

# THE CHURCH



## IN POST COVID 19 SIERRA LEONE

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To the memory of our President (CCSL)  
**Bishop John K. Yambasu**  
(1956 – 2020)  
May his soul continue to rest in the peace of the Lord and his memory ever  
cherished!

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**Preface:**  
**From The Desk of CCSL General Secretary**  
**Mrs. Eburn James – Dekam<sup>1</sup>-**

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All of us have been significantly affected by COVID 19, we have had to unlearn and relearn behaviour patterns to ensure that we and our families stay healthy. Some of the new lessons learned and the behavioural changes made have been uncomfortable but have been productive. When we compare our COVID 19 statistics to most of the other countries in the world, we can see that in retrospect the correct lessons and actions have been taken. We live in one of the safest societies in Africa and the world.

Some time ago, the Council of Churches invited persons from within its membership to reflect on the impact or effect of the COVID 19 on the life of the Church and then to reflect on what the Church would ‘look like’ in the post COVID time frame i.e. what should be its distinctive identification given the COVID experience. The written responses were varied and certainly reflected different perspectives on actions the Church should take.

Traditionally the Church in Sierra Leone is called to obediently remain faithful to its calling namely leading all persons in society to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that the personal relationship grows in quality. Additionally, the Church, the Body of Christ made manifest or visible, is to exercise its prophetic voice in identifying and addressing the issues of the day as it related to the health and well-being of all of God’s image bearers in society.

COVID 19 has impacted the Church; the papers in this document reflect different perspectives on what the Church should consider as it moves into the ‘new normal’ to remain true to its calling i.e. leading individuals into a deeper relationship with their Lord and Savior and exercising its prophetic voice in a changing society.

The Council of Churches is thankful for this opportunity to present these materials to you for your consideration and reflection.

To God be the glory now and forevermore as we move forward in expressing our love for and grateful obedience to the Almighty God.

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Eburn James Dekam served the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone and retired as General Secretary in December 2020

# **INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO COVID 19**

**By the Editor**

The coronavirus (COVID19) was first identified in Wuhan, China in December of twenty-nineteen and had since spread throughout the world. It has created widespread disruption globally. The disruption has not only impacted the lives of those individuals who have been infected, their families and loved ones, as well as health care workers, but it has also impacted children whose schools were temporarily closed down, workers who lost their jobs, companies forced into bankruptcy and liquidation, etc. The COVID 19 crisis is having broad impact on the geopolitical dynamics as well as the global economy. It is affecting all sectors: religion, government, academia and education, businesses and the economy, the family, women and youth, the media, and the environment.

In January 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the pandemic a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The spread was so fast that it caused a desperate global panic. As at the time of writing, nearly one hundred million (100,000,000) people are infected globally and the global death toll stood at about two million, two hundred thousand (2,200,000) and growing by leaps and bounds every day.

Sierra Leone experienced its first case on 31st March 2020 and the Ministry of Health put stringent measures in place to contain the pandemic. The victim, a Sierra Leonean, had travelled to France for five days and was tested positive on his return to Freetown.

The government set up a response team and declared a ‘State of Public Emergency’ to help the nation cope with the Pandemic. The regulation imposed included the closure of places of worship and schools. Our church buildings were closed in March 2020 and were only reopened in July. As we go to press over three thousand (3000) Sierra Leoneans were infected and seventy-nine (79) of them had died.

Most unfortunately, conspiracy theories abound and are easily swallowed by many gullible people. Some conspiracists said that the introduction of the new 5G wireless broadband was intent on spreading the virus; that it was a laboratory

creation as a biological weapon to eliminate humankind; that it was an effort by billionaire philanthropists, Bill and Melinda Gates in association with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) to implant tractable microchips in vaccines that would be forced on unsuspecting human victims and that the microchip bears the biblical Mark of the Beast (666). Once the Mark is inserted, it would enable the New World Order to track down and follow up on the activities of the victims and thus easily manage and manipulate the global population.

Some conservative evangelical Christians support and propagate this conspiracy theory pointing to the vaccines as tool of spiritual warfare created by the devil and its agents – “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood...” (Ephesians 6.12). They see it all as a sign of the apocalyptic end times. This is a fallacy and a misleading Theological interpretation that distracts attention from the real issues in dealing with the crisis.

It is most unfortunate that even as millions of people stand at the brink of death there are religious people busy feeding false conspiratorial theories thus pouring fuel into the fire. This stands against the Christian mission manifesto of promoting life in all its fullness (John 10.10). Abundant life as promised by Christ demands a loving and caring attitude that points to healing. The Christian faith, rightly understood, seek to make real the promised fullness of life. Being infected with the virus militates against the experience of life in its fullness. In the light of this, the Church stands with NACOVERC to eliminate COVID 19 and its affect away from Sierra Leone.

The Christian response to the crisis that COVID 19 presents should be based on love – love of God and love for fellow human beings. The professed love of God is manifested in love of neighbours. We cannot love God if we do not love our fellow creatures. Profession of love of God that is not reflected in love for neighbours is hypocritical.

Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10. 25 -37) presents the model for our response to the COVID 19 crisis. The Samaritan responded to the situation appropriately and did not spend time on building up a conspiracy theory. He did not conclude that it was a trap set up by the Jewish enemies to ambush him; rather, he responded in love and restored life to the Jewish victim. He did not see a Jewish

enemy, he rather saw a fellow human being created in the image of God – he saw ‘a brother’.

It is in that love that the Christian is called to play his/her part to terminate the transmission of the virus. Our adherence to the regulations as Christians is not merely legalistic, but it is rather a display of love – loving others so much as not to infect them, so we mask up – so we keep safe physical distance - so we stay at home as much as is possible.

Our response is in our responsibility. Responsibility is the key word of our response to the crisis. We should put up responsible attitude and behaviour, not just for our own sakes, but for the sake of God and our fellow human beings.

**BUT WHERE IS GOD IN ALL OF THIS?** Has God forsaken us? Is the pandemic a curse from God? NO! God has not forsaken us and the Pandemic is not a curse from God. Then where is God now? That question has been asked many times when people are confronted with crises. Two incidences come to my mind immediately. The first is the Babylonian Exile when the Jews felt abandoned by the God of the Covenant and, secondly, the Holocaust in which six million Jews were eliminated. In the first, the prophets pointed the Babylonian exiles to a loving God who cares and is always merciful and forgiven. It was they that abandoned the covenant yet the Loving and merciful God was willing to forgive and restore them.

I recall a story of an execution of a boy in the Nazi Camp as narrated by Elie Weisle, in his book ‘NIGHT’. A little boy was among three prisoners that were executed. The two elderly prisoners died almost instantly because each of their body-weight was enough to have their necks broken by the hangman’s rope. The little boy, on the other hand, remained for more than half an hour dangling on the rope and lingering between life and death. The prisoners were forced to look at him at close range as they filed past the gallows. Elie Weisel (2006:64) wrote:

"Where is merciful God, where is He?" someone behind me was asking.... He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where He is? This is where — hanging here from this gallows. "

That points to the connection between the cross of Christ and the suffering in our world; and points us beyond that to the victory we share in the resurrection of



Christ. Christ is not oblivious to the sufferings of those infected by the virus – those who die and those affected by it. He stands with us in our sufferings since –We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who have been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4. 15)

The World Health Organisation has informed us that the world will have to live with the Corona virus. The Church in Post COVID 19 Sierra Leone has to face up to that reality and make the necessary adjustments in line with the direction of NACOVERC until such time that the vaccines are available in Sierra Leone and we are all vaccinated. We should act responsibly.

We must:

- Use a thermometer to check the temperature of worshippers before they enter, refuse entrance to anyone whose temperature is above 37.5 degree Celsius
- Observe regular washing and sanitisation of hands.
- Provide buckets at the entrances for worshippers to wash their hands before entering our buildings
- Ensure that no one enters our premises or sit through our worship services without face mask properly worn, covering the mouth and nose.
- Set the seats and standing points within the range of two metres (6 feet) apart to observe physical distance.
- Keep your services short within the timeframe directed by NACOVERC from time to time.
- Clean and disinfect the edifice between each worship service, allowing at least 30 minutes between one service and the other.
- Be strict in the observance of these directives.
- Pray sincerely for vaccines to be made available to Sierra Leone and for the pandemic to end.

ACee Temple – Anono  
Editor

# THE CHURCH IN SIERRA LEONE: RESPONSE AND MISSION DURING AND AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

BY  
PRINCE SORIE CONTEH<sup>2</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is the acronymic name for Coronavirus disease which broke out in December 2019. The church as progenitor of care and love, is expected to play a crucial and lasting role in dealing with this pandemic. This paper discusses the church's spiritual and practical response and mission during and after COVID-19. In terms of the church's spiritual response and mission, its theology and teachings should be pragmatic. They should put in action - by the process of contextualising theology - bringing the gospel to the life-situation of the people. God is not absent in this situation. The church's belief in a loving God helps to make sense of and cope with the coronavirus outbreak. In terms of the church's practical response and mission, the church can play a major role in saving lives and reducing illness related to COVID-19 by adhering to the preventive measures and recommendations by the government and health experts

## Introduction

This paper is a response to the Call for Papers by the Ecumenical Desk of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone in June 2020 on the subject, –The Church in Post Covid-19 Sierra Leone. As COVID-19 is on the rampage, the aforementioned Desk believes that theologians should make their contributions to scholarship in practical areas of our human engagement. Writing as we all know, teaches us to make sense of ourselves and our community and world; to challenge ourselves, to learn, and to grow.

There is in extant a plethora of writings and published works in both print and electronics on the church's and faith-based responses to COVID-19. It is impressive to see how religions are responding and disseminating their actions. This initiative by the Ecumenical Desk of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone is a crucial contribution to the advancement of the global and religious discourse on COVID-19. To this, I am privileged to contribute.

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<sup>2</sup> Prof. Prince Sorie Conteh holds doctorates in Systematic Theology and Religious Studies respectively. Prince is a minister of the Methodist Church Sierra Leone – presently in the Wilberforce Circuit. He is Professor of Theology and Religion, and has served academic institutions in Canada, the USA, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. He has published several works in Theology, Religion and Biblical Studies.

On 11 February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced an acronymic name for CORONA VIRUS as COVID-19. The 'CO' stands for Corona, 'VI' for Virus, and 'D' for Disease, and '19' for 2019 the year the outbreak was reported. According to Medscape, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by WHO on 11 March 2020. Since the outbreak of the Virus, many deaths have been reported. Numerous television stations display daily statistical updates on persons infected, quarantined, those that have recovered, and dead. COVID-19 has also caused states of emergency, nation-wide lock downs, travel bans, borders and closure of most public institutions, and huge strain on national and global economies.

As a pandemic, COVID-19 threatens life, economy, security and social relations around the world. It is a deadly unseen predator. Religious groups and institutions are looked-up to for comfort and solace during this time of crisis and devastation. The church is expected to play a crucial role in alleviating fear and suffering of people, and in bringing hope and faith to all peoples.

The churches in Sierra Leone continue to do their best by disseminating the Word and edifying Christians through print, broadcast, and electronic media. Some denominations have also bought up the opportunity to serve others in pursuant of **Galatians 6.10** which says, *“While we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”* So churches in Sierra Leone are seen providing spiritual, emotional, medical and social support to their congregations.

This paper, as the church in Sierra Leone continues to impress and emphasize the love of God during this challenging time, provides a contour in responding and understanding our Christian mission during and after COVID-19. As Christians, after exploring our needs and the needs of the society and world, it is helpful to enquire about them from a faith perspective. Social analysis must be accompanied by an insightful theological analysis. Contextual Theology demands that we learn to formulate faith questions about contemporary issues and experiences. The church must ask the following faith questions:

- What is the appropriate Christian response to COVID-19?
- How can the gospel be presented in a meaningful way in this situation?

- How could this situation contribute more effectively to establishing the kingdom of God?
- What Christian values would help transform this situation for the better?

## **Relevance of Contextual Theology during and after Covid-19**

Contextual Theology is the way Christians apply the message of the Bible to personal life, the wider spectrum of social, cultural, historical, political, religious, economic and scientific contexts (Bevans, 2005:2). Contextualization, as Bergman (2000:3) states, –is a vivid interaction between the gospel and the very reality where people are. Rather than conceiving theology as something concrete and permanent, it should be conceived as pragmatic - an activity, a process, a way of living. As such, the church should not only be structured by the teachings of the Bible, but its action - by the process of contextualising theology - bringing the gospel to the life-situation of the people (Fleming, 2005:296). Christians must never forget that the Bible and Church teaching remain as a standard by which to judge attempts at doing theology. So what is the relevance of the Bible to COVID-19? Let us look at some approaches in contextualising the message of God.

Many Christians have used the Translation Approach to portray the relevance of the Bible to COVID-19. The translation approach is the adoption by, or accommodation of the Bible to, a particular situation. In this case, “it is crucial that the message of the gospel remains unchanged. However, the translation model does not intend, or even encourage, the literal translation of biblical and theological terminologies” (Lee, 2015:2). In other words, the translation approach must preserve the message of Bible while adapting faith expressions to a particular context.

COVID-19 compels us to learn from our Bible characters, who turned their attention to scripture to understand the agency of God in times of disaster as a direction for their own times. We see God’s hand in the story of the plagues upon Pharaoh and Egypt at the time of the Hebrews’ deliverance from slavery (Exo 7:14-12:26). Through this episode we can see how God cares for the world during our own difficult time. The ten plagues cause economic, natural and personal hardship and devastation. However, they provide an opportunity for Pharaoh and the Hebrew people to see God’s

omnipotence over creation and their own lives. In relation to Pharaoh's stubbornness, God says to Pharaoh in Chapter 9:15-16:

For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But this is why I have let you live: *to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth.*

From the Exodus 7:15-16, we can rightly say that the ten plagues are not punishment. They are an invitation to know God: *-The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord*, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them. || Jesus shows us that the blindness from birth of the man in John 9 is God's intention to reveal himself (John 9:3).

Calamity is not a time for the Church to exude fear and unbelief. Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we should fear no harm (Psa. 23:4). We are further assured that:

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. <sup>2</sup> I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."  
<sup>5</sup> You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, <sup>6</sup> nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. <sup>9</sup> If you say, -The Lord is my refuge, || and you make the Most High your dwelling (Psa. 91:1, 2, 5, 6, 9).

Instead of fear, the Church must respond through the witness of her actions. Actions from our Christian recognition of our participation in God's care of the world through our participation in Christ's ministry. Refusing to let fear turn us inward, away from our suffering neighbour: this is our witness. In this regard, Christians have also used the Praxis Approach in contextualizing the message of the Bible. This approach is about theology in practice or in action. It argues that theology is best done as Christians reflect on their practice of the faith. It is about -one's action within a particular situation, e.g. experience, culture, social location, social change to which one contributes and re-reading of the Bible and Christian traditions in light of one's present situation in order to bring positive change through committed and intelligent action (praxis) || [Lee, 2015]. In this approach, scriptures and theologies are therefore constantly being reinterpreted and applied within a given situation.

COVID-19 is global pandemic, in that regard, as Christians in Sierra Leone contextualise and apply the Bible message to our country's situation, which is the immediate context, they must not forget about the world, which is the wider context. The Transcendental Approach emphasises on what is called the personal view of human experience. When groups of people have a shared or the same experience, then we can speak of a general experience. For example, an American and an African may be different in their cultural and social issues, but there are at times some elements or issues that all human beings experience regardless of circumstances and background. At this time regardless of culture or status, the entire world is experiencing COVID-19. This experience transcends all cultures and societies. People all over the world are basically having the same experience. So our message must be Transcendental.

As Gibbs puts it, 'true Christianity is found in openness to the diversity of particular situations. Nevertheless grassroots Christian communities are part of the wider Church community and should value ecclesial and doctrinal unity' (2007:12).

### **Relevance of Theodicy during after Covid-19**

Theodicy is from the Greek, *Theos*, 'God' and *dike*, 'justice/righteousness.' It is the vindication of divine providence in the view of the existence of evil. As such, Theodicy tries to explain why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God allows evil in the world. Having studied the situation the Christian or community engaged in contextual theology formulates a relevant faith question and responds to that question drawing on scripture and church teaching. When disasters like COVID-19 occur, as Christians:

Where is God in this situation?

