

COVID-19 and the World Church: African Pentecostal Perspectives. **Bishop Moses Owusu-Sekyere**

Introduction

My reflections on this subject are gleaned from a series of conversations with Black Pentecostal leaders mainly from Ghana, UK and the U.S on Faith Forum. Faith Forum is an online programme which brings academic and practising theologians together to critically reflect on matters relating to Faith and Practice.

Pentecostalism is currently the second largest Church tradition after Catholicism. William Kay (2009), rightly, agrees to the difficulty in defining Pentecostalism as different types of Pentecostalism exist based on their history, doctrine, ritual or a combination of these. However, Pentecostalism is defined, it may not be wholly inclusive. Perhaps, more broadly, Pentecostalism may be defined as that branch of Christianity that emphasizes the working of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, on the basis of both, phenomenon and theology (Allan Anderson 2014:5). Whilst there are multiple origins and definitions of Pentecostalism, for reasons of lack of documentary on some of the sources of its origin, it is normally traced to the theology of Charles Parham and the 1906 Azusa Street revival led by William Seymour, (Anderson, 2014).

Pentecostals are grouped into Classical Pentecostals, mainly churches with links to the Azusa street revival (Assemblies of God etc), Neo-Pentecostals, newer Pentecostal Churches established from the late 1950s (Redeemed Christian Church of God), Charismatics, which are those churches from the mainline churches like Baptist, Methodist, and Anglican which embrace Pentecostal beliefs and practices, (Kay, 2009) and African Initiated Churches (AIC), the Aladura-type of Churches. Alan Anderson (2014) agrees to the use of 'Pentecostalism' in this broad sense, as the term emphasizes experience and spirituality rather than formal theology or doctrine.

With the growth of global Pentecostalism, is the proliferation of African Pentecostal churches in the United Kingdom and other Western countries, within the last decades. Burgess (2009) attributes the proliferation of African Pentecostal churches in the UK to a myriad of factors, among which are economic, social and religious. Peter Brierley (2014), observes that the Pentecostal Black Majority Churches are the most significant contributors to church growth in London. This reflection is focused on African Pentecostals (excluding the AICs) in the UK, Ghana and the USA.

Shock and Cause

Covid-19 rather came as a shock to the larger Pentecostal Community in spite of the Pentecostal movement being touted as a Prophetic Community. Most African Pentecostal churches in diaspora and in Africa hold very largely attended 31st December Watchnight (Crossover) services. These services are known for the prolific prophetic pronouncements of what to expect in the coming year. Such prophetic announcements cover a wide range of issues; including who is going to win the next presidential election in the local country as well as in some of the Western countries, which celebrities will lose their lives, what national and global disasters are going to take place and where, and many other more. Interestingly, apart from very few people who claim to have had wind of COVID-19, majority of

Pentecostals were caught “prophetically, with their pants down” (Ps Celia Appeageyi on Faith Forum).

With the onset of the pandemic, Pentecostals sought to understand and explain what was going on. A plethora of arguments have been advanced as to what might have accounted for the pandemic. Popular among these are: Divine Judgement on particularly a western society that has become increasingly secular and atheistic. This argument flourished for a while till COVID-19 casualties were recorded among BAME groups in UK Pentecostal churches and when perceived very religious countries in the Global South also began to record high numbers infections.

Eschatology features prominently in Pentecostal theology in moments of crisis. There are many who read eschatological meanings into the pandemic. Apocalyptic scriptures in the Revelation of John 6:1ff; 2 Timothy 3:1ff are commonly referenced to support the assertion that we are in the ‘last days’. There are others who have dismissed these arguments, suggesting that similar eschatological assertions were made during the Spanish flu in 1918 yet the world has lived a further 100 years and counting.

