‘Reconfiguration and adaptation of a church in times of Covid-19 pandemic: A focus on selected churches in Harare and Marondera, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: The explosion of COVID-19 pandemic on the global scene has redefined human interaction in a manner that is unprecedented. Religious practices have also been challenged globally as the new norm of social distancing and lockdown become the new normal strictly enforced by state apparatus. Freedom of association that underpins the hallmark of worshipping has thus been put to a halt. Churches then have to negotiate and create a new norm under such unchartered territories. This paper raises the key question around the new forms of exclusivity that is being brought by the pandemic in the operations of the church and how the church is attempting to deal with this. Using mostly virtual interviews with different representatives of selected churches in Harare and Marondera, the researchers investigated how the churches are adapting to the new social order. The paper demonstrated how COVID-19 lockdown has affected the operations of churches in Zimbabwe. Key policy pronouncements of social distancing and staying at home had direct and indirect implications on church members as well the administration of the church. Though the paper showed that adoption of digital platforms to communicate emerged as the most obvious option, there are some challenges that were highlighted. The paper also concludes that the church regrets the way it was “side-lined” in the promulgation of the policy position on Covid-19. There was

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

COVID-19 pandemic has redefined human interaction in a manner that is unprecedented. Religious practices have also been challenged globally as the new norm of social distancing and lockdown become the new normal strictly enforced by state. This paper raises the key question around the new forms of exclusivity brought by the pandemic in the operations of the church and how the church is attempting to deal with this. The paper investigated how the churches are adapting to the new social order. It shows how COVID-19 lockdown has affected the operations of churches in Zimbabwe. Though the paper showed that adoption of digital platforms to communicate emerged as the most obvious option, there are some challenges that were highlighted. The paper also concludes that the church regrets the way it was “side-lined” in the promulgation of the policy position on COVID-19.
a strong sentiment that the state could have engaged the church more as they also had the capacity to provide solutions to the problem.

**Keywords:** church; COVID-19; reconfiguration; adaptation; lockdown

1. **Introduction**

   The explosion of COVID-19 pandemic on the global scene has redefined human interaction in a manner that is unprecedented. From the detection of the first cases in China around December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the economic, social and religious norms due to the social distancing requirement. Religious practices have also been challenged globally as the new norm of social distancing and lockdown become the new normal strictly enforced by state apparatus. Freedom of association that underpins the hallmark of worshipping has thus been put to a halt. Churches then have to negotiate and create a new norm under such unchartered territories. New forms of communication and the exercise of faith have to be developed if churches want to maintain their membership. The pandemic has also created immense pressure and stresses among people such that the church or faith as a key pillar for social support has to be accessible. This paper thus sought to investigate adaptive methods and mechanisms that churches are adopting to remain an accessible and viable social pillar of humankind. One of the key questions is the new forms of exclusivity that is being brought by the pandemic in the operations of the church and how the church is attempting to deal with this.

2. **Overview of churches in Zimbabwe**

   Before proceeding with overview of the churches in Zimbabwe, it is important to define what is meant by “the church” in this article. Togarasei (2006) aptly captures the Christian situation in Zimbabwe and many other countries when he describes it as that of “one Bible, many Christianities.” Togarasei (2006) postulates that although they read from the same Bible, Christian churches are of different typologies: mainline churches with Western origins and connections, African Independent/Instituted/Initiated Churches with African origins, and Pentecostal or Evangelical churches with more charismatic outlooks, among others. Chitando and Togarasei (2010), postulates that the churches can be grouped according to their associations: the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) for mainly the mainline churches, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference (ZCBC) for the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) for Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches. One can therefore talk of the “church” referring to each of the typologies, referring to all of them or referring to individual churches and congregations that belong to these typologies. This study paid particular attention to Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe.

   The significance of churches during trying times in Zimbabwe and the rest of Africa has been well documented. Dete (2011) notes that Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe were very significant during the peak of the 2008 economic meltdown. People preferred these churches that preached the gospel of prosperity, giving people hope of making it through difficult times. In Nigeria, Ukah (2007) observes that during times of economic hardships, people find refuge in Pentecostal churches, which offer them hope in the form of deliverance from the yoke of evil spirits. In addition, Biri (2012), comments that the economy is the driving force of every country and when it nosedives, people resort to the supernatural for explanations and answers to their problems. In such contexts, Pentecostal churches came offering attractive answers with seeming possible solutions to the economic and social problems faced by people.

