

COVID-19 AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE BEHAVIOR TRENDS

EVIDENCE FROM GHANAIAAN PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC CHURCHES

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Abstract

The concept of religious economy views churches as corporate entities, pastors as marketers offering a range of products, and church members as consumers whose preferences shape the goods and services provided by ministers. Within this framework, church members react quickly to changing economic, social, and cultural conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only had an economic impact, with job losses and financial struggles, but has also brought about social and cultural changes that have affected consumer behavior in many areas of life worldwide. For instance, during the pandemic, church gatherings were restricted or prohibited, socializing was replaced with social distancing, air travel was disrupted, and conferences were canceled, postponed, or moved to virtual platforms. These changes have led to significant shifts in consumer habits regarding church attendance in Ghana. This article draws on ethnographic data from two Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Ghana to explore the various changes and trends in consumer behavior exhibited by members due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that the pandemic has had a profound impact on church attendance behavior, as it has disrupted many aspects of life.

Introduction

The world faced the severe COVID-19 pandemic for a few years, which changed many aspects of everyday life. During the peak of the pandemic, numerous measures were implemented by national governments and international organizations such as the World Health Organization. These measures entailed the replacement of all forms of

social gatherings with social distancing regulations, the grounding of all passenger flights as nations closed their air spaces to traffic, the cancellation or virtualization of conferences, and the enforcement of lockdown regulations that required people to stay at home. The pandemic has not only posed economic challenges to nations but has also brought about significant social changes.

In Ghana, the regulations were relaxed in August 2021 after the “third wave of infections.” Nevertheless, some of the changes occasioned by the pandemic were so drastic that many facets of life had not returned to pre-COVID-19 levels, including church attendance. The lockdown measures in the West African nation included closing churches, chapels, and mosques. These closures changed many aspects of church life, including how COVID-19 has affected people’s approach to church attendance. While African Christianity is diverse in its expressions, church attendance is an essential aspect of spiritual life that forms the basis of fellowship, worship, and discipleship in all its various forms. It is a fundamental practice that enables individuals to connect with their faith community, engage in meaningful worship, and grow in their spiritual journey. Whether it is attending regular services, participating in small group discussions, or joining in community events, attendance plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and deepening one’s relationship with God.¹

Some studies have suggested a link between church involvement (attendance and membership) and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.² One reason for establishing this connection is that church members engage in culturally specific practices to communicate with God, such as attending church services. In Africa, Christianity is not solely a matter of belief systems, but rather a way of life that involves adhering to prescribed social and cultural practices.³ As such, attending church services is deemed essential for the spiritual development of church members.

This article aims to shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on church attendance behavior in the Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic context.⁴ It seeks

¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1995); John R. Bryson, Lauren Andres, and Andrew Davies, “COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home,” *Journal of Economic and Human Geography* 111:3 (2020), 360–72.

² Paul Vermeer and Joris Kregting, “Religion and the Transmission of COVID-19 in the Netherlands,” *Religions* 11 (2020), 2; Simon Dein, Kate Loewenthal, Christopher Alan Lewis, and Kenneth Pargament, “COVID-19, Mental Health and Religion: An Agenda for Future Research,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23:1 (2020), 1–9; Sayed A. Quadri, “COVID-19 and Religious Congregations: Implications for Spread of Novel Pathogens,” *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 96 (2020), 219–21.

³ Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation. A Theory of Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Christian Smith, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁴ The churches described here belong to what Paul Gifford has referred to as “Ghana’s New Christianity.” For detailed reading see Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 2004); Marleen

to provide new perspectives to a growing body of literature on religion and pandemics.⁵ The study examines changes in consumer behavior from the pre-pandemic period to August 2021, when the third wave in Ghana came to an end. The article is structured into four sections: a theoretical overview, the methodology employed, the findings and analysis, and the conclusion.

The Religious Market Model and Consumer Behavior

This article utilizes the religious market metaphor to elucidate the shifts and patterns in Pentecostal-Charismatic church attendance amidst the pandemic. The model views religious activity through an economic lens, positing that religious economies operate similarly to commercial economies, with a market and a set of organizations vying to cater to that market.⁶ As with any commercial economy, the level of regulation plays a crucial role in the functioning of a religious economy. It is founded on the principle of religion operating within an unregulated market, where followers have the freedom to select where and how they worship.

