

A Case Study of the Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Church Activities in the Catholic Diocese of Damongo in the Savannah Region of Ghana

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Abstract

Since the emergence of the Covid-19 virus, the world has changed in almost all spheres. Economies, transportation, health, commerce, tourism, education, hospitality, employment, agriculture, religion, among others have all been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The overarching goal of the study was to explore the impact of Covid-19 on church activities in the Catholic diocese of Damongo in the Savannah region of Ghana. Thus, the study explored the perceptions of Catholic priests in Damongo diocese about the Covid-19 pandemic, examined the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on church activities in the various parishes as well as sought to gain some insights into the strategies priests in the various parishes adopted to cope with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative case design, sixteen (16) priests from all the parishes in the Catholic diocese of Damongo were purposively selected and interviewed. The data was analyzed thematically. The findings revealed competing perceptions about the Covid-19 pandemic among priests in the diocese. The findings also showed that the impact of Covid-19 on church activities in the diocese of Damongo has been severe. Among other things, finances of parishes diminished, church attendance declined, and the faith of parishioners was put to the test during the pandemic. Yet, parishes also learned new ways of evangelizing during the pandemic, namely through digitalization. Survival was a major challenge for parishes during the pandemic. Priests resorted to God for protection. Lay associations and societies were appealed to for donations. Digital platforms were adopted to facilitate evangelization. Based on the findings, the study recommended that parishes should be pastorally proactive, invest in other sustainable ventures, and use accrued funds judiciously. The study further recommended that a self-reliance drive which the diocese initiated in the past be upheld and parishes should explore modern digital means of reaching out to the community of faithful across the diocese of Damongo.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Impact, Church Activities, Catholic Diocese, Damongo, Savannah Region, Ghana

DOI: 10.7176/EJBM/14-5-03

Publication date: March 31st 2022

1. INTRODUCTION

The world today has been challenged more than ever, arguably, with the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the emergence of the Covid-19 virus, the world has changed in almost all spheres. Sectors such as economies, transportation, health, commerce, tourism, education, hospitality, employment, agriculture, religion, among others have all been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. As at today, the world still appeared helpless as the virus continues to spread rapidly with attendant high mortality rates. Many people have thus described the world today as not in normal times. One of the spheres of life that has been hit hard by the covid-19 pandemic is the “Church and religious communities” (Pillay, 2020, p. 266). According to Pillay, “the Church has been severely affected and...transformed by the pandemic” (p. 266).

According to WHO (2020), the deadly coronavirus disease (Covid-19) was caused by the “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, formerly 2019-nCoV), which emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Covid-19 cases were soon exported to other Chinese cities and overseas, mainly owing to the traffic surge near the Chinese Lunar New Year (Bogoch et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). Mainland China was the first country to identify the disease and its pathogen and was also the first country to impose strict measures in response to the outbreak including lockdowns of cities and face mask wearing. It was also the first country to bring the outbreak under control. The outbreak of Covid-19 was received by the world with mixed feelings. Some saw Covid-19 as a cluster of mysterious pneumonia and related it to seafood market in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province. The local governments of Wuhan and Hubei were widely criticized for their delayed responses to the virus and their censorship of the related information during the initial outbreak, especially during the local parliamentary sessions. More cases of Covid-19 started spreading to neighboring countries and eventually to other parts of the world.

When covid-19 emerged, governments across the world put in place measures to control the spread of the virus. One of such measures was the closure of churches and mosques and other places of worship. The situation is not different in Africa (African Union, 2020) and Ghana for that matter. In Ghana, churches and mosques were closed for some time then later restrictions were eased to allow for some religious activities to go on but for very limited numbers and time. Many religious men and women and the worshipping Ghanaian population have expressed frustrations about how the pandemic has sorely affected religious life and activities. Adjei (2019) sought perspectives about the pandemic in Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana and discovered that there are various schools of thoughts about the pandemic. According to Adjei, some people believe the virus is being visited on humanity by God as punishment for atrocities committed while others think it resulted from a scientific experimental mistake.

Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020) observed that churches adopted “modern technologies and public media” to reach out to their members in the pandemic. Some churches held “online services and streamed lived videos of sermons and prayers to aid in the dissemination of important health information” (Wildman et al., 2020, p. 116). Although Covid-19 limited the celebration of religious activities, Shibambu and Egunjobi (2020, p. 1) discovered that religious communities “stayed better connected and supported.” For Kowalczyk et al. (2020), there are varied impacts of Covid-19 on religion and faith. Religious missionaries could not move around in the pandemic due to travel restrictions (Yasin et al., 2020). Covid-19 has changed the world and altering our way of life and worship. According to Pillay (2020, p. 266), “the new landscape calls for both resilience and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing things and of being church. Churches have to adapt; they have to ask themselves questions about the implications for being church in this ‘new normal’ context.”