Lennox (2020) in his book titled: *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?* Discusses how belief in a loving God helps us to make sense of and cope with the coronavirus outbreak. People are living through a unique, era-defining period. Our traditional certainties have gone, whatever our view of the world and whatever our beliefs. The coronavirus pandemic and its effects are perplexing and unsettling for everyone. How do we begin to think it through and cope with it? The book examines the coronavirus in

light of various belief systems and shows how the Christian worldview not only helps us to make sense of it, but also offers us a sure and certain hope to cling to. The author presents the biblical view of natural evil. Using the coronavirus crisis as his point of departure to demonstrate that God is all-loving and all-powerful and not the author of evil.

In *Coronavirus and Christ*, Piper (2020) exhorts us to stand on the solid Rock, who is Jesus Christ, in whom our souls can be sustained by the sovereign God who ordains, governs, and reigns over all things to accomplish his wise and good purposes for those who trust in him. Piper offers the following six answers to the question: *What is God doing through the coronavirus?*:

- ANSWER 1. God is giving the world in the coronavirus outbreak, as in all other calamities, a physical picture of the moral horror and spiritual ugliness of God-belittling sin (p.61).
- ANSWER 2. Some people will be infected with the coronavirus as a specific judgment from God because of their sinful attitudes and actions (p.69).
- ANSWER 3. The coronavirus is a God-given wake-up call to be ready for the second coming of Christ (p.73).
- ANSWER 4. The coronavirus is God's thunderclap call for all of us to repent and realign our lives with the infinite worth of Christ (p.77).
- ANSWER 5. The coronavirus is God's call to his people to overcome self-pity and fear, and with courageous joy, to do the good works of love that glorify God (p.87).
- ANSWER 6. In the coronavirus God is loosening the roots of settled Christians, all over the world, to make them free for something new and radical and to send them with the gospel of Christ to the unreached peoples of the world (p.95).

These answers are very thought and theological provoking. There are some very "hard sayings" in them to absorb and ponder at a theological level. One cannot avoid being selective and counter argumentative. Piper

in Answers 1-4 presents God as evil and the one who sent COVID-19. He does not in these answers try to defend God. In Theodicy, we try to extricate God from the perception that He is the cause and perpetrator of evil, a reflection of Calvinistic/Reformed doctrine.

Answers 5 and 6, are true expressions of the God in Christ we know and serve, and they encapsulate our response and mission during and after COVID-19.

Both Lennox and Piper's work remind us that God is at work in this moment in history. God is not "an absentee landlord." He is omnipresent and transcendent. He is active in human history. He will not abandon or forsake us during trying times.

God says to Israel:

But now, this is what the LORD says-- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour (Isa. 43:1-3).

## **Practical Considerations**

On 7 April 2020, WHO published an interim guidance document titled: 'Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19' (WHO, 2020:1-5). Here is an excerpt of the document:

WHO states that religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities can play a major role in saving lives and reducing illness related to COVID-19. These leaders, organisations and communities are a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve. Religious leaders of faith-based organizations and communities of faith can share health information to protect their own members and wider communities, which may be more likely to be accepted than from other sources. They can provide pastoral



and spiritual support during public health emergencies and other health challenges and can advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations.

By sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19, religious-inspired institutions can promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices. Religious leaders are integrated into their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need. Religious leaders are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.

As such, WHO recommends and discusses in the document the following preventive measures:

- Prevent touching between people attending faith services
- Prevent touching or kissing of devotional and other objects that the community is accustomed to handling communally.
- Encourage healthy hygiene among participants in faith services and other activities when gatherings are permitted.
- Frequently clean worship spaces, sites, and buildings.
- Use technology to maintain community and continue worship.
- Use low-technology means to maintain faith-based practices in the community.
- Keeping the community connected.
- Helping others.
- Helping members manage the onslaught of worrying news.
- Responding to situations of domestic violence.
- Offer special prayers for the sick alongside messages of hope and comfort.

In similar vein, on 10 July 2020, the Sierra Leone Government National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre (NACOVERC) Freetown in collaboration with the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL), provided Guidelines for the resumption of Congregational Worship. The following is an excerpts of the document:

1. The following guidelines will be jointly monitored by the working committee from the Inter Religious Council of Sierra Leone and the

National / District National COVID19 Emergency Response Centre (NaCOVERC and DiCOVERCs). Weekly review meetings will be held.

2. Churches and Mosques will have responsibility for following the stipulated guidelines and ensuring internal monitoring mechanisms:

A. Hygiene

- Churches and Mosques should clean and disinfect their premises first before they are re-opened for worship. They should also be cleaned and disinfected in between services.
- Every worshipper must either use soap to wash their hands or apply sanitizers before being allowed to enter the Church/Mosque.
- Veronica buckets, soap and water or hand sanitizers should be provided at the entrance of every Church/Mosque.
- The use of toilet facilities to be responsibly monitored.

B. Preventive measures

- The temperature of every worshipper must be taken before admission into the Church/Mosque and people with a high temperature (37.5C/99.5F) should not be allowed into the Church/Mosque but be advised to go and seek medical attention.
- Everyone in the place of worship must properly wear a facemask during worship. Masks should not be removed or lowered when speaking or singing.
- There must be the use of sanitizers in Mosques/Churches as appropriate.

C. Numbers and seating capacity

- All places of worship must not exceed fifty percent (50%) of the original capacity of the space taking into cognizance physical distancing of at least 6 feet. Churches and Mosques should map out the seating arrangements in the place of worship to ensure this.
- Churches can make use of classrooms and multipurpose halls for services where available, especially in big churches in order to accommodate more worshippers at a go. TV circuit and speakers can be used for those who are not inside the main auditorium.
- Multiple services can be held following the same guidelines as provided for in point 1 and 2 in this section for the Christians.

D. Social distancing and safe practices

- Social distancing should be observed in the sitting arrangement with two metres gap between worshippers. A seating arrangement should be marked and guided by the Church/Mosque.
- A church service must not exceed one and a half hours. In the case of the Muslims each daily prayer time should not exceed fifteen minutes while the Juma prayer must not exceed thirty (30) minutes.
- There should be a gap of 30 minutes between one Church service and another where there are multiple services to avoid crowding.
- Handshaking and hugging should be avoided before, during and after the worship.
- Different exit and entrance points will be used by worshippers (where possible) and movement will be done row after row.
- Social distancing should maintained during counselling.

#### E. Ministration practices

- There will be no Laying of Hands while praying for people.
- Communion will be served row after row and in individual cups or by intinction.
- Scaling down of the choir where necessary. Due to the high risk of spreading COVID-19, strict physical distancing of at least six feet must always be maintained by choristers.
- Offering bags/plates will be taken from row to row to avoid movement of people. The use of envelopes is advisable.
- Standing or individual microphones should be used at all times to avoid cross infection.

#### F. Monitoring of compliance

- An internal and monitoring committee should be constituted in every Mosque/Church to oversee compliance to the suggested guidelines.
- Medical awareness and health promotion should be done during Church services.
- All the measures outlined herein shall apply to all activities conducted in places of worship.
- Churches/Mosques that are found non-compliant with the above guidelines will be warned through the appropriate oversight structures; and subsequently shut down for repeat offenses.

## Conclusion

It is with great care that we look at the COVID-19 pandemic and respond in light of God's mission and actions. To participate in God's provision of the world at this time, the Church in Sierra Leone has to provide a consistent, sacrificial witness through a conscious theological contextualization that focus on the omnipotence and immanence of God over the long haul. The church as a faith community is a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the people it serves. The church is must provide pastoral and spiritual support during public health emergencies and other health challenges and must advocate for the needs of the vulnerable. The Church in Sierra Leone is integrated into the community through service and compassionate networks and is often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need. The church is a critical link in the safety net for the vulnerable and needy within her community and wider communities.

Christians also have the responsibility to combat the spread of COVID-19 by adhering to the preventive measures and practical consideration recommended by the government and health experts. By sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19, religious-inspired institutions can promote helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices. It has been predicted that we will have to live with COVID-19 for many years to come. It is the church's mission to re-live her beliefs and teachings over the long haul. God will be with us every step of the way.

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## ANOTHER KAIROS MOMENT

BY

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We are not in normal times in our world today and the Church is affected. The world is faced with a major crisis – the Corona epidemic (COVID19). Its dramatic rise created panic and disrupted our geopolitics and global economy. It also affected religious institutions and our education systems.

In Sierra Leone, Church buildings/ chapels were closed, along with other places of worship, in March (2020) and normal worship could not take place in our chapels or church buildings. The Christian Association of Sierra Leone and various church denominations moved the Church to the media. Members were led in worship on television, radio and live streaming on social media platforms. Towards the end of July 2020, the government lifted the ban on worship centres and set out guidelines to keep out the pandemic from spreading.

Sierra Leone, with the rest of the world, is going through a major crisis. As I write this article about eighty million people worldwide were infected with the virus and about two million had died. Sierra Leone accounts for about 2500 affected victims with over seventy virus related deaths. It is indeed a crisis.

Even though by its very nature crisis, when it occurs, often presents extremely difficult and dangerous situations, yet the concept is not altogether negative in that it presents a Kairos moment – a call to reflection and an opportunity for critical examination of the deeper meaning of the crisis.

The word 'crisis' is related to the Greek word *Καιρος* (Kairos) meaning 'time'. There are two words in ancient Greek that translate the English word 'time' - *chrónos* (Χρόνος) and *kairos* (Καιρός). While *chrónos* is quantitative and depicts chronological sequences, *Kairos* is qualitative and presents

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opportunity for action.

There are scriptural examples of the concept. The entrance of Jesus in the world of humanity (the incarnation) was a Kairos moment:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Galatians 4. 4 – 5)

The start of the ministry of Jesus was a Kairos – a moment of opportunity:

The time has come; the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!

The crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus present a Kairos moment. (John 19. 28)

The consummation of history, which God will bring about in his own time, also depicts a Kairos moment. (1Timothy 6. 15).

That the word crisis relates to *Kairos* makes it not altogether negative but presents us with opportunity for reflection and action.

There are lessons to be learnt from this period so that the Church will be the Church, in Sierra Leone and the world today. COVID19 offers us new ways of envisioning and pursuing our common life together as the Body of Christ.

First and foremost, did it surprise us that in the face of the COVID19 pandemic we had no answer – or did we? The Church has no answer. We can only listen and discern what God is saying to us in COVID19 – what opportunities does it present. We lament and we question – ‘why Lord?’ But there is no answer’ so we pray “may your grace remain sufficient for us Lord.” This is much like the questions in the minds of the Jews in Babylonian Exile (597/587–539 BCE)

-Where is God in all of this? Has the Lord deserted/abandoned us? How could these tragedies have happened to God’s people? How could the Davidic kingship be cut off? How could the Temple, indwelt by the Lord

Himself, be destroyed? Has Yahweh abandoned us? Has God repudiated his covenant? These were burning questions for them, as their personal and collective identity was under threat.

COVID19 came to us in Sierra Leone at the most important point of the Christian calendar – the season of Lent, leading up to Easter and Pentecost. COVID19 interrupted our usual seasonal programmes and imposed itself as a subject of reflection.

Our churches have magnificent buildings for their worship, yet COVID19 deprived us from using our buildings for worship for nearly six months. Many missed the grand worship in the buildings and expressed it much like the Babylonian exiled people of God missed and longed for worship in the temple in Jerusalem.

One of the lessons of COVID19 is that Church is more than any building or worship centre. However, the importance of the building should not be underplayed. It is not just any building; it is a building where Christian fellowship takes place. The notion is derived from the Greek idea of *‘Kuriake Oikai’* which is translated ‘the Lord’s house.’ It is the meeting place of a congregation of the Church, where, in the formula of the sixteenth century Reformers, God’s word is purely proclaimed, the sacraments are rightly administered (Augsburg Confession, 1530: VII and in the addition of Barmen Declaration, 1559:3) and the fellowship of prayer and discipline takes place (Belgic Confession, 1561).

The problem with the formula of the Reformers is that the church is a place where something is done. The formula does not present the church as a living organism acting out itself in the world. If we limit the Church to this definition, it presents itself as a domestic entity that seeks to enrich its own inner life. (ACee Temple-Anono: 2012)

The Church is not absolute – it is relative. It is related to Christ and also stands in a relationship of service to the world in God’s plan of creation and salvation. The Church does not exist for itself. It exists for the world; it is not a domestic entity.



It is a sound historical fact that the Church did not start in elaborate buildings of the kinds we have today. Rather, it started in a humble way as house groups. They gathered in houses of Christians and learnt to be real people of God dedicated in worship and in building up a community of faith. The post-Constantine prestige and the ensuing success and power that the Church has enjoyed reduced it to an institutional entity rather than the fellowship God meant it to be.

Maybe the emergence of COVID19 is a kairos moment that calls us to become the Church that God wants us to be in the world.

With the emergence of COVID19 there was an unprecedented cooperation of various denominations in Sierra Leone, worshipping together on radio, television and social media platforms. The Christian Association of Sierra Leone brought together Catholics, Pentecostals, and the mainline denominational members of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL), the Evangelical Fellowship of Sierra Leone (EFSL) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Sierra Leone (PFSL) in a weekly television and radio broadcast worship that was also live-streamed on Facebook. This was in addition to the worship service of the Seventh Day Adventists held on Saturdays via Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBC) radio and television.

It is one of the lessons of COVID19 that the various denominations can work together and can worship together. We did our Lenten meditations and celebrated Easter in unity as Christ wills.

The reality remains that no one denomination can be 'The Church' to the exclusion of others. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, or any denomination whatsoever cannot be the Church exclusively. The idea of one denomination exclusively defining itself as 'the Church' is always a mistaken notion as the Church cannot be limited to any particular denomination. No denomination can be the definitive expression of the one, holy Church.

The influential South African missiologist, David Bosch (Bosch:1991:248) notes that the Protestant preoccupation with right doctrine (orthodoxy) soon required that every group which seceded from the 'main body' had to

validate its action by maintaining that it alone, and none of the others, adhered strictly to the “right preaching of the gospel.”

I hope the experience of working together and worshipping God together as a lesson of COVID19 is well learnt.

The Church is ‘*bigger*’ than all of our denominations and theological expressions put together.

In its truest sense, ‘the Church’ is people, not buildings. It is an event not an organisational hierarchy. It is the called out people of God. Called out to proclaim the Good News of salvation and called out to be the Body of Christ in the world. (Temple-Anono:5)

The Church is God’s creation through the Word and the Holy Spirit. Despite its institutional aspects, the Church is basically an event. Institutions remain enabling factors to concretise the pastoral, teaching and administrative offices for the sake of continuity and identity of the believing fellowship in time and space. (Temple-Anono:5)

In New Testament Greek, the word ‘*Ecclesia*’ (almost always translated in English by the word ‘Church’) was used, in preference to ‘*Kuriakon*’, primarily to designate a particular communal reality: an assembly - a community of believers; a community gathered by God through the incarnation of his Word.

*Ecclesia* is the Septuagint Old Testament translation of the Hebrew word *kāhāl*, which is translated ‘assembly’, primarily, the assembly of the Covenant people of God in the Wilderness. This finds its greatest Old Testament significance in the assembly of Israel before Yahweh on Mount Horeb (See Deuteronomy 4.10; 9.10, 10.4; 18.16) when God sealed his covenant with them. ‘*kāhāl*’ is often translated as *Synagōgē*. When that translation is used in New Testament Greek, however, it is limited to the Jewish assembly as distinguished from that of the Christians.

The image of the Church as ‘the People of God’ is a continuation of the Old Testament concept of Israel as the Covenant People of God. In calling Abraham, God chose his descendants as his own people. This idea of

election is expressed in Old Testament scripture, mainly in the prophets: “I will be their God; they shall be my people.”

The Church as the People of God is an extension of the historic and geographic Israel — a new Covenant Community that claims a share in the sonship/daughtership of Abraham through what God has done in Christ Jesus. Christian believers are spiritually children of Abraham, thus, God’s Covenant people through the justification that is derived from the salvific act of Jesus Christ.

