



Responding to the crisis: Implications of the challenges and opportunities of being a Church during COVID-19

Dumisani Wilfred Mncube
University of Zululand, South Africa
ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5566-2288>
Email- mncubedm@gmail.com

Thandiwe Nonkululeko Ngema
Faculty of Education, Department of Arts and Language Education,
University of Zululand, South Africa
ORCID- <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5915-5619>
Email- NgemaT@unizulu.ac.za

Zanele Gladness Buthelezi
Faculty of Arts, Department of African Languages and Culture
University of Zululand, South Africa
ORCID- <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4330-8094>
Email - ButheleziZG@unizulu.ac.za

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Abstract

A global crisis of this magnitude needs churches that have a deep wealth of knowledge, faith and wisdom to provide leadership when such a pandemic shakes the foundations of human society. Such a crisis can lead to seismic changes, but often does not; it simply clarifies current challenges and possibilities. The widespread virtual streaming of important Easter and Sunday sermons had a palpable impact on church life. This study investigates the challenges and opportunities of being a Church during the worst of times in the history of the Church. It uses a qualitative methodology. Four of the churches in KwaZulu-Natal were used as a case study. One leader in each church was purposively selected to participate in the data generation process. Furthermore, two ordinary members in each church were interviewed to explore how the faith communities are coping with responding to lockdown, social isolation, and physical distancing. The findings revealed that both church leaders and congregants were psychologically traumatised, and thought this crisis was a wake-up call to capacitate the church to respond to such eventualities with one voice. The study recommends swift and immediate intervention that will change the outlook of the Church to reform business as usual to be technologically oriented.

Keywords: Church, challenges, opportunities, virtual, pandemic, congregants

Introduction

The crisis experienced by most communities owing to COVID-19 has had a severe impact on their normal life of worship across the globe. Global leaders in big and small chapels, mosques, sanctuaries, shrines, and temples are scratching for answers as to why this unprecedented period caught them by surprise. COVID-19 is so serious that the churches are empty because God is looking for a personal relationship with His people (City Press, 2020). However, Folarin and Adelakun (2016) predicted that a Church, like any other institution in society, is likely to encounter a major interruption or a crisis. The only shocking revelation about the coronavirus is its ability to spread faster than any other known family virus, and it is deadly and contagious.



The work of the Church has ground to a halt in recent months in an attempt to find an immediate solution while trying to analyse the nature of the virus and understand its trajectory. While the Church tries to figure out the solution, ordinary members of the faith are dealing with severe distress, anxiety, and burnout. As human beings, the Church is the only coping and survival mechanism. The Church management stated that any Church is characterised by both human and spiritual attributes. Like HIV/AIDS, the coronavirus has brought an enormous burden upon the lives of many people throughout the world (Muthai, Bururia, & Kagema, 2018). In times of desperation and hopelessness, congregants put their trust in their respective Churches for spiritual, emotional, physical, and psychological support. This dilemma has never been seen before in the history of the churches so those who strive in large gatherings to conduct their business are now identified as the most vulnerable places.

While the magnitude of this crisis scares both congregants and Church leadership, most are optimistic about the future post-COVID-19, although an estimated 4 million people are infected, and 150 000 have perished in what the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a pandemic, up to 20 May 2020 (WHO, 2020). Some commentators see religion in general, and Christianity in particular, as contributing to a crisis like COVID-19. Love, care and sharing are some of the important values a Church promotes, and these traditions have heightened the spread of COVID-19 in a manner never anticipated before because most churches worship in crowds. One of the charismatic churches in South Africa defied social distancing regulations by holding a mass congregation of 865 churchgoers who attended a prayer gathering in Bloemfontein; but five overseas visitors turned out to be infected with COVID-19, and unwittingly infected 67 more people (*News24* 2020, 3 April). The culture of maintaining close contact through hugging, kissing and handshakes is a sign of love, compassion and *Ubuntu*; but they are the main contributors to the high increase in the infection rate and deaths (*CNN* 2020, 1 May).

