28 states in Nigeria, and has extended into neighbouring countries of Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin Republic; reaching Malawi in Southern Africa, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and London in Europe. Presently COCIN has a membership of over 3 million worshippers. Its headquarters is in Jos, Plateau State. The church is zoned into ten (10) Provincial Church Councils (PCC); eighty-two (82) Regional Church Councils (RCC's); about two thousand (2000) Local Church Councils (LCC's), and over four thousand (4000) Church Congregations (CC's). It has over one thousand ordained pastors, and over three thousand unordained pastors.⁶. The Church is Evangelical

and accepts the infallibility of the Holy Bible as its final authority in matters of faith and conduct.⁷

COCIN AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE

On December 31st 2019, China alerted World Health Organization (WHO) to several cases of unusual pneumonia in Wuhan, a port city of 11 million people in the central Hubei province on January 1st 2020. On January 7th 2020, officials announced they had identified a new virus, according the WHO. The novel virus was named 2019-nCoV and was identified as belonging to the coronavirus family, which includes SARS and the common cold. On January 30th 2020, the WHO declared coronavirus a global emergency as the death toll in China jumped to 170, with 7,711 cases reported in the country, where the virus had spread to all 31 provinces. On February 1th 2020, the WHO announced that the new coronavirus would be called "COVID-19"⁸

Since then the virus has spread to over 188 countries, the worst affected of them, besides China, are the United States, Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom, among others. Infections have spread far and wide, almost at the speed of lightning. In the era of globalization and the free movement of goods and people, the spread and development of infections due to the virus are almost unstoppable. This is complicated for the moment by the knowledge that there is currently no known vaccine that can cure the infection.⁹

COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 30th January 2020 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). On 27th February 2020, the Federal Ministry of Health announced the confirmation of the first case of Coronavirus disease in Lagos State, Nigeria. To prevent the spread of the virus the federal government issued a directive on lockdown of all official and unofficial programmes.¹⁰

COCIN as a denomination was not immune to the impact of the pandemic. Pillay contends that the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted churches into a somewhat revolutionary way of thinking and being church today. By revolutionary he means sudden, fast, forced and very different ways of functioning; churches did not have the luxury of

choices they were simply forced to close and in the endeavour to stay open they had to resort to creative ways of fulfilling their mission. For example, the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa brought with it particular challenges for the faith communities. All religious gatherings were banned. Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost could not be celebrated in the churches. Initially, there was huge resistance, since congregating to pray, worship and celebrate is an integral part of the Christian faith.¹¹ A large number of churches turned to electronic platforms to reach their members and this has given a faster and inevitable rise to the digital church. Churches had to adjust to digital worship, digital sermons, digital tithes and digital mission. We shall now explore the pandemic's impact on selected areas of the church's work and ministry. What we shall illustrate is the 'radical shifts' churches had to make to embrace and 'survive' in their new reality of being closed by governments during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² Pillay identified shifts in theological, worship and missional areas of Christianity, which we shall summarize and have COCIN in view.

Theological Shift

COVID-19 has certainly put some traditional theological views under the spotlight. The need for Church none can dispute theologically. Calvin, for example, holds a high view of the Church as the *ecclesia*, the called-out people of God. Calvin speaks about the visible and invisible church and describes the visible church as the 'external means or aid by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein' (Book IV). While both pictures of the church are crucial, Calvin's main concern is with the visible church: its marks, authority, ministry and organization.

COVID-19 has inadvertently raised the question of what it means to *be* the church (body of Christ) without going to church (place of worship). It has called into question our understanding of the church as an institution which is usually associated with buildings, offices, organizational arrangements, budgets, ministry, leaders, theology, doctrine and visibility. Perhaps COVID-19 is teaching the church what

it means to be the church *invisible* since churches are not allowed to meet physically.¹³

Many churches, including COCIN, have taken to electronic platforms to continue with ministry and to sustain the 'gathering' of their congregations. They are conducting digital worship services, which include the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Lord's Supper thus fulfilling Calvin's marks of the true church. While we need the external structure of the visible church, COVID-19 is teaching the church that it is only a vessel for what matters, namely the living faith of the community.¹⁴

COVID-19 also calls us the church to reimagine the idea of the church as a community. The call to community is central to the Christian faith and practice. The very notion of community is established in the Godhead; God is a community (Trinity) and the church (*ekklesia*) refers to a community whether it is a local church, a city-wide church or the universal church. God works with the community and whenever God does work with individuals, he sends them right back into the community.¹⁵

