

Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Pentecostal Groups in Ondo State, Nigeria: Smaller Congregations and New Initiatives

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Abstract

The study examines how COVID-19 affected religious activities in Pentecostal churches, and how members responded to the challenges occasioned by the pandemic in Ondo. Interviews were conducted with 87 interviewees and analysed using content analysis. Findings show that COVID-19 pandemic altered the conventional pattern of face-to-face contacts during church services, and replaced by the freedom of personal worship anchored on the use of on-line transmissions via social media platforms. While the Government's insistence on religious groups adopting on-line transmissions for interaction and spiritual purposes, such as preaching, prayer intercessions and Bible-study as a means to curtail the spread of the virus engendered huge losses of in-church membership, church-identity and church-income, it also made room for churches to adopting an innovative pattern of operations evident in the use of electronic payments of both offerings and tithes by members; and, even holding church services in sessions of smaller, more manageable groups.

Keywords: Covid-19, Pandemic, Pentecostal churches, Worship, Commitment, Cohesiveness, Belongingness

Introduction

The ravaging effects of COVID-19 pandemic on religious groups across the globe have attracted increased interests from organizational experts geared towards understanding the consequences of the pandemic on Pentecostal churches in the world (Ragheb, 2020). In view of this, there is grave concern to know how leaders of Pentecostal churches and their members (worshippers) coped with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pentecostalism is a variant of the Christian religion that holds out Christianity as a revolutionary religion, instituted by God, to speedily change Africa and its inhabitants for better (Ukah, 2020a). Thus, Pentecostal churches have won many converts in Africa for its claim to be able to produce a new being, via the process of healing and restoration in all spheres of human endeavour. In other words, the belief of being born-again through supernatural power, constitutes a significant motivator to many people. Succinctly, Pentecostal churches play the role of convincing people that they are capable of healing societies from poverty through its prosperity theology and economic ideologies, as well as able to heal people afflicted by illnesses through its deliverance method and healing doctrines and practices (Ukah, 2020b, 2016; Cabrita, 2018).

In Nigeria, Pentecostal churches have impacted on both the spiritual and physical aspects of social life. For instance, the continuous ritual, conducted on a daily basis that attracts huge numbers of worshipers, has made it possible for spiritual leaders of Pentecostal churches to build mega-structures as worship centers geared towards upholding a religious hegemony that propagates prosperity for worshipers. This hegemony has led to the emergence of leaders in Pentecostal churches with huge wealth and capital. Thus, invariably, transforming their social standing into one comparable with the statuses of politicians or even, captains of industry.

Faced with rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by the incessant deaths of its victims, Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) embarked on implementing some protective measures aimed at curtailing the spread of the virus. The measures

included among others, restriction of movement within the country which resulted in a total lockdown in Lagos and Ogun States, and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Other States in the Federation joined suit with a combination of measures, such as total lockdown, partial lockdown, dusk-to-dawn curfews, etc. In addition, inter-State traveling and religious activities were very restricted while stringent regulations and bye-laws were made against any form of large gathering – be it social, political or religious.

Most of the measures introduced then had tremendous consequences on Pentecostal churches, never imagined. For example, the measures implemented deprived many people from the ritual of solidarity derived from collective face-to-face convergence; impeded social bonds, rendered worshippers vulnerable, and reduced the leaders' degree of control over members (Afolaranmi, 2020, Sulkowski and Ignatowski, 2020). Other studies, such as Honigsbaum (2020), Kagema and Mathai (2018), suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the operational structure of many Pentecostal churches that, even, threatened their existence. Such dynamics necessitated smaller congregations as well as introducing new strategies that may define the 'path' of Pentecostal churches in the new dispensation.

