



The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Children’s Ministry of the Methodist Church Ghana: A Case Study of Emmanuel Society-Konongo

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus-19 (Covid-19) pandemic took the whole world by surprise and caused unanticipated changes in people’s life. The effect of this global pandemic on the religious, economic, political and social lives of people has been enormous. In Ghana (the context of this study) many churches experienced great challenges for their members could not fellowship together physically because of the restrictions that were imposed by the government. Churches whose members tended to depend solely on their leaders to access God’s blessings learnt a bitter lesson as their members could not have any meaningful encounter with God without their Pastors. Many studies have been conducted on the effects of the pandemic on Church life with a greater focus on adult members of the Christian community. There is just a little attention paid to the impact of the pandemic on the Children’s Ministry. This paper contributes to filling that gap by examining the impact of the pandemic on the Children’s Ministry of the Methodist Church Ghana using the Emmanuel Society of the Konongo Circuit as a case study. It is an empirical study that gathered data through questionnaires, interviews and participant observation. The responses received revealed that there was a huge gap created between the children, other believing friends and Sunday School teachers. The paper made recommendations for the Christian community.

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INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) took the whole world by surprise and caused unanticipated changes to people’s life. Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The disease was first identified in 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei, China and had since spread globally, resulting in the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic.¹ The common symptoms of Covid-19 include fever, dry cough, and difficulty in breathing but diarrhoea, sputum

¹ David S. Hui et al., “The Continuing 2019-NCoV Epidemic Threat of Novel Coronaviruses to Global Health — The Latest 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak in Wuhan, China,” *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 91 (February 2020): 264–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijid.2020.01.009>.

production, muscular aches and sore throat are less common. Most instances have modest symptoms, but some worsen and lead to pneumonia and multi-organ failure.

In March 2020, the rate of deaths per number of diagnosed cases was 4.4 per cent; however, it ranges from 0.2 per cent to 15 per cent, according to age group and other health problems. More than 1,010,000 cases of Covid-19 have been reported in more than two hundred countries and territories as of 3 April 2020, resulting in over 53,000 deaths but more than 211,000 people have recovered from this deadly virus.² Since more than 80,000 Covid-19 cases have been recorded in China as of the initial cases from Wuhan at the end of 2019, with the majority of those cases occurring in Hubei and neighbouring regions. A joint World Health Organization (WHO)—China fact-finding mission estimated that the epidemic in China peaked between late January and early February 2020, and the rate of new cases decreased substantially by early March.³ Presently, cases have been reported in all continents, except for Antarctica and have been rapidly rising in many countries of the world. The unexpected lockdowns were announced as a result of the Covid-19 instances rapidly increasing throughout the world, particularly in the United States, the majority of Western European nations, and most recently South-East Asia.

Typically, respiratory droplets created during coughing are how the virus is passed from one person to another. It may also be spread by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching one's face. The virus can survive for up to 72 hours on surfaces. The incubation period of the virus is generally between 2 and 14 days and a middling of five days.⁴ The criterion system of finding is by reverse transcription-polymerase (rRT-PCR) using a nasopharyngeal swab. Infections can also be identified using a combination of symptoms, risk factors, and a chest CT scan that reveals pneumonia-like characteristics. Frequent hand washing is one of the suggested ways to prevent the infection, social distancing (maintaining physical distance from others), and keeping hands away from the face. For those who are suspicious and those who care for them, wearing sanitised masks is advised; however, the general public is not advised to do so; those who choose to use basic cotton masks may do so. For Covid-19, there is no specific antiviral medication or vaccination. Treatment is mainly by supportive care, isolation and experimental measures.

In Ghana, most people mistook Covid-19 for malaria or fever, since the early symptoms of these ailments are similarly deceptive. The aetiology of SARS-CoV-2 remains a debate since several possible causes have been noticed throughout the world. Scientists believe that the pandemic is of a zoonotic origin. Ghana confirmed her first cases of covid-19 on 12th March 2020, which were all imported cases. On 15th March 2020, while Ghana had recorded five cases, certain restrictions which included the shutdown of churches were imposed. Wearing sanitized masks is indicated for suspicious persons and those who care for them; the general public is not urged to do so; those who prefer to utilize straightforward cotton masks may do so. There is no specific antiviral drug or vaccine for Covid-19.

