

Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on church ministries in Africa: A literature analysis focusing on South Africa

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This article argues that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which emerged in 2019, has had a negative impact on all institutions and spheres of life, including churches. Scholars and religious practitioners concur that the pandemic has negatively affected the church in various ways such as in church worship, fellowship, finance, interrelationships and various other ministries and programmes. Despite a reference to challenges posed by COVID-19 on the churches' ministries, there are very few academic articles based on literature scoping on the subject, particularly its impact on churches in Africa with a particular focus on South Africa. A study of that nature is important as it provides an insight into practical church ministries during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article presents the findings of a scoping study conducted to inform a broader empirical study on churches and COVID-19 in South Africa and Africa. The article concludes by recommending an empirical qualitative study to explore in-depth issues on COVID-19 and the church to generate academic articles in order to overcome the prevailing gap, whereby the bulk of the information on the subject is popular in sources such as blogs.

Contribution: This article is a study that scopes literature published on the impact of COVID-19 on churches and provides a detailed understanding of the phenomenon. It contributes to understanding how COVID-19 particularly affected church ministries in Africa and South Africa and proposes areas requiring empirical studies on COVID-19 and churches.

Keywords: church and COVID-19; church worship and COVID-19; COVID-19 church responses; church fellowship and COVID-19; church mission and COVID-19; digital church services; virtual worship services; COVID-19 and churches.

Introduction: A terrain sketch of the COVID-19 situation and problem identification¹

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that emerged at the end of 2019, and it threw the church into a ministry crisis (Afolaranmi 2020; Allen 2020; Burger 2020; Global Ministries 2020a; Mathe 2020; Msibi 2020; Pillay 2020; Scott 2020; Tysick 2020; WHO 2020:2). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines COVID-19 as an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (WHO 2020:n.p.). While scientists cannot conclusively locate the emergence of the coronavirus in humans, the underlying fact is that COVID-19 is real and serious. As of 29 October 2021, the disease had spread to six continents and caused serious illnesses and complications that claimed the lives of more than four million people across the globe (Statista 2021). There is no country that has not been affected by COVID-19.

Numerous authors as cited above reported that COVID-19 has negatively affected the church in various ways, including worship, fellowship, finance, interrelationships, mission, evangelism, outreach, finance and pastoral ministry plus various other ministries and programmes. That is, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted long-established and cherished patterns of doing church. Unfortunately, the effect of COVID-19 on churches is not systematically documented to clearly understand the manner in which COVID-19 has specifically affected/impacted the churches (Afolaranmi 2020; Allen 2020; Burger 2020; Global Ministries 2020; Mathe 2020; Msibi 2020; Pillay 2020; Scott 2020; Tysick 2020; WHO 2020:2).

1. The article is a scoping study to inform an empirical study; hence, it's longer than a normal article. This study presents both positive and negative aspects. Some of the positive aspects are innovations that arose in response to COVID-19. Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 was experienced at various levels, including vertical, internal and external dynamics of the church.

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In light of the preceding discussion, the objective of this article is to establish the impact of COVID-19 on church ministries in Africa, with a particular focus on South Africa. In order to accomplish this objective, the article will employ a scoping review methodology. Paré and Kitsiou (2016:163) described the scoping review methodology as a method that seeks to give an 'initial indication of the potential size and nature of the extant literature on an emergent topic'. The scoping review method can also be:

[C]onducted to examine the extent, range and nature of research activities in a particular area, determine the value of undertaking a full systematic review or identify research gaps in the extant literature. (Paré & Kitsiou 2016:163)

Unlike narrative and descriptive reviews, 'the whole point of scoping the field is to be as comprehensive as possible, including grey literature' (Paré & Kitsiou 2016:163). When one employs this methodology, 'inclusion and exclusion criteria must be established to help researchers eliminate studies that are not aligned with the research questions' (Paré & Kitsiou 2016:163–164). In this article, I scope literature on the impact/effects of COVID-19 to church ministries in Africa, with a particular focus on South Africa. Therefore, the methodology is used to identify if there are any gaps or need for future research on the proposed topic.

Before I scope the literature that indicates the impact of COVID-19 on church ministries in Africa, particularly in South Africa, the initial section will briefly define the church and its purpose, as well as the ministry variables that it does to fulfil its biblical mandate. After establishing the ministry variables, the main section of the article examines in detail the impact of COVID-19 on church ministries in the identified contexts. I conclude by reflecting on the overarching findings of the study.

Towards defining church, its purpose and types of ministries

Definition of the church and its purpose of existence²

Lindsay (2000:18) indicated that the Word translated 'church' in the New Testament as *Ecclesia*. He noted that in Numbers 10:2–3, the Jews used the word *Ecclesia* to refer to the assembly

of the congregation of Israel that was summoned to meet at the door of the Tabernacle of God by men blowing silver trumpets. The Greek, as shown in Acts 19:41, used the word *Ecclesia* as a reference to the sovereign assembly of the free Greek city-state, which was summoned by a herald blowing a horn along the streets. However, for the followers of Jesus Christ, the *Ecclesia* is the congregation of the redeemed community of God, whose messenger continually summons it to appear in the presence of God, who was always in its midst (Lindsay 2000:18–19). Thus, in the Old Testament, the *Ecclesia* has been the congregation of Jehovah (God), and in the New Testament, it refers to the congregation of Jesus Christ (Lindsay 2000:19).