There is research consensus (ASEAN, 2020; Ozili & Arun, 2020) and public consensus that Covid-19 has adversely affected all spheres of life. The Church and its religious activities have not been left out in the waging devastating effects imposed by the pandemic (Pillay, 2020; Yasin et al., 2020; Kowalczyk et al., 2020; Shibambu & Egunjobi, 2020; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). Since the emergence of the Covid-19 virus, research has looked at the human rights dimensions of the virus response measures (The Global Fund, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; OHCHR, 2020; UNAIDS, 2020; WHO, 2020; Weerth, 2020; UNICEF, 2020) and its impact on economies of the world (Ozili & Arun, 2020; Jackson, Weiss, Schwarzenberg & Nelson, 2020; Zandi, Cochrane & Xu, 2020; UNCTAD, 2020). Other studies have looked at how religious activities have been affected by Covid-19 (Pillay, 2020; Yasin, et al., 2020; Kowalczyk, et al., 2020; Shibambu & Egunjobi, 2020; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). These studies are however foreign in nature and context, and may not reflect the lived experiences, perspectives, and views of most Ghanaians on how the pandemic has impacted church activities in the small West African country. Also, within Ghana, the discourses around the impact of covid-19 appear more focused on health, education, and the economy, while paying little attention to the impact on church activities.

Furthermore, the limited discourse on the interaction between the pandemic and church activities appear to lack the active voices (Nangwele, 2013) of religious leaders and their congregations especially in rural Ghana such as Damongo in the Savannah Region of Ghana. Catholic religious leaders such as the priests are the ones who conduct and superintend over activities in the church and yet their perspectives have been minimally included in the discourse on the impact of Covid-19 on church life. Therefore, there is the need for a study that brings to the discourse the voices, experiences, perspectives, and views of the religious leaders on the impact of Covid-19 on church activities.

Thus, this study seeks to explore the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on church activities in the Catholic Church in Damongo diocese in the Savannah region of Ghana from the perspective of the clergy. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourses on the interaction between religion, faith, church activities/ behaviors and pandemics. The study reveals range of strategies that the local Church communities deploy to cope with the implications imposed on them by the virus, which could serve as useful resource for other faith groups and communities to inform their practices, activities, and behaviors during pandemics. The findings discussed in this paper are significant in stimulating a rethink about the positions and arguments, for instance, as Nangwele (2006) and Pillay (2020, p. 266) indicate, “...against considering or even implementing different ideas of ‘being’ church today.”

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of Catholic priests in Damongo diocese about the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What are the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on church activities in the Catholic Church in Damongo?
3. What strategies do Catholic priests in Damongo adopt to cope with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Church?

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience Theory

The Resilience Theory of crisis management (Boan & Ayers, 2020) was deployed in this paper to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Catholic Church in Damongo Diocese and how it coped with those impacts or implications. The importance of resilience in times of crisis has been well acknowledged (Clarke, 2021; John-eke & Bayo, 2021; Woltjer, 2015; Duchek, 2020; Otu & Makichi, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2017). Living in this Covid-19 era and coping with the impact it imposes on communities require a great deal of resilience. Research has indicated how resilience enabled coping in the Covid-19 pandemic (Widman, 2021; OECD, 2020; Panzeri et al., 2021; Edua-Mensah, 2020).

The explanation of the theory is that people are able to survive adversity with less harm when they have one or more protective factors. Thus, “Resilience is about doing more than having” (Barton et al., 2020, p. 118) and working together “to build resource capacity within communities” (Nijssen, 2020, p. 100). It directly involves dealing with emotional outcomes (such as fear, anxiety, grief, panic, etc.) of adversity (Barton et al., 2020, p. 118). As shown in the findings, the Catholic Church in Damongo was dealing with the fears, anxiety and panic the pandemic created in its community of faithful. Also, the church deployed education and sensitization and giving hope, care, spiritual support, and comfort to its community members to enable them cope in the pandemic.

The church has been supporting and “meeting people’s needs; supporting authorities; giving comfort and hope; sharing the gospel; and praying” (Landrum, 2020, p. 6-7). When people are cared for, comforted, given hope, prayed for and their needs addressed, in the pandemic they are able to suffer less harm, resist or cope with the impacts of the pandemic and recover quickly. It is no gain saying that our world needs a systemic resilience approach to tackle Covid-19 and other future shocks (OECD, 2020). As such, in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Catholic Church in the Damongo Diocese gave attention to people’s grief, loss, fear, anxiety and panic.

The Church had to as Barton et al. (2020, p. 117) stated, “take stock of their routines, roles and resources and then reconfigure, redeploy and repurpose.” The church thus demonstrated agency and resilience during the pandemic. Without resilience, thriving in crisis or pandemic could be difficult (Nijssen, 2020). Hence, “Resilience matters now more than ever” (Barton et al., 2020, p. 117).

1.3 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach. Qualitative approach involves exploring and understanding phenomena from the participants’ own perspectives (Creswell, 2014; Neville, 2007; Ary et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2007, Nangwele, 2020). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) noted that qualitative approach focuses on a particular phenomenon in a way that it is typically lived by human beings. A qualitative approach was deployed because it allowed the Catholic priests in the diocese of Damongo to express their perspectives about the impact of Covid-19 on church activities as well as permitted the study to have a personal interaction with the priests. The goal of this research is thus to rely as much as possible on the priests’ views about the Covid-19 pandemic in the Damongo diocese (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative approach is about questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Adzahlie-Mensah et al., 2017).