The changes that Covid-19 brought did not spare the Christian fraternity. Churches were closed down for almost three months. Churches, therefore, resorted to virtual and online church services on both traditional and social media platforms. In the Methodist Church Ghana, Covid-19 affected both adult and children services. The Methodists also adopted virtual services through Wesleyan Television, the official television station of the church which was carried on various social media platforms. Aside from the connexion services, some dioceses and circuits and even some societies also had their virtual services on their various social media platforms of which Konongo Circuit was not an exception.

The Children's Ministry Directorate is the arm of the Methodist Church Ghana that sees to the spiritual, moral and psychological well-being of the junior members of the church. The developmental structures within the Children's Ministry are five (5) and they are the cradle role (0-3 years), beginners

² Worldometer, *Real-Time World Statistics*, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info>.

³ World Health Organisation Media Report, 2020.

⁴ An Tang et al., "Detection of Novel Coronavirus by RT-PCR in Stool Specimen from Asymptomatic Child, China," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 26, no. 6 (June 2020): 1337–39, <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2606.200301>.

(4-6 years), primary (7-10) years, juniors (11-13) years and teens (14-17) years.⁵ The researchers' interest and concern are focused on the impact of Corona Virus disease 2019 on the Children's ministry of the Methodist Church Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a mixed method approach, comprising both qualitative and quantitative methods, and probability and non-probability sampling techniques. Focus group discussions, questionnaires and interviews were used in the collection of the data. Probability sampling is meant to ensure that all members of the population stand an equal chance of being selected to be part of the study. By this, the stratified sampling technique was used. The motivation for using this technique is that the church children's ministry has five (5) developmental structures, as mentioned above.⁶ The Emmanuel Methodist Church (which was studied) has three developmental structures—the Beginners (primary school pupils), juniors (JHS pupils) and Teens (SHS students). With the non-probability sampling technique, convenient sampling was used. This means that the children who were available and were considered relevant to the study were those interviewed.

With a total sample size of one hundred and twenty (120) children, with an average church attendance of sixty (60) children per service, this research sampled half of the total population which is sixty (60) children from the age range of 7 years to 17 years. The same method was used to select ten (10) people including parents from the five classes within the church in addition to the minister in charge of the Church and some of the Children's service teachers making the total sample size to be seventy (70). The focus group discussion was used to collect the data from the beginners' class of ten (10) children. The questionnaire was administered to the junior and teen classes and the selected parents accordingly. The researchers also participated in some services and gathered additional data for the research. The quantitative data collected in April 2021 was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Children's Ministry in Context of the Methodist Church Ghana

Methodism in Ghana was introduced in 1835 by a Wesleyan missionary called the Rev. Joseph Rhode Dunwell. As the Gold Coast Church grew stronger through the propagation of the Gospel of Christ to various villages on the Gold Coast, it was marked by a variety of practices, the most important of which was the teaching and learning of the local language. The teaching sessions were conducted separately from the secular education provided by the British Merchants in the Castle school during the weekdays. Children's Christian education was actively sought in the Castle schools. The Church in Ghana introduced formal school education from the Castle schools to the communities under the leadership of Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman, also a British Wesleyan Missionary. These Methodist schools have a lot of Children. In these Methodist schools, a Local Preacher would be appointed to administer to the spiritual needs of the Children while the school teacher looks after them.⁷

Even though the day school (Castle schools) became the Church's nursery, Rev. Terry Coppin, a Wesleyan Missionary and Chairman of the Ghana District of the Methodist Church from 1883 to 1886, strongly proposed at the end of the jubilee synod in 1885 that the church be built by Sunday services conducted in the church. During this time, the Cape Coast Sunday School was without a doubt the most successful model for children's ministry. From 1892 to 1894, Mr. F.C.F. Grant was the first superintendent of a Sunday school. During his tenure, the Children's Ministry grew at a breakneck rate. From 1894 to 1832, Father Brown succeeded him. It's worth noting that during this period the separation of the young from the old at public meetings, whether religious or secular was not a major issue. The Ghanaian society was an adult society. In the words of F.L. Bartels, the Church expected

⁵ MCG, *The Policy, Bye-Law and Child Protection Manual of The Methodist Church Ghana* (Accra: Alpha Royal Publications Limited, 2019), 18.

