

## **APPRAISAL OF THE CHALLENGES OF COVID – 19 ON CHURCH ACTIVITIES IN MINNA METROPOLIS OF NIGER STATE, NIGERIA.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of the Church in Minna metropolis of Niger State, Nigeria. The Church as a religious institution was not spared of the problems and devastating effects of COVID-19 especially in the year 2020 with the measures adopted by the government to curtail the spread of the disease especially lockdown that restricted the movement of people thereby paralyzing the activities of the Church and the commitments of members to religious activities. The objective of the paper, is to appraise the challenges of COVID-19 on the Church. The methodology adopted for the paper was historical. Both primary and secondary sources were also utilized to gather necessary data for the paper. The findings of the paper have shown that the sustenance of Church activities depends on the congregation, also church activities bind people together and the maintenance of the Clergy also are highly dependent on the congregation. The paper concludes that church activities should include measures that can promote self-reliance among both the clergy and the congregations, also programmes and activities that can sustain members of the church should be emphasized. The Church needs to re-evaluate some of her activities to meet up with the realities of our times. This paper hereby recommends that, there should be re-orientation for members of the Church concerning her commitments to church activities; the Church should also include activities that are sustainable like skill acquisition, empowerment and management skills.

**Key Words:** Appraisal, Challenges, COVID-19, Church activities, Sustenance.

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### **Introduction**

The challenges and multiple effects of coronavirus disease otherwise known as COVID-19 is a reality all over the world. Every individual is directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic. When the scourge was first announced in Nigeria in February 2020; most people did not really pay attention to the disease. Though the scourge was reported to have originated from the village Wuhan in China, in 2019 with alarming rates of death.

The index case reported in Nigeria was an Italian, who visited Nigeria in February,

2020. This man was said to have been to some other states in Nigeria before testing positive to COVID-19 with the possibility of infecting many people he came in contact with. This news sent waves of panic across Nigeria due to the level of unpreparedness of the country for the pandemic. To worsen the panic, the World Health Organisation (WHO) categorized Nigeria as one of the 13 high-risk African Countries with respect to the spread of COVID-19. Nigeria is also among the vulnerable African Nations, due to the weak state of the healthcare system. In Nigeria, there are still communities

without healthcare facilities, apart from the scarcity of health workers.

The first case of COVID-19 patient in Niger State, Nigeria was announced by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2020, since then, many cases have been confirmed in the state, and more cases are still being reported. The number of cases in Niger State as at April 30, 2021 stands at 930 with 17 deaths and 913 recoveries.

The increasing number of cases of COVID-19 patients in Nigeria, made the federal government of Nigeria to embark on lockdown of all activities in the country with restrictions on inter-state travels throughout the country. The lockdown and curfew were put in place to make people adhere to the basic safety guidelines of social distancing, frequent hand washing and the use of face masks in public places. Later, the lockdown was relaxed to enable people perform their commercial activities in order to minimize the hardship and challenges people faced during the lockdown period. The lockdown and stay at home directives had adverse effects on people's livelihood, with disproportionate effects on the vulnerable population; most of whom are daily income earners; in which the church is a major representative. While the lockdown was critical for disease containment, it undermines the economic and social foundations for survival and the resilience structures of Nigeria's most vulnerable population. The ban on religious gatherings had adverse effects on the church. Some prominent Church leaders defied the government directives, also compliance with safety guidelines is very low among other churches. During the lockdown period, some Churches in Minna metropolis especially the Independent Churches without any financial support from elsewhere defied the restrictions either due to the economic effects or with

the claim that God is the main healer of all diseases, that in situations like COVID-19, the gathering of God's people in the Church for prayers should be put into consideration.

### **The Church in Minna Metropolis**

The Greek work "Ekklesia" from which the word Church comes has the meaning of being "called out or an assembly of congregational meeting". In the New Testament Sense (Acts 11:1, 12, 29, 15:3), the church is the company of believers called out from the world and indwelt by the spirit of God. The true Church is composed of the whole number of regenerated persons from Pentecost to the first resurrection who are united together to Christ by the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1Cor. 12: 12-13). The Church is the body of Christ, to which he (Christ) is the head (Eph. 2:21). The Church is equally a building designed for worship for group of Christians (Manus, 2008). All Churches are built for sacred and religious purposes to carry out the various religious activities and observances to fulfill the mandate of the church.