3. **Features of church fellowshipping in Zimbabwe**

   Features of church fellowshipping cannot be understood from a singular perspective, they are diverse, because of different doctrines. This is so because what informs a church congregation is a key factor in determining the features. Thus, Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe interpret church fellowshipping as involving a sharing of friendship among believers, mutual love and
trust and also as involving the members being brothers and sisters in the same family. Part from this, it also involves practical sharing, partnership in the work of Christ and also being part of a believing company, not being separate or isolated. As such mostly in Pentecostal churches constant emphasis is laid on the importance of preserving unity in the fellowship, clearly indicating that Christians need fellowship with one another, and where this is lacking or diminished there are very serious consequences. They base their argument on the mere fact that the characteristic of the Early Church was a togetherness, which is far deeper than any other human grouping, and which strongly manifested mutual support and generosity of spirit (Maranatha, Briefing 2012). As such they believe that one cannot be a Christian in isolation, hence the importance of meeting and praying, worshipping God together. Maranatha, Briefing (2012) postulates that Christian fellowship is two-dimensional that is vertical and then horizontal, and further notes that the vertical dimension of fellowship is Christians’ close relationship with God. This dimension involves giving to God and receiving from God and communicating with God as posited by Biri (2012). Following this vertical relationship with God, Christians are led by Christ into a horizontal relationship with other believers. With them and through them they find strength, refreshment and instruction. They then experience a deep level of sharing in which they give and receive in a face-to-face interaction (Biri, 2012).

### 4. Spirituality and faith healing in Zimbabwe

Bourdillon (1993) postulates that Africans generally have unbreakable belief(s) in witchcraft (kuriova), demons, diseases or ancestral curses in form of misfortunes (minyama or mamhepo) such as poverty, unemployment and barrenness. When Africans feel threatened with any of these at any time, they hunt for spiritual intervention (Bourdillon, 1993). This makes the ministries of healing and deliverance some of the most important expressions of Christianity in African Pentecostalism. Churches believe in healing and deliverance whenever people are sick or faced with problems which they believe to be caused by demons.

In concurrence, Anderson (2004) highlights that, in African independent churches, healing and protection from evil are prominent practices. Healing has to do with praying towards the restoration of health for the sick, and includes anointing with oil as noted by Kahl (2007). Deliverance refers to the exorcism aspects of the process when evil spirits are perceived to be involved in crises. African Pentecostals believe that when healing and deliverance take place, prosperity, in terms of abundant life in Christ and success in the material world follows the believer (Biri, 2012). In line with this, Manyawu (2008) pointed out that Pentecostal churches put more emphasis on faith healing. Pentecostal church pastors of these churches believe that they have been endowed by God to bring physical healing to their followers as a proof of the validity of their preaching (Manyawu, 2008). This clearly indicates that they are strongly tied to the notion of healing, which is the belief that there is no disease that is incurable.

### 5. Interface between church and the state

In Zimbabwe, different scholars such as Biri (2012) and Chibango (2016) highlight that the church occupies such a central space in Zimbabwean society, and it responds to major issues, even if it is initially cautious about adopting too “political” a stance. Tarusarira (2016) highlights that in the face of the country’s full-blown political and economic crisis post 2000, the church has intervened in a number of ways seeking to contribute to a peaceful and sustainable resolution. Tarusarira (2016) further posits that churches have injected more inclusive, universal perspectives into Zimbabwe’s national conflict. Togarasei (2006), notes that when the philosophy of jambanja (militancy) emerged during the fast-track land reform programmes, which implied that the rule of law could no longer be guaranteed; churches played a significant role to encourage dialogue between the political parties. Apart from this, the leaders of the three main Christian groupings—the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC)—also embarked on a strategy to promote dialogue. Significantly, the role played by the church clearly reveals an intricate relationship between the church and the state.
In direct contrast to the above views, which claim that church–state relations are relatively warm, some studies reveal that church–state relations in Zimbabwe have never been uniform (Chirongoma, 2008; Hallencreutz & Moyo, 1988). They have varied over time in response to the emerging issues. Thus, when in the late 1990s Zimbabwe's economy was in free-fall, the church called for visionary leadership. Unfortunately, the nationalists were not ready to reinvent themselves or allow a new generation of leaders to emerge. This set the scene for one of the darkest periods in the country's postcolonial history.

