



Impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the religious services of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Ghana

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Abstract: The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all religious organizations including the Jehovah's Witnesses Church. The Jehovah's Witnesses church is a Christian organization practiced in most parts of the world and trademarked for its house-to-house Christian educational campaign. This study sought to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Ghana. The study is a qualitative descriptive study involving interviews with 11 valid and active Jehovah's Witnesses in 11 out of the 16 administrative regions in Ghana. A case study design, and snowball sampling technique were employed for the study. The study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of Kingdom Halls for more than two years. The house-to-house educational campaign by the church was suspended. There has been a reduction in social bonding among members, deterioration of their infrastructure and a reduction in growth of membership. The study also revealed that Jehovah's Witnesses had been very innovative by adopting technologies such as zoom and other video conferencing tools for their Christian educational programs.

Keywords: Jehovah's Witnesses, COVID-19, Online Church, Religion, Christianity

Introduction

Ghanaians celebrated the 2019 Christmas in fear as the news of a deadly contagious virus spreading from Wuhan in China to Europe and America was littered across all international news outlets. Sadly, on 22nd March 2020, Ghana's Minister for Health announced the first case of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which was killing millions of people worldwide (Ministry of Health, 2020). COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Infected persons experience mild to moderate respiratory illness. However, some people are more likely to develop serious illness, particularly the elderly and those with underlying health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020). As of February 10th 2022, there had been a total of 157,751 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 1,419 deaths in Ghana (Ghana Health Service, 2022).

In response to the virus, the World Health Organization (WHO), leading the global fight against the pandemic, prescribed some practices and interventions to be adopted globally to curb the disease. Key among such practices was the use of social distancing (Krishnakumar & Rana, 2020). Social distancing, also known as physical distancing, is a public health practice that involves behavioral modifications aimed at preventing sick people from coming into close contact with healthy people to reduce the risk of disease transmission (Pearce,



2020). This practice was recommended due to the experiences of the Spanish influenza outbreak in 1918 (Pearce, 2020). Researchers observed that early implementation of social distancing in some US cities helped reduce the transmission of the Spanish influenza and lowered mortality rates by a significant margin (Pearce, 2020).

The Government of Ghana responded to WHO's call by implementing some draconian restrictions to comply with the social distancing directive. The Imposition of Restrictions Act (ACT 1012), which became law in March 2022, limited movement. All public gatherings including conferences, funerals, festivals, and religious activities were banned until 31st May, 2020. Wearing of face masks was required at all public places (Sibiri, Prah & Zankawah, 2021). These restrictions had a severe impact on all spheres of the Ghanaian society as it has been recorded in other parts of the world (Agyekum, 2022; Osei-Tutu et al., 2021).

The closure of markets during the early stages of the pandemic and its associated panic buying brought about shortage of supply of food items and this led to an increase in the general prices of goods (Asante & Mills, 2020). This was also exacerbated by the closure of Ghana's territorial borders as Ghana relies heavily on our neighboring countries for the supply of essential food items. Asante and Mills (2020) reported that prices of food items doubled and, in some cases, tripled during the peak season of the outbreak. Obese et al. (2021) reported that the three weeks-imposed lockdown lowered animal protein consumption as there were shortages of local livestock due to reduction in the availability of feed resources and farm inputs for animal production. The pandemic also led to an increase in unemployment and a reduction in wages for workers. During the partial lockdown in Ghana, about 42,000 employees were laid off and about 25% of the total workforce had their wages reduced (Aduhene & Osei-Assibey, 2020; Simone et al., 2021). Workers in the tourism and hospitality sectors were reported to be among the hardest hit. It is reported that the industry had a total loss of about \$171 million during the first three months of the pandemic (Asante & Mills, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on children has been enormous. Close to one million children below age one have missed out on routine essential health services; and a total of 24.1% of children between 6 months and 14 years were living in households who reported they have less meals than the period before the pandemic (Unicef, 2021).

