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The Role of Pentecostal Church Leadership to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Zimbabwe

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The Role of Pentecostal Church Leadership to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Zimbabwe

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Abstract- Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe have large number of followers and these were also affected by the Covid 19 pandemic which has been and is still torturing the entire world. These churches have leadership structures at different levels ranging from national to smaller groups of an assembly. There is need to understand the roles played by leadership at different levels in fighting against the pandemic in Zimbabwe. The study used an online survey to reach out to leaders and learn their efforts in managing the Covid 19 pandemic. The survey got insights into encounters of the leaders with the pandemic as well as different roles which they played in managing both the virus and their members. Findings suggested that at the onset of the pandemic, fears were pronounced and leaders used awareness, sharing of biblical and encouragement messages, prayers and counselling to help members to overcome fear. The study also revealed that even after leaders have put in a lot of efforts, there is still evidence of fear as some members still do not attend physical services even when restrictions are relaxed. Church leaders also mobilized financial resources and groceries to cater for their pastors and underprivileged groups. However, incomes are dwindling which makes it difficult for leaders to provide as much support as intended. A number of challenges were cited which included underestimated value of church leaders as government views their role as nonessential. Among the recommendations, leaders stressed the need to strictly ensure members follow recommend health guidelines to manage the pandemic. This study is significant in expressing the role of church and its leaders in addressing challenges even of a global nature which is largely ignored.

Keywords: pentecostal churches; covid 19; pandemic; lockdown; world health organization; zimbabwe; health.

I. Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic has continued to affect global citizens socially and economically especially with no end in sight (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). The pandemic is affecting the social and mental wellbeing in view of restrictions which limit interactions such visiting families and friends (Isiko, 2020). When restrictions are relaxed, they still do not allow social norms such handshakes making citizens uncomfortable. In an African context activities such as weddings and funerals as well as visiting others in times of need (such as when they are admitted in hospital) are important. The pandemic has posed limits to all of these causing psychosocial pressures. Additionally, others have lost close relatives to pandemic while others have survived but suffering from stigmatization due to fears by others to contract the virus.

Economic pressures have also added weight to these challenges (Deguma et al., 2020; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

The pandemic has slowed down economic activities and growth with situation worse in developing country where resources were already limited. In other countries the pandemic came at a time when other challenges were still affecting economies. For example, Zimbabwe had not yet recovered from the impact of Cyclone Idai which had hit its eastern areas destroying roads and buildings as well as taking many lives in March 2019. Due to Covid 19 related slowdown of economic activities most businesses were incapacitated resulting in loss of employment and in other cases reduction of salaries (Pavari, 2020). Some businesses completely failed to return to normal levels of operation while most self-employed citizens were forced to spend even the capital during lockdown periods.

Churches were not spared as they suffered due to restrictions which only allowed small gatherings and worse during total lockdowns (Isiko, 2020; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). This affected revenue of churches as collections such as offerings were largely not possible while permitted alternatives such as virtual services could not equate in participation to physical gatherings when situation is normal. Some of the members who remained active were also among those whose income generating activities were adversely affected by slowed down economic activities. Under normal circumstances, the church stands by members such as through visiting the sick, counselling, charity works, supporting the bereaved and burying the dead. Due to the pandemic, most of these duties were compromised causing challenges which included loss of membership, emotional disorders among members while counselling was almost impossible and disruption of routines and unity of the church.

Even amidst these challenges, the church had to find ways of living with the situation and support its members, needy communities as well as partnering with others. According to Alexander (2020), the hope and trust people have in churches makes them institutions to provide solace to millions affected by the pandemic for which politicians have no answers. Successful involvement of the church relied on effectiveness of different levels leadership across hierarchies. For

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instance, in Philippines Catholic Bishops accepted vaccines and offered churches as facilities for government vaccination program (Gopez, 2021). Continuation of activities even during times of lockdown by possible means required strong commitment of leaders. The leaders were needed to make sure that resources to keep churches running are available. Same time, leaders needed to work hard to ensure that membership does not significantly reduce as members lose track during times of isolation. It is thus necessary to understand the specific roles played by leadership from national down to much localized levels.