Conspiracy theories have also flourished in some African Pentecostal circles during COVID-19. Some have gone as far as suggesting there is no pandemic but the numerous deaths are as a result of 5G installations in predominantly Western countries. Such theories lost ground as countries without 5G installations began to experience COVID-19 cases. Probably what has gained much traction is the theory that COVID-19 is a man-made crisis with the ultimate aim of population control and ultimately the institution of a Global World Order. The theory of a Global World Order resonates with some Pentecostal Eschatology theology, hence its prominence amongst the Conspiracy Theories. Unfortunately, such conspiracy theories may have further disastrous effects on the African Pentecostal Community as suspicion is entertained that the development of a vaccine would have as its aims, controlling population growth mainly in the Global South and implanting electronic chips in people, to facilitate a Global World Government. An announcement by the UK Secretary for Health that the BAME group would be among the first to receive any developed vaccine has further heightened conspiracy theories among some African Pentecostals.

Why BAME?

The BAME group has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 both in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America. Various reasons have been advanced for the disproportional impact of COVID-19 on the BAME group. Whilst some reasons are attributable to genetics, a good number of people see it as rather due to socio-economic factors. Unfortunately, a good number of registered COVID-19 deaths were BAME NHS, TFL and Security frontline staff. Many BAME deaths have been recorded among senior clergy in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in the USA and the Church of God of Prophecy in Wolverhampton. Whilst some may have had underlying conditions, the over-representation of BAME deaths has raised concerns and worries in African Pentecostal Churches. The thought of a vulnerable group also comes with the stigmatisation of the group as agents of COVID-19 spread. There have been instances in China where Africans have been barred from entering certain public spaces because of this stigmatisation. Stigmatisation, even

after one has recovered from COVID-19, if unchecked, poses a danger to the wider society in that it can lead to people from the BAME community, who have COVID-19 symptoms, failing to notify health centres of their condition.

Ecumenism

Lockdown came as no surprise as there was generally a public outcry demanding it. It seems, however, that little consideration was given to the far-reaching effects of lockdown on the Church and wider society. Societal general response was phenomenal as we saw the best of humanity expressed through volunteering, increased compassion and support one for another in many neighbourhoods. In the midst of this, Church traditional boundary lines have been increasingly blurred. We have seen various interdenominational (London Church Leaders) and interfaith (Safe Secure Resilient London) co-operations and initiatives. Ecumenical social-media platforms have been set up and information sharing encouraged. Churches Together in England (CTE) has been at its best, endlessly circulating any information they feel is helpful to its member churches during the crisis.

The Church Economy

Churches took a significant economic hit from not being able to hold in-person services during lockdown. Whilst congregants resorted to online giving of both tithes and offerings, a good number of African Pentecostal Church leaders generally observed very significant reductions in Church giving during the lockdown. Undoubtedly, job losses, furloughs are contributory factors to Church income loss. The link, however, between in-person Church attendance and giving is real in many churches. Traditionally people are used to taking their offerings/tithes to church to receive a prayer before dropping them in the receptacles. Church income loss has had adverse effects on particularly, some of the smaller African Pentecostal Churches. A number of such Churches are currently saddled with outstanding rent payments accrued during the long period of no in-person Church services. There is fear that some of these Churches may have not survived the pandemic. I am aware of some Churches having had to totally shut down and ask their congregants to join larger Churches, for financial reasons.

Civic Engagement

Governments in the UK and in Ghana brought Church leaders together to discuss the lockdown and how Churches and Faith groups could cooperate with government, to curb the spread of the virus by closing down places of worship. This Government-Church dialogue made the Church feel it was recovering its Prophetic Role and Voice in National life. It is only hoped that this dialogue will continue. Government-Church dialogue with Black Pentecostal Churches became even more prominent following the over-representation of BAME deaths and subsequently the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. Following these leads, Faith Forum brought has had conversations with Black Pentecostal Theologians on: Over-representation of BAME group in the Pandemic; The Bible, Race and Racism; Pentecostalism: Civic Engagement and Climate Justice; The Windrush and many more. Undoubtedly, there appears to be an increasing shift in Pentecostal theology relative to Civic Engagement. Black Pentecostals are becoming increasingly aware of the need to go beyond addressing the mercy and humanitarian needs of its people, to dealing with the systems and structures that give rise to societal inequalities. Theologians like Prof Robert Beckford agree that COVID-19 has brought a great awakening to the Black Pentecostal Church in this regard.