Owusu-Fordjour et al. (2020) in reporting the impact of the pandemic on education in Ghana revealed that, students were unable to study effectively from the house thus, making the online system of learning very ineffective. Again, parents were incapable of assisting their wards on how to access online learning platform, neither were they entirely able to supervise the learning of their children at home without any complications. They furthered that the e-learning platforms rolled out also posed a challenge to majority of the students because of the limited access to internet and lack of technical know how of these technological devices by most Ghanaian students.

Religion was not spared by the pandemic. It changed the way in which many religions had been practicing their rituals for centuries. As mentioned by Buonsenso et al. (2020), a common feature of most religious institutions is the meeting of people, usually in an enclosed place to perform rituals while maintaining physical contact through greetings, kisses and



hugs. Observing the social distancing directives to prevent the spread of the disease meant that such practices could no longer be sustained. This has had a major impact on religious institutions in Ghana.

One religious group that was badly hit was the Jehovah's Witnesses who rely heavily on in-person house-to-house Bible education, with the aim of winning souls. Thus, during COVID-19, the traditional house-to-house approach to Bible education was no longer permissible, and there was a need to invent new ways of educating people about the Bible, such as online engagement which was difficult to establish initial contacts as this is new to many people in rural areas and lead to the fear that Bible education during COVID would serve only the few contacted people/homes who were willing and connected to resources. The paper is unique in that it outlines the effects of COVID-19 as well as the lived realities of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses: History, beliefs and practices

The Jehovah's Witness church is a proselytizing Christian movement with approximately 8.7 million members worldwide (WBTS, 2022a). The church was founded in America in 1881 by Charles Taze Russell and was previously known as Bible Students. In 1938, missionaries were sent to Ghana to propagate the religion and recruit new members (IRBC, 1990). Currently, there are about 149,232 Ghanaians who identify as Jehovah's Witnesses in about 2,339 congregations in Ghana (WBTS, 2022a). The church publishes the Watchtower and Awake magazines, which are distributed nationwide by its members. They believe that "Jehovah" is Almighty God's personal name and that Jesus Christ is the only-begotten son of God who surrendered his life as a ransom to redeem mankind from the effects of sin and death brought on by Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden (Wah, 2001).

Members of the church have some controversial beliefs that are viewed as distant from mainstream Christianity by the general public. They maintain political neutrality and do not participate in national elections. They refuse to salute the national flag because they view such practice as a form of idol worship. Members do not accept blood transfusion as a health care intervention and many of their members have opted to die rather than to accept a blood transfusion (Chryssides, 2016). Although the religion in the past prohibited its members from vaccination, there has been a new directive that acknowledges the efficacy of vaccination in preventing hepatitis A and hepatitis B (Grabenstein, 2013). The leadership of the church views vaccination against COVID-19 as a personal decision that individual members must make some of its members have vaccinated against COVID-19 (WBTS, 2022b).

The main objective of this study is to explore the impact and resilience of the Jehovah's Witnesses church during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is the resilience theory. According to Park et al. (2021), resilience is the capability to maintain adaptive functioning as a response to ongoing misfortunes that produce stresses that disrupt our daily living. Earlier, Holling (1973, p.30) defined resilience as "the ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships that control a system's behaviour". The theory deals with the qualities that institutions and people exhibit, allowing them to overcome hardships and adversity (Van



Breda, 2001). Resilient theory operates in different levels and they are individual resilience, family resilience and community resilience (Van Breda, 2001). Individual resilience is mostly used in the field of social work, especially when dealing with children. It has to do with the promotion of the competence of individuals by helping them to overcome adversity and navigate life stressors, boosting their ability to grow and survive (Greene et al., 2004).

