

## **Pastoral Care and Counseling and Post-Covid Kwaran Christians**

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### ***Abstract***

The COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon perceived with mixed feelings by different individuals in the religious and nonreligious circuits globally, especially in Africa and Nigeria. Despite the obvious impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the spiritual, economic, health, sociopolitical and other aspects of national life, there are yet different assertions about the pandemic which have raised many perturbing issues that are affecting the mental health and commitments of many individuals including Christians, thus calling for the responsiveness of Pastoral care and counselling. The purpose of this paper is to forestall the significance of Pastoral care and counselling in addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on the churches in Kwara State, Nigeria in the post-COVID-19 era. The methodology for this research is a qualitative analysis that employs the analytical and historical approaches. The notable questions guiding the findings in this research are: What is Covid-19? What is the Post Covid-19 Era? How are churches in Kwara State impacted in the post-COVID-19 Era? What are Pastors and Christians in Kwara doing to curb the impacts of COVID-19? The attainment of apposite answers to the above questions guarantees solving the perceived problems.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Post Covid-19 Era, Impacts, Pastoral Care and Counselling, New Normal

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

### Covid-19

From the perspective of medical science, COVID-19 is said to be an infectious respiratory disease caused by viruses through respiratory droplets, contact with contaminated surfaces or infected persons. It is a pandemic that plagued the world most especially between 2019 and 2020 as attested to by the World Health Organization (WHO) with symptoms like fever, cough, and difficulty in breathing, fatigue, headache, sore throat, diarrhoea, and nausea or vomiting etc.

In their report, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the first case of COVID-19 was in Wuhan, China<sup>355</sup> with several individuals breaking down in health and death cases in 2019 but in 2020, the case grew beyond Wuhan China to various parts of Europe, Australia, and Africa which resulted in tagging the ailment a pandemic. As a result, many governments worldwide have implemented diverse measures such as lockdowns, mask mandates and travel restrictions to slow down or curtail the widespread of the pandemic.

Additionally, some of the preventive measures proffered by the WHO include vaccination, physical distancing, wearing of masks, frequent washing of hands, avoidance of contact etc. The vaccination gained government support in most especially Nigeria where it became a compulsory requirement before accessing some benefits like travelling out or coming into the nation. Some were even vaccinated without their consent which has left many with no option but to attach meanings and suspicions to the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>355</sup> Knavul Sheik and Roni Caryn Rabin, *The Corona Virus: What Scientist have discovered so far* New (York Times May, 2020), 1.

### **Pastoral Care and Counselling**

Counselling is a professional relationship between a trained professional and another person, usually a client, designed to help the professional to understand and clarify views of circumstances affecting him. Counselling is a process designed to help individuals learn and reach their self-determined goals through meaningful, well-informed choices and resolution of problems of an emotional or interpersonal nature.<sup>356</sup>

Furthermore, counselling is a very principled relationship characterized by the application of one or more psychological theories and a recognized set of communication skills, modified by experience, intuition and other interpersonal factors, to address the intimate concerns, problems or aspirations of certain individuals (client) through the help and guidance of trained personnel (counsellor).<sup>357</sup>

On the other hand, pastoral counselling is the art of helping a person arrive at an appropriate answer through the aid of analysis of the situation and the facts. It has to be done professionally without any attempt to influence the values and beliefs of the client. According to Benner, Pastoral counselling practically deals with the process of talking with a person in a way that helps such person to solve a problem or create conditions that will cause the person to understand and improve his behavior, character, values or life circumstances as a form of social relationship growth<sup>358</sup>.

Pastoral care refers to the emotional, spiritual and practical support provided, most especially by Pastors, churches or other Faith-based communities to individuals or families in need. It

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<sup>356</sup> H. M Burks, and B. Steffl, *Theories of Counseling*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw- Hill, 1979), n.p.

<sup>357</sup> C. Feltham, and W. Dryden, *Brief Counseling: A Practical Guide for Beginning Practitioners* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>358</sup> David G. Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counselling: A Short-term Structure Model* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 32.

is more of love in action or through good deeds. Thus, while pastoral counselling involves more talking, pastoral care involves more action. The two are crucial because they play significant roles in soul care as the world is filled with much trouble but with less care. After all, the love of many has waxed cold.