The novel coronavirus has impressed upon the church the need to embrace the 'virtual community. Even though it may not be the most ideal way to build community, it is possible. It is interesting to see how many churches are continuing with their weekly activities using Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams and other such media. Bible studies, cell groups, council meetings, prayer meetings, youth groups, pastoral care and counselling, and even fellowship and 'coffee' is done virtually after an online Sunday service for those who want to remain behind. COVID-19 has forced us to engage in different ways to build relational communities, which traditional ecclesiology has prevented us from considering. It is our opinion that this 'new normal' will continue to remain with us when the coronavirus has passed. If the church is intentional in building relational communities with a much wider group of people and not limited to those who physically attend church, then this is the way to go. It may pose challenges to church theology and ecclesiology but it is as Nelus Niemandt says, the church has to embrace relational ecclesiology.¹⁶

Another theological challenge COVID-19 has placed before the church relates to traditional understandings of church leadership. In a sense, it has 'flattened the curve' of hierarchical church structures. It has shown us that faith survives without pastors, priests and bishops. The closure of churches has led to the reinforcement of the 'priest' in each home; someone in the home takes the lead to provide spiritual guidance and nurturance for the family. In a lot of homes women also assume this role which in some churches is a problem in terms of theological views and ecclesiology, women leadership simply is not allowed in some churches. It can be said that COVID-19 has resurrected the concept of the 'priesthood of all believers, and created new opportunities for the recognition and acceptance of women in church leadership. The Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, in their reaction against the Roman Catholic Church advocated the principle of the general priesthood. It abolished the distinction between clergy and laity as ecclesiastical classes. All Christians are in the same position before God and all have principally the task of ministry of word and sacrament.¹⁷

Worship Shift:

While it is important to recognize the significance of the church's gathering to worship, the pandemic has forced the church to rethink *how* we gather. Suddenly we are recognizing that with all the challenges we may encounter yet the church must gather. The church buildings may be closed but the churches (people of God) are still alive and active. What we see in Christianity so often is a move away from family (often as a place of spiritual defeat) towards a move of organized artificial performances in sacred buildings far from the atmosphere of real life. So what we see with the COVID-19 pandemic is the church returning to its roots – back to where it came from. It comes home, completing the circle of church history at the end of world history.¹⁸ So in essence churches have not closed but come home: a church in each home.

The transition of character building and discipleship from church buildings to home is also a manifestation of obedience to the Great Commission by studying the Acts of Paul and the Early Church, who used homes as their place of worship and mission. This transition

becomes a strategy to strengthen the spiritual life of Christian families as the smallest units in church congregation and society in general. If these small units are strong, the strength will impact significantly on larger groups. In addition, house churches can also be strategies to reach people around the Faithfull's homes.¹⁹

The COVID-19 lockdown has forced many people to turn to electronic platforms to continue with public worship. This has also provided an opportunity for Christians to be exposed to other forms of worship, liturgical practices and preaching than they are usually accustomed to. The electronic medium has created opportunities to 'wander' and experiment. For some, it leads to a deeper appreciation of their church tradition and worship practices and for others, it may have opened up a new world of worship experience altogether.²⁰

The electronic platforms also open new doors to Christian worshippers from different cultures and backgrounds worldwide. Worship of the triune God will always be contextual. COVID-19 has strengthened the possibilities of spreading the Gospel on a broader scale and reaching the un-churched, people of other faiths and people with no faith as we grapple for answers in the current struggles in the world and tune in to electronic platforms for encouragement and hope.²¹ However, it has come with some limitations, because physical fellowship is real and we have been admonished in scripture not to neglect meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another.

Missional Shift

The biblical focus on the kingdom (reign) of God provides a comprehensive summary of what the Christian mission is all about. The COVID-19 experience draws us into a more appropriate understanding of the Christian mission with the focus not being on the Church but the reign of God. How do we see and understand God's presence amid a pandemic in which millions of people are infected, hundreds of thousands are dying and human lives and communities are disrupted and devastated? The pandemic helps us to see the state of the world rather than to focus on the inside of the church.²² COVID-19 has the additional

opportunity of making the church more accessible, not only to those who are its members but to all people.

COVID-19 has opened the eyes of the churches to the realities of the sufferings in the world and moved churches to orient ministries towards ideals of the kingdom of God rather than the narrow focus on the church. What is the mission of the church in such a context? It is encouraging to hear inspirational stories of how many churches, against all the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown rules, are providing food, counselling, prayers and different ministries to the suffering masses. In word and deed, they hold out hope and peace in these troubled and difficult times.²³

In addition to the missional, worship and theological shifts impact, the following were identified as some of the impacts of covid-19 on the local churches in Nigeria. Without a doubt, the coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria incited a tremendous change in the practices and customs of churches in Nigeria "Suspension of corporate worship, suspension of the sacrament (Baptism, marriages, confirmation, Holy Communion, suspension of a crusade, revival programme, and reduction in the income of the church and suspension of rural evangelism as the negative impact of COVID-19."²⁴

The togetherness and happiness shared by Christians in various churches have been meddled with as a result of the need to maintain social distancing and other preventive measures to curb the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, this daunting period has paved an opportunity for Churches to explore other means of engaging with and disseminating the Gospel of Christ to both members and non-members. It is also a time for sober reflection on the supremacy of God over his creatures.