Family resilience, on the other hand, has to do with the capacity of the family as a functioning system to withstand and rebound from stressful life challenges, emerging strengthened and more resourceful. This could be achieved by mobilizing social and economic resources, sharing emotions openly and solving problems collaboratively (Walsh, 2003; 2016). Magis (2010) explained that community resilience is the existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment associated with change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprises. Community resilience places emphasis on identifying and harnessing both individual and community strengths that, put together, could be leveraged upon to facilitate self-organization and agency, which then contributes to a collective process of overcoming challenges and adversity (Berkes & Rose, 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a misfortune that caused global stress and hardship disrupting socio-economic activities affecting individuals, families and communities. As mentioned by Lindinger-Sternart et al. (2021), there is the need to conduct resilience studies in diverse settings and countries to understand how individuals and communities have shown resilience by adopting adaptive strategies to cope with the hardship. As the church and religion as a community was not spared by the pandemic, it is most appropriate to conduct resilience studies to understand how it fared during the pandemic (Greene et al., 2020). This article focuses explicitly on pre-existing practices within the JW group that could impact their ability to recover following the emergence of COVID-19. It adopts the inherent resilience portion of the COVID-19 resilience of Jehovah's Witnesses practices for its theoretical basis as a result.

Methods

Approach and design

This study adopts the interpretive paradigmatic view as a research philosophy. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p.21), "the central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience". In line with this philosophical stance, we employed the qualitative research method. The central goal of a qualitative researcher is to understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). A case study design, which falls under the qualitative paradigm, was used. The Jehovah's Witnesses church was selected as a bounded case to allow us to gain an in-depth understanding of lived experiences of religious groups during the pandemic (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994).



Participants

Originally, the participants for the study were 16 Jehovah's Witnesses selected from each of the 16 regions in Ghana. The selection criteria were that the participants should be a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses and must be active in their ministry. Eventually, 11 of the members responded to the interview. Five of the interviewees requested to end the interview midway because they felt the study was not sanctioned by their leaders, and others indicated that they were no longer interested. The 11 valid responses comprised nine males and two females with ages ranging from 24–71 years. The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants. A key member was identified, which in turn led to the recruitment of other participants in other regions. All the members interviewed were asked to suggest another active member in a different region to be included in the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews via telephone and WhatsApp calls with the participants. We developed a four-item semi-structured interview guide to facilitate data collection. A semi structured interview guide that explored how the COVID pandemic has affected the way of worship and ministry of the Jehovah's Witnesses was used. Participants were asked to elaborate on issues that needed further questions. The interviews lasted between 19 and 52 minutes averaging around 27 minutes and were conducted in English and Akan.

Ethical considerations and data credibility

With regard to ethical issues, we sought the consent of the participants. We explained to them (prospective participants) the purpose of the study and described what their participation in the study entailed. To safeguard the anonymity of the participants, they are not identified by their respective names; rather their initials are used to denote them. Furthermore, for data credibility, member-check principle was adopted. Members were asked to go through the transcript to confirm or disconfirm whether what the transcripts captured exactly, their individual narratives of the interrogations. They validated their responses. A peer review system was used to ensure rigor. Peers of authors in the same discipline were requested to go through the manuscript to share their perspectives on the paper. All their contributions that added value to the study were captured in the current study. Finally, bracketing was employed to keep away the biases of the authors.

Analysis

According to Attride-Stirling (2001), "if qualitative research is to yield meaningful and useful results, it is imperative that the material under scrutiny is analysed in a methodical manner . . ." (p.386). As such, data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2020) approach. This involved six different steps, namely: (a) familiarizing with the data; (b) gathering initial codes; (c) searching for themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) defining and naming of themes; and (f) producing results. Earlier, the English interviews were transcribed verbatim. However, those that were recorded in Akan were translated and later transcribed.



Results and discussion

Five main themes were observed during the data analysis: (1) Closure of Kingdom Halls; (2) Suspension of house-to-house bible education; (3) Reduction of social bonding and sense of community; (4) Reduction in growth rate; (5) Digitalization of worship and ministry.

