

# Social Media as the Wheel for the Christian Faith Amid COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*The advent of COVID-19 has redefined all aspects of human endeavour globally of which religious faith most especially the Christian faith in Nigeria was not an exception. This was because the practice of the Christian faith within the Nigerian space was purely based on the traditional face-to-face in-person form of religious worship; instead of harnessing the technological innovation brought to the fore by Social Media (SM) for religious worship which had pre-covid being part and parcel of Christian worship in developed countries. It was based on this premise that this study systematically examined social media as a wheel for the Christian faith amid the pandemic in Nigeria. The study adopted the interpretivist paradigm hinged on the qualitative research approach using content analysis of the social media activities of the five major Christian denominations in Nigeria (Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal, Catholics, and the Apostolic Church) on their websites, and Facebook in addition to their Instagram pages between March 1st 2020-December 31st 2020. Findings from the website and social media handles of the five major Christian denominations in Nigeria indicated that all embraced and used social media for the propagation of the Christian faith amid the pandemic in varying degrees. The study concluded that the use of social media should be greatly improved so that it can truly be seen as being used as a wheel for the Christian faith amid the pandemic and beyond. The study recommends that since anecdotal pieces of evidence, as well as empirical facts, are showing that the world is tilting towards the full embrace of social media into all aspects of human endeavor; it would therefore be a disservice for Christian denominations in Nigeria not to follow this innovation brought to bear by these technologies.*

*Keywords: Christian faith, social media, religion, Christian denominations, Nigeria*

## Introduction

The same way social media has been redefining human interactions positively in no small measure can be likened to how the COVID-19 pandemic, reconstructed almost all activities in contemporary human history since it was first detected in China in the year 2019. It thus introduced an era of the new normal to relationships globally starting from the home, schools, and worship centres were not exempted as well. Re-definition of human interactions in all economic, educational, social, and religious activities was of the essence when the numbers of infected people were increasing and the death rate was hik-

ing globally, thus there was a need for a place of comfort to allay people's fear and that was found in religion (Yezli & Khan, 2021). Knowing that religion has always been a source of succour for people most especially in prevailing situations is not disputable (Zhang, Hook, Hodge, Coomes, Davis, Van Tongeren & Aten, 2021) and a pandemic like the Covid-19 that brought the world to a standstill is expected to instill fear in everyone which necessitated people tilting towards religion for the fear of the unknown. Howbeit, the effect of the pandemic made religious physical interactions a mirage and there was an urgent need to migrate to the social media space which is not inhibited by time, means, and location due to the ubiquitous nature of these technologies (Bakare, 2018). More reason, the Christian faith most especially embraced the use of social media for their religious activities globally of which the Christian denominations in Nigeria was not an exception. It is on this premise that this study systematically examined social media as a wheel for the Christian faith amid the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

### **The Christian Faith amid the Pandemic**

It will be pretty difficult for Christians all over the world to forget the year 2020 in a hurry because of the unexpected that happened. Never will anyone believe that the celebration of Easter will be done on a very low key. The usual celebration with families and friends, going out partying, and visiting different places of enjoyment was cut short by the presence of Covid-19 which gave a new dimension to all events and activities in the world as Yezli and Khan (2021) opined this period as creating anxiety, panic, and fear among many people. Also, since Churches were under indefinite total lockdown, physical activities were as well suspended which made the Easter celebration be done indoors with just between families. Churches that were Information Communications Technology (ICT) compliant settled for faith-based activities online to be able to seamlessly provide the needed spiritual support. There were mixed reactions as to the way and manner churches catered to the needs of their members amid these prevailing times. Some Churches were able to meet the need of their members and pastors online, that is encouraging them through the word and attending to their physical needs through the transfer of cash. While some who were not technologically inclined forgone the online spiritual gathering of members as well as their physical needs unattended. Some ministers of God like Late Temitope Joshua of the synagogue of all Nations gave much money and foodstuff, so also Adeyemi of Daystar did not leave his members uncattered both digitally and physically through different forms of palliatives. Genesis Oladele of the Celestial Church of Christ also gave foodstuff to his members to mention just a few. While some churches were insensitive to meeting the spiritual needs of

members and still expected their members to pay tithes electronically without harnessing these technological channels as a means of worship.