A case study design was used. The study designed the research questions in a broad and general manner so that the priests could construct their perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the activities of the church in the interviews better (Creswell, 2014). This made it possible to listen carefully to what the priests said in the interviews or do in their parishes (Creswell, 2014). Data was collected through interviews. With a qualitative case study, the study was able to have a rich understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on religious activities in the Catholic Church from the perspectives of the priests who experienced the phenomenon. This paper studied the Catholic Church as a case because “it offers a unique example of real people in real situations” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 253).

A qualitative case study was also adopted because there is not much literature about priests’ perceptions and experiences about covid-19 and its impacts on religious activities. Adzahlie-Mensah et al. (2017) indicate that case studies are useful in situations where previous research does not exist or where little is known about the phenomenon. The study purposively sampled sixteen (16) priests in the Damongo diocese to participate in the study. The participants were drawn from the 13 parishes in the diocese. The priests in the Catholic Church conduct the activities of the church and thus possess significant knowledge and information on how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the activities of the church. Thus, the interaction with them provided this study very rich insights into how the pandemic is viewed by the church, how the activities of the church have been impacted and the strategies that the church adopted to navigate through the conditions presented by the pandemic. As such, the adoption of purposive sampling in this work aided in the selection and interaction with priests who have significant information about the impact of covid-19 on the Catholic Church. The study paid due attention to the issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent of research participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to minimize the possibility of identifying them (Nangwele, 2013, 2020).

1.4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study. The discussions of the findings are into three parts. First, the perceptions of Catholic priests in Damongo diocese about the Covid-19 virus have been discussed. The second part discusses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on church activities. The final part discusses the strategies that priests, and their parishes adopted to cope with the Covid-19 implications on church activities in the Catholic diocese of Damongo. The study concludes by drawing some lessons from the findings and offered some recommendations to the Catholic church in the Damongo diocese.

1.4.1 Perceptions of Catholic Priests in the Diocese of Damongo about Covid-19

The perceptions of priests in the diocese of Damongo about the Covid-19 pandemic did not vary with the parishes they serve. All 16 priests in the study indicated how they perceive the Covid-19 virus. Their perceptions show that people have become more afraid, apprehensive, suspicious, uncertain, and helpless in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic. Their perceptions also indicate that surviving through the pandemic has been daunting for many parishes and individuals.

1.4.2. Real and Unexpected Phenomenon

The interviews reveal that priests in the Damongo diocese believe that the Covid-19 virus is real. Participants indicated that when the virus broke out, there were conspiracy theories that sought to convince people that the virus is a mere hoax with the sole goal to create fear and cause people to live hygienic lives. Participants highlighted that Covid-19 exists although there are some people in some rural communities in Ghana who do not believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is real since they have not witnessed contraction of the virus in their locality. Some priests indicate in the interviews that because they believe the virus is real that they took steps to educate their congregants about observing the safety protocols. A participant indicated:

Covid-19 pandemic is real... (Interview with priests, 2021)

Another Priest shared that:

Every Catholic Priest of the Diocese of Damongo believes and accepts the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic is real. Before the arrival of nose masks and hand sanitizers in the Ghanaian market and pharmaceutical stores, priests of the diocese of Damongo took front line roles to educate their congregants regarding the need to observe and practice the safety protocols. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Also, participants indicated in the interviews that although the virus is real, many never expected that it will spread and reach their communities. For instance, a priest said:

Catholic priests in Damongo diocese perceived the Covid-19 pandemic as an unanticipated trial, out of the blue and characterized by fear, anxiety and panic, stress, and nervousness. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Participants explained that they thought the virus was going to remain in the West and China. One priest indicated as follows:

Initially, a lot of people, including priests, perceived the pandemic not to be an immediate threat until it stormed our immediate environment. It looked very distant, far away in China, and we thought it was going to take a long time to reach us, by which timely remedies would have been found. (Interview with priests, 2021)

As such, they perceived the experience of Covid-19 cases in Damongo as an unexpected situation which they had to live with and negotiate.

1.4.3. Dangerous, Deadly and Threat to Society

Participants also view the Covid-19 virus as very dangerous and deadly. According to participants, the spate at which the virus spread across the world, the rate of infections and the death tolls resulting from the virus are scary. A participant indicated that:

The Covid-19 pandemic is a very dangerous virus to be feared... (Interview with priests, 2021).

Participants expressed worries about the large number of people that have been killed or incapacitated by the Covid-19 virus. As such, participants described Covid-19 as a dangerous phenomenon that appears to be killing faster than the known deadly diseases. The effects of the virus are devastating, and many people are struggling to survive. According to the priest participants, Covid-19 threatens the very survival of society. Some priests indicated:

It is a mysterious disease that is threatening the very existence of humanity as the virus keeps mutating. (Interview with priests, 2021)

It is a dangerous infectious disease unimaginable until we experienced it. Covid-19 is terrible...if not controlled it will destroy humanity. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The research participants further explained that the Covid-19 pandemic is a threat to the society and to the people of Damongo diocese because it has brought fear, anxiety and affects the general atmosphere of life in Damongo in terms of production, commerce, financial resources, education, and development. Participants were also concerned that the virus is not just killing people but that some scientists are also raising infertility issues with

some survivors. Thus, they view the virus as something that is threatening to extinct humanity. The general perception of the Covid-19 pandemic among priests in Damongo diocese is that the virus is contagious, deadly, and fearful.