Closure of Kingdom Halls

In almost every community where there is a congregation, the Jehovah's Witnesses own a physical structure built by local volunteers with the support of trained artisans from their national headquarters. These structures are called Kingdom Halls. Members of the group attend public meetings at their Kingdom Halls two times in a week. Aside from their weekly worship meetings, the Kingdom Halls also serve other purposes. Literacy classes are held in some Kingdom Halls to teach children and adults how to read and write; and it serves as a venue for sign language or other foreign language instruction. Weddings and funerals involving members of the congregation are likewise held at the Kingdom Halls.

Attending worship meetings at the Kingdom Halls is considered an essential part of the behavior of each Jehovah's Witness (Beckford, 1975; Chryssides, 2016; Cronn-Mills, 1999). These meetings enable members to receive bible-based instructions that shape their way of living. They view the meetings at the kingdom halls as sacred and a way through which Jehovah and his son communicate and establish strong bonding with them (WBTS, 2009). Among members, these meetings at the kingdom halls offer them the opportunity to demonstrate love for each other, and it is reasoned that making spiritual comments and participating in spiritual songs encourages others. The meetings also serve as a venue to unite members as one family and to demonstrate love for each other.

Two weeks before the Government of Ghana imposed a ban on public gathering during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana, the Jehovah's Witnesses shut down their Kingdom Halls for their regular public meetings. They reopened their Kingdom Halls on 1st April 2022, almost two years after the government of Ghana lifted the ban on public gathering in June 2020. Two main reasons were given for the long delay in reopening their public places. First is the belief in the sanctity of life and second is the obedience to the Jesus Christ commandment of 'love thy neighbor'. JV is a regular member of the sect and he mentioned that;

'We have heard and understand that the covid is killing many people. Life is precious and as a Christian the bible urges us to respect life.' – JV

To the ordinary Jehovah's Witness, showing respect for life entails keeping in mind the need to maintain safety conscious. They were advised to avoid risk just for pleasure or excitement. Even before the ban on public gathering, they had been adhering to the public guidelines to prevent the spread of the disease. Handwashing facilities were installed in all their Kingdom Halls while adhering to the social distancing directive. At their meetings, regular announcements and reminders on basic hygiene practices to prevent diseases were given (WBTS, 2014; WBTS, 2022b).

Another member of the sect revealed that;



‘When you read Mark 12:31, Christians are commanded to love thy neighbor. This disease is communicable and as we are all aware, it spreads faster when we don’t adhere to social distancing. If we love our neighbor as Jesus has commanded us, then we will have to maintain the social distancing practice. So, as we have closed the Kingdom Halls, we are obeying Jehovah.’ – AM

The closure of the Kingdom Halls meant that members were not be able to physically meet and this was a huge blow to some of them. A newly wedded woman recounted her disappointment for her inability to stage her wedding at the Kingdom Hall. She mentioned that;

“COVID blew my wedding excitement away. I have been anticipating that all my loved ones will come around to witness my wedding at the Kingdom Hall. I have rehearsed several times how I will climb the stairs at the hall as my friends look on. Now this never happened. It took the shine away.”

The closure of Kingdom Halls for almost two years has resulted in some Kingdom Halls deteriorating. Although there is a committee responsible for the maintenance of each Kingdom Hall, non-occupancy for a long period makes it difficult for early detection of leakages and other defects. Studies have shown that the desertion of public buildings due to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the poor state of several public facilities, thereby increasing the cost of repair as attempts are made to reopen the facilities (Osakwe & Alamina, 2021). Worse off, other studies have confirmed that the pandemic has had a negative effect on church finances, robbing it of its ability to cater for major rehabilitation and physical expansion (Osei-Kuffour et al., 2022; Sutinga & Nangwele, 2022).

Suspension of house-to-house bible education

One key characteristic of the Jehovah’s Witness church is their house-to-house bible educational campaign. They go door to door to people’s home because they believe this is the method of making disciples in the model Jesus Christ gave the church as well as the example of first century Christians who spread the gospel by going from house to house as recorded in Matthew 10:7, 11-13 and Act 5: 42; 20:20. Participating in the house to house preaching work is seen as a critical part of worship by members because they are taught that their salvation depends on it. Therefore, each member spends an average of 12 hours moving from house to house each month to preach and distribute literature published by the organization (WBTS, 2014).