Many churches created YouTube channels, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Zoom links etc. amid this period for virtual worship. Extant literatures have shown that as this was the situation amid the pandemic, physical worship was either cancelled or restricted to a certain number as many opted to use Facebook, Facebook live, Zoom, Skype, Instagram, giving applications, YouTube videos, conference lines and live streaming to continue their primary worship services, mid-week services, community ministrations and even virtual concerts (Adegboyega, Boddie, Dorvie, Bolaji, Adedoyin & Moore<sup>2021</sup>; Burke, <sup>2020</sup>). On these virtual platforms, some churches often feature short conversations thus giving insights into settling disputes among couples since some ministers of God noticed the regular occurrence of quarrels among couples amid the trying period of uncertainty. As the study of Ekici and Watson (<sup>2021</sup>) revealed a level of religiosity had a substantial impression on healthy and lasting marital commitment. This in a way helped many couples to come together again and also had positive implications for the parents-children relationship as the study by Gambin, Woźniak-Prus, Sekowski, Cudo, Pisula, Kiepusa, and Kmita (<sup>2020</sup>) revealed parenting self-efficacy with appropriate social support are the best predictors of the positive experiences in parent-child relationships in both mothers and fathers during the lockdown. This is in tandem with the findings of Clayton, Clayton, and Potter (<sup>2020</sup>:4) which revealed that “most parents enjoyed the opportunity offered by the lockdown to work from home and build stronger bonds with their children. This translated to prolonged family time together usually seen by these parents as being positive with family bonds becoming stronger and perceptions of well-being improving for the whole family” as families had the opportunity to virtually attend church services together within the confine of their homes. Harnessing the technological innovation brought to bear by social media for the Christian worship amid this period further entrenched the family as core to the Christian faith as well as pivotal to its teachings, a fundamental positive output which was better displayed amid the pandemic.

### **Social Media as a Wheel For the Christian Faith amid the Pandemic in Nigeria**

The paradigm shift brought by the introduction of social media into all aspects of human communication and interactions cannot be over-emphasised. It has reconfigured the social landscape by bringing people from different parts of the world irrespective of the generational cohort, profession, ethnicity, political af-

filiations, tribe, socioeconomic status, and creed to share events, psychological traumas, pictures, personal moments, videos, emotional struggles as well as religious worship as if they were physically together within a geographical space. These tools are now being harnessed to bridge the gap of distance between or among people in real-time as Bakare (2018) opined these tools as varied internet platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc.) that have made interaction boundless, seamless without any inhibition of time, means and location due to the ubiquitous nature of these technologies.

For more reason, Melendez (2021) asserted that religion has a new home on the internet and social media technologies have made it pervasive. These technologies were quite handy for the worship of the Christian faith amid the Covid-19 pandemic as the social distance protocols of shutting up all churches' physical accesses needed to be observed to curtail its spread. Knowing fully well that the Christian religious faith in Nigeria was used to the traditional face-to-face form of worship, and controlling the crowd during these prevailing times could be a herculean task due to the uncertainty and fear that pervaded people's minds as regards the virus, social media instantaneously filled the chasm as it has removed remoteness from the dictionary of the Christian faith.

The council of major Christian denominations globally most especially in Nigeria are The Baptist, Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, The Apostolic Church (also known as the orthodox churches), and the Pentecostal churches (the new generation churches like Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith a.k.a. Winner's Chapel, Day Star, etc.) were left with no choice than to migrate to the usage of these virtual communication channels amid the pandemic at varying degree to continually act as a source of succour, a support system and in addition to further promoting the Christian faith. This aligns with studies in the literature which revealed that amid the pandemic, church pews, as well as premises, were empty and leaders did not have a choice but to devise ways of reaching out to their congregation through social media outlets (Bacchi, 2020; Melendez 2020; Heilweli, 2020; Nthabiseng, 2021; Afolaranmi, 2021; Darko-Adjei, Animante, & Akussah, 2021)