1.4.4. Test of Faith and Warning to the World

Another perception that became apparent in the interviews was that Covid-19 came to test people's faith. For instance, a priest indicated in the interview thus:

The Covid-19 pandemic was perceived by most of us, priests in this diocese, as a real test moment for our local church, and our readiness in coping with abnormal times and challenges. (Interview with priests, 2021)

According to most participants, when the virus broke out it affected how people worship God and churches could no longer congregate to celebrate the sacraments as usual. Thus, participants indicate that the virus has come to test commitment of people in terms of their faith, spirituality, and belief in God as the controller and protector of the world. Also, some participants view the virus as a warning to the world for the numerous atrocities and sins that are committed against God. A participant stated:

The Covid-19 pandemic...is probably a warning to all to reform our lives. (Interview with priests, 2021)

They perceive the virus as something that God is using to warn people to turn away from their waywardness and sinful activities. This finding feeds into Adjei's (2019) observation that some people think that God is using Covid-19 to punish the world for our sins and disobeying his commandments.

1.4.5. Weapon

Some participants also indicated in the interviews that Covid-19 is a weapon that has been designed or created by some people to further an agenda. For instance, a priest indicated that:

Some imagine it to be a bio-chemical weapon. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Participants who believe that the virus is a weapon think the design and spread of the virus is purposive. As such, they indicated that Covid-19 was created to kill and wipe out some populations of the world. Participants thus perceive Covid-19 as a biological weapon.

1.4.6. Error from Science Laboratory

In the interviews, it also became apparent that some participants view the virus as resulting from errors made by scientists in their laboratory activities. That is, some participants think the virus was not a manufactured weapon but an error that resulted from scientific laboratory. This supports Adjei's (2019) finding that Covid-19 resulted from "unguided medical laboratory experiment in Wuhan, China" (p. 88). Some participants stated that:

For some it is a result of human error from science laboratory. (Interview with priests, 2021).

Covid-19 pandemic is a global disaster occasioned by excessive and uncontrolled scientific experiments of man that has now gone wayward. (Interview with priests, 2021).

Thus, the perception of most priests in the study is that Covid-19 came about when some scientists were preparing chemicals in their laboratory and made a mistake in the process thereby leading to a leakage of the chemicals. It can therefore be argued that there are competing schools of thoughts about the outbreak and spread of the covid-19 virus. While some schools think Covid-19 is a biological weapon, others view it as an outcome of error from scientific laboratory. The discussion thus affirmed Adjei's (2019) argument that there are competing perspectives about the origin and spread of Covid-19.

1.4.7. Obstruction to Evangelization

The priests in the interviews also indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic is an obstruction to evangelization. According to participants, doing evangelization became very challenging and daunting in the wake of the virus and the accompanied restrictions that government has imposed. For most participants, the pandemic is an obstacle to evangelization. Some participants' statements indicating this claim are as follows:

Covid-19 pandemic...is an obstacle to works of evangelization and acts of charity in the diocese and the world at large. (Interview with priests, 2021)

It makes the work of evangelisation difficult due to social distancing. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Participants indicated that masses could no longer be celebrated in huge numbers and priests could not interact with their congregations as they used to. Priests perceive Covid-19 as an adversary to pastoral progress. Also, they view Covid-19 as something that has retarded pastoral activities in the diocese of Damongo.

Generally, Catholic priests' perceptions about the Covid-19 pandemic are largely negative and did not vary among the parishes. Just as Adjei (2019) indicated, priests' perceptions of the pandemic in this paper are located within the spiritual and scientific schools of thoughts about Covid-19. Meanwhile, the Catholic priests in the interviews believe that the virus could be overcome if handled with urgency and with the requisite resources. They also believe that discipline is crucial to combating the virus. The argument is that a vaccinated population that is not disciplined may still struggle to overcome the virus since it keeps mutating.

1.5 Impact of Covid-19 on Church Activities in the Catholic Diocese of Damongo

After exploring the perceptions of priests about the Covid-19 pandemic, the study sought to investigate the effects of the pandemic on the activities of the Catholic Church in the Damongo diocese. The findings indicate that church activities in the Damongo diocese have been severely impacted by the pandemic and many parishes were merely on 'life support.'