Until 1st April 2022, the house-to-house preaching work of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was suspended in adherence to the ban on public gathering and the social distance directives of the Government of Ghana. The statements below by some members reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the house-to-house preaching work.

‘Almost every weekend before the disease, I participate in the field service work. However, the disease did not allow us to visit our bible students in their homes. I used to record more than 12 hours a month but these days it is difficult because our style of preaching has changed. The number of bible students I record has also reduced. I am hoping that the disease will go away so that things can come back to normal.’ – EE

“A colleague at work jokingly said she thought all Jehovah’s Witnesses have died and are currently living in paradise because hardly could she see any of us. She said so because it is



common knowledge that we go to people's homes every weekend. We are at their workplaces and on every street. Suddenly we are not there... It is not unusual for people to reason this way. I miss going out on weekends with my children to preach." -SS

The suspension of door-to-door ministry work has not been peculiar to only the Jehovah's Witnesses. Allen (2020), Mpofu (2021) and Tysick (2020) all report that the evangelistic mission of most churches was severely affected globally due to national lockdowns because the clergy could no longer preach and teach the word of God in public as people were restricted to their homes. Chukwuma (2021) similarly observed the indefinite postponement of crusades where evangelists move from community to community to preach to a larger number of people from different faiths at the same time in Nigeria.

Reduction in social bonding and sense of community

Regular physical meetings among the Jehovah's Witnesses has been a key instrument used by the leaders to maintain strong bonding among members. Their meetings provide a venue for them to interact and establish connections among each other. During their house to house preaching work, they mostly move in pairs and are seen in public interacting. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the church had been organizing international, regional and district conventions where members from different congregations meet at their assembly halls or stadium to listen to bible-based instructions. On such larger occasions, a period is allotted for members to interact with other members from different countries, regions, districts, circuits and congregations. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these meetings and as a result impacted on their social bonding. Below are some statements made by some members concerning how COVID-19 has affected their relationships.

'Our weekly meetings provided me the opportunity to see my brothers and sisters in the congregation. Now I feel like that connection is no more there. Although we talk on the phone, I feel like I lived on an island.'

'Before and after our meetings I could share interesting moments within the week with my friends in the congregation. Now this is not happening again because of the covid.'

Another member indicated that the absence of physical meetings has led to a reduction in social support among members. He mentioned that;

"When we meet physically, the bonding is stronger. You could see your brother and can tell from their facial expression whether they need some help. Now that we don't meet physically, it is difficult to determine the kind of support a sister or a brother will need."

Other members indicated that physical meetings provided them a sense of purpose and social value. They mentioned that the ban on public gathering created a loss of purpose for some of them who serve certain roles in the church. One member explains that;

"I am in charge of the public address system in my congregation. I play the music and videos for our public meetings and supervise other members handling the microphone. I sit behind the congregation and I gain a lot of satisfaction and recognition from that. Now, that role is gone and I sometimes feel like I am less relevant."

Loss of community and social bonding among religious people due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been observed in other literature. Frei-Landau (2020) revealed that one key area affected by the COVID-19 pandemic among Jewish people in Israel is that people feel less connected and have the sense that the pandemic is gradually driving them away from



where they belong. Osei-Tutu et al. (2021) observed that the pandemic made it difficult for religious leaders in Ghana to offer critical social support to members who need help. They also mentioned that religious leaders who derive satisfaction from the roles they play in churches reported a decrease in well-being because of the depletion of their roles and their social importance due to the pandemic.

Reduction in growth rate

During the past 100 years before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Jehovah's Witnesses have sustained an extraordinary growth rate of around 5% per year (Stark, 1997; Torres-Prunonosa et al., 2022; Cragun & Lawson, 2010). However, their growth rate dropped to 1.32% and -0.6% in 2019 and 2020, respectively (WBTS, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there had only been one period where they experienced a negative growth. This was the period between 1976 and 1979. During this period, several Jehovah's Witnesses abandoned their faith because the leaders had prophesied that the world would come to an end in 1975. However, 1975 came and there was no sign of the end of the world. Some members felt betrayed, deceived and perceived that the sect was not being directed by Jehovah (Chryssides, 2010).