The customs of worship pre-covid in mostly all these denominations ranges from physical mid-week services such as bible study, deliverance sessions, group meetings, and Sunday school preparation which is usually on Saturdays then culminated with the main service on Sunday morning (starting as early as 6 am in Pentecostal churches and 9 am in orthodox churches; while having multiple Sunday services is a common phenomenon in Pentecostal churches to curtail the crowd because of space and convenience of the congregation pre-Covid) were all relocated to social media platforms to virtually cater for the spiritual needs of Christian followers.

This online service as it is usually called comes in form of WhatsApp Chats, Voice Notes (VNs), Facebook Live, Instagram (IG) Live, using video conferencing tools like Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, etc.; or all these social media outlets are incorporated to the websites of the churches. Therefore, the researchers believed that before we can say that churches within the Nigerian space truly used social media as a wheel for the Christian faith presupposes the fact that they had harnessed these technologies amid the pandemic to promote different church activities which epitomizes what the Christian faith stands for and as emphasized in Hebrews 10:25 that we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as brethren. The study of Afolaranmi (2021:169) domiciled among pastoral ministries in Nigeria revealed a massive usage of the Internet cum social media outlets with 369 responses representing 315% of the population sampled for the study with WhatsApp and Facebook taking the front burner. This goes a long way to show that “various aspects of the Internet ministry take a very major role in the pastoral ministry of respondents to their church members during the pandemic”

## **Methodology**

The study adopted a content analysis, a form of qualitative research approach which is hinged on an interpretivist paradigm to assess the usage of social media by major Christian denominations in Nigeria (The Baptist, Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, The Apostolic Church (also known as the orthodox churches) and the Pentecostal churches (the new generation churches like Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith a.k.a. Winner’s Chapel). White and Marsh (2006:27) quoting Krippendorff (2004) defined content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” based on an either qualitative or quantitative approach. It was based on this premise that inferences that form patterns about the activities of these major Christian denominations amid the pandemic (March 2020-December 31<sup>st</sup> 2020) were made from the social media outlets as well as on their websites to be able to know whether these outlets truly acted as a wheel for the Christian faith.

The purposive sampling technique was adopted in choosing the five major Christian denominations in Nigeria and the most popular of the Pentecostal churches (Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith a.k.a. Winner’s Chapel) as well. These were purposively sampled as major denominations are expected to be at the front burner of the propagation of the gospel of Christ during the pandemic. The denominations were supposed to harness every available means to be a support system for their members amidst the crisis in which social media technologies played an important role. This corroborated

the assertions of Galang and Galang (2021) who affirmed social media as a veritable tool for the Church's mission of being a pillar of support amid the Covid-19 pandemic for their members

## **Content Analysis of the Major Websites and Social Media Handles of the Denominations**

### **The Baptist Convention**

The website (<https://nigerianbaptist.org/>) has five major hyperlinks on the header which are: Home, About Us, Departments, News, Watch Live, Online Payment, and Contact Us. Most of the links are quite active except for the Departments whose pages have not been populated with content. The "Watch Us Live" page showcases the Livestream 108th annual Baptist Convention which took place on April 26th, 2021. There was no video or any news about the Covid-19 pandemic on the website. The social media icon on the website is Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The three hyperlinks are active and lead to Nigeria Baptist Convention on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The IG page of BC was created on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020 which was at the peak of the pandemic which signified the intention of the denomination to use SM for promoting their faith and the page has been quite engaging. The first post about online church service was on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 with the caption "Join Us for Online Sunday Worship" scheduled for 10 am with live streaming on television and radio stations as well as the church website and social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube Channel. This Sunday online service runs through the page till when the lockdown was lifted in the country

The church also created a Telegram group handled by the Christian Education Department named "The Church and Covid 19" with the link attached. Knowing fully well that sexual harassment most especially rape was a common occurrence amid the pandemic in Nigeria, the church too lent her voice against this menace in a post captioned "Be an Ambassador of Dignity! Stop Sexual Harassment! Stop Rape." The church uploads memes, pictures, and daily devotionals to encourage as well as act as a support system for their congregation amid the pandemic. The church successfully had its 107th Annual Convention virtually on Zoom and also live-streamed on social media platforms between August 29th – and 30th 2020. Findings showed that the same post on the church's IG page was duplicated on their Facebook Page too. This, therefore, revealed that the church utilised her social media handles well in the propagation of the Christian faith, though there was no video or any news about the Covid-19 pandemic on the website.

