A Global Perspective on the Role of Faith and Spirituality in a Post-COVID-19 National and Community Recovery: The Nigeria Case of the Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper focuses on contributing to the ongoing discourse regarding the global perspectives on the role of faith and spirituality in a post-COVID-19 national and community recovery with reference to the pandemic in Nigeria. The year 2020 saw a lot of faith organisations like churches introduce and apply new initiatives of spirituality-based elements in helping people to recover from the pandemic. These elements are embodied in their programs and fellowships to their members and the general society. A vast majority of the members acknowledge a reliance on God for solutions against mental, emotional, physical, material, and financial challenges caused by the pandemic. An analytical methodology through the Integrated Critical Analysis method was used with data collected from available literature as tools of research for this study. The research findings of this study show that the value and benefit of faith includes its efficacy on the behaviours and attitude displayed in the engagement or non-engagement of people. This is to the extent of the people's faith, religious and spiritual beliefs, along with the support that they find in their being members of faith communities. Although people may have at one time or the other had negative experiences in the past, however, studies show that faith and spirituality plays a significant role in preventing further negative effects and risk in the recovery process. The study concludes that the value that spirituality and faith-oriented approaches bring

to the prevention and recovery process is a necessity.

Keywords: Global Perspective, Faith, Religion, Spirituality, Pandemic, COVID-19

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the role of faith and spirituality to national and community recovery in a post-COVID-19 Nigerian society. This contribution is offered from a Christian perspective. As many countries in the world are confronted with the surge of the coronavirus disease 2019 [COVID-19] pandemic, Nigeria certainly has its own share amid the global crisis since the first recorded case on the African continent in Egypt on the 14th February 2020 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). This Egypt incident is subsequent to the first reported human case of the disease by officials in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019 caused by the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19, later named SARS-CoV-2 (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2020). This is so even though there is uncertainty about the full scope of the pandemic cases and data which are underreported and uncertain, thereby prompting the WHO to warn that Africa could become the next epicentre of the crisis (OECD, 2020). Like all other countries in the world, there are life-saving spiritual and faith initiatives and interventions that need to be applied as essential components of rescue and recovery from the pandemic in Nigeria.

The central argument of this paper is that faith and spirituality is an integral part to solving health, economic, and social needs. While faith and spirituality are often useful at a personal level, the paper explores the research question: Is faith and spirituality capable of playing a significant role in a post-COVID-19 national and community recovery in Nigeria? With this important research question, it is argued that faith and spirituality are a powerful, indispensable, and integral necessary resource for the prevention and recovery from the distress and frustration caused by the pandemic. The paper sought to understand the contributions along with the intricacies and challenges surrounding the involvement of faith and spirituality in the system. It seeks to translate the role played by leaders of Christian communities to what they can assume in the process of national and community recovery in a post-COVID-19 environment.

An overview of the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was presented along with the analysis of the contributions of Christian churches in preventing the spread and economic effects of the pandemic and helping in the recovery from it. Moreover, it is necessary to state that although the emergence of the COVID-19 has raised the consciousness of Christians to the importance of faith community and spirituality, the research on how

different Christian communities have responded to COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa is still emerging.

Methodology

An analytical method through the Integrative Critical Analysis [ICA] (Gilbert et al., 2018) was used in this study. The ICA focuses mainly on analysing the existing body of literature that is relevant to the study. With this method, existing literature data was collected and utilised from articles, books, websites, twitter, blogs, YouTube videos, and organisational releases, bulletin and reports from churches, government, local and international organisations. Applying the ICA method provided a significant body of secondary data in existing published and unpublished materials or statements by scholars and leading Christian leaders and other relevant materials relating to the state of COVID-19 in Nigeria and churches' response. As Gilbert (2018, p.51) puts it, "An integrative critical analysis of published literature is a process of true discovery; that process is as significant to the total research effort as are the fresh empirical findings and exegetical analysis that typically follow such an analysis of the literature." The ICA method was applied with an Insider-Outsider Perspective in an objective and balanced manner (Nakata, 2015). As a current member of the clergy and a Nigerian who was born and lived in Nigeria until recently, when I moved overseas to research Nigerian Pentecostalism and social engagement, I am well acquainted with the dynamics of social interaction between the church and social life. I am also able to assess the activities of the churches from a distance in view of the emerging global realities occasioned by COVID-19.