Pentecostal churches command huge membership in Zimbabwe. These include old ones such as Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and ZAOGA as well a number of relatively new and emerging ones such as United in Faith International (UFI) among others. By affecting these Pentecostal churches, the pandemic could affect the faith of a huge proportion of citizens. Most of these churches have leadership levels which range from national, provincial to assembly and small group level to ensure effective management of operations. This stratification signifies different levels of interventions which need to be understood to appreciate the role played by Pentecostal churches in managing impacts of the pandemic. This dimension is lacking in literature and a study in this direction would help the nation to understand the role played by church leadership in socio-economic wellbeing of the country.

II. Datasets and Methods

a) *Data collection*

The study focused on role of leaders of Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe thus data collection was confined to the bounds of the country. Due to Covid 19 restrictions, physical collection of data from church leaders is still not possible. Furthermore, the restrictions make it difficult to gather information from Pentecostal church leaders in different parts of Zimbabwe. The use of online survey was found to be the most effective as it allowed collection of data without physical contact thus not breaking rules set by the country to control the spread of the virus. The method was also found to be cost effective as it did not require travel while it accessed respondents from different parts of the country. The online survey consisted of 14 open ended questions and 1 guided one which basically lured for information about the efforts made to ensure that churches did not collapse, the assistances that were rendered to the government, church members and communities as well as the challenges encountered during these efforts.

b) *Data analysis*

Data from different respondents were quality controlled before they were used for analysis. This included reliability and consistence tests. Quality data were then sorted according to the question they were responding to and deductions were made from them qualitatively. For each question, analysis included grouping of similar responses into one theme to allow good flow of resultant descriptions and discussions. Even responses from few individuals were not ignored as they could entail extra ordinary efforts which could also be unique. The study assumed that all the participating church were in their best level of operation before the pandemic such efforts made during the Covid 19 era were mainly directed at countering its negative impacts. The study also assumed that restrictions imposed by the government affected all the churches equally although impacts may vary depending on factors such as resource base and membership sizes which vary between the churches.

III. Description and Discussion of Findings

a) *Characteristics of respondents*

i. *Consent to participation*

A total of 786 responses were received with all respondents indicating that they participated willingly (Figure 1). Forced participation has effect of causing findings not to be trusted. In our view 786 was a good number of responses given that the survey was online based which required internet or data for connectivity while there were no resources to support participants in this regards. It is not easy to get that number of willing participants.

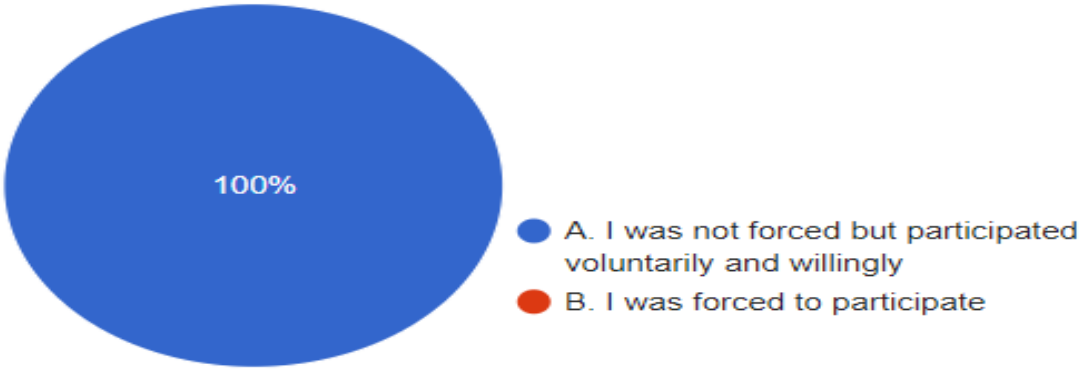

Figure 1: Indication of consensual participation by respondents

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ii. *Levels of leadership of the participants*

The proportion of participants who have leadership roles at national level was equal (30%) to that who lead at smaller group at assembly level (Figure 2). This distribution was important because national leaders oversee activities of the entire church while smaller group levels are where most of the interactions and activities occur. The responses also indicated the general involvement Provincial, District and Assembly leadership.