Within this framework, religious organizations function as businesses, and their followers are viewed as customers who have the freedom to explore various religious offerings. Likewise, religious figures such as pastors are seen as producers, marketers, and entrepreneurs who respond to the challenges and possibilities of the religious marketplace.⁷ The preferences of consumers play a significant role in shaping the goods and services offered by religious leaders. This freedom of choice directly influences the activities of religious producers as they strive to make their offerings appealing to potential customers. Given that consumers have a certain degree of autonomy, religious product producers must cater to their needs and preferences. The success of these

De Witte, "Business of the Spirit: Ghanaian Broadcast Media and the Commercial Exploitation of Pentecostalism," *Journal of African Media Studies* 3:2 (2011), 189–204; J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: African Christian Press, 2005).

⁵ Vincenzo Alfano, Salvatore Ercolano, and Gaetano Vecchione, "Religious Attendance and Covid-19: Evidence from Italian Regions," *CESifo Working Paper* 8596 (2020), 1–15; Vermeer and Kregting, "Religion and the Transmission of COVID-19 in the Netherlands," 1–12; Francesco Molteni et. al., "Searching for Comfort in Religion: Insecurity and Religious Behaviour during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy," *European Societies* (2020), 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1836383>; Justice A. Arthur, "African Pentecostal Church Life in the Post-COVID-19 Era," *Missio Africanus Journal of African Missiology* 6:1 (2021), 1–19, <https://missioafricanus.com/journal/>.

⁶ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "The Dynamics of Religious Economies," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michelle Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 100; Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 27–31.

⁷ Shane Lee and Philip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

producers in this market environment is determined by how effectively they package and market their commodities to resonate with the consumers' tastes.⁸

Moreover, consumers in this framework are highly responsive to economic, social, and cultural shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, has caused significant financial strain on countries worldwide, resulting in job losses for many individuals. It has also led to social and cultural transformations that have impacted consumer behavior in various aspects of life, including attendance at religious services. Church members, as consumers, have adapted to these sociocultural changes brought about by the pandemic. Furthermore, the pandemic has influenced how pastors create and offer religious products and services, leading to a corresponding change in church attendance patterns.

Within the religious market framework, consumer behavior is influenced by external and internal factors such as the social environment, economic situation, and the customer's personality.⁹ The social, economic, and personal changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacted have considerably changed how firms and consumers behave.¹⁰ Both firms and consumers are adapting quickly to the frequent transitions that are taking place.¹¹ According to Mehta et al., during times of crisis, such as a pandemic outbreak, consumer behavior can be categorized into three approaches: economic, psychological, and sociological.¹² The economic approach is based on consumers' understanding of their basic needs within the micro economy. The psychological approach focuses on the connection between the consumer's psyche and behavior. Lastly, the sociological approach is based on how consumers react in different situations or how social events impact their behavior. As a result, consumer interests are constantly being challenged and traded in the market.¹³ Consequently, during times of crisis, people's reactions to negative economic or social impacts can vary greatly, leading to the emergence of new consumer habits. For instance, Lenka Svajdova has noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has already affected consumer behavior in the retail industry, resulting in a decrease in consumer confidence but an increase in average spending and

⁸ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 150; Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 27.

⁹ Katarina Valaskova, Katarina Kramarova, and Viera Bartosova, "Multi Criteria Models Used in Slovak Consumer Market for Business Decision Making," *Procedia Economics and Finance* 26 (2015), 174–82.

¹⁰ Seema Mehta, Tanjul Saxena, and Neetu Purohit, "The New Consumer Behaviour Paradigm amid COVID-19: Permanent or Transient?," *Journal of Health Management* 22:2 (2020), 291–301.

¹¹ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, 4th ed. (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2017).

¹² Mehta, Saxena, and Purohit, *The New Consumer Behaviour Paradigm amid COVID-19*, 291.