6. Technology adoption in Zimbabwean churches

Castells (2000) unequivocally states that technology has revolutionized the world. He further states that it has become an essential part of people's lives. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and technological devices and platforms have become common features of business and society. A high level of technology use is not only being experienced in the West but the use of technology in Africa has arisen to an almost equal extent as well. There has been an explosive growth of technology use in Africa, particularly in the area of mobile phones. Kitetu (2008) and Isaacs (2007) agree that technology is now used in Africa to a huge extent. Magezi (2015) in a Zimbabwean study to determine the extent of technology use and the emerging identities of pastors in African churches noted that pastors are different on how they embrace the use of technology. Magezi (2015) further notes that in Pentecostal churches like Kingdom church and celebration centre, the pastors are aware of technology and use it in the church without restriction. The reason for widely using technology is the need to connect with broad membership as well as a desire need to attract and be relevant to young Christians.

Magezi (2015) further notes that the second category of churches and pastors are those that are slowly and cautiously embracing technology. A significant majority of these pastors are part of congregations that belong to denomination families that are centrally controlled. In such congregational families, individual congregations have limited control. These pastors and churches use technology in a limited way, for example, public address (PA) systems, data projectors and basic messaging platforms. Such pastors are caught between wanting to fully utilize technology and denomination control. Examples of such churches in Zimbabwe are the mainline churches such as Methodists, the Salvation Army and Baptists. These churches are usually controlled nationally by central leadership. The third category is those churches that have been using technology on a limited basis in their worship services. Here, ICT has been viewed as a secular tool with little or no place in formal worship. Examples of such churches are Roman Catholic, Anglican, End Time Message Church and Bible Believers. The worship services of these churches used to be statically drawn from prayer books with church being viewed as a sacred place that is not influenced by the world. There is very limited use of technology in church during worship services.

Jones and Ough (2010) maintain that despite reservations regarding technology use, technology helps one to reach more people in and outside the church. Castells (2000) proposes that there is a need to identify paths of social change in our time, rather than adhering to old ways. It would be unwise for pastors or any other church leader to resist the use of technology. Ossai-Ugbah (2011) maintains that the advent of computers and other complementary technologies has increased ministry effectiveness. Technologies such as the Internet have led congregations using computer technology to enhance and strengthen traditional ministries such as worship, fellowship, pastoral care, education, mission and community outreach, evangelism and communications.

Technology is notably used in various ways in churches and the pastoral ministry. For instance, technology is providing opportunities for the new generation of pastors to reach out to many followers through satellites. Virtual churches have been arising through the exploitation of technology. The Internet is being used to deliver church sermons in Zimbabwe as people are becoming increasingly busy and getting so much more attached to their careers. These include Internet sermons, social networks being used to preach the gospel, and text messages used as reminders of
the gospel and when some Christians experience challenges in their lives they may not have time to go and seek spiritual advice from church leaders; hence, they are reached through text messaging. Biblical and self-empowerment messages are sent using text messaging services to assist Christians to stay on track. Biri (2013) examines the Pentecostal use of the television, internet facilities, print media and cell phones beyond the pulpit and argues that religion and emerging technologies are compatible and not competitors since religion has largely appropriated media technologies to its advantage.

Despite these commendable uses of technology, Allen (2008) observed that the digital age is nonetheless posing pastoral challenges to the church. In line with this, Vieira (2012) notes that Pope Benedict VI described technology as having a dual role. It can provide huge opportunities but poses huge challenges at the same time. ICT can either be a service or a disservice. For instance, overuse of technology could create an Island of certain churches and pastors. Gillwald et al. (2010) reported that access to ICT in Africa is high in urban areas, leaving rural areas largely untouched. The Zimbabwe National Gender Policy (2013–2017) confirms this situation. The policy notes that Internet access is only 0.07% in rural areas; hence, overemphasis on the use of technology suggests that such churches may concentrate in urban areas at the neglect of rural areas, hence weakening the missionary role of the church.