One of the chapters in a book written by Fretheim (2017) paints a grim picture of how Churches, Christian theology, clergy and Christians have long been part of the crisis, both through complicity and passivity. The First World War is a classic example that characterised the complicity as well as the quietist attitude of churches and Christians, resulting in the killing of millions of people around the world. The understanding of Hendrick Kraemer has appeared to be fascinating in part because the Church has always lived with crisis (Dreyer, 2015). Therefore, in his characterisation, each generation must realise anew that the Church will always be *ecclesia militans*. Elbert (2020) states that in unprecedented times, the Church rises to the occasion because of a sense of community, knowing that no plan is perfect. There is always a challenge and working for a Church comes with generous grace.

Dreyer (2014) presents a compelling argument about the possibility of a Church having to face a real crisis from time to time. In times like these, confusion sets in, and true Church leaders are called into question to confront such a crisis. The magnitude of the problem facing the Church needs calm people from all walks of life to offer a helping hand. In an attempt to retain some semblance of influence and power, Dreyer argues, the Church has often given wrong answers, sided with the wrong people, and even supplied theological and ethical justification for injustice and violence. The conflict of interest is not a new phenomenon, as in the past many Christians left the Church, disillusioned by the lack of integrity and blatant disregard of faith, perceiving it as servitude to political agendas.

More recently, Dharmshaktu (2020) has revealed that the high number of cases could be linked to countries where Roman Catholics are in the majority or form a large minority – countries such as Italy, Vatican City, France, Austria, Switzerland, Netherland, and the USA (*Washington Post* 2020, 23 March) – most of whom go to church for Sunday mass. Under such circumstances, it may have caused multiple secondary/tertiary cases in those countries owing to the initially infected person administering the sacraments of Holy Communion. In other instances, the virus might be spread by contaminated concentrated bread and the wine served at Sunday mass, or by person-to-person contact in the church. Faith communities are



among those most affected by this virus simply by virtue of the fact that they frequently gather in person (Siddiqi, Graves-Fitzsimmons & Gonzalez, 2020).

The biggest challenge for churches

Most researchers have acknowledged the online church for decades from the early 1980s to the early 2000s (Malley 2020). Many religious organisations have found new and creative ways to gather for worship, prayer, and continuing community social service work (Siddiqi et al. 2020). "But for the majority of Christians around the world, the online church began in March 2020" (Malley, 2020). Before then, argues Malley, the so-called "high tech" churches may have had a website, been active on social media, or even had a live stream of their services, but very few had tried to connect with their people entirely through online technology. Collective efforts to flatten the curve of COVID-19 through social distancing are critical to spreading the rate of infection over time. Chau (2020) states that one of the prominent pastors from the US, Howard-Browne, openly challenged public health guidance: "We are not stopping anything." He also said, "I've got news for you: this church will never close" (Deguma, Deguma, Tandag & Acebes, 2020).

COVID-19, according to Deguma et al. (2020), has tested the ability of the Church to put its social distancing into practice. Carr (2020) writes about the need for a moral test that requires valuing human life and dignity when the scale of suffering, death, tension, division, and isolation examines who we are, what we believe, and what kind of society we are becoming. Thus, the novel COVID-19 pandemic becomes an opportunity for the Church to renew its vocation to serve. In a book entitled *The Church Isn't Empty*, Campbell (2020), writes that in 2010 a congregation in Iceland was advised to join online, and offered comments, prayers and thanks. It was amazing to recall that by 9 February Chau (2020) noted that a few churches had cancelled Sunday services, more joined them on 16 February, and still more on 23 February. These disruptions forced different kinds of pastoring and fellowship, including Sunday worship, which can only be done via the internet or telephone. The spread of COVID-19 had reached unprecedented levels by March, frightening the church into taking cautious and restrictive measures to contain the spread (Campbell, 2020).