### ***Kwara State***

Kwara State is situated in the North Central region of Nigeria with a population of approximately 3 million people as of the 2020 census, a land area of 36,825 km<sup>2</sup> mixed with different languages but predominantly Yoruba and rich in Agriculture<sup>359</sup>. Nevertheless, for the sake of emphasis and effectiveness, the scope of this paper is limited to a few pastors/church leaders and members in Kwara State selected at random.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Post Covid-19 Era**

The post-COVID-19 era refers to the period after the Covid-19 pandemic was brought under control with societies and economies recovering and rebuilding. The era has brought about a new normal; a global shift begging for the strengthening of global health infrastructure, economic recovery, digital transformation, changes in consumer behavior, maintenance of mental health and wellness, technological advancement, environmental sustainability resilience and adaptability.

The shift resulting from the Post Covid-19 era also affects the religious circuits and Christianity is not exempted. Many Christians and churches have been impacted socially, spiritually, mentally, economically and otherwise because of the indelible mark left by the advent of the pandemic. In the case of

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<sup>359</sup> "Kwara State" Retrieved from [www.google.com](http://www.google.com). Accessed on 6th November, 2024.

this paper, the study is centered on Kwaran Christians and the impact of post-Covid-19 on them.

### **The Global Impact of the COVID-19 Era**

**Economic shift:** The post-COVID-19 era has compulsorily upgraded people to adopt remote work arrangements leading to urban planning, transportation and commercial estate. It also led to the growth in the use of digital payment systems thus reducing the need for cash use in financial transactions. Consequently, there is not a time when E-commerce gained more acceptance like in this era. There is an accelerated growth in E-Commerce which has brought a change in the retail landscape and creates opportunities for businesses both onsite and online.

**Global Health Infrastructure:** As a result of the post-COVID-19 era, there is a shift in the health infrastructure resulting in the need for a strengthened healthcare system, improved preparation and enhanced global cooperation to prevent present and future pandemics<sup>360</sup>. Furthermore, there is a growth in the recognition of the importance of mental health and wellness and an increased investment in related services and support.

**Change in consumer behavior:** Without mincing words, a high percentage of the world's population are now having a better understanding and application of the scale of preference thought in economics because of the economic meltdown and increased hardship. There is a shift in consumer preferences, values and behaviors such as increased emphasis on health, wellness and sustainability over other stuff.

**New social norms:** The advent of COVID-19 resulted in the inculcation of the practice of virtual events, conferences and seminars, thus reducing the need for physical travel and

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<sup>360</sup> World Health Organization, *A Heavy Burden: The Indirect cause of illness in Africa* (Brazzaville: WHO Regional Office for Africa, 2019)

contacts. There is also a renewed emphasis on community building with people seeking to reconnect with neighbours, friends and families through the use of social media handles such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter, Google Meet and the likes.

**Environmental Impact:** Out of many impacts on the environment, the influx of COVID-19 resulted in an abridged emission of carbon into the atmosphere due to reduced travelling and improved energy efficiency. Furthermore, there is an increased focus on environmental sustainability through increased investments in renewable energy, viable infrastructure and eco-friendly practices.

**Technological advancement:** The Covid-19 era gave rise to increased patronage of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Currently, there is an accelerated development of vaccines using new technological apparatus for improved diagnostics using rapid testing and genomic sequencing which enables faster detection and response to the outbreaks of pandemics. There is also an increased adoption of telemedicine which enables remote healthcare consultation and improved healthcare services.

### **Significance of Pastoral Care and Counseling**

Firstly, many citizens of Nigeria, Christians inclusive, have experienced significant loss and disruption, including the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and social support networks as a result of the influx of COVID-19. Therefore, Pastoral care and counselling play a vital role in helping such persons to cope with the trauma and stress of being forced to leave their homes and communities as opined by Oyedele in his book on Pastoral Care and Counselling<sup>361</sup>.

Secondly, Pastoral counselling offers a unique approach to addressing the mental health and spiritual needs of

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<sup>361</sup> Sam O. Oyedele, *Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Ogbomoso: Amazing Grace Press, 2011), 76.

traumatized persons. This is obtainable when trained pastoral counsellors, often from the same cultural or religious background as such persons, provide a safe and empathetic space for individuals to share their stories, process their emotions, and reconnect with their spiritual beliefs and practices.

Thirdly, as Pastoral counsellors and caregivers use various techniques, such as narrative therapy and trauma-focused counselling, to help individuals process their experiences and develop coping strategies, Miller and Jackson explain that this may help in exploring the emotional and spiritual impacts of post-Covid-19, addressing feelings of guilt, shame, and anger, and finding ways to honour and memorialize lost loved ones and homes<sup>362</sup>. Indeed, one of the key roles of pastoral care and counselling is to help displaced persons address the trauma and grief associated with their displacement.