1.5.1. Decline in Church Activities and Attendance

The study discovered that the restrictions that the government imposed during the pandemic resulted in a decline in church activities. The ban on social gatherings by the government of Ghana has reduced the number and length of activities in the churches. Priests are worried that the effects of the pandemic on the church may persist for long. Some of the priests shared in the interview as follows:

We could not have regular church services/Masses. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Throughout the diocese of Damongo, church activities declined greatly. With the ban on social as well as religious gatherings church activities were not possible. Everyone was scared to come to church. People were unsure as to when and where they might end up contracting the virus. The impact of the pandemic on church activities will remain for a long time to come, especially those who were not so strong in the faith, have found enough reasons not to appear in church. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The long period of lockdown encouraged some people to be interested in staying away from church services. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Participants indicated that churches had to suspend some activities due to the increasing spread of the virus in the country. Participation in activities of the church and attendance declined considerably. Most of the church's activities such as vigils, adoration, rosary prayers, prayer meetings and other devotional activities in the church were crippled. A participant indicated that:

Spiritual programmes such as meeting to pray at the grotto, retreats and recollections, formation programmes, and even liturgical celebrations that had the potential of bringing large numbers of people together were all cancelled. This seriously impacted the very survival of the church, as even the limited resources parishes used to rely on for daily chores were no more forthcoming. Even after restrictions have been lifted, we can see obvious reduction in our membership, with people still entertaining fears in mingling with others. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The church is a family of God, but the pandemic made it challenging for people to socialize and come together as a family to celebrate. The scriptures say that wherever two or more are gathered God is present. However, the pandemic made gathering rather dangerous. Many people were afraid to come together to pray and to celebrate the Eucharist. The fear of contracting the virus created fear in many congregants and this made some people to stop going to church. Participants shared that the closing down of churches have had a great negative impact on their incarnational faith.

1.5.2. Diminished finances of parishes

All the priests who participated in the study indicated that their parishes rely heavily on church collections and donations from the community of faithful to survive. However, due to the pandemic many people stopped going to church and this affected the finances of many parishes. Some priests shared the following in the interviews:

Church collections have been our main source of income and this was greatly hampered by the advent of Covid-19. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The pandemic...weakened the financial strength of parishes... (Interview with priests, 2021)

The church collections and donations have been drastically diminished during the covid-19 times. (Interview with priests, 2021)

It has led to a great financial difficulty in the parishes of the diocese; some parishes can hardly meet their financial obligations due to the Covid-19 pandemic. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Many parishes became financially bankrupt. According to participants, parishes in the Damongo diocese were struggling to survive in the pandemic period. Parishes' finances had dwindled and taking care of the priests was very difficult. Participants also stated in the interviews that the diminished finances of parishes made it very difficult for the church to support the poor and needy. According to one of the priests interviewed,

Since the pandemic has brought about low collections there isn't much money to carry out important church activities e.g., caring for the poor and needy. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The cost of PPEs, paper towels, sanitizers and fumigation of church buildings became an extra financial burden for parishes that were already struggling before the pandemic. It can thus be argued that Covid-19 has brought the economies of parishes in the Damongo diocese to their knees.

1.5.3 Churches learned new digitalization of evangelization

Participants also shared that there were some positives from the pandemic on the church. According to priests in the study, the pandemic made them to think outside-the-box by adopting new digital ways of reaching out to their congregants. They indicated that prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 that the church resorted to only the traditional

method of evangelization such as Sunday and daily masses. However, priests indicated that with the emergence of the pandemic they learned new ways (such as radio liturgies, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and television) of digitalizing their evangelism and reaching out to a larger community of faithful. A participant stated:

On another note, the positive impact of Covid-19 cannot be overlooked. It has led to new digitalization of evangelization via social media. Secondly, many get to know more about Holy Mass because it is now being celebrated on YouTube and other social media.

Thus, participants shared that many people have now become aware of Holy Mass because the church has adopted digital modes of propagating the word of God. Participants shared that they can now reach out to the church community without personal contact and this has helped them to observe the Covid-19 safety protocols.

1.5.4 Diminishing faith of Christians

Participants also expressed concerns that the faith of many members of the Christian community in the diocese has diminished. The priests in the study claimed that some people no longer come together to pray, for confessions and mass regularly. According to a priest in the study:

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been greatly felt. There is diminishing faith of Christians since they could not come together to worship and to be inspired by God's word. Majority of our youth are illiterate and cannot read the Bible themselves to understand God's will for them. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Patronage of the sacraments was low and priests in the diocese lost contact with most of their parishioners. Regular contact between priests and their parishioners was difficult. Thus, a priest indicated that:

...we have been negatively impacted pastorally and spiritually due to our inability to organize and celebrate the liturgy... (Interview with priests, 2021)

Furthermore, the priests who participated in the study indicated that the sick were more frightened as priests could not get close to them to administer the sacrament of the sick. As such, participants remarked that the faith of some members of the Christian community in the Damongo diocese was diminishing. Some priests indicated that the pandemic unearthed the shallowness of the faith formation that some parishioners received. The pandemic appeared to have tested many people beyond their coping limits. Many parishioners felt helpless in the absence of community celebrations.

1.5.5. Every unexecuted planned activity is blamed on Covid-19

The study also revealed that one impact the pandemic presented to the church in Damongo diocese was the tendency of people to blame their inability to execute planned activities on Covid-19. The pandemic resulted in frequent postponements of church activities. Some participants stated:

A number of Church programs such as the Silver Jubilee Celebration of the diocese slated for 2020 was postponed indefinitely. (Interview with priests, 2021)

On-going church projects came to a standstill and no new projects executed since the pandemic. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Many of the priests indicated in the interviews that since the emergence of Covid-19 whenever groups and associations in the church planned to undertake an activity but were unable to do so, the blame was put on Covid-19. For example, some participants shared the following thoughts:

Many unexecuted planned activities are blamed on the Covid-19 pandemic. (Interview with priests, 2021)

All unexecuted planned activities are blamed on the Covid-19 pandemic. No doubt covid-19 has affected all facets of life by letting people and organizations postpone and abandon their plans altogether. Since the covid-19 pandemic commenced, some funerals in the diocese have not been performed. Baptism in large numbers has not been carried out. Jubilee celebrations have been postponed till further notice. (Interview with priests, 2021)

As such, participants indicated that this has affected development in the parishes throughout the diocese.

