

COVID – 19 AND ITS IMPACT ON CHRISTIAN ACTIVITIES IN ONITSHA ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION.

Abstract:

This study looks at the effects of covid-19 pandemic on the religious lives of people living in Onitsha, Anambra State Nigeria. The work investigates the response of the inhabitants to the emergence of the novel disease called Covid-19, and how it impacted the spiritual development and growth of the people at the peak of the lock down imposed by the state. It also looked at the implication to the church in Onitsha. The aim was to propose possible measure churches need to put in place to reduce the negative impact on the spiritual well-being of their members in case of such occurrence in the future. During the course of this study, online and offline libraries were consulted. Also, interviews were conducted on selected church leaders, and members of various denominations. The study therefore observed that due to lack of fellowship among brethren, the spirituality of many Christians suffered which led to many dead, increase of sickness as a result of loneliness, and loss of income. It discovered that the church was grossly affected which resulted in the introduction of online service, revival of house/zonal fellowship, training and personal development of leaders among other numerous changes in strategy and approach adopted to avert future occurrence.

KEY WORDS: *Covid – 19, Impact, Christian activities, Onitsha*

Introduction:

The emergence of Covid – 19 towards the end of the 2019 was a big surprise to the international community. It came at a time the world is not well prepared to handle the threat to life of such deadly virus. This tells why within few months of the outbreak in Wuhan China, it travelled to many global cities without much resistance and prevention. The implication was very devastating to different facet of human enterprises and the religious world was not left out. However, Nigerians did not take it serious when it was announced that an Italian citizen tested positive to the disease in Lagos. It was seen as a joke because the citizens could not believe that such disease could survive in Nigeria high temperature but before one could understand what

was going on, the story became a reality and worst still, the religious climate which to some Africans has control over other sectors became seriously affected and degraded.

At the early stage in Nigeria, the people believed that Coronavirus – (Covid -19) belongs to the elites because many who tested positive were the rich who returned from International travels. As a result of this wrong perception, the application of control measure was not well adhered to by the people and it was not too long that community transmission began to emerge and what followed next was a complete lockdown by the Government.

Onitsha the economic life wire of the South eastern states of Nigeria was not left out. It became seriously affected due to the fact that her major economic relevance is centered on buying and selling. The lock down imposed when the case was reported in Anambra State took the inhabitant by surprise and not only that, the Christian community became the victim because of their unpreparedness to witness such event of grave magnitude. As a result, there was no immediate measure put in place to see to the spiritual growth and survival of the numerous adherent of faith.

In the midst of growing threat to the spiritual life of the people, various church leaders and denominations took proactive steps to ensure that their members are taken care of spiritually, physically, financially and socially among others. Though, physical church service was prohibited to specific among of people, yet various denominations resorted to online service and fellowship, the use of prayer cell or house fellowship, the use of zones and branches and one on one private visitations to ensure that the spiritual life is taken care of.

Understanding the city of Onitsha:

Onitsha as one of the major pronounce city in the South east is located on the eastern bank of the River Niger. It is located in Anambra State Nigeria and serves as the economic nerve of the state. Onitsha is well known for commerce, industry and education. It is important to note that Onitsha became great due to her acceptance of the early Church Missionary Society (CMS), missionaries who arrived at the bank of the River in 1857. With time Onitsha gradually becomes a strategic commercial port for the Royal Niger Company after the abolition of slave trade and subsequent arrival of the CMS Missionaries. Ever since then, the city of Onitsha has been serving as a metropolitan city where divergent people meet and interact. The city is renowned for having the oldest secondary school known as Dennis Memorial Grammar School in 1925 built by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) which is today called the Anglican Church. No wonder that this city and her inhabitant are religiously incline in nature and accommodate the headquarters of two major orthodox churches in the state – Anglican Church and Roman Catholic church including other Pentecostal churches. This study focuses its investigation on the impact of covid-19 to the Anglican church which has one hundred and fifty branches parishes in the metropolitan city of Onitsha.

