

## **Re-thinking Christian Worship in the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in a Post-Pandemic Era**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Christian worship forms the basic tenets of Christianity because it serves as a platform for intense communion with God. Every denomination has its unique pattern of worship distinct from others, Evangelicals (Protestants) and Pentecostals respectively and also diverse means they reach out to the large audience they have. The COVID-19 Pandemic has affected Christian worship in the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in diverse ways. This paper, therefore, is a call for re-thinking of Christian worship in the Church of Christ in Nations in a post-pandemic Era. The aim is to articulate Christian worship in a changing world, especially in a post-pandemic Era, and the need to review Christian worship to fit into the new Era of Grace. Even though the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic cover a wider scope, this paper is limited to Christian worship in the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in a post-pandemic era. The paper adopts functionalist theory which stresses the holistic function of religion in a changing world. Research materials were drawn from secondary sources; through historical and descriptive approaches. The paper argues for the need for the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) to diversify its worship mode and medium of reaching its members, especially in the post-pandemic era. The paper also highlights the new form of worship in a post-pandemic era including Online services and Bible studies, Television broadcasts of Church services, Zoom meetings and a regular devotional service from the

headquarters Church to members across nations. Therefore, the paper recommends that church leaders and members should understand the importance of diversifying worship patterns in the changing era of the post-COVID-19 Pandemic.

**Keywords:** Christian worship, Church of Christ in Nations, post-pandemic era, COVID-19 pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

Human existence from history till date has experienced a lot which has influenced every aspect of daily living. The pandemic has claimed many lives in history and recently, in 2020 another great pandemic broke out that brought the world to a still and solemn moment. The gross effect of this pandemic is still fresh to date because of the delay it has caused to every aspect of human lives.

More so, it has also made life more complex for certain parts of the world and simpler for a few. The closure of churches as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic 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 a church today.<sup>1</sup> The quest of maintaining traditional belief was the order of the day and as a result of such a conserved mindset, a lot of churches were grossly affected during the COVID-19 lockdown most especially the evangelical (protestant) churches unlike many of the Pentecostal churches that adopted the new shift to electronic services as others call “The online church”.

The aim of this paper is not to discuss the history of the COVID-19 pandemic but rather to call on the Church of Christ in Nations for rethinking church worship in a post-pandemic era.

**Description of the concept of worship in Christianity:** Christian worship has received different definitions from different scholars, so it does not lend itself to one encompassing definition.

Worship in Hebrew word means "shachah or sahar" which if translated means 'to bow down or to pay homage and is first used in Genesis 18:2. While in Greek the word worship is derived from the word "latreuo" which means to serve or to minister.<sup>2</sup> However, Christian worship cannot be understood apart from the Jewish worship that first cradled and nurtured it. Like worship in Judaism, Christian worship is the glad response of total individuals-through "heart, soul, strength, and mind"-to the saving acts of God in history. It is the communal and personal celebration in the universal church of God's love for creation and every human being. This divine love is revealed in God's gracious covenant with the people of Israel and God's coming into the world in Jesus Christ. Christian worship is more than a passive response to God's revelation. It is in itself a Pentecostal proclamation. It both announces the good news of God's love for the entire world and invites all people to share God's saving grace. This active response would not be possible without the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who endows the community of faith and individual Christians with the gifts that are necessary for God's service. All that Christians are and do, corporately and individually, is worship, liturgy, the work of praise and thanksgiving.<sup>3</sup>

Wiersbe in his book quotes Evelyn Underhill who defines worship as "the total adoring response of a man to one eternal God self-revealed in time".<sup>4</sup> Again in an attempt to bring out a lighter definition of worship, Wiersbe quoted a whole paragraph of Williams Temple's definition of worship, the Archbishop of Canterbury in Wiersbe's book titled *real* worship says:

Both for perplexity and dulled conscience the remedy is the same; sincere and spiritual worship. For worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his Holiness, the nourishment of mind by his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty, the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of the will to his purpose—all of this gathered up in adoration the most selfless emotion in our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy

for that self-centeredness which our original sin and the source of all actual sin. Yes, worship in spirit and truth is the way to the solution of perplexity and liberation of sin.<sup>5</sup>

Just as a writer on worship, John Macarthur says "any essential expression of service rendered unto God by a soul who loves and extols Him is worship. As a way of emphasis again, therefore real worship should be the full-time, nonstop activity of every believer, and the focus or the centre of the exercise must be to please God (if at all the worshippers would be sincere in worshipping his or her maker).<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it is apparent that we worship God because we were created for such. Worship is at the centre of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being. God created us be his image –an image that reflects his divine glory. The whole creatures were brought into being to reflect the divine glory of God.

