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23 HEALING AND DELIVERANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NOMIYA CHURCH, EASTLEIGH, KENYA

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INTRODUCTION

Pandemics are generally alarming and scary due to lack of adequate knowledge of their cause and treatment. Though there have been other pandemics in human history, such as influenza, swine flu and others, the Covid-19 pandemic shocked the whole world, including global economies, due to the contagious nature of its spread and the lack of knowledge of how the transmission would unfold, let alone the fatality rate envisaged. Kenya confirmed her first case on 12 March 2020.³ Containment recommendations, such as wearing of masks, social distancing and closure of schools and churches, were issued by governments in collaboration with World Health Organization (WHO). In Kenya, physical worship was banned, and Kenyans were encouraged to observe social distancing. Some counties, such as Nairobi, were placed under lockdown and curfew was imposed in the country.

Myths and misconceptions about the virus were fronted from different circles. In Africa, particularly, due to low fatality rates reported in comparison to the Western world, myths were propagated regarding Africa's alleged resistance to coronavirus. Although there were fewer cases of Covid-19 related deaths reported in Africa in comparison to other parts of the world,⁴ there is no scientific proof to support such myths. Unfortunately, some government leaders propagated these myths through their utterances and reactions towards measures issued by WHO to contain the spread of the virus. A leader of one Eastern Africa nation, for instance, reportedly championed the use of steam therapy as a form of treatment for Covid-19. Another was recorded declaring his nation corona-free due to the prayers made by the citizens.⁵ Madagascar is perhaps the most notable nation in Africa for coming up with the Covid Organics (CVO) from the artemisia plant, which the country

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3 World Health Organization (WHO), Regional Office for Africa. 2021. "Media Briefings on Covid-19", WHO. Online at: <https://www.health.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Statement-on-Confirmed-Covid-19-Case-13-March-2020-final-1.pdf>

4 <https://www.science.org/content/article/pandemic-appears-have-spared-africa-so-far-scientists-are-struggling-explain-why>

5 "Coronavirus: John Magufuli declares Tanzania free of Covid-19", *BBC*, 8 June 2020.

promoted as a remedy to Covid-19.⁶ Some people believed these myths to be true, hence their rejection of the Covid-19 vaccination.

Health and well-being are part of our daily concerns. Governments have invested in the health sector, financially and legislatively, at the individual, regional and national levels. The right to health, first articulated internationally in the 1946 Constitution of the World Health Organization, remains one of the fundamental human rights in most nations.⁷ The preamble of the WHO constitution further states that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.”⁸ The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights mentions health as part of the right to an adequate standard of living.⁹ According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the WHO “the right to health is relevant to all States: every State has ratified at least one international human rights treaty recognizing the right to health”.¹⁰ Furthermore, “states have committed themselves to protecting this right through international declarations, domestic legislation and policies, and at international conferences.”¹¹ In Kenya, for example, the Kenya Health Act 2017 states in Section 5(1) that “every person has the right to the highest attainable standard of health which shall include progressive access for provision of promotive, preventive, curative, palliative and rehabilitative services.”¹² In pursuance of this right, the government of Kenya, in collaboration with the WHO, introduced a universal health coverage programme. Its implementation has led to increased access to health services with an addition of more than 200 community health units, 7 700 community health volunteers and over 700 healthcare workers recruited.¹³ The ongoing reforms in the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF), the mandatory universal health coverage scheme and the provision of health coverage for low-income households, among other health reforms, require support from different sectors of the society, including religious institutions.

Health remains an integral focus of faith in all religions of the world. Religion has influenced health practices in societies throughout human history to a great extent. Adam Chepkwony, a professor of comparative religion and an ardent propagator of African indigenous religion, notes in this regard that, “the redemptive messages

6 “Coronavirus: John Magufuli declares Tanzania free of Covid-19”.

7 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). 2008. “The Right to Health”, OHCHR/WHO Factsheet No. 31. Geneva: OHCHR.

8 OHCHR, “The Right to Health”.

9 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc A/810 at 71 (1948), art 25.

10 UDHR, art 25.

11 UDHR, art 25.

12 Health Act, 2017, 5(1).

13 World Health Organization (WHO). 2020. “Keeping to the Universal Health Coverage Path in Kenya”, *WHO.int*, 11 December.