Background on the Status of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

Nigeria was deeply hit by the spread of the coronavirus and this has resulted in poverty, illnesses, deaths, the decline of economic resources, and lower income for Nigerians (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The cumulative number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Nigeria between 28th February 2020 and 6[th]April 2021 is about 160,000 (Roser et al., 2020). Thus, the government was faced with the challenging task of managing a health crisis and a weakened economy. The socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria can be seen in the dwindling rate of employment, food insecurity, human development, and other areas of people's livelihoods. Oseni et al. (2020) in the World bank blog reports that "While significant recovery in employment was registered in latest rounds, a high rate of households reported income loss, and many are still moving in and out of work" (para.5). The analysts further state that "economic shocks continue to take a stronghold on Nigerian households as such households reduce food rations in their consumption as a coping mechanism has increased" (para.7).

Before the current COVID-19 crisis, Nigeria scored poorly on response and preventive measures to pandemics by the 2017 WHO's mission report on the Joint External Evaluation of Core Capacities of the International Health Regulations (IHR) on the Federal Republic of Nigeria (WHO, 2017). This underscores the fact that as a country, Nigeria was not prepared for response to the COVID-19 pandemic that rocked the country because of the Nigerian government weak policy response which in itself did not measure up to the huge challenge (Dixit et al., 2020). An example of this lack of preparedness is the Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill 2020 which was passed on the 24th March by the Nigerian House of Representatives (Brooks & Knight, 2020). The bill was passed to support businesses and individual citizens with 50% tax rebates. The bill only focused on relief for the formal business sector as against the informal sector which employs the majority of the workforce in Nigeria. Another example is the announcement of the government in April 2020 on cash transfers of ₦20,000 to vulnerable and poor households registered on the National Social Register. This measure had little or no positive effect as the cash payment only reached a small portion of those registered in the National Social Register. Moreover, other measures like the Central Bank of Nigeria stimulus package of 3 million credit loans to poor families affected by the pandemic did not yield adequate results because the loan is not interest-free and it required collateral which many people are unable to afford (International Monetary Fund, 2021; Dixit et al., 2020). Interestingly, the announcement by the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs Disaster Management and Social Development to provide food assistance to vulnerable and hungry households in states like Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory did not go far enough. It was marred by corruption, lack of accountability, and transparency which were further made worse by the use of middlemen.

These and many other issues have made it a necessity to look into the role of faith and spirituality as played by faith-based institutions in a COVID-19 national and community recovery in Nigeria. Governments and political leaders in Nigeria do recognize that the federal, state, and local structure and agencies need the collaboration and support of faith organisations in providing adequate logistical resources required in comprehensively and effectively confronting the pandemic in many local communities. Hence, the situation requires the support of faith-based organisations (Hein, 2014; Acker, 2017). Faith-based leaders and organisations are well placed to reach beyond these governmental structures, particularly with their congregations and programs in engaging them and their community in the recovery and restoration process (White et al., 2012). Faith is a personal and social resource that helps people to cope with the struggles of life. Its impact is often made manifest as people congregate and fellowship in their local places of worship and during religious

gatherings. Over time, the involvement of the Nigerian faith-based institutions has complemented the shallow commitments made by the Nigerian government and its agencies.

Faith and Spirituality

The role of faith and spirituality in a society cannot be overemphasized particularly in the context of Nigeria. Faith and spirituality are two vital components that help to bridge the gap between socio-political realities and the economic life of the Nigerian people. Due to inequalities in the economic distribution, most Nigerians have learned to rely on their faith for their daily sustenance.

Faith is defined by the Oxford Living Dictionary as "Strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof" (Cross & Livingstone, 2005, p.598). Bishop David Oyedepo states that "faith is an active living force! When it gets into a man, it turns him on, it controls his mentality. Your faith is what determines the events of your life" (Udodiong, 2018, para.2). Oyedepo is one of the leading Christian ministers in Nigeria and the founding Senior Pastor and Presiding Bishop of Living Faith Church, a Pentecostal Megachurch in Nigeria (Cocks, 2021). Bishop Oyedepo adds that "The operation of faith in your life will prove the reality of heaven. Faith is the master key to every man's destiny. It takes faith for anything to work. Therefore, faith is not optional in the Christian race, it is the prerequisite for good reports" (Oyedepo, 2018, para.1). There are two points to note in the above two definitions. Firstly, a person's faith controls them and determines the events of their life. Secondly, it takes faith for anything to work. These two points reveal the important role that faith plays in motivating and galvanising people amid the COVID-19 debacle in most communities in Nigeria. Most Nigerian Christians share the sentiments expressed by Oyedepo above.

Spirituality is the openness to God or a divine connection to experience inspiration and enlightenment with a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Hodge (2011, p. 22) argues that while spirituality is a "person's existential relationship with God or the Transcendent… whereas religion is… an expression of the spiritual relationship developed in community". Transcendent because it goes beyond an ordinary or common experience, belief or thought by that connection into the corporate expression of that connection in the person's relationship to God and the community through an organized system of faith, religion, beliefs, and practices. Religious beliefs influence the sense of happiness and self-concept of people (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Emmons, 1999).