The geographical and historical Israel is constituted by its biological descent and its historical, cultural and national heritage. In contrast, the new Israel of God is consists in its qualitative communal relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. This is produced by God’s promise and by corporate hope, by God’s election and human response in faith; by the dying and resurrected life of Christ and the willingness of us, human beings, to accept that life as our own. The ‘People of God’ is a description of the Church that carries a strong sense of identity and mission. God has chosen that community for his own possession; men and women who are called by the Holy Spirit to participate in Christ’s word and work and to be light to the nations. This includes a calling to live out the values of the Kingdom of God – a call to justice, truth, love and freedom. This implies that there should be no ‘passive passenger’ as all must be actively engaged.

The Church as the Body of Christ presents a communal model. It is about building a caring, sharing and worshipping global community. It is a community built out of the love of God in Christ and is therefore a sign of the extension of the incarnation of Christ and the anticipation of the fullness of the Kingdom of God. It is an instrument of God’s design to gather all creation under the Lordship of Christ. In fulfilling God’s mission, it enables those outside its life to recognise God’s presence and action in God’s world. The Greek word that represents that reality is ‘*Koinonia*’.

All members are called to participate in the building up of the body – the fellowship (*Koinonia*) – and are given gifts in good measure to fulfill the

calling. The church, in its entire membership, participates and points to the reality of the Kingdom of God.

In Acts of the Apostles, we see a description of the fellowship (*Koinonia*) of the early believers:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2. 42 – 47)

In the passage above, the members of the Body of Christ were endeared to each other and shared their meals together. They showed compassion to the poor and provided for their needs. They were a 'community of love' built on the commandment of our Lord Jesus:

A new command I give to you; Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

It is interesting to note that another translation of *Koinonia* is communion, which has the same root as 'community'.

What is it that bound us together in this fellowship? First and foremost, it is our common baptism which is a sign that we belong to Christ. We were each baptised into fellowship with Christ and to each other. That is an initiation rite both into the Church and into each other.

Secondly, it is the Apostles' teachings. When in reciting the creed, we say we believe in the 'Apostolic Church', we are affirming a Church based on the teachings of the apostles of Christ. We are affirming continuity in what is taught from the beginning of the existence of Christianity.

Thirdly, we are bound together by the breaking of bread. We meet regularly and affirm that because of the giving of his body and blood for us, we are the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. We share a simple meal together signifying our oneness with each other and with Christ. We are affirming a tradition – *paradosis* (παράδοσις).

Fourthly, we are bound together by common prayer. We are children of the same father and we address our prayers to God, the Father, through Jesus Christ our elder brother, saviour and friend. We pray for each other, for our communities, our nations, our leaders and the common good of society.

The ‘body’ imagery is derived from the Lord himself, who offered his body for the salvation of the world “this is my body...” In the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, we are incorporated into the body of Christ and thus we are part of the Body with him as head.

St. Paul particularly invokes the image of the Church as the Body of Christ and it represents the ‘*corporateness*’ that characterises the Church. To be a member of the Church is to be incorporated in Christ. God’s purpose and mission is to bring humanity into one body through the cross.

The image of the Church as ‘body’ is quite apt. All of us together make up the body of Christ. **No one Christian or denomination is the body apart from the others.** We can repeat again what we expressed above, no church – no denomination can exclusively be the Body of Christ. Any and all attempts of exclusiveness only seek to disfigure the Body.

The members of our natural bodies do not all perform the same functions. The head does the thinking and planning, the hands and feet, the implementation. The ears, the eyes, the nose, even the anus (ops! did I mention it?) all carry out important functions, which the body can scarcely do without. The body is deprived when, for any reason, one member becomes ineffective. Saint Paul says “if the one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it”.

As the Body of Christ, the Church is in an intimate, living relationship with Christ who is the Head. Christ the Head is one, as is the Body, the Church that is animated by the Holy Spirit and in which Christ, as Head, and

believers are united. Christ is constantly present and acting through word and sacraments, building up, renewing and strengthening the Church to be what it is really meant to be: 'a light to the nations'.

### EFFECTIVE SMALL CELLS MAKE A HEALTHY BODY

Our natural body is alive only because its cells are alive and active. This is also true of the Body of Christ. When small cells are well organised and active, the Church is effective in carrying out God's mission.

Cells are the basic structural unit of all living organism. Like our natural bodies, the body of Christ is best effective in small cells. The Methodist Class system represents such cells in the Methodist Church.

The Methodist Class system was put in place by John Wesley so that every individual benefited from pastoral care. The Classes were the cells of the Body of Christ (the Church).

The advantage of keeping the classes small was to make sure that as much as was humanly possible, the leaders maintained personal contact with the members. The welfare of members was the paramount concern of the Class leaders.

The smallness made for the formation of intimate communities – being familiar with the personality of every individual including his family background and business relations. The leaders were expected to know their members in their times of joy and in their times of sorrow; in their health and sickness, in their prosperity and austerity, and to inform the ministerial staff of their conditions. It was the role of the leaders to organise pastoral visits of the ministers to their members. Wesley brought his followers together, "to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation."

Effective small cell is the soul of the Church. It logically follows that if we lose the cell system, the soul of the Church is lost. We therefore need the revival and renewal of the Cell system in Sierra Leone today. The cells should be organised in such a way that they present themselves as instruments of effective pastoral encounter. They should engage the

members in Bible study, Christian and Civic Education activities and sharing of personal testimonies. They should be fora for disciplinary action in the Church, setting standards for leaving in communities. The Leaders within their cells should deal with issues of indiscipline and bring the same to the notice of the Church.

I stress again that the renewal of the small cells System will go a long way in the revitalisation of the Church in Post COVID19 Sierra Leone. These cells are the life blood of the Church. I propose that for a renewed spirituality within the Post COVOD 19 Church in Sierra Leone, effective pastoral renewal is of the essence. I propose that we encourage house groups as pastoral cells of our post COVID19 congregations. All of the cells need not follow the same pattern. What may work within the geographical realities of some congregations may not work in others. The various congregations should experiment and see what works for them. What is important is the formation of effective pastoral cells within the congregations.

### **The Post COVID19 Church as a reconciled and reconciling community.**

The Church is an agent of reconciliation because of the members' understanding of themselves as belonging to a reconciled and reconciling community wholly dependent on the reconciliatory work of God in Christ. Through his incarnation, ministry, suffering, atoning-death and resurrection, Christ reconciled humanity to God. He brought an end to a relationship of enmity between God and humanity and replaced it with one of peace and goodwill.

He is our reconciliation having restored us to fellowship with his father by bridging the enmity between God and humanity. St. Paul made that very clear for us:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation:** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sin against them. And **he has committed us to the message**

**of reconciliation.** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God was making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5. 17-21)

The church therefore, is charged with a mission of transmitting the peace and reconciliation of God, enacted through Christ, to persons in society so that they can attain peace with God, peace with themselves and peace with one another!

Also, when one considers the church's experience at grassroots levels and her ability to directly touch and influence the lives of people, it is but expedient to examine her role in peace initiatives in Sierra Leone. For our nation is always in need of sustaining its hard earned Peace. (Note the current violence in our nation – the role of political parties in fanning the flames of discord – the violence of the youths – the use of excessive force by our security units, etc.)

The doctrine of Reconciliation is central to the ministry of Jesus, thus central to the mission of the Church. Through Christ, every human person is called to be reconciled to God – to make peace with God. Paul says further in Romans 5.10:

For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

All human persons, though sinners, are potentially reconciled to God through the offering of Christ. Is it not of any significance to us that the initiative for reconciliation was taken by God, the offended party?

The basis of the initiative is the **love of God.** In that love, God created humankind in his own image and likeness. He gave humankind one of the greatest gifts they can have – the gift of freedom. In the giving of freedom,



God puts himself at the risk of his creation – the risk of being rejected. That rejection, when it came, caused God great pain. That pain was very severe because of his love. The pain came as a result of injury done to his love. God's love was injured.

Without that nature of love, the pain would not have been felt that much – it would not have been so severe. It was the love of God that was injured in the rebellious attitude of his creatures – when humankind, the objects of God's love, turned rebels against the one who loves them so much. In that injured love, he waited in deep pain for their return. The parable of the prodigal son in the Gospel of St. Luke speaks clearly to this. While the son continued to waste his life in wild living, the father continued to wait in deep pain.

Forgiveness is part of God's revealed nature (If God marks our iniquity, who shall survive? However, there is forgiveness with God that God may be feared). That's what the Church of Christ in Post COVID19 Sierra Leone is called to witness to. We are forgiven and freed to become the forgiving and reconciling community in the world.

Forgiveness is lived; it is not merely pronounced and felt. It is a way of life into which both the sinned-against and the sinner commit themselves. To be a Christian is to be a member of the reconciled community whose members are themselves instruments of reconciliation. It is in the understanding of our living in the context of communion that we are committed to reconciliation.

Right through his ministry Jesus taught about forgiveness. On the Sermon on the Mount, Christ challenged the rabbinical teaching of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' and proposed 'turning the other cheek' and 'loving the enemy'.

Many today find these teachings of Christ demeaning and smacks of weakness and vulnerability. Retaliation and revenge speak better for many in our world today as it seeks to reverse the positions, bringing the weak and vulnerable victim to the position of a powerful conqueror. Does it really?

It is also true that the teachings are difficult for victims that have been violated. How easy is it for a victim of a crime to forgive a perpetrator that caused so much suffering to him/her? **Forgiveness is painful and costly.**

Christ did not only call on us to love our enemies but taught us how to do it by forgiving those who caused his sufferings on the cross, pleading with his Father:

Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

It was at the cross of Christ that violence and mercy, hatred and love met together. Christ offered an unconditional forgiveness to those who had been so violent to him, causing him suffering and death. Forgiveness is an essential ingredient for reconciliation, so are love, mercy, truth and justice. Love is the starting point. To love one's enemy presupposes forgiveness for that enemy. We pray that our enemies be drawn under the cross of Christ to experience God's mercy and love and peace. We pray for and love our enemies in imitation of God's action in Christ Jesus. Christ made peace with us while we were yet enemies of God.

**Our worship becomes worthless to God if we fail to forgive and be reconciled with brothers and sisters.** And so in his teachings Jesus advises that:

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

What do we really mean when we say, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us?' It is as though we are saying "dear God, with the measure by which I forgive, do forgive me." It is as if God's forgiveness of us is consequential on our forgiveness of those who sin against us and this Jesus emphasised with the parable of the unforgiving servant. The unforgiving servant represents our capability to see the shortcomings of others – judge them for it and seek their condemnation, while closing our eyes at our own sins.

Saint Matthew sets the Lord's Prayer within the context of the Lord's teaching on forgiveness. Jesus followed the recitation of the prayer with an exposition and left the disciples in no doubt as to what he meant.

If you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others of their sins, your Father will not forgive you (Matthew 6.14)

Paul echoes that in his letter to the Church in Colossae:

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Christians are forgiven people learning to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us. The Church in post COVID Sierra Leone needs to confess that we have been silent in the face of oppression that resulted in the suffering and impoverishment of God's people around us. The churches need to confess and be instruments of reconciliation within the communities to whom they seek to witness the forgiving grace of Christ. We are reconciled people called out to be instruments of reconciliation.

The prodigal son in the parable of Jesus, as a result of his repentance, was able to benefit from the forgiveness of the father. It was not his repentance that motivated the father's offer of forgiveness. It was the father's love for his son. If the son had not repented and made the confession he did, the offer of forgiveness, which sprang from the bowels of love and mercy of the father, would still have been there. But only that the son would not have benefited from it.

The Jewish leaders of Jesus' time found the teachings of Jesus difficult to cope with because they were so different from the laid down principles and doctrines of their time. For instance, the Jewish rabbis taught retribution - 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', but Jesus taught differently:

Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

The Jews were also taught to love their neighbours and hate their enemies. But Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Even some of us as Christians still find these teachings difficult and look for ways to go around them.

As reconciled people of God, we are also ambassadors of reconciliation, called to proclaim and live out the message (gospel) of reconciliation. As ambassadors of the gospel of reconciliation, we bear witness to the life of reconciliation – we bear witness to the possibility of loving our enemies. Bonhoeffer (1995:21) says:

The spirit assents when Jesus bids us love our enemies, but flesh and blood are too strong and prevent our carrying it out. Therefore we have to practise strictest daily discipline; only so can the flesh learn the painful lesson that it has no rights of its own. Regular daily prayer is a great help here, and so is daily meditation on the Word of God and every kind of bodily discipline and asceticism.

When forgiveness is denied, both the offender and the offended suffer. Forgiveness is liberative. When it is offered, it frees both those who offer and those who receive it for positive engagement in life. Nelson Mandela believes that 'to make peace with an enemy one must work with that enemy, and that enemy becomes one's partner.'

It is true that repentance and confession are necessary for reconciliation. Nevertheless as the sinned-against struggle for healing and release, his ability to forgive should not depend on the willingness of the perpetrator to show remorse. The perpetrator should not continue to dictate the pace of the healing process. The offering of forgiveness can move the hard core offender to repentance. It does not necessary have to be vice versa.

It is a fact that no true and lasting reconciliation and peace is possible without justice. There is always the vital need to address the injustices that underline the various conflicts. But that should not take away our ability as members of the reconciled community to practise the art of forgiveness.

The addressing of issues associated with human rights is a vital element in the maintenance of a reconciled community. It seeks to help both sides understand and appreciate the other's perspectives. Be that as it may, it does not take away the need for release from the hurt and bitterness of the victim, so that he/she can move on with life even if the perpetrator is not ready to move on.

There is always the need to move away from revenge to creative living, which is based on justice and truth. Revenge leads to more blood-letting and feuds.

This idea of forgiveness must be emphasised in the teaching of the Church in Post COVID19 Sierra Leone so that our land be healed of the growing violence and experience the needed social cohesion.

The church in post COVID 19 Sierra Leone is called to serve a wounded world in interreligious solidarity.

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# COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A DESERT EXPERIENCE FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY GENERATION? THE BIBLICAL SERPENTS AND COVID-19 VIRUS IN CONTEXT

BY

Fr. Lawrence Gbangbaya<sup>4</sup>

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## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century generation will never forget the –novel coronavirus pandemic. What started as a Chinese (Wuhan) affair has now become a global tragedy. The atrocities the virus has and continues to cause are devastating. It has affected every fabric of human existence. The great economic fortunes of most powerful nations are on the brink of unprecedented recession. Strict restrictions and regulations on public gatherings including public acts of worship were promulgated and enforced by various nations.

This has given rise to novel mantras like, ‘self isolation’, ‘self-quarantine’, ‘social distancing’ to mention a few. Hence, churches and mosques were closed for about six months. Worst of all, the greatest gift; the human resources are perishing. For many, largely self-proclaimed men and women of God, it seems it is the end of everything. But, is it really the end of everything or the beginning of the -Great Beginning? The Pandemic has attracted various research works at different levels.

A critical reflection on ancient Israel (God’s people) reveals that they were bitten by fiery serpents in the desert and the pole of Bronze serpent for their healing. Hence, can this experience of ancient Israel reveals any theological underpinnings of the Covid-19 pandemic? Can the biblical serpent pandemic help us to construct a sound theology for a Post-Covid-19 Church? In the light of these questions, this paper will try to construct a

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sound and meaningful theology for the Post-Covid-19 Church especially in Sierra Leone, using the biblical serpents' pandemic. The paper is structured in the following ways:

- Covid-19: Its Theories and Assumptions
- Israel and the Desert Experience
- Yahweh's Reactions
- The Serpent Bites
- Towards A Post-Covid-19 Church
- Conclusion

### ***Covid-19 : Its Theories and Assumptions***

The heart of the problem of Covid-19 lies in the fact that people all over the globe have become affected directly or indirectly. It is a battle of humanity versus virus, and the virus seems to have the upper hand over humanity at the moment. Hence, it has brought the great powers of and the generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with all its advanced technological, medical and digital progress, on its knees. This raises serious concerns. In the political and economic arena, one may ask; where are the Great Americans? Where are the Great European nations? Where are the 'big six'? Where are the G8 nations? In the arena of religion, where are the thousands of pastors, prophets and prophetesses who cure all manner of diseases, cast and bind demons and witches all around the corners of Africa daily? Where are the great men and women of God who filled Churches and mosques everyday prophesying and shouting? In all this, what has become of humanity today? What core message does covid-19 pandemic has for the Church in Sierra Lone and her people who have suffered from the shackles of slavery, civil war and Ebola? These questions can be summed-up in two: What is the source and why the outbreak of this virus? These two 'Ws'- *what* and *why* virus form the crux of the problem.