The church is a visible redeemed (the Christ's salvific work) and united community or society of God's people, both Jews and Gentiles, who consider Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour of their lives from death to life³ (Lindsay 2000:19). This united community of God believes in the doctrine of universal sin for all humankind that emerges from the biblical interpretation of Genesis 3 in conjunction with Romans 5:12–21 and many other related New Testament passages (Wright 1991:40). In line with the previously mentioned verses, the community of God believes in the covenantal perspective that views sin as having entered the world through Adam and that God graciously chose or elected Abraham and his descendants (which is Israel) to be vehicles for the redemption of all humankind from the *Adamic* sin (Wright 1991:40).

This means that the church is a community of God that believes that Abraham and his descendants (Israel) were part of the *Adamic* sin and death, so they could not fulfil their God-ordained redemptive role (Magezi 2018:159–165). Thus, in the narrative of redemption, we are confronted with Jesus Christ as the sinless New Adam, who is both true God and true man in nature, who has come to fulfil the covenant necessities (between God and Israel) from the sides of both God and man (Torrance 2008:73; Wright 1991:35–40). That is to say, 'Jesus Christ stands in the place of Israel' as the one who fulfils the role of Israel in bringing salvation to all humankind (Wright 1991:35–40). Therefore, the church is a visible community or society (both Jews and Gentiles) of God that believes in Jesus Christ's redemptive work for salvation.

Church refers to the community of people who believe in Jesus Christ as their personal saviour and Lord (Shekhar 2017:1227). These people gather at a place of worship to listen to God's Word being proclaimed. It is important to

2. I am aware that there are some scholars who uphold the theological concept of the invisible and visible church (Stibbs n.d.:194–203). Invisible church refers to an invisible Christian church of the elect (born again believers of the past, present and future) that can be only seen and known by God (Stibbs n.d.:194–203). The visible church is the institutional body on earth, which expresses Christianity in a way that people can see (Stibbs n.d.:194–203). These visible ways include the gathering and practices of the individuals in various church buildings on Sundays, including the evangelisation of the world, as Jesus commanded his followers to do in Matthew 28:16–20 (Stibbs n.d.:194–203). In my view, these entire church concepts arise from one's biblical understanding of the doctrine of salvation. However, in the context of this article, I am going to define the church as an institutional body on earth that expresses Christianity that people can see and, in this sense, it operates as an agent of God in accomplishing his plans and purposes in the world (cf. Van Aarde 2016:298–299). That is to say, 'the Church plays a central role in the realisation of the reign and kingdom of God and the completion of the mission of God. The task of the completion of the mission of God has specifically been given to the Church. The Church is God's primary instrument for "the summing up of all things" (Eph 1:10) and the "fulfilling" or "completion of all things" (Eph 1:23)'. Furthermore, it should be noted that there are different models of church, which is not the focus of this discussion (see Dulles 1991).

3. I agree with Lindsay (2000:22) that "the word Church is seldom used in the New Testament to designate one universal and comprehensive society." On the contrary, out of the 110 times in which the word occurs, no less than 100 do not contain this note of a wide-spreading unity. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the word "church" denotes a local Christian society, varying in extent from all the Christian congregations within a province of the Empire to a small assembly of Christians meeting together in the house of one of the brethren. St. Paul alone, if we except the one instance in Matt. xvi., uses the word in its universal application; and he does it in two epistles only – those to the Ephesians and to the Colossians – both of them dating from his Roman captivity. But there are numberless indications that the thought of the unity of the Church of Christ was never absent from the mind of the Apostle. The Christians he addresses are all brethren, all saints, whether they be in Jerusalem, Damascus, Ephesus or Rome'.

note that the purpose of the church in the world is to glorify God and serve fellow human beings (Brunsdon & Magezi 2020:8). The church glorifies God by performing its God-ordained responsibilities, such as worshipping God and evangelising the world (Mt 28:16–20), building up believers to reach Christlikeness and partake in compassionate ministries in the world. The mission of Jesus Christ was to create the foundation for God's mission by his redemptive work, teaching and appointing the church to serve God, each other and the world (cf. Van Aarde 2016:285–286, cf. 298–300; Deyoung & Gilbert 2011:26; McNeal 2009:24). This emphatically affirms that Christ founded his church as the agent of the mission of God. This is why Van Aarde (2016:285–286, cf. 298–300) argues that in the plan of God, 'the Church is more than a sign post or an end in itself; it has a participatory and prominent role in the unfolding and execution of God's plan'.

I agree with Deyoung and Gilbert (2011:26), Van Aarde (2016:284–300) and many other scholars who viewed the purpose of the church as summarised in the Great Commission⁴ (Mt 28:16–20), without losing the wider perspective of the comprehensiveness of the mission of the church (which is also God's mission) that involves serving other people. I concur with Pascoe (2015) that the purpose of the church is:

...(1) to bring people to saving faith in Christ and then assist them to grow in Christ-likeness, and (2) to bring every believer into vital authentic relationship with God through the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, such that every believer glorifies God in thought, word and deed both in the church and in the World with the ultimate goal of presenting everyone complete in Christ (Col. 1:28). (n.p.)