Global vs Local Faith Communities in Fight against COVID-19

The participation of the faith communities within the global community in the fight against a pandemic is so vital that the World Health Organisation embarked on ensuring an ongoing collaboration and dialogue with religious leaders in response against the COVID-19 outbreak (WHO, 2021). Furthermore, through one of its offices, the World Health Organisation Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) made available, for online discussions and comments, a draft setting out practical guidelines for members of the faith communities before it was reviewed and finalised in April 2020 (WHO, 2020b). Since then, many organisations, governments, and countries including Nigeria have built upon it by issuing out their own strict public health guidelines and directives via tools like webinars, articles, and other faith-directed resources for religious communities and their leadership. Moreover, faith groups and leaders continue to display unique insights into practical roles to play in this period as people look up to faith teachings to find solace. By so doing, they know that they are consciously and unconsciously building the tenacity to endure the crisis individually and collectively despite their vulnerability.

The role of faith and spirituality has further provided Nigerians with more life changing and lifespan opportunities. The benefits of which the alternative of disregarding its important role can leave society with new sets of ailments like mood disorders, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other illnesses (Dacher, 2014). More and more experiences in Nigeria show that faith and spirituality in this COVID-19 era is providing the needed healing in people's lives as there is increasing recognition of the importance of spirituality and healing (Orr, 2015). Studies have shown that faith and spirituality have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of people as they go through their journey of recovery from distressful circumstances, situations, and events that happen in their lives (Koenig, 2012; VanderWeele, 2017; Schoenthaler et al., 2018). In his analysis of religious/spiritual (R/S) beliefs and practices, Koenig (2012) concludes that "people who are more R/S have better mental health and adapt more quickly to health problems compared to those who are less R/S" (p.15). To Koenig, "these possible benefits… impact physical health, affect the risk of disease, and influence response to treatment…a desire to provide high-quality care, and simply common sense, all underscore the need to integrate spirituality into patient care" (p.15). VanderWeele (2017) in his synthesis of religion and health states that "religious participation of various forms is associated with lower rates of depression" (p.4). Furthermore, in one of his summary propositions, VanderWeele declares that "religious participation contributes to physical and mental health, and subjective well-being, through shaping behavior, creating systems of meaning, altering one's outlook on life, building

community and social support, supporting moral beliefs" (p.30). It is therefore not uncommon that people in Nigeria resort to faith, spirituality, and religious beliefs and practices for support.

Many of the faith-based organisations in Nigeria, particularly the megachurches within the Pentecostal strand like the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Daystar Christian Centre, and others had to adapt to the changes that arose from the effect of the virus (Orjinmo, 2020). Daystar Christian Centre (DCC), a Pentecostal church with headquarters based in Lagos, Nigeria is an example of one of the faith-based organisations that have taken the role of contributing and supporting initiatives on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria despite the unpreparedness of most churches (Osanyintuyi, 2020). For instance, in April 2020 during the pandemic, DCC launched feeding programs and donated critical Personal Protective Equipment as a response to the COVID-19 fallout (Daystarng, 2021). As these charitable networks push on in carrying out their activities, they continue to embark on mobilisation efforts. While also complying with sanitary and social distancing rules, these faith-based organisations and leaders use volunteers along with the provision of financial resources to meet needs in response to the pandemic's impact. Therefore, the sick, the poor and the vulnerable like the homeless, elderly, disabled, and less privileged people within their sphere of contact in their society were assisted to stay the course of the pandemic.

Leaders of megachurches in Nigeria felt the need to speak out to stir up the faith of not only their members but the Nigerian populace in general. For example, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, predicted that although the disease will not die out completely, the disease will however dissipate, thus encouraging and strengthening the faith of the people to have hope of a brighter future (Ayeni, 2020). Not only that, Adeboye went further to donate 200,000 hand gloves, 8,000 hand sanitisers, and 8,000 surgical masks to the Lagos State government for distribution to affected people in the state (Orjinmo, 2020). This gesture cushioned the devastating effect of the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, leaders of Christian communities aided the vulnerable in society who are at higher risk of contracting the disease and being hit with the pandemic's downturn by helping them to beat hunger through the delivery of groceries. They also put in place certain infrastructure including the provision of online church services and prayer services which were run by many churches including the DCC during the period (Orjinmo, 2020). This step has largely helped to reduce the status quo of in-person gatherings as faith leaders continue to come up with creative and innovative options that stir their faith communities to adapt to the new reality facing them. In carrying out their mission, churches who can afford it have put in place measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus disease by moving their worship services online.

