



COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the church landscape in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to critically review the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the landscape of the churches in Zimbabwe in 2020 and 2021. The article is based on the relevant literature review and lived experiences and observations of the authors concerning the landscape of the church during this period. It outlines the negative effects of the pandemic such as restrictions of church attendance to all church members, deterioration of values, low financial income, church doctrine degradation, and modification of Christian celebrations such as Easter. The article details the positive effects of the pandemic such as revitalising house fellowship, practising live-streamed services, increasing the number of Sunday services and the use of digital services.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, online services, church, Zimbabwe, socio-economic landscape.

Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 virus is regarded as responsible for causing the COVID-19 disease which spread grievously and swiftly across the globe (Yei-Chin Liu *et al.*, 2020; Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; Levin, 2020). It was first detected in Wuhan, China, on 31 December 2019 (Yei-Chin Liu *et al.*, 2020). By the end of March 2020, the virus had spread to several countries in the world, including those on the African continent. In Zimbabwe, the coronavirus was first discovered on 20 March 2020 and by the end of that month, one out of eight Zimbabweans, who were already infected, died of the disease. To date, almost five thousand Zimbabweans have succumbed to the COVID-19 disease. Out of more than two hundred thousand reported coronavirus cases, over one hundred and fifty-nine thousand recoveries from the coronavirus were reported (Mavhunga, 2020). The health infrastructure in Zimbabwe is buckling under pressure from more challenges inherited from the coronavirus disease. Health workers do not



have enough personal protective equipment, there is a shortage of health workers, and patients had to be turned away, due to lack of capacity to cope with increasing infections and deaths.

According to Zimbabwe and the COVID-19 document (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020), the COVID-19 virus is one of the major impediments, and society is the breeding ground for the spreading of this virus. Churches were negatively affected in terms of restrictions on the number of church attendees, leading to many other factors such as low financial income, division between churches, loss of members, and many other challenges (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Churches responded in various ways, by increasing the number of worship services on Sunday to accommodate the required number of attendees per public gathering and using technology to spread the gospel to those who cannot participate in face-to-face worship service. This article critically reviews the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the landscape of the church in Zimbabwe from 2020 to 2021. It is based on a relevant extant literature review, as well as the authors' experiences and observations.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the first confirmed case of the COVID-19 virus was recorded on 20 March 2020 and, before the end of that month, eight people were already infected with that virus (Murewanhema *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, by the end of March 2020, out of eight people infected with the coronavirus, a prominent media personality *Zororo Makamba*,¹ who had travelled from the United Kingdom, died from the COVID-19 disease (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Since then, despite the first wave claiming less people, people became complacent and allowed the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus to enter the country, prompting more deaths and an astronomical increase in the number of infections. To date, Zimbabwe has more than two hundred thousand cases, over one hundred and sixty recoveries from the COVID-19 virus, and nearly five thousand deaths. This is a huge number considering that the first wave had failed to reach triple figures in terms of deaths (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). This has called for drastic and radical measures from the Zimbabwe government. To curb further loss of lives, all public gatherings were banned, including the church worship services in the country. This led to countless restrictions that left the churches and other civil society organisations under considerable threat of natural death. Such actions affected churches, in particular.

The next discussion focuses on the effects of those restrictions on churches in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has experienced numerous restricted lockdowns since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with both positive and negative effects on churches in Zimbabwe.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches

There are both negative and positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches.

Negative effects

Restrictions on movement of people and church attendance

According to Van der Weele (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a drastic drop in church services across the world. Being part of the global village (world), Zimbabwe is obliged to follow the leads and recommendations of the World Health Organization in the fight against the deadly pandemic which has killed millions of people in a very short space of time since

¹ Zororo Makamba dies of Corona virus <https://allafrica.com/stories/202003230692.html>. Date of access 29 October 2021.