The two 'Ws' have raised a ground for battle. With its devastating effects, Covid-19 has finally brought about warfare on humanity. Can humanity win this battle or Covid-19? In the quest to answer this question, people have

tried to trace the source of this virus. One school of thought argues that Covid-19 is a chemical or biological warfare. For such people, it is an artificial virus created by humans in the laboratory. Going with this view, on one hand, some people blame the people of China. They question why the virus did not affect the great cities in China as is doing in the West, America and Africa. It is not surprising to see President Donald J. Trump referring to it as “the Chinese virus”. On the other hand, some people argue that, Americans should also be blamed for the origin of the virus. For this people, the virus was created by Americans and some Americans inflicted the virus on the people of Wuhan. It is believed that Americans initially had the cure for the virus they created. However, the Wuhan virus was later modulated by the Chinese thus making the American antidote impotent. This is the reason why no cure has yet been found for the virus as it spreads around the globe. It is nevertheless important to note, that these two views are yet to be proven as authentic. Whatever the case maybe, the truth of the matter is the virus exists and must have a source; be it natural or artificial and there must be an underlying purpose for this outbreak.

### *Power Struggle Theory*

One of the theories involved in this argument believes that the pandemic is the by-product of global power struggle. It is believed that Covid-19 is a planned strategy by China to breakdown the powers of America and the West. Proponents of such view hold that the reason behind the spread includes both economic and political advantage. For them, China wants to take over and the one way is through biological warfare. Whether this position is true or not remains a mystery. What is however certain is that nations have often waged wars to gain supremacy. In the ancient world, famous nations waged wars against others. The world has witnessed great and super powers falling. The Egyptian power fell. The Roman Empire also fell. What about Portugal and Spain who once occupied master’s seat during slave trade? What about the great USSR? United State of America has been the super-world power for decades. Could it be it is time for change? Or could it be it is time for the walls of America to be broken as it happened to the Roman Empire?



### *Theological Theory*

There is another theory which is religious in nature. Some people believe that the pandemic is the result of humanity's sins. Going through various social media messages, many people are praying and calling on God for mercy on the wrongs of humanity. They call on God to have mercy and take away the virus. In fact, in crisis like this, the tendency to think that the world is coming to an end increases and people share videos expressing such a view. Just few days ago, I entered a bus to the city of Bo and as it is the case in many Africa nations, a young man also entered the bus with a big cross on his neck. Guess what his message was! That –the virus was as a result of humanity's sins and that Satan wanted to take over the world for seven years. This was really ridiculous. However, many in that bus tended to believe him. In my opinion, this unique case is just an example of thousands of pastors, prophets and prophetesses plying around; making people believe that God is angry with humanity.

### *The Common Humanity Theory*

Finally, there is another theory I call *common humanity theory*. Supporters of this theory believe the pandemic occurred to bring humanity back together. It is no doubt that over the years, humanity has been faced with high level of segregation. This involves racial, cultural, economic, national, ethnic, intellectual and religious. Nations and people have built walls and fences around themselves forgetting the common humanity. In recent times, we see several confrontations among world leaders all trying to take care of their own nations, not counting the impacts their actions would have on others. In the midst of all these theories, what unique gift Covid-19 offer our world?

### ***Israel and the Desert Experience***

The arrival of the Israelites into the desert, where they wandered before reaching the Promised Land, opened up another episode in their relationship with Yahweh. Now that the Egyptians were no more, the Israelites were left to face the realities of the desert. Biblical account tells

us that this wandering of Israel lasted (40 years?). Anderson warns that this figure should not be taken mathematically exact, rather as a stylized expression of a full generation. W. C. Martins describes Israel's condition in this way:

The trip from sea to Mt. Sinai ... was a difficult one. Existence in the Egyptian slave camp had been rough, but had offered a good deal of security. There had been sufficient food and water, and the threat from hostile people had been negligible. Now, food and water were in short supply, and native tribes were understandably hostile at the instruction of such a motley horde of strangers. The Israelites were free from the Egyptians, but they were not free from the moral and physical struggles which trouble other men.

Israel thus faced the challenge of food, water, wars and threats from natives, leadership, and fidelity to Yahweh. J. K. West opines that the wilderness era is depicted as the period of hardship, testing, and rebellion.

The Exodus narrative tells us that just after few days of their victory over Pharaoh and his army, they started complaining. The first complaint was about the lack of good drinking water. Moses, however, cautioned them. As weeks passed by, the Israelites started to complain also about food. This complaint took a severe tone, since they felt Moses had brought them out from Egypt to starve them to death.

For them, Egypt became the best preference to the desert void of food and water. They preferred the cruel and heartless taskmasters with forced labour to Moses wandering with them in a desert without food and drink. In this regard, J. K. West argues that notwithstanding all Yahweh did for Israel, when confronted with rigors and difficulties the desert posed, they complained and longed for the safety of the Egyptian bondage.

One, from the face value will immediately try to cast blame on the Israelites as ungrateful people. This however presents a realistic human situation. Desert wandering is difficult and tasking. Imagine, these people were walking on foot. It was really hard for Israel to comprehend a God whom

Moses presents as their God, allowing them to wander on empty stomachs in the desert.

Yahweh once again manifested his power; a power that shows the Israelites that his care and love for them was nothing to compare with that of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Yahweh remedied this situation by the provision of a food called Manna, which in Hebrew is *Man hu*. W.C. Martins argues that the most likely substance of the biblical "*Man-hu*" is the honeydew excretion produced by insects. Tamarisk trees attracted insects. Insects fed on them and as they do, they excreted and formed a substance. For the Arabs, this substance is the *man es-simma* and takes it as their delicacy. Apart from this *man-hu*, Yahweh provided Israel with other substances to live on.

Yet, since Yahweh decided to attend to the second request- request for food without attending to the first, request of water, the Israelites became so angry and discontented. This happened at Raphidim and Moses became afraid that the people might stone him. Yahweh provided them water through Moses from the rock. This site was named by Moses as Massa and Meriba. These names mean Faithlessness and faultfinding. A. Saulzer however opines that the narratives or stories were one-time popular etiologies of the place name Mara (bitter), Massa (testing), and Meriba (quarrel). For this reason, he cautions against the assumption of considering the narratives as catalogue of day-to day events of the desert sojourn.

The challenges of food and drink were over. A new challenge emerged, that of threats from hostile natives. One of such natives was the Amalekites. These people attacked the people of Israel at their encampment at Rephidim. Interestingly, the rod of God that was held up in Moses' arms was a sign of Yahweh's power. Human as Moses was, when each time he felt tired and moved his arms downwards, the Amalekites advanced and whenever his arms were raised up with the rod, the Israelites advanced. With the help of Aaron and Hur, his arms were held up until the Amalekites lost the battle.

Another problem Israel faced was leadership. We know that other Semitic people also lived in Egypt at the period of slavery and liberation. Hence, one can assume that the people that were liberated from Egypt were multi-cultural and tribal. This factor of 'mixed people' contributed to the huge leadership problem. In the desert, W.C. Martins argues that the Bedouin tribes had a customary leadership technique which Moses tried to use though it did not work out well for him due to the large number of people.

A good number of those who queued every day to see Moses were unable to see him. This brought discomfort among the people. Jethro, Moses' Father-in-law gave a laudable solution to the problem of leadership. He advised Moses to divide the people into groups and sub-groups and appoint judges over each group. The judges were to help settle minor disputes while difficult and tasking ones were brought to Moses.

The most difficult challenge which Israel faced and continued to face even while in exile in Babylon was the challenge of fidelity to Yahweh. The context of the ancient world was polytheistic. This might have even accounted for the moulding of the Golden Calf by Israel. However, Moses, the judges and the prophets constantly reminded the people about the essence of remaining faithful to Yahweh with whom they had made a covenant on Mount Sinai.

On Mount Sinai, a special and important event took place. Yahweh and Israel entered into a covenant. In the ancient world, covenants were agreements or treaties made between individuals, nations or kings for exchange of goods and services, or for the maintenance and sustainability of peace. Generally, therefore, Covenants referred to an agreement about anything the parties wanted to agree on. In other words, covenants are treaties in which parties commit themselves to achieve certain goals or foster relationship. A more thorough examination of Yahweh-Israel covenant raises more questions: what kind of covenantal relationship existed between Yahweh and Israel? What were the terms and conditions of the covenant? Can one find parallels between Yahweh-Israel covenant and the ancient covenant forms? The answers to these questions are however beyond the scope of this work.

### ***Israel's reaction and Yahweh's care***

We have seen that Israel faced the desert life and wandering situation with an attitude of impatience, infidelity and ungratefulness. When Yahweh solved one problem, Israel instead of even thanking Yahweh complains about another. A life of complaint became a normal routine for Israel. Each time they encountered even the minutest difficulty, they complained. A. Suelzer argues that, though, Israel wondered and praised YHWH at the exercise of his power over the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds, complaints branded their lives and years in the desert both before and after Sinai. This is because, just after the Sea of Reeds experience, Israel grumbled for water, food, etc. One of their acts of impatience and ungratefulness that merited a severe punishment for them was the erection of the Golden Calf and subsequent murmur against Yahweh. This led to the serpent bite.

### ***The Serpent bite: Reasons and Consequences***

Before we proceed to the reasons and consequences of the serpent bite in the Exodus account, let us first of all explore the theology of the biblical serpents and its motif. In the biblical accounts, serpents are mentioned severally. We know that a serpent is a “scaly, limbless, elongated reptile of the genus Ophidai or Serpentes”. In this regard, it falls into a wider class of snakes. The figurative use of snakes by biblical writers also applies to serpents. In most references made to snakes, picture of evil, danger and wickedness is portrayed. Similarly, biblical writers employed the usage to serpents. When one opens the bible, the first encounter of the word ‘serpent’ is found in the creation account when it is portrayed as distorting the truth of God’s union with his creatures. And in this exodus story, it is portrayed as an instrument for punishing God’s people for sinning against God. Does it mean that the serpent of the Genesis account is different from the ones Israel encountered in the Exodus story? Whatever, the case could be, scholars have often cautioned readers not to take biblical stories literary, seeking for the historicity of every event, but rather its theological motif.

A. Suelzer enumerates some reasons for the serpent bites. In the wider context, the entire grumbling life of Israel merited them strict sanctions from YHWH more especially after the death of Moses and Aaron. As YHWH's representatives, Israel directed their murmurs against Moses and Aaron. Sometimes, it was personal resentment. One of the examples is the murmuring of Aaron and Miriam against Moses. In a strict sense, the complaint in Numbers 14:1-38 merited Israel the punishment of the stings of seraph serpents. Scholars have debated whether the seraph serpents' event was initially part of the early traditions. To this, A. Sualzer holds that it is a latecomer to the desert murmuring. Ancient world used bronze serpent as cultic symbol which until the time of Hezekiah was honoured. Its insertion was probably for a legitimate purpose. For W. G. Williams;

The story comes from one of the early sources, probably E, in which the use of magic and magical cures are prominent, but the story used by the later compilers to emphasize the importance of faith in God.

- G. Williams' position tallies with H.H. Rowley argument that the whole Israel-Serpent encounter story is aetiology. Also, N. H. Snaith argues that —... Numbers 21.4-9 is an aetiological story...|| On the contrary, M. Noth disagrees with them and opines that the passage is not aetiology of the Nehushtan removed by Hezekiah. Noth bases his argument on the fact that, there is no record or reference made to Israel taking the serpent along with them after Moses erected it. For him, the *religio-historical* conception of serpent also played a part in the formation of the serpent and bronze serpent stories. Whatever debate scholars propound, for Israel, the reason for the serpent bites was their sins.

The major consequence for the serpent bites was death for the Israelites. The theology of death has also been linked to sin or alienation from God. It was a death experience, since Israel had not only murmured but exhibited an ungrateful attitude. Such merited them the bites from the fiery serpent. Now, there is something here. YHWH had made a covenant with them; he continued to remain faithful to them. The action of murmuring by Israel was their decision. Delivering them from the wrath of the serpents required in like manner Israel's decision. Therefore, the erection of the bronze serpent as a cure was a medium by which the people who had been bitten by the

serpents could once again renew their loyalty to YHWH as a God who has power to heal and save. W. H. Bellinger, Jr. supports this notion when he asserts: –The continuing plague and bronze snake remind the people of the need for confession and the power of God to heal. Indeed, no one was forced. People were left to make a choice between life and death. This explanation brings to mind the covenant at Sinai when Moses said to the people: –I put before you today life and death. In this regard, M. Noth notes; Hence, the release from fatal effects of the serpent bites is linked to a test of obedience set by Yahweh in his free judgment, a test which, at the same time, bears witness to the sovereign power of Yahweh even over the dangerous and sinister character of the desert.

From our exposition above, two views have unfolded. Firstly, the story as an aetiology of II Kings 18:14 and secondly as a *religio-historical* events. The fact remains that the Bible employs a great deal of aetiological stories and Israel often narrated their stories in a unique way with YHWH as the centre of all events. As a way of concluding this chapter, we can assert that, the serpent story is of great significance to Israel. In fact, for N. H. Snaith, –it was the last but most dreadful, of all Israel's apostasies. It demonstrates that grateful hearts please YHWH. Most importantly it portrays that although our actions can merit us punishments from God, his mercy and love is abounding and is always ready to accept and forgive whenever we ask for mercy.

### ***Towards A Post- Covid-19 Church***

In recent times however, nations have started easing restrictions and regulations. Some countries have lifted most of their bans and restrictions. In this regard, many nations allow public worship while observing the social distancing rule. It is in the light of this, that one can talk of post-covid-19 Church. Thus, constructing a sound theology for post-Covid-19 Church, I bring out the messages of two great personalities; The Director General of WHO Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and the Holy Father Pope Francis.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on one hand has accepted that Covid-19 has taken too much from humanity. On the other hand, he expressed that it has offered humanity the opportunity to come together, as one humanity so as to work, learn and grow together. Indeed, although the virus makes people to be isolated, it has made humanity to once again realize that no one nation or group can grow without the help of the other. In the face of Covid-19, the importance and indispensability of common humanity is brought to the limelight. Similarly, Pope Francis in his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing, pointed out that all are important and needed. He therefore noted: "We have all realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to grow together, each of us in need of comforting the other". These words of the Holy Father brings to my mind one of the songs; "One People, Different Colours, One People Many Nations" by a great African reggae star Lucky Dube. Human beings no matter the skin colour, location, position and power share common oneness and Covid-19 has offered humanity the opportunity to reflect and appreciate our common strengths, weaknesses and fragilities. Due to this common fragility found in all humans which Covid-19 has laid bare, the Holy Father maintains, "we are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we flounder; we need the Lord, like the ancient navigators needed the stars." Humanity in this sense, survives on two values; the value for our common heritage as humans and the value for the wonder of our being and all that surrounds us; God.

The post-Covid-19 Church especially in Sierra Leone can be identical to that ancient Israel 'Church' that experienced the concrete love in the wilderness. They felt the wrath of death due to their infidelity to Yahweh through the bites of the serpents. At the same time, gained salvation through the loving mercy of Yahweh. The Church in Sierra Leone, prior to the advent of Covid-19 has not been that ideal Church of unity and orderliness. The springing up of churches on daily basis and their varied prosperity theologies reveals some crave for autonomy among ministers. This crave endangers the common heritage of faith. If post-Covid-19 Church has to make a head way, she needs to be a symbol of unity. She needs to be the visible mouth piece of the poor and the weak. She needs to be concerned for her ministers (who they are, how they are trained and



who trains them). She needs an open Church that reads and acts according to signs of the times. She most importantly needs to be the *intercessor* for the world. Perhaps we need more than ever an invocation of the Holy Ghost Fire in post-Covid-19 Church. However, this time not to destroy our perceived enemies but for restoration and reconciliation among human beings and God.