Problem statement

The novel COVID-19 pandemic triggered unprecedented challenges to the normal operation of all churches around the world. It triggered the church community to begin questioning the relevance of long-established doctrines and beliefs held in high esteem by the Church, such as mass gatherings, handshakes, kissing and hugging. These practices have been proven to be the main source of behaviour and activities to be abolished as they spread COVID-19 faster than other means of transmission. Churches across the country have established their own customised guidelines informed by public health protocols to respond differently to this pandemic. The strategy for prevention and control of this pandemic varies from church to church depending on their capacity, socio-economic condition, geographical location, and healthcare infrastructure. The Church understands that for all such infectious diseases, success depends on the extent of the response to the determinants of the pandemic.

Recent research has identified religion and faith delivered by most churches as a critical form of coping mechanism during any major life-threatening pandemic such as HIV/AIDS, IBOLA and SARS (Lewinson, Hurt & Hughes, 2015). The study conducted by McDougle, Konrath, Walk and Handy (2015) reveals that as individuals age, they are exposed to numerous novel life events and changes linked to the death of a partner, loss of physical and mental health, and prolonged loneliness and isolation. This study investigated optimal adaptation to changes in lifestyles and other adversities faced by the churches as they navigate in an uncharted territory linked to virtual streaming of church services, psychological trauma and counselling, teamwork and opportunity to learn. The Church has had to respond and show superior leadership strength to these difficult challenges but continues to serve the congregants with the word of God. The ability of the Church to turn the challenges into opportunities has been



tested to the limit, and this study hopes to provide answers to those difficult questions about how churches have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to explore innovative strategies employed by the Church to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the Church. The study also seeks to investigate the challenges and opportunities for the Church in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To investigate the interventions being sought in response to COVID-19 lockdown regulations in selected churches.
2. To evaluate the challenges and possibilities of these interventions used by the Church during the lockdown.

Methodology

A qualitative method was used to explore a phenomenon of human interaction that necessitated analysis and interpretation (Yazan, 2015). Merriam (1998) underscores that in a qualitative case study, researchers focus on the particular and complex nature of a case. In essence, qualitative research involves participants' perspectives as human beings evolve and change. This case study explores the in-depth understanding of four churches' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Esikhaleni Township in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The study was premised on the desire to unearth alternative interventions implemented by most churches to respond to strict level 5 lockdown regulations of social distancing and hygiene protocols. Since this is a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2002; Yazan, 2015), an interpretive paradigm was chosen. The four churches used in this study were selected using systematic random sampling where every second church was picked from a total of 15 registered churches at Esikhaleni Township. Considering that these churches have a large number of congregants, systematic random sampling was used to obtain the sample size from the church members. The church leaders gave a researcher an official register of all church members over the last 12 months. Every fifth person in the target population was selected and requested to be included in the sample. The sample size comprised eight members and four church leaders or pastors from these four churches. A total number of 12 participants were selected.

Instrumentation

For this case study, data were generated using online platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, telephone conversations and SMSs. These instruments helped to triangulate the findings and adequately interpret the case. An explanation of the purpose and potential benefits of the study was provided to the participants. Soon after the easing of lockdown, one-to-one interviews were held with church leaders. Most of the questions were open-ended for the interviews, and the interview protocols for both church leaders and ordinary members were different. The nature of the study allowed innovative means to ensure social distancing, and lockdown regulations were observed.

Data analysis plan

Data generated by focus groups on WhatsApp and one-to-one interviews were analysed qualitatively by arranging the responses thematically. Data collected were coded and developed from emergent themes and patterns and compared and analysed in the interpretation process. Neuman's (2011) suggestions for data analysis involved the identification of similarities and differences in details, and the application of emergent codes and derived themes that provided clarity in making sense of the research study. This allowed the researchers to identify the main themes to be used to determine their adequacy, usefulness and consistency. Efforts were made to enable the researchers to identify data



segments that were critical in answering the research questions. During the data analysis, objectives were used as a guiding principle in the generation of themes. Data analysis and interpretation involved triangulation for the purpose of validating information and drawing conclusions.