Pascoe's (2015) statement should be qualified by adding that the purpose of the church is not only to serve those in its faith community in the above-mentioned ways but also to address the various needs and well-being of people from all religious and ethnic backgrounds (Brunsdon & Magezi 2020:8). This point is supported by the Vatican Council's II familiar documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, which apply Matthew 25:31–46 in an ensuing manner (cf. Brunsdon & Magezi 2020; eds. O'Brien & Shannon 2010):

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbour of absolutely every person, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an older person abandoned by all, a foreign labourer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee ... a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord: As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren you did it for me (Matthew 25:40, 45) [#27]. (p. 119)

From the aforesaid discussion, it is clear that the church exists to serve God, fellow Christians and people from other religious backgrounds. If this is granted, the question that

arises is: *which ministries has the church been doing (to fulfil its God-ordained roles in the world) that have been impacted/affected by COVID-19?* In order to answer this question, we need to first define church ministry and then identify the variables of church ministries that are being done by the churches. Once this is established, the main section of this article will proceed to discuss how these ministry variables were affected/impacted by the pandemic.

Defining church ministry

Acts 6:1–7 is a critical passage that can help one to determine the meaning of church ministry and its variables (Hampshire 2020). As shown in Acts 6:1–7, the situation in the first church caused the apostles to step forward and make big organisational decisions (Hampshire 2020). In verse four of the proposed passage, in which the apostles said that they needed to devote themselves to the 'ministry of the Word' (Hampshire 2020). In Greek, the word 'ministry' essentially means the same as 'serving tables' (Hampshire 2020) – which has the same sense as of verse two, a duty that the apostles said should be executed by other people. The term ministry means to serve or execute the command of someone else. We can perceive that in the context of Scripture, the word denotes a type of general service to others.

I agree with Hampshire (2020:n.p.) that church ministries are important because they play a role in fulfilling the church's God-ordained role in the world. However, not all church ministries are of equal importance (Hampshire 2020:n.p.). Together with Hampshire (2020), I view the proclamation of the Word of God as *the* most important task, service or ministry that the church can provide to others.

The ministry of the church should be comprehensive because the salvation that God, in Christ, brought into the world can universally address all aspects of life that were distorted by sin (cf. Torrance 2009:196). The ministry variables that the church partakes in to fulfil its biblical mandate should have vertical, internal and external variables. Vertical ministry refers to church ministries of service to God.⁵ Internal church ministries are those that serve members, while external ministries serve non-Christians. Table 1 places the church ministry variables into their respective categories, as identified by numerous authors (Palmbly n.d.; Brewster Baptist Church n.d.; Greater Life Apostolic Church Ministries n.d.).

I am conscious that there are many church ministry variables in which the churches are involved in order to execute their God-ordained mandate in the world. However, I have decided to focus on the above-mentioned ministries, as I consider them to play a central role in the life of the church. From Table 1, one can perceive many variables of church ministry that can be categorised as vertical, internal and

4.Regarding the Great Commission as the central calling of the church, Deyoung and Gilbert (2011:26) note that 'the mission of the Church is summarized in the Great Commission passages14 – the climactic marching orders Jesus issues at the ends of the Gospels and at the beginning of Acts. We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling'.

5.I am conscious that all that we do is worship, including compassionate ministries and sanctified way of living.

TABLE 1: Categorisation of church ministries.

Vertical church ministries	Internal church ministries	External church ministries
Worship ministry	Hospitality ministry	Hospitality ministry
	Teaching ministry	Teaching ministry
	Counselling ministry	Counselling ministry
	Music ministry	Music ministry
	Adult discipleship	Student ministry
	Fellowship (human element) and community life	Evangelism
	Parent ministry	Outreach ministries/evangelism
	Care ministry for the sick in hospital, needs and orphans	Care ministry for the sick in hospital
	Men's ministry	
	Women's ministry	
	Youth ministry	
	Outreach ministry	
	Finance ministry	
	Single ministry	
	Comforter ministry	
	Generation-to-generation ministry	
	Social sector	

external. These authors have named and described the functions and purposes of some of these church ministries mentioned above in a manner that I subscribe to.

Palmby (n.d.) named the following types of ministries and indicated their functions in and outside church spaces. These include hospitality, teaching, outreach, music and counselling ministries. Brewster Baptist Church (n.d.) listed the following types of ministries (worship, adult discipleship, and student's, parents', fellowship and community life plus the missions and outreach ministries), indicates their functions and purposes on either Christians' relationship with God, their functions or purposes in and outside church spaces. According to the Greater Life Apostolic Church Ministries (n.d.), there are different ministries, such as the comforters, youth, men's, women's children's, singles' and generation-to-generation.

Various scholars (Allen 2020; Burger 2020; Global Ministries 2020; Mathe 2020; Msibi 2020; Pillay 2020:265; Scott 2020; Tysick 2020; WHO 2020:3) stated that COVID-19 has negatively affected the church in various ways, including worship, fellowship and communal life, finance, interrelationships and various other ministries and programmes. Pillay (2020:265) argued that the pandemic has distorted the 'long-established and cherished patterns' of *doing* church. With the lockdown regulations that promote physical and social distancing as a measure of reducing the spread of the pandemic, many of the church ministry variables listed in this section were seriously affected.

There is a need to critically assess the impact of the disease on the church ministry variables in Africa, with a particular focus on South Africa. In assessing the said impact, I concur with Omondi (2020) that the pandemic has adversely affected almost all church ministry variables in equal measure, so some interrelated church ministry variables

were clumped together as I sought to assess how each has been impacted by COVID-19.

The next section discusses the impact of COVID-19 on the church ministry variables in Africa in general and South Africa in particular.