¹³ Mehta, Saxena, and Purohit, *The New Consumer Behaviour Paradigm amid COVID-19*, 292; Valaskova, Kramarova, and Bartosova, *Multi Criteria Models Used in Slovak Consumer Market for Business Decision Making*, 174.

a decrease in purchase frequency.¹⁴ Similarly, Flatters and Wilmot have emphasized the critical impact of the 2008 global recession on consumer behavior and trends.¹⁵ Against this backdrop of changing consumer behavior during crisis periods, we became interested in investigating the trends in church attendance and behavior adjustments of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians in Ghana.

While the metaphor of religious markets offers us a valuable, even self-evident, lens to consider church members as consumers within the religious landscape, it has some apparent limitations, too. Foremost, it is based on the rational choice theory, which prioritizes cognitive and calculable factors and cannot fully account for non-rational influences that also impact economic behavior.¹⁶ Additionally, the use of the market metaphor in relation to Pentecostalism has, at times, created a negative portrayal of the movement as the “ideological agent” of American capitalism in the global south.¹⁷ Due to these weaknesses, our use of the religious economy metaphor is not to suggest that church attendance behavior can be comprehensively explained only in economic terms, though it is a significantly helpful lens to explore the lived experiences of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians in the African context.¹⁸

Methodology

The study employed a combination of traditional and cyber ethnographic methods to investigate church attendance at two of Ghana’s leading Pentecostal-Charismatic churches: the Church of Pentecost (CoP)¹⁹ and the International Central Gospel

¹⁴ Lenka Svajdova, “Consumer Behaviour during Pandemic of COVID-19,” *Journal of International Business Research and Marketing* 6:3 (2021), 34; Lydia Andoh-Quainoo, “Psychological Factors in Continuance Digital Media Behaviour: Smartphone, Internet and Social Media in Young Consumers,” *Pentvars Business Journal* 13:1 (2021), 46–58; Ludvík Eger, Lenka Komárková, Dana Egerová, and Michal Mičík, “The Effect of COVID-19 on Consumer Shopping Behaviour: Generational Cohort Perspective,” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 61 (2021), 1–11.

¹⁵ Paul Flatters and Michael Willmott, “Understanding the Post-recession Consumer,” *Harvard Business Review* 87:7–8 (2009), 64–72.

¹⁶ Bernice Martin, “Pentecostal Conversion and the Limits of the Market Metaphor,” *Exchange* 35:1 (2006), 64–65.

¹⁷ Martin, “Pentecostal Conversion and the Limits of the Market Metaphor,” 67.

¹⁸ Asonzeh Ukah, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power: A Study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 2008).

¹⁹ We selected two different strands of Pentecostal churches, being aware of the heterogenous nature of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity. The Church of Pentecost (CoP) is a classical Pentecostal church, part of the group of Pentecostal churches that evolved in Ghana because of the revivalist movement in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It has branch churches in all the districts of Ghana as well as international churches in Africa, Europe, North America, South America, Asia, and Australia.

Church (ICGC).²⁰ It involved extensive observation and participant observation, as well as in-depth interviews with pastors and church members who produce and consume religious goods. Due to COVID-19 protocols, cyber ethnography was employed when the physical environment was not conducive to traditional methods.

Integrating data from both types of ethnography is crucial because one of the fundamental aspects of ethnography is observing a group of people in their natural environment, including online spaces.²² Cyber ethnography is particularly valuable in examining how online communities inform the study of physical communities, such as churches and their social interactions. This approach is especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the internet has become a primary setting for many people's lived experiences. Additionally, cyber ethnography enables the identification of information-rich religious actors in digital spaces, which can then be followed up with traditional ethnography. Moreover, this method has proven useful in reaching adherents who may not be comfortable with face-to-face interviews due to the pandemic.

The traditional ethnographic study commenced in December 2020 and concluded on August 20, 2021. Additionally, structured interview guides were utilized to collect online data from June 6 to August 20, 2021. In both instances, the purposive sampling method was employed to select branch churches and respondents. This method was chosen to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of church attendance behavior among a homogeneous group of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians.

The cyber ethnography participants were reached through Google Form links sent via email and social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. A total of fifty responses were gathered from both cyber sources and traditional ethnography. From these fifty respondents, twenty-five individuals were selected from each of the two Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, consisting of five clergy members and twenty church members. To ensure a balanced representation of consumer perspectives from both urban and rural areas, three city-based branches and three rural-based branches were chosen from both the CoP and the ICGC.