Research findings

The researchers used all their arsenal to investigate the programmes initiated by the Church to continue with the business of the Church as part of the response to COVID-19. Churches prioritised their services and members while trying very hard to optimise their ministries and outreach in quarantine. One clear message from pastors and church leaders draws a solid conclusion that the Church has a bigger responsibility to respond faster and differently to COVID-19 compared to previous disaster scenarios. There was no denying the magnitude of the role churches play when communities are facing a period of distress. In essence, as leaders, participants stated that they need to be compassionate, show solidarity, draw inspiration from the history of the Church, and serve their community and meet their needs.

Identify the institutions with credible and reliable information

At the outset, members of these churches were able to describe their preparations and preventative approaches and make suggestions (both implicit and explicit) for managing COVID-19 post lockdown. It was clear from all participants that everyday sources of COVID-19 information included television hosts, government officials and health experts. These new sources of COVID-19 information for ordinary members of the churches require them to do their empirical observations and information gathering and draw their conclusions as to how COVID-19 is contracted and transmitted in order to formulate their COVID-19 prevention strategy.

The participants felt that this health crisis is different from the crisis faced before by society, therefore health experts and health institutions (such as the WHO) remain critical sources of information. In times like these when information is scarce, loyal members turn to the Church. This information always helps the Church and its leaders to stay updated on recent developments, and, in real-time, package this information for all members (Freire, 1970; Palmer, 1993; Hooks, 1994). Some pastors called themselves residents online, rather than visitors, and it was similar to White and Le Cornu's (2011) description of digital natives and digital immigrants. In times of panic and chaos, one of the participants identified information sharing and distribution as a powerful weapon with which the church leaders can bring proper religious education:

Pastor 3: *"In my church, I always call medical experts who are loyal members in my church to serve on the committee and garner more information. Fortunately, they are willing and able to rise to the occasion. Members of the church always call me for constant updates and new information on how to respond as a church. The main guidance from these health experts is "Let's follow government regulations and WHO guidelines published on the website."*

Pastor 1: *I remember during the first week of lockdown, we got so confused and scared about the impact of such lockdown on our services and gatherings. At that time so much planning was underway to prepare for Easter week and other important services. We had very little credible information about the novel coronavirus. In turn, our members were calling us for clarity, and how we should respond to this crisis.*

Member 2: *"A Sunday before the official announcement of the lockdown, our pastor announced the seriousness of the pandemic, and related the process of quarantine to Isaiah 26:20 to emphasise that the process was not strange in the Bible. He invited one of the nurses to address the whole church as she unpacked terms like quarantine, coronavirus, lockdown, sanitise."*



Pastor 3: *“As the church was scrambling for answers, the news was streaming faster than this COVID-19 was an invisible enemy highly dangerous to the elderly, and people with underlying conditions. The church had to respond by advising our elders and children under 13 years of age to stay at home and observe social distancing protocols as they are at high risk.”*

Most leaders started contacting other church leaders for credible information about COVID-19, and they discovered that most churches had very little information. Church leaders felt desperate and helpless, as they often lacked sufficient medical expertise. In a time of need, people grab any available information at their disposal to use as a shield, whether credible or fake. Likewise, churches can mutually learn from one another about best practices and effective strategies (Volf & Croasmun, 2019). One of the participants thought of coming up with strategies that would package information about this pandemic, using professional expertise available in the church.

Pastor 2: *“My church is blessed with diverse loyal members who were prepared to serve the church by packaging useful information. Here, I am talking about asking the seasoned journalists, medical doctors, teachers, police officers and other important members to form a medical task force that will respond to this information deficit.”*

M3: *“As a doctor, it was a humbling opportunity to address and save my pastor and church members, as I am privy to information that may be far-fetched to them. I addressed all the terminology concerned, and the behaviour confined, e.g. social distancing. More importantly, I also sounded a clarion call, warning members of this deadly disease.”*

P1: *“In my church, I saw the brochures containing critical information about the novel coronavirus, nicely done and written in Zulu and English with simple language. Even the elders were impressed with this kind of information sharing. The other platform mostly used was WhatsApp and group messaging. Sharing such information empowered me as a father whom God has called and expects to protect the nation.”*