⁶ MCG, *The Policy, Bye-Law and Child Protection Manual of The Methodist Church Ghana*, 8.

⁷ MCG, *The Policy, Bye-Law and Child Protection Manual of The Methodist Church Ghana*, 8.

its young people to live as fully in an adult situation as their understanding would permit them.”⁸ Mothers carried their babies or led their little children by the hand to the church services. Adult guides would then gather the children at the rear, preferably in the gallery for them to be spectators of the adult activity. Gradually the children were separated for a short period during the Sunday adult divine service for religious instruction, but their service will end before the adult service. However, the children would stay on to see what would happen in the adult service.

Sometimes, institutions for young people, such as Sunday school, the Guild, or youth fellowships, are overrun by adults. The Sunday school was soon transformed into reading lessons for students aged ten to forty. Two sessions of Sunday school were created to retain the children and nurture them in the church's fellowship: the morning session and the afternoon session. Throughout its history, the Methodist Church in Ghana has relied on schools to provide literate members, teachers, catechists, and ministers, as well as lay leadership.⁹ It appeared that the care and the teaching of the children for a short period outside the day school was not a strong feature for the growing church since the church did not have a baby language and the adult guides for the children were by apprenticeship.

As a result, Sunday school became an important part of the young church's development, as members who were unable to attend the Castle schools were able to learn to read and write in their native tongue. The Sunday school was then used to train and educate people for positions of leadership such as local preachers, stewards, and class leaders in the Church.¹⁰ “A Singing Band formed out of the Sunday school, not only led the singing in the vernacular in the Church but also accompanied preachers on their visits to nearby villages.”¹¹

Its involvement in teaching young and old how to read and write the vernacular as well as how to read the scriptures was a significant boost in the Church's existence that many others tried to imitate. Following Ghana's independence, secular education began to take hold in the country. Despite the positive studies on the Christian Education of Young People in relation to the Sunday school presented at Synods each year, the undercurrent discontent expressed by Sunday school teachers was that the attention given to work in the Sunday school is relatively low. The focus of Sunday School changed from the teaching and learning of the local language to the teaching and learning of the scriptures as a means of providing religious instructions to children in the church due to the rapid transformation in the educational system of the nation.

To improve the System, research was conducted into activities of Education in the church with an emphasis on education for children.¹² The work of para-church organizations, such as those, whose aim was to evangelize children, took advantage of the opportunity to train teachers within the Christian community, and the Methodist Church Ghana was not excluded. It introduced a slew of new ideas to Sunday schools. The Methodist Synods, Quarterly Meetings, and Leaders' Meetings took a keen interest in Children's ministry. Rev. Peter KweiDagadu, who was assigned to take care of the Sunday school, was one of the people who worked tirelessly to bring the ministry to where it is now. Others like Rev. Joseph Kwao Clegg, Rev. J.E. Yarquah, Rev. E.E. Ackon, Rev. Rachael EtrueTetteh and Rev. W.E. Davis helped to hold the fort.¹³ Currently (January 2023), the Children's Ministry Directorate is led by the leadership of Very Rev. Kenneth Arthur-Sarfo. With the above background, the paper proceeds to present and analyse the data collected.

⁸ MCG, *The Policy, Bye-Law and Child Protection Manual of The Methodist Church Ghana*, 9-10 .

⁹ MCG, *The Policy, Bye-Law and Child Protection Manual of The Methodist Church Ghana*, 9.

¹⁰ Maxwell Kwaku Obeng, *Developing Healthy Children Ministry* (Accra: FG Press Ltd , 2018), 3.