²⁰ The International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), founded by Mensa Otabil, is a Neo-Pentecostal church or what is usually referred to in Ghana as a Charismatic church. These churches began in the 1970s and 1980s through local initiatives. The ICGC could also be described as a megachurch with branches in many parts of Ghana and internationally in Africa, Europe, and North America.

Data Analysis and Results

This study sought to primarily investigate the various consumer behavioral patterns in relation to church attendance. It examines these trends under three different periods: the pre-COVID-19 era, the COVID-19 era, and the post-COVID-19-vaccine era.²¹

Pre-COVID-19 Church Attendance Behavior

To begin with, let us examine the church attendance rates in the pre-COVID-19 era in the CoP and the ICGC. The data indicates that attendance was not a major issue during this time, particularly on Sundays when churches recorded significant turnout. Some of the respondents opined that

“We had about 80–100 people attending church regularly before COVID-19. These members came out of their own volition. I was attending church about 5–6 times a week” (Resp. 21 L).²²

“We were attending church regularly; I could attend church service thrice a week” (Resp. 6 M).

“Church attendance was massive before the lockdown, and I could attend church at least twice a week” (Resp. 10 M).

Regarding church activities and church service experience in the pre-COVID-19 period, most churches were operating at peak levels. Adherents attested that they always had a fulfilling experience at church. They could interact freely with other members of the church community and participate in sacraments like communion. These are some of the responses:

“We could interact freely and share fellowship and love. We had a wonderful experience with God through fruitful worship” (Resp. 22 M).

“Our time in church was truly fulfilling, and we could engage in activities like praise and worship without looking over our shoulders” (Resp. 36 M).

“There was a great sense of fellowship as there were no restrictions on time and activities like the Lord’s Supper” (Resp. 21 L).

It could be inferred from the various responses that church attendance was a truly satisfying experience for many church members. Unfortunately, the global pandemic significantly changed church attendance behavior as churches resorted to a new norm of deploying virtual platforms to remain relevant and competitive in the religious

²¹ The post-COVID-19-vaccine era is defined as the period between when mass vaccination began in Ghana to the end of the third wave—March 2 to August 10, 2021.

²² “L” signifies leaders’ voices while “M” indicates church members’ voices.

market.²³ This also led to frequent disruptions and the absence of dynamic church activities, as consumers were primarily deprived of the emotional release prominent in Pentecostal-Charismatic church services in Ghana.

Church Attendance Behavior during COVID-19

COVID-19 affected church attendance behavior in several ways. Foremost, churches in Ghana were banned from physical meetings at the peak of the pandemic because of protocols implemented to prevent the spread of the disease. There was an unprecedented adaptation from church communities, including in places of worship, from pastors and their congregations. Many had to meet in smaller groups with social distancing protocols, while others resorted to virtual services, which were live-streamed or recorded, edited, and broadcasted as real-time experiences but also stored on digital platforms for open access. For some churches, the telemediated services were augmented with small group meetings. Evidence gathered from members indicates that in the era of COVID-19, people were very much interested in church activities. The digital platforms gave members who were in lockdown the opportunity to worship within the virtual community. Some respondents expressed the following views:

“I always participated in organized online services” (Resp. 8 M).

“I could attend church services during the lockdown through online and television services” (Resp. 43 M).

“I was always willing to be in church, so I participated mostly in the online services” (Resp. 24 M).

While these responses give us an idea of church members' interest in church attendance during the lockdown period, it is difficult to establish the veracity of these assertions.

Disruption of Church Routine by the COVID-19 Protocols and Telemediated Services

Next, due to the vast interest in church services even during the lockdown period, respondents were asked if they were aware of the protocols instituted by the state to control the spread of the virus. This was to gauge their knowledge of and adherence to the established guidelines. The majority of respondents confirmed their familiarity with all the protocols, including regular handwashing, use of hand sanitizers, social distancing, wearing of facemasks, temperature checks, and avoiding physical contact

²³ Hazel O'Brien, "What Does the Rise of Digital Religion During COVID-19 Tell Us about Religion's Capacity to Adapt?," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 28:2 (2020), 242–46.

such as handshakes and hugs, common in Pentecostal-Charismatic contexts. While some churches in urban areas were able to implement all COVID-19 protocols and ensure strict adherence, some local churches in rural settings faced challenges in acquiring critical equipment like thermometer guns and commercial handwashing buckets, making it difficult to comply with the guidelines. More significantly, the COVID-19 protocols were seen as disrupting the regular routines of the church, to which it took many attendees a considerable amount of time to adapt. At the same time, some never got used to it.