7. Research objectives
(a) To capture the interpretation of social distancing and lockdown in the context of church fellowshipping

(b) To describe the reconfiguration of the church in face of COVID-19 imposed limitations
(c) To explain the new forms of human interaction within churches under COVID-19 conditions
(d) To document how churches are dealing with the new forms of exclusion brought about by the new conditions
(e) To analyse coping mechanisms employed by the church as it fights to maintain its social and religious role in society

8. Methodology
This study used remote-based qualitative approaches to data collection where the researchers collected in-depth data using a mix of digital platforms. Face-to-face interaction with the participants was not possible due to the lockdown restrictions existing in the country. We therefore utilized methods that include telephone voice conversations, email interactions and social media engagements that include the WhatsApp platform depending on the choice of the respondent. The participants were drawn from churches based in Harare and Marondera mainly because these are areas we had easy access to. In terms of the inclusion criteria for the study, participants needed to be in any leadership capacity of any registered church in Harare or Marondera. This meant that pastors, church elders or any other people in church leadership were recruited to be part of the study. We targeted five different church denominations to spread the reach of our population and also to enrich the data collected. In selecting our participants, we largely relied on purposive and snowball sampling techniques. We deliberately selected those respondents in church leadership because they stood a much better chance to be appraised with the operations of the church in times of lockdown. Snowballing was also appropriate because this saved time in locating other respondents considering also the limitations in travelling and communicating with people. In terms of the sample size, we had 18 interviews composed of 14 pastors and four church elders. At the beginning of our fieldwork, we relied on our initial contacts of respondents whom we knew and these referred us to other respondents who met our inclusion criteria. We then used purposive sampling to select information-rich cases from the large pool of people introduced to by our initial interlocutors. Participants were recruited on willing basis as the researchers observed ethical principles that include informed consent. Findings are presented thematically with the use of
direct quotations as evidence to substantiate the point being made. In this study, we protect the names of the respondents and their churches to protect their anonymity.

9. Presentation and discussion of research findings

9.1. Interpretation of social distancing and lockdown in the context of church fellowshipping

The concepts of social distancing and lockdown have become the buzzwords associated with the COVID-19 and its repercussions. These have been close-knit into the WHO health guidelines and also adopted by the nations of the world as they fight against this deadly virus. It was therefore important for the researchers to understand the various interpretations that churches gave to these new terms. One respondent interpreted social distancing as the avoidance of physical conduct between people and among people. When looked at from a lockdown perspective, this means all activities, gatherings that will promote the close interaction of below 2 m or at least 1 m were to be suspended. It was established that within the context of the church, there are normally more than 50 people in each church service; hence, this contravened the government regulations of maintaining social distancing. The normal way of fellowshipping in this particular setting makes it very difficult for people to proceed in the normal course of their worship and prayer and therefore worshippers had to remain home. This contradicts Pentecostal emphasis on Christian fellowship (Maranatha, Briefing 2012) as church members are barred from fellowshipping in person as they are expected to exercise social distancing and avoid interaction where the transmission of the virus can happen as a result of the proximity of members. This therefore clearly shows how the church and state interact, as churches are obliged to follow directive from the government; hence, there is an intrinsic relationship between the two as noted by Togarasei (2006).

Another respondent indicated that even at the foundation of Christianity, Jesus also taught about observing social distancing. When people pray, the fundamental principle that needs to be observed is to go into the inner house, close the door behind you and pray. Such an interpretation therefore situated lockdown and social distancing within Biblical principles of self-isolation. The respondent went on to say the following:

So there was always within the context of the Christian understanding that element of distancing ourselves from the society was always there so that we could actually have time in which we are fellowshipping with him not just inter-human fellowshipping but fellowshipping with him as our lord. So that element could actually be strengthened by what we are having right now, that we are having more time not only to ourselves but to ourselves with him.