Fourthly, Pastoral counselling also plays an important role in helping troubled people rebuild their sense of identity and purpose. The post-COVID-19 era has led many to experience a loss of cultural and religious practices, which are often closely tied to one's sense of self-worth and community. Wayne Oates explains that Pastoral counsellors can help individuals reconnect with their spiritual beliefs and practices, find new ways to express their cultural identity and develop a sense of belonging in their new community<sup>363</sup>.

Fifthly, pastoral care and counselling can help dented persons navigate the complex and often overwhelming process of resettlement resulting from the post-COVID-19 era. Through the application of caregiving and counselling principles, Pastoral counsellors can provide guidance on practical help

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<sup>362</sup> William R. Miller and Jackson Kathleen, *A Practical Psychology for Pastors* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1985), 14.

<sup>363</sup> Wayne Oates, *New Dimension in Pastoral care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 47.

such as housing, employment, and education, as well as emotional support and advocacy.

Sixthly, pastoral care and counselling can help in building resilience and lost hope in affected persons. Pastoral counsellors can help individuals develop a sense of control and agency over their lives by focusing on the individual's strengths and resources, rather than their shortfalls or problems. Clesbsch opines that this can involve exploring the individual's spiritual beliefs and practices, identifying sources of comfort and support and developing coping strategies to manage stress and anxiety<sup>364</sup>.

Furthermore, pastoral counselling plays an important role in promoting social cohesion and community building among persons affected in the post-COVID-19 era. This is obtainable through bringing individuals together for group counselling and community activities. In that way, pastoral counsellors can help build relationships, foster a sense of belonging, and promote collective healing and recovery.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Various research methodologies are at the disposal of researchers as the research method used in any research is usually informed by the type of study at hand. The methodology for this research is the qualitative analysis which employs the analytical and historical approaches. The advantage of the methodology is that data are readily available having many sources from which the data can be collected and used while the primary research allows the researchers to collect data from research participants. Furthermore, Noor explained that secondary research is quicker to conduct because of the availability of data ranging from books, journals, newspapers,

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<sup>364</sup> William A. Clesbsch and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 33.

articles, government reports and online news<sup>365</sup> some of which were used in this research as well. Below is the table showing a sample of citations using the historical research methodology:

S/N	Source	Information
1	Book	William A. Clesbsch and Charles R. Jaekle, <i>Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective</i> (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 33.
2	Journal	Khalid Bin Mohamad Noor, <i>Case study: A strategic research methodology</i> American Journal of Applied Sciences, 5 (11), (Selangor: Science Publication, 2008), 1603.

A Set of interview questions were used for the analytical method and below is the table showing the questions and the data of the interviewees:

S/N	Interviewee	Questions
1	Kolawole O. Tobi, member, 1 <sup>st</sup> Baptist Church Bashita, Ifelodun LGA, Kwara State	1. What is your perception about Covid-19?  2. What are the ways your church is impacted in the post-COVID-19 Era?
2	Rev. Israel Olusegun, Baptist Church, Alla, Isin LGA Kwara State	
3	Pst. Ufuoma Ohwovoriote, Lead Pastor, Living Faith Church, Igbaja, Ifelodun LGA, Kwara State	
4	Pst. Taiwo Adeoti Shadow of Light Evangelistic Prayer and Bible Church, Tanke Ilorin, Ilorin South LGA	
5	Pst. Akanbi F. Peter, 3 <sup>rd</sup> ECWA Church Olla, Isin LGA Kwara State	

<sup>365</sup> Khalid Bin Mohamad Noor, *Case study: A strategic research methodology* American Journal of Applied Sciences, 5 (11), (Selangor: Science Publication, 2008), 1603.

6	Apostle Dr. Oyekunle Taiwo, the President, Christ Reconciliation Evangelistic Ministry International (CREMI), Ilorin, Ilorin West LGA	3. What are the opportunities you are exploring as a result of the post-COVID-19 Era?
7	Mrs Elizabeth O. Alao, Member ECWA Chapel Ilorin, Ilorin West LGA	

## FINDINGS

The discussion in this section is from the conversation with the few individuals represented in the table above.