M1 *“In my capacity as Colonel, I saw fit to allay fears concerning the security forces, especially since their presence would be more protective than aggressive. I warned the congregation, though, to take proper precautions like really respecting the lockdown rules.”*

One key intervention to aid in this effort to solidify information was the establishment of a COVID-19 response team in many churches, consisting of medical professionals in all sectors. This strong team of health professionals was tasked with developing and implementing the most crucial aspects of the response. The participants maintained that in trying times like these, the Church needs to use the network within the Church to restore confidence and dispel fake stories. It is extremely difficult to fight fake news if your information-gathering team is weak. Most participants draw inspiration from social media platforms to begin encouraging members in the church to form WhatsApp groups for sharing the word of God, spiritual healing and counselling, comfort, solidarity, and moral support including mourning for the loss of loved ones. Stalman (2020) admits that this is the time for everyone to learn how to stream sermons and services. In other words, the Church must keep hope alive in the midst of negativity and despair (Chau, 2020). Women pastors now had to be fully involved in preaching using WhatsApp, while not so long ago they had been shouting at their children for playing with phones. Now the turn of events had left them with a bitter taste for scolding their children. Phones became so relevant for sharing God’s messages effectively and efficiently.

Worshipping services and church practices



The Church as an institution of the people and God remains vulnerable to COVID-19. The participants who lead the church reported frustration with proposed government regulations as they threaten the fundamental values of the Church. It was hard for some of the participants to encourage members to abandon the meet and greet in the service. The church leader interviewed argued for turning off the light, thus indirectly telling members to stop meeting in groups and exchanging greetings.

Usher 1: *“I have never thought times like these would ever exist in my life, but as a true servant of God, I know that the Bible reminds me of moments like these in the history of the Church. I always encourage people to stay far apart from each other, but who am I to contradict health experts? Many pastors are working to eliminate the practice of group meetings or standing in crowds and shaking hands during the service.”*

Usher 2: *“In my case, ushers are no longer required to welcome people as they used to. Instead, they are only using signs from a distance and microphones to communicate with congregants. Wearing gloves and masks is mandatory for all ushers. It’s strange how the entire service is conducted, but people are terrified, and no longer keen to attend church services because of the invisible enemy (COVID-19) and lockdown.”*

The implementation of lockdown forced worship leaders to begin experimenting with new methodologies and strategies. The shocking moment was to learn that in March, no members, irrespective of their position of importance, were allowed to participate in church services that were led by five gathered in a church building. The congregation, for the first time in the history of the Church in South Africa, were invited to worship from home. This change was predicted by White and Le Cornu (2011) in their book entitled *Visitors and Residents: A New Typology of Online Engagement*. The majority of participants, in particular Member 2, advised members to read certain scripture and pray together at specific times according to the given instructions.

Member 2: *“Members are advised to read certain scriptures and pray at home, and this is meant to prepare members for certain significant roles to continue with the work of the church. Trying to adapt from working in the physical building of the church to doing so in our homes was a frustrating reality that we had to endure as members of the church, and this arrangement was psychologically draining. Remember that in the church, we receive blessings from our pastor, and when you are facing challenges, church members give you comfort by way of visits and prayers.”*

Member 6: *“At times, assuming a role reserved for the pastors and men of God or church leaders challenged me and my family. Remember, I am not trained to handle small sermons and, more seriously, prayers, for that matter. As a senior member of the family, I have never led the church or any similar service before, and now with the directive from my pastor, I had to lead the church service online, at times involving neighbours.”*

Most of the ordinary members of the church were given a chance to be active in leading the liturgy (worship). These members did everything in their power to steer the ship in the right direction in honour of their church directives. According to the work of the revered scholar, Freire (1970), these religious educators were embracing the best practices in teaching and learning, as well as deepening a community’s welcome and practice of love. The outcome was breath-taking, as those members who were leading or reading scripture got a thumbs-up from ordinary members, and others responded through comments on WhatsApp, Facebook posts, Instagram and voice recorders to give their approval of and satisfaction with these unusual proceedings.