### **Anglican Communion**

The website (<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/>) has 9 major hyperlinks at the header and the pages are all populated with content. The News Site at the super right part of the website leads to the ACNS News Service which gives a highlight of “Top New Stories” across continents. On this page, The only news on Covid-19 was posted on May 26th, 2021 titled “Archbishop of Canterbury joins global leaders in calling for equitable distribution of vaccines.” There are three links below the banner on the website which are “Press & Media; News Service and Resources.” The “Press & Media” page provides information about events such as the meetings of the Anglican Consultative Council, Primates’ Meetings, and the Lambeth Conference. The latest press releases on this website have no information about the Covid-19 pandemic. The social media icons on the website are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Pinterest; all are active and lead to the designated social media pages. The Instagram page of the church had a post on the 107<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention which was held virtually on Zoom from 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> August 2020 amid the pandemic and the same information was equally posted on her Facebook page.

### **Catholic church**

The official website of the Catholic church in Nigeria (<https://www.csnigeria.org/index.php>) has seven major hyperlinks on the header and all the pages are well-populated with content. However, there is no news or information on Covid-19 and the link for the programme could have shown whether any program was held amid the pandemic is blank i.e. it lacks content. The website does not have social media outlets linked to it. The researchers used “Catholic Church of Nigeria” as the search word on Facebook and IG which generated 69 & 3 Catholic Churches respectively. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria/Worldwide (CCRN/WW) stood out among these churches for its activities amid the pandemic were rich and frequently updated as against the Catholic Church itself. This substantiated the findings of Galang and Galang (2021) which revealed that the Catholic Church is slowly migrating to the digital field.

### **The Apostolic Church**

The website has seven major hyperlinks on the header and all the links, as well as the sub-links, are well populated. On the Media hyperlink is the sub-link for Sermon and Video/Audio on Demand. Sermon in March 2019 was displayed. The “View Sermon” on the page navigates to another page that displays the sermons. On the other hand, the Video/Audio on Demand hyperlink displays videos of online services amid the Covid-19 pandemic which can be shared on Face-

book, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The social media icons are at the base of the website where we have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube. Navigating through the Facebook page of the Apostolic church showed no information content in form of video, pictures, Facebook Livestream, or textual content was uploaded amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the last update on the page was on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 which was a video of the 43<sup>rd</sup> LAWNA Annual International Convention. The same can equally be said about the church's IG page.

### **Redeemed Christian Church of God**

The website for the Redeemed Christian Church of God(<https://www.rccg.org/>) has six major hyperlinks on the header and siblings which are well-populated with content. There are three hyperlinks at the base of the banner which are Watch Live, Online Giving, and Convention Quiz. The Watch Live hyperlink navigates to the “National Digital Page” of the church which houses all the digital contents across different RCCG parishes. However, there was no mention of online services amid the pandemic or any information related to the virus. The social media icons are at the base of the website which is supposed to navigate to the social media presence of the church; however, it is only the IG link that is active while the links to the Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Pinterest all lead back to the home page of the church website while only YouTube indicated “the page not existing.” The IG page of the church is quite a busy one with lots of posts about the Preaching of the General Overseer Pastor Enoch Adeboye, church programs, etc. The page also has the caption of online services amid the pandemic of different branches of RCCG across social media platforms and the 2020 annual church conference was done virtually with minimal physical participation. The same can be said about its Facebook page and the YouTube Channel. The redeemed of God has harnessed the ubiquitous nature of the social media platforms way back pre-covid in the propagating of her church activities. This is evidenced in the monthly Holy Ghost Service which has always been live-streamed on the RCCG YouTube Channel