¹¹ Francis L Bartels, *The Roots of Ghana Methodism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

¹² H. C. Ahiabile-Addo, “Focus on the Early Methodist Church in Ghana,” *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* , 1996.

¹³ Bartels, *The Roots of Ghana Methodism*.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

This looks at aspects such as age, gender, denomination, occupation, educational background and marital status of the respondents.

Age of Respondents

This was considered to see if there could be varied opinions from groups of church members, lay workers and pastors.

Table 1: Age distribution of the respondent

Variable (Age)	Frequency	Percentage
10-20	54	60
21-30	6	6.7
31-40	23	25.6
41-50	5	5.6
51 and above	2	2.1

Source: Field Study, 2021

The above table 1, represents the age distribution of respondents who participated in the study. It can be seen that a quite high percentage of the respondents were within the age group 10-20(60%) closely followed by 31-40(25.6%). Meanwhile, only 2.1% of the respondents were from the age group 51 and above who demographically are approaching retirement age in Ghana with a lot of health complications.

Gender and Occupation of Respondents

The gender of the correspondent was checked to find out which sex dominated the study. It was found that the number of females 57 (63.3%) was more than males 33(36.7%). Majority of the respondents were unemployed students (63%), self-employed (24%), government employed (11 %) and Church workers (2%).

Educational Background of Respondents

Respondents who obtained Junior High School education recorded the highest frequency 27(30%), it was closely followed by those who had primary education 24(26.7%), secondary school /Technical & Vocational (20) representing 22.2%, Tertiary education recorded 15 representing 16.7% and those who had no formal education (Illiterate) recorded the lowest 4 (4.4%).

Table 2: Educational Level of Respondents

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary	24	26.7
JHS	27	30
SHS/TVET	20	22.2
Tertiary	15	16.7
Illiterate	4	4.4

Source: Field Study, 2021

Marital Status of the Respondents

For the marital distribution of respondents, it was found that singles were the majority 57(63.3%), married couples followed 31(34.4%) and divorced 2 (20.8%).

The Children's Ministry during the Covid-19 Period

There was a general consensus from all the respondents interviewed on the state of the children's ministry during the Covid-19 period. All feedback received from parents, Sunday school teachers and ministers were all in the affirmative concerning the changing state of the children's ministry during the Covid-19 restriction period.

They shared the same view and opinion that Covid-19 has changed the way the children's ministry conducts church services. Among the responses received include the creation of a huge gap between the children and their Sunday school teachers. Most of the parents also realised that their children were not in regular contact or interactive enough with other children during the period and as such minimise their fellowship with these other believing children.

The Ministers and teachers reckoned that children were predominantly restricted from worshipping in person as a way to control the easy spread of the disease. This resulted in children not being able to play the usual roles in church during children's programs or activities. Some parents also did not attend church service during the Covid-19 restriction period and therefore did not bring their children along to avoid any careful or constant supervision.

Generally, parents, Sunday Schoolteachers and ministers are all still in fear of bringing their children to church service for lack of fully observing the safety protocols. Again, respondents especially the ministers believe that the enthusiasm for children to know God and learn much about Him has declined drastically. In effect, there's a huge reduction in attendance to Children's Services even upon the resumption of the new normal church services. Sunday school teachers particularly noted the increasing fear of some children attending service as they are still and consistently anxious about contracting the deadly disease. This has spiritually and financially stalled the otherwise surging growth of the children's ministry.

Measures Put in Place by the Church to Minimize the Impact of Covid-19 on the Children's Ministry

Firstly, children were admonished to stay at home and join the various virtual services conducted on television as reiterated by the Ministers and Sunday school teachers. This, notwithstanding, seniors of the children's group or older children especially those of the teen class were allowed to attend the adult service under strict supervision and adherence to all safety protocols. Special teaching classes were intentionally created for the children where they were spaced out as part of the process of observing the social distancing protocol. Welfare incentives were also given to children and their parents during the Covid-19 period to keep observing the protocols.

