

## **The Global Pandemic And Philanthropy In Christianity**

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### **Abstract**

COVID-19 Global pandemic is an epidemic that ravaged the globe with high death rate, hardship, restrictions in movement, associations and relationship. The impact of this pandemic on Christian spirituality of any nation especially in Nigeria cannot be overemphasize as it is seen to be both negative and positive. Why is the globe under attacked by COVID-19 pandemic? Why is the church restricted from fellowshiping and worshipping by the government? Is COVID-19 pandemic a blessing or a curse on the nation especially the Christian community? The sufferings posed by the COVID-19 pandemic incapacitated so many nations, states, organizations and as well created mass unemployment and retrenchment and this evidentially is found in the Nigerian state. The Christian community in Nigeria at this time is faced with the challenge of alleviating the sufferings of her members in the society occasioned by this pandemic by way of provision of palliatives as the case may be. This research x-rays a brief overview of COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of philanthropy in Christianity and the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on Christian philanthropy. The researchers went further to state the extent of pastoral intervention in the era of COVID-19. The methodology utilize in this research is analytical as well as the utilization of books, journals articles and internet sources. With the analytical method, it x-rays the extent of care, philanthropy and spiritual relevance of the church in a world enmeshed with COVID-19 pandemic. Amongst others, this research recommends that the Church should regularly absorb the culture of giving back to the society by way of provision of food for the hungry and the poor and not to wait for global or national crisis before intervention.

### **Introduction**

COVID-19 pandemic is ravaging the entire world, leaving it in a devastating state. This is a serious crisis to individual, families, communities and the world at large. According to

Afolaranmi (2020:164) “as part of efforts to curtail the spread of Coronavirus disease in Nigeria, churches and other public places of gathering were locked down around March 2020”. Expectedly, the financial challenges experienced by individual Christians during the pandemic had a corresponding effect on the Church finances as all Church gatherings were prohibited. Many argued that the dwindling state of Church income was partly responsible for the incessant nationwide clamoring among Church leaders for the reopening of Churches during the lockdown. In spite of the poor level of health infrastructure in Nigeria and the possible collapse in the face of rapid increase in the spread of the virus, Christian clerics continued to resist the lockdown of places of worship.

Winston (2020) opines that COVID-19 era is also a time to recognise that people remain in bondage –whether to poverty, prejudice, addiction, political circumstances or illness. Many of us take our privileges for granted, but this is a moment to realise how fortunate we are. Those of us with homes, job security and food on our tables are lucky. Many people are risking their lives to help others, whether as medical professionals or as service workers or as delivery people. Olukoya and Mohammed (2020) state that one of the foremost Christian leaders in Nigeria, with large membership base across many States in Nigeria and overseas, Bishop David Oyedepo, openly and persistently agitated for the re-opening of Churches through his online sermons. The cleric is of the opinion that the shutdown of Churches was an attempt to cripple Christianity. Others frowned on the continuous shutdown of Churches while, according to them, more crowded marketplaces remained open. Another cleric, Tunde Bakare, the leader of The Citadel Global Community Church saw the situation differently; he urged religious leaders to collaborate with the government and be more philanthropic in their response by offering some of their worship centres to government as isolation centres.

Caner (2018) says that in classical and early Christian usage, the concept of philanthropia (philanthropy) rarely just meant “love for one’s fellow human beings” or generosity towards people whom one did not personally know. Classicists point out that in both of these ancient traditions; it was most synonymous with the Latin term *clementia*. As such, it had a concessive facet and a universalising force: showing kindness to humans, even if doing so went against one’s natural or justified reluctance; being merciful, despite the fact that beneficiaries might not seem worthy of it.

Philanthropy is a rescue mission of any good spirited individual or organisation to extend hands of fellowship through gifts of cash and kinds for alleviation of the pains and sufferings amongst the poor, less privileged and victims of natural disaster or pandemic. In this era of COVID-19, philanthropy is a necessity for the Church and government to cushion pains of the jobless and handicapped individuals. The desperation of some Church leaders to have Churches reopened raises some questions. Is the call based on the care for the spiritual wellbeing of their faithful or financial considerations? If these Church leaders are as powerful and endowed as they claim, could they not have stopped the spread of the virus? The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fact that many Church services and programmes are borne more out of monetary concerns than the health and spiritual wellbeing of members. Were churches really pathetically philanthropic to the suffering of their members and the poor masses?