Thus, they were able to help their members and other members of the society to make sense of the pandemic (Grant et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic slowed and led to the breakdown of daily activities through lockdowns in Nigeria. This caused hardship and inconvenienced many. The role played by faith and spirituality helped to bridge the gaps that arose from it. This includes steps taken in preventing coronavirus transmission such as tips on how to wash hand with soap and clean water, promotion of sanitation and hygiene practices, etc. These steps were applied by educating and raising awareness through social media and online platforms, television and radio broadcast with jingles, and drama skits in local dialects (WaterAid/Onome Oraka, n.d). Other steps include WHO (2021b) advice to the public such as getting vaccinated, keeping a physical distance of at least one metre from others, avoiding crowds and close contacts, wearing a properly fitted mask, particularly when in poorly ventilated settings and where physical distancing is not possible. After all, Nigeria has had previous experiences of which it had to deal with epidemics like the Ebola pandemic which shook many parts of the African continent more specifically in Nigeria of which an infected airline passenger entered the country on 20th July 2014 (Althaus et al., 2015). Although the said passenger's arrival caused an outbreak, first in the city of Lagos and spreading to the city of Port Harcourt, Nigeria was however later declared Ebola-free on 20th October 2014 after the country reported a total of 20 cases which included 8 deaths (Althaus et al., 2015).

A close look at the history of pandemics, including smallpox, Ebola, HIV/AIDS and others that have rocked the world in the past, show that the intervention of religion, faith, and spirituality factors have been an integral and constant part of the story at every point in time. This is because these factors have played and continue to play important roles in everyday life for the majority of people affected by such crises in Nigeria and the world at large. Applying the lessons and experiences from past pandemics like smallpox, Ebola, SARS, and HIV/AIDS must continue to be the watchword in the role played by religious organisations and spiritual leaders as faith actors in the crisis (Levin, 2020; Mui, 2019; LeDuc & Barry, 2004). For example, as in past outbreaks in which religious engagement was vital, the necessity to enforce and maintain physical distancing becomes a central focus for public health. As a result, the need to adopt and adapt the limiting of religious gatherings becomes obvious for faith and public partnership to work.

Although faith and spirituality are very personal things, particularly with adherents to and in an organised religious group or setting, yet there are those who do not consider themselves religious. Such individuals approach the concept of faith differently and still have a strong sense of spirituality that shapes their lives, the values by which they live and their worldview.

Therefore, faith and spirituality can be very important tools in supporting and helping people with a sense of comfort, community, and belonging in being able to cope with their problems and various issues in times of great distress. In answering the question of how faith and spirituality help with the issues and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, it must be stated that when dealing with a crisis like this, it is very easy to be afraid, feel alone, and disoriented. However, faith and spirituality can help in easing these feelings by providing individuals with the strong conviction that there is a higher power who will guide them and their wellbeing. It also provides a connection to the community or fellow group of people of faith around them who share similar beliefs as they maintain the hope and reassurance that things will get better and are thus equipped with strength and calmness in expressing themselves. This is important because it is quite beneficial that people are in a position whereby they feel more comfortable in talking with other people who share beliefs of faith and spirituality that are like theirs.

Being able to express and explore one's faith and spirituality is a universal human right of which individuals can express their faith and be part of an organised religious group that may be able to offer help and support in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. United Nations General Assembly (1949, Article 2) states that: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status". Moreover, the strategic role that religious groups play in helping people find meaning in their lives while also maintaining hope in the face of threats and disruptions from the pandemic becomes more apparently vital. People can seek explanations, get comfort, and have a glimpse of hope from faith and spirituality in the face of their challenges when they are boxed into a position of fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. For instance, Enoch Adeboye, General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, in one of his Sunday sermons admonished Christians not to be afraid but rather put their trust in God for His protection during the pandemic because he won't allow calamity on those who trust him (Omoniyi, 2020). He backed this by citing some scriptures including Psalm 91:1 which says: "He that dwells in the secret place of the almighty must abide under the shadow of the almighty" and that dwelling and abiding in God are conditions to enjoying God's blessings in these end times (Omoniyi, 2020).

The successes and failures of the responses of the federal, state, and local governments in Nigeria is largely dependent on the recognition and accommodation of the role that faith and spirituality can play in the shaping of an effective public policy. Ensuring that there is constructive engagement with churches and its leaders in the country will go a long way in mitigating challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of the faith

and spiritual community is important for many reasons. One reason is that due to their deep knowledge of the local communities and large network of communication, church leaders are helpful and quite influential in the conveying of relevant information in times of crisis like COVID-19. Using their pulpit, voice, organisational structure, media and other tools at their disposal contributes immensely to effectively disseminating public health messages which by necessity are a direct and short way of simply urging people to adhere to government guidelines.