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taught by all religions are expressed in terms of deliverance from a state of bad health to acceptable and full health as expected and intended by the creator.”¹⁴ Health and healing remain an important part of African spirituality, despite the introduction of other religions, such as Christianity, that sought to civilise Africans and to discourage beliefs and practices associated with traditional healing that were considered to be superstitious, barbaric and unscientific. The unique and strong affinity of African spirituality and holistic well-being caused many Africans to experience in the newly found Christian faith an emptiness of healing that they considered inadequate. This is because Christian faith introduced Western medicine and constructed hospitals to heal the sick using modern scientific methods of healing, disregarding African indigenous medicine. Consequently, “Africans who belonged to mission churches left and formed independent churches outside mission control to enable them infuse elements of African spirituality in their faith.”¹⁵

One such church is Nomiya Church, the first African Independent Church {AIC} in Kenya. As African religion scholar Ezra Chitando rightly notes about AICs, these churches have achieved remarkable success in holistic health and healing through their religious teachings and rituals. They have adopted African interpretations of disease and use African approach to healing, thus providing an alternative therapeutic system of holistic healing.¹⁶ Many have adopted the African cosmotheandric view of life propagated by African scholars, such as Chioma Ohajunwa.¹⁷ The three-dimensional relational approach to life includes human beings, nature and spiritual beings. Well-being is understood holistically as encompassing multiple aspects of life, including individuals, family, kinship, community, ancestors, the physical world and future generations. A disturbance of the relationship among any of the above entities, such as through pandemics, affects the living, non-living and spiritual beings. Holistic healing in such contexts becomes paramount. This African indigenous approach to well-being and existence is used in this chapter to show how the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted life in its entirety, called for holistic healing. Furthermore, AICs such as Nomiya Church use African indigenous conceptions, experiences and practices of well-being which are cosmotheandric in nature. This chapter thus examines how holistic healing and deliverance was facilitated by Nomiya Church during the Covid-19 pandemic period, particularly when the government of Kenya banned physical worship and issued measures requiring social distancing and lockdown.

14 Chepkwony AK. 2019. “An Understanding of Healing in African Christianity: The Interface between Religion & Science”, *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 4(1):22.

15 Chepkwony, “An Understanding of Healing in African Christianity”, 23.

16 Cox LT and ter Haar G (eds). 2003. *Uniquely African? African Christian Identity from Cultural and Historical Perspectives*. Asmara: African World Press, Inc.

17 Ohajunwa C. 2019. “Indigenous spirituality within formal health care practice”, in Mji G (ed). *The walk without limbs: Searching for indigenous health knowledge in a rural context in South Africa*. Cape Town: AOSIS.

HEALTH AND HEALING IN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

Health and well-being remain at the core of African being and existence. Rituals and ceremonies surrounding the rites of passage generally depict the central place of human life and well-being among Africans. Health and well-being among Africans concerns not only the living, but also extends to the unborn and the living dead. Africans thus feel at peace when their relationship with God, spirits, fellow human beings and the living and non-living things is good.¹⁸ A broken relationship between these beings causes disaster, which affects not only the individual, but also the rest of the family, clan, community and even the nation at large. Sickness, illness and even pandemics may befall the living as a result of broken relationship with the spiritual beings.¹⁹ It is from this strong belief that some Africans interpreted Covid-19 as a curse from God due to some evil committed by the living. Consequently, as Nahashon Ndung'u, a scholar of African Independent Churches, notes, there is a need for a remedy to bring back the wholeness of life to the people. Such a solution would be acquired through rituals that might include offering of animal sacrifices to seek absolution from the spiritual beings. This process of restoring the right relationship with the spiritual realm can be seen as a healing process.²⁰ In one county in Kenya, for instance, the Kipsigis elders, conducted a ritual by the river to cast out the spell of coronavirus in the country. They offered a ram, which was slaughtered and its blood poured into a river. The belief is that as the water flows, washing away the blood, so shall coronavirus be directed away.²¹ Some AICs have adopted this form of healing, which at times is performed through exorcism.

Healing, understood in its wider sense as the restoration of the wholeness of life – social, personal, cosmic and communal – is thus not new to Africans. Africans have practiced health and healing in unique ways long before the introduction of Christianity, Western medicine and education. The uniqueness is founded in the African cosmotheandric perception of life which includes the spiritual realm, human beings and the environment – a mix of living and non-living things.²² It is for this reason that Edwina Ward, a pastoral theologian, concluded from a comparative study of African and Western understandings of health and healing that “in the case of illness it is (not really much the individual who needs healing but) mainly the

18 Mbiti JS. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 2.

19 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

20 Ndung'u NW. 2009. “Persistence of Features of Traditional Healing in the Churches in Africa: The Case of the Akurinu Churches in Kenya”, *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)* 1(2):87.