1.5.6 Difficulty in planning for the future

Owing to the uncertainties that Covid-19 presents, many of the priests in the interviews indicated that they found it difficult to plan for the future. Participants highlighted that the uncertainties presented by the pandemic pose challenges in planning for future programs. Some participants highlighted:

There is the difficulty in planning some activities for the future because of the pandemic. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The covid-19 pandemic made the future unpredictable and unsafe to plan anything. Initially, to get people together to plan was difficult because of fear of infection and the cost involved. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Participants indicated that groups in the church have difficulties in planning for the future. Overall, the findings show that the pandemic has negatively impacted the activities of parishes in the Catholic diocese of Damongo. This affirms Pillay's (2020) argument that the church and religious communities experienced serious negative impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.6 Strategies Catholic Priests in Damongo Diocese Adopted to Cope with the impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Church

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the Catholic Church in the Damongo diocese has been severe. Parishes were struggling to survive in the pandemic times. Thus, this study, after establishing how the pandemic impacted the Catholic Church in the Damongo diocese, made an attempt to gain insight into the coping strategies by priests during the pandemic. The study discovered that all the parishes in the Damongo diocese adopted the similar coping strategies in the pandemic times.

1.6.1 Education and sensitization of congregants

It became apparent in the interviews with the priests that all the parishes in the Damongo diocese engaged in education and sensitization drive to ensure that their communities of faithful knew how to protect themselves against the virus. Priests indicated that they educated their congregations through their sermons during the celebration of Holy Mass. Some participants shared the following insights:

We educated parishioners during Mass on the pandemic especially in observing the safety protocols.
(Interview with priests, 2021)

Before the arrival of nose masks and hand sanitizers in the Ghanaian market and pharmaceutical stores, priests of the diocese of Damongo took front line roles in educating their congregants regarding the necessity to observe and practice the safety protocols. (Interview with priests, 2021)

According to some participants, some people in the villages were of the view that the virus was not real but rather a hoax. As such, some did not see the need to wear nose mask, wash and sanitize their hands regularly, observe social distancing, and the like. Thus, participants indicated that they had to intensify the education of their congregants about the virus and how to conduct themselves and their activities in a manner that would not compromise their health or put them at the risk of contracting and spreading the virus. This particular finding supports Wildman et al. (2020) argument that important health information has been disseminated by churches in the pandemic.

1.6.2 Resort to God for Protection

Also, the study discovered that one strategy that priests in the Damongo diocese adopted to cope with the Covid-19 implications on the church was to rely on God for protection and guidance.

There is uncertainty but as people of faith we rely on the Lord for protection and guidance. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Participants indicated that they became helpless and confused with the severe impact of the pandemic on the activities of the church. Parish finances had diminished, masses could not be celebrated, people's faith was dwindling and supporting the welfare of priests, the poor and needy was difficulty. Thus, participants indicated that the only hope they relied on was God. God became the only source of hope for the future of parishes in the diocese. Some priests noted that only God could give wisdom to remedy the situation:

It is only God who can grant wisdom for the development of an effective vaccine against the virus.
(Interview with priests, 2021)

Thus, the priests and congregants engaged in prayer to seek God's intervention and help to see them through and to overcome the challenges presented by the pandemic. Reliance on God was a source of hope and security to many Christians in the pandemic. Whereas the faith of some congregants dimmed during the pandemic, others became more prayerful and committed. Hence, the church demonstrated resilience by supporting and "meeting people's needs; giving comfort and hope; sharing the gospel; and praying" (Landrum, 2020, p. 6-7).

1.6.3. Use of digital platforms for evangelization and mobilization

The pandemic resulted in the imposition of restrictions which affected the activities of churches. Churches could no longer gather in large numbers to worship. Contact of priests with congregants was lost. The Church had to as Barton et al. (2020, p. 117) stated, "take stock of their routines, roles and resources and then reconfigure, redeploy and repurpose." As such, participants indicated that they had to resort to the use of digital platforms such as radio, WhatsApp, Facebook, You-Tube, among others to propagate the word of God to their communities. The Catholic Church in the Damongo Diocese thus demonstrated agency and resilience during the pandemic. Some priests indicated that they formed WhatsApp groups for their parishes and posted their homilies on the pages for members to reflect on. This finding affirmed Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020) observation that churches adopted "modern technologies and public media" to reach out to their members in the pandemic.