Resources of Faith Communities

Faith and spiritual leaders draw on theological, spiritual, and relatable stories that are interpreted both in context and tradition to convey and educate people in ways that they can comfortably and undoubtedly accept and act upon. Constructive behaviours can be modelled, for example, through respect for quarantine requirements. Furthermore, by facing threats and tension from social isolation, violence, and criminal behaviours amid the pandemic, faith and spiritual leaders can teach and instil in people the inspiration to invoke care and compassion, rather than feeling angry, accusing and condemning others. Studies such as Goodman (2020), Coppola et al. (2020), and Lee et al. (2016) have shown that in times of pandemics, those who are actively involved in a faith community do participate in their faith community as they invest in a prayerful relationship and strong connection with their God. For example, Goodman (2020, para. 1) describes the situation in the following words:

> Kay Bajwa, a real estate agent...., spends her time in quarantine praying five times a day and working with members **...**to find ways to help the less fortunate during these difficult times. "This whole ordeal is bringing us closer together**...**" she says. "Spending time praying and being with him is comforting." Bajwa is not alone in turning to her faith to weather life's storms. Religion and belief are now seen by many researchers and clinicians as an important way to cope with trauma and distress thanks to research over the last three decades.

Although the situation described in the above quotation is common to many, it is however arguable that a few may be struggling with their faith during the pandemic (Goodman, 2020). Those who are active, particularly the youth, are less likely to fall prey to continued frustration and distress during the crisis thereby reducing the likelihood of taking excessive alcohol and engaging in other unwarranted negative activities (Lee et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2018). The Pew Research Centre (2021) concludes that "in nearly every country surveyed, those who say religion is very important in their lives are more likely to say both their own faith and that of their compatriots has grown due to the pandemic" (para. 9). It is therefore not

surprising that Moreno and Cardemil (2018) reveal that religious attendance is linked to a lower level of a situation in which depressions, disorders, despondency, and anxieties take hold of such people. This is attributable to the potency of the power of religion on adherents, specifically those who associate with Pentecostal churches in Nigeria.

Challenges Faced by Faith Communities due to COVID-19

It is becoming obvious that while various religious groups in Nigeria are willingly adjusting, others are sometimes grudgingly adjusting to the shocking interruptions that the COVID-19 outbreak brought on almost every facet of normal life. These have caused challenges and obstacles in the way in which churches have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

One way to illustrate such a conundrum is the ability of churches to carry out their mission objectives and their social responsibility together with their desire to offer themselves as receptacles of public trust. Even though amongst other things, those who can afford it are streaming their services online as already discussed, however in many cases, these churches became less successful against their wish of executing their social responsibility. This is because many of the arms of these churches including their para-church ministries and institutions were no longer functioning at full capacity or were completely closed to the public as part of the restrictions and lockdown arising from coronavirus diseases (Grant et al., 2021).

Maintaining spiritual and social connections during COVID-19 is another difficulty that faced communities of faith in Nigeria. This lack of connection has affected their religious rites and life, their ability to do charitable work, and their pastoral care and congregation. While on the one hand, these factors can cause pain when religion is left out, on the other hand, they however allow for the generosity and creativity of religious leaders and their members to adapt to the change in circumstances. As people adapt, they are finding new ways to practice their faith and serve members of their communities during such restrictions. One of such ways is dealing with the challenge of the vulnerable groups in society like the bottom poor and the homeless in the society being marginalised and stigmatised with the belief that they are associated, truly or falsely, with the disease. It is quite possible for the faith and spiritual communities to magnify such prejudice or tensions and, on the other hand, counter them. Religious and faith leaders should step up in teaching, pleading, admonishing, and emphasising the need to dispel such prejudice.

Another issue is that of trust which is vital for public health interventions along with tackling the economic and social disruptions that accompany them. Very few people, communities, and their leaders trust the

system as they do not have confidence that the system and implementation of such interventions will work effectively and efficiently without the usual hiccups that take place in governmental services in Nigeria. It is therefore important that the help of religious leaders is sought to play key roles in tackling misinformation and fear as they are in the category of leaders that are often most trusted in the society, though not all the time.