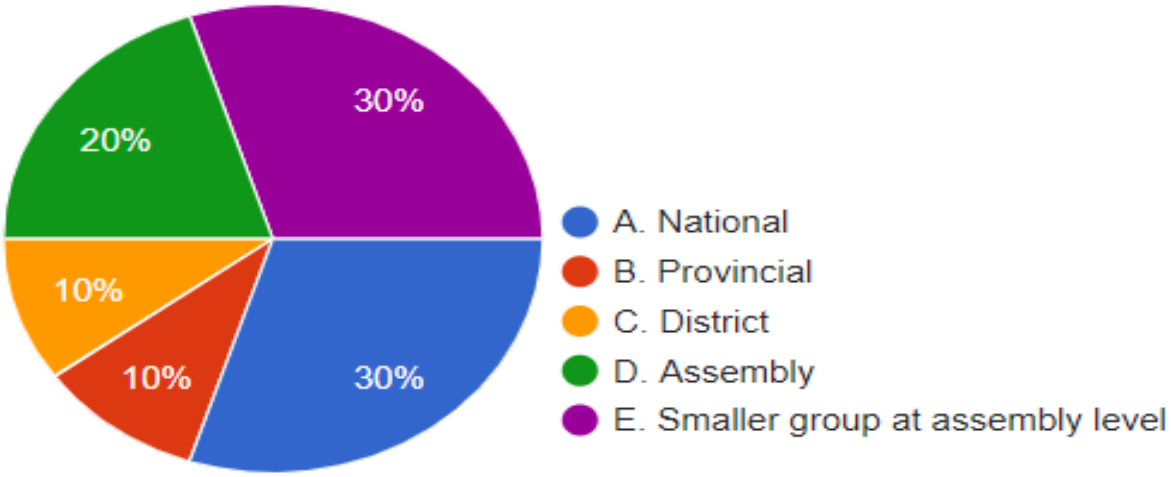

Figure 2: Levels of leaderships of the respondents

b) *Fear of diseases is usually interpreted as lack of or little faith. In what ways did you address the fear/faith dilemma around Covid-19 pandemic?*

Most of the leaders indicated that fear is strongly associated with lack of or limited faith. They signalled that fear measures appreciations of biblical principles and overall trust in God. In support of this, one of the respondents indicated that when fear dominates, people will be praying with their eyes open instead of focusing on communicating with God. There were also opinions that in order for people to pray freely, they must be safe. A notable number of respondents expressed that 'safety comes first' in every situation.

c) *Efforts by leadership to manage fears of the pandemic in members*

Ensuring following of WHO and government's guidance and alerting members to avoid complacency gave them some feeling that their safety was guaranteed. This reduced fears among those members were attending services whenever restrictions were relaxed. Others made use of teachings to assure members that as long as they take all precautions, God was going to keep them safe. Leaders of most churches also introduced regular online teachings and services to raise the faith of members. They also sent biblical scriptures and messages to encourage them to ensure good relationship with God and at same time have knowledge and faith in that the Lord is their salvation and shepherd. When risk was high, leaders generally asked members to stay at home and continue praying to God as usual. To ensure constant communication with members other leaders introduced zoom or Microsoft Teams meetings and counselling sessions. Virtual prayer sessions were also used to encourage members to submit to God their cries while they were sticking to recommended health guidelines.

d) *Effect of the pandemic on attendance to services and other gatherings even when restrictions are relaxed*

There was limited understanding of the Covid 19 at the onset due to limited awareness. Some of the decisions such as moving into the first lockdown were abrupt causing confusion and fear among most church members. Adding to the confusion were also diverging sentiments about the virus as information was coming even from unverified sources but still reaching to the members. In order to reduce risk a big number started not to attend services even before lockdowns were declared. Most church leaders indicatd that there are still some members who never visited church and other gatherings since the declaration of the first lockdown in Zimbabwe a year ago (March 2020). Some leaders even stated that as much as 60% of their church members had chosen to stay away for safety. Therefore, the decline in attendance has remained sustained even in the presence of periods of relaxation of restrictions.

e) *Steps taken by leaders to restore attendance and participation to the usual level*