Some research has addressed issues on COVID-19 in the light of cleanliness and Godliness in the light of theological principles for alleviating the scourge of the

pandemic; the psychological implications of COVID-19 pandemic on families; interplay of faith and rationality in Christian responses to Coronavirus pandemic etc. This research focused on the effects of global pandemic on Christian philanthropy. To this end the church still remains the hope for the poor masses through acts of generosity, pastoral counselling, spiritual interventions and mission via social gospel.

### **A Panoramic Overview of the Global Pandemic in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic**

The year 2020 will be remembered for a long time because of the disruptions by the global spread of the Coronavirus disease. This pandemic started as a drizzle in November 2019 in Wuhan, China, and by March 2020 it became a wave that precipitated a global crisis of immense proportions. COVID-19 global pandemic has come with several crumbling effects on individuals, business, government, religious organizations, educational institutions and the world at large. The world has witnessed reduction in economic activities due to this pandemic, some industrial facilities have been shut down, and several death cases related to COVID-19. While the virus infests people regardless of wealth and social status, the poor have been mostly affected. Also, the most and immediate significant effect is the sudden rise in unemployment.

COVID-19 pandemic is likened to Asiatic cholera pandemic which occurred between 1817 to 1824 and the Spanish Flu of 1918 to 1920. Obviously, the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 resulted in mass death across the world communities and was described as the mother of all pandemic. It is also seen as the largest influenza pandemic in history and very devastating.

According to World Health Organization (2020), COVID-19 is a transmittable ailment caused by a recently found coronavirus that usually affects the respiratory tract of those infected. In fact, it is a respiratory infection that is spread from person to person through infected persons' cough or sneezes. This is a serious health crisis of our time. Younger people recover quickly without any unique remedy, while those who are advanced in age with underlying ailments such as diabetes, cancer, heart and respiratory problems have a higher risk of complications. This pandemic began at a seafood marketplace in Wuhan, China; the majority of those affected were workers or regular visitors to the market.

In addition, GP Editors (2020) holds that COVID-19 has many signs and symptoms, along with pneumonia. Some of which are fever, cough and respiratory problems. However, it is noteworthy to state here that the hope of recovery from the disease is contingent upon the strength of the immune system of affected persons. Recent studies show that majority of deaths recorded are those with prior poor health status.

World Health Organisation (2020) says as of April 29, 2020, the number of people infected with COVID-19 was over three million people worldwide, with a total death toll of 207,973. The European region had the highest number of confirmed cases 1,406 and deaths of 129,311; while Africa, had 23,254 and deaths of 903. The Nigeria Centre of Disease Control (2020) reported that Nigeria had confirmed cases of 1,728 infected persons and 51 death cases.

### **The Concept of Philanthropy in Christianity**

Philanthropy is the practice of helping the poor and those in need, especially by giving money. It is an innate of one to promote the welfare of others. Hayes (2020) describes philanthropy as the effort an individual or organisation undertakes based on an altruistic desire to improve human welfare. The term is derived from a compound of *φίλος* (*philos*;

meaning love or affection) and ἄνθρωπος (man) to give *φιλανθρώπως* (*philanthropos*) and it simply connotes the love or affection for a fellow man.

Minnich (2016) argues that the distinction between “secular” and “Christian” philanthropy is not in the specific activities themselves, but rather in the motivation and message behind the actions. Hayes (2020) states that while Christian philanthropy is motivated by the need to spread the good news of Christ and secular philanthropy is done because it is the right thing to do. It takes love and deep concern to be philanthropic in nature. Christ and the apostles preached it and the church was given the command to demonstrate it as an act of social gospel to reaching the unreached which is also seen as mission and evangelism.

Christian Philanthropy is thus the practice of helping the poor and those in need with the singular motive of leading them to Christ. The word appears in its different forms three times in the New Testament as stated by Thayer (2015). Firstly, the adverbial form *φιλανθρώπως* is used in Acts 27:3. In this context, the word is interpreted as humanely or kindly. Here, it is referred to the kindness shown by the Roman guard to Paul in permitting him to visit his Christian friends who would attend to his needs. Secondly, the noun form *φιλανθρώπιαν* (*philanthropia*) is used in Acts 28:2 to imply benevolence, or love for mankind. It refers to the unusual kindness the Islanders showed towards Paul and his entourage at Malta. The third and last time the word was used in the Bible is in Titus 3:4. In this case, *φιλανθρώπια* (*philanthropa*; meaning the love for mankind) is employed to describe the manner of love which God offered His Son, Jesus for the salvation of mankind. According to Osili (2020) the COVID-19 crisis is philanthropy’s type of problem. Philanthropy is good at filling in gaps, innovation– taking risks that government cannot take. Flexibility philanthropies can move fast. Donors can step in to ensure that children are not hungry and working across borders. This is philanthropy’s moment to work well.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Consequential Effect on Christian Philanthropy Effect of COVID-19 on Church Finance and Philanthropy**