Missiological Opportunities

Many of our Churches rather easily navigated the transmission from in-person to online services using: Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Telephone Conferencing facilities and many more. Going online undoubtedly increased the reach of Churches. Local Churches immediately became global. This missiological opportunity, however, comes with implications for the Church. Sermon contents, language and mode of delivery need to be reconfigured to meet this new audience. Churches without experience in multi-cultural reach have found this missiological opportunity rather challenging.

Normal Pentecostal practices of speaking and praying publicly in tongues has also received further scrutiny as some Churches chose to pray and speak in tongues, publicly online. Pentecostal theology on this subject needs to be examined further so public Tongues-Speaking does not become a missiological impediment (1 Corinthians 14). This, however, needs to be approached carefully since Tongues-speaking is the hallmark of Pentecostalism.

COVID-19 appears to be a blessing in disguise in that the Church now has a wider reach through the use of technology. Archbishop Doye Agama of the Apostolic Pastoral Congress, in calling Church leaders to be digital leaders, avers, it is time for Churches to claim the digital space. He perceives it is important to do so as partial and even full lockdowns may be continued to be announced for the next one year.

Pentecostal Healing Theologies

Pentecostal theologies on divine healing have also come under much scrutiny during COVID-19. The ravaging effect of COVID-19 on Black Pentecostal congregations, the bringing to the fore of poor health among many of these congregations, particularly church members with underlying health conditions; including diabetes, respiratory problems like asthma, high and low blood pressure and cardiovascular disease requires Black Pentecostals to re-examine its 'Health and Wealth' gospel. There is definitely urgent need to address underlying health conditions of Pentecostal church members in this country, particularly in the black churches. Pentecostals place high premium on Divine Healing. Most Pentecostals subscribe to one of the following views on divine healing:

Healing based on the Sovereignty of God: God as determiner of who receives divine healing and when.

Healing based on the Atonement: This position suggests that every believer is a potential recipient of divine healing, and

Healing based on Faith: According to this position divine healing is conditioned on the faith of the person needing healing or the faith of the Minister administering the healing.

Healing in many instances is administered by laying on of hands and anointing of oil. Obviously COVID-19 does not allow healing via laying on of hands and by the Minister rubbing oil on the sick. Much more significantly, however, following the relative high COVID-19 cases in many Pentecostal Churches, whereas in the past, Faith was touted as key in receiving divine healing, there seems to be a shift in

Pentecostal divine healing theology. This shift appears to be towards recognising divine healing as more dependent on God's sovereignty. Obviously the need to recognise other alternative healing approaches, including medicinal, as ways by which God heals is gaining increased attention in our theologies.

Church as a Social Hub

African Pentecostal Churches in diaspora, beyond serving as Churches, serve as social hubs. Churches offer numerous services, including: being the first port of call for immigrants, centres for mobilising the larger migrant community for baby christenings, funerals and for addressing the larger welfare needs of the community. Such in-person meetings allow the community to catch up with the latest news from and on their countries of origin. There is meal sharing, hugging and exchange of pleasantries at such Church-Social functions. COVID-19 has virtually rendered many of these in-person functions impossible to deliver. Following the return to in-person services with social distancing and all the health guidelines and protocols, I have heard some Church members say, what is the point of attending an in-person Church function, if I cannot hug, share a meal and engage in long chats with fellow church members. This underscores the importance of the Church as an important Social hub and rallying point within the African Pentecostal Church community.

Among others, Pastoral care requiring home visits, home fellowships, which bring Church members living in close proximity together into Home-Cell groups have been largely affected by COVID-19. Home-Cells are used primarily as Church growth strategies by many African Pentecostal Churches.

Social distancing in Churches, limiting attendees at any particular time is likely to affect Churches with limited space as they will need to run multiple services to accommodate existing members and potential new members. Running multiple services has cost implications for churches which rent hourly—costed premises. To accommodate the increasing numbers African Pentecostal Churches attract, there is definitely the need to adopt a hybrid approach in this new normal world- in-person and online services.