All safety protocols were duly observed by the church during the period to minimise its impact. The church also encouraged members and children alike to wear nose masks, wash their hands regularly and sanitise their hands before entry into the church at all times for any activity. More so, the church procured or secured enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including alcohol-based hand sanitisers, surgical nose masks and veronica buckets for hand washing for members especially children to ensure their safety in the event of attending the adult service and even in post Covid-19 era.

Parent Support Systems to Improve Children's Ministry during the Covid-19 Restriction Period

This objective or question had an overwhelming endorsement by all respondents. Parents, Sunday school teachers and the Ministers interviewed on this subject believe that parents have a major role to play in supporting the children's ministry during the Covid-19 restriction period. They all agreed to the fact that parents had to, needed to and actually supported their children and the church to improve the children's ministry during the Covid-19 period.

It is interesting to know that all respondents (parents, teachers and ministers) fully consented to the various roles parents had to play in supporting the children's ministry, particularly the support for their children to improve the children's ministry during the Covid-19 period. These support systems were made available by parents to improve the children's ministry.

To begin with, most parents held daily devotions with their children and also empowered them to lead during these regular devotions as outlined by parents and the minister interviewed. As stated by some parents and Sunday school teachers, some parents had to have pep talks with their children to allay their fears and clear some misconceptions about the disease. Parents also provided PPE for their children in a bid to ensure their safety, especially in public and crowded places. Most children were also taught the Word of God by their parents as these children were made to learn and study in the comfort of their homes. Some parents provided their children with audio-visual aids to assist them while at home to learn the Bible with ease and relative convenience. Parents also reiterated that they had to regularly check up on their children to ascertain their safety and strict adherence to all protocols.

Again, under strict supervision, some parents brought their children to church service to sustain the children during the Covid-19 restriction period. They also encouraged their children to have their quiet times amid the chaos around them. Children were mostly provided with a conducive and enabling environment at home to join the virtual services conducted on television.

Structural Changes that Affect the Conduct of Children's Service Post-Covid-19

About 88% of responses received were in the affirmative with regards to whether the structural changes made during the Covid-19 period will affect the children's ministry post-Covid-19. All the Sunday school teachers and most parents interviewed shared the same perspective except for one parent who had a varied opinion that the conduct of the children's service may not be affected by any structural changes post-Covid-19 era. This parent believed that things may go back to normalcy and that changes made earlier during the restriction period will not affect the service conducted for children in any way.

Among the changes expected to affect the children's service post-Covid-19 as stated by Sunday school teachers and the Ministers interviewed encompasses the improvement in the practice of personal hygiene by children and instilled by parents and teachers alike. There will be a stipulated starting and closing time for all children's services; this will eventually encourage punctuality and time consciousness among the children. Quite unfortunately, there will be limited time spent by children at church to rehearse songs, dance and drama or plays.

Moreover, the teen class (older children) will be strengthened and enlightened by the turn of events happening around them with the support of their parents, Sunday school teachers and the minister. Many children will have learnt to fellowship with God in their privacy and thereby translate it to other children in the church. Most children will also get familiar or acquainted with audio-visual aids and online or virtual meetings or services; this may or will, in turn, restrict in-person fellowship and outdoor activities.

Lastly, with the wearing of the nose mask, the real, actual or true facial expression of the children during their service may not be fully recognized, noticed or seen by their Sunday school teachers, for the teachers to act accordingly with a swift response.

DISCUSSION

Socio-Demographics of Respondents

Considering the age of the respondents, it was deduced that a quite high percentage of the respondents were within the age group 10-20 (60%). It was expected that by virtue of their ages, most of them were schooling and do not fall within the active workforce and again they have superficial knowledge about the impact of Covid-19. The next age group with the highest percentage was 31-40 (25.6%), they could work assiduously to improve productivity, and perhaps by their age, they were advanced in knowledge and had adequate knowledge of Covid-19.

According to the gender results, females 57 (63.3%) dominated over males 33 (36.7%). Generally, ladies tend to admire attending church more than guys; it was not surprising that females outnumbered the males because more ladies were in church attendance than men. This, therefore, explains the disparity of the gender imbalance.