There is also the issue of some spiritual leaders who take things too far in that some of them can sometimes convey inaccurate and sometimes false information and or reasons why an event is happening. An example is a report by Dr. Sanusi Bala, Chairman of the Nigerian Medical Association, who indicated in an April 2020 channels television interview that Kano religious leaders do not believe in coronavirus spread (Channels Television, 2020; Sahara Reporters, 2020). This kind of assertion from such leaders is very dangerous as the influence that such leaders have on their followers is so firm that their followers are immediately prone to believing them, thereby leading to disobedience of public health policies. Moreover, some of the Muslim adherents have voiced out that the whole issue of the pandemic is a conspiracy to prevent Muslims from praying and that there is no such thing as COVID-19 or coronavirus. Other religious leaders have even escalated the distrust and fears of people during the pandemic, particularly by well-known faith leaders. For instance, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy caused a major controversy when he alleged that the coronavirus is linked to the 5G technology network which is part of a conspiracy to create a new world order, but was quickly debunked by scientists (Orjinmo, 2020). Oyakhilome's theory was also swiftly quashed by other Nigerian Pentecostal leaders like Sam Adeyemi and Matthew Ashimolowo, Senior Pastors of Daystar Christian Centre and Kingsway International Christian Centre respectively, whose pressure later led to backtracking by Oyakhilome (Adesina, 2020; Egbunike, 2020).

Amid a surging pandemic, other prominent church leaders have agitated for the churches to be fully reopened. One of them is David Oyedepo, the Bishop and Founder of the Living Faith Church, a leading Pentecostal megachurch in Nigeria. He described the shutdown as an attempt at crippling Christianity (DW, 2020). However, in the same vein, others like Pastor Tunde Bakare of the General Overseer of The Citadel Global Community Church, formerly known as Latter Rain Assembly, have chided religious leaders, particularly those that run mega facilities, who have called for prayer houses and places of worship to be reopened. He advocates that such leaders should support and collaborate with governments instead of embarking on criticisms and he went a step further to say that they provide their facilities for use as response centres for dealing with the coronavirus (Bakare, 2020; Olowoyo, 2020; Dw, 2020). While it is understandable that there is frustration amongst

pastors, and various faith leaders who find it difficult to operate during this pandemic, still they have to show an example in displaying patience. Some of the issues these leaders face are the difficulty they have in giving physical in-person spiritual support and guidance to the sick, especially to those who are isolated in their homes or quarantined in hospital facilities as a result of the sickness. Besides, families and community members are unable to have the physical presence of such spiritual leaders when their loved ones die as they are faced with restrictions on rites of mourning their loved ones.

Findings from the Literature

The relevant literature and analysis reveal that faith organisations such as churches in Nigeria are relevant to the COVID-19 period in Nigeria. It can therefore be said that they would be relevant in a post-COVID-19 era. The literature suggests strongly that churches and other faith organisations were actively involved in the life of the nation and, therefore, have a role to play in the national and community recovery. Their role is vitally indispensable to the post-COVID national recovery for the following reasons.

First, churches see themselves as being relevant to the national recovery because they are essential community hubs that are providing a key base for members of the society to get access to refuge and comfort in times of crisis, in this case, the COVID-19 Pandemic. Moreover, they have an even bigger role to play now with the increased need for further resources and support to maximise what can be offered to people and communities at this critical time of recovery in the country.

Secondly, the existing networks provided by these faith-based organisations are vital in helping to restore both communal and individual wellbeing while also helping to build the necessary resilience needed both now and in the future. The problems that individuals and communities experienced when places of worship were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic became apparent as they were denied access to sacred places where they can find respite, feel safe, seek peace and solitude to mourn, pray and deal with their issues. This shows that such places of worship are symbols of long-term survival, for people in their communities, as they are local centres giving care, practical support, and companionship. These places of worship have the potential for providing continuous support, not just a one-off, for people of all faiths as the Nigerian nation engages in the post-COVID national recovery process for not only their members but also non-church members who have been affected by the closure. As hallowed grounds, they must remain open as they are increasingly essential to the community and the activities resulting in the prevention of the negative impacts of increased isolation and needs in a period of difficulty and suffering cutting across all groups of people, socially, economically, and otherwise.

Thirdly, politicians and governmental leaders have expectations as there is increasing recognition by the local, state, and national governments of the immense value and role such faith-based institutions play in being community partners, making available their places of worship, and making contribution to the well-being of the people. The level of the network they provide in helping to reach across a wide range of communities is also a recognisable factor. "No single government, or level of government, can meet the demands of crisis management alone. The COVID-19 crisis, given its scope and magnitude, is challenging all levels of government to reinforce their partnerships…in the short, medium, and long term" (Allain-Dupre et al., 2020, p.75).

Fourthly, prayer being the most prominent response from the church to these sorts of challenges is another finding which shows that churches rightfully think that they are relevant actors in the recovery process. Additionally, during the post-COVID pandemic recovery, churches will continue to be well-positioned in giving people the spiritual support they need and the encouragement to have faith through consistent prayer that things will turn around for good for those who have been greatly impacted by the pandemic financially, economically, and otherwise.