God's primary activity after the fall of man, has always been seeking true worshippers. That is why God is speaking to individuals; He speaks to persons, not structures. For one's salvation to be deeply rooted in Christ, he/she must seek to worship God not concerned with the blessings but giving out a sacrifice to the holy God. Worshipping God should be upon oneself or one lifestyle. It is not optional; worship is not an elective course for Christians- Deut 6:13. Christian worship is inspired by the Holy Spirit, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and directed by the Holy Spirit. Purifies by the Holy Spirit and bears the fruit of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Christian worship is spirit filled. But when the reverse is the case, the worship is turned down, misunderstood and abuse of the glory of God will be the opposite of worship as prophet Amos as far back as in the eighth century BC, insisted that true worship must be holy and the people too must live up to that standard of holiness as our maker himself professed to be. In other words, worshippers of God must maintain high holiness.<sup>8</sup>

The role of Christian worship can be summarized into three categories as follows; giving, good conduct and praise to God. How broad is the biblical concept of worship? And how one can accurately perceive it? MacArthur has it that worship is to the Christian life what the mainstream is to the watch, what the engine is to a car. It is the very core, the most essential element. It is a bad theology for anyone to neglect, relegate, and isolate worship to one place, time, or segment of one life. We cannot effectively worship God while we are reckless, disobedient and sinful in life – it must proceed from a God-fearing heart.<sup>9</sup>

Worship in the Bible is a comprehensive category describing the Christian's total existence and in the specific context of worship, truth is of importance it coexists with the faith-response wherever and whenever that response is elicited.<sup>10</sup> If that is so, then our traditional understanding of worship is restricted to cultic gatherings of the congregation the designated time and place for rite and proclamation will no longer be possible.

Suppose the Christian life should be overwhelmed with worship thereby taking every gathering to be an avenue for worshipping God since by no means the worship of God is restricted to the singing of songs only. We understand that true worship touches each area of life. We are to honour and adore God in everything. Regarding this Apostle, Paul makes a powerful statement in Romans 12:1-2 about the Christian life and worship.<sup>11</sup> For the first Christians, worship and work were one piece. D. A. Carson adds if the heart of sinfulness is self-centeredness, the heart of all Biblical religion is God-centeredness: it is worship.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the history of the church, Christian worship forms the basic model of communion and the building of an intimate relationship with God. Mark Dyer observes that 'about every 500 years the empowered structure of the institutionalised Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, becomes an intolerable carapace that must be shattered so that renewal and new growth may occur.<sup>13</sup> This can be seen because of "The fall of the Roman empire or the coming of dark ages, the second 500 years of reformation which is the great schism that ensured the wedging of Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Roman

Catholicism. The third aspect of this renewal which is also known as the great reformation occurred around 1517 when Martin Luther purported the 95 theses in Wittenberg.<sup>14</sup> All these are periods of renewal of the church from one level and dispensation to another which brought changes in the initial traditional mode and medium of church worship. The changes continue almost every 500 years in the history of the Church as stated by Wagner.<sup>15</sup>

This paper, therefore, lends credence to the brief historical fact of the process of renewal, reform and transformation that the church has gone through in history to state that the COVID-19 pandemic is another season that brought about great reform in the church's traditional mode and medium of worship to fit into the new dispensation or era of grace. With the revolutionary shift, the Church around the world had to accept the new normal by moving from traditional Christian worship to electronic services (online services) in an attempt to adjust to the new order. This has added to the history of the church and of humanity that cannot be wiped out for centuries to come. It will be told in generations to come of a time when the church had a great shift from traditional worship to digital worship, digital sacraments, digital sermons, digital tithes and digital mission which fits into the digital age of technology.