“The pandemic has reduced the liberty to dance, sing praises, and interact freely in church” (Resp. 4 L).

“The Pentecostal style of worship and activities such as crusades, rallies, and evangelism have all been put on hold. Dancing, clapping, and jumping have all been replaced with sobriety” (Resp. 8 L).

“For more than one year, we have never had any fundraiser in the church” (Resp. 36 L).

In addition, the implementation of protocols and subsequent adoption of telemediated worship services in churches raised concerns among consumers regarding the quality of their church experiences. Some members reported feeling disconnected due to issues with sound quality, while others expressed that their virtual worship experience did not compare to their in-person experience. This may be attributed to the lack of physical participation and interactions with fellow church members. Despite producers of religious goods and services adapting their strategies to meet consumer demands, it became apparent that many church members struggled to adjust to digital services. In fact, some respondents asserted that virtual church platforms compromised the quality of the worship experience. The following are sample responses:

“It felt like church was boring and dull” (Resp. 1 M).

“There was no sense of fellowship at all in online services though the word ministration [sermon] was powerful” (Resp. 16 M).

“Although the word of God did not change [during the COVID-19], I felt apprehensive about the experiences in church that if this is the way the church will be, it will be very problematic going forward” (Resp. 47 L).

“Church service was very challenging, and if you were not determined, you would not attend the services like you used to” (Resp. 6 M).

“Generally, the church was not interactive” (Resp. 27 M).

“Online service was not so inspiring. Something was lacking although I can’t put my finger on what that is. It was simply not the same” (Resp. 29 L).

The findings reveal the specific needs and preferences of different members of the church community, which were not fully satisfied by the implementation of telemediated worship services during the pandemic. As a result, some members expressed a degree of discontentment. It also suggests that certain individuals require a sense of release and excitement as an integral part of their worship experience, a need previously met by traditional church services before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Loss of Fellowship

Despite the challenges posed by the shift to online services and small group meetings, some church members remain convinced that the Holy Spirit's presence was palpable. This is supported by various perspectives that suggest that as producers within the religious market, the church could only meet the demands of a segment of the consumers in a complex market altered by the pandemic:

"The Holy Spirit was very much alive in our services during the COVID-19 period. However, the services were mostly limited to prayer meetings mainly. No musical instruments were deployed. Hence, church service differed from in-person fellowship" (Resp. 26 L).

"Online service was good but not as enjoyable as in-person services. But the church leadership reacted quickly in transforming the worship style amid the pandemic" (Resp. 47 M).

"The service experience was never the same, although the presence of God was felt, and the cell system provided a near pre-COVID-19 service experience. Word ministration [preaching] was also top-notch" (Resp. 16 L).

"Members were not free to express themselves fully in dancing and worship. Many members yearned for the interactive aspects of fellowship" (Resp. 24 L).

These findings suggest that during the height of the pandemic, churches explored new ways of fostering fellowship, but not all individuals found online experiences to be fulfilling. While the platform for church services did not always meet market demands, members generally expressed satisfaction with the sermons delivered through online sources. However, some respondents noted that online church services lacked certain aspects that made Pentecostal-Charismatic church experiences truly fulfilling. Telemediated church services presented challenges for some consumers, particularly those who lacked computer skills or struggled to adapt to new ways of congregating as a church. Nevertheless, some responses indicated that certain church attendees enjoyed virtual services and found them to be more satisfying. Some even expressed appreciation for live-streamed or pre-recorded church services. Here are a few responses:

"Digital service was fun for me. I was able to pay my tithes and enjoyed the preaching of God's word" (Resp. 6 M).

“The virtual church gave me a new experience with the word of God. The word became so real to me than before” (Resp. 38 M).