Examining the State of Children Ministry during the Covid-19 Period

Covid-19 has basically changed the way the children's ministry conducts church services. Among the responses received include the creation of a huge gap between the children and their Sunday school teachers and consequently has minimised believing children fellowshiping with each other.

Children were predominately restricted from worshipping in person as a way to curb the easy spread of the disease. This resulted in children not being able to play the usual roles in church during children's programs or activities. Some parents also did not attend church service during the Covid-19 restriction period and therefore did not bring their children along to ensure careful or constant supervision.

Parents still entertained fear in bringing their children to church service for lack of fully observing the safety protocols. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and its related lockdowns have resulted in an unprecedented rise in online services, not only among Pentecostals and Charismatics but also among mainline historic mission churches, especially Wesleyan TV which has allocated airtime for children ministry every Sunday for the sharing God's word with children. Many Ghanaian churches now organize services via media platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, conference calls, television and radio broadcasts among others.

Kioh Shim opines that since the late 20th century, the world has witnessed a growing interest in the use of the internet, personal computer, mobile phone and other forms of new technology for communication.¹⁴ However, in Ghanaian Christianity, the online ministry was done mainly by Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.¹⁵ The pandemic has also affected the liturgical setup of many churches. Using the Methodist Church Ghana as an example, the church hierarchy has advised that choirs and other singing groups in the various societies should avoid robing, procession and recession in the Covid-19 era. In the first phase of the easing of Covid-19 restrictions, group singing was discouraged; soloists were encouraged to sing in the church. In most Sunday divine services, the preacher now reads the Bible passage(s) and conducts the liturgy as well. Before the pandemic, the reading of Scripture lessons and the conduct of the liturgy were not done by the preacher. In addition, many preachers now use only one Bible lesson (instead of three lessons) for their sermons as a way of managing time. To avoid contact with the communion elements some ministers now use spoons to pick the wafers or ask the communicants to pick the wafers and the wine themselves.

Measures Put in Place by the Church to Minimise the Impact of Covid-19 on the Children's Ministry

The church insisted that children should stay at home and join the various virtual services conducted on television. However, seniors/teen class was allowed to attend the adult service under strict supervision and adherence to all safety protocols. Special teaching classes were intentionally created for the children where they were spaced out as part of the process in observing the social distancing protocol. Welfare incentives were also given to children and their parents during the Covid-19 period to keep observing the protocols.

All safety protocols put up by the government were duly observed by the church during the period to minimize its impact. There are several health protocols put in place by the government through the Ministry of Health to help stop the spread of the virus. There is the mandatory wearing of face masks, the practice of social distancing, thorough and regular hand washing with soap and water, as well as the use of alcohol-based hand sanitisers. Additional health protocols include avoiding handshakes, drinking enough water daily, engaging in regular physical exercise, eating healthy food, staying home as much as possible, and having adequate sleep. The church also encouraged members and children alike to wear nose masks, wash their hands regularly and sanitize their hands before entry into the church at all times for any activity. More so, Christians have the responsibility to obey the

¹⁴ Kioh Shim, "John Wesley's Eucharist and the Online Eucharist" (University of Birmingham, 2013), 241.

¹⁵ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Taking Territories & Raising Champions* (Accra: Asempra Publishers, 2010), 13.

rules of their nation provided these rules do not contradict God's word (Rom. 13).¹⁶ This is so because it is God who has established civil authority; therefore, to rebel against civil authority is to rebel against God.¹⁷ This paper takes the position that the health protocols associated with this pandemic were made known to health officials by God; therefore, refusal to observe these protocols is disobedience to God. More so, the fact that it is not only Christians who are required to observe these protocols indicates that the church is not the primary target in the observance of the Covid-19 pandemic health protocols.

Hence, the church procured or secured enough PPE including alcohol-based hand sanitisers, surgical nose masks and veronica buckets for hand washing for members especially children to ensure their safety in the event of attending the adult service and even in post Covid-19 era.