The study revealed that priests prepared Sunday homilies and posted them on various WhatsApp platforms for parishioners to read. This feeds into Wildman et al. (2020) observation that videos of church services, sermons and prayers were livestreamed by some churches in the pandemic. Some participants' statements illustrating this point are as follows:

The following strategies were used during the covid-19 pandemic times: working more at home using the social media-recording sermons and sending them by WhatsApp; Using the phone and emails.
(Interview with priests, 2021)

We ventured into the use of mass and social media for evangelization. Before the advent of the

pandemic, we did not have so many sermons and reflections on WhatsApp platforms, Facebook, radio, TV and print media. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The pandemic made us to review our resource mobilization strategies as a diocese. It is very clear that we no longer can rely on only church collections which comes solely from members during celebrations but have to encourage members that even without their Sunday attendance they still have the responsibility of supporting their church. A lot of priests have embraced the use of other means, such as the social media, to still evangelize through the sharing of their homilies. Virtual celebration of Masses, and broadcasting through local radio stations also became the order of the day. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Digital platforms were also used for consultation and guidance to parishioners. Also, priests indicated that some people were no longer attending church services for fear of contracting the virus and this affected the finances of churches since their main source of income was through offertories and collections. As such, all the priests in the interviews indicated that they had to resort to digital means for members to pay their collections, tithes, and donations to the church. Parishes thus created electronic or money accounts to ensure that members who could still have the opportunity to pay their church dues, collections, and donations. A participant stated:

...with the total absence of Church activities, survival became an issue in the lives of the priests. In some situations, priests had to solicit support via the creation of WhatsApp platforms and linking parishioners to them. Those people who could support the priests were given some mobile money numbers to pay their offering into. (Interview with priests, 2021)

According to participants, this helped to keep parishes alive through the pandemic period. Again, participants highlighted that they used the digital platforms to mobilize and organize their members for action. Whenever churches wanted to undertake any event, they made announcements through the radio or the WhatsApp platforms. Thus, digital avenues were deployed by churches to disseminate information, reach out to their community of faithful, and propagate the Word of God. During the pandemic people could attend church service from their home through the radio, television, You-Tube, or Facebook. The study also revealed that sometimes vital information for the community were channeled through the catechists and prayer leaders. Provision of spiritual support to people through digital means helped many to cope in the pandemic. The word of God gave hope and a sense of security to the community of faithful in the pandemic. This ensured that many people were not left out in the sharing of God's word.

1.6.4. Appealing to church groups, associations and diaspora for donations and support

The study also discovered that parishes appealed for monetary donations and support from groups and associations in the church to keep the church alive. Participants indicated that the ban on social gatherings reduced numbers in the church and affected churches' finances because collections and offerings were not forthcoming. As such, priests indicated in the interviews that they had to resort to appealing to groups and associations in the church to donate to the church. They also stated that they appealed to their community of faithful in the diaspora to make donations. Some priests shared that:

We had to find alternative means to raise some income for survival such as appealing to church Groups and Associations for donations to survive. We also reaching out to some parishioners in the Diaspora for financial support. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The awareness was also created among various Church societies and individuals to come to the aid of their priests. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The priests appealed to church associations, groups and personal friends and relatives for support: food, toiletries etc. (Interview with priests, 2021)

The study found out that priests appealed to parishioners for support even outside liturgical celebrations. Also, parishes appealed to partner parishes in Europe and America for financial support. According to the priests in the interviews, the donations from church groups, associations, diaspora, and partner parishes in Europe and USA helped parishes to cope with the difficult financial situation that the Covid-19 pandemic imposed on the diocese of Damongo. The finding thus supports the argument of the resilience theory that people are able to survive adversity with less harm when they have one or more protective factors. Also, the finding affirms that "resilience is about doing more than having" (Barton et al., 2020, p. 118) and working together "to build resource capacity within communities" (Nijssen, 2020, p. 100).

1.6.5 Increasing the number of Sunday Masses

One other strategy that priests in the Damongo diocese adopted to cope with the impact of Covid-19 pandemic was increasing the number of Sunday Masses. According to priests in the interviews:

We had to increase the number of Sunday masses to have many more parishioners attend the Sunday masses. (Interview with priests, 2021)

In order to obey the social distance protocols, we organized a number of Masses in small groups on Sundays i.e. in groups of 50 or 25 people. We increased the number of Masses on Sundays e.g. from two to 4 Masses or more in many of the parishes. (Interview with priests, 2021)

According to priests, they had to increase the number of church services they celebrate on Sundays so that parishes could conform to the pandemic safety protocols imposed by the government of Ghana. Some parishes celebrated Holy Masses between three and four times every Sunday in the diocese of Damongo. Priests explained that celebrating more Holy Masses on Sundays was to ensure that all their congregants participate in the holy sacrament.