RESPONSES OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN NATIONS (COCIN) TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

One of the effects of COVID-19 on the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) is the drop in offerings due to a lack of meeting together, responding in this regard, in his inaugural speech on the 9th of January,

2022, the new COCIN President propose the creation of two new departments which are:

- a) Printing Press Department- this will be a business outfit, which will focus on marketing her products with a view of enhancing finances for the church
- b) Investment Department- this department will make business proposals with the view of enhancing the church's financial base.²⁵

Many churches have taken to electronic platforms to continue with ministry and sustain the gathering of their congregations, and therefore COCIN must not lag. The world is digital and Mohzo, the COCIN President has proposed that "The Church should be able to connect largely on the platforms of the digital world to ease her stress in communication. It is the vision of the church to work hard to connect every RCC Headquarters to the Headquarters in Jos, Plateau State. Our Missionaries serving in other countries should be able to attend our General Church Councils in the comfort of their homes. COCIN members should be able to observe and audit our General Church Council meetings and send in their contributions through their RCCs."²⁶ On the way forward, he says, "We must work on connecting Regional Church Councils, Headquarters Church, Gindiri Chaplaincy, and mission stations in other nations. This will enable the church to disseminate information at all levels of her strata, it will also help coordinate partnerships and collaborations with other mission bodies. Besides, platforms shall be created for teaching and passing critical issues, and policies of the church, and encourage meetings by zooming. Indeed, the benefits cannot be overemphasized. I call for some experts within and outside the church to contribute toward making this dream achievable."²⁷ The proposal by Mohzo is in tandem with the proposed COCIN television and radio stations in the 7-point agenda of former President Soja Bewarang which should be revisited, for evangelism, missions and preaching of the gospel to a wider audience and members of the church. The Light Bearer magazine of the church should be online, instead of print copies only. The e-version of the Daily Walk With Christ for 2022 is commendable and recommended to be

continued. The novel coronavirus has impressed upon us to embrace the 'virtual community.'

Post-COVID-19 has made COCIN rethink what the Christian mission is all about, it has drawn her into a more understanding of the Christian mission with a focus not being on the church but the reign of God. It has opened the eyes of the churches to the realities of the sufferings in the world and moved churches to orient ministries towards ideals of the kingdom of God rather than the narrow focus on the church.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To help the local churches prepare for the future and keep on worshipping God, the following have been recommended for the local church as the way forward, which are appropriate to be considered by the Church of Christ in Nations:

- 1) The local churches should diversify the revenue of the church to create more avenues to generate income apart from the offerings.
- 2) The use of home cell groups is an antidote to the Covid-19 pandemic. The local churches should ensure their members are meeting through the home cell. Even though members may not for the time being gather in large numbers for worship, they can always remember Jesus' words that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). However, it should be born in mind that smaller gatherings require by public health protocols, our Lord is present and at work. At many times during the history of the Church, Christians have been obliged to meet only in small groups, and have yet to succeed in spreading the gospel and continuing the faith. So too can we continue to worship and witness in these times?²⁸
- 3) Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) needs to rethink, reevaluate and reassess its concept of church going forward in the post-pandemic era, it has called into question our understanding of the church as an institution which is usually associated with buildings, offices, organizational arrangements, budgets, ministry, leaders, theology, doctrine and visibility. Perhaps COVID-19 is teaching us what it means to be the church invisible.

- 4) Gathering to worship is very important, but the post-pandemic period has forced the church to rethink how we gather. During the pandemic, the maximum number of those to meet for worship was restricted to fifty (50). What we see in Christianity so often is a move away from family on towards a move of organized artificial performances in sacred buildings far from the atmosphere of real life. But with the COVID-19 pandemic is the church returning to its roots- back to where it came from.

CONCLUSION

The coronavirus pandemic has forced churches into shifting and rethinking some of their long-held theological views and practices. Some of these theological views are not in conflict with what these churches believe but with what they practice. The virus has provided a window of opportunity to re-imagine a new theology for the church, which is not focused on institutionalism, structure, roles and rites but being God's transforming presence in the world.²⁹ The paper concludes that for the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) to survive in the post-pandemic era, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) unit of the church must be functional. The proposed COCIN television and radio stations in the 7-point agenda of former President Rev Prof. Soja Bewarang should be revisited, for evangelism, missions and preaching of the gospel to a wider audience and members of the church. The Light Bearer magazine of the church should be online, instead of print copies only. Online means of a collection of tithes, and offerings are to be encouraged and implemented.

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