The negative growth rate recorded in 2020 was not due to false prophecy by the leaders. This was as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. CO is a regular member and he recounts that;

“One way we are able to recruit new members is through our house-to-house bible campaigns. We have suspended this campaign because of the pandemic and it is reasonable that this is having an impact on our numbers.”

Some participants perceived that the faith of other members has gone cold and they are no longer active in the ministry because they hardly meet to encourage each other. To be counted as a Jehovah's Witness, individuals must actively participate and provide a monthly account of their ministry work. PA is a leading member of a congregation and he revealed that;

“Although we have suspended house to house preaching, we still preach through other mediums. But the number of people who report preaching and the hours they report have reduced. We have been reaching out to some of them to encourage them.”

The reduction in growth as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is not only associated with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Sutinga and Nangwele (2022) reported that the Catholic church in Ghana also experienced a significant decrease in church activities and attendance, thereby affecting their growth. However, this is in contrast with other findings elsewhere. In a study conducted by Ge et al. (2021) on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious activities of people living with dementia, it was reported that caregivers and Persons Living With Disability (PLWD) who were unable to attend in-person worship services pre-pandemic were now able to actively engage in all church events online thereby increasing fellowship numbers.

Digitalization of Jehovah's Witnesses worship and ministry

The Jehovah's Witnesses church is a technology friendly organization. Since its inception the group has selectively been adopting prevailing technology to strengthen the spirituality of its



members (Cardoza, 2019; Chryssides, 2016; Rota, 2018; 2019). In the late 1800 and early 1900, the group was already using newspaper syndicates, moving pictures with synchronized sound in the silent-movie era, and, later, syndicated radio broadcasts to reach out to their members and the general public. Torres-Pruñonosa et al. (2022) note that in the 1980s they developed a proprietary computer system called “MEPS” for the translation of their publications into several languages and assisting with typesetting and tracking of translation decisions.

The presence of the organization was first felt online in 1997 when a limited set of their publications in a few languages were published online. In 2010, the jw.org website, the official website of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was launched. Several publications in PDF format and in audio and video in over 300 languages were released online (Cardoza, 2019). The group increased its video output from 2014 through its monthly program dubbed “JW Broadcasting”. Video recordings in over 100 sign languages are also regularly published on jw.org. By 2019, several Jehovah’s Witnesses were using smart phones and tablets to attend their public meetings because the group had decided to reduce print publications.

The COVID-19 pandemic synergized the digitalization among Jehovah’s Witnesses. All physical meetings were canceled and moved online until April 2022 even though they could legally meet physically from June 2020. JV recounts the early stage of moving meetings online;

“The organization needed to be proactive at the time because things were changing so fast. Initially we were using pre-recorded videos for our online meeting. Already, pre-recorded videos were played during our physical meetings so this wasn’t much of a challenge. However, there was a new directive and we switched to internet video conferencing. Those who didn’t have supportive devices for the video conferencing joined the meeting through telephone.”

FA also revealed that,

“In my congregation, we started using zoom but there were so many challenges. Internet connectivity problems. So, we changed to conference telephone calls.”

Torres-Pruñonosa et al. (2022) indicated that the shift from pre-recorded video meetings to real time videoconferencing was necessitated by the fact that pre-recorded meetings rule out participation and social interaction. The zoom video conferencing software was therefore deployed by most congregations because it has features that allow real time interaction among members during meetings.

The digitalization also affected other public meetings aside from their regular weekly meetings. All their regional conventions were organized online. Their 2020 regional conventions were video recorded and translated into over 500 languages by volunteer translators. According to Torres-Pruñonosa et al. (2022), viewing of this video presentation was supplemented by videoconference gatherings after each session at the local congregational level, during which members could discuss what they had seen in small-group “breakout” rooms.