It was established from interviews that some church leaders embraced COVID-19 restrictions and instead interpreted these in line with the Christian principles. In this context, it was explained that the times encouraged people to have that time where they distance themselves from the society and have a time where they are fellowshipping with God. There was therefore an emphasis on spiritual edification beyond the usual physical one. Another respondent who commented on the question indicated that at first the church interpreted the restrictions as real persecution that was directed towards people by the forces of darkness. There was no instant acceptance of the regulations as these directly infringed on the core of church fellowshipping as African people’s lives are closely linked to their spirituality (Bourdillon, 1993); hence, they cannot survive without going to church. The reason for such a position and reaction was that all kinds of illnesses and diseases can be healed by God; hence, the COVID virus was not an exception. This confirms Bourdillon (1993)’s assertion that African people rely on spiritual intervention whenever they are threatened. It therefore meant that God who can heal all illnesses including COVID virus could therefore not have his church activities disrupted by that which he had power over as this would mean defeat for their God whom they regard as always, a victor.
In the view of Biri’s (2013) observation that churches believe in healing and deliverances whenever they are sick or faced with problems (which they attribute to demons), it becomes easy to understand why church pastors at first maintained this position. Manyawu (2008) also subscribes to the same view that Pentecostal churches put more emphasis on faith healing. Another reason for their doing so could be because they wanted to maintain their faith in God as the God who heals; who has power over everything. This resonates with Manyawu’s (2008) findings that highlight the Pentecostal belief that there is no disease that is incurable. Thus, for pastors, agreeing to with the view that COVID-19 is powerful would be a clear indication of failure on their part as they believe that God has endowed them with power to heal every sickness as noted in Biri’s (2012) study in Zimbabwe.

As time went on, the church changed its stance by seeing it as a time to hide for a while until the plunge is over as was prophesied by prophet Isaiah in the following scripture:

“*Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast.*” Isaiah. XXVI: 20

Clearly, the interviews with various church denominations showed that there were varied interpretations over the issue of restrictions to meet in church for the purposes of fellowshipping. This confirms Chirongoma (2008)’s findings that in Zimbabwe church–state relations have never been uniform. The state views and the church views are always contrasting, as they do not share the same viewpoint in most things. This study also found that there were some few isolated cases where people met despite the lockdown albeit in secret. Such meetings were in direct defiance against the government regulations that suspended all church gatherings, hence clearly showing that the two never agree on certain things.

We established that generally, churches expressed resentment over the way the government had treated them harshly when coming up with decisions to impose the suspension of church activities. They probably felt this way because they also wanted to be consulted on how best to deal with the problem of the COVID-19 virus rather than just receiving instructions as they believe the church plays a central role in addressing society’s problems (Biri, 2012). Respondents indicated that the church needed to be given much more prominence on such matters. The reason for such a suggestion can be clearly understood looking at how Chibongo (2016) highlights that the church occupies such a central space in Zimbabwean society, and it responds to major issues, so in this case it came as a shock to the churches not to be consulted on a big and serious issue. However, they had to comply with the regulations mainly because the state had the authority and force to enforce its regulations through state apparatus like police and the military.

9.2. How social distancing and lockdown affect the way the church operates
The study also established that church activities were directly affected in many ways. We sought an in-depth understanding of how church activities were affected by the lockdown regulations. Findings showed that the church’s role and how it operates are generally used to involve face-to-face human fellowship and interaction of people, and this resonates with Biri (2012) who noted that some of the characteristics of church fellowshipping in Pentecostal churches include face-to-face interaction and spiritualism manifested in glossolalia. The social aspect where people came together just to sit down and interact at a human level defined a typical church service in all the churches. One respondent had the following to say on the question:

