PENTECOSTALISM AND INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Since the announcement of the first case of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) on the 27th of February, 2020 in Nigeria, there has been an upsurge in the number of confirmed cases of the virus in the country. This has necessitated the declaration of the social distancing policy and movement lockdown by the government of Nigeria in most states. This policy led to the closure of worship centers and the prohibition of all forms of religious gatherings. This paper examines the impact of the Covid-19 social distancing policy and movement lockdown on Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The paper also investigates the extent to which Pentecostalism has employed ICT to sustain and build the faith of its members in the face of the pandemic. The paper employs the expository and analytic methods of data analysis. This paper concludes that just like the Spanish influenza of 1918-19 led to a great revival and the formation of prayer groups and churches to cushion the effects of the influenza, Pentecostal movements in Nigeria have not only used the ICT to sustain and build the faith of its member in the face of the pandemic, it has also used the ICT to evangelize and win new members to the fold.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, ICT, Covid-19, Pandemic.

Introduction

The 21st century is referred to as the age of science and technology and the effects of scientific and technological advancement and innovations are far reaching. One way that science and technology unveils itself is through the gadgets and infrastructures of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which has permeated all aspects of human life while at the same time, providing a faster and better means of communication. Imhonopi, D and Urim, U, M (2011:1) corroborated the above when they argued that:

> The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has provided the means for faster and better communication, efficient storage, retrieval and processing of data and exchange and utilization of information by its users, be they individuals, groups, businesses, organizations or government.

The use of ICT has as well, motivated people to modify their ways of doing things, this they have done by leveraging on the advantages and possibilities provides by ICT. The advent of Coronavirus 2019 otherwise referred to as COVID-19 and the impact it has exacted globally has necessitated the modification of the way we do things. This is because of the movement lockdown and the physical distancing policy of government all over the world to cushion the spread of the virus. In this context, when the worship and practice of God by the various religious persuasions have also been affected. The fact that the various religious groups and within the context of this study, Pentecostal Christian religious groups cannot meet for their regular worship has prompted them to make recourse to the use of information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to enable them stay afloat during the pandemic. This paper seeks to explore how Pentecostalism has fared in the face of the coronavirus 2019 pandemic using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Hence, the paper proceeds from a preliminary discourse of the concepts of Pentecostalism and Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) ICT through a discourse on the origin and spread of the coronavirus pandemic to a discourse on ICT as the new normal in the sustenance and spread of Pentecostalism in the face of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Pentecostalism and Information and Communication Technology (ICT): An Exposé

Pentecostalism is a global phenomenon with a large following in North America, Latin America, Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. The rise, growth and influence of Pentecostalism in Africa are enormous and have, without fear of contradiction, become one of the dominant expressions of Christianity on the continent. A contextual analysis of Christianity in Africa showed that the African soil is more fertile for this movement. Its manifestation ranges from classical Pentecostalism (first wave), to the charismatic movement (second wave) and the charismatic renewal movements (third wave) (Mashau, D. T., 2013: 1). It refers to a renewal movement within Christianity which places emphasis on direct personal experience with God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The term is derived from 'Pentecost', the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Week (Allan Anderson: 2015). According to Livingstone, "Pentecostalism is a moderate religious movement within Christianity whose adherents share a common belief in the possibility of receiving the same experience as the first Christians did" (1980: 391). Consequently, Pentecostal churches refer to all the churches within Christianity that emphasize the personal experience of God through the Holy Spirit and have the speaking in tongues as it major mark and characteristics.

Some of the reasons for the growth of Pentecostalism in Africa include amongst others (1) emphasis on the 'flexibility of the spirit', which enables it to transplant itself easily onto any cultural context; (2) emphasis on the working of the Holy Spirit, especially the power to provide deliverance not only from sin, but also demonic attacks, demon possession, and poverty through healing and prosperity promises; and (3) spontaneity and communal participation in worship (2013:2).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) according to Imhonopi, D and Urim, U. M (2011:2) is the technology that has made positive impact on information generation, storage, retrieval, transmission and communication. It encompasses all those technologies that enables the handling of information and facilitates the different forms of communication amongst human actors between human beings and electronic systems and among electronic systems. For Ughegbu as quoted in Imhonopi, D and Urim, U. M (2011), information and communication technology is a group of technologies that is used to handle and manage information and records as well as in transmitting such information to whosoever needs it. It is also referred to as the amalgam of modern technology and tools such as computers, facsimile transmission, macro graph telecommunication, macro electronics, office information and control engineering. From the angle of the World Wide Web (www), information and communication technology is made possible by the internet through the interconnectivity of computers that allows the sharing and receiving of information through computer network systems.

Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19): The origin and the Spread in Nigeria

The Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) is an infectious disease caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARSCoV2) (Joseph, A.A and Joseph A.O, 2020: 73). The virus began in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Residents who live in Wuhan had some link to large seafood and live animal market, which suggests that the mode of transmission of Coronavirus was from animal to person. The first known patient of coronavirus started experiencing symptoms in Wuham, China on December 1, 2019 (Ozili, 2020). Since then, there have been millions of recorded cases all over the world with an increasing death toll. It was however, on January 30, 2020 that the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 virus as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) because of its spread to countries of the world and its effect on trades and travels (DAWN 2020). And according to Joseph, A.A and Joseph A.O (2020:73), on the 11th of March 2020, it was declared a pandemic.

Regarding the spread of coronavirus to Nigeria, Ebenso and Otu (2020) averred that news broke on the 27th of February that an Italian citizen was Nigeria's first case of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The individual had landed at Lagos airport two (2) days earlier on a flight from Northern Italy, and had subsequently travelled from Lagos to Ogun State, western Nigeria where he became ill and was promptly isolated. While the Federal Ministry of health announced the confirmation of the first case of Covid-19 in Lagos state, Nigeria, in the same communication, the minister of health announced that the multi-sectoral coronavirus preparedness group led by the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) has immediately activated its emergency operation centers (see the Nigerian Education sector Covid-19 response strategy in North East (2020). In their contribution to the discourse on the spread of the virus, Jombo, G. T. A. *et'al* (2020:26) averred that:

> As at 6th April 2020 COVID-19 has afflicted about 1.3 million people worldwide with 70, 590 deaths; Spain recorded 135, 032 infections and 13055 deaths while Italy has so far recorded 128, 958 infections with 15, 887 deaths and USA, 337, 797 infections and with 9, 670 deaths and in Nigeria, it has infected 322 people with 5 deaths.

These figures have since increased astronomically and within the context of Nigeria, as at Wednesday 29th July 2020, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) daily update reveals that there are 41804 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Nigeria out of which, 22172 are active cases, 18764 have been discharged and 868 deaths have been recorded. The wide spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), all over the world is devastating, this has prompted most world leaders to employ adequate measures in order to curtail it from further spreading; this pandemic has become the subject of concern and deliberation across the globe because of its apparent impact on countries in all the continents of the world. One of the measures that have been put in place to curb the spread of the virus in the country is the imposition and enforcement of the governmental social distancing policy and movement lockdown (either total or partial) in the country, the effect of which have been felt by most citizens.

The world is currently facing a human, economic and social crisis due to the surge of the novel Coronavirus pandemic. That the policies of lockdown of the societies, the physical distancing or the stay-at-home order of governments are intended to cut the chain and possibly flatting the curve of the COVID-19 transmission are currently the workable measures aimed at eradicating the disease, since there is no known cure or vaccine yet is a statement of fact. The

mass compliance with the order is not without concomitant effects; such resultants consequences are exacted on the social and economic wellbeing of the globe, which ushered a direct human condition whose magnitude is not less than those of the disease if not checked. The social and physical distancing policy aimed at checking person-to-person viral transmission is in some way widening social crisis created by the pandemic which potently increases inequality, exclusion or discrimination, and global unemployment in the medium and long term, as projected by the United Nations.