## **CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN NATIONS, PRE-COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Church of Christ in Nations COCIN is known as the traditional form of worship which gives less consideration to the use of electronic or social media in the transmission of her service. In an oral interview, Nehemiah a member of the COCIN headquarters Church, affirms that the church has been conservative in many practices, unlike other Pentecostal churches who seek to reach out to a larger audience through the use of social and electronic media platforms during their services.<sup>16</sup>

More so, COCIN as an evangelical church or orthodox as other scholars refer to it has been more of a local indigenous church where services are conducted mostly locally and culturally. The church has been more African and as such its pattern of worship. The church is

used to engaging local instruments in worship and songs being rendered in the local dialect or indigenous dialect of the members.

Timchang however, asserts that some of the COCIN Churches within Urban centres use electronic media to enhance their worship, but not the use of social media handles to reach the online audience.<sup>17</sup>

This implies that before the COVID-19 Pandemic, COCIN adopts physical services across her churches. Members are used to coming for mid-week services in the church where they seat and listen to the preacher preach and so also during Sunday Services.

## **WORSHIP EXPERIENCE OF COCIN DURING THE COVID-19 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.<sup>18</sup> A contemporary definition of the pandemic as described is an epidemic that occurs and covers a very wide area which could include a region, country, continent, or the globe and usually affects a large proportion of the population.<sup>19</sup> Deducing from the various definitions, a pandemic can simply be seen as a disease or virus that spread rapidly and affects every aspect of human life across the globe.

Therefore, the pandemic Era can be the period from which a virus rapidly spread and result in total lockdown in an attempt to avoid the wide spread of the virus. The pandemic era in Nigeria as experienced in the year 2020 is said to have lasted for about 7-8 months.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and the ban on corporate worship has been stooped in all local churches across the country.<sup>20</sup> Samuel et al assert that in reaction to the banning of public and religious gatherings, some religious denominations in compliance with the government directives adopted new modes of practising their faith.<sup>21</sup> While some have resorted to online worship services, others have developed home cell worship services, splitting their members into smaller units. COCIN as one of the major

evangelical churches in Nigeria is known for observing corporate worship on Sundays and mid-week services respectively. But due to the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown which spans 7-8 months, the traditional Sunday worship was halted and the church had to split into prayer houses and little gatherings to observe their regular worship. This came with a lot of challenges which affected the church grossly in almost every stratum.

First, the spirituality of the members greatly wanes and also the financial strength of the church is greatly reduced. This is because of the absence of the regular traditional gathering of her members weekly to worship and fellowship together. In addition to the effect of the lockdown on the church, many of the members who are not deeply rooted in faith never saw the need of going for the home cells fellowship again as a result of which affected their spirituality. Their prolonged absence from corporate gatherings has made others return to the practice of syncretism and other fetish practices.

Many Pentecostal churches which have adopted an advanced form of worship in a changing world returned to online services via Facebook, zoom, google meet, and online radios, among others unlike COCIN which has not adopted the new means of change in a changing world couldn't reach out to its numerous members. This brought a great setback to the church of Christ in Nations especially in the post-pandemic era as the church struggles to maintain stability as it was before the pandemic era.

## **RETHINKING CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN COCIN IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA**

Sequel to the above-given definition of the pandemic era, Post pandemic era, however, entails the period within which the number of infections has grossly reduced and human life has returned to normalcy, it is undoubtedly true that we are in a post-pandemic era because the great lockdown has been relaxed despite the little number of cases realized daily and life has returned to normalcy.

In light of the above-established reality, and in response to the gap that caught up with the Church of Christ in Nations during the



pandemic era, this paper, therefore, calls for a re-thinking of Christian worship, especially in this post-pandemic era. Pillay recounted history by stating that for a long we have been accustomed to gathering physically for public worship because it is only through this platform we get to commune with God through corporate fellowship. It is the time of renewal of our commitment to God and an avenue where lost hopes are being restored.<sup>22</sup>

However, the lockdown of churches has left the church with no option but to diversify means of worship and that resulted in a paradigm shift from physical services to online services to meet up with the mandate of encouraging and strengthening believers in Christ Jesus through messages being preached from the distance church to the distance audience via the use of electronic media. While the church needs to recognize the significance of public gatherings, the pandemic has forced us to rethink how we gather. Pilley added that Church buildings may close but churches (people of God) are still alive and active.<sup>23</sup> This indicates that the church in such a season had to return to its root, back to where it came from in which the building or corporate gathering does not define the church but rather the individuals by that completing the circle of Church history. Samson emphasized by opining that churches have not been closed but come home: a church in each home.