## **Conclusion**

What I have done so far is adding my voice in unravelling the great mystery that surrounds the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic that has ravaged the world for the past months. I have done this considering the biblical serpents' episode in the light of Covid-19 virus. At the end, it is realized that just as the (bronze) serpents bites on ancient Israel, Covid-19 is taking so much from humanity and has become the 21<sup>st</sup> century generational challenge. In this challenge lies the greatest lesson and gift for our generation. This lesson and gift is that if humanity is to survive the battle Covid-19 poses and subsequent calamities, healthy relationships on both vertical and horizontal dimensions are needed. When the people of Israel looked at the erected (bronze) serpent, they received healing. In the same way, amidst the threats Covid-19 poses, God stills loves humanity. As Yahweh healed the victims of the serpents' bites through the intercession of Moses, the post-Church should be 'Moses' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century generation constantly interceding for healing and eradication of the covid-19 pandemic. The obvious reason is that we all belong to One Humanity and One God.

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## GLOBAL MISSION DIMENSION

As we discuss 'The Church in Post COVID 19 Sierra Leone', we do so with the realisation that the Church in Sierra Leone does not exist and operate in isolation. It is part of an entity – the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church. It is a vital part of the global Church. We are called to make our contribution to the Great Commission – the gospel to all the world. This can only be effective when we work in solidarity and in partnership with each other. This is recently captured by our brother Michael Oh. He looks toward a post COVID 19 era of mission, one in which creative, bold leaders envision new mission strategies and collaboratively build the community that we want for the future.

Michael Oh serves as the Global Executive Director / CEO of the Lausanne Movement. Michael and his family served as missionaries in Nagoya, Japan, from 2004 to 2016. There he founded a ministry called Christ Bible Institute (CBI), which includes Christ Bible Seminary, the Heart & Soul Cafe, and a church-planting ministry.

Below is the edited transcript of his video message as downloaded from the website of the Lausanne Movement (<https://www.lausanne.org/>)

## THREE NEEDS FOR GLOBAL MISSION IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

By  
**Dr. Michael Oh**

These pandemic days are not lost days. Even with global lockdowns and slowdowns, the opportunity for the gospel has accelerated. The question that people most often ask the Lausanne Movement and our leaders is, 'What do I need to know about what's going on in the world, and how does that impact global mission?'

So I wanted to share three brief points that are both COVID-19 context specific and independent.

The Lausanne Movement, founded by Billy Graham in 1974, has the mission of connecting influencers and ideas for global mission. And our starting point as we connect some amazing influencers across every nation on earth, who are doing some amazing ministry, is this:

'I can't fulfill the Great Commission by myself.'

'My organization can't fulfill the Great Commission—Christ's command to make disciples of all nations—by itself.'

'My church, my business, my school, my ministry, my family, etc. can't fulfill the Great Commission by themselves.'

### 1. The Necessity of Collaboration

Disciples of all nations will be made when disciples of all nations are collaborating. Now of course no one actually believes that they can fulfill the Great Commission by themselves (hopefully not!), but we often act like we can; or we make it look like we can in our brochures, videos, grant applications, and our ministry activities, that are at best isolated and at worst competitive.

In the midst of all of the headaches and heartaches of the COVID-19 pandemic, one blessing is that the reality of our need for each other is becoming more real to us. The fact that we can't fulfill the Great Commission by ourselves is more intensely felt now than ever, when we are in lock down, when we can't leave our homes, when churches can't meet, when outreach events can't be held, when missionaries can't be sent, when we can't even have a cup of coffee with someone with whom we want to share the hope of Jesus!

So we have an incredible learning opportunity and reset opportunity. We desperately need each other in order for the hope of the nations to go to the nations. How does this happen in our new reality? That's what we need to figure out together! In our season, and possibly not just a season but in this new post-COVID-19 mission era of decreased mobility and increased digital connectivity, how do we collaborate for the sake of the gospel?

There is no textbook here. Everybody knows that nobody knows what to do. We need new-wineskin thinking and strategizing and action. I don't think we realize the extent to which our planning and organizations are based on old wineskin barriers and categories. For example, most church community groups are organized based on geography. The concept of community needs to be re-imagined—not defined by the limitations of physical location and space—but community as relationships without any more geographic borders or commute time. The same goes for community outreaches. For example, what if a Punjabi Sikh background Christian community in Edmonton, Canada, could do digital gospel outreach to a Sikh community in Punjab, India?

We need a re-imagining of place, of space, of presence; of love, of outreach, of community. This is some seriously new wineskin; which leads to my second point, which is on the necessity of leadership.

## **2. The Necessity of Leadership**

We need LEADERS, not just managers, in the post COVID-19 Mission Era.

Lausanne has had some incredible leaders who have spoken prophetically in times of unique challenge and opportunity. Ralph Winter in 1974 who put out a challenge for the global church to radically change our mission strategy to engage Unreached People Groups with the gospel; Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar calling Christians to embrace every possible expression of the love of God in *misión integral* or 'integral mission'; and Luis Bush at Lausanne II recognizing a unique gospel opportunity in a geographic area with the greatest concentration of people without the gospel, the poor, and the persecuted and the lowest concentration of missionaries called the 10/40 window. These were game-changing strategies that impacted for generations.

Global mission in a post-COVID-19 era needs leaders, not just managers. There are a lot of ministries led by managers who know how to maintain and tweak and are desperate for things to return to the 'old normal'. We need a new generation of innovative, bold, entrepreneurial, and creative mission leaders who will not be caught flat-footed in times of crisis or waste months of gospel opportunity.

Ed Bastian, the CEO of Delta Airlines said, "we're going to spend the time in these next few months as we build the company we want for the future, not necessarily rebuild what we had." Let's spend time in these next months as global influencers and decision makers to build together a global mission strategy and community that we want for the future, not try to rebuild what we had.

These are not lost days. Overall, we sense an acceleration of opportunity for the gospel and we're eager to steward this faithfully. We need vision, innovation, inspiration from our leaders. And we need collaboration to make our common vision become a reality.

Where do we get such inspiration and boldness? Just this morning I read in Nehemiah chapter 2 about Nehemiah's God-inspired plan and God-empowered boldness that was born in the crucible of heart-wrenching prayer of repentance and intercession. There is no greater expression of biblical leadership than prayer. And there is no greater source of leadership innovation than prayer.

And let me also plead with you who are ministers and missionaries, the 1% of those in professional ministry, to not neglect the incredible gifts and experience and wisdom of the 99! The 99% of those who are not in

professional ministry, 100% of whom are called to exercise their own God-given, Holy Spirit empowered, world-blessing work of ministry! (Eph 4:12) Workplace Christians look to pastors and theologians in their area of expertise. Why do the 1% not look to the 99% in theirs? If we want to get some of the best minds for innovation and boldness in our time of incredible need, we have to look to and work with our marketplace leaders. They are making kingdom impact in every sphere of society—in the arts, media, science, technology, architecture, medicine, you name it. We need them. We can't fulfill the Great Commission without them.

### **3. The Necessity of Keeping a Global Perspective**

And for my third and final point, I want to make a plea—a plea for you **to not neglect the global body in this pandemic**. This not just a national crisis or a regional crisis. This is global. And you are not just an individual Christian in a single location. Every Christian has a shared identity as a part of the global body of Christ. And every Christian has a shared calling—to be a part of the local and global mission of God.

No doubt you are paying attention to the flattening of the curve in your country or prefecture or community. And you are hoping for a slowdown in the rate of infections and the easing of restrictions in your community. But this is a global pandemic. And you are a part of the global body of Christ and called to the global mission of God! And even when the most difficult days in this pandemic in your area are over (at least temporarily), there are thousands of other communities around the world that will continue to suffer.

So when I look at the COVID-19 statistics each day (multiple times per day), my eyes and my heart often focus in on Russia, Brazil, India, Nigeria. I look at Africa and Latin America, a bit fearful for what might lie ahead for them, for our brothers and sisters there, and for the hundreds of millions who do not know Christ.

As one version of Hebrews 13:3 says, 'Don't forget those who are suffering. Remember them as though you were suffering with them.' Remember them in your prayers. Remember them in your giving. Remember them in your strategies. Remember them in your partnership planning.

I was recently speaking with an amazing South East Asian leader who said to me, 'We have been blindsided by this pandemic, and we are not ready.' But we reminded each other that even as many things on earth are shaken, God's kingdom cannot be shaken. Even when we are immobile, God is still

on the move. Even when we are stuck in one place, God is still omnipresent. Even when we are weak, God is still omnipotent.

How can we be a part of God's work in this post-COVID-19 mission era? We're looking forward to figuring this out together with you.

# **PARADIGM SHIFT IN POST COVID-19 CHURCH**

## **BY**

### **SIDNEY A. I. COOPER<sup>5</sup>**

In the past few months, the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has gone global; affecting almost all countries, societies, and health systems. It is disrupting spheres of our social, political, or economical lives. It is also intruding our spiritual domain.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought profound changes to our lives, including our religious observances. In accordance with the government and public health measures, most churches and religious organisations were closed to the public, adopting unprecedented measures such as live stream and Zoom.

COVID-19 is a big, ugly, dangerous thing that is changing the way we work, play, worship, learn and live – and for far too many, the way we die. This is likely the case for the foreseeable future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has an extremely significant impact on the functioning of societies, as well as many sectors of economic life. It is very difficult to forecast the directions and depth of necessary changes during the development of the pandemic. This is due to the fact that different scenarios and the pace of development of COVID-19 are considered in different countries. Thus, public policies used in the fight against pandemics are also different in individual countries.

Assessments of social, economic, and cultural effects of the pandemic must be multidimensional, and thus, subject to significant uncertainty. The coronavirus pandemic is developing very rapidly on a global scale. It is understandable that it has a very significant impact on the whole social life, including religious life. Religious practices, which have, by their very nature, a community dimension in almost all religions, especially in Christianity, are set aside.

Despite the lingering uncertainty, COVID-19 silently offers us an opportunity to reflect on the spiritual impact it has on the world and our

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communities. In this broad sense, the spiritual impact is currently not unequivocally positive; however, I'm convinced that in the end, humanity, as a whole, can take a spiritual leap forward

Coronavirus has come to stay with us for a while. Exactly how long, we don't know. How many people will be affected, we don't know. This moment is asking us to reimagine our lives and ways of being, which at the moment includes the way congregations' worship since we cannot gather together like before.

More so, CoViD-19 has helped in the rediscovery of family values which was lost to modernity, as most parents now have more time for their children than before. Many separated families are brought together, because almost everyone is thinking *Home, Sweet Home* for the adage that says "home is the best" – is now better appreciated by many.

The fact remains that everything, however long, has its end; the centuries that have passed, the times we failed to manage properly and the opportunities we missed will never return. We continue to learn from these. It is very important to appreciate attentively, what we are living out at each point. This involves the place, the time and the experience. It is true to say that all that begins must end, and all that grows, undergoes decay and death. All the same, we must learn something in order to have better days ahead. Learning is a continuous process. We learn from the past in order to live in a worthy present. What matters is how we were able to utilize what we have learnt from events of the past and present, and then shape our future with them. We must begin now to plan for the Post COVID-19 era. Hard times they say, die, but hard people triumph. Relying on God, we shall all come out safe and sound. *Shalom!!!*

Changing behaviours is tough. Among the behaviours we are trying to reshape in this coronavirus context is the tendency to hug, handshake and high-five. We have learned a new phrase – social distancing. Maintaining six feet of physical distance is intended to reduce the likelihood of exposure to the virus through coughing, sneezing and touching. While we normally try to avoid people coughing and sneezing around us, embracing this no-touching aspect is new.

Changing behaviour is arduous but not impossible. We are not old dogs, so we can learn new tricks. Although we cannot worship the way we use to due the policies made by the Health official, but we can find ways to

worship in the presence of God happily. Physical fellowship was not possible few months ago, but an alternative approach was used to express personal care, concern and community.

**The coronavirus crisis is threatening** the physical and financial health of hundreds of thousands of people. It will certainly affect many more. COVID-19 will be fatal for some and catastrophic for others. Some people, businesses, schools, non-profits and churches will not survive while others will be adversely impacted for years. This is the kind of communal calamity that would call people together for prayer, worship, encouragement and support. Social distancing, however, is necessary radical change required in this disastrous situation

How is it that a virus so tiny in size can have more power than a nuclear bomb to change the course of history? Well a war, a bomb and most natural disaster are basically confined to a region. A virus on the other hand, depending on its infection quotient can quite literally sweep across the world leaving behind death and a debilitated economy. COVID 19 is a new iteration of the highly contagious Coronavirus which attack respiratory systems. Recent statements by health experts tell us that COVID 19 is not going away soon. In fact we have to be prepared for attacks of newer viruses in the months and years to come. Efforts to find a vaccine and a cure for the virus is going on in hundreds of research laboratories around the world. Till we find a vaccine preventive caution is the only solution. The reopening of church building is a channel of spreading the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a worldwide upheaval. It literally causes society to lockdown, confined billions to their homes. Churches worldwide were closed, with the cancellation of most church activities in church buildings. Overnight, it forced the church to move online utilizing numerous platforms and social media. Some churches are doing well in this, others not so.

Now, as the pandemic begins to settle, there has been an ease on the ban by the president and restrictions for churches to meet physically is lifted. While restrictions are eased, there still are many requirements that are instituted for the prevention of COVID-19 infection and reinfection. In general, church gatherings are limited to 100 persons or less at one time, meetings not more than one and a half hours, and should have, at least, thirty minutes between meetings to allow for cleaning and health protocol; Congregants seated distancing at least 2 meters from each other and

should wear face masks. Temperature monitoring and personal contact information will be taken on entering the hall.

The situation is dire and there may be closure of some churches and 'retrenchment' of pastors in the aftermath of the pandemic. These are mostly churches that are heavily committed financially to rental properties and staff.

There needs to be a **paradigm shift** in our thinking about the way we do and become church. I will suggest the post COVID-19 Church be a home Cell Church that is connected physically in homes and via technologies. Sunday services will be streamed into the cells. Perhaps it is no longer necessary for large auditoriums and offices. If needed, these churches can always rent a hall for their large group meetings.

Worship and preaching must learn to go outside of the walls of the church buildings. We must create gatherings of small communities in homes to gather with other folks.

The Post COVID-19 church will be where human gather together. What is new is how it would be expanded beyond its bricks-and-mortar shells to cyberspace to become a home cell Church. There will need for what I call Acts 2 church.

This type of church will emerge from the dust once the COVID is over and the authorities facilitate the opening of the church buildings for total freestyle worship. While many are hopeful that life will return to normal once the pandemic is over, the reality is that we have to live with the new normalcy. Unfortunately, there will be many Christian leaders who will want to return to the old normal, by force if necessary.

What is this new normalcy and what will the church look like? **SOCIAL DISTANCE** is the key here. I have discovered social distancing is here to stay and in a way, we will remain a 'distanced' church. The organizational setup of a home cell church is a better option in times such as these.

COVID-19 should generate in the modern man a great deal of soul-searching, enabling him to think and act with both feet on the ground. His perpetual scientific and cultural haughtiness as well as waywardness are counterproductive, leading him in the long-term basically nowhere.

Before the advent of covid-19 how was the church like, asked one of my colleagues? The church was so preoccupied with fund raising activities and In the process, the idea of God was relegated to the forgotten —absentee landlordll who lives —upstairsll from the world which humans inhabit. There was more and more antagonism between the modern man and Heaven.

The way people conceive and react to COVID-19 is an unmistakable sign of humankind's smallness and vulnerability. What they normally do, as much individually as institutionally, is a combination of arrogance and ignorance, masked with incredible occasional honesty and determination

Many persons are now turning back to God, the Author and Finisher of life. There is renewal. Above all, coronavirus pushes people to value prayers. People are now more interested in God and recognise that their relationship with God has to be personal and that before God, all men and women are equal.