The fifth finding is the fact that there are some damaging effects resulting from the closure of places of worship and restrictions on movement as can be seen from the findings already discussed above. It is essential for every effort to be made in keeping places of worship, including the facilities that go with them, open to support such pandemic emergencies to ensure physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual care and wellbeing along with other communal benefits. This will in the immediate and long-term help to deal with the grief and loss of those whose issues could not be supported and resolved in the tick of the pandemic challenges which may take years to heal and return to normality.

Besides all of the above, it is clear that despite the regulations put in place by the government to deal with the COVID-19, churches still managed to look out for opportunities to make their presence felt. This they did through their engagement with people online to provide continuous spiritual support; reducing and, where possible, eliminating the dire consequences of social isolation and loneliness; giving people access to quiet reflection from the comfort of their homes; and various other assistance like contacting the isolated folks. Other ways in which they made their presence felt include providing practical help such as partnering with the government as hubs for vaccination and testing; making available food and other needed supplies like medicine, water, and so on.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis and findings from above, this study hereby recommends the following.

First, churches must not only continue to exercise restraint but must also work to ensure they are trustworthy as they beef up efforts that include not holding meetings and not having gatherings where necessary, as this can contribute to further spread of the virus which has the potential of resurfacing. On the issue of trust, since Christian faith leaders are supposed to be trusted by members of their communities, they are well placed in the position to encourage the people on positive behavioural changes on issues like adjusting to habitual mask-wearing, maintaining physical or social distancing, and so on. Therefore, the "Government can leverage the trust, reach and practical support of religious leaders to deliver effective public-health responses" (Tony Blaire Institute for Global Change, 2020). Nevertheless, to effectively do so, government officials, public leaders, and public health authorities need to earn the trust of the religious community leaders and vice versa. This is necessary considering that public health officials have to work with religious leaders in conjunction with the World Health of Organisation to overcome obstacles of mistrust arising from pandemics on issues of the day that affects people in the local communities. For instance, there was public mistrust as was evident during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa on issues like how people can bury their loved ones without getting exposed to the virus (Dockins, 2014).

Second, churches need to beef up their capacity to enable them to provide spiritual and social support and care for the sick, the bereaved, and the dying in more appropriate ways. This should include supporting their own pastors and ministers to be better positioned in providing the needed assistance as key workers in the local communities in which they are located. In addition, those who have the resources should increase their investment and efforts in clinics, hospital, and COVID-19 recovery centres including making available ministers who can provide chaplaincy duties to care for both patients, volunteers, and staff in such designated places.

Third, the teachings of churches and faith leaders should focus on encouraging people to obey government guidelines and public health order to help slow down the virus. Example include following 1.5 meter social distancing rule, wearing masks, etcetera. Any dissidents amongst them should be called out and be reminded of the biblical injunction made by Jesus, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17, ESV - English Standard Version). Despite the unworthy actions of conspiracy theories and so on, faith leaders have the special duty of helping to dispel such claims and correct them along with various other rumours, conspiracy theories, scapegoating, misunderstandings, misinformation, or deliberate false information that are linked to religious beliefs that are peddled by people.

These corrective measures are a necessity for religious faith institutions who ultimately have the capacity to communicate their messages in positive ways as these do play a very critical role in determining how the coronavirus disease is perceived and understood by the public in Nigeria.

Fourth, in the same vein as above, churches must ensure that they do not preach messages that undermine COVID-19 protocols but should respect the right of others such as members and non-members of their congregation who want to do so without being judgemental of them.

Fifth, not only should all churches work to ensure that they are applying the necessary rules and providing support, they should work with a common goal and attitude. For example, a situation whereby some churches are more open to opening their places of worship for use by the general public, while some others are not that willing to do so should not be allowed. The more there are in the number of faiths organisations and leaders that get involved in a collaboratively coordinated effort, the better it will be for an increased rallying of spiritual and social solidarity that supports many people through this pandemic which in turn may result in stronger networks of relationships on communal, organizational, and personal levels. Not only that, there may also be the possibility whereby the groundwork through this pandemic is laid now for the future for closer public-private partnerships amongst the various levels of governments and the various faith communities in Nigeria. Having said this, it should be equally stated that faith-based organizations must not be expected to bear the major brunt in handling most of the burden that comes with this responsibility even though they see themselves as having the duty of care to do these things. They should rather be seen as important and necessary partners in the drive to reach and care for the needy and vulnerable in society. It should be borne in mind that the congregations in many of these organisations are small, particularly in the smaller ones which are mostly made up of volunteers in their staffing structure. Such small faith organisations will therefore need the necessary support financially and otherwise because as Proverbs 27:17 (ESV) puts it, "Iron sharpens iron, and one sharpens another."