2019. Sochas *et al.* (2020) further argue that the essence of protecting people across the world has prompted the restrictions on public gatherings. Zimbabwe applied these restrictions, due to the severity of the COVID-19 cases. As the COVID-19 virus cases increased at an alarming rate, the government implemented restrictions on the movement of people in the form of a lockdown. Lockdown implied that people were ordered to stay at home and not be allowed to participate in any public gathering whether political, cultural, or religious. Furthermore, during strict lockdowns, people were not allowed to go to work; only those who were doing essential services were permitted to go to work. Since 30 March 2020 (Mavhunga, 2020), Zimbabwe has implemented several strict lockdowns that barred the movement of people and public gatherings. The other lockdown in Zimbabwe was pronounced in June 2021 when COVID-19 cases increased at an alarming rate. The Zimbabwean government barred public gatherings, including church worship services until 12 August 2021, when church worship services were opened for individuals (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

How did these strict lockdowns affect churches? In Zimbabwe, churches were severely affected when people were denied the opportunity to gather for worship in their usual places of worship service.

Selective attendance

Since the discovery of the first COVID-19 case in Zimbabwe, the lockdowns have restricted movement of people, attendance of public gatherings, and some economic activities. Each time the state implemented restrictions on the movement of people, all the religious, cultural, or political gatherings were prohibited (Mutanda, 2022). Church worship services were mostly affected, as people were denied the opportunity to gather for worship in their usual places of worship service. However, when the number of COVID-19 cases dropped, the government of Zimbabwe maintained the state of emergency by not fully allowing free movement of people and public gatherings. The Zimbabwean government would only allow a restricted number of individuals, roughly fifty or one hundred, to partake in public gatherings, especially in church worship services (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

For example, on 12 August 2021, the Zimbabwean government permitted individuals to attend worship services of their own churches; it restricted the number to fifty individuals and to only those who were vaccinated (Chingwe, 2021). This Zimbabwean government decision was challenged by church ecumenical bodies such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, and the Union for Development of Apostolic and Zionist Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA). They argued that this order was difficult to implement because, theologically and practically, the church is an open and welcoming space for everyone. They added that no one has ever needed qualifications or qualifiers to attend church service, as it is a place of God's grace (Chingwe, 2021). This engagement of the state by the ecumenical bodies of the churches in Zimbabwe led the government to adjust the number to one hundred attendees per worship service, without discriminating between those who are vaccinated or not.

A restriction on the number of attendees at a worship service created many internal problems for churches. For example, the few churches that agreed to be open to a limited number of congregants experienced a challenge of who should be allowed to attend or be turned away from attending worship service. Those who were denied access to a worship service felt discriminated against and opted to withdraw from their own churches and establish new ones, on the pretext that they had been treated unfairly by their own churches (Chingwe, 2021). In general, a restriction on the number of attendees at worship services in Zimbabwean churches led to allegations of discrimination, division of churches, and loss of members, as other



congregants opted to attend worship services near their homes and in open spaces, thus leading to loss of income for churches, as most congregants prefer to donate money to churches in person rather than electronically (Chingwe, 2021).

Low financial income

Modell and Kardia's (2020) survey indicated that, after the COVID-19 outbreak, many churches in large towns and cities in Africa became heavily indebted to various utilities providers, as the churches struggled to raise the funds to pay for the costs of running their ministry. The account clerks and the administrators of various churches went for months without salaries, making the churches liable to pay for daily utilities such as water, rates, and electricity bills. This has tarnished the name of specific churches in the process of doing ministry of God (Madhi *et al.*, 2020). Ntumba *et al.* (2019) attribute the challenge of low income to churches to a failure of most churches to empower their members to develop personal spiritual maturity and relationship so that, in time of outbreaks or crises, their congregants maintain their loyalty to their congregations. In Zimbabwe, some church members moved away from churches, because they cannot afford the costs and resort to open churches where there is usually no tithe or monetary contributions.