21 Kilonzo SM and Omwalo BO. 2021. “The Politics of Pulpit Religiosity in the Era of Covid-19 in Kenya”, *Frontiers in Communication* 6: art 616288.

22 Panikkar R. 2006. *The Cosmotheandric Experience. Emerging Religious Consciousness*. Beijing: Beijing Religious Cultural Publishing House.

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broken relationships.”²³ Every African community therefore has ways of dealing with life-threatening forces, such as diseases, floods, droughts, barrenness, curses and witchcraft, among others. These forces are believed to be caused by evil spirits and human agents through witchcraft and magic.²⁴ According to prolific African theologians Laurenti Magesa²⁵ and John Mbiti,²⁶ anti-life forces can be seen as part of religious experiences. Consequently, they require religious approaches to be dealt with properly. As a renowned professor of religion with keen interest in AICs, Gerhardus Oosthuizen notes that, for diseases that are not peculiar to African cosmology, a combination of Christian and traditional methods might be used.²⁷ Rinaldo Rozani, a Roman Catholic priest and pastoral theologian, supports holistic approach to health and healing by asserting that “the combination of both scientific skills as well as resources from a spiritual view seems to be the last approach, as it deals with the whole person.”²⁸

The scientific approach to the Covid-19 pandemic no doubt required religious support, as it shook different pillars of the society. In African traditional societies, this approach would include the services of medicine people, who offer not only physical but also psychological healing. Psychological healing, in John Mbiti’s view, is the equivalent of spiritual healing in the contemporary society.²⁹ The Covid-19 pandemic caused fear, anxiety, tension, confusion and stigmatisation, all of which affected people psychologically. Churches, including AICs, provided necessary support through prayers, counselling, home visits and material support, among other forms, to support holistic healing, despite the Covid-19 protocols of social distancing and bans on physical worship. In this chapter therefore, the term healing is used in a holistic sense to imply “putting in order those systems, structures and feelings which have been disrupted causing imbalances and suffering in the life of individuals and society at large.”³⁰ Deliverance also implies and may entail exorcism of evil spirits believed to be involved in the Covid-19 crisis. Covid-19 measures on social distancing, lockdown and ban on physical worship disrupted holistic well-being, as human beings were alienated from one another. The physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual well-being was interfered with, prompting holistic approaches from churches as further discussed below.

23 Ward E. 2002. “Similarities and Differences in Cross-Cultural Pastoral Supervision”, *Journal of Theology for South Africa* July:51-64.

24 Ndung’u, “Persistence of Features of Traditional Healing in the Churches in Africa”.

25 Magesa L. 1997. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 159.

26 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 169.

27 Oosthuizen GC. 1992. *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches*. Leiden: EJ Brill, 86.

28 Ronzani R. 2007. *Christian Healing: The anointing of the Sick*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 18.

29 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 169.

30 Ndung’u, “Persistence of Features of Traditional Healing in the Churches in Africa”, 89.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING AND THE BANNING OF PHYSICAL WORSHIP ON THE COMMUNAL OPERATIONS OF NOMIYA CHURCH, EASTLEIGH

Before delving into adaptive methods and mechanisms adopted by Nomiya Church towards the ends of holistic healing and deliverance during the pandemic period, it is imperative to consider the impact of the government measures of social distancing and the ban on physical church worship on the communal operations of the church. Social distancing, understood among Nomiya Church's members to imply physical distancing, affected the operations of the church, since it is highly communal in nature. Church fellowship in Nomiya is generally face-to-face human fellowship and interaction of people in a physical space. A typical worship gathering at Nomiya is where believers come to church, sit together and interact at a human level. Sharing personal experiences in the form of testimonies of what God has done or the tough experiences that one is undergoing is part of the church service. Believers share these experiences before the sermon is preached, so that in case one wants encouragement or prayers, the pastor can attend to it accordingly. Due to social distancing and the ban on physical worship, believers were prevented from sharing these experiences and feeling part of the community of believers. Though they could post prayer requests through the Facebook platform that the church adopted, they could not express themselves as fully as they would in a physical worship service.