In spite of previous findings, especially by Afolaranmi, 2020, Sulkowski and Ignatowski, 2020, Honigsbaum, 2020; and, Kagema and Mathai, 2018, there is still not much known about the effects of COVID-19 on Pentecostal churches in Akure, Ondo State. While the studies are instructive, they significantly failed to explain the effects of COVID-19 on Pentecostal churches in Akure because the studies were conducted in environments unlike and outside Akure. Moreover, given the variations in socio-cultural settings, findings from previous studies are insufficient to project the situation in Akure. Hence, the need to undertake a qualitative study aimed at ascertaining the effects of COVID-19 on Pentecostal churches, attitudes of Pentecostal worshipers to COVID-19, and strategies adopted by both church leaders and members to cope with salvage the challenges posed. Conducting this study can be of immense benefit to researchers and those interested in the consequences of COVID-19 on Pentecostal churches, shall add to the existing literature, suggesting grey areas for further research.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the explanatory model of the Health Belief Model (HBM), as espoused by Becker (1974) – recently reviewed by Sharma and Romas (2012) – to discuss the effects of COVID-19 on Pentecostal churches in Akure, Nigeria. HBM is a cognitive model which posits that behaviour is determined by a number of beliefs about threats to an individual's well-being and both the effectiveness and outcomes of particular actions or behaviours. A certain construction of the model features the concept of self-efficacy alongside beliefs about actions (Bandura, 1997). Beliefs are further supplemented by additional stimuli referred to as 'cues to action', which trigger the actual adoption of particular behaviours. Perceived threat is at the core of HBM, as it is linked to a person's 'readiness' to take action. It consists of two sets of beliefs about an individual's perceived susceptibility or vulnerability to a particular threat and the seriousness of the expected consequences that may result therefrom.

The perceived benefits associated with a behaviour – that is, its likely effectiveness in reducing a threat – are weighed against the perceived costs of and negative consequences likely to result from it or perceived barriers, such as the side effects of treatment, in establishing the overall extent to which a behaviour is beneficial. An individual's perceived capacity to adopt a particular behaviour – his/her self-efficacy – is another key component of the model. Finally, HBM identifies two types of 'cue to action': internal, which in the health-context includes symptoms of ill-health; and external, which includes media campaigns or the receipt of other information. These cues affect the perception of a threat and can trigger or maintain behaviour. In order for behaviour to change, people must feel personally vulnerable to a health-threat, view the possible consequences as severe, and perceive taking action is likely to either prevent or reduce the risk at an acceptable cost with few barriers.

In addition, a person must feel competent – that is, have self-efficacy – to execute and maintain the new behaviour. A trigger, internal or external, is required to ensure actual behaviour ensues (Nisbet and Gick, 2008). When an individual perceives a threat as not

serious or themselves as unsusceptible to it, s/he is unlikely to adopt mitigating behaviours. Low benefits and high costs can have the same impact.

Relating HBM to the study area, the extent to which the public in Ondo State exhibit positive beliefs about the threats posed by COVID-19 may to a large extent, determine how they would embrace the safety-protocols designed to curb the spread of the virus among the populace and especially members of Pentecostal churches. Thus, positive beliefs imply the acceptance and compliance with washing of hands, use of sanitizer, use of nose-mask, observance of social distancing, and desisting from shaking hands etc. Such positive beliefs, if widely displayed by the populace may not only enhance the level to which they accept to be inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine, but, also predispose them to receive the booster and, thereby, raising the level of community-immunity and assuring the safety standards of public health. In contrast, should the public exhibit negative beliefs towards the pandemic, compliance with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) safety-protocols is likely to be low, and thereby rendering the public vulnerable to the dangers posed by the virus. In conclusion, deliberate change of behaviour in favour of or against safety-protocols remains a function of the beliefs imbibed, internalized, assimilated, and displayed by the public, particularly members of Pentecostal churches, towards the pandemic during worship- services.

Method and Materials

The research design was qualitative, and conducted in Ondo State, Southwest Nigeria. The large number of Pentecostal churches in Ondo State accounted for the choice of the state as the study area. In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were used to elicit information from 86 interviewees who were selected purposely. The IDI and KII guides contained questions on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pentecostal churches, attitudes of worshipers towards the measures imposed, and how Pentecostal churches coped during the period. The study was conducted in three Local Government Areas (LGAs); namely, Okitipupa, Akure-South and Akoko-South West LGAs. The three LGAs are located in the three Senatorial Districts of Ondo State; thus, making the selected participants representative.

In spite of the fact that the study was qualitative, efforts were made to quantify the bio-social characteristics of the interviewees. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted between 25-40 minutes each. Data collected were sorted, transcribed, analysed through content analysis, and reported thematically. During data collection, safety measures such as the use of nose-mask cover, social distancing, washing of hands, and application of alcohol-based sanitizer were observed by the researchers, field officers and interviewees.

Results and Discussion

Bio-Social Characteristics Of Interviewees

The bio-social characteristics of the interviewees show that 51 males and 35 females participated in the study. Their ages ranged between 18 and 60 years; 24 of them are aged between 18 and 29 years, 18 are aged between 30 and 39 years; 25 are aged between 40 and 49 years; 15 are aged between 50 and 59 years; and 4 are 60 years and above. The profile on the interviewees' marital statuses shows that over half 47 of them are married, 29 are single, 7 are divorced, 2 are separated (2) and 1 are widowed. Many of the interviewees (78) had acquired one form of formal education, such as primary (11), secondary school (23), tertiary (46), while 6 had no formal education.

Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Pentecostal Churches – Leaders and Worshipers

In the quest to ascertain the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on Pentecostal churches, interviewees were asked to give in their views on how the pandemic affected activities in Pentecostal churches. Interviewees generally stated that COVID-19 significantly affected social life and structures of members in Pentecostal churches in several ways least imagined. The interviewees further mentioned that Pentecostal churches were under lock and key for over two months occasioned by FGN's restriction of movement geared towards curbing the spread of the virus. This rendered the usual collective face-to-face convergence of large groups in Pentecostal churches difficult, and limited regular physical contacts between the clergy and the laity. In this context, the interviewees said that they lost the sense of commonality and solidarity often shared among themselves that gave rise to exercising fear of being alienated from one another

and, even, their religion. The sudden situation was perceived as shocking to almost all the interviewees given that prior to the COVID-19 epidemic, they had never experienced such a situation in which worshippers are restricted from performing their religious rituals in large groups or congregations.

In contrast to the decline in solidarity reported by the interviewees, among worshippers due to inability to converge as a church, internal bond and group cohesiveness, especially among family members, were reported to have increased due to church services held in individual member's homes. In fact, the interviewees affirmed that there was increased commitment in members' participation in religious services held at various homes during the lockdown. According to them, the integration and cohesiveness attained at this level gave them hope of continuity and enhanced the drive in them to garner courage that the period of the pandemic was for a while and will be over in a short while. Interview excerpts from a male interviewee read thus:

No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has induced many new things posing challenges to our belief and faith. For example, can you imagine we cannot attend church services due to the lockdown restricting movement as well as the convergence of not more than 50 persons in a building. Prior to the pandemic, it was almost unimaginable to hold church services in our respective homes without face-to-face contact with our pastors! Though we lost the close bonds shared as a congregation while in church together, it was gradually restored at our various homes as people became more bonded than before the outbreak of the pandemic (*KII, Male Interviewee, Okitipupa, 36 years, February, 2021*).

The narrative of another interviewee provides additional illumination:

When we could not attend church-services for months, due to the lockdown, propelled by the pandemic for months, I felt isolated and abandoned because of the inability to meet with other members in church. However, the house fellowships held at various homes rekindled my hope and

gave me further impetus to worship God (IDI, Female Interviewee, Akure, 22 years, January, 2021).

In addition, some of the interviewees who are Pastors in Pentecostal churches expressed their dislike for the restrictions, occasioned by the pandemic which hindered members from attending church services. Accordingly, the Pastors claimed they felt threatened, unsafe, and unhappy given that their churches were virtually empty and were worried about their members engaging in sinful acts against God, especially when their absence from church prevents them from paying their offerings and tithes. The submission of another interviewee to buttress the view is captured below:-

Many of my members erred in their obligations towards God, especially in the area of offering and tithing during the Covid-19 lockdown; and, in my view, I consider this a sin. Tithing is a command from God and non-compliance attracts spiritual sanctions (Malachi 3:8-12). Given my understanding of God,s command on tithing, seeing my members not complying, due to inability to attend church-services engendered by the pandemic, broke my heart. Committing a sin that attracts curses, I felt quite unhappy (IDI, Male Pastor, Okitipupa, 49 years, December, 2020).

From the above submissions, a plausible inference there from is that apart from the reduced number of members' attending church-services, occasioned by the pandemic, it also had a dwindling effect on churches' income with a grave implication for the continued existence of churches.

Pentecostal Worshipers' Attitudes And Responses To Covid-19 Pandemic

Findings from the study show that interviewees displayed mixed attitudes and responses towards COVID-19 pandemic. For example, some of them perceived COVID-19 pandemic as a serious issue that threatens human life and requires urgent attention in order to protect lives and improve community-health. This category of interviewees opined that failure to recognize and treat Covid-19 pandemic as a serious health-threat to human existence, can render it difficult in curtailing its spread. But once people believe that the pandemic exists and is quite deadly, then its treatment and ultimate control are assured.

One of the key informants alluded thus:-

Personally, I view Covid-19 pandemic as a serious public health problem, which calls for joint efforts in combating the. To combat the virus, there is the need for advocacy-programmes to make people believe that the virus exists. This can enhance people's belief and attitude towards observing COVID-19 safety-protocols geared at curbing its spread. When the pandemic started and we were asked not to attend any gathering, including worship centers, I was among those who held the view that not going to church portended danger to church- members. Surprisingly, joint church-services did not hold during the lockdown period; and, no disaster occurred in any of the church member's houses (KII, Church-member, Akure, 48 Years, January, 2021).