How did the lockdown and restricted worship attendance affect the income of churches in Zimbabwe? In Zimbabwe, there were times during the strict lockdowns when churches were closed for worship services or where only fifty congregants were allowed to worship per congregation. This adversely affected the income of many churches. There are costs incurred in the running services of the churches and there are people who are dependent on these church services for survival. Churches offer various services such as sacraments, outreach to the poor to offer them food, clothes and shelter, and evangelization of those in need of gospel. Pastors, the maintenance staff, the clerks of the church, and church members are essential to implement those services of the church. Most often, pastors, the maintenance staff, and the clerks of the church depend on the funds from the church to implement and ensure the smooth running of the services of the church. Most of the funds come from the members of the churches who were not allowed to gather and worship together during lockdown (Chowdhury, 2020).

Zimbabwe's economy is largely dependent on the informal business sector and, during strict lockdowns, the operations of informal business sectors were extremely restricted, especially during the winter COVID-19 peak days when cases are relatively high. This is a source of income for many church members in Zimbabwe. This means that, during lockdown, the churches incurred a serious financial loss which adversely affected other ministries such as outreach to give food and clothes, and maintain online worship services.

As a result of a lack of income, some church members shifted their allegiance to those churches that were offering those material or spiritual help to survive in those tough times and to those churches whose worship services are within walking distance from their homes. This led to some churches losing their members to other churches that used creative means of worship such as online worship services, and house churches or members shifted their allegiance to those churches within walking distance of their homes. For example, *Mapostori of Johwani Masowe* church experienced an increase in membership during lockdown, because they used unusual places such as the mountains and bushes for worship services. These were places where the police did not bother to inspect.



Conspiracy theories against the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination

The aggressive and rapid growth of the COVID-19 pandemic led to many fake news or conspiracy theories across the globe, and churches were also implicated in the spread of such fake news or conspiracy theories. Nyika *et al.* (2021:4) argue that the conspiracy theories were spread mostly through social media such as Whatsapp, twitter, Facebook, and by influential leaders from the religious sector, the community, celebrities, and politicians. Conspiracy theories thrive on fear, low confidence, and low trust (Shahsavari *et al.*, 2020). Massive loss of life, as predicted by scientists, led to unabated fear among global citizens. Lack of cure created low confidence among individuals. An increase in conspiracy theories led to lack of trust among global citizens and politicians, church, and state, as well as patient and doctor. The consequences of the above are lower vaccination intentions (Jolley and Douglas, 2014; Chingwe, 2021) and less willingness to follow restrictive measures to curtail further propagation of the disease (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020).

According to Nyika *et al.* (2021:4-12), these are some of the common conspiracy theories spread across the globe:

- In the UK, citizens condemned telecommunication systems, claiming that the COVID-19 virus is spread through the use of 5G technology (Vincent, 2020).
- The mark-of-the-beast conspiracy theory is based on Revelation 13:19, 20. Suffering caused by the COVID-19 virus will compel people to obey, follow and worship the beast. The beast, in this instance, may be politicians or capitalists.
- The conspiracy theory centred on the electronic chip advocates that, by agreeing to vaccination, one exposes oneself to having a tracking chip inserted that will infringe upon one's right of privacy through tracking and surveillance technology.
- Conspiracy theories based on vaccines, in general, usually propagate the ideology that COVID-19 was created in a laboratory to cause illness and death, so that pharmaceutical companies could make a profit from vaccines. By agreeing to be vaccinated, one may be injected with some harmful coronaviruses created in laboratories.
- Conspiracy theories related to the cure of illnesses caused by COVID-19 infections. Claims that were not supported by clinical trials purported that a herbal concoction that includes artemisia can cure COVID-19 infection.
- Conspiracy theory related to the belief that COVID-19 is an evil supernatural power that can be healed by non-evil supernatural powers to set people free from this evil power by using holy ashes and holy water.
- There was a conspiracy theory from some of the prophets who prophesied that the pandemic would miraculously disappear before or on 27 March 2020. Nyika *et al.* (2021) note that 27 March passed and the pandemic did not disappear. However, on a positive note, the church encouraged members to get vaccinated.
- Conspiracy theory based on beliefs about who is susceptible to COVID-19 infections. This conspiracy theory pursued an ideology that infection by the COVID-19 virus is dependent on specific geographical location, socio-economic class, race, religious beliefs, and others. For example, the coronavirus was viewed as a punishment for rich



countries; as a disease that infects the rich people; it affects some races and not others, and it was also speculated that some people of a specific faith cannot be infected with the COVID-19 virus.