The impact of the governmental lockdown policy during the pandemic is enormous. Aside the fact that, jobs will be lost, there is hunger especially amongst the lower income earners, small and medium scale enterprises, petty traders and artisans who have to go out every day to work and earn a living. The Pentecostal church is not left out in this regards, with the restriction of movements and gatherings of any kind, there will no more be meetings of Pentecostal Christians in the form of weekly activities, conferences, crusades, revival meetings amongst others. What this translates into is that, the Christian life of Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria will be affected and the impact of the absence of these meetings in the face of the uncertainties that comes with the pandemic is amazing. To this end, the Pentecostal church in Nigeria sought other means of reaching out to its members and sustaining as well pushing forward the frontiers of Pentecostalism in the country in the face of Covid-19 pandemic.

ICT as the New Normal in the Sustenance and Spread of Pentecostalism in the Face of Covid-19 Pandemic

In the research on local identities and global processes in African Pentecostalism, Ukah (2003) in his studies of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria noted that, information technology also played a role in the church globalization. Today the Redeemed Christian Church of God makes global broadcast of her programmes through their television station. Many church leaders see the Internet as God's solution to world missionary logistics challenges. The above goes for other such Pentecostal churches as the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, the Living Faith Church Worldwide, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, Assemblies of God's Church Nigeria, Royalty Christian Centre, the KICC, Hilltop Evangelical Centre amongst others who have television channels and are broadcasting to the world.

Commenting on the Internet evangelism day, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, National President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Pastor Word of Life Bible

Church and a former chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) says (IEC, 2011):

> The great commission of our Lord Jesus Christ is that we should take the gospel to the end of the earth through various evangelistic activities. The Internet has proved to be one of the most efficient and reliable means of communicating globally with little or no restrictions, which Christians cannot ignore. Like other means of communication, we urge Christians to take advantage of the numerous opportunities provided by the Internet for evangelism. Churches should promote computer literacy programmes for members to enhance their use of the Internet as outreach to many who need to hear about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Much as the gospel is eternal and never changes, it will be difficult for us to significantly influence the 21st century if we are not knowledgeable enough about modern tools for influencing world opinion like the Internet. We need to sufficiently saturate the Internet with evangelistic websites and information that can win over unbeliever from the kingdom of darkness into His marvelous light.

Deducible from the above is the fact that a good number of Pentecostal pastors and ministries have to the realization of the propensity of the information technology at driving the gospel message beyond known boundaries and hence have keyed into it even before the advent of the covid-19 pandemic. For the few churches and heads of ministries that have not keyed into the use of information and communication Technology, such myths as (i) that the internet is the devils playground which churches should stay away from, (ii) that the church will not reach the people through the internet (iii) that it is very expensive to manage and (iv) the use of social medias like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube should be discouraged seems to hold sway.

The awakening that stares Pentecostalism in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria is that they have to be alive to the new normal of the understanding that they can "privately worship God in the comfort of their homes, even on designated worship day" (Amunnadi and Ezeugwu, 2020:31). The question that resonates ramifies that of how can they possibly do that? That is where the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) comes to play.

New technologies, as anyone who is still in touch with reality will argue, have changed our ways and methods of communicating in the past decades, there

have been the adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by the contemporary church all over the world for communication with the intents of growing the church. In the face of the governmental policy on social and physical distancing as well as movement lockdown, Pentecostalism in Nigeria has continued to thrive regardless of the inability of the churches to conduct physical services in their church premises and meeting halls. In this regards, the frontiers of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria has continues to move forward just like it did in the days of the Influenza. During the lock down, the ICT have been fully activated and utilized to attain this goal. This has occasioned the "change in the mode of conducting religious services using technological innovations like Zoom, video conferencing and teleconferencing" (2020: 31). Drawing from the above, ICT and media technologies has come to be seen as the extension of the physical pulpit.

Pentecostal churches in response to the prevailing realities that has come to play with the coronavirus pandemic now have such ICT infrastructures as the VSAT, TV stations or Television production, central storage or repositories of their resources, database portals, web portals, web servers, and wireless network infrastructures. They also have Facebook pages and YouTube channels through which they stream their programmes and services live to their social media followers and WhatsApp group chats where they share materials ranging from resources in their archives, sermons, Bible studies, soul lifting music, videos, prophetic declarations of their founders, daily devotionals, to prayer request and testimonies of God's faithfulness for their members to download.