Church activities vary from one church to the other, but they are all geared towards the ultimate goal of the Church which is evangelism. Other functions of the church include discipleship, fellowship, ministry and worship. In Nigeria, the Church has come together under one umbrella named the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) that oversees the affairs of the church. The CAN chairman in Niger State is Rev. Dr. Matthias Echioda.

Minna the present capital of Niger State originated at the hilltop around the 1750's while the modern town emerged at the bottom of the hill in 1910 due to colonial railway. The position of modern Minna as a railway terminal and provincial headquarters increased its ethnic and

cultural heterogeneity. This situation was further enhanced with the emergence of the town as a state capital in 1976. Several factors facilitated the position of Minna as a state capital, this includes its location at the centre of the state and the proximity to Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This has contributed to the growth and importance of the town, because some civil servants that work in Abuja have their families based in Minna.

Christianity came to Niger State and Minna in particular through the missionaries before the creation of the state in 1976. The first Christian mission to evangelize the people of Niger State was the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) founders of the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA)(Fuller,1995). Now known as Evangelical Church Winning all. Today, ECWA is the most widespread denomination among the indigenous Gbagyi people in general, both in Niger State and other Gbagyi speaking people across central Nigeria. The ECWA Church has its headquarters in Niger State situated in Minna: The ECWA Goodnews Church while the District Church Council (DCC) also is in Minna.

Other denominations like the Baptist, The Apostolic Church, Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Nupe Calvary Ministry, Deeper Life Bible Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Occupy Ministries and others came to Minna and Niger State in the 1970's with members drawn from the main line Orthodox Churches. The numbers of churches keep on growing in Minna metropolis is about 300. These churches fall under the Mainline (Orthodox Churches), Pentecostal and Independent Churches.

These churches in Minna metropolis have impact on the lives of the people with their various denominational and doctrinal

practices based on the teaching and understanding of the Bible. So, when the COVID-19 epidemic came into Nigeria as an entity and Niger State with the measures taken by the government to curtail the spread of it; including lockdown and curfew in the state, the effect of the lockdown on the activities of the Church and the challenges posed by the effect has devastating consequences on individuals and the activities of the Church in Minna metropolis. The Church as the congregation of believers and "the house of God" has her own shares as it undermines the survival of both churches leaders especially those who depend on the offerings, tithes and contributions from Church members for daily sustenance; and the members who look upon their leaders as embodiments of faith to withstand this scourge. Both the clergy and the laity were affected and are still struggling to balance the effect of COVID-19 on their sustenance as individuals.

### **Activities of the Church in Minna Metropolis**

There are so many activities of the Church to fellowship with one another, to express their joy and gratitude to God or to exercise their faith and carry out their responsibilities as Christians. Almost all the activities of the Church are geared towards fulfilling the mandate of the great commission which is evangelism as commanded by Jesus Christ the founder of the Church. (Mt 28:19-20).

Activities of the Church vary in Minna depending on the beliefs and practices of the Church. Some of the main activities of the church in Minna metropolis are listed below as follows:

- Sunday/Sabbath worship
- Midweek services
- Prayer meetings and Bible study

- Vigils
- Christian Festivals like Easter, Christmas, New year celebration
- House fellowship
- Outreach programmes
- Revival programmes
- Crusade
- Mother's Day, Father's Day
- Thanksgiving services for special occasions like Birthdays, promotions; deliverances from danger
- Marriage ceremonies
- Ordination
- Baptism/confirmation
- Counseling sessions
- Bible school
- Church picnics
- Retreat and Seminars for Church unit leaders.

### **Challenges of COVID-19 on Church activities in Minna metropolis**

The Church through her various activities have played and are still playing significant roles in the lives of not only the adherents, but the society at large. These significant roles are not only limited to only religious activities and services to the people, they have cut across other aspects of everyday living and interaction of people in the society; ranging from social, moral, psychological, educational, spiritual and economic. During the COVID-19 lockdown period, in order to prevent the spread of the disease, the church all over the world faced a lot of challenges which are as follows;

- Inability to meet for Church services and activities: The local church could not meet for her various activities due to the lockdown. This is one of the major challenges of the church during the COVID-19 pandemic. Church activities and programmes were cancelled in order to comply with the lockdown embargo and

social distancing. For example, the Easter programme(s) of most churches in Minna could not be held due to the lockdown. Also, the Pastor's retreat and village outreaches to Nubuta and Dutse in Faith Foundation Church in the month of May and June, 2021 could not be held due to the lockdown sanctions. Many, marriage ceremonies could not be conducted in the church during this period. Marriage dates were shifted and postponed, especially in the big churches in the year 2020, for example Good News ECWA Church and Saint Peter's Cathedral Church all in Minna town. A pastor's son's wedding in Faith Foundation Church was postponed from May to November, 2020. Other church activities were adversely affected also.