Financial decline in most churches during the period of COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overemphasized as it adversely put a stop to so many projects which were under construction as money was not much in circulation due to lockdown of financial institutions and church members were no longer gathering due to government policies. Some church members lost their jobs as some companies and employers could no longer measure-up retaining most of their staff. Bevin states that the volume of financial resources and the means of giving to the Church were not the same. Some Churches recorded low income; others had high income as members donated tithes and offering through digital/mobile platform. Cash offerings were hardly accessible for use since some banking outlets were not even operating for such money to be deposited in Church’s accounts as stated by Belvin (2020). Ehianu and Efe (2017) maintained that:

There is a correlation between the economy of a nation and the income of the Church. Endemic poverty in Nigeria which inevitably takes its toll on Church income makes it pretty difficult for Church authorities to respond promptly and adequately to the needs of those in distress.

Due to the restrictions on large gatherings in public places, Church services were migrated to online platforms, a move that stirred consternation even among believers. While Church leaders argued that the move was necessary in ensuring the continuity of

religious activities; for others, the ulterior motive was to provide the avenue for uninterrupted flow of money into Church coffers through tithes, offerings, alms and subscriptions in the midst of a global pandemic as found in Vanguard Newspaper Online (May 17, 2020).

Bishop Gooday Okokporo condemns the group of Church leaders who engaged in such practices of demanding payment of tithes and offerings through online platforms rather than helping their members at a time of a pandemic which had shut down economic activities. Christian philanthropy geared towards giving back to the people due to hardship caused by the pandemic is what the Church ought to focus on and not to continue take from them as stated in Vanguard Newspaper Online (May 17, 2020).

However, Bishop Emma Isong, the National Publicity Secretary of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, defends the Churches' move to engage the use of online apps to generate revenue by insisting that professional and spiritual services should not be free during the COVID-19 pandemic. He adds that as long as people do pay for transport fare and continue to buy foodstuffs from the market during the pandemic, they should likewise pay for their spiritual services. Any pastor not collecting tithes and offerings from their members ought to be investigated, while asserting that "we encourage our members to pay tithes and offerings to our account at Guarantee Trust Bank and we are able to use this money to carry out our humanitarian services". He, however, did not mention any specific humanitarian services his Church has undertaken, found in Vanguard Newspaper Online (May 17, 2020).

Ven. D. O. Egbenusi Esq (Personal interview, September 16, 2020), a clergy of the Anglican Communion and the Chaplain of the All Saints' Chapel, University of Benin, Ugbowo campus, states that the pandemic affected every area of the Church. The Church thrives on the freewill donations of members during services. Services were not on and there was no physical motivation for people to give. Some were not technologically incline to transfer money into the Church account; as a result, the Church suffered financial haemorrhage. Rev. Fr. A. Obinyan (Personal interview, September 17, 2020) of the Saint Albert Catholic Church, University of Benin, Ugbowo campus averred that salaries in his parish were paid to staff but reduced to 40%. There are laid down organisational policies through which income emanates in the Catholic church. Catholic Church relies on annual harvest which takes different dimensions such as appeal to parishioners for support, appeal to friends of the parish, etc. for her income but all these sources of income depleted as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. During the period of this pandemic, some parishioners lost their children and we as well lost some members not resulting from COVID-19.

Rev O. Igbini (Personal interview, September 21, 2020), the Executive President of the Edo Baptist Conference stated that there was a very poor income in the Church as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Baptist Church depends 99% on tithes and offerings of the Church and these were not forthcoming. Slashed salaries and bills are being paid from tithes and offerings. It was a very difficult time for the Church as many could not give during this period even when account numbers of the Church were distributed to them because they felt there was no Church gathering. Very Rev. P. O. Ukaegbu (Personal interview, September 23, 2020), a presbyter of Wesley Cathedral and Synod Secretary of the Methodist Church Nigeria, Edo/Delta Diocese, responded that COVID-19 negatively affected the Methodist Church. Banks were closed; thus, members could not have access

their money in banks and only few operate mobile banking and could transfer money into the Church account. Salaries of staff were paid from the savings of the Church; we did not slash their salaries.