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant obstacles faced by online services during this time was the increased demand for interpersonal connections. As per national guidelines, all forms of physical contact were prohibited in church settings, including hugging, handshakes, and close dancing, all of which are integral components of African Pentecostal-Charismatic congregational worship. Social distancing measures were implemented in lieu of physical interactions, leading to significant alterations in how members communicate. As a result, the pandemic and the accompanying protocols had a profound impact on fellowship within these communities.

“We could not interact as we used to do. We could only respond to people’s comments on church sessions. Physical counseling services with pastors could only be held online” (Resp. 15 L).

“The virtual service allowed for participation, but members missed being together” (Resp. 24 L).

“Close fellowship was missing” (Resp. 37 M).

Finally, there were some negative experiences during the lockdown, although people were in touch with the church through small groups and digital services. These were some responses of people’s feelings:

“I felt like a prisoner” (Resp. 24 M).

“Very boring and sad” (Resp. 13 M)

“I felt very disorganized and wished we could meet as a church” (Resp. 2 L).

“I felt very devastated and frightened. I had never experienced such a situation before” (Resp. 16 M).

“I felt very sad, especially when the aged were left out of online church services” (Resp. 28 L).

According to these findings, it appears that a significant number of Christians experienced negative emotions and feelings of sadness when they were unable to gather in person. If this situation had persisted, it is conceivable that a considerable number of Christians may have experienced depression. This underscores the importance of attending church services as a valuable resource for managing negative moods.

Deconstructing Traditional Notions of “Church” and Church Leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a reevaluation of some time-honored theological perspectives in African Pentecostalism, particularly regarding assumptions about the church and its leadership. One key area of discussion was the traditional understanding

of the church. In the African Pentecostal context, the term “church” typically refers to physical buildings, institutions/organizations, or groups of Christians. However, the pandemic has raised important questions about what it truly means to be a church without a physical place of worship. It has challenged the notion of the church as an institution defined by buildings, budgets, and offices and has demonstrated that a church can exist beyond the confines of a physical structure. The rise of virtual communities has necessitated a deconstruction of the church as a physical community, as people can now come together in shared experiences and time, even if they are not physically present in a church building.

Also, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, African Pentecostalism faced a significant challenge to its traditional understanding of church leadership. The outbreak of the virus prompted a reevaluation of the strict hierarchical structures that had been in place for years. It became evident that the presence of clergy was not always necessary for the thriving of churches, and this realization sparked a need for a new approach to church leadership. The following respondents affirm this notion:

“It’s been a period of reflection. COVID-19 is challenging some of our beliefs and doctrines. Women are administering the Lord’s supper (communion) because the pastors can not be there because of the restrictions. Yet in our church, women can’t be ordained as pastors” (Resp. 36 L).

“The pastor can preach to us virtually, but in terms of the sacraments, he cannot be in every home. Someone has to do them in our homes, including single-parent homes, where many of them are led by women. Does God oppose these women from administering sacraments? I don’t know. I think we have to come again on some of the teachings we have held so dear to” (Resp. 41 L).

The pandemic-induced closure of churches meant that in many homes, someone provided spiritual leadership and administered sacraments like communion to the family. In many instances, those who offered spiritual leadership were women, which will be a big challenge in some African Pentecostal churches such as the CoP. The reason is that many of these roles are reserved for ordained ministers who are strictly men. COVID-19, therefore, called for a rethink of some of the church’s long-held theological views and practices, particularly with regard to gender roles in church leadership.

Post-COVID-19-Vaccine Church Attendance Behavior

Following the lifting of the ban on church meetings, congregations were advised to gather for a maximum of two hours while adhering to all safety protocols. Despite members resuming their regular routines at work, markets, and other social events, churches faced a longer road to recovery. The post-COVID-vaccine church experienced

setbacks in areas such as low church attendance, loss of fellowship, welfare concerns, and reduced quality of service and activities.

Low Church Attendance Levels

Respondents were asked to describe the post-COVID-vaccine church behavior at the individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, three general responses were gathered from church members. Some revealed that their church attendance had not been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These are some of the responses:

“It has not affected my church attendance” (Resp 12 M).