The church also took it upon itself to pray to avert the impact of the pandemic on the children's ministry. Many church services in the Covid-19 era are geared toward finding solutions to the pandemic through prayers. Preachers and prayer leaders draw from the atonement of Christ to give hope to their congregants that Jesus can heal the nation (and indeed the world) of the virus. In this regard, the Covid-19 pandemic is considered one of the many diseases that Christ overcame through his atoning and a substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. Archbishop Nicholas Duncan Williams (founder of the Action Chapel International) has declared in prayer that, "The coronavirus is a name, a person without body and in the name of Jesus, as we bow our knee and we pray, this plague, pestilence and virus will bow the knee and stand down and go back to where it came from."¹⁸ From the African worldview, Christ is the true *Oduyefo* ("physician") who has the cure of diseases considered incurable.¹⁹ This is the rationale behind a WhatsApp post that featured C.O.V.I.D. as an acronym for: "Christ Overcomes Viruses and Diseases." Afua Kuma encourages Christians with her assertion that "Jesus is the one who fills his basket with sicknesses and dumps it into the depths of the sea. He has already visited and cured illnesses. He extends his arms out over the water as the devil strolls through the trees in agony."²⁰

Parent Support Systems to Improve Children's Ministry during the Covid-19 Restriction Period

The majority of the parents, 87% held daily devotions with their children and also empowered them to lead during these regular devotions as outlined by parents. Some parents had to have pep talks with their children to allay their fears and clear some misconceptions about the disease.

Parents also provided PPE for their children in a bid to ensure their safety, especially in public and crowded places. Most children were also taught the Word of God by their parents as these children were made to learn and study in the comfort of their homes. Some parents provided their children with audio-visual aids to assist them while at home to learn the Bible with ease and relative convenience. Parents also reiterated that they had to maintain regular checkups on their children to ascertain their safety and strict adherence to all protocols.

Parents should endeavour to accommodate and even provide support to those children in the children's ministry that have been infected with the deadly virus and not neglect them for the fear that they too can contract the virus. One of the questions that need a response from parents is this: How would Jesus have related with those infected and or affected by the coronavirus if this pandemic had occurred during Jesus' earthly ministry? The biblical teaching on the need to care for those in trouble (Lk 10:29-37; Matt. 25:37-46; Jam 1:27) makes caring for people affected by the virus a moral imperative for Christians. Parents and for that matter, the church at large should desist from judgmental attitudes, discrimination and stigmatization of children during the Covid-19 pandemic. The fear of discrimination and social isolation is the reason why some victims hide their status. Following Jesus'

¹⁶ Yusufu Turaki, *The Church and the State*, ed. Tokumboh Adeyemo (WordAlive: Nairobi, 2006), 1397.

¹⁷ David M. Kasali, "Romans," in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokumboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: WolrdAlive, 2006).

¹⁸ Nasiba Yakubu, *Duncan-Williams Declares Thirty-Days Fasting, Prayers against Coronavirus*, 2020, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/coronavirus-duncan-williams-declares-30-days-fasting-prayers-against-coronavirus/>.

¹⁹ Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises* (Accra: Asempe Publishers, 2011), 17.

²⁰ Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises*, 17.

example, parents are expected to accept, identify with and show love to children during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not necessarily one's fault to be a victim of the pandemic, and even if it is through one's negligence that they are affected by the pandemic, it is unchristian to ignore them.

The study agrees with Pobeë that true Christian religion and spirituality is "at best the quest after what is human... To be human is to have a relation of love even with the victims" of Covid-19.²¹ Certainly, the Covid-19 crisis needs divine intervention. Humans can do nothing without the help of God. Speculations and human wisdom cannot find a solution to the pandemic without God's grace. No matter what happens, the world is still God's world. The problems that the world encounters are usually the consequence of human choices, sometimes even arrogating to human achievements things that ought to be explained in terms of God's power and sovereignty. God has not abandoned his people; he surely has a message for the world through the Covid-19 pandemic. The need to seek salvation through the atoning sacrifice of Christ is a major part of the divine message that could be learnt from the pandemic.