1.6.6. Strict observation and enforcement of Covid-19 protocols

The interviews also revealed that churches resorted to strict observation and enforcement of Covid-19 protocols so as to cope with the pandemic. Priests indicated that they ensured that all Covid-19 protocols were observed by members of their parishes. Participants indicated that they provided washing containers and sanitizers at the entrance of their churches. For instance, some participants said that:

We enforced a strict observance of the Covid-19 protocols during Mass services and other Church gatherings i.e. wearing of nose masks, washing of hands regularly, the observance of social distance etc. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Priests in Damongo diocese first of all followed the safety standard health protocols of Covid-19 pandemic stipulated by the World Health Organization. This included using of hand sanitizers, washing of hands, wearing of nose masks and social distancing. More so, the reception of Holy Communion on hands, wearing of nose masks and observing social distancing during confessions, using of ear cotton bud to anoint people instead of bare hands during baptism and confession either by the Bishop or the priests were additional safety measures the parishes adopted. The fumigation of church buildings frequently and posting of inscriptions or epitaphs on vantage points in the church like 'no nose mask, no entry', or 'wash your hands here'. (Interview with priests, 2021)

Church buildings were fumigated periodically, cleaned regularly with detergents and members were admonished to observe social distancing during mass celebrations. Some parishes formed Covid-19 committees which included some health professionals. Parishes networked with other stakeholders (District Assemblies, Parishioners, Partner Parishes, NGOs, etc.) to acquire PPEs. Churches also ensured that they met very often with the various actors (ushers, choirmasters, lectors, sacristans, village leaders, etc.) to discuss recommended protocols. Participants explained that they ensured strict observance of safety protocols to keep themselves and their congregations safe.

1.7 Lessons for the Catholic Church

There are several lessons for the Catholic Church to learn from the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Pillay (2020, p. 266), "the new landscape calls for both resilience and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing things and of being church." The pandemic has exposed parishes' economic vulnerability and over-reliance on donor support. It is important for parishes to realize that external support is not a sustainable way to maintaining and running of the church. Due to the over-reliance of parishes on foreign aid, weekly collections, donations from parishioners, the study realized that many parishes in Damongo were suffocating financially in the pandemic times. These parishes were in a state of financial disequilibrium because the congregants and other donors who frequently support parishes in the diocese were unable to do so because of the fear of the unknown. The crashing of economies across the world had also affected individual donors and benefactors thereby making it difficult for people to continue to redeem their commitments to the church. This is a major lesson for the church. Parishes need to begin venturing into other means of raising funds to support their activities. In some parishes, the Sunday collections and donations are woefully insufficient to sustain the church and its activities.

Also, the pandemic has taught the Catholic Church that there is need to invest. Parishes need to invest some of their accrued revenue in business ventures (for instance, agriculture, hotel, restaurants, buying treasury bills, etc.). Furthermore, parishes need to use their finances judiciously.

Another important lesson that is learned from the findings is that the Catholic Church in Damongo needs to revisit and strengthen its self-reliance drive and projects. Parishes need to push the drive for self-reliance forward by engaging in long-term projects that are income-generating to support themselves. Parishes must deconstruct the thoughts that they can always count on external financial help. Diaspora or foreign aid is not reliable. Besides, donor fatigue is real and not a hoax. Therefore, parishes need to explore their environments and begin engaging in projects that they can rely on to support the local church.

Again, the findings have taught the church in Damongo that there is need to explore digital avenues to reach out to the community of faithful and to remain relevant. Many people have become aware of what Holy Mass is due to the digitization of the celebration of Holy Masses during the pandemic via television, radio, Facebook, You Tube, etc. For the local church in Damongo diocese to keep abreast with the times and reach out to a larger community of faithful, parishes need to explore more digital platforms to facilitate evangelization. Hence, "resilience matters now more than ever" (Barton et al., 2020, p. 117). Without resilience thriving in crisis or pandemic could be difficult (Nijssen, 2020).

1.8 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are competing perceptions about the Covid-19 pandemic in the Damongo diocese. Priests' perceptions of Covid-19 did not vary among the parishes in the Diocese of Damongo. Though Covid-19 is real there are still some people who doubt its existence. How people perceive Covid-19 influence their response and behavior toward the pandemic's safety measures and protocols. Covid-19 has affected all facets of life in the Catholic Church in the Damongo diocese. Finances of parishes, faith of members, church activities and planning have been severely hampered. Surviving in the pandemic is a major challenge for parishes in the diocese. Parishes became helpless and had to elevate the level of their prayers to God for protection, guidance, and support. God was the only source of hope of the diocese. Self-reliance of parishes is a major concern in the Damongo diocese. Parishes are economically vulnerable and somehow deeply dependent on external donor support. Thus, many parishes cannot survive without church collections and revenue from sister parishes in Europe. It is time for parishes in Damongo diocese to explore and harness their own potentials in order to secure a state of financial equilibrium. Parishes must also be proactive rather than reactive in the way they carry out pastoral activities. Most parishes only adopted modern technologies to evangelize, mobilize members and raise funds during the pandemic. Although this approach was in reaction to the pandemic and served as a coping mechanism, parishes across the diocese could have been more proactive as a 21st century communities of faith where digitalization is the norm and not an exception. The parishes survived the pandemic through resilience. Resilience is critical to survival and coping in crisis situations. Therefore, it is recommended that parishes should diversify their sources of income, invest, and use funds judiciously. Also, parishes need to revisit and strengthen their self-reliance drive. The pandemic has taught parishes the importance of planning for the future.

In summary, parishes in the diocese of Damongo survived the covid-19 pandemic amidst many challenges. It may be beneficial for parishes in the diocese to draw useful lessons from other parishes in and outside Ghana on how to remain alive and relevant during pandemics. Also, besides the traditional methods of doing ministry in the church, exploring other ways of being a 21st century church will be in the best interest of the diocese both as a human and spiritual agency.

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