“I attend church regularly online and in person. There is no problem at all” (Resp 40 L).

“As a serious believer, attending church services is so important you shouldn’t allow anything to affect it. My church attendance has not been affected” (Resp. 47 L).

A second group believed that even though the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted their church attendance behavior, they had been able to bounce back to church. A third group admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their church attendance behavior. These are excerpts from the responses:

“Personally, I feel sluggish to attend church sometimes after the pandemic” (Resp. 10 M).

“Many Christians have become relaxed in church attendance and must be supported to attend church” (Resp. 29 L).

“Church attendance has been reduced by as much as 35%. For example, 100 people used to attend weekday services, now it is only 65 people who attend regularly” (Resp. 38 L).

“After the Covid, attendance has reduced by 10%” (Resp. 12 L).

“Generally, the number of people who attend church service has reduced to about 70%. 30% of members are often absent from church. The general attendance has decreased by 10–15%” (Resp. 20 L).

The data indicate that attendance at the chosen churches decreased by 10% to 40% even after the vaccination drive had commenced. On the other hand, some participants attributed the decline in church attendance to factors other than vaccination:

“Many Christians are not committed to the things of God. Those who are not too willing to attend church services now have the perfect opportunity to stay away from church” (Resp. 27 M).

“Some people are just hiding behind the covid effects” (Resp. 15 M).

“Some have generally become lazy or watch services on television to compensate for in-person church service” (Resp. 2 M).

Alternatively, the decline in church attendance may be attributed to a gradual adaptation of church members to the current circumstances, a temporary lapse in spiritual commitment following an extended period of pandemic-related isolation, a greater emphasis on family bonding due to the pandemic, or primarily financial concerns and COVID-19-related stress.

Financial Stress and Welfare Issues

One of the main reasons for decreased church attendance is the economic impact of the pandemic. This has a ripple effect on the microeconomy of individual church members, ultimately affecting the church’s overall income. The respondents noted that a significant number of people have been laid off, lost their businesses, or have seen their businesses struggle due to the pandemic's impact on the national economy. As a result, many individuals have been unable to fulfill their tithing and offering obligations; some have even had difficulty affording transportation to church. Additionally, some have had to prioritize their families’ basic needs over attending church and participating in related activities. Here are some responses:

“Some of my church members have lost their jobs, which has affected attendance and offerings” (Resp. 21 L).

“Money to even board public transport to church is difficult to come by for some of us” (Resp. 43 M).

“Some of us can’t even feed our family, let alone pay tithes and offerings. Things are difficult” (Resp. 6 M).

Financial stress on individuals has impacted church income as the primary sources of funding for the two churches are tithes, offerings, and other donations from members. Accordingly, this has stalled evangelistic activities and capital-intensive church projects. For instance, some respondents shared the following views:

“For more than one year, we have never had any fundraising in the church” (Resp. 21 L).

“Special services like anointing and mid-week services have all been put on hold, so the church is also suffering a lack of funds (Resp. 14 L).

“Some activities like prayer and offerings are done at the cell group level, which limits what is coming in” (Resp. 9 L).

“We have put our church building on hold because income flows are seriously affected” (Resp. 44 L).

Moreover, churches have been affected financially by COVID-19, which has caused them to delay projects and address welfare concerns. As a result, church members have begun to question the welfare strategies of their respective churches, and the churches themselves are reconsidering their approach to welfare issues. These are the views of some respondents:

“The church does not care about the members. It had no plan for some of us who desperately needed support during the lockdown” (Resp. 10 M).

“We can’t continue to give only for us to be abandoned at the time of our need” (Resp. 19 M).

“The executive council should consider how welfare issues are addressed in the local [assemblies]. At one point, we were using our money to solve some of the problems. How long can this continue?” (Resp. 37 M).

COVID-19 Anxiety

Another significant factor contributing to the decline in church attendance during the pandemic is the concern of contracting the virus in group settings. The interlocutors emphasized that anxiety over disease transmission, particularly among the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, is a crucial factor in the reduced attendance at church services. This fear was so intense that some individuals continue to avoid attending church even after receiving vaccination. The level of anxiety was particularly high among senior citizens and the elderly. The following feedback from respondents affirms this factor:

“Some people are afraid of contracting the COVID-19 disease, especially those with underlying health conditions” (Resp. 3 L).