The COVID-19 lockdown has forced the church to return to the electronic means of worship and by that allow a larger audience to be partakers of the divine fellowship with culture and distance, not a barrier. The electronic medium has created an opportunity for the church to still achieve the great commission despite the total lockdown. Many Pentecostal churches used this avenue to constantly teach their members to encourage them and counsel them through Youtube channels, Facebook, Mixlr, Zoom, and google meet unlike the Church of Christ in nations.

Therefore, there is a need for the church to devise such means of reaching its members in turbulent seasons as such. The church must be aware that the world is not stagnantly waiting for the gospel from the pulpit but rather in transit and by that, the need to meet up

with the changing world becomes very essential for the church in times like this. The church of Christ in nations needs to be aware of the fact that electronic platforms open new doors for Christian worshippers to worship God even during challenges. Despite the negative implication of such kinds of services on the spirituality of the members, we cannot deny the great advantages and opportunities such posed to the church in a crisis-driven situation. The church can encourage members to also employ the use of e-banking in payment of tithes and offerings to cripple the gross financial challenges such kind of season posed on the institutional church.

The church can also employ the medium of the television broadcast of services and midweek prayers and daily devotional services from the headquarters Church to get across to its members across the globe. Kangdim's response to this challenge is that the COVID-19 pandemic is a new normal and has come to stay just like HIV and Aids and for that reason, the church must devise means of accepting the reality of the new way of life.<sup>24</sup>

COVID-19 has to strengthen 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 struggles in the world and tune into electronic platforms for encouragement and hope.<sup>25</sup> The church is reminded to know that its primary aim is not to attract, and draw people in, but to equip and send God's redeemed people into mission in the world irrespective of the medium used to reach out to this large number of people.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper has the following recommendations to the church leadership and membership to help prepare the church for church worship in a changing world:

1. Pastors in COCIN should learn efficient use of the internet and other technological tools in their ministry because this will serve as a supplement to the old way of doing ministry and not necessarily replace the old. If such is done, it will

help them to maintain their relevance in periods like the COVID-19 Pandemic.

2. The church of God should learn to place less emphasis on building large auditoriums and more emphasis should be on building people to help them cope well spiritually in a liken season to the COVID-19 lockdown. This will help to reduce the struggle for survival spiritually in an unfavourable situation.
3. The church should diversify means of worship as supplementary to the traditional congregational gathering by engaging Youtube channels, Facebook, Mixlr, Zoom meetings and google meet to create opportunities for people outside the immediate geographical location of the church building to partake in the blessings of the service. This will also serve as an opportunity to reach out to the online audience.
4. The I.C.T unit of the church needs to double up and catch up with the trend of the day technologically and make meaningful contributions to the church in technologically advanced age. More so, the required equipment and technological gadgets needed to help improve I.C.T units in the Church should also be provided to improve efficiency.
5. The normal mode of traditional worship ought to be diversified by the church leadership to meet up with the online church and by that, certain things need to be modified to fit into the church in transit to maintain relevance and still not alter the original intends of God for his church.
6. The use of home cell groups is an antidote to the COVID-19 pandemic. The local church should organize its members and ensure that the members attend the home cell meetings to help equip them.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has succeeded in underscoring Christian worship in the Church of Christ in Nations in Post Pandemic Era. It has been discovered that the lockdown of churches has brought a new shift in the worship pattern of the church irrespective of denomination. By this, the Church of Christ in Nations still wants to fulfil its missions and visions and also meet up with the great commission of Christ for his church, then the need to re-think its church worship in a post-pandemic era becomes very necessary at this point so as not to suffer subsequent gross effects of situations that might arise and also to reach out to a larger audience in a changing and technologically advanced world. It is also worthy of note that the online church will not be a complete substitute for physical gatherings but complementation to the physical gathering all in an attempt to reach out to souls within a wider coverage. If this must be achieved, then even the pattern of traditional worship needs to be diversified to meet up to the need of the online members. The paper has unveiled the need to re-think Christian worship in the Church of Christ in Nations in a Post-Pandemic Era.

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