Effects of Covid -19 on Christian activities in Onitsha

The religious world was never immune to the consequences of this pandemic called Covid -19. From history is obvious that religious communities always seek answers about the importance of pandemics whenever it occurs and not do they seek for answers they do adapt their religious practices and behavior to be relevant to those affected (Simonsen et al. 2018). Likewise, in the present pandemic, church leaders took steps to ameliorate the impact on the people. This study finds out that COVID-19 pandemic has impacted church in various ways, including the cancellation of the church services of various faiths and the closure of Sunday schools, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals (Burker 2020). This also resulted in many churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples resorting to online services and worship through live stream (Parker 2020).

The church in Onitsha was not left out as our findings indicated. The climax of it all was the fact that the Holy Week of 2020 (5th – 11th April) was never done as usual in most churches due to the lock down imposed by the State government as a regulatory measure to control the spread of the virus. During this period, most churches in Onitsha became grossly affected and this study observed the following:

Restriction on number worshippers:

One of the major actions taken by the State government was to ban all forms of gathering including religious worship. Though there was the option that no gathering will not exceed 30 persons at a time with full compliance to covid – 19 protocols which include: Use of face mask, positioning of wash hand basin and sanitizers in strategic places, social distancing and making sure that no service exceeds 1 hour. This restriction was not easy to some churches especially some of the New Religious movements or the Pentecostal Churches who did not have the necessary facilities to accommodate such rules. As a result many churches increased the number of their services to accommodate many worshippers and as a result created the problem of stress, and over labour among the priests, pastors and evangelist. Also, being that Africans are religious in nature and are inclined to community solidarity, it became a big problem that most worshippers no longer enjoy the service due to the fact that less activities are being allowed so as to allow time management as prescribed by the State. While some churches with facilities divided their worship into different centers allocating ministers and pastors to give religious oversight to the congregations.

Closure of Churches/worship centers:

This is the climax of government decision during the pandemic. The strict lockdown rule and prohibition of worship caused many worship place to be closed and many of these churches suffered adversely.

Humanitarian crises:

The closure of economic activities in Onitsha gave rise to serious financial crises considering the fact that over 80 percent of inhabitants of the City depended so much on day to day activities for daily bread. So, the closure of markets placed moral burden on the Church to take care of her members by providing palliatives in terms of food item and financial aids to members and other people who may be in need of it. In response to such ugly scenario, it was observed by this study that Diocese on the Niger (Anglican Communion) took proactive measures in the provision of palliatives to her numerous members. It did not end in that, the Diocesan charged all the clergy and workers in charge of congregations to provide palliatives for their members (Nwokolo, 2020). Interaction with some of the selected Anglican churches in Onitsha indicated that most of the churches distributed bags of rice, beans, tubers of yam, indomie noddles, face masks, sanitizer among numerous other things to help cushion the effect on the people considering the fact that Government is not doing much to help the people. In addition to the above, it was recorded that the Diocese on the Niger fed over five thousand families during the pandemic spending over thirty million naira (that is US 70,000 dollars) during the first two weeks of complete lockdown in the State. Most other churches like the Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Roman Catholic Church and other Pentecostal churches distributed many palliatives during this point in time.

Increase in crime activities:

Due to loss of means of livelihood during the period of the lockdown, many youths took to crime and as a result some churches witnessed destruction of their offices and facilities due to their quest to steal money from the church coffee. Among the 25 churches visited in Onitsha, 12 among them witness this incident though the damages done to each varies.

Cancellation of Vigils, and other religious conferences:

Due to the pandemic, vigils were cancelled especial the Good Friday vigil did not hold. Even adoration centers were closed and as a result the spiritual life of many people were affected including Sunday schools and numerous other programs that inculcate values and build up the spiritual life of the people.

Eucharistic services were modified:

The Eucharist which is central to the religious life of the people were affected severely considering the fact that most church began online stream services where only the word and

prayers are used because the worshipper who join online cannot partake in the Eucharist. This is because Eucharist can only be shared when in physical worship. Even after the lockdown, the distribution of wine using the chalice was no longer advisable; rather the distribution is done using customized cups for convenience sake.