In addition, Nomiya observes two important liturgical rites, male circumcision and infant baptism, which are celebrated communally. These rites are highly symbolic and provide a strong sense of identity to Nomiya members, distinguishing them from other African Independent Churches. Male infant circumcision at eight days, for instance, is the pride of every male adherent.³¹ The rite involves different groups in the church, who are assigned specific roles during the celebration. The climax of the ceremony is *yepo*, a welcome and readmission service of the mother after childbirth, which is conducted in the church led by the *Simeon-Ka-Lawi*, the name given to the priest who takes the role of Simeon when he received baby Jesus and his parents during the purification and dedication ceremony in the gospel of Luke 2.³² Social distancing and the ban on physical worship deterred believers from celebrating these liturgical rites, which had to be postponed or at times celebrated by the families with only a few church leaders in attendance.

The ban on physical worship further affected the church's financial position. Collection of offerings, tithes and funds to support the bereaved families is an important part of Nomiya's worship service. The church's treasurer, assisted by a member from the congregation, collects money from every member of the church, calling out names and the amount given by each member. A record is kept for the tithes and

31 Sudhe SO. 2018. *The Socio-Cultural and Theological Context of The Double Rite of Passage in Nomiya Church in Rarieda Sub-County, Siaya County*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Maseno University, 115.

32 Sudhe, *The Socio-Cultural and Theological Context of The Double Rite of Passage*", 115.

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offerings for the purposes of transparency, accountability and tracking a believer's commitment. A special giving towards the bishop and the church's pastor is done on a Sunday set aside by the church. It is a special moment for the believers to receive blessings from church leaders through giving, both in cash and in kind. Believers feel that for them to get blessings from the church leaders, the gift should be hand-delivered to the church leader in the church. Giving through digital platforms, such as Mpesa, is thus perceived as a formality rather than a blessing. Some members thus slackened in their online giving, which affected the general operations of the church.

Visiting each other at homes during happy and sad moments is central to Nomiya's community. Believers visit each other when sick, bereaved or when celebrating graduations of their children. What defines love to them is how they treat each other, not only in church, but also in their homes. As an example, on one occasion, a member stood up during a church service and expressed dissatisfaction with church members who had not attended her daughter's graduation party at her home. This was long after the government had lifted the ban on physical gathering, and she had expected that most members would attend. During the lockdown and due to social distancing, believers could not visit each other to console one another or celebrate together. Only a few church leaders, most often the bishop, could visit the bereaved members.

Furthermore, believers in Nomiya accompany the bereaved families throughout the mourning period. They not only visit them in their homes, but also accompany them in burying the dead. They organise a common means of transport to accompany the funeral cortege from Nairobi to upcountry in western parts of Kenya. Covid-19 protocols that limited the number of people attending burials and the time limit within which a dead body was to be interred, denied Nomiya's believers opportunities to express love for one another during such sorrowful moments. One member who had lost a loved one during the Covid-19 period felt left out when his church members could not accompany him to bury his son. Though they took photographs and shared them with the church members through WhatsApp, but the absence of their physical presence meant a lot to him.

HEALING AND DELIVERANCE IN NOMIYA CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As indicated earlier, Nomiya Church is the first African Independent Church in Kenya. The church is widely spread among the Dholuo-speaking people in Kenya. Nomiya Church, Eastleigh, is the headquarters of Nairobi diocese, which has four parishes and eight churches. Like other churches, Nomiya was greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The church, which is characterised by a convivial nature of worship with rigorous Luo dancing and clapping of hands, was forced to close her doors when physical church worship was banned in Kenya. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent containment measures, such as social distancing and the ban on physical worship, generally affected the communal operations of the church. Consequently, many churches, including Nomiya, had to adopt adaptive

mechanisms to facilitate holistic healing among their members. The church had to move worship services to online spaces in order to address the needs of their members. In addition, they had to offer holistic support to their members, who were not only spiritually affected, but also socially, emotionally and physically deprived by the pandemic.