The programs of these faith organisations and their leadership should be supported through spending and sponsorships from other public institutions like the government, privately-owned companies, and international organisations since such publicly supported social initiatives and interventions of such faith organisations can be beneficial to all (Hein, 2014). Besides, like any other organisation, faith-based organisations and their arms or institutions should have and do have the right to apply for grants from governments and international organisations. Nevertheless, such grants must be used for the social responsibility purpose for which they were released – which in this instance has to do with responding adequately to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from mobilisation of additional funding, the collaborative efforts between the faith organisations and government or international organisations should also be such that it increases the efficiency of responses to the coronavirus pandemic. An example is ensuring that there are regular and consistent health programs like vaccinations that must remain well funded with providing enough tools and logistic support like transport, accommodation, and so on for volunteers that faith organisations have readily made available. The importance of volunteering and helping others cannot be overemphasised because response and recovery programs that are run with volunteers, like those advanced in and/or through congregations of faith-based organisations, have an inherent ability for success. This can be seen in the fact that such steps are efforts that are linked with outcomes that lead to positive health for all (Yeung et al., 2017).

Sixth, the ongoing consultations, communication, and advice on the latest scientific information must continue with churches and practitioners in the grassroots to ensure that places of worship remain open safely. This will also enable them to maximise their contribution to people's wellbeing and recovery and, more so, in the event that there is a surge in the transmission of the COVID-19. While it is a fact that having a more coordinated and broader role by and with the faith community in areas that are focused on addressing COVID-19 response and prevention can be significantly powerful, it is nevertheless necessary to emphasise the urgency for such coordination to be quickly applied. This is more so that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to remain with us for some years to come, thereby necessitating more considerations on how the social service programs of faith communities can be delivered effectively and safely. Initiating coordinated efforts that are creative and innovative is required to ensure the continuation of laudable programs that serve the needy in society, particularly in a country like Nigeria where the needs and demands are increasingly being felt by the low-income citizens. Coordinated programs should not just be a collaboration between the local, state, or federal government and the faith organisations and their leaders, it should go beyond that. The prominent and well-established faith-based organisations, their arms or institutions and leaders should not work in isolation or by themselves as this will be selfish and will not be helpful in meeting the high demands and needs during this pandemic in a large populated country like Nigeria. They should rather collaborate with smaller faith organisations to achieve this goal as this action will extend the reach and network that is needed to accommodate such objectives. This brings to mind the biblical injunction in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 that:

> Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie

together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him-a threefold cord is not quickly broken." (ESV - English Standard Version)

The above is summed up succinctly in two other scriptures which are Ecclesiastes 4:9 (ESV) which says, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil." Also, Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV) that says, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

Seventh, although churches are showing support, they should, however, do a lot more in collaborating with their counterparts and the federal, state, and local governments to improve efforts towards the enhancement of effective and efficient distributive mechanisms to reach people, households, and communities that are worst-hit by the pandemic.

Conclusion

This study has shown that faith and spirituality including religious beliefs and practices are a necessity in responding to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria as they play their part in consideration of their role within the global perspective on the response. In giving support and comfort to not only those in need, but the various levels of government, the faith and spiritual communities provide valuable and tangible resources and support that assist in preventing and addressing the fallout of the coronavirus disease that has plagued the country. Despite all the initial pushbacks at the first half of 2020 by religious leaders, people began to accept these restrictions which continued for the rest of 2020 into the first quarter of 2021. When considering the role of religion in the recovery and prevention process of this crisis, it is impossible not to reflect on the provocative correlation between the challenges and responses. The COVID-19 response and recovery interventions will not be enough with only the governments having to act. Intervention measures will be much more successful with the participation and roles played by religious faith-based organisations in helping to address the various issues that medical and scientific interventions are unable to address. These include helping people to heal faster mentally, emotionally, and otherwise as they find recourse to trusted interventions through faith and spirituality of which faith organisations, their arms, institutions, and congregations are very effective in mobilising and providing a timely and appropriate response in times of crisis and needs.

Finally, it has also been shown that those who are spiritually active do participate in their faith community as they invest in a prayerful relationship

and strong connection with their God. The implications of COVID-19 are quite significant. As the pandemic grows, there will be greater pressure on the drivers of faith and spirituality to respond appropriately and safely to help all types of people and communities within their reach. There is urgency on the need for more integrative and collaborative efforts for effective response and recovery during the period of the impact that comes with this pandemic. It will be a mistake if faith leaders, members of the faith communities, and their partners do not act now as they will run the risk of mistakenly taking for granted the continued positive and negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic can have on Nigeria both now and in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call to Nigeria and the world at large, particularly with policy and structural issues required in a post-COVID-19 world. A more integrated and collaborative response is needed in all sectors of the society including faith organisations to provide the needed support of spiritual, health, finance, and other interventions.

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