### Perceptions about COVID-19 by Kwaran Christians

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts in the world but the perception many Africans and Nigerians have about the reality of such a pandemic is both complex and varied. At first, there was anxiety in the hearts of many Nigerians about the spread of the virus because of the limited healthcare facilities in the nation, thus many succumbed to the lockdown order by the Federal Government. Owojaiye observed that as time went on, diverse storylines began to unfold even from Clerics<sup>366</sup> resulting from the incessant concern and effort to tackle the said pandemic through enforcing lockdowns and making vaccination compulsory, tagged the discussion on such storylines as ‘conspiracy theories’ which resulted to questions like:

- a. Why is the government spending so much to build Quarantine Centers but leaving the already existing Government hospitals dilapidated?
- b. Why is there much concern about the vaccine to the extent that it has become compulsory for all

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<sup>366</sup> Babatomiwa Owojaiye, *Evangelical Response to the Corona Virus Lockdown: Insights from the Evangelical Church Winning All*, (Ajah, Lagos: Harmony Publishing, 2020), 39.

when there are other ravaging viruses with no financial aid to help the victims?

c. Why is the disease seemingly kindly some set of individuals and leaving some others, unlike the case in China and Western nations experiencing the same pandemic?

These and many more questions have made some Kwaran Christians clinch that Covid-19 is a scam with a hidden agenda and so began to break the laws concerning the prevention of Covid-19 such as wearing masks, physical distancing, lockdowns or vaccination<sup>367</sup>. Nevertheless, despite the perception by many people that COVID-19 is a scam, some people are still maintaining their hygiene personally and organizations still keeping to the rules of hand sanitization, masking and social distancing.

Consequently, despite the mixed perceptions concerning the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact the emergence of the virus has left on the whole world cannot be overemphasized for it is considered an era that has brought a new normal to the systems and facets of life even religiously. There is no sector, region or religion left out; rather every affected party, including individuals, organizations, families, communities and the church, is grappling with how to untangle the challenges posed by the post-Covid-19 era.

### **Ecclesiastical Challenges in the Post-Covid-19 Era in Kwara State**

As earlier mentioned, there are several challenges conveyed by the advent of Covid-19 but the focus of this paper is on the recurrent experiences of the churches.

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<sup>367</sup> Corey L et al, *A Strategic Approach to Covid-19 Vaccine*, (Bethesda: National Library of Medicine, 2020), 948-950.

*Burnout:* The influx of COVID-19 was a new experience filled with challenges for contemporary Pastors on how to navigate between understanding the situation and untangling it was an event that took everyone by surprise because it came differently compared to the previous cases of flu experienced in the past. Many Kwaran Christians including the few who were interviewed testified to how they were overwhelmed with stress as a result of the shift toward prioritization of self-care, burnout prevention and mental health support.

In the post-COVID-19 era, the stress is doubled for Pastors who are attempting to maintain the raised standard of living caused by the influx of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is so because most churches now have two sets of membership; virtual and onsite members. Also, some Pastors are not digitally inclined thus the dynamism to maintain such a status quo is nerve-racking and traumatic.

*Drop in financial flow:* Both the pastors and members interviewed testified to the fact that the pandemic brought about a global economic shift with cases like loss of employment, closedown of companies, hike in the prices of goods and services, non-increment of salaries and the like, thus leading to a drop in the income of many church members and consequently in the level of their giving and donations to the church as many are struggling to survive the economic hardship.

Another reason for the drop in financial flow is the challenge of the ignorance of mobile transactions; not many people have the gadgets and or mobile bank accounts to transfer their offerings, tithes or donations to the church while some feel their money is too small to use the mobile Apps to send thus tend to prolong giving it or divert it to other things.

*Decline in attendance:* Due to the fear of the widespread of the pandemic and the restrictions by the governing authorities on social/physical distancing, the attendance of many churches

has drastically dropped whilst the churches who have been operating both physically and virtually gained more members online. The challenge of the decline in the physical attendance of members hits more hard in the rural areas where there are limited or no internet services.

*Rise in complex theological and ethical questions:* The highest questions raised by the influx of the pandemic are on the vaccine mandates and worship restrictions which were centered more especially on churches than any other worship centers. For many Christians, the vaccine mandate led to the adoption of a conspiracy theory<sup>368</sup> as emphasized by Owojaiye, a theory which attempt to connect the lockdown with the warning in the book of Revelation 13 which states that the mark of the beast would be placed on either the forehead or right hand of people, therefore, leading to the indifference of some Christians towards taking the vaccine. This assertion led to the need for Biblical responses to the theological teaching on the mark of the beast and the ethical correctness of the said Corona virus vaccine.

*Imbalance between physical and virtual ministering:* The adoption of virtual ministry became a new normal for many pastors as a result of the influx of the pandemic, therefore, navigating between physical and virtual ministry and drawing a balance between the benefits of technology with the need for in-person relationship between Pastors and members has become a challenge in many churches.