Collapse of many businesses:

As a result of economic crises occasioned by the effect of the pandemic, many worshippers in the small scale business lost their means of livelihood due to their inability to maintain their capital base during the lock down; the implication is that many of these people fall back to the church to help them start up another business. The church in this scenario found it difficult because of the reduction in their income. However, this study found out that some churches were able to tackle the challenge based on their ability. In the midst of 13 churches visited, 8 churches enumerated that more than 11 worshippers were in such situation and that they were able to sort the issues out though not without difficulty.

Though the pandemic can be said to have serious negative impacts, however; this study was able to find out some positive implications that help the Church to grow. One of such is the ability of the church to adopt new approach and strategy in ministry. Such approaches include:

Online services/live stream:

The pandemic opened the eyes of many church leaders on the necessity of adopting technology in church worship. As a result of this necessity, many churches used the period of the lockdown to begin live streaming in Facebook, YouTube, Zoom among others. Such attitudinal change in approach also gave employment to many youths who were engaged in the business of technological empowerment so as to make them relevant thereby helping the church where they worship. Such innovation was very helpful to the propagation of the gospel to the outside world. No wonder that after the lockdown many of these churches that began the online service continued while a very handful of others could not continue. Investigation revealed that out of the 21 churches that began the online services, only 4 dropped after the lockdown due to the problem of man power and resources to continue.

Revival of house/zonal fellowship:

The lockdown helped most churches that no longer practice the act of zonal/house fellowship to activate it for the purpose of meeting the needs of her numerous members. This approach helped the church to see to the spiritual well-being of her members. Also, during this period, increase in number of fellowship taking places among family members was observed. This is because necessity is the mother of invention.

Closeness to church:

The lock down affords many the opportunity of visiting the church for private prayers and relaxation. This is because, many buildings in Onitsha lacked basic necessity of life and necessary spacing to accommodate large people during the lockdown. As a result of this, many of the men stays in church premises most of the time merely for relaxation, interaction with other people, and sporting activities. These in no way helped tremendously to reduce the problem of loneliness, and high blood pressure among the men. Though, immediately after the lockdown, much of men's presence in the church disappeared.

Training/re-training programs among church leaders:

The pandemic was great time for leaders to look inwardly on how best to improve themselves for effectiveness and efficiency after the pandemic. Among 55 church leaders interviewed, 46 were able to agree the fact that the period gave them access to study and personal trainings that will help them to be useful to the ministry.

Improve in family life:

It was a great period for children and mothers in Onitsha. This is because Onitsha as a commercial city never gives the men (fathers) the opportunity to spend time with their children and wife but during the lockdown, it avails the children the great privilege of spending time constantly with their parents most of the time. It goes a long way to unite families and ignite love and passion for family life.

Need for financial investment

One of the greatest lessons the church leaders in Onitsha learnt is that depending in offerings and good will of worshippers is no longer sustainable. The study was able to find out that many church leaders who have no other source of income suffered greatly and were begging for help. In essence, the need for the church to invest in Agriculture and industry becomes very obvious. This is to avert the dangers of church losing her prestige and influence in the society in case of future occurrence. For instance, most churches that were able to sustain their members and others gained influence and became influencers in their environment while others who could not do the needful lost their influence.

Conclusion:

Though Covid-19 vaccine is available but it is obvious that the wound and pains inflicted by this pandemic will still take longer time to heal. The economy of nations is in danger, and not only that, the church which controls the spiritual atmosphere has not fully recovered from the effects of the pandemic. However, this study were able to find out that despite the negative effects on the church, the positive implications outweighed negative effects and as a result, the church has a moral responsibility upon her shoulder to take drastic measures in ensuring that the gains and

windows of opportunity opened during this pandemic is utilized. By so doing, the church will be well positioned to play major role in case of future occurrence of issues of this nature.

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