Prayers

Prayers receive a lot of attention in times of crises such as war, diseases, casualties, natural calamities and pandemics. The Covid-19 pandemic was no exception, especially given its contagious nature and spread. Prayers were offered in different parts of the world by the faithful, who sought divine intervention to a disease that shuddered the world. The president of Kenya declared 21 March 2020 a National Prayer Day, and he hosted religious leaders from different denominations led by Interreligious Council of Kenya (IRCK) at State House, Nairobi, for interfaith intercessory prayers dubbed “prayers of forgiveness”. The prayers sought God’s intervention to spare the nation from doom if the people turned away from their evil ways.³³ The president further called for a national holiday, dubbed Huduma (selfless service) Day, on 10 October 2020 and declared a weekend of prayer, with interfaith prayers held at State House, Nairobi. These two examples point to the significance of prayers during times of crisis. It further indicates the healing role of prayers, which is not necessarily physical, but importantly emotional, psychological and metaphysical.

Through prayers and messages of hope given by religious leaders through different forms of media, Kenyans felt encouraged to brace themselves through the pandemic, despite the challenges they had to endure. In these prayers, messages such as “Do not be anxious about anything, but in prayer and supplication, make your requests known to God and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7)”³⁴ were repeatedly chanted. The Secretary General of Hindu Council of Kenya (HCK) encouraged Kenyans to be calm and to remain hopeful during the pandemic period using the following words from Hindu scriptures: “He takes care of all that breathes and all that does not breathe. He has got all this conquering power. He is the one and one alone and the only one. All these luminous forces of nature become one in him.”³⁵

Nomiya Church leaders prayed for their members and the nation at large in church and at home. They met in the church on Sunday morning to offer prayers before and after the service, which was streamed live through Facebook. In addition, the bishop visited members in their homes, especially the bereaved and the sick.

33 State House, Kenya. 2020. “The National Day of Prayer Service”, *Facebook*, 21 March.

34 Inter-religious Council of Kenya. 2020. “Be Anxious of Nothing”, *African Council of Religious Leaders/Religions for Peace*, May.

35 “Program for National Day at State House”, *The Citizen*, 21 March 2020.

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Social distancing and the imposed curfew limited such visits, which offered crucial emotional support. During these prayers, clergy and church members quoted passages from scripture, such as “You are the temple of the living God. Not the temple of weakness, decrepitude, sickness, dullness and distress, but the temple of strength, health and beauty”,³⁶ by which they offered spiritual healing to those who were affected by the pandemic. These prayers were a source of hope and comfort to the sick in body and at heart.

Scholarly views from different fields, including sociology and psychology, indicate the importance of prayers in health and healing. Christian Science adherent Peter Ross notes that “we speak of man as both mind and body, mind being the upper, the more ethereal layer, and body the lower or grosser. But they are both mental, both parts of the same mentality.”³⁷ Consequently, “since the body is mental and disease is mental, all types of disease respond to metaphysical or spiritual treatment.”³⁸ In his view, spiritual healing addresses physical and mental distress. Spiritual healing, practiced in Nomiya Church through prayers aimed at exorcising the evil spirits, was necessary with Covid-19 pandemic, since people sometimes needed spiritual and mental deliverance from the myths, misconceptions and fears about the coronavirus. Some people were psychologically and mentally sick due to isolation, quarantine and lockdowns, which did not allow family members to interact with their loved ones. Furthermore, bereavement was made a family affair with the dead being hurriedly buried in the presence of a few family members. In fact, at the onset of the pandemic, those who died from Covid-19 pandemic were hurriedly buried even at night without any of the family members allowed to attend. Prayers offered during and after such sorrowful moments soothed the crying soul, thus facilitating holistic healing of the body, soul and mind. As Ross further notes, prayers offer metaphysical treatment to a sick body. Prayers permeated with sympathy, comfort, tenderness, compassion and cheer and soothe the soul and the body.³⁹ Nomiya Church transcended Ross’s views of spiritual healing by addressing the holistic aspects of human beings by including physical, social and emotional healing.

Exorcism

Beliefs about evil spirits and demons and the practice of exorcism remain part and parcel of most AICs. These churches draw significantly from African spirituality and African experiences. According to African religion scholars, Hennie Pretorius and Lazio Jafta, exorcism is one of the main characteristics of many AICs, where

36 Interview with Nomiya adherent by F Cheronoh and T Musili in Eastleigh Parish, Nairobi Kenya, on 5 December 2021.

37 Ross PV. 1946. *Leaves of Healing: Method of Metaphysical Treatment*. New York: Hobson Book Press.

38 Ross, *Leaves of Healing*, 132.

39 Ross, *Leaves of Healing*, 133.

religious leaders cast out devils through examples drawn from biblical sources such as Matthew 10:1-8.⁴⁰