In Zimbabwe, some pastors spread most of the conspiracy theories related to religion (Ndoro, 2021). For example, the conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 virus as an evil supernatural power that can be cured through non-evil supernatural power, and a belief that COVID-19 will disappear on 27 March 2020 were common and spread by pastors through social media. This led to lack of trust in the government and low vaccination turnout.

Deterioration of values

Shimanskaya (2020) notes that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in immorality of those in church leadership. For example, some clergy were involved in sexual immoral acts that put the church to shame.

In line with immorality related to money, Piot *et al.* (2019) mention that some pastors were implicated in crimes such as fraud or robberies for survival under the harsh conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, when there is limited income for survival. Although the purpose might be to survive and make ends meet, it is publicly known in Zimbabwe that the lives of artisanal miners was stereotypically violent and immoral, something that a prophet of God is not supposed to be associated with, considering the magnitude of his followers (Ozor, 2019).

The other financial fraud committed in the name of the church was an increase in the number of fake prophets during the lockdown period, as people resort to misusing church spiritual services in order to survive by asking congregants to pay for deliverance. For example, *Masowe Echishanu Church* was known to be giving free spiritual healing, but, during the lockdown period, several prophets from this church started asking a fee for spiritual healing. This was against their religious belief that spiritual healing is from God and is free. We also witnessed many cases involving known prophets using rubber snakes as 'goblins'; they charge the unsuspecting victims and make money in the process. This is against their Christian principle to which they subscribe. This indicates that desperate times are driving the church wayward and the men of God away from their perceived godliness.

We have encountered many minors who are lured with money, food, or security for sexual exchange. Young girls became pregnant during the pandemic. Some of these young girls, who violated the doctrine of no sex before marriage, belong to Christian societies. The number of abortions increased, something that God perceives as fornication and a sin. Due to the lack of consistent instruction in the doctrines of the church, young people are exposed to the information and knowledge that is not suitable to their age group (Mavhunga, 2021).

According to Maria *et al.* (2021), it is difficult to groom young people into the church doctrine when they are not exposed to the church from early stages of development. As a result, they often view the church as an institution that deprives them of their freedom to do what they want with their lives. Lockdown adversely affected the attendance of worship services by youths, some of whom regrettably, due to peer pressure and lack of electronic gadgets to access audios, lapsed their faith and became trapped in various acts of immorality.

Positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches

Churches are spiritual institutions guided by the Holy Spirit for creative ministry in their own context. Churches are also human institutions that are affected by internal and external factors



to facilitate deep change in their ministry. What are the positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches in Zimbabwe?

Introduction of online worship services

In March 2020, when Zimbabwe experienced a first lockdown that restricted movement of people and closed all public gatherings, many churches were left stranded as to what they should do to reach out to their members with the gospel. This was witnessed in Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (Pavari, 2020). Some churches opted to close down and wait until church worship services were allowed to operate again. Others opted to shift to online worship services, thus taking the opportunity to use the available social media technology to spread the message of hope to their members and the public at large.

The live-streaming of worship services made it possible to improve people's access to the godly message from various pastors across the country and the globe. Live-streamed worship services were broadcast on radios, television channels, Facebook, Whatsapp, zoom and YouTube (Kim, 2020). However, it must be noted that the introduction of online worship services was, in some instances, not accessible to those who do not have smartphones, especially the older people in rural and underdeveloped areas in the country.