The impact of COVID-19 on church ministry variables in Africa, with particular focus on South Africa

The impact⁶ of COVID-19 on worship, fellowship, preaching and teaching of the Word of God

It is important to note that before I describe how COVID-19 affected worship, communal fellowship, preaching and teaching of the Word of God, I give the meaning of Christian worship and its various aspects. Here, a qualification has to be made that this discussion is not comprehensive, because worship is a broad concept (Emmanuel 2019:n.p.) and defining the term is not the focus of the research. However, a brief discussion of the term will help us to proceed to the other various interrelated aspects of church worship that were affected by COVID-19.⁷

Brief definition of worship

Piper (2016:n.p., cf. Emmanuel 2019:n.p.) argued that true Christian worship entails valuing or treasuring God above all things. Such worship comprises both the inner (Mt 15:8–9) and public expressions (Rm 12:1). The inner sense of worship comes sharply from Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (Mt 15:8–9), who were accusing his disciples of breaking the Jewish tradition by not washing their hands before eating (Mt 15:8–9). In Matthew 15:8–9, Jesus makes a clear declaration that true Christian worship is, in essence, a matter of the heart (Mt 15:8–9).

However, the inner sense of worship should result in sacrificial outward expression of worship services or daily acts of love to others, which Paul calls our 'spiritual worship' (Rm 12:1) (Piper 2016:n.p.). In my view, this is when Christians affirm acts of obedience to their calling as the agents of God who bring change in the world (cf. Van Aarde 2016:285–286, cf. 298–300; Deyoung & Gilbert 2011:26; McNeal 2009:24). Thus, in configuring Matthew 15:8–9 and Romans 12:1 together, one can define worship as displaying the worthiness of God through our thoughts, utterances and acts of love to others, regardless of their religion⁸ (Piper 2016:n.p.). This clearly means that all that Christians do is worship, that is, worship is a way of life for Christians (Piper 2016:n.p.). Acts

6.Impact is both positive and negative. The positive aspect largely refers to the innovations that emerged in response to COVID-19.

7.For more information on the biblical concept of worship, one should visit https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339240912_WORSHIP_A_Biblical_Perspective/link/5e45b5f992851c7f7f37a842/download. See Emmanuel (2019).

8.Together with Piper (2016), I acknowledge that these two aspects come from Hebrews 13:15–16, which affirms that: '...through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of the lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased'.

of utterance constitute activities such as praising God, preaching and teaching of the Word of God, communal fellowship, repentance in worship services or small group gatherings (Lee 2014; Piper 2016:n.p.). Lee (2014:III) argues that worship is the context of preaching and teaching the Word of God and, consequently, the fellowship of believers, in my view. The sacrificial acts of love include all that Christians do with their bodies, hands and feet to others (Christians and non-Christians) that demonstrate and reflect the supreme value of God (Piper 2016:n.p.).

Having established the understanding of worship, a considerable number of scholars and organisations (Afolaranmi 2020a:168; Global Ministries 2020; Mathe 2020; Pillay 2020:268; Scott 2020:1; WHO 2020:2) concur that COVID-19 has affected church worship and its interrelated facets in many different ways, which will be discussed in the forthcoming sub-section.

The impact of COVID-19 on worship, fellowship, preaching and teaching of the Word of God

In explaining how COVID-19 has affected church worship, Pillay (2020:266) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the church's traditional ways of worship, as the congregants were accustomed to gathering physically for public worship.

When the Christians physically gathered to worship God together (public worship) on Sundays or any day of the week, it was an important time for them to celebrate their salvation in Christ and fellowship with one another, thus, having their faith and hope in Jesus Christ renewed (Pillay 2020:266). These physical gatherings strengthened the faith and hope of Christians in Jesus Christ, as they sang Christ-centred songs of praise and worship as a community of God and listened to the teaching and preaching of the Word (Pillay 2020:266). Also, the encouragement from fellow believers, through the sharing of Scriptures and testimonies of life experiences rooted in the grace of God, uplifted those who were experiencing challenges (Pillay 2020:266).

However, with the COVID-19 lockdown regulations that were put in place by governments and the WHO to promote social distancing, traditional ways of worship were adversely affected (cf. Pillay 2020; Scott 2020; WHO 2020). The WHO (2020:1) considered church religious leaders, faith-based organisations and faith communities as critical role-players in saving lives and reducing COVID-19-related illnesses by teaching their respective communities about COVID-19 and the guidelines and regulations that had to be followed in order to save lives.⁹ The faith-based community leaders could create and help community members to accept new ways of worshipping and reverencing whenever there are church gatherings (WHO 2020:2). Wildman et al. (2020:115–117) noted that, from the government perspective, there was a need for the

churches to strictly follow the COVID-19 guidelines because religious practices constitute a major risk in spreading the virus.

It is important to note that the North Korean pastor who conducted physical worship services believed that failure 'to attend worship in person is evidence of a lack of faith – arguably bullying church members to show up against their better judgment' (Wildman et al. 2020:115).¹⁰ Therefore, many North Korean citizens urged their government to prosecute the church leader for the gross wilful negligence that caused a massive spread of COVID-19 infections in the country (Wildman et al. 2020:115). In my view, the Korean case demonstrates that the emergence of the COVID-19 virus created tension between the church and the governments, as some church leaders insisted on conducting in-person worship services at the expense of their members' health and in clear violation of the COVID-19 guidelines and regulations.