The practice of healing through exorcism in most AICs has, however, taken different forms over time. Exorcism or deliverance from evil powers of the world in the Nomiya Church derives its impetus from deliverance practices in the Bible, which have greatly influenced their healing practices. An example commonly used at Nomiya and also used by preachers in other churches is the story of Simon's mother-in-law recorded in Luke 4:38-39. Drawing from different biblical versions, the following words, interpreted from the passage, would be heard in exorcism prayers: "As soon as the spirit behind the fever heard, understood and obeyed, the fever left her and she was healed." Church leaders commanded the evil spirit behind Covid-19 declaring God to be great, greater than any power in this world, through invocations such as *Nyasaye Duong', Duong' ni Duong'* (God is Great, His greatness is great).⁴¹

Exorcism, which takes the form of prayer in the contemporary Nomiya Church was offered through chanting of words meant to chase away the evil spirit. This is based on the belief that the real forces behind the world of physical matter are spiritual and that the real cause of sickness is neither mental nor physical, but rather spiritual. A spiritual approach is thus required in order to cast away the evil forces, hence exorcism. The use of anointing oil, holy water and handkerchiefs, among other symbolic materials, was not part of exorcism or healing procedures in Nomiya as was witnessed in other churches during the pandemic period. Prayers invoking God's name and his greatness to cancel the powers of coronavirus were offered by church leaders without much dramatisation. Church members would follow the prayers online through Facebook Live. The believers would at times meet in their homes and conduct prayers, even though government measures limited such physical gatherings.

Material support

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic brought dire social, economic, physical and mental issues. Many world economies faced a slowdown in their economic activities, at individual, organisational and national levels. Poverty levels increased, especially in developing countries. This can be attributed to the Covid-19 containment measures of lockdown, social-distancing and quarantine, which rendered many people jobless. A survey by Twaweza, a Kenyan nongovernmental organisation, in March 2021, showed that 60% of Kenyan families could no longer afford three meals per day.⁴² During the first four months of the Covid-19 pandemic,

40 Pretorius H and Jafta LA. 1997. "Branch Springs Out: African Initiated Churches", in Elphick R and Davenport R (eds). *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social & Cultural History*. Cape Town: David Philip, 211-226.

41 Sudhe, *The Socio-Cultural and Theological Context of The Double Rite of Passage*.

42 Mulinya B. 2021. "Covid Plunging Many Kenyans Deeper into Poverty", *VOA News*, 7 March.

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more than 1.7 million Kenyans experienced job losses.⁴³ Unemployment rates nearly doubled with the reduced job opportunities. The working hours and earnings of wage workers were cut, impacting families heavily. Most families that relied solely on the income of their small businesses experienced significantly reduced revenue, while others closed their businesses due to lockdown restrictions and hard economic times. Food security became a major concern for many families. Some families could not afford food, while others could only afford one or two meals per day. According to Twaweza, more Kenyans were worried about where their next meal would come from than their health care in the last six months of 2020.⁴⁴

Families were also broken with increased cases of gender-based violence (GBV). A survey by Liverpool Voluntary Counselling and Testing (LVCT) Health, a Kenyan nongovernmental organisation, indicated that in one and half months following the Covid-19 lockdown in Kenya, a total of 793 adolescent and young women presenting to their clinics reported experiencing violence, a stark increase from pre-Covid times.⁴⁵ Physical violence increased from 33% to 43%, while sexual violence doubled from 2.5% to 5%. According to a report by the UN Country Team in Kenya, calls to GBV hotlines increased by 775% in March and April 2020.⁴⁶ This meant that an additional 3 650 cases of GBV were reported between March and the end of July.⁴⁷ Consequently, some families separated, while others divorced, challenging the core mandate of parenthood where both the mother and the father are expected to complement one another in parental responsibilities.

As a result, churches had to provide material support to those among their members who were greatly affected by the pandemic. At Nomiya, church leaders mobilised funds and basic commodities, especially foodstuffs, from their members who were able to contribute. It is worth noting here that a majority of Nomiya members in Nairobi County reside in informal settlements characterised by poor standards of living and high poverty levels, as affirmed by UN Habitat, which reported that “an estimated 60-70 per cent of Nairobi’s more than 4 million residents reside in urban informal settlements”.⁴⁸ Church members donated foodstuffs such as cooking flour, cooking oil, milk, baking flour and even maize. Some contributed cash, which was collected through the church’s WhatsApp group.⁴⁹ Food items would be assembled

43 Mulinya, “Covid Plunging Many Kenyans Deeper into Poverty”.

44 Mulinya, “Covid Plunging Many Kenyans Deeper into Poverty”.

45 Ngunjiri A et al. 2020. “Covid-19 GBV Brief: Violence Against Women and Girls Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic – LVCT Health Experience”. Nairobi: LVCT Health.