Urgent need for sharing equipment with the ministry



Members were also quick to express caution about this new trend, as they wanted to go back to their normal life. Considering that most small to medium churches had little or no experience in online services, participants proposed the sharing of equipment with bigger and more established churches. Ultimately, the decision was made to allow leaders of the large churches, who were well-resourced, to run online services. Yet God is concerned with one soul. Jesus says the shepherd leaves 99 sheep in the kraal to look for the one that has gone astray. In some instances, the issue was the confidence to launch worship services.

Pastor 4: *“Our church is small to medium-sized here in Esikhaleni. Our main branch is located at H2 in the middle of the township. As you can imagine, we have the capacity, but our church leaders felt strongly that online services should be centralised to allow small churches to gain confidence and procure more advanced equipment.”*

Member 1: *“You can imagine that churches are not resourced equally. Some are small, while others are well resourced. In our case, we have limited resources to effectively run online services (Twitter). The main challenge is the lack of confidence and skills to run services in this way.”*

The idea of sharing and collaboration between small churches and large churches has been mooted, but the discussion has now gained traction at a high level. The kind of experimentation and imagining proposed by leaders requires Christian leaders to ask an important question: “God, what are You up to in this new media landscape?” (Branson, 2016; Gorrel, 2019). Some participants corroborated the idea proposed by Evoy (2020), that offline churches be given a list of links by larger churches that are highly advanced technologically, and better resourced. Gorrel (2019) argues that it is important that pastors and other types of Christian religious educators become committed to hybrid ministry and teaching hybrid faithful living. The most interesting analogy for this narrative came from the senior pastor who advised his church to support hybrid ministry that occurs in church buildings and online in the region.

Pastor 3: *“I think our churches can collaborate in supporting the main church with resource mobilisation and avoid duplication. We are one, after all – these other churches are serving at the behest of the bigger church.”*

As the excerpt above illustrates, members have their analysis of how the small and medium churches respond to the pandemic. This argument was dominant across the churches in South Africa, but there was a serious contestation from small churches, who felt this idea would swallow their churches. Small churches thought they were thriving and had done very well to be where they were their limited resources, they would disappear from the radar. Some leaders believe they have worked so hard to build their base, only to give more established churches their loyal members. Some members who participated in this study presented a compelling argument against this idea, and had the following to say:

Pastor 4: *“We are not challenging this view for the sake of it. Remember, we want pastors who know our needs and work with us very closely. Someone who understands our immediate plight and is accessible should you need individual attention, or to talk to someone online.”*

Member 2: *“This coronavirus affects us in our community, and our distress and other challenges happen in our local community. If we submit to a big church, who will support us, as we are a big church in Durban? No way – we have dismissed this idea, good as it might seem. We cannot allow this crisis to take away our church, never. It is always comforting to see the face of the pastor you know during depressing times.”*

Continuity and stability



The idea that a church is a fortress that cannot be shaken exists for most members of the church who participated in the focus group and interviews. This viewpoint was salient during the individual one-to-one interviews, where the intangible and spiritual dimension of their faith gained traction from the discussion. In times of plague, pandemic and crisis, illness and death, the religious community is known for pledging support and fighting the \common enemy.

Member 3: *“During the entire COVID-19 debacle, many church members have been dealing with difficulties, and in this time, you wish to share this moment with your leaders and pastors, in certain instances, there are members of the congregation whom you know are going through a difficult moment and need all of us. but because of lockdown and social distancing, you can’t be with them to offer your support. The posting of prayers on our social media platforms or pages gives powerful spiritual upliftment at times. These prayers have a profound effect when they come from members who understood your plight before the lockdown was implemented.”*