With all these in place and the seeming reduction in the prices of data by the internet service providers in the country, Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have been able to meet the spiritual needs of the people in the face of the apparent uncertainties that comes with Covid-19. In this context, even individual who do not go to church before, tends to yearn towards a return to God in the face of the pandemic and the various ICT outlets of the Pentecostal churches comes handy; believers are also strengthen in the faith and backsliders are restored to God in the process. Through these ICT infrastructures and social media outlets, prayer meetings and night vigils (all night prayers) are held, church seminars and conferences are also held, live streaming and live transmission of messages from the founders and heads of ministries are taken to members in the comfort of their sitting rooms and away from the pandemic, live musical concerts are also held to strengthen the faith of the people, an example of which is the "Worship Without Walls 2020" concert by the Sabbath Embassy of Christ (Internet Church), a twelve (12) straight hours internet concert with over fifty (50) gospel artists from different Pentecostal churches on Sunday, May 31st.

This concert, according to one of the organizers, Pastor (Dr.) Ope Banwo is about the unstoppable worship of the King of Kings regardless of what is going on around us. It is also a direct response to the Covid-19 disruption of the regular places of worship and shut down our physical places of worship, it cannot and it will never shutdown our voices of praise to the almighty God.

In all these attempts by Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, messages of hope and of God's faithfulness are received through radio stations, satellite television stations, through smart phones and even to the isolation centres by people who have tested positive for Covid-19 and are undergoing treatment. Aside the above, Pentecostal churches in the face of the movement restriction and lockdown provided dedicated telephone lines through which their members can call and receive prayers, pastoral care and counsels where the needs arise. In addition, a host of these churches also made use of short messaging services (bulk SMS') to keep in touch and to check on their members by sending them messages of hope in such trying times.

Drawing from the fact that tithes and offering is part of worship and thanksgiving to God, the most part of the Pentecostal churches also harped into the possibilities of the ICT to provide application, portals and account numbers through which its members can pay in their tithes and offering. This was made possible through the use of smart phones and codes that enabled willing members to pay their tithes from the comfort of their homes.

While it is true that one of the factors that promoted the growth of African independent churches and Pentecostalism in Nigeria was the worldwide Spanish influenza plague, it is believed that the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) will also promote the growth of Pentecostalism against all odd. And just like there was a massive revival after the Spanish Influenza of 1918 that led to the formation of prayer groups and churches to cushion the effects of influenza, the effect of which was the arrival of Christ Apostolic Church, the Assembly of God Church, Foursquare Gospel church etc and the establishment of Redeemed Christian Church of God amongst others in the decades following, it is believed that these attempts by the Pentecostal churches to push forth the frontiers of the gospel of Christ and the message of hope despite the movement lockdown period will lead to a sustained revival even after the pandemic.

Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, attempts have been made to examinehow Pentecostalism has fared in the face of the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic. As we draw to the conclusion of this reflection, a number of positions have been raised and a rehearsal of a few of them is considered necessary. One that we live in an

age that is considered an age of science and technology and that science and technology has permeated every aspect of our existential life are statements of fact that coheres with the actual state of affairs. Two, Pentecostalism and Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, like elsewhere have had their places of meeting shut down as a result of the government movement lock down and physical distancing policies that have been put in place to curtail the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. However, Pentecostalism in Nigerian have been able to wither the storm and sustain itself regardless of the lockdown and prohibition of public gathering. This it has done, exclusively by leveraging on the advantages and possibilities of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Through this medium, Pentecostal churches have been able to convey the message of salvation and of hope to her members in the comfort of their houses, to the isolation centres and also to evangelize and win new members to the fold.

In this context, they have leveraged on ICTs to get their messages, live sermons and messages from their archives, prophetic declarations, daily devotional amongst others to the people through radio, Television production, church Television broadcast station, facebook pages, YouTube channels, Zoom video telecast amongst others. Furthermore, the have been able to hold live prayer meetings and night vigils to seek the face of God for the end of the pandemic as well as live internet concerts to worship God. what is to be noted is that, just like the Spanish Influenza of 1918 triggered a massive revival and led to the growth of Pentecostalism globally, the COVID-19 pandemic is it is believed, will lead to the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria in the post COVID-19 era as against the predictions that it will negatively affect the growth of the same.

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