46 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). 2020. “Emergency Appeal, Kenya, April-September 2020”, *Reliefweb*, 9 April.

47 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) 2020. “Kenya Situation Report – September 2020”.

48 UN-Habitat. 2019. “Kenya Habitat Country Programme Document (2018-2021)”. Nairobi: UN-Habitat.

49 Musili TK and Cheronoh F. 2022. “The African value of communality in virtual space amidst Covid-19: The case of WhatsApp welfare communities in Nomiya Church, Eastleigh”, Chapter 24 in this volume.

in a central place in the church, where church leaders with the help of some church members would sort them out while noting the quantities. They would then list members whom they knew or had been reported by other church members as being vulnerable. Food items would then be packed in small bags and distributed to each household, depending on what had been collected. Some families would be given small sums of cash to purchase other basic commodities like soap or drinking water when finances allowed. The church did this solely from the contributions of their members and from the church account without the help of any other institution. In so doing, Nomiya provided physical, social and psychological healing to their members. In addition, it brought together the community of believers, including families who had separated or were living together unhappily. Holistic healing, of not just the physical hunger, but also social and communal bonds that had been broken by Covid, was provided by the church in this way.

The church thus fulfilled the greatest commandment, as instructed by Jesus in the Bible: Love one another. Love, they said, is best felt and seen when one is in need. The example of Jesus feeding the five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish (Matthew 14:13-21) was cited as a charitable work worth emulating, especially during times of crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The church's theology on feeding her people was drawn from inspirational passages in the Old Testament imploring Israelites to consider the needs of others. For example, Isaiah 58:10 says: "If you give some of your own food to [feed] those who are hungry and to satisfy [the needs of] those who are humble, then your light will rise in the dark, and your darkness will become as bright as the noonday Sun." Likewise, Isaiah 58:7 says: "Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help."

Online communities

The Covid-19 pandemic has proven to be a catalyst for the growing importance of online communities globally. People have embraced online communities due to the desire for a strong sense of belonging. Though people were distanced socially and isolated from one another by the Covid-19 pandemic, online space gave them an opportunity to interact virtually. People connected and continue to do so in new and interesting ways which have hitherto appeared strange to many. Apps and online communities sprang up in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as if from nowhere, offering vital services to those who needed them. Meeting apps, such as Zoom and Google Meet, along with complex scientific research apps for collecting data on the spread of the virus, emerged. Zoom, for instance, was relatively unknown among many Kenyans, particularly those who were working outside corporate circles, before the Covid-19 crisis. Today however, church meetings, fundraising, tea parties and international meetings are held using the Zoom app. Apps aimed at encouraging communal ways of living are being introduced. For example, according to the founder of the community media platform Disciple, Benjamin Vaughan, the

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National Health Service (NHS) in the U.K. has been promoting new app-based communities designed to give support to struggling parents and teenagers and to connect people with similar health conditions.⁵⁰ Though these have not been fully actualised and utilised in Kenya, they are important avenues for social support.

Within Nomiya Church, online communities were formed through WhatsApp and Facebook. The different groups in the church, similar to small Christian communities, held their meetings online with different groups, forming their own WhatsApp group to discuss church matters at group level. A general WhatsApp group for all the members of the Eastleigh church existed through which information concerning church progress, plans and vital Covid-19 information were shared. A Facebook page for the entire parish and a separate one for Nomiya youth within the parish also existed. Church leaders used these platforms to encourage their members, sharing prayers and inspirational messages drawn from the Bible and theological writings. They also encouraged their members to oblige to government Covid-19 protocols urging them to be safe. Church members would also encourage one another by sharing prayers and Bible inspirations among themselves through SMS or WhatsApp. Thus, they connected virtually and practised their spirituality online.