A number of leaders indicated that they invited health experts to educate members of departments responsible for health and counselling. In other churches and assemblies they made sure that health and counselling departments are manned by health experts who are also members for correct interpretation of stipulated guidelines. In order to be fully compliant church leaders organized resources needed for the health department. The idea was that members who had chosen to abstain would only start to attend when their

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safety was guaranteed. Other churches sent bulk messages to members giving assurance of safety and also made use of online follow ups. Although in some cases they experienced resistance, other leaders introduced home visitations for face to face interactions with abstaining members. Other leaders promoted vaccination to boost the immune systems of members and make sure that they feel that they can overcome the virus.

f) Catering for the groups at high perceived risk of contracting the virus (e.g. the elderly and the sick)

Most of the church leaders indicated that they did little or even nothing to cater for groups such as the sick and the elderly. Most of the efforts did not differentiate members as most leaders believed that everyone was equally prone to be infected by the virus. In cases where minimal efforts were made, age groups at high risk were encouraged not to attend. Other leaders pushed that if every other member takes precautions religiously then all group would be safe. As such they encouraged washing of hands, sanitizing of equipment such as musical instruments and social distancing. Social distancing included increasing number of services which reduced number of people per session. When vaccination programs were introduced other leaders encouraged members to be vaccinated and not to attend physical services whenever they were not feeling well with symptoms similar to those of the Covid 19 virus. Largely, efforts to assist vulnerable groups were affected by lack of resources.

g) Efforts by leadership to make sure that Pastors' welfares were taken care of

Although the number had decreased, there some families and individuals who remained faithful throughout to support the work of God sacrificially. Leaders kept on encouraging and praying for these and other members while those responsible for managing financial resources sent regular messages to remind members of their obligation. This was done to make sure that financial resources did not completely dry out and that there were funds to take care of Pastors. In other churches, coordination was done centrally to ensure that of the available resources even pastors from assemblies in low income areas were supported. Other leaders stressed that some pastors suffered reduction in income to the extent of moving children from boarding school and registered her to day classes. Other raised utilities such as groceries from members to give to their pastors. There were also best cases in which members at an assembly continued to pay tithes and offerings part of which was directed towards welfare of pastors. Worst cases were also expressed where members did not take care of pastors completely throughout the Covid 19 era even when leaders made efforts to encourage them. In some cases leaders at the highest level of the churches collected grocery items from capable assemblies and members and sent humpers to pastors in low income areas or whose incomes were worst affected by the pandemic.

h) Role of leadership in supporting the underprivileged church members to withstand Covid 19 related challenges

According to (Deguma et al., 2020), Covid 19 resulted in the suffering of the poor more than just health risk in Philippines. Some leaders indicated that they encouraged and supported underprivileged members to start small businesses in order to sustain themselves. They further went on to create business and personal development platforms on social media were different successful people could give speeches and advices on how to become successful starting from humble beginnings. In other churches and assemblies, they mobilized groceries and gave humpers to the less privileged. Due to the understanding that some members could not afford gadgets and data bundles required for social media engagement, some leaders resorted to use of text messages with same information as that sent on other platforms to cater for those with limited resources. As a result, most of the underprivileged could receive all necessary message including health alerts from their leaders as long as they possessed a basic minimum phone.

Other churches and assemblies were fortunate enough to receive support from external funders through coordination of leaders. Some were sending regular announcements inviting any of the members experiencing challenges to bring them to the attention of leadership for assistance to be provided. Leaders also encouraged members to stay united and to be brother's keepers which most leaders indicated was key to survival of assemblies as members constantly check on one another. Leaders of most churches and assemblies also regularly checked on families who are known to be incapacitated to identify and address needs. Although there were a number of efforts in place, most leaders admitted that limited or absence of financial resources affected effectiveness of reaching out.

i) Efforts made by highest church leadership level to ensure that assemblies and other gatherings are observing stipulated guidelines to control the spread of the virus

The national secretaries continuously reminding church secretaries and leadership to observer regulations such as through national routine memos. Similar approaches were also seen in other countries such as in Uganda where leaders encouraged members to social distance and stay at during the unsafe periods (Isiko, 2020). Similarly, in Poland, they also followed restrictions as churches had limited or totally suspended their religious life (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). Other churches instructed assembly secretaries to forward records of numbers that attend services to provincial