The lockdown and social distancing affected directly the human level face to face interaction that involved people seating down in the presence of a clergy to receive the word, to pray, to be prayed for, to minister and to be ministered to, it’s now impossible we can’t do that any longer.
The church by its very nature is supposed to be an organization that caters even for the financial issues for its own running and for the members of the community as noted by Biri (2012). In this study, it was established that the voluntary nature of church means that it depends on the resources that are given by its members. Respondents mentioned that the lockdown restrictions affected the financial position of the church because the absence of face-to-face meetings made it difficult for the collection of offerings, tithes in the normal way that churches operated before lockdown. This was despite the digital platforms that people can use to send their money to the church. It was said that there are some people who feel that for them to get blessed properly the money should be thrown into the offering basket; hence, they tend to slacken in their giving. It was also established that the lockdown had affected the church sacraments as was shared by the following respondent:

> Lockdown affects the way we worship as a church and sadly there are three sacraments that we have to follow as a church; baptism number, its holy communion and the dedication of people. All these things used to happen at close proximity where the physical dipping of a person into water, or where you are actually giving somebody Holy Communion or praying for somebody. These three are critical to our faith and our religion and the way we conduct church. In the context of lockdown, these cannot happen. Imagine if we have members who want to give their lives to Jesus. If they are not baptized, they may feel that their salvation has not yet been completed.

It was also established that visiting each other in a context of church was central to Christianity and could not be substituted by anything. There was consensus from the respondents that what defines love was how people treated each other. There was reference to how people treat the sick in the church.

> If someone is sick the bible says we should lay hands on the sick and they will recover, the bible says if someone is sick they should be able to call for the elders to come and anoint them with oil but all those things have now been in a way taken out of the way so indeed our fellowship between one another as Christians has been compromised in certain areas which are fundamental to our faith.

The laying of hands over the sick was emphasized by the respondents as one of the cardinal principles of Faith. However, this was also acknowledged as a direct contravening of the regulations on lockdown.

> Maranatha, Briefing (2012) posits that Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe interpret church fellowshipping as involving a sharing of friendship among believers, mutual love and trust and also as involving the members being brothers and sisters in the same family. The church has therefore been characterized as a big family, which is usually made strong by coming together of its members. So social distancing was seen as violating the brotherhood of the church by, distancing the congregants from one another against the bible which instructs otherwise. The same argument went on to liken the church as a human body, which is made up of hands, head, fingers, heart, and lungs (Biri, 2012). Any removal of any part was feared to incapacitate the function of the body. The same effect was explained in the context of social distancing, which was believed to be weakening the church, the body of Christ. From the interactions with all the respondents, one thing stood out that lockdown and the social distancing had negatively affected the smooth operations of the church. The effects were explained as direct and indirect, but in general they were seen as negative. There was an emphasis on the financial resources that are required to run a church as well as principles, which ought to be fulfilled through interaction. These were no longer possible due to the prevailing environment.

### 9.3. Opinion of church towards social distancing and lockdown policy positions

The enforcement of lockdown regulations in Zimbabwe like all the countries was done regardless of any objections from the people. Churches like any other institution found themselves obliged to
comply. Interviews with the respondents however showed that it was not everyone who fully agreed with the policy position. Respondents generally agreed with health experts on the need to social distance taking into consideration how the virus is transmitted. However, it was also argued by some respondents that this policy position brings contradictions to people’s faith in the sense that Christians believe that the church is a superior organization just like hospitals where all the sick would come and get their healing. Shutting down the church was viewed as shutting down hospitals as the church plays exactly the same role as the hospital. One respondent had the following to say:

The fact that this is a novel virus where people don't know exactly what they are dealing with, I think the human side is trying to find mitigating factors to limit the transmission. I agree to the policy position but the fact that the church comes in the same category as a beer hall, it puts our faith to question, we question whether the nation and the policy makers are truly understanding the role of the church and its abilities so those are some of the internal contradictions that you begin to find.

These views could be tied to the belief commonly held by most Pentecostal churches that God heals all diseases (COVID-19 included). Some respondents drew some references from the Bible where they expressed mixed feelings towards the policy position. One respondent stated that

If someone had leprosy, those people were put in their own place (space). When Jesus healed those lepers, he told them to go and show themselves to the priest so that they could then be admitted into the society. I was so interested to find out that there is a scripture which says that any recently married man should be given a year without going to work, without going to war; so that he can be at home and please his wife –in a way with this lockdown –you are being locked down from work so that you can be with your family. That's exactly what this lockdown has done. It has allowed us time with our families, to build our families and bring them to a place where they are stronger, our intimacy with our family.