### **COVID-19 Philanthropy: Church Intervention through Giving of Palliatives**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a huge socio-economic burden upon people in Nigeria. The pandemic ensured that the States government declared lockdown restricting the movements and large gatherings of its citizens for the period between March and August 2020. The Church during COVID-19 lockdown gave foodstuff to members and some to non-members to alleviate their suffering state. Occasioned by this act of philanthropy of the church which is also seen as social gospel, more member or new converts are added to the church afterwards. At this time, the church felt the suffering state of her members and society which became a veritable instrument for evangelism when all forms of physical contact for personal and group evangelism were restricted as well as crusades.

Ven. D. O. Egbenusi Esq (Personal interview, September 16, 2020) said that Anglican Church has more than 170 Dioceses that enjoy autonomy and they responded to interventions with palliatives in relation to their ability within this period of global pandemic. COVID-19 protocols were put in place to prevent the spread. Some engaged health workers to sanitise the environment to avert the risk of COVID-19. Some maximised the social media for meetings to avoid physical contact. Rev. Fr. A. Obinyan (Personal interview, September 17, 2020) said that the Archdiocese sent materials which were shared to needy parishioners who enrolled for assistance. Every Sunday collection is taken for the needy to assist them and to pay medical bills. Palliatives were shared and prayers through phone were made. Rev O. Igbini (Personal interview, September 21, 2020) and Very Rev P. O. Ukaegbu (Personal interview, September 23, 2020) said during the COVID-19 pandemic, palliatives were given to help the less privileged members and beyond but money was not given to anyone. The Church provided water, sanitisers, compelled members to wear face mask and maintain social distancing in line with COVID-19 protocols.

### **Effect of COVID-19 and Christian Philanthropy through Health Care**

The role of religious leaders in saving lives and reducing illnesses related to COVID-19 cannot be overemphasised because they are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance and health care for the communities they serve as stated by World Health Organisation (2020). In fact, Christian philanthropy in a time of global pandemic such as COVID-19 should encompass spiritual, pastoral and health care supports for the needy and most vulnerable people in society. The provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), surgical face masks, hand sanitisers and health information for their followers and other needy people in the society should be a major response of the Church in curtailing the spread of COVID-19.

According to Orjinmo (2020), although some Churches in Nigeria supported the Federal Government with some medical aids such as hand sanitisers, hand gloves, and surgical face masks, these contributions at best were meagre. They neither reflect the sacrificial giving they preached nor reflect their huge wealth. For instance, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, with branches scattered all over the Christian dominated cities in Nigeria with approximately 50 million members worldwide and a huge financial base donated 200,000 hand 8,000 hand sanitisers and 8,000 surgical facemasks.

Gabriele (2020) opines that due to long history, Christianity has a tendency to produce contradicting reactions to any number of situations—and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. On one hand, some religious leaders have shown that they believe a Christian response to the global emergency involves steps such as making allowances for their congregants to practise their faith with social distance worship in March. Pope Francis talked about “the creativity of priests” in responding to this crisis. Meanwhile, others have made it clear that they see their Christian faith as a reason not to follow public health guidelines. In Matthew 25:34-36, Jesus gave guidelines for care and good neighbourliness which reflects Christian lifestyle without bias especially to those in difficult situations for help:

Then shall the king say unto them on his right hand, come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited: I was in prison and ye came to me.

#### **Effect of COVID-19 and Christian Philanthropy through Skill Acquisition**

COVID-19 created room for poverty in the globe and cost of living became very high and difficulties found in the environment for survival. The church at some point decided to take up the responsibility to sponsor her members especially youths on skill acquisition with the understanding that the quality of any organization is largely dependent on the quality of human resources. The training of some pastoral staff, volunteer children of ministers, youth ministers, music ministers and mission ministers were carried out to equip them for effective ministry. The church sponsored and spent large amount in her magnanimity and philanthropic act of giving ensured that they were given scholarship. According to Willams (2020), music found in churches has improved, children and teenagers have added new experiences during the lockdown. Training is a cutting edge in leadership in any organization, the church inclusive. If the church does not face this reality, it will be tantamount to living in the past.