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and national secretaries. During lockdowns, central leaderships advised members to stay at home and ensured services were done through social media or national broadcasting services. For instance, the President of AFM in Zimbabwe (Reverend Chiangwa) conducted services on Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) during the lockdown period. The use of public media by churches to communicate and encourage members during the pandemic period was also reported by Sulkowski & Ignatowski (2020) in the Philippines. National leaderships also encouraged assemblies with huge congregant bases to have many service in order to stick to stipulated group sizes. However, even after relaxation of restrictions physical visits by central leadership or their representatives to inspect compliance to set regulations has never taken place in most of the churches.

j) Handling of stigma around Covid 19 by leaders

Among the steps taken to handle stigma, leaders shared information with members about how the virus is spread as other social media sources were sending around wrong information. Leaders also made members to understand that everyone was vulnerable and it was important for them to care for one another. Other leaders indicated that they did not have direct experience with the virus and had not recorded cases of stigmatization in their churches. Others indicated over time, an understanding grew that it is possible to survive even after contracting the virus. This lessoned cases of stigma compared to the days when first cases of the virus were recorded in the country

k) Support rendered by leadership to help the government, other authorities or organizations to provide resources where there was need during the Covid era

Leaders responded to government call for support during the pandemic period. For instance, they contributed towards removal of street people and establishment of a stable home for them in Chiredzi to reduce their exposure to the virus. National leaders also provided food humpers, sanitizers and masks to help the underprivileged. Others provided resources for posting of education and awareness messages around the country. Other leaders admitted that they did not play any significant role in partnering with the government and other players to provide needed resources for a successful fight.

l) Challenges faced by church leadership in managing the Covid 19 pandemic

In spite of education and awareness activities some church members remain adamant and complacent thus do not always fully comply with specified regulations to control spread of virus. There are cases when some members do not wear masks during services which to them is a sign of strong faith. There also members who prefer handshaking and hugs rather than noncontact methods of greeting each other. The other challenge cited is that of conspiracy theories which has affected understanding of the pandemic by some members leading to reluctance in taking necessary precautions. Normally, church leaders visit and pray for the sick in hospitals but imposed restrictions have largely made this impossible. On the other hand, when some members are not visited by church leaders during ailment they lose faith and in worst cases dismember themselves. Controlling number of people per service or gathering was also found to be difficult as, naturally, churches do not turn away people once they have come to seek divine intervention while some members take advantage of that. While the church needs abstaining members to attend services when restrictions are relaxed, use of social media and other noncontact methods was found to be not very effective. The other challenge was that the role of church leaders in fighting against the pandemic was understated as they were categorized as nonessential. This was in the background that members needed prayers for strength while others needed counselling due to the traumatizing nature of the pandemic. Leaders also indicated that inflow of funds to churches was dwindling which incapacitated them even if they were willing to assist vulnerable members and citizens as well as to support other initiatives.

m) Recommendations by leaders towards improvement of management of Covid 19 in churches

Leaders indicated that all assemblies and gatherings must have Covid 19 task teams to ensure guidelines are observed religiously. Leaders must be strict in ensuring members follow World Health Organization guidelines such as by sanitizing hands and proper wearing of face mask. Leaders also suggested that more awareness should be done about the Covid 19 pandemic. Leaders indicated that they must give hope to members and combat fear with encouragement through faith. Keeping members constantly connected and showing God's compassion and care to those affected was needed throughout this trying time.

IV. Conclusion

We investigated the role of Pentecostal churches leadership in fighting the Covid 19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. The churches and leadership were not spared of the impacts of the pandemic which included reduction in influx of funds and number of people attending physical services. The pandemic has caused a lot of fears in members with others not comfortable to take part until nations are in full control of the virus. Leaders at different levels to a number of steps to ensure that members are safe as well as to remove fears from the members. Leaders were making every effort to reach out to all members using possible

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technologies in times when physical gatherings are not allowed. Leaders have also been instrumental in taking care of Pastors and the underprivileged members of the church and society. There is need to increase strictness in churches towards following of health guidelines as some members have continued to stick to old ways. The church leaders could do more but are mostly constrained financially due to impact of the pandemic on livelihoods of members.

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