Revitalization of house worship services

House worship services was one of the creative responses that churches used to reach out to their members during strict lockdown that restricted the movement of people and public gatherings. According to Ayeni (2020), house fellowship refers to a religious service conducted in a person's house by a group of persons from the same church who live close to one another. It provides an avenue for familiarizing with people who attend the same church. It makes people feel closer to God and revitalizes the spirituality and fellowship of believers (Bawidamann *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, house worship services are easily accessible, as they can be attended by believers in the same vicinity. It allows a space for creativity, as it is not bound by the institutional rules of the church, and it offers the opportunity to know and care for each other.

House-fellowship centres usually have leaders who act as coordinators between church management and church members. In many churches, members get in touch with their pastors through their house-fellowship leaders. For example, if a member is hospitalized, bereaved, assigned to bed, or wants to carry out a special thanksgiving, he or she informs his or her house-fellowship leader who then communicates with the pastor for further action. Some churches observe their house-fellowship meetings once every month, whilst some meet weekly or daily in a bid to ensure that people remain part of God's daily plans (Chukwumba, 2021). During the lockdown period, pastors held virtual Sunday worship services in a bid to keep the people spiritually connected with their God and to maintain their loyalty to churches. Every person has a room in which to access the worship service, as long as the electronic gadgets have data bundles. This is unlike face-to-face worship services, where those who do not attend them miss the sermon.

Increase in the number of worship services

During the lockdown periods, churches were often open to conduct worship services, but the number of attendees was restricted to fifty or one hundred, depending on the number of infections in the country. This created some challenges for some churches as to who will be allowed to attend and who will not and how they will maintain social distancing in a small venue (Hwang, 2020). In response to this challenge, some churches reverted to increasing their



number of worship services and reducing the duration of each service in a bid to give everyone the opportunity to be part of those who listen to the word of God and contribute to the building and maintenance of the church of God (Hwang, 2020; Hong & Paul, 2020). Other churches resorted to adopt the *Masowe Church* strategy, by holding worship services in open areas, so that the circulation of air eliminates the spread of the COVID-19 virus, while simultaneously safeguarding the churches from losing members who are frustrated by a lack of messages of hope and consolation from the church, due to the loss of loved ones (Chukwumba, 2021).

Another positive effect of the lockdown is that some churches in Zimbabwe moved from holding worship services not only on Sundays, but also on other days of the week. Some churches also decided to increase their worship services online, not only on Sundays, but also daily. These could be accessed anywhere and at any time. The positive effect of this is that church members no longer go to the church but the church goes to the people.

Modification of Christian celebrations such as Easter holidays

The Holy Week, in the Christian liturgical year of the Orthodox, stands between Palm Sunday and Easter. During the Holy Week, solemn rites are observed commemorating the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Nicolaidis, 2020). Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, is a Christian religious day that commemorates Jesus Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem through a crowd waving palm branches in a procession. This custom can be traced back to at least the fourth century (Bruce, 2019; Chukwuma, 2021). From Monday to Thursday, Christians carry out special observances that are concluded on Thursday by recalling the institution of the Last Supper. Scripture readings, solemn prayers, and veneration of the cross recall the crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday, when people mourn the death of Jesus with Maria. Holy Saturday commemorates the burial of Christ. Easter is an annual festival commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the most important feast in Christianity, because, on this day, Christians celebrate Christ's victory over death. Easter also symbolizes Christians' participation in Christ's death and rebirth to a new life. In the 2020 Christian liturgical year, Easter fell on 12 April. Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted the Holy Week celebrations in many churches in Zimbabwe. Whilst some churches did not participate at all in Palm Sunday, others observed it without carrying out the associated rituals such as allowing congregants to move onto the streets to worship Christ with palm branches in their hands. The Christmas holidays are difficult to celebrate with praise and worship, when the number of cases are expected to rise, as people travel from hot-spot countries to Zimbabwe.