More lessons abound. People are now learning that sometimes it pays to leave the public forum for a personal recollection. People have learnt how to live a very simple hygienic life. It has made people to be internally productive, pushed the world into new discoveries and given people the opportunity to learn new skills.

We must begin now to plan for the Post CoViD-19 era.

People will trust and turn back to God more than ever before as COVID-19 has taught humankind that God is above humankind. Churches, and Mosques, would reopen, but only allow a few people in at a time to avoid the spread. COVID-19 is a warning to all that's supposed to bring people back to God.

We also have to remember only what God wants will eventually befall us. If He decreed that COVID-19 will affect a person, no amount of awareness, care and preventive measures could frustrate His plan. Similarly, if God decreed that a person will not be affected by COVID-19, absolutely nothing could alter His decision.

This by no means tends to promote the idea of passive fatalism, just as it does not intend to land any support to the notions of complete freedom and indeterminism either. Human life is a delicately struck balance between the two opposing domains. Human life is the result of God's divine will, plan

and ultimate care. In it, there is no room whatsoever for coincidences, absurdities and injustice.

To sum up, the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us we are—deep down—spiritual beings, whether we realize it or not, and makes us recognize that the problem of coronavirus is right here at the face of our global community; it's a challenge that requires global cooperation and unity, a component of compassion to alleviate suffering, and a greater responsibility to exercise our faith to witness divine intervention. Though the COVID-19 crisis has brought the world to a halt and sadly, the health and economic impact will be disastrous, I feel that from a spiritual angle, the pros will outweigh the cons making us a global community with spiritual connectivity

In the final analysis, the fact remains that everything, however long, has its end; the centuries that have passed, the times we failed to manage properly and the opportunities we missed will never return. We continue to learn from these. It is very important to appreciate attentively, what we are living out at each point. This involves the place, the time and the experience. It is true to say that all that begins must end, and all that grows, undergoes decay and death. All the same, we must learn something in order to have better days ahead. Learning is a continuous process. We learn from the past in order to live in a worthy present. What matters is how we were able to utilize what we have learnt from events of the past and present, and then shape our future with them. We must begin now to plan for the Post CoViD-19 era.

### ***POST-COVID-19 ACTIVITIES***

COVID-19 has transformed our everyday lives. It's as if another world has arrived in the blink of an eye. Yet life is not on pause. We still need to live. The pandemic, like any other time, is a moment both of opportunity as well as challenge.

- *The church moving out of the wall and building the capacity she has through its presence.*
- *Church raising funds to support her programs locally.*
- *Encourage our theological colleges to commence a module in their curriculum on church sustainability.*
- *Church becoming actively involved in social issues facing the community and less privileged members.*

Economic reform should become one of the church's most significant concerns. The present scope is to stress the role of local church leaders responsible for raising funds.

To attain the aforesaid goal, I will thus: (1) Put emphasis on past grounds and perceptions that have shaped the Church, (2) engaging into business venture, fundraising locally.

The pandemic revealed the vulnerability of most churches who could not manage their ministries due to the unavailability of funds during COVID.

Finally, which type of church will survive the aftermath of the pandemic? Economic and social disruption will follow pandemic? Churches that have heavily invested in buildings and staff. Money will be scarce as tithing amounts will be reduced as members face the financial crunch. Churches may be forced to heavily cancel financial activities or sell properties at little cost if not sell off their buildings, and reduce their personnel.

There needs to be a paradigm shift in our thinking about the way we do and become church. I would suggest the post COVID-19 be a Cell Church that is connected physically in homes and via technologies. Sunday services will be streamed into the cells. Perhaps it is no longer necessary for large auditoriums and offices. If needed, these churches can always rent a hall for their large group meetings. This makes more sense than owning large buildings which we utilize for a few hours every week. This will reduce the financial burden and allows more member to take up leadership roles and cell leaders. This is more in line with the Biblical and Reformers' mandate of the priesthood of all believers. Understanding ecclesiology in terms of substance rather than the form allows us the liberty to choose.

Create a Health Team to regularly monitor coronavirus risk and impact on the church and community.

# CHURCH AND LIFE BEYOND CORONA: SPIRITUAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE IN POST COVID-19 SIERRA LEONE

By  
Rev. Dr. Joseph G. L. Moiba<sup>6</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the people of Sierra Leone experienced a seemingly unstoppable catastrophic outbreak of the Ebola virus and leading to strict precautionary measures, quarantine and fear of death. The church after Ebola was as normal as the church before and during Ebola.

Like the corona pandemic in march 2020, the economic impact of the Ebola crisis hit the poor and vulnerable, and by extension the church, hardest. However, the situation with corona is even worse due to its dramatic nature and the fact that churches in Sierra Leone have never been shut down the way they were during this COVID19.

Now that worship activities have been resumed, we should contemplate on the dynamics of the church's life and worship during and after the COVID 19 era.

## THE CHURCH DURING AND AFTER THE CORONA CRISIS IN SIERRA LEONE

The Church during and after COVID-19 should continuously reflect and act on spiritual, health, and economic life beyond corona in Sierra Leone. The priestly, pastoral and prophetic roles of the church must be maintained. However, there will need to be an emphasis on the **pastoral** and **prophetic** roles of the church in more public ways. This is because **faith** without **action** is dead. The church in Sierra Leone can for example promote Wesley's manifesto in an effort to promote economic, health (preventive, curative) and spiritual growth in Sierra Leone. The spiritual and economic life of peoples of faith and peoples of no faith is an interesting and relevant

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topic to reflect on. Many people are predicting doom and poverty with regards to life beyond corona in Sierra Leone. However, I am very much positive with regards to the life beyond corona, spiritually and economically due to the following factors:

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Most people think that corona is a very small virus and it's so small that humans were a little surprised that so small a virus can make them so weak and their vulnerability exposed to such an extent that the -the whole worldll becomes closed.

It is a clear theological position that in times of crises, people become either very religious, or less religious. Many people return to prayers, whereas others return to blaming God and sometimes blaming their belief in false doctrines, especially those rooted in Pentecostal teachings about healing, miracles, etc. Many of such doctrines seem to be probably built on false foundations and some of these foundations are not built on sound biblical and/or theological bricks. There are too much emphasis on miracles, which overlook sound theological, biblical and scientific reflections and research. That is dangerous and can lead to much death and further crisis in the midst of such a pandemic like corona.

The evil that men do lives after them. In our post-modern time, world health is said to be one of the highest achievements of modern Western medical science. People live longer, healthier and much more comfortable lives than in any other known period of the history of mankind. However, COVID-19 seems to expose the vulnerability of mankind as well as the weaknesses of modern Science or postmodernity for that matter. The symptoms of COVID- 19 are similar to so many other major and minor diseases, demonstrating the limits, weakness and uncertainty of human knowledge.

God warns mankind in Holy Scriptures, to not fear the one that kills the body but cannot kill the soul, but to fear the One that has power to kill both the body and the soul. The Corona virus is deadly and we must use our god-giving senses and talents to prevent, contain and treat ourselves of it, in a given situation. However, the real theological position is that God continues to warn us not to put our trust in human beings, but to have confidence in him/ her.



Even though one does not subscribe to conspiracy theories about, SARS, EBOLA and COVID-19 viruses , there is much evidence to show that the modern World Health Organisation, and for that sake the post-modern man, seems to neglect the importance of spirituality, ethics and divine health values as recorded in holy scriptures. This has to do also with the area of spirituality, theology, religion and health.

God continues to remind us to never live in fear but to live in faith even in the midst of viruses like Sars, Ebola and Corona. We must as humans remember that science is many things. Even theology and religious studies can be studied scientifically. The science of religion and theology reminds us that viruses and plagues were attributed to human sin in the past. Hence my theological position is this: that the biological weapons-race in our post-modern world is one of the un-godliest activities of world powers and if it is not put under check, by the church after corona, it will eventually lead to the destruction of the human race. God reveals this to me forever that we must repent and remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Thus the prophetic role of the church in Sierra Leone needs to be promoted after corona.

We must therefore worship God and obey his or her commandments of love. Love God and love our fellow human beings and let's stop the arms-race and playing-god. May we all be spared from corona virus if, as the World Health Organisation (WHO) claims, the church have to learn to live with the corona virus even after COVID 19.

The church in Sierra Leone will also probably need to reflect and act on spirituality and health. A continuous reflection and action on this theme of spirituality and health will better prepare the Sierra Leone churches theologically, spiritually, medically and economically because spirituality is probably the missing dimension of world health which I will now reflect on in the following paragraphs:

## SPIRITUALITY: THE MISSING DIMENSION OF WORLD HEALTH

The weaknesses of Western medical practices were exposed by epidemics, pandemics and other forms of side effects of synthetic medicines and medical practices. This is also looked at from Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shifts in science and the scientific method. What makes this paradigm shift more profoundly challenging is when science is limited

to only natural science and leaving behind other forms of sciences that explain social phenomena and social realities such as spirituality, life and death issues, etc. The limit of all sciences is the beginning of theology and Theo sciences! Thus churches can introduce Theo-medical studies in seminaries both for practicing ministers or priests as well as students of theology. The aim of a Theo-science education will promote the study of how churches can handle pandemics and epidemics like Ebola and corona and other forms of crisis. This leads me to doing pastoral duties during and or after corona.

There are dos and don'ts during and after a pandemic like corona. These are: (a) PRAY, (b) REST, (c) PLAN and HOLD Virtual or Physical meetings, where possible to discuss the crisis and how to do Gods work during and after a crisis. (d) But most importantly, each church must HAVE A MISSION and finally, the church during and after corona must NOT CUT THE BUDGET. Thus Christian health spirituality must be promoted after the pandemic.

Spirituality after a pandemic can take the form of addressing the above issues with sound biblical stories from both the Old and New Testaments with renewed emphasis on orientation, disorientation and reorientation using the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms must come alive and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) can promote studies in the book of Psalms as a way of dealing with the three emphases above, which in turn can help the church address economic, health and other issues after corona.

Regarding economic issues, and the economic challenges and opportunities after corona, my appeal is biblical, vis: Do not worry for what you eat or wear for your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Thus is the post corona period the church can promote post pandemic ministerial practices.

#### POST PANDEMIC MINISTERIAL PRACTICE

The church can intensify counseling, re-orientating congregations and citizens using the its holy book, especially the book of Psalms. The church after COVID 19 should and can promote –what to do in a future pandemic or epidemicll, Intensify the prophetic role of the church, Promote members welfare and healthcare with emphasis on spirituality and Wesleyans manifesto, Intensify home visits/ home cell, Reinvigorate home cells theology, give more communion services in homes, and engage in

interfaith dialogue on spirituality and health. These can be achieved when ecumenism is vigorously promoted after CORONA 19 because of the power of grouping. An example of this is given below based on experiences during the eleven year war in Sierra Leone, and to this I now turn:

#### AN EXAMPLE OF THE POWER OF GROUPING DURING THE WAR IN SIERRA LEONE

Many factors contributed to dialogue, and ultimately to the attainment and maintenance of peace, in Sierra Leone during and after the war. These factors of ecumenism and even inter-faith collaborations through the Inter Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) can contribute to better prepare citizens of Sierra Leone for a conducive and stable economic, religious and political atmosphere in Sierra Leone after corona. In dialogue, participants must be aware of the need for judgments to be suspended. There must be a release of desire for a specific outcome; there must be an inquiry into and an examination of underlying assumptions. Additionally, encouraging authenticity, maintaining a slow pace with silence between speakers and listening deeply to the self and others are paramount in religious conversation, as well as the search for collective meaning (Eleanor and Girard, 1998, p. 26). Religious leaders serve as opinion leaders in their respective communities, which means that people adhere to and respect their views and opinions on social and religious matters. This gives such leaders the chance to influence members in a manner that Huntington (2002) seems to overlook. As opinion leaders, religious leaders are also instruments of peace. They are not expected to go to war but are often regarded as moral guarantors acting on behalf of their various groups. (Olonisakin, 2008: pp. 35 and 161)

#### Religious Leaders' Use of the Bible and the Qur'an in Peacemaking

Depending on their audiences, Religious leaders referred to passages from both the Bible and the Qur'an in their peacemaking efforts during and after the 11 years war in Sierra Leone. The Chief Imam of the southern part of Sierra Leone, Alhaji Dr. Mohamed Tunis, added his voice to this when he confirmed that:

They [talking about Christians and Muslims] have no ill feelings between themselves, especially the good Christians and especially the good Muslims. Wherever we meet, we always show that we are worshipping the same person. Who is this person? It's the almighty God. Whether you are going to the church or to the mosque we have to have it at the back of our

minds that we have one God. Also, the Bible and the Qur'an were passed on to the prophets. The Qur'an was passed on to Prophet Mohammed; the Bible was passed on to the Prophet Issa [Jesus]. So we used to remind religious people about this and we are still reminding them about this. These two people are prophets who left us messages which must be followed. So we still remind them about this.

It is against this background that I propose that religious texts – in both the Qur'an and the Bible – are still relevant to modern, post-modern and future readers, in contrast to what Avalos advocates (Avalos, 2005, 2007). These books are still relevant for the church and life after COVID 19 in Sierra Leone, especially if the church focuses on the book of psalms in its reorientation drive after the pandemic.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The church after COVID 19 must intensify ecumenism, home cell theology, studies and reflections on orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, using the book of Psalms. The church can also continue to vigorously promote spirituality and health, material welfare, as well as relating economic and political philosophies in Sierra Leone based on Wesleyans manifesto, with aim of reducing the gap between the rich and the poor in Sierra Leone.

The church needs to also emphasise doing church after a pandemic by introducing new studies in their theological seminaries. Studies such as crisis management, theo-science and viruses, plagues and history, etc. It is as a result of the above background that this paper focuses on how Wesley's manifesto can be made to influence the Sierra Leone political and economic realities. Thus, how can Wesley's manifesto viz; 1.Reduce the gap between rich people and poor people 2.Help everyone to have a job 3.Help the poorest, including introducing a living wage 4.Offer the best possible education 5.Help everyone to feel they can make a difference 6.Promote tolerance 7.Promote equal treatment for women 8.Create a society based on values and not on profits and consumerism 9. End all forms of slavery 10. Avoid getting into wars 11. Share the love of God with everyone and 12. Care for the environment, be applied in Sierra Leone economic and political realities for best governance and patriotism through advocacy, political active-ness and the fight against corruption and unpatriotic behaviors in the public and private services.

Given the information presented above, one can conclude that as perceived by both Sierra Leoneans and independent observers, religious tolerance in Sierra Leone is second to nowhere else in the world. This situation helped religious leaders in their reconciliatory role during and after the war. There were many Christian leaders who played significant roles in Sierra Leoneans' efforts to bring the 11-year war to an end. These Christian leaders engaged in various peacemaking activities both as individuals and as groups. The tools they used in their activities included holy books as well as their multi-level organisations, which span the entire country.

There is hardly any town or village in Sierra Leone without a church or a mosque, which became very useful for peace-making led by Christian leaders. This strength can also be vigorously exploited in the Sierra Leone church after corona for theology, spirituality and health, ecumenism, pastoral and prophetic advantages for the role of the church to be more visible and relevant after a pandemic.

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# **BIBLICAL POINTERS IN COVID19 REGULATIONS OBSERVANCE**

**By**

**Rev. Christiana Sutton - Kororma<sup>7</sup>**

The COVID19 pandemic has presented us with unprecedented global challenges, touching every community in every nation of the world. The pandemic is causing systems of work, education, finance and domestic lives to grind to a halt, affecting nearly every aspect of people's lives. In Sierra Leone the first case was recorded on the 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2020.

As the pandemic continues wreaking unimaginable sickness and increasing death tolls, we are particularly aware of the increased vulnerability of children, families and in particular girls. Children are facing a range of challenges to their health and safety: school closures, high levels of emotional distress, higher risks of violence and increased food insecurity.

Several response measures have been taken to help people stay safe from the virus. These measures include, restrictions on traveling and movement, closure of schools and religious gatherings, physical distancing, self-isolation in the home, lockdowns, stay at home notices, shops and services closing down or opening for a limited amount of time. These means are meant to help people stay safe from COVID19.