“Some people have become too hygiene conscious because they fear COVID-19” (Resp. 7 M).

“Some members are still afraid of contracting COVID-19 in church” (Resp. 21 L).

While certain church members may harbor a general fear of pandemics, others hold a distinct apprehension. They maintain a belief that life is fragile and fleeting, and that death could come at any moment. This outlook has instilled a desire to live right with God.

“The pandemic has instilled fear in me towards the things of God. Hence, my desire to attend church has increased, although I attend only online services” (Resp. 8 M).

“The pandemic has shown that death is so close to us. It has also made me more willing to attend church services” (Resp. 20 M).

“People are very conscious of the disease, so it creates fear, anxiety, and insecurity” (Resp. 26 M).

Quality of Experience at Church

Pentecostal-Charismatic liturgy places great emphasis on the experience. However, due to the ongoing pandemic, numerous restrictions and regulations were implemented, forcing churches to adopt alternative strategies to maintain the quality of their services. These regulations impacted activities such as all-night prayer meetings, as churches were required to operate within a two-hour service period and adhere to social distancing guidelines for seating arrangements. These arrangements engendered time consciousness, often making churches rush through their liturgy. One respondent observed: “Church activities are conducted in a rush. It has affected singing and dancing such that people are not able to feel free and dance anymore” (Resp. 47 M). These activities mentioned by the respondent are significant in Pentecostal-Charismatic church worship experiences. It generates a sense of emotional and spiritual release among church attendees.

During the period when the vaccination had just begun in Ghana, the church experience was affected. Although some church members viewed the changes brought about by COVID-19 negatively, others believed that these changes enhanced their connection with God. Some respondents recounted their stories as follows:

“The pandemic has reduced the liberty to dance, sing praises, and interact freely in the church, but it opens the opportunity for us to do things differently” (Resp. 4 M).

“As soon as church resumed, people who had greatly missed congregational worship were so joyous. They avowed that worship was awesome as the presence of God was manifested greatly. Post-COVID-19 fellowship levels are generally low. The restrictions have also taken away full satisfaction. Many people, however, believe that half of a loaf is better than none” (Resp. 21 L).

“Church is not as lively as it used to be before the COVID-19—everything has changed now” (Resp. 35 M).

“The Pentecostal activities such as crusades, rallies, and evangelism have all been put on hold. Also dancing, clapping, and jumping have all been replaced with sobriety” (Resp. 8 L).

Generally, the church has been impacted in various ways due to the pandemic and its protocols. These include reduced church attendance, financial stress experienced by both individuals and the church as a whole, increased anxiety related to COVID-19, and a decline in the quality of church services.

Conclusion

Based on preceding discussions, it could be inferred that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, church attendance was generally satisfying for both members and clergy in the two churches. However, the pandemic disrupted in-person meetings and church routines, leading to the introduction of telemediated services and a loss of fellowship due to the sustained adoption of virtual services. This shift in consumer behavior forced churches to reconsider traditional theologies and practices, including finding new ways to be a church, recognizing gender dynamics in church leadership, and adapting liturgies to remain competitive and relevant. Unfortunately, the post-COVID-19-vaccine period was marked by low attendance, financial and welfare issues, COVID-19 anxiety, and a decline in the quality of church services.

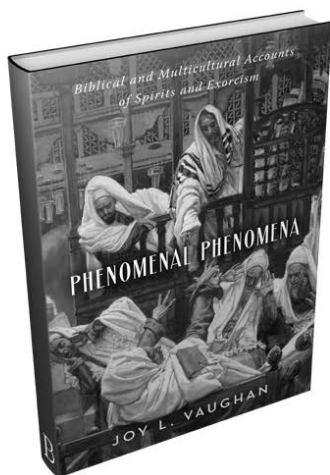


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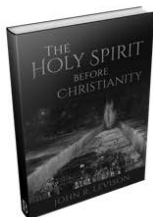
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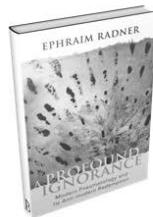
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