Sensitization to COVID-19 regulations

Despite some pastors and their churches in Zimbabwe spreading misinformation about the coronavirus and its corollaries, others supported the efforts of the Zimbabwean government to curb the spread of the virus, facilitate normalcy, and save lives (Koenig, 2020). One of the earliest actions taken by many church leaders was to encourage their church members to cooperate and obey government instructions on implementing the preventive measures of the COVID-19 virus. Some churches invited health officials to teach and inform their members about the virus and its preventative measures, because some of their members live in rural areas where modern technology is inaccessible. These information sessions were held during worship services to inform church members about the basic preventive tips such as maintaining social distancing, avoiding shaking of hands, sanitizing, and regular washing of hands (Irekamba, 2020). All these efforts were the churches' own initiative in safeguarding lives and protecting society from the COVID-19 virus, something they believe will facilitate normalcy and safeguard lives (Chukwuma, 2021).



Churches also encouraged their members to get vaccinated, so that Zimbabwe could have herd community and reduce the rate of infections. Despite misinformation against the coronavirus that spread across the globe through social media and by some leaders from society, including the pastors, many disillusioned church leaders started to support the Zimbabwean government by encouraging their members to vaccinate. For example, to eliminate the misconceptions against the COVID-19 virus, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa encouraged his members to vaccinate because the COVID-19 virus vaccine was safe for use (*The Herald*, 2021). This worked to the benefit of the church and Zimbabwe, because, in the recent lockdown in 2021, when the government opened worship services, the latter were initially limited to only fifty people who were vaccinated, because the government realized that some pastors spread misinformation about the vaccination, thus undermining the government's effort to achieve the required herd community.

Church and social responsibility

Hargreaves and Davey (2020) posit that, amidst the financial challenges occasioned by the lockdown, churches in Zimbabwe practised 'social action evangelism', which is commonly regarded as an effective way of propagating the good news of Jesus Christ through welfare actions. Social action evangelism encompasses a declaration of God's kingdom in words and deeds. Most of the churches in Zimbabwe did so with good funding from donors. Several churches such as Hope Ministries, Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventist, Roman Catholic Church, and the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe have been involved in social action evangelism to help alleviate the needs of the poor and those in need, in order to ensure that society does not lapse into antisocial behaviours because of deprivation of basic materials due to the government's efforts that do not reach everyone in the country. As mentioned earlier, COVID-19 adversely affected the income of churches. Subsequently, the lack of funds severely affected the churches' social responsibility of taking care of the poor and the marginalized. This should not stop the churches from their social responsibility of providing care and hope to those in need.

In Zimbabwe, we observed churches making an effort to operate on various levels such as addressing the immediate need by providing food to the poor. When the government restricted the movement of people and closed down public gatherings, including worship services, we observed that churches unanimously and through ecumenical organisations challenged the government's policy, stating that this will affect the economy and spirituality of the citizens of Zimbabwe. More importantly, we realized the robust engagement of the church and state when the churches challenged the government on restricting worship attendance to fifty and permitting only those who are vaccinated to attend the church.

The church landscape amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the churches in Zimbabwe to rethink outside the box. Regardless of the government-induced lockdowns and restrictions of people gatherings as a measure to reduce the spread of the pandemic, the gospel has to be preached in and out of season. The church, as a prophetic institution, must be in a position to read and interpret the signs of time, in order to remain relevant and to fulfil its mandate of being the salt of the earth.

The authors of this article observed that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the church's landscape in Zimbabwe has both positive and negative impacts. The major positive impact is that the use of online services is not limited to specific denominations, but accessible globally, and no person is left behind. This is unlike what would happen if people were to physically attend worship services in their church buildings and cathedrals. Therefore, technologically, the



COVID-19 pandemic encouraged churches in Zimbabwe, Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Pentecostals Ministries, and Indigenous churches to embrace the use of technology in promoting the gospel. The landscape has drastically changed from the traditional way of doing worship services to a technological way of doing worship services.