Though the virtual ministry is swift and quite reliable with many pastors and members adjusting and adapting to it, the reality remains that it cannot replace the physical care for the souls of members. God could care for people from heaven (and He sure does) but decided to send His only begotten Son, Jesus

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<sup>368</sup> Daniel Gachuki, “3 Reasons not to Support Conspiracy Theory” in *The Gospel Coalition Africa* <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-you-should-not-support-conspiracy-theories/> accessed 1st June, 2021 cited by Babatomiwa Owojaiye, *Evangelical Response to the Corona Virus Lockdown: Insights from the Evangelical Church Winning All*, (Ajah, Lagos: Harmony Publishing, 2020), 39-40.

to the earth, then it is an imbalance for anyone to ever think of facing more of the virtual ministry whilst neglecting the physical ministry as some pastors are in the habit of doing in this era.

### **Opportunities in the Post-Covid-19 Era in the Churches in Kwara State**

*New model for worship:* With the influx of COVID-19, the onsite or physical meetings of the congregation are no longer enough as people have become so busy with different activities and engagements that keep them away from their church communities, therefore, virtual worship grants the opportunity to accelerate innovations in worship by exploring a new model that blend traditional and virtual elements such as online worship services or Bible study, virtual groups and hybrid community events.

*Renewed focus on Mission and Evangelism:* The pandemic opens the church to explore the greater opportunity to witness to world on a large scale. Missions and Evangelism are made easier through the use of social media handles like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and the likes to share the Gospel and serve communities. Therefore, the church stands the chance to refocus its vision towards mission and evangelism.

*Emphasis on pastoral care and counselling:* The pandemic disrupted many facets of life and endeavors for individuals and members of the church thus affecting most especially the mental health of different classes of people ranging from the old/young, rich/poor, learned/unlearned and the likes. Therefore, this provides opportunities for pastors and church leaders to display their pastoral care and counselling prowess by investing towards supporting and providing their members with a safe space for emotional and spiritual healing through issuing palliatives and other grants to alleviate poverty.

*Greater collaboration and partnership:* One of the many opportunities provided by the invasion of the COVID-19

pandemic is in helping the universal church to realize and embrace the disjointed spaces created by division in the church and fill up the gaps through collaboration efforts and partnership as a team. It is by seizing the opportunities in collaborative efforts and partnership that the church can be sustained to address her common challenges and opportunities.

*Deeper reflection on faith and resilience:* The pandemic prompts the need for a re-examination of personal faith and resilience with a deeper reflection on how churches in Kwara State can facilitate the spiritual growth of their members through serial teachings, creation of small groups and personal discipleship. This is necessary because of the advent of diverse teachings online that are rather false and misleading.

## **CONCLUSION**

The post-COVID-19 era presents an opportunity for Kwaran Christians to reexamine their values, beliefs and practices and to seek new ways of living out their faith in a rapidly changing world full of uncertainties. Furthermore, pastoral care and counselling play a critical role in supporting this process of reflection and discernment towards helping individuals to integrate their faith with their experiences and to find ways of living out their faith in the post-COVID-19 world.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations in this paper are centered on the Roles of Pastors towards curbing the Negative Impacts of Post Covid-19 as observed from the findings in the research:

- a. Pastors and church leaders should provide emotional and spiritual support for Kwaran Christians who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- b. Pastors and church leaders should also foster a sense of community life among Kwaran Christians by encouraging them to support and care for one another.
- c. Pastors and church leaders should promote resilience and hope among Kwaran Christians by encouraging them to trust in God's sovereignty and provision.
- d. Furthermore, pastors and church leaders in Kwara State should be trained to be able to properly address grief and trauma-related issues to enable Kwaran Christians to find supportive environments to process their emotions.
- e. Churches and Christian organizations should provide counselling services to Kwaran Christians who are affected by Covid-19.
- f. Churches and Christian organizations should also provide practical support such as food, shelter and finances to Kwaran Christians. Most especially those affected by the pandemic.
- g. Christian counsellors in Kwara State should use culturally sensitive approaches that take into cognizance the unique cultural and spiritual values of Kwaran Christians.
- h. More research should be conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on Kwaran Christians by delving into aspects

such as their mental health, spiritual well-being and socioeconomic status.

- i. Researchers, educators and practitioners should foster collaboration to ensure that research findings and educational resources are translated into effective pastoral care and counselling practices.

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