## **Role of Faith-based in Post-COVID 19**

Religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities can play a major role in reducing illness related to COVID-19 in Sierra Leone. They are well placed within communities to be a source of refuge in times of need and can reach into communities where governments cannot.

For the Christians our call is to love one another as Christ loved us and not to turn away communities. The religious community are primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social service, for the communities they serve. Religious leaders of faith-based organizations and communities of faith can share health information to protect their own members and the wider communities, which may be more likely to be accepted than from other sources.

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It is sound biblical principle to prevent problems before they arise and that serves as guide to prevention. As the saying goes; “prevention is better than cure”, and the Scripture gives us guidance for such actions....

Sensible people will see trouble coming and avoid it, but an unthinking person will walk right into it and regret it later.  
(Proverbs 27:12) (GNB)

## **Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention**

The guidance presented to us by the NACOVAC are not against religion. They are supported by Scripture.

- **Personal Hygiene** - Maintain personal Hygiene and cleanliness – **Cough and Sneeze into your Upper Arm or Sleeve.** Sanitation and Hygiene are very important to health survival and prevention of every disease such as CORONA. The Bible clearly states as follows...

||You shall have a place outside the camp and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with you as tool, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.||  
(Deuteronomy 23:12-14) New International Version.

The above text points to the importance of good hygiene and sanitation for the prevention of diseases and this includes CORONA which is caused by virus in our environment. As it is commonly said, cleanliness is next to godliness.

### **HAND WASHING:**

The Lord said to Moses... “You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the Alter, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash hands and their feet.” (Exodus 30:17-21 NIV) New International Version.

Washing of hands frequently with soap and clean water will help to prevent us from contracting the CORONA virus and even other germs. It is one good hygiene that needs to be practiced by all.

- **SOCIAL DISTANCING**

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:

When a person has on the skin of his body...when the priest has examined him, he shall pronounce him unclean... (Leviticus13:1-59) English Standard Version (ESV)

According to the Scripture recorded in Leviticus 13:1-59, social distancing was prescribed for infected people. It is therefore significant that at this time of CORONA Virus we should distant ourselves from each other as we are all potential carriers of the virus. With the seemingly rampant spread of COVID-19 or CORONA Virus, governments and infectious disease experts are recommending social distancing as a necessary way to slow down the spread of the virus.

### **AVOID HAND SHAKE and HUGGING**

Handshake is the easiest means of transmitting diseases/virus. Discharge of the body fluid secretion will infect others. Leviticus chapter thirteen warns against touching an infected (unclean) person. It is therefore advisable to avoid handshake so as not to transmit disease/virus. Like the Israelites, we should avoid handshake when there is pandemic/epidemic in a community, such as our present experience of the CORONA virus.

Also let us see what this Scripture guides on the issue of laying on of hands in our ceremonies during pandemic/epidemic and how the church can respond. We usually shake hands during the sharing of the peace, and greetings in and out of the church, this Scripture below is as a guide to save ourselves as well as our families and communities:

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands. Keep yourself pure.  
(1Timothy 5:22) New International Version (NIV).

Paul warned Timothy to exercise the greatest care for his own life, he is not to be partaker of other man's problem.

- **STAY AT HOME OR QUARANTINE**

It is required for everyone to stay at home or do self-isolation, avoid social visits or go out only when necessary during a pandemic/epidemic as COVID-19. Staying at home is to prevent the spread of any infectious disease or virus such as COVID-19. It is stated in the Bible, it is not a punishment.



The Leviticus passage admonishes infected persons to isolate themselves in camp until they were healed. They were to stay at home for seven days. If there is no sign of cure, another seven days making it fourteen days. It shows that infected people need to go through the process of examination and observations to confirm that they are healthy to go out so as not to spread the infectious disease as CORONA to more people. Go out when necessary and make sure you mask up.

- **SEEK MEDICAL HELP**

To seek medical treatment when we are sick or when we experience signs and symptoms is essential even in biblical times. The Priests that administered the care were instructed to change their clothes and wash thoroughly after inspecting the victim.

Even though we believe in prayer for healing, it is incumbent upon us to go to the hospital for check-up and treatment when we are sick.

- **AVOID STIGMATIZATION**

Addressing stigma, violence, and the incitement of hate. The Bible condemns all forms of stigma and discrimination. The woman caught in adultery brought to Jesus to be killed. Jesus said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:1-11 (NIV)). The Church and faith-based organizations should be in the position to handle the issues of stigma, violence and hate speeches, due to the abnormal situation in the Post-COVID-19 by speaking out and denouncing such when they occur and taking action to stop them.

If stigma and discrimination are not handled well by a faith organization, it will lead to the victim's death and create a situation wherein those who are infected will also wilfully infect more people in their community after knowing their status.

Upholding human rights and addressing stigma and discrimination is essential to the mission of the Church. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Luke 10:27 NIV). Freedom, equality, and dignity are bestowed on all by virtue of being human, made in the image of God.... "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute:

Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9 ESV)

Apostle Paul reminded the Christians in Galatia that these rights are not earned but divinely ordained. Religious leaders have a particularly important role to play in championing attention to and inclusion of, vulnerable populations including minorities, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, indigenous peoples, prisoners, people with disabilities, and members of other marginalized groups, by creating supportive environment; advocating for their rights and access to diagnosis, treatment and vaccines; sharing evidence-based accurate information; and publicly standing against statements and acts that encourage violence and human right violations against people and ethical principles of –do no harm,, solidarity and the –golden rule.}}

- **SAFE CEREMONIES**

Gatherings (where permitted) Local and national health authorities are the primary source of information and advice about COVID-19 in communities and can provide information about locally mandated restrictions on the movement of people, whether gatherings are permitted and, if so, of what size. Those organizing a gathering should comply with guidance issued by national and local authorities and if a medium or large gathering is planned, the organizers should establish and maintain contact with the authorities in the build up to and for the duration of the gathering this is in relation to what the World Health Organization.

Celebration of Sacraments and ceremonies performed by religious leaders in worship spaces will need to be modified during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the POST-COVID-19 actions, Religious institutions will have to strategize and put in place some innovations to enhance the safety and wellbeing of their congregants, by adhering to the various guidelines of the medical and government requirements and educate the communities to do the same. A lot of adjustments are needed to be done in the programs of the church. Where necessary the use of cyber platforms such as Facebook, Zoom, Skype, etc. can be very helpful.

Replace hugs, kisses, and handshakes with a bow and use the same signs when sharing the peace during the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper while maintain physical distance.

- Greet people at the entry to worship spaces with friendly words and smiles, rather than handshakes or other forms of physical contact. Many worshippers share –sign of peacell during services including handshakes and hugs. These are being replaced by for example:

- When partaking of the Lord's Supper communicants should be safely distanced from each other and it is advisable that a spoon be used to dispense the wafer and the single individual cups be used to dispense the wine instead of a single chalice.
- It is also advisable that social distancing be observed during ceremonies of Baptism; and for infants, the parent should carry the child whilst the minister, having disinfected himself/herself do the sprinkling of the water on the child. For Adult baptism especially immersion, the priest need to know the status of the candidate before proceeding with the process.
- For Weddings and funerals, the rules and regulations given by the health authorities for regular worship services must be followed in relation to size of people and distancing, using all the protocols.

## **CONCLUSION :**

Information shared by faith leaders, faith-based organizations, and communities are among the most trusted in our communities. Their followers and community members may trust and follow guidance about COVID-19 coming from faith leaders even more than if delivered by governments and health authorities.

Faith leaders also have a special responsibility to counter and address misinformation, misleading teachings, and rumours, which can spread rapidly and cause great damage. Sermons and messages can build on factual information provided by World Health Organisation and National or Local Public Health authorities and is in line with teachings and practices of their respective faith traditions. Accurate information can reduce fear and stigma and keep people safe.

Faith leaders should use their prophetic voice to advocate for the people, especially the most vulnerable in society giving words of hope and courage where hope is gone. The future is in the hands of these trusted voices at a time as this.

May this paper challenge every religious leader to be more proactive in such situations.

## On being the Good News - Post COVID 19

By  
Ivan Dekam<sup>8</sup>

Paul says to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep, He also reminds us to bear one another's burdens. Most people are afraid to truly be in solidarity with those who weep and to bear another's burden.

It's hard to be a follower of Jesus, its demanding and exhausting. There are those among us who say that because we follow Jesus, everything is supposed to be cheerful and we will prosper and our day to day struggles will be over. We know that is not true; it wasn't true for Jesus, for Paul, Peter and John, it wasn't true for Dietrich Bonhoffer, the German Theologian killed for resisting the Nazis or the Nigerian Pastor and his wife recently killed in Nigeria in the strife between the Tiv and Jukin (and both Tribes profess to be Christian) and it's not true for us in Sierra Leone in 2020.

How can we be 'cheerful' when we in Sierra Leone are in the grips of a worldwide pandemic? Indeed, we should ask, should we be cheerful when we are faced with poverty, greed, injustice and a disease that is no respecter of persons and is lurking just around the corner?

Taking on the pain and suffering of the vulnerable, the poor and the marginalized is our calling as followers of Jesus and corporately the calling of the Church, the Body of Christ, made visible. When the population in Sierra Leone sees the Church, and it must be 'in action', their reaction should be, "aha, so that's what Jesus looks like".

During the Ebola epidemic we all learned some 'survival skills' to ward off the Ebola virus and dealt with somewhat a similar situation. This past horrid experience has been helpful.

Due to COVID 19, educational institutions are closed, economic activity is greatly curtailed with the ban on inter district travel and shortened

economic activity, 9:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. curfew for all persons and the communion of the saints is banned on the traditional day of worship (Sunday). Weddings and funerals – both events with long standing vital cultural traditions with community participatory and celebratory aspects are for the most part totally different during the COVID 19 rule.

Health authorities and medical expertise tell us that COVID 19 can be ‘held off’ if we practice physical distancing, wear facial masks, wash our hands and arms up to the elbow with soap and water frequently for at least 20 seconds.

We wait for a cure – for the vaccine to be developed and tested and rolled out; we are told that may be late this year or early next year if all goes well. Meanwhile we ‘tread water’ as the COVID 19 statistics continue to add up i.e as of this date (June 19, 2020) 1298 confirmed cases, 52 deaths (approximately 5% mortality rate within positive confirmed cases) and an encouraging 60% recovery rate among the past positive cases while the future of the current confirmed cases in treatment centers await final disposition.

So what do we do as a Church - as the Church in Sierra Leone? Where are our people and how many are we? What does the population look like? Where are the densely populated areas? Where are they working? Are they employed? What are income levels? What are the educational levels?

## **Population**

According to Statistic Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone has a population of 7,534,883 persons of which approximately 51% are female and 49 % are male. Of the total population, 63% (4,754,139) live in the rural areas of the country and 37% (2,780,744) of the population lives in urban areas. The sex ratio for Sierra Leone in 2018 is **91 males to 100 females**, which underscores the dominance of females in the population. This scenario is the same for all Districts. The average household is comprised of 6 persons with rural households tending to be larger and urban households tending to be smaller. The age and sex grouping are shown below as per age group and gender:

	0-5 yrs	6-17 yrs	18 – 35 yrs	36 – 64 yrs	65 yrs >
<b>Male</b>	<b>649,095</b>	<b>883,491</b>	<b>1,208,038</b>	<b>714,005</b>	<b>151,456</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>707,184</b>	<b>962,556</b>	<b>1,316,147</b>	<b>777,902</b>	<b>165,010</b>

## **Employment**

The distribution of employment by broad sector in 2015 was 51.1 per cent in services, 33.7 per cent in agriculture and 15.2 per cent in industry. – Informal employment affects nearly nine in ten (89.4 per cent) young workers in Sierra Leone. Rates are higher among young women and youth in urban areas.

A new report on poverty in Sierra Leone published on 1 October 2019 by Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL) shows a small decrease of 5.6% in poverty between 2011 and 2018. According to the findings of the 2018 Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) Report, poverty remains high in Sierra Leone with the official poverty rate standing at 56.8% in 2018.

Calculations from the 2018 SLIHS place the food poverty line (the amount needed to buy a sufficient amount of food following the local diet) at Le 2,125,000 annually per adult equivalent, and the total poverty line (accounting for both food and non-food expenditure) at Le 3,921,000 per adult equivalent. This results in an extreme poverty rate of 12.9%, a food poverty rate of 54.5% and an overall poverty rate of 56.8%, the authors of the report said.

Poverty is more concentrated in the rural areas of Sierra Leone. Poverty rates in rural areas are more than twice as high as in urban areas, 73.9% compared to 34.8%. Separating out Greater Freetown (all urban areas in Western Area), the authors found that Freetown has a significantly lower poverty rate (22.8%) than other urban areas (49.3%). Extreme poverty rates show an even greater disparity: the rate is 19.9% in rural areas and 3.8% in urban areas.

Food poverty rates show less variation; and the rate for rural areas is quite close to the rate for other urban areas, showing that although those in rural areas are much poorer overall, they are no worse than urban dwellers (outside of Freetown) in terms of having sufficient food.

Poverty depth and severity (which consider not just whether households are poor, but how poor they are and inequality among the poor) show stark disparities between urban and rural areas. The North is the province with the highest rate of poverty. Poverty rates by province are: 64.1% in the East, 76.5% in the North, 62.3% in the North-West, 67.7% in the South and 23.3% in the West. In terms of districts, Tonkolili (north), Pujehun (south) and Falaba (north-west) have the highest rates of poverty by district.

Poverty rates vary widely within provinces, however, and the three poorest districts (Pujehun, Tonkolili, and Falaba) span the far south, center and far north-west of the country. The least poor districts are Western Area Urban and Rural, Kambia and Bonthe.

National poverty has decreased modestly since 2011 driven by decreases in urban areas. The new poverty rate of 56.8% is not directly comparable to the official rate of 52.9% in 2011, due to differences in methodology and setting a new (higher) poverty line for 2018.

Adjusting for these changes, the authors found that poverty in Sierra Leone has decreased by 5.6 percentage points since 2011. Poverty in rural areas has remained flat (increased by a statistically insignificant amount) while poverty in urban areas has decreased significantly (by 6.2 percentage points), concentrated in urban areas outside of Freetown. All the regions saw decreases in poverty, but only that in the West is statistically significant. Extreme poverty has not changed overall since 2011 but increased in rural areas (5.3 percentage points) and the East (5.9 percentage points). Food poverty has increased significantly (8.4 percentage points) with particularly large increases in rural areas, the East and the North.

### ***Does this reflect the reality in our church?***

#### **Education**

In 2018, adult literacy rate for Sierra Leone was 43.2 %. Adult literacy rate of Sierra Leone increased from 34.8 % in 2004 to 43.2 % in 2018 growing at an average annual rate of 13.18%. Sierra Leone adult female illiteracy was at level of 61 % in 2015, up from 60.9 % previous year. Sierra Leone has, according to UNESCO, an adult literacy rate of 32.43%.

While the male literacy rate is 41.33%, for females is 24.86%, showing a big gap between the sexes.

UNESCO 2018 reports that school enrolment is as follows:

- Pre-primary: 653,316
- Tertiary: 662,880
- Primary: 1,214,796
- Secondary: 1,205,605

***Does this reflect the situation in your church and community?***

## **Health**

There are about 80 hospitals in the public and private sectors in Sierra Leone. The facilities include 17 government civilian hospitals, with a key private hospital, Choithram, in Freetown. **There** are 1.4 **doctors**, nurses and midwives per 10 000 population compared to the most recent sustainable development goals threshold (set in 2016) of 44.5. In absolute terms, this equates to a qualified workforce of just over 1000 **doctors**, nurses and midwives, with an approximate shortage of 32 000. (Jul 30, 2019)

Sierra Leone has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates, at an estimated 1,165 deaths per 100,000 live births according to government data. The Infant Mortality rate, (infant mortality per 1,000 live births) in Sierra Leone was reported at 78.5 per 1000 live births in 2018, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators.

Does this reflect the situation in your church and community?