Structural Changes that Affect the Conduct of Children's Service Post-Covid-19

Among the changes expected to affect the children's service post-Covid-19 as stated by Sunday school teachers and the minister interviewed encompasses the improvement in the practice of personal hygiene by children and instilled by parents and teachers alike. There will be a stipulated starting and closing time for all children's services; this will eventually encourage punctuality and time consciousness among the children. Quite unfortunately, there will be limited time spent by children at church to rehearse songs, dance and drama or plays. Moreover, the teen class (older children) will be strengthened and enlightened by the turn of events happening around them with the support of their parents, Sunday school teachers and the minister. Many children will have learnt to fellowship with God in their privacy and thereby translate it to other children in the church. Most children will also get familiar or acquainted with audio-visual aids and online or virtual meetings or services; this may or will intend to restrict in-person fellowship and outdoor activities.

In another development, one social structural change that Covid-19 brought was the distorting of social relationships. As God's image bearers (Gen. 1:26-27), humans are social beings. The social dimension of human life is reflected in the Ghanaian communal view of life. Like other Africans, Ghanaians share the communal worldview as expressed in the saying "I am related by blood, therefore, I exist or I exist because I belong to a family."²² Ghanaian communal life is so important that every Ghanaian tries to avoid social exclusion.²³ In Ghana, "the value of humanity is, intrinsically, linked with that of the unity of all people, whether biologically related or not."²⁴ The Ghanaian traditional social life extends to the church. During church services, people dance together, shake hands, hug and sit close to each other to enjoy communal life in the chapel. The ban on church gatherings and other social activities such as funerals, weddings, and others necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic restricts Ghanaians from enjoying their social life. The need to ensure social distances and the ban on handshaking prevents congregants to enjoy the social life that they are used to.

RECOMMENDATION

The world has experienced the Covid-19 pandemic for some time now and the heat of it seems to be abating. However, there is the need to continue to observe some precautionary measures so that neither the old version nor the variant type may have devastating effects on humans again. Based on the results and analysis of the data, the following recommendations are worth noting. First, parents must endeavour to insist their children strictly adhere to all the Covid-19 safety protocols to prevent the

²¹ John S. Pobeë, *HIV/AIDS in Africa: A Biblical Response* (Paper Presented at WAATI Conference Kumasi, 2006), 26.

²² John S. Pobeë, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 49.

²³ Isaac Boaheng, *Poverty, the Bible and Africa* (Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2020), 23.

²⁴ Emmanuel Asante, *African Traditional Religion* (Accra: SonLife, 2017), 35.

spread of the virus. This pandemic is one like one of those that have occurred in the world before. By following health principles, it will be no more.

Secondly, Revered ministers may continue to use the virtual platform to reach out the gospel to children and adults to avoid members distancing themselves from God in the Covid-19 era. However, because of unreliable sources of electricity and limited access to internet facilities, it is recommended that physical meetings be used while observing health protocols.

Thirdly, Children's Service/Sunday School teachers should constantly educate children on issues of Covid-19 and also periodically call or pay a visit to the children in their homes. There is a need to equip the teacher with enough resources to handle whatever situation that confronts them. Fourthly, the post-Covid-19 church should make conscious efforts to improve upon its discipleship role so that in the event of another occurrence that prevents physical meetings, Christians (including children) will be able to survive on their own.

CONCLUSION

The paper examined the state of children's ministry during the Covid-19 period. The findings reveal that children were predominantly restricted from worshipping in person as a way to control the easy spread of the disease. It also came out that, the church insisted that children should stay at home and joins the various virtual services conducted on television. However, seniors/teen class were allowed to attend the adult service under strict supervision and adherence to all safety protocols and besides the church organised intensive prayers to battle against COVID-19. Lastly, on the issue of structural changes that affected the conduct of children's service in the post-Covid-19 era. It was revealed that personal hygiene has been instilled in children by practising the safety protocols. It has inculcated in children the habit of punctuality whereby they strictly adhere to the stipulated time for starting and closing all children's services. It is believed that the findings and recommendations given will help the church to get better prepared for ministry in times of pandemics.

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