On this matter, members of the church discussed the importance of having reliable congregants or group prayers to provide a support system. During this period, as members, we rely on WhatsApp messages, Instagram, Facebook, and calls, which are not enough to quench frustrations. The challenges with these modes of communication are that data and airtime are too expensive. The issue of honest video conferencing has been wishful thinking because Zoom, Skype and Cisco Webex serve the interests of a few privileged elites in the church. When members of the church were called to join in the evening prayer on Zoom, there were five members of the church who made it, and this exercise was very disappointing. It was to be expected for members to scorn the platform, as Taylor (2016) had cautioned congregants against sharing faith using social media. This opportunity requires congregants to explore innovations and learn to live with religious communities online (Campbell, 2005). Despite this concern, one member commended the availability of technology as she proudly shared her story:

Member 4: *“Although we did not meet physically for church fellowship, we met via Zoom. We saw one another, shared our views, and on Fridays we had our midnight prayers through Zoom. Although we were apart, we did continue to grow spiritually. Even our Thursday services were recorded on WhatsApp and distributed to various groups.”*

Member 5: *“if times are tough, if you experience some problems, whether physical or mental, the church is the only institution to fall back on; but the church under lockdown is not accessible and very distant, because virtual platforms are a luxury to most in my church.”*

Member 4: *“In the past two weeks we had a death in the family and had to attend a funeral. The church leaders and pastors were absent because of the lockdown. These are the people who can hold the family together, give them strength, and make them feel that they are surrounded with unconditional love to get through a difficult time. The funeral was attended by strangers. All church members were absent, but the pastor and two worshippers. Family members could not honour the deceased decently since only 50 members were allowed.”*

While this strategy is amazing and should be lauded, the majority of congregants are compromised as attendance remains weak, and only serves the privileged few. During these incidents, members have felt the pain of praying in empty rooms where no trusted members or members of the church were present. The worst part was the absence of neighbours, as they were afraid of coming closer to the members of the bereaved family.



Pastor 3: *“Hey, life! One night I was woken by a husband who wanted to shoot his wife after beating her to a pulp was not enough for him. I so wished to drive to their residence but had to respect the lockdown regulations. You know, I can tell you about countless incidents of family violence I have had to deal with. My, my, just pathetic.”*

One pastor’s wife related a painful encounter when there was an incident in a family where young girls and boys were so insecure. This is what she had to say:

Member 2: *“Don’t ask me about challenges. You know what? As you look at me, I am just a walking zombie, I am dead inside. What do you do when an eleven-year-old girl has been raped, and you cannot take her to Thuthuzela Centre at the Ngwelezane hospital because the hospital is dedicating every ounce of power and time to COVID-19 patients? It’s so difficult to be helpless when your congregants are looking up to you, you know.”*

There were occasions during this study when participants took this pandemic as an opportune moment to reflect and learn more about their capabilities. One pastor could not hold back his optimism as he shared his excitement:

Pastor 3: *“You know what? I thought I had learnt everything, but this COVID-19 taught me a lot about my calling. This was truly life-long learning. This gave me an opportunity to learn to never take church members for granted. This taught me to prepare my sermons thoroughly since there were no warm bodies to pump me with a lot of amens as I repeat one point many times. I had to prepare for a full thirty minutes, knowing very well that my sermons were no longer confined to my little congregation, but were open to many Facebook viewers. I have to know my story. I was also exposed to praying over the phone for people I had never seen before, but who were responding to my messages.”*

The change of attitude was amazing. Ministers of the cloth resorted to live streaming on Facebook to send a strong signal to those who shamed them for thinking this platform only belonged to young people. More importantly, there was a change of focus where congregation-based preaching was now content-based. The church had to preach the word, abandon shouting amen, and that the same thing over and over. Now pastors had to prepare seriously to avoid the embarrassment of preaching for three minutes. It was apparent that sermons were more positive and encouraging, instead of criticising people and addressing issues from the pulpit. Taylor (2016) identifies the fact that online spaces offer people anonymity; they do not have to perform in a face-to-face setting, which gives them the confidence to explore faith without fear of ridicule, or the exposure of walking through a church door.