So, what does the church do in Post-COVID19? What should it look like? Given its mission of Proclaiming the Good News, does the Church have a common understanding of the meaning of the **Good News**?

**Luke 4:18** tells us "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, (see Isaiah 61:1)

## **Isaiah 42:1**

Here is My Servant, whom I uphold, My Chosen One, in whom My soul delights. I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will bring justice to the nations.



### **Isaiah 61:1**

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release from darkness to the prisoners,

### **Matthew 11:5**

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is preached to the poor.

### **Matthew 12:18**

"Here is My servant, whom I have chosen, My beloved, in whom My soul delights. I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations.

### **John 9:39**

Then Jesus declared, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind may see and those who see may become blind."

**Micah Chapter 6:6-8** provides an answer from God to some of the issues faced by Israel many years ago.

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Isaiah 58:1-14 is also instructive for the church today. The nation of Israel has been going through the motions of being 'obedient' and then wondered why God seemed so unresponsive to them. Isaiah was called upon to:

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

“Why have we fasted?” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” –Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: “Here am I”. -If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

I suggest that the leadership of The Church in Post COVID 19 in Sierra Leone go slowly and deliberately to find the current contextual meaning of

the phrases in the Sierra Leone post COVID 19 context. For example, what does it mean today to -

- proclaim freedom for the prisoners
- Recovery of sight for the blind,
- To set the oppressed free, and
- spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and
- satisfy the needs of the oppressed and If you
- Do away with the yoke of oppression and
- To act justly and to love mercy and
- To walk humbly with your God.

### **Justice and Mercy Dynamics**

In addition, when we think about the general economic situation, or the employment situation or the health situation, or the administration of justice in the courts of law - do these situations reflect the 'justice' described in scripture? What does scripture say about 'success' in terms of a living church? (In a room full of Pastors from a variety of denominations I was told emphatically that a successful pastor of a successful church SHOULD have a large SUV.)

And finally, how does the Post COVID 19 demonstrate 'mercy'? Mathew Smaltz in his book 'Mercy Matters' defines mercy as "love that responds to human need in an unexpected or unmerited way." How can or how does the church do that?

As you would have noticed, no answers have been provided – just some questions; I do believe that the Post COVID 19 church needs to address some of the issues raised if it will be a relevant force in this post COVID situation.

Psalm 34: 15- 18 reminds us that:

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to blot out their name from the earth. The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all

their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14).

# **MISLEADING THEOLOGIES IN THE MIDST OF COVID19**

**Viewpoints shared by**

**Rev. Christian Kannu, Rev. Tom Johnson and Deacon Melvin Koroma**

**Vine Memorial Baptist Church**

As most people in the world are now actually aware, an outbreak of COVID 19 was detected in main land china in December 2019. As of this writing, every continent in the world has been affected by this highly contagious disease, with nearly a million and a half cases diagnosed in over 200 countries worldwide.

The cause of the outbreak is a new virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus (SARS-COV2). On February 12, 2020 World Health Organisation (WHO) officially named the disease caused by the Novel corona virus as Corona virus Disease 2019 (CVOVID-19).

Corona virus is among a family of viruses that can cause mild to moderate upper respiratory track illness such as the common cold sever acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and middle east respiratory syndrome (MERS). When the infected person coughs or sneezes, the new corona virus may be transmitted through expelled droplets and these can enter a person's system through contact routes such as mouth, eyes, nose and droplets can be inhaled into the lungs.

The virus can be easily spread through contact with an infected person as movements within Africa, Asia, Europe and the American continents take place.

## **THE COVID-19 VIRUS IN SIERRA LEONE**

On 31t March 2020 the ministry of health and Sanitation in Sierra Leone reported the country's first case of COVID 19 in the country. Sample tested at the 34 military hospital and two other accredited laboratories to detect the virus in the capital Freetown turned out positive on the evening of 30th March 2020. A patient who was a 37 years old Sierra Leonean male had travelled to France on 12th March 2020. He returned on the 16th March 2020 and was immediately put in mandatory managed quarantine for 14 days. He was tested at the end of the quarantine period when he developed flu-like symptom that subsequently led to the confirmation as COVID 19. The World

Health Organisation Representative in Sierra Leone declared 'we have now shifted from preparedness to response. We must now focus on tracing those who had come in contact with the infected person to be able to isolate and provide them with medical care. Since then Sierra Leone entered a crucial period.

In this regard Sierra Leone's president, His Excellency Julius Maada Bio declared a 12 months Public Health Emergency to tackle the corona virus pandemic. The situation requires effective measures to prevent, protect and curtail the spread of COVID 19 in Sierra Leone. The national security operatives were charged with the responsibility to enforce compliance with all public health directives. Specific measures were introduced by the government to stem down the virus spread including closing of Schools, worship centers and inter-district lock-down, closing down of the international airport, control of movement in burials, parties and weddings, putting facial mask and above all maintaining social distance. This adversely affected the operation of churches in Sierra Leone.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) affirmed that we will have to leave with the Corona virus for many years to come, much in the same way we live with HIV/AIDS and many other viruses.

Despite the fear the world is going through on COVID- 19, we should not allow misleading theologies that are floating on social media to dominate the minds of some of our members.

Some Schools of thought would view the pandemic as God's judgment on the world; while others would see COVID 19 as a clarion call for all Christians to be vigilant as it is a sure sign of the end times as just seen in Matthew 24:7. Whatever the position might be theologians should carefully examine the present day crisis both on scriptural evidences and scientific grounds.

Another misleading and faulty theology is the wide spread belief by Christians that as long as you have been saved and you are in Christ you can lay hands on the sick and no sickness would transfer to you. This is actually not so as there is the danger that in the laying of hands to pray for people, especially when you come in contact with a COVID 19 patient unaware, the disease can spread through your

hands that you lay on the sick and also being close to him while praying for him is a big risk of transmission.

We should not forget what is said in the scripture in (James 2:26) that faith without work is dead; we ought to work our faith with wisdom. We must also not forget what is written in (1st Peter 2:13) that we must submit to every ordinance or authority set by God. The government is an authority set up by God to rule and control. As Christians we must obey the laws of the land so long it does not lead the Christian into something heretical. The laws made by the government are set for precaution, prevention and safety. Laws have been made in accordance with social distancing and the Christian must obey the authorities. If a Christian want to pray he can still pray without having physical contact with the sick Person taking into consideration that there is no distance for the Holy Spirit.

We should adhere to our government's regulations and appropriate guidelines and be examples to others in our attitude of obedience during this perilous time. This in effect means that we should maintain the prescribed distance of 2metres (six feet) as crowding ourselves otherwise would spread the virus.

There are Christians who believe that as long they are righteous and therefore no plague or virus can infect them. They rest that on their interpretation of Psalm 91 verse 9 & 10:

If you make the Most High your dwelling... then no harm will befall you, neither shall any plague come near your dwelling.

The story of Job should speak to us here. We see that job was a righteous man yet he was struck with a plague. Yes! God can protect us from plagues; but when we are standing in faith on these promises let us be very cautious, abiding by the rules and regulations put by the authorities for our safeguard..

We should not forget what is said in the scripture in James chapter 2 verse 26 that, "as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead." We ought to work our faith with wisdom. We must also not forget what is written in the First letter of Peter, chapter 2 verse 13 that we must submit, for Christ's sake, to ordinances of authority set by God. As Christians we must obey the laws of the land

so long it does not contradict God's will. The laws made by the government are set for precaution, prevention and safety.

## HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS RESPOND TO COVID 19?

As always, Christians should be open to opportunities to help those in need and that is no less true during this time. It will be more challenging to offer assistance with the social distancing and isolation rules in place, but when the opportunity present itself, do not hesitate to help. Love is central to our Christianity; whatever help we offer is a response to the Lord's command to love others as we love ourselves.

As the COVID 19 Pandemic sweeps across the world and Sierra Leone is no exception, I believe that as Christians in Sierra Leone there are specific responses that we can and should make to the crises in the country.

Christians must not panic or despair over COVID-19 even as some people preach and proclaim doom and gloom. We believe that it is important during this time that we realize that God is still sovereign - He is in control. Nothing that is happening is a surprise to Him, nor is it something that He has not allowed to occur for some reason; a reason that may only be known to God. Regardless of what may happen in the society or even the family, God is in control and the Christian must trust Him to accomplish His perfect will through whatever may come.

The Christian should not think he would not suffer hurt or grief, but as Paul said in (2nd Timothy 1:12) - I know who I have believed and am persuaded that He will guard what I have entrusted to him till the end.

## STAY IN TOUCH WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS AND FELLOW CHURCH MEMBERS.

One of the challenges that Christians are facing is being isolated from other people. For most people, extended isolation can be very challenging.

During this time the Christian must look for opportunities to stay in touch. Nothing can replace face to face contact and human touch but through the social media WhatsApp / Facebook/ YouTube and other such platforms, one can chat, texts, e-mail, talk on the



phone or make video calls. Of course, not everyone can do all of that, but most of us can do at least some of it.

Stay in touch with each other in a normal circle of family and friends. Make the effort to contact them and see how they are doing and offer them encouragement and especially look to those who may be alone, reach out to the elderly and aged in the congregations.

### TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

You may find it challenging if you are among the many who find themselves spending more time at home than you are accustomed to. If you are in that position, take advantage of the opportunity to spend more time in personal development. You can read a book, explore a field that you find interesting and invest time in your family. There are countless things a Christian can do with the newly found free time.

Maybe the most important thing a Christian can do is to take advantage of the opportunity to grow spiritually. Christians often express that life is too busy to spend much time in prayer and Bible Study. But this is an ideal opportunity to invest in spiritual life. Pray and read the bible. Pray some more and meditate on what you are reading. Read a book on spiritual discipline, seek the Lord and his will for your life. Above all, don't let this time go to waste.

### REJOICE AND GIVE THANKS TO GOD

Without a doubt, the loss of lives and sufferings caused by COVID-19 is tragic. It has touched everyone in the world directly or indirectly. A Christian may have suffered from it or has someone who has suffered from it; but as Christians, our response does not need to mirror the unrest and despair that the COVID-19 exhibits around. Christians have a hope that transcends this world and our circumstances. Christian can rejoice, not in the tragic events around us but in the God who can use them to accomplish his purpose in life.

During this time of darkness, a Christian should be a light. Rejoice always pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for all believers in Christ (1st Thessalonians 5:16 – 19).

## THE CHURCH IN POST COVID-19 IN SIERRA LEONE

The advent of COVID-19 has seriously affected the congregational life of churches, especially in the area of congregational worship in the church. For a period of six months we were not able to meet in our chapels for our usual activities as there was a ban imposed. Let us not forget that WHO has announced that we will have to live with COVID-19 just like any other viral disease in existence. So in this light we may ask how the church would look like in the near future now that worship services and other church activities have commenced, taking into consideration the protective laws and probably some restrictions so that there would not be any second phase in the country.

Firstly, how would the church cope with the use of face mask in singing hymns and choruses taking into consideration that people need fresh oxygen for proper circulation of oxygen in the blood to the body? How would pastors cope in preaching sermons with face mask? We should realize that with the use of face mask people breath in most of the carbon dioxide that is breathed out. Christians in the church services may encounter problems of fainting, discomfort and more especially dangerous to members suffering from Asthma. If we are sick, we should avoid congregating, at least for now that we are faced with this public emergency.

Church members have been dwelling in the atmosphere of congregational interaction. How would the church look like with the Law of Social Distancing? Especially when members go to worship with their relations. This creates a negative sense of physiological isolation and no closeness in the spirit. This may lead to psychological insecurity in the church. Yet we have to cope and pastors should offer the necessary counselling to mitigate the stress.

Also such would be problem in the area of one to one evangelism as those evangelist who have been going out especially on 'one to one' or 'house to house' evangelism would not be able to put in more of their time as before. Church members and pastors would somehow relax a bit in the area of visitation and fellowship would not be as warm as it used to be because of Government laws of social distancing and other restrictions.

This can cause the situation wherein church services would not be attended freely and attendance might drop as some people will prefer to worship at home rather than staying outside the church building because of the limited number of worshippers that would be accepted inside the church due to distancing. Those who are outside the church would not have quality concentration in the worship as many things outside the church would distract them.

Never-the-less, we believe that there is something positive that the COVID-19 has helped the church in Sierra Leone and that is the dissemination of information, preaching, prayers and bible studies through social media. We do believe that the church would continue to propagate the Lord Jesus and worship Him in this way as an added time to our normal services in the church's edifice.

Churches that used to have one divine service would be having two or three, those that used to have two or three would be having four or six divine services and this would be stressful for the pastors of the church, especially churches with only one pastor, not forgetting the stewards and organist of the local church. We can only re-strategize and put mechanisms in place to accommodate the situation.

**A Small Tribulation**  
**By**  
**Rev. Moses Kainwo<sup>9</sup>**

There is no engine to put the fire out  
Day and night it rages from without

Firemen are lost as they too are judged  
Blowing gas from sky to where people are lodged

A war with no trenches is war can't you see  
With warrior invisible still let it be

The war rages with brimstone and fire  
So dire in the presence of Squires

Is this demon the judge by whom we fall  
Will he ever judge to grant us our all

It touched the Church from the altar to the pew  
Yet we are poor \_cause the war is by the few

The foe is airborne right over my chair  
Baptized with a name and given his own chair

His name is Virtual and his pay is so  
Ever so baptized from above and below

Corona or COVID you roast us in fire  
You grip us by the throat and we too are pyre

Tears dropped in America are insignia  
Of tears virtually dropped in Asia

The Church cannot park oh the Church cannot wait  
The message must be thrown in virtual ways

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<sup>9</sup> Rev. Moses Kainwo is a Poet and a Minister of the Methodist Church Sierra Leone, presently serving at Wesley Circuit

The thunder and lightning have struck the world  
A tsunami from the air and underworld

The desolation the darkness the judgment  
The fever the coughing the chastisement

This Church must wake up and say no to Satan  
And bury the tribulation now on her hand

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**POSTSCRIPT**  
**BY**  
**Mrs. Kezia Kargbo**  
**General Secretary CCSL<sup>1</sup>**

I took up office as General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) just as this publication goes to press. Mine is to give a final word on this important issue of living with COVID 19.

The first two decades of this century has been very difficult and traumatic for our nation. We saw terrible catastrophe such as the Ebola epidemic, the landslide at Regent, storms, and floods as a result of environmental degradation and the current global crisis of COVID 19. During all of these trying times, the Church in Sierra, through the CCSL pointed our despondent people to the hope that is derive from Christ, our solid Rock. We responded in very practical terms in providing for material well-being, psycho-social counseling and prayers to the resilient people of our great nation.

The World Health Organisation has informed the world that we would have to live with the pandemic for a long time to come. As we continue to live with it, we have vague questions haunting our minds, such as where did such darkness come from and how do we make sense of the tragedy and death it carries on its wings? Why does God allow it? How can the church endure pain and suffering of its people that succumb to the virus?

Thankfully, God's Word has not left us completely clueless and comfortless. This publication is tremendously helpful, both in providing answers for difficult questions and in strengthening faith for walking the path of suffering in the presence of Christ. It also helps us to engage in evangelistic conversations with those who have not yet found faith in God as we discuss the realities of the times we live in. This pandemic naturally brings to the surface some our greatest fears and needs, which means this bizarre situation is a wonderful opportunity to show others how the all-sufficiency of Christ is the remedy for our greatest Fears. This book can help us know how to engage in these conversations.

Thanks be to God that we now have appropriate vaccines in Sierra Leone and many Sierra Leoneans are taking advantage of that. The ideal situation will be for the population of over seven million people to be vaccinated. If and when that is done the restrictions presently in place will be relaxed by the authorities. As Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, we encourage all our members to stand above the conspiracy theories be examples in taking the vaccines to preserve our own lives and the lives of others. I join my voice with Bishop Temple to say that it is in the love of God and fellow human beings that we act rightly to eliminate this scourge.

I offer my appreciation to the authors for taking time to put these materials together and pray that every reader will be blessed by this publication.

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Keziah Kargbo took up office as General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) in January 2021