### **Winners Chapel**

The website (<https://faithtabernacle.org.ng/>) has nine major hyperlinks on the menu and three hyperlinks on the banner. All the pages are adequately populated, however, there is no information, video, or message on the Covid-19 pandemic or services conducted during this time. There are four social media icons on the banner which are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram; all these icons navigate to the official social media handle of the church. The same can be said of the social media presence of Liver Faith just like it was stated about

RCCG as both denominations have embraced the advantages of using the social media platforms in reaching out to their congregation on different church activities via these virtual channels. This implies they have been running blended church services across their branches so migrating totally to the digital space was quite a seamless drive as compared to orthodox churches which were used to the traditional face-to-face form of congregational interactions.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Findings from the website and social media handles of the five major Christian denominations in Nigeria indicated that all embraced and used social media for propagating the Christian faith amid the pandemic in varying degrees. Topmost on the list among the orthodox is the Baptist which was active amid the pandemic both on the church's website and her social media handles. The next was the Apostolic Church which displayed videos of online services amid the Covid-19 pandemic on the church's website and these were also shared on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Although navigating through the Facebook page of the Apostolic church showed no information content in form of videos, pictures, Facebook Livestream, or textual content was uploaded amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The last update on the page was on August 3rd, 2019 which was a video of the 43rd LAWNA Annual International Convention. The Anglican on the other hand had only a post about the pandemic on the church's website, while the social media IG and the Facebook handle had posted on the 107th Annual Convention which was held virtually on Zoom from 29th-30th August 2020 amid the pandemic. However, The Catholic denomination had no information about the pandemic on its website and neither is there any social media presence on the website page, unlike the other three preceding denominations. Also the search term "Catholic Church of Nigeria" generated 69 & 3 for Facebook and IG respectively. The implication of this is that, though the Church headquarters in Abuja might not be active on the social media landscape in using social media for the promotion of the Christian faith both on the church's website and the various social media outlets, the different branches of the church were all active amid the pandemic on the social media landscape. Analysis of these catholic churches on Facebook showed that the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria/Worldwide (CCRN/WW) stood out among all church activities amid the pandemic as it displayed viable virtual interactions and frequently updated content. Findings on RCCG and Living Faith also showed the adoption and incorporation of the usage of social media usage into all church activities. This was part and parcel of both churches pre-covid, therefore migrating fully to cyberspace was not an issue for them at all as compared to orthodox churches who took time before starting church services on social

media platforms. The findings of this study are in tandem with previous research which asserted that churches within the Nigerian space used social media for the propagation of the Christian faith amid the pandemic in various degrees (Afolaranmi 2021)

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

There is no gainsaying that social media technologies are handy tools in this era of digital connectivity in reaching a wider audience and have made communication seamless amid the pandemic due to the observance of the social distancing protocols to curtail its spread. The practice of the Christian faith is thus not left out in its usage knowing that religion has transcended to the cyber domain wholly because of the prevailing situations caused by the pandemic. The Christian denominations in Nigeria were not left out in this space as its adoption and integration into different church activities was evidenced on the churches website and different social media handles, though in varying degrees which should be greatly improved upon so that it can truly be seen as being used as a wheel for the Christian faith amid the pandemic and beyond. Since anecdotal pieces of evidence, as well as empirical facts, are showing that the world is tilting towards the full embrace of social media in all aspects of human endeavor, it would therefore be a disservice for the Christian denominations in Nigeria not to follow this innovation brought to bear by these technologies. The study, therefore, recommended that all denominations in Nigeria should embrace social media as an important tool for the ministry and the propagation of the Christian faith as this technological innovation will go a long way in removing the inhibition of time and location that is a bane of the physical form of worship. This will also better situate the practice of the Christian faith in Nigeria on the global landscape this is what is obtainable in contemporary times which is brought to bear by the era of digital connectivity.

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