Online communities through WhatsApp groups would also be used to mobilise funds towards supporting bereaved members of the church. If a member lost a loved one, they would communicate this to the pastor, who would then form an online community together with other church leaders in order to communicate the news to the other church members. The church's treasurer would then receive the online contributions, updating every contribution in the WhatsApp group for purposes of transparency. Funeral arrangements would be made through these platforms, and a few church leaders would visit the bereaved families. Since death is inevitable, as noted by one of the members, most of the adherents participated actively in financially and emotionally supporting one another. As a result, online communities became an extension of physical communities, although without replacing, them as rightly noted by digital religion scholar Heidi Campbell in her analysis of religion online and offline.⁵¹ Furthermore, as Benjamin Vaughan asserts, human beings generally are social and have a deep sense of belonging to a community. They thus want to help others and be pro-social at all times.⁵²

Church members further supported church activities through online communities. Though tithes and offerings were given at individual level, church contributions, such as the annual contribution per parish, were done at group levels. Group leaders would mobilise their members through their WhatsApp groups to give their contributions, which would then be channeled to the church's treasurer on a given dateline. Church leaders however, noted that such financial support towards the church's activities decreased online in comparison to physical contributions,

50 Vaughan B. 2020. "How Online Communities Are Saving the World", *Forbes*, 13 May.

51 Campbell H. 2012. "Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80(1):64-93.

52 Vaughan, "How Online Communities Are Saving the World".

where members would feel embarrassed if they remain seated while the rest were giving their support. In addition, economic crises and reduced income caused by the pandemic stretched the financial capacity of most households. Interestingly, these online communities remained active even after the government eased Covid-19 measures to allow full capacity in churches. Most of the members noted that there are times when one needs urgent help that cannot necessarily wait until members congregate together physically on a Sunday. Urgent cases, such as those involving a death, would thus be handled virtually and even physically. In this way, members feel being part of the community and are closely bound together by codes of alternative kinship.

There was also a general increase in ownership of smartphones and tablets and increased internet connectivity among Kenyans during the Covid period. In January 2020, it was estimated that there were 22.86 million internet users in Kenya, representing a 16% increase between 2019 and 2020, and a penetration of 43%. In addition, there were approximately 8.80 million social media users in January 2020, with an increase of 13% between April 2019 and January 2020. Around the same time, there were 52.06 million mobile connections in January 2020.⁵³ Although such statistics serve as an indication of exponential growth in Kenya's technology, not every Kenyan owns a smartphone. Some Nomiya Church members could not, therefore, utilise these online communities. Some members did not have smartphones that could support these apps. Consequently, these members would rely on their brethren from the church to pass vital information to them relating to church matters. Some felt left out due to mobile inaccessibility, which affected their relationships and interactions with other church members. Challenges of internet connectivity and lack of enough data bundles was a further hindrance to maximum utilisation of the online communities, especially in the informal urban areas that Nomiya Church dominates.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined healing and deliverance in Nomiya Church, Eastleigh, in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. The church's communal operations were adversely affected by the government's containment measures, such as social distancing and ban on physical worship. Consequently, the church adopted adaptive mechanisms, such as forming online communities, in order to address the needs of her members. Holistic approach to health and healing drawn from African spirituality and experience was adopted by Nomiya Church, Eastleigh. The psychological, emotional and spiritual needs of the adherents were addressed through prayers that were conducted to deliver people from anxiety, depression and distress caused by the pandemic. Material support was offered by the church to address arising physical and social needs, thus restoring the wholeness of life to her members. An African cosmotheandric view of life and well-being was affirmed

⁵³ Kemp S. 2020. "Digital 2020 Kenya", *DataReportal*, 18 February.

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by Nomiya Church's adaptive mechanisms adopted to facilitate holistic healing of their adherents. The church embraced technology and formed online communities through which they shared vital information about Covid-19 and also provided emotional and financial support to their members. This affirms the assumption of the African religion scholar Lovemore Togarasei that "the histories, geographical spaces and traditions of most AICs have been permeated to a great extent by the Internet, WhatsApp, YouTube, Mobile Telephony, Mobile Money Transfers, and the like to transform the ways in which they access the gospel and interrelate".⁵⁴ African Independent Churches, such as Nomiya Church, Eastleigh, made use of these new digital spaces to meet the needs of their members towards healing and deliverance from the pandemic.

⁵⁴ Togarasei L. 2012. "Mediating the Gospel: Pentecostal Christianity and Media Technology in Botswana and Zimbabwe", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27(2):257-274.