Jaja, Anvanwu and Jaja (2020:n.p.) noted that in the South African context, some churches disobeyed the government's guidelines and regulations for curbing the spread of COVID-19. This clearly indicates that some churches were not following the government's preventive measures to curb the spread of infections such as social distancing, sanitising and the wearing of masks. Just like in North Korea, the failure by South African churches to follow COVID-19 guidelines and regulations created tensions between the state and the church (Mpofu 2020). The government's failure to act decisively on these religious leaders was a huge obstacle to socio-economic and religious transformation, and this created a dilemma in the church-state relations (Mpofu 2020:1).

Jaja et al. (2020:1077–1079; cf. The Conversation 2020) helpfully concluded that religion, culture and burial ceremonies in South Africa undermine the government's efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19.

I argue that COVID-19 regulations and guidelines have affected the very heart and soul of what it means to be humane and relate to others. The American-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020b) concurred with the prior observation by stating that:

[M]illions of Americans embrace worship as an essential part of life. For many faith traditions, gathering together for worship is at the heart of what it means to be a community of faith. (n.p.)

Thus, the worship and *koinonic* aspect of the church, which defines its very essence in terms of fellowship, brotherhood and sisterhood was decimated, given that people were forbidden from mingling and mixing with others, either for fellowship, worship or any other social gathering. Social distancing, the wearing of masks and sanitisation seemed to communicate the message that a fellow human being was a

⁹This corresponds with an article by Wild-Wood et al. (2021), titled *The Public Role of Churches in Early Responses to COVID-19 in Africa: Snapshots from Nigeria, Congo, Kenya and South Africa*, which indicates that churches in many countries are at the forefront of formal and informal health delivery and disease control, through medical services and faith healing.

¹⁰For more examples of churches that resisted following the COVID-19 guidelines and regulations and were subsequently blamed for the spread of the pandemic, read the work by Wildman et al. (2020:115).

threat to the health of others and should be avoided (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020a:n.p.). Here, the explicit and implied message is that one can be protected from contracting the virus by avoiding other human beings, thus, living by social distancing as the order of the day (Richter 2020:n.p.). Given this, the churches were forced to conduct their services differently and, thus, re-imagine the future of the church (Pillay 2020:265; Shibambu & Egunjobi 2020:9).

I now argue that the lockdown and social distancing regulations, as measures to flatten the curve of COVID-19 infection, forced the church to reimagine new ways of worship namely: distance church (Campbell 2020:4; cf. Shibambu & Egunjobi 2020:9ff.).

Campbell's assertion brings me to the discussion of the advantages and challenges associated with technologically facilitated worship for the church in the forthcoming sub-section.

The advantages and challenges of technologically facilitated worship

The lockdown forced pastors to reach their members virtually by live-streaming church services on digital platforms such as Facebook, television,¹¹ YouTube and many others, and this physically separated the pastor/clergy from the flock and the flock from one another (Campbell 2020:4; cf. Pillay 2020:265). Here, as the church, respectively, adjusted and adhered to the COVID-19 challenges and guidelines and regulations, Omondi (2020:7) notes that it attempted, in a variety of ways, to maintain its visibility and witness in the world. In addition, the church was forced to reinvent new meanings of being present in, or absent from church, as new ways of participating in worship and the mission of God were forged (Global Ministries 2020:n.p.; Mpofu 2021:1).¹² Parish (2020:1) concurred with Mpofu (2021) by asserting that even when the buildings of the church are closed because of the lockdown and social distancing protocols, the churches (people of God) are still alive and active in their worship and fellowship (Pillay 2020:265). Hence, physical distancing challenges the church to contextualise its theology of living together as a church or reimagine ways of *doing* church in the age of pandemics such as COVID-19, as the Holy Spirit works beyond face masks and social distancing (Global Ministries 2020:n.p.).

However, the WHO (2020:2) indicated that one of the advantages of virtual worship is that it reduced the need for congregants' labour to thoroughly clean and disinfect

the church venues after every worship service. In my view, this could be a tiresome task; hence church members decided to worship at their homes. This had manifold benefits as well. While curbing the spread of COVID-19 by refraining from gathering, the congregants avoided needless labour and expenditure, given that not many churches had any disposable money to buy disinfecting chemicals to clean the churches (WHO 2020:2). This assertion corresponds well with an observation by Father Russell Pollitt, Director of the Jesuit Institute South Africa that many churches in South Africa, particularly those in the rural areas, cannot afford to buy sanitisers and PPEs (Friedman 2020:n.p.). To make the matters worse, Father Russell Pollitt affirms that the government is not helping the financially battling churches with the necessary PPEs and sanitisers because it is already under pressure to do so in schools and hospitals (Friedman 2020:n.p.). In his view, even though the government could assist the churches with PPEs and sanitisers,¹³ it is apparent that many of them do not have the capacity to implement the safety measures and regulations, as directed under the lockdown regulations (Friedman 2020:n.p.).

Sonjica (2020:n.p.; cf. Mathe 2020) noted that some pastors who already had existing online platforms found it easy to fully switch to online worship. In Pastor Khosa's view, COVID-19 negatively impacted everyone in many aspects. Some people lost their loved ones to the pandemic. These people could login to the church's online services in search of counselling, fellowship and encouragement (cf. Mathe 2020; Sonjica 2020:n.p.). Sonjica (2020) cited Pastor Chris of Hope Restoration Ministries, who noted that virtual church enabled people to remotely access his church services. Because of this, the number of viewers on his online platforms significantly increased for two reasons (Sonjica 2020). Firstly, people need spiritual empowerment and the church's online services enabled them to access it from the comfort of their homes. Secondly, online services opened doors of opportunities for people who were not members to attend services virtually (Sonjica 2020).