The only things that were working 24/7 were cell phones. The only thing that kept us going was having strong faith that this moment would pass one day. The consensus that emerged from some of the interviews and focus groups was that the physical structure and values of the churches and worshipping had to change. Fundamental reform such as amalgamation would not change how they worshipped God, or whether they went to church. They went because of the community and the spiritual dimensions, not because of the buildings themselves. This was predicted by Helland’s (2000) classic category of religion online, where existing religious institutions project their physical life and traditions directly into the online space.

Discussion

Church members have been filled with fear and confusion because of fake news and the sheer lack of reliable information about the destructive impact of COVID-19 on each age group. The leaders in all churches were stunned and overwhelmed by the speed at which this virus spread from Wuhan in China to Europe, and finally South Africa, but also by its very contagious and



deadly nature. In the midst of the worldwide storm of fear and anxiety, church leaders felt isolated and overwhelmed, first by what COVID-19 can do, and second, by the announcement of lockdown while they were underprepared. While the majority of church leaders dismissed COVID-19 as a little non-threatening virus, congregants confirmed the inevitable to the leaders about the lethal nature of the virus, which was later declared a pandemic. Team effort managed to source information from the congregants working in both the private and public sectors as champions for the Church. Innovative approaches such as information sharing and distribution were coordinated to quickly respond to bring hope and comfort. The network within the Church was called to respond to duty calls to restore confidence and squash fake news linked to the 5G network and other rumours. The established teams began to use social media platforms such as WhatsApp group messages, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom and Skype to respond to the societal crisis.

Teamwork and team building played a crucial role in building confidence and was valued by many pastors and congregants as one of the most effective innovations that eased the pressure on the leaders of the Church. In the past these people were nobodies, but in a split second their team effort alleviated the pressure on pastors and demonstrated the power of information sharing. In this regard, pastors had to work with knowledgeable others to address pertinent issues never seen before that were troubling the Church's existence, and the work for the Church of nurses, doctors, journalists, and police was amazing. The power of delegation was evident for the first time as pastors as spiritual giants had to take a back seat and learn from the professionals, who under normal circumstances are underused in the church.

The nature of the crisis required church leaders to learn faster and encourage church members to hold onto their gadgets. The results show the extent to which pastors and leaders got frustrated and discouraged in their continual failure to learn to use new technologies. The available technological platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, and Zoom were readily available to complement the work of the pastors. For many staunch supporters, learning to abandon the meet and greet in the service was a source of frustration, but the technology was able to perform these functions.

New opportunities for mentorship arose as elders in families had to lead prayers in the home for the first time in the history of the church. In this instance, members who were heads of families had to act in accordance with the Bible. The Bible gave a father headship in the house, as was confirmed by pastors, who said that indeed heads of families had a huge responsibility to serve God.

Conclusion and recommendation

The Church as an institution for the people, by the people, has to change its policies and principles for handling information. As an institution, the Church must take advantage of members and use them to produce brochures about health protocols and educate members more about COVID-19. The study found out from participants that a lot of people are not sure whether coronavirus is real or not. This study recommends that all platforms must be used to spread the message. In essence, the Church must take advantage of modern technology and other related platforms to educate church members about the virus. People pay attention to social media and information shared on these platforms tends to resonate with congregants better than personal coaching. The issue of language needs to be emphasised, as it plays a huge role in dispersing information across age groups and racial divides.

The study found that small churches, whose functions have suffered under the pandemic, needed to be harnessed and strengthened. Big churches should consult with the small ones and encourage partnership and synergy of purpose. In the interest of physical distancing, family members must be supported to gain confidence to pray at home, attend live-streaming of sermons together, and be empowered to counsel and support each other in times of need.



In conclusion, the Church as an institution has been challenged by many dynamics presented by the pandemic. In this regard, pastors have been unable to attend to urgent matters of family counselling and support. Ordinary members of the church who had to stay together for the first time, while some of them struggled to cope without alcohol, have been some of the reality that the Church has failed to intervene in earlier and prioritise. The availability of technology has posed an enormous challenge for pastors and ordinary congregants. Young people have been very helpful in easing the enormous pressure on older congregants, who have praised these young adults for their skill in operating the technology.

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