- Division: Another challenge faced by most churches is division. COVID-19 pandemic increased divisiveness within many churches. The inability to meet together as Church leaders widens the gap. Also the gap between members of the Church and the leaders who were trying to cope with the demands of COVID-19 in meeting their personal needs like prayers for the sick, spiritual counsel and financial assistance rendered to the needy and the aged in the church.
- Economic crises: This is another major challenge of COVID-19 on the church. COVID-19 created a devastating setback to economic growth throughout the globe. During the lockdown period, people were out of work and church members could not meet for their various

activities, thereby dwindling the incomes of the Church. This affected the finance of the church both local and global in which Minna metropolis is not an exception. Church members could not give their tithes and offerings. Other charitable activities carried out by members of the church were not impressive enough. Vulnerable members of the church who depends mostly on the church for their sustenance were affected. Even Church leaders, Pastors, Evangelist, Prophets, Preachers, etc. who depends on the church stipends for their sustenance were adversely affected. They could no longer receive supports from the church as it were before the covid-19 period. In the words of a pastor “we had to wait on the Lord, every day to meet our needs and feed us”. Some members became beggars to feed their families.

- Insecurity of lives and properties: This is another challenge faced by the church during this period. Due to the inability to meet one’s immediate needs, some people resolved to breaking into people’s houses to steal. There were reports of burglary in some churches in Minna, for example, Bishara Baptist Church, Maitumbi and Faith Foundation Church, Shango where church properties like musical instruments, microphones, electric bulbs, wall clock even communion items were stolen. Also, the stay-at-home embargo forced some youths to become restless leading to vandalization of properties of both individuals and public properties in Minna metropolis at any slightest provocation. Obasanjo shopping

complex and its environs has been a constant target of some miscreants. The combined efforts of both the military and police are sometimes utilized to disperse them.

- Anxiety and fear: These are part of the challenges faced by the church during the covid-19 period. Due to the strain and weariness of the effects of COVID-19 both Pastors and church members have become anxious and afraid, thereby diverting their attention from the realities of our times. This has in turn created suspicion and lack of trust among fellow Christians, thereby widening the gap in relating with one another in love.

#### **Overview of the challenges of the COVID-19 on church activities in Minna metropolis**

The coronavirus pandemic has not been eradicated. The pandemic is said to be in the third phase with variants that are defying normal treatments and diver’s signs and symptoms which means that, the disease is still around, also, the challenges that emerged, with the disease.

The church in general and the church in Minna metropolis is still grappling with the challenges of the disease which has affected the activities of the church. The challenges of COVID-19 on church activities have affected the church in several ways. In the words of the CAN chairman of Niger state the effect of COVID-19 on the church and her activities are as follows;

- Low church attendance
- Reduced zeal of church members
- Reduction in spiritual and temporal commitments of members
- Lack of finance

- Low response to financial commitments of members
- Inability to continue with church projects
- Cancellation of some church activities like vigils, house fellowship, village evangelism e.t.c

Others effects are:

- Compulsory use of face masks
- Social distancing
- Reduction of church services and activities to one to two hours
- No handshake or hugging
- Provision of sanitizers and hand washing equipment's in church premises.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are hereby suggested in the light of the above presentation on how the church in Minna metropolis can manage and cope with the challenges of covid-19 on church activities.

- The church should educate her members on how to manage the effect of covid-19 on people's wellbeing.
- The church needs re-orientation of her members on the realities of our times.
- Proper information dissemination should be utilized by the church to reach her members.
- The church should avail herself of the use of social media services to conduct her programmes and activities where necessary through virtual meetings.
- Members of church must be empowered through skills acquisition, formal education to meet their needs.
- The church needs to create employment opportunities for her members.

- Indigent members of the church should be supported and helped to meet their needs.
- Church leaders should acquire skills that will help them to meets their immediate needs.
- Pastors needs to depend on God for their sustenance and not their church members.
- Church activities should be geared towards meeting the realities of our times.
- Church leaders should live by example in every way possible by being law abiding.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has tried to appraise the challenges of covid-19 on church activities in Minna metropolis. The realities of the challenges of COVID-19 on the world are visible for all. The church as an institution has not been spared of the effect of the pandemic on both individuals and the activities of the church. The church needs to readjust through faith, prayers and works to cope with and manage the challenges of the disease.

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