Irrespective of the fact that virtual church services offered a broader platform to anyone who could access the internet, I am of the opinion that there are some churches that could have experienced challenges with virtual worship for many different reasons. In this case, the underlying question is: what challenges did the churches in Africa experience when using digital platforms to worship God? It is unfortunate that the extant literature does not stipulate such challenges, possibly because the subject has not been fully explored yet. Turianskyi (2020; cf. The Conversation 2020) alluded to the general digital challenges that the generality of Africans face and these can be applied to the African church. According to Turianskyi (2020), the term digital divide refers to the 'uneven access to/distribution of information and communication

11.Sonjica (2020) reported that the Rhema Bible Church, which is one of the biggest churches in South Africa, had been offering virtual services to its members via its television and YouTube channels for years. So, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit South Africa in March 2020, the ministry did not encounter many challenges, as it already had an online worship system in place; it simply had to intensify its virtual presence. In other words, the Rhema Bible Church moved to the existing online platforms that were set before the pandemic, so it did not need a lot of money and labour to set up new online platforms in order to continue with its ministries.

12.It is interesting to note that Mpofu (2021:6) advanced that '...digital spaces, which mediate interaction through "telepresence", embodied in the representations of the sacred available through online systems where users are no longer ordinary believers – but religious participants who have power and freedom to choose when and who they want to associate with'.

13.At this occasion, I am aware that in Nigeria, there is a report that some Church leaders like Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the head of Redeemed Christian Church of God, has donated 200 000 hand gloves, 8000 hand sanitisers and 8000 surgical face mask to the Lagos State Government (Orijinmo 2020:n.p.).

technologies (ICT) in societies, which is a global problem'. The problem of digital divide is more prevalent in Africa because of the following: (1) unfavourable socio-economic factors, (2) weak ICT infrastructure, (3) poor access to information and communication and (4) internet shutdowns (Turianskyi 2020). In view of the socio-economic factors, many African people are not able to access the right technology, such as laptops and smartphones and high-speed internet, and this creates immense challenges for people who are supposed to work from home, as a means of curbing the spread of COVID-19 (Turianskyi 2020).

In relating social-economic factors as the major cause of the digital divide and, consequently, its impact on the South African church, Friedman (2020:n.p.) reports that when President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that under the Lockdown Level 3 regulations, only a limited number of people could attend religious gatherings, the move was welcomed by some church leaders, but it was criticised by others. For instance, Friedman (2020:n.p.) noted that the announcement was well received by Berry Behr, the chairperson of the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative, while Father Russell Pollitt, Director of the Jesuit Institute SA criticised it arguing that the decision was too hasty.

Given the above-mentioned conversation, I argue that although some pastors already had existing online platforms before the emergence of COVID-19, thus finding it easy to do online worship services and resultantly witnessed increased viewership, it is also true that some church members and non-Christians did not have access because they did not have devices such as smartphones or computers. Hence, it can be established that the church in Africa can never be immune to the effects of the digital divide. In substantiation of the preceding point, Hanekom (2020:n.p.) indicated that many people in South Africa do not have internet access in their homes. In a comprehensive discussion that cites various sources, Hanekom (2020) noted that North West and Limpopo provinces have the lowest access to internet at home, at 3.6% and 1.6%, respectively. This buttresses the argument that most church members in South Africa were isolated from church activities because of the lack of internet access in their homes.

Turianskyi (2020:n.p.) reports that the rest of Africa is also bedevilled with weak and inadequate ICT infrastructure. Unfortunately, there are no studies that focus on how the church in Africa has struggled because of the lack of ICT. People have been worshipping online and have had different experiences. For instance, these researchers witnessed in their church, first-hand, a number of issues that reflect weak ICT infrastructure and lack of information and communications technology skills in churches. In their church, it took the media team a long time to get the online audio-visual system to function. Sometimes, the programmes could not start at the scheduled time as the IT people struggled to live-stream the worship services. In some instances, the interrelated facets of worship, such as preaching, teaching and praise and worship

could not be streamed, because of internet problems or malfunctioning electronic devices (cf. Lee 2014). In my view, the previously mentioned reflect either the weak ICT infrastructure or lack of information and communications technology skills in churches.

Consequently, the connectivity challenges adversely affected the flow of information, thus, isolating church members from accessing online services. In my view, poor internet connectivity and related issues, which were experienced by many African churches, hugely affected the teaching and preaching of the Word of God, which are very important aspects of church ministry (cf. Lee 2014). Preaching and teaching seek to exalt God by pronouncing what the Bible says (Obielosi & Mgbemena 2019:1–12). Furthermore, WHO (2020:3) stated that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, people have to wear masks and practise social distancing. It is apparent that such regulations were not favourable to conducting sermons because the preachers would not be audible enough (either in person or in virtual preaching), as they were required to wear masks and maintain social distancing (WHO 2020:3). Notably, although one can consider teaching and preaching different, in both cases, the Word of God is explained, interpreted and applied to people's personal concerns and challenges so that they can glorify God (cf. Obielosi & Mgbemena 2019:1–12).