Marriage and funeral ceremonies that were previously organized at the Kingdom Halls were also moved online. DA is a regular member and he revealed that;



“We no longer hold marriage ceremonies at the Kingdom Halls. It is done online. We usually share a zoom link with members and invited guests. The wedding talk is given online while the couples also recite their wedding vows online”.

One other area that was digitized during the COVID-19 pandemic was the house-to-house preaching work. Within the Jehovah’s Witnesses, each congregation is given a territory to cover and is charged with making sure people in that geographic area are contacted by a member. To ensure that people within a congregation’s territory are contacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, members adopted the use of telephone calls, Whatsapp, and facebook messenger. LM recounts her experience;

“For my bible students, I already have their contacts so reaching them to continue our bible studies on the telephone was not a problem. Getting the contact of others I have not met within my territory was the issue. But I relied on Facebook profile search to identify interested people to initiate a conversation.”

The digitalization of religious meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic has widely been reported in the literature. Yuono (2020) and Widjaja et al. (2020) stated that the pandemic has successfully directed church ministry to the context of the digital world. The Church is open virtually without being restricted by geographical locations. In Ghana, Sutinga and Nangwele (2022) reported that the Catholic Church heavily relied on digital media for their ministry during the pandemic. They resorted to WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube for their masses and other church activities. Although some people perceive that digitized worship does not have the same degree of sanctity and serenity as in-person services, Tambunan (2020) contends that worship should be unconfined to time and space if theologically worship is interpreted as a personal encounter between God and His people. In addition, God’s presence is not construed as merely a ceremonial atmosphere but the manifestation of the fellowship of the faithful with God. Therefore, digital worship should also be construed as fellowship, and by extension, everyone should form a fellowship with God.

Conclusion and implications for policy and practice

Previous research has highlighted the effects of COVID-19 on the religious landscape and the importance of understanding members' adjustment strategies in combating the threat (Osei-Tutu et al., 2021; Chukwuma, 2021; Agyekum, 2022). Our study adds to the literature by investigating participants' experiences, motivations, and perspectives, as well as determining the extent to which these difficulties can be attributed to values of care for God's people. As a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the disease, the social distancing directive had a significant impact on the Jehovah's Witnesses. It compelled the closure of their Kingdom Halls and the elimination of physical meetings, resulting in a decrease in social bonding and a sense of belonging among members. They experienced negative growth for the first time in several decades as a result of the suspension of their trademarked house-to-house preaching work. The group, on the other hand, has been very innovative in digitizing its method of worship and ministry. The use of video conferencing tools via the internet has aided in reducing the impact of the pandemic.

The findings of the current study have implications for policy and practice in both health and religious institutional settings in Ghana. Regarding health, the study has relevance for



formulating Covid-19 pandemic-related healthcare delivery policies in the Jehovah's Witnesses Church and other church denominations in Ghana.

In the religious education front, there should be investment policy on digital infrastructure acquisition for online church and teaching services. This may include the acquisition and use of desktop and laptop computers, zoom, skype, and teleconferencing facilities. The use of the social media facilities such as facebook, twitter and YouTube to capture online church services and theological education organized by the church is similarly necessary. In fact, these tools have global and far-reaching impact; more so than the face-to-face church services and the religious education programs. Resulting from the above point, there should be digital skills training policy for all church leaders, staff as well as the members to keep them abreast with the use of the online church services and educational technologies. Furthermore, the huge negative impact of the pandemic is critical caution to churches to prepare adequately for the availability and use of online technologies for church services and teaching in order to contain similar future shocks.

Limitations of the study and direction for future study

The use of phone calls and WhatsApp to collect data caused the authors to miss out on the possible observation of facial expressions and other non-verbal communication elements that could have aided interpretation in face-to face dialogue. Future studies can use face-to-face interviews now that the effect of the pandemic has subsided and many have been vaccinated.

Conflict of Interest: The authors report no conflict of interest

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