In contrast, the study also shows that a reasonable number of the interviewees seriously doubted the existence of Corona virus. Accordingly, they were convinced that the emergence of COVID-19 was an attempt to destroy the church and prevent the spread of the Gospel. Hence, many Pastors talked down the issue of the virus as a plan from the pit-of-hell to destroy the Pentecostal movement and by extension, cut-off souls from God's fold. Thus, Pastors who were strongly of this view did not allow their members to discuss issues relating to Covid-19. The situation is aptly summed up by one of the key informants:

Please, give me your ears, and listen to me good; the cry about Covid-19 is nothing more than a plan from the pit of hell to capture God's children. Have you not read from the dailies and social media or heard from people around the globe about the plan to infuse chips into people through vaccine inoculation. This is a part of fulfilling the biblical prophecy about the Anti-Christ, with number '666'. Once the vaccine is taken and the chip is infused, then, such a person automatically sows his/her soul to the devil (IDI, Male Pastor, Akoko, 47 years, January, 2021)

Therefore, many Pastors towed the path of the situation above, while some orientated their members on the need to stay safe, by observing all the safety-guidelines

aimed at reducing the spread of the virus. In this regard, Pastors of this view affirmed the observance of social distance by re-arranging chairs in the church such that it allowed for spacing between and among members. In addition, they claimed to ensure that members used nose-masks to church-services; and, they made water and soap available for washing hands'.

Contrary to the interviewees' claims, observational findings showed that few of the members, even Pastors, wore nose-masks to church services for reasons associated with difficulty in breathing, hike in prices of nose-mask and sanitizer which rendered them unaffordable. Social distancing was often not observed during many churches-services safe for some clergies on the altar and in some churches with high profile members. Probing showed that many members did not comply with the protection guidelines because of the teachings received from the altar that the church is a healing center where people get healed of their illnesses supernaturally. One of the key informant restated this thus:

With the emergence of Covid-19, prices for nose-masks cover and hand sanitizers were hiked to the detriment of consumers. This rendered them difficult for many people to purchase nose-masks or hand sanitizers for use. In addition, washing of hands has not been frequent given the unavailability of potable water in this part of the globe. It is, indeed, difficult to comply with the safety guidelines in climes like ours where the poverty level is high and most persons are engrossed with the need to feed themselves and their families. Moreover, our Pastor said that God is the Greatest Healer who can heal all sorts of diseases, therefore, we should not be afraid of COVID-19 virus. Such daunting situations definitely left many not adhering to the safety-protocols (IDI, Female Church Member, Akoko, 41 years, January, 2021).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding that the information sourced for this study is limited to self-reported experiences of Pentecostal members; the study has raised cogent issues that may be of immense benefit to future research initiatives in the neglected area of the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on members of Pentecostal churches in Ondo State. Future research can explore other methods such as the quantitative, with a large sample size of respondents to test both bivariate and multivariate relationships among variables. The present study is fairly unique because it has shown that members of Pentecostal churches coped with the social change occasioned by COVID-19 pandemic which posed immense challenges to the existence of Pentecostal churches, which past research failed to adequately explain, particularly as it relates to Ondo State.

Nonetheless, the study also shows that, though religious sects may be exposed to similar conditions, their perceptions and experiences of social conditions differ from one another. The differences in group-perception and experience of social issues constituted the catalyst that made members of Pentecostal churches to accommodate what they previously considered inimical to their belief system. Finally, in extending HBM, the study has shown that notwithstanding a group's perceived belief of their religious rights being threatened, a belief that group-related problems can be solved collectively, is sufficient to fuel the necessity to protect their identity; and, such a strong belief can be crucial in explaining the collective response of the members of Pentecostal churches to COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, the study concludes that the members of Pentecostal churches were aware of the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to their religious rites and also, the negative effects on the operations of Pentecostal churches. However, the lockdown facilitated membership-bond, towards one another and God; and, increased the understanding that threats are best solved collectively, with insights from indigenous knowledge. Even though COVID-19 pandemic seriously limited congregational numbers by preventing convergence of many worshipers, yet, Pentecostal churches introduced initiatives of continuity, through their collective responses to the challenges. The salient

fact that Pentecostal churches continued their operations stronger than hitherto, is an indication of their resilience and successfully bouncing back to their religious pattern and rites, post COVID-19 pandemic.

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