Recommendations

Dahab *et al.* (2020) argue that lessons can be derived from recent experiences with COVID-19 in Zimbabwe and those experiences may help contribute to a better church in Zimbabwe. Contagious pandemics such as COVID-19 threaten the future of the church. Hence, the need to make a few recommendations to the churches for the sake of their survival in these trying times that threatened the churches' existence and sustainability. This article aimed to investigate the effects of COVID-19 on the religious traditions of churches in Zimbabwe. Based on the discussions and findings, the authors recommend the following:

- ❖ Churches in Zimbabwe should wholeheartedly embrace both face-to-face gatherings and technological advancements, because they are all viable ways of proclaiming the good news and safeguarding the existence and sustainability of churches in the country. Those churches that do not use various media applications should do so rather than suspend all forms of religious observances until the pandemic is completely contained, in order to avoid loss of lives and loyal congregants of the churches of God.
- ❖ From restricted movement and selected attendance, we learnt that, when churches were faced with common challenges, their strategy was to unite and co-operate with each other to achieve their common goal, that is to serve the poor and the marginalized, by addressing the immediate needs of those in need, and using the united voice of the ecumenical organisations. Can the churches in Zimbabwe not take this lesson beyond the COVID-19 pandemic to work together to tackle the common challenges faced by the churches such as poverty and injustices?
- ❖ Churches should strictly observe COVID-19 preventative measures in their services. Once COVID-19 is contained, churches should endeavour to maintain some hygiene principles such as washing of hands and use of hand sanitizers during their services as a preventive measure against other communicable diseases that are also likely to surface. Highly populated churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, the United Methodist Church, and the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe or Prophetic Healing Deliverance Ministries that increased their number of services should maintain the increase, even after the pandemic is under control.
- ❖ It is also recommended that, once COVID-19 is contained, churches should modify some of their practices that predispose members to infectious diseases. For example, holding of another person's hands whilst praying and sitting very close to one another during services. The culture of shaking hands should be discontinued to avoid further communicable diseases. However, the authors believe that, since Christian tradition has practices of proximity, touching, kissing, and embracing each other, churches will need to review how these practices can be resumed beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ❖ Churches should not totally depend on tithes and offerings for paying the wages of their pastors and workers. It is recommended that they diversify their means of income so that they move on in cases of eventualities. Churches need to be insured against such eventualities in the future and churches venturing into business will safeguard their tithes and offerings for future situations.
- ❖ They should also encourage their pastors, workers, and members to have diverse means of income so as not to totally depend on the church for their sustenance.



- ❖ In as much as ceremonies still successfully took place (on a low key) during the pandemic, it is recommended that (even after the COVID-19 pandemic is contained in Zimbabwe) people should reduce the amount they spend on unnecessary ventures during ceremonies such as weddings, child-naming, and funerals.
- ❖ Churches should hold workshops on sensitizing their members of the impact of COVID-19 and dispel conspiracy theories about vaccination.

Conclusion

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly heralded obvious changes in the traditions and practices of churches. Some long-standing traditions of the church such as Holy Communion, baptism, and the sharing of peace have either been suspended or modified to suit the new normal ways of church life. Churches in Zimbabwe were negatively affected in terms of restrictions on the number of church attendees. This resulted in low financial income, division of churches, loss of members, and many other challenges. Churches responded in various ways by increasing the number of worship services on Sunday to accommodate the required number of attendees per public gathering, and by using technology to spread the gospel to those who cannot attend face-to-face worship services.

This article recognized that the church has taken some commendable steps with respect to controlling the spread of the virus by encouraging its members to methodically observe the preventive measures as laid down by the World Health Organization and the Zimbabwe Health Ministry led by the Vice President of the country. The use of online worship services has contributed much to combating the spread of the coronavirus and increased the number of weekly worship services. Through social actions, the church has improved the lives of some people and converted non-Christians to Christianity through experiencing the works of God in times of need.

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