In view of the above challenges, I observed that some churches experienced challenges while conducting different aspects of ministry such as teaching and preaching the Word of God on their digital platforms. Hence, there is a need to speed up the training and upskilling of church pastors and leaders to utilise technological devices, as these will be indispensable to both present and future ministries of the church, because the COVID-19 virus will be with us for a long time to come (Allen 2020:n.p.; Coffrini 2020:n.p.; cf. Mpofu 2021:3–4). In this case, the church might require to invite ICT experts to train pastors and leaders. However, given that most churches are already battling financially, they can barely afford internet access and data, let alone hire ICT experts (cf. Mpofu 2021:4). Chinembiri (2020:n.p.) noted that in spite of governments making mandatory orders for mobile companies to reduce data prices, many Africans cannot afford to go online because of data costs and lack of internet-enabled devices. With this in mind, Mpofu (2021:4) noted that in ministries, such as the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), the money that was supposed to be used by the presbyteries, sessions and commissioners for transport to official church meetings was given to members to buy data in order to access virtual church services. This effort by the UPCSA significantly shows how church members in other churches may be in dire need of data to access online services.

The effects of COVID-19 on the mission, evangelism and pastoral ministry of the church

It is important to note that COVID-19 has negatively affected the mission, evangelism and pastoral ministry of the church

(Allen 2020; Afolaranmi 2020; Mpofu 2021; Tysick 2020). Baron and Pali (2021:1) in their empirical study in Free State, South Africa, observed that COVID-19 challenged churches and church leaders to reimagine church ministry and mission. Thus, in their different ways, these authors (Allen 2020; Mpofu 2021; Tysick 2020) argue that in most countries, the evangelistic mission of the church was severely affected by national lockdowns because the clergy could no longer preach and teach the Word of God in public, as people were confined to their homes (Tysick 2020). Given this, the church and its leaders had to adhere to the COVID-19 regulations and guidelines, while continuously conducting the mission of the church, evangelism, as well as ministering to the spiritual and physical needs of members (Afolaranmi 2020:12).

Numerous authors (Afolaranmi 2020; Allen 2020; Mpofu 2021; Tysick 2020) concurred that there was a need for the mission, evangelism, pastoral ministry and many other ministries of the church to continue during the national lockdowns in African countries and beyond, and this could only be achieved by using online platforms. However, Allen (2020) and Mpofu (2021:3) indicated that the major hindrance was the lack of digital literacy skills by many church leaders and pastors, who struggled to utilise their digital devices to virtually conduct the church ministries on a large scale. Because of this technological challenge, I concur with Allen (2020:n.p.) that many churches were preoccupied with the 'effort to retrain and re-orientate agents of evangelisation to gyrate towards online catechesis'.

Although there is a need to fast track the upskilling of pastors and church leaders with working knowledge of technological devices, I argue that some of the leaders find it difficult to keep up with simultaneously running their areas of ministry and learning new skills and language (Allen 2020:n.p.). In my view, this clearly indicates why some church ministers and leaders found it difficult to continue with some of their ministries using online platforms. Consequently, this weakened the effectiveness of ministries such as the mission of the church, evangelism and pastoral ministry. However, this does not mean that all the church leaders and clergy in Africa struggled to utilise online platforms to continue with their ministries.

I observe that the results of Afolaranmi's (2020) research indicated that some African churches, particularly in Nigeria, successfully used the online platforms to conduct virtual counselling. Nevertheless, this observation cannot discount the fact that many African churches are struggling to continue with some aspects of their ministries because of the lack of knowledge in using digital devices. Even in the midst of the pandemic, some congregations continued with their traditional ways of pastoral ministry (Afolaranmi 2020). In my view, this implies that some church leaders found it difficult to abandon established modes of ministry and solely focus on using online platforms, in compliance with the WHO and their respective governments' efforts to curb

the spread of COVID-19. The most plausible reason is that the clergy and leadership did not have confidence in the effectiveness of their online church structures.

The preceding notion seems to correspond well with Bedford-Strohm, cited in Lutheran World Federation (2020:n.p.), who argues that COVID-19 presented the church with a dilemma on whether online worship should permanently replace personal interaction. I agree with this assertion that although virtual worship has been effective for some churches, it is difficult to perceive how some of the church pastoral ministries, such as visiting the sick and the old age homes, could be carried out virtually because they ideally involve personal interaction between Christians and/or non-Christians (Lutheran World Federation 2020:n.p.). With this in mind, one can observe that online worship will never replace personal interaction, owing to the fact that some ministries (evangelism, holy communion, pastoral care to the sick and old-aged people) require more personal Christian-to-Christian and Christian-to-non-Christian interaction (World Federation 2020:n.p.). In concurrence with Bedford-Strohm, I advance that the issue of virtually conducting some church ministries and programmes, such as Holy Communion and pastoral care to the sick, has the potential to spark serious theological discussions within the church (World Federation 2020:n.p.).

The economic and financial impact of COVID-19 on the church

The COVID-19 pandemic economically and financially affected churches in Africa and beyond (Afolaranmi 2020:169; Boorstein 2020:n.p.; Burger 2020; Msibi 2020; Verasamy 2020:n.p.). This point interlinks with Mbunge's (2020:1809) assertion that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the economies of many countries, including South Africa, because of 'the closure of international borders, global demand meltdown, supply disruptions, [and the] dramatic scaling down of human and industrial activities during lockdown'. Haleem, Javid and Vaishya (2020:1) concurred with Mbunge (2020) and noted that 'COVID-19 has rapidly affected our day to day life, businesses, [and] disrupted the world trade and movements'. The drastic changes that were instituted to manage the spread of COVID-19 resulted in millions of South Africans losing their jobs and income, both in the formal and informal economic sectors (Khambule 2020:91).