In the area of technological development, most churches in Nigeria were very analogue in their mode of operation. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown drastically affected the gathering and worship life of the church. The need for internet and mobile church became very necessary and expedient because many churches and ministers were not internet compliant. Churches suddenly saw the need to be on social media platform. Young people were freely trained to put on air the services of the church to enhance wider coverage. The Church also empowered the youths in her assembly by purchasing laptop for some of them after training them free of charge for businesses such as printing and sales of recharge cards, internet businesses, etc., which is philanthropic and has given these youths self-employment.

#### **Pastoral Intervention in Era of COVID-19**

There are conflicting arguments over the existence of COVID-19. The clergy played significant roles during this period. Oyedele (2011:35) avers that “healing functions involves aiding people to find wholeness and wellbeing from brokenness, injury or disease, which could emanate from the spiritual or emotional background”. Leanna (2016:1) posits: that “pastoral care involves healing from brokenness and extends to joyful times in families”. Adeola (2020) holds that pastor’s telephone calls to members in

trouble during COVID-19 pandemic stimulate good relationship between the pastor and the members. Prayer with and for members is another essential care measure during problems and COVID-19 pandemic. Many experienced prayers during the period of the pandemic by way of intercessions for individuals, families, churches and communities.

Pastoral leadership through technology in the era of COVID-19 is now of importance. Obalade (2020) holds that today's world is shifting to technology and the Church is being affected. According to Kotter (2012:51), "The Church mostly arrived later on the shore of innovation than any other institution". The post-COVID-19 pastoral leadership should neither be apathetic nor antagonistic to the use of technology to run the Church in all ways as possible.

Adeola (2020) opines that pastoral counselling for victims of rape, incest, ritual killing, etc was taken seriously during this period. Pastoral counselling for those infested with the COVID-19 virus became very necessary as hope in Christ was reassured them. The act of bringing estranged people together and building bridges between people in conflict especially families was of paramount importance to pastors. According to Drum (2013:234), "a good shepherd will labour to reconcile in a wide array of situations: material breakdown, health challenges, race, disability, sex orientation and so on".

### **Recommendations**

This section recommends by way of proffering solutions to the society faced with COVID-19 pandemic in the following ways:

1. The government should enforce the culture of washing of hands with running water and the use of hand sanitizers for a good and healthy living in every gathering, establishment, and organizations.
2. The culture of philanthropy by the church should go beyond the pandemic era for provision for the needy and less-privilege. The church should forecast in the future with satisfactory response.
3. Due to uncertainties in the world, the church should maintain the culture of social distance in places of worship by way of increasing the number of services on Sunday or other days of worship.

### **Conclusion**

Obviously, COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. It was not expected and so budgetary provisions were not made for it. Again, there seems to be no end in sight to the pandemic as efforts to discover vaccines for the virus are still ongoing. Wisdom demands that Churches must be courteous in their spending as there seems to be no end in sight. Available funds must be reserved for salaries and overhead costs. The socio-economic and mental health challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic provide an ideal setting or scenario for the Church to showcase her philanthropic programme since the major goal of Christian philanthropy is to alleviate the suffering of the common man and to harness such opportunities to introduce Christ to them. Some Churches provided for non-member as a way disseminating the social gospel of Christ. Kurlberg and Kurlberg (2018) acknowledge that an intrinsic link exists between spiritual and social transformation and that this is the kind of activity the Church should strive to pursue in the 21st century.

The church was seen to be very active in the provision of palliatives in the area of food, clothes, cash etc. Free medical care was provided by the church as well as provision of facemask for her members in places of worship. Some churches donated their hospital as isolation centres for treatment of COVID-19 victims. Due to mass unemployment and



retrenchment in the society, the Church used this opportunity to train her members especially the unemployed youths in the area of skill acquisition which made them self-employed.

In Nigeria, even though there is controlled re-opening of Churches, schools etc., there is palpable uncertainty and fear. The possibility of another lockdown cannot be ruled out, so available funds must be handled with all prudence. Furthermore, compliance and dissemination of health information as laid down by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) also suffered setback from religious leaders in the city as some clerics would rather tell their members to fast, pray and use consecrated items such as anointing oil, handkerchiefs, hand bands, fez as antidote to the virus.

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