Khambule (2020:91) reiterated that the effects of the job losses were felt in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. However, it is not easy to accurately quantify the extent of the job losses in the informal economy (Khambule 2020:91). In Khambule's (2020) view, the emergence of COVID-19 challenged the perception and assumption that the informal economy was an employment shock absorber in times of economic crises, as the pandemic brought the entire global economy to a halt and subsequently caused an economic and financial downturn. In the formal sector as well, many people lost their jobs as the national lockdown

forced many companies to reduce their salary budgets, as production and sales had dwindled drastically (Maluleke 2020:n.p.).

Having established the preceding assertion, I concur with Boorstein's (2020:n.p.) assertion that churches were both economically and financially affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, because some Christians were among the people who lost their jobs or had their salaries reduced as companies were preoccupied with surviving the effects of the pandemic. Consequently, some of the affected members were not able to contribute their weekly offerings, which play a key role in advancing the work of the church (Boorstein 2020:n.p.). This is supported by Msibi (2020), who stated that when the national lockdown came into effect, the churches' finances became unstable. In order to operate effectively, most churches rely on donations, Sunday collections and tithe. However, because of the lockdown and its attendant effects, these sources of revenue were not reliable. To worsen the situation, Burger (2020) stated that many churches that rely on donations to meet their bills are in financial crisis because they have not been getting adequate donations, as the donors themselves have also been impacted by the pandemic.

It is important to note that although the churches can encourage their members to pay their weekly offerings and monthly tithe using electronic or digital banking, some are not able to do so because they no longer have any sources of income (Boorstein 2020:n.p.; Burger 2020; cf. Verasamy 2020:n.p.). Again, like all other people, church members are also preoccupied with meeting their basic needs, as well as anxious about the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their financial and economic situation (Boorstein 2020:n.p.; Burger 2020; cf. Verasamy 2020:n.p.). Because of the economic havoc wreaked by the pandemic, some churches can no longer afford their water, electricity, ministries and salaries bills, among others (Boorstein 2020:n.p.; Burger 2020; cf. Verasamy 2020:n.p.). Given the above scenarios, there is a growing concern that many churches will not survive the financial impact of COVID-19 (Boorstein 2020:n.p.).

Echoing the foregoing concerns, Verasamy (2020:n.p.) predicted as follows: 'The longer the lockdown takes, the worse it's going to be for us. Some churches have even started saying that they cannot pay pastors' salaries'. In line with Verasamy (2020), Burger (2020) states that many churches are in financial crisis because they have not been getting adequate donations in order to cover bills and salaries of staff. Indeed, this clearly indicates that COVID-19 has had such a negative impact on the economy and finance of the church that some African churches had to resort to using digital platforms to ask for donations (Msibi 2020).

Conclusion and summary

In conclusion, one can argue that there is an emerging perception among the scholars that argues that COVID-19 has created a new way of *doing* church. This perception arises

from the notion by some scholars who argue that as churches move to online worship services, attendance increased in a significant way, because non-church members with internet access in their homes could also log in from the comfort of their homes. However, this conception is challenged by one that posits that Africa is mainly affected by the digital divide because the majority of her population are socio-economically deprived; thus, the people do not have smartphones, computers and internet access in their homes. This gives credence to the argument that only limited number of Christians and non-Christians managed to access online church services. Having noted that, I argue that the negative impact of COVID-19 on church ministry variables outweighs the opportunities that it brought.

In Africa, COVID-19 has arguably destroyed the Church's traditional ways of worship and ministry variables such as worship, preaching, teaching, fellowship, mission, evangelism, pastoral ministry and many others. As the African churches moved their ministry variables to online platforms, it was noted that some churches that had existing digital platforms, such as television and YouTube, found it easy to conduct worship and preaching services online, as they just had to strengthen their platforms to minister to a larger audience. However, churches that did not have existing platforms battled to move their ministry variables online. Some of the digital migration challenges were amplified by the lack of financial resources to install strong internet infrastructure. In other churches, some leaders and the clergy did not have the requisite skills to use digital devices. To counteract the aforementioned challenges, various African scholars urge the church to speedily train the clergy and the leaders to use smart electronic gadgets.

Although some African churches have managed to conduct their preaching and worship online, the challenge lies on how they can continue with ministries and programmes such as Holy Communion, evangelism, pastoral care to the sick and old-aged people that require more personal interaction. Thus, the dilemma is whether online worship will permanently replace physical interactions or not. As posited earlier, this observation can potentially spark serious theological discussions within the church.

Having summarised the above discussion, one can cite lack of literature on the impact of COVID-19 on church ministries in Africa, with a particular focus on South Africa, as a challenge. Most of the available literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the church in Africa focuses on ministry variables such as worship, preaching, teaching, evangelism, finance, mission and pastoral ministry at the expense of others, such as pastoral care to the sick and old people, Holy Communion and ministries to men, women, parents, youth, married people, bereavement and many others, that are central to the existence of the church. This observation contradicts the perspective that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected all aspects of church ministries in equal measure.

Thus, I argue that there is a need for qualitative studies that discuss the impact of COVID-19 on all church ministry variables in Africa. In addition, the findings of such studies should be published in academic journals, so that the churches may adopt evidence-based interventions on their ministry variables. In substantiation, most information regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the discussed church ministry variables is not found in academic works, but in blogs and webs, as the bibliography indicates. Again, this requires more qualitative studies on the issue.

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