Those respondents who expressed agreement with the policy position of lockdown were however clear that there was nothing they could do otherwise. Instead of bemoaning the lockdown restrictions, many made sense of the policy by drawing Biblical inspiration. There was also emphasis on the importance to share the word from one’s own home, hence embracing the lockdown regulations. Another respondent indicated that the spread of the virus especially in Europe and the Americas was a wakeup call for the local church. The high deaths and rates of infection as was being broadcast on the news showed that drastic measures locally were justified to avert the worst-case scenario in the country. Some respondents also lamented the poor public health situation in the country and indicated that drastic lockdown measures were therefore justified as the country did not have the capacity to handle any surge in the infections.

Various measures such as sending audio messages, audio prayers and just sharing the word with the congregants were cited as new methods of communicating in churches. This was not really explained as a new method in churches but rather lockdown made it an exclusive method available for church communication. One respondent had the following to say

You will find that the bible is filled with letters, like in the new testament there was letters that were written by Paul to two churches that he couldn’t be with them physically so he was writing letters to these people. So right now, we are actually in a better position because for us the letter does not need to go with someone to a place like the UK. We are living in an era of technology where the communication is instant and easy. That means for someone who is in the UK or who is in Botswana because of work it's not really new we are not employing new methods but the sad thing is they are the only methods. You would also find Paul in the letters he was writing saying that I longed to be with you, I long to come there, I want to come there. He wanted to physically be there talking to these people and see them face to face so the sad thing is that these are only options that we have right now but it's not new.
The above view resonates well with existing views on the propagation of the gospel using various media. According to Magezi (2015) the adoption of ICT by churches has enhanced the ease with which churches can spread the gospel in Zimbabwe.

9.4. The Vaccination call and the reaction of the church

It is apparent that the vaccination call has proved to be one of the contentious issues around COVID-19 not only in Zimbabwe but the world over. States across the globe have vigorously pushed for the citizens to get vaccinated with the hope to shorten the pandemic’s life cycle. However, respective states are not only dealing with vaccine availability and the associated logistical issues but also the mounting reservations that some people have against the vaccines. Divergent political opinions have also divided people over their attitude towards vaccination with countries as the USA where some people still hold that COVID-19 is a hoax drawing from their political affiliation. In Zimbabwe, the state has struggled with religious viewpoints which raise skepticism over the vaccination drive. It is notable that the state has used policy positions to encourage and almost coerce people into embracing vaccination. One of such started when the Zimbabwean government pronounced that all its civil service was expected to be fully vaccinated or risked their employment terminated. This was also followed by lockdown reviews that were subsequently made allowing those who were fully vaccinated to attend church services. Even though such policies were targeting to push as many eligible people to get vaccinated, there have been some mitigating variables including access to the actual vaccines across the parts of the country.

Our exploratory engagements with church principals showed that the government had not managed to fully enforce its policy pronouncements to ensure total compliance. This meant that church goers saw it as a weakness and continued to attend church services even though they were not vaccinated. Findings also showed that the decline in COVID infections especially during mid-year 2021 created complacency among citizens who believed that COVID-19 was coming to an end. It was only after the resurgence of infections after the discovery of the Omicron variant at the end of the year 2021 that reminded people that the pandemic was still far from ending. The role of religion in shaping how people make decisions about health matters is significant, especially in Pentecostal churches. As we were following events in the year 2021, the government found itself in a tight corner as it struggled to counter the influence that church leaders have over their followers.

9.5. Relevance of the church in the context of COVID-19 lockdown

Against the many ramifications of the COVID-19 lockdown on the church, it emerged that there were many measures that the church had adopted to remain relevant as well as to fulfill its mandate in society. Churches have gone digital to some extent, where they seek to deal with the limitation over face-to-face interaction and running of the church. The most common platforms used for interaction were cited as WhatsApp, Facebook and Zoom meeting, which has given churches some level of continuity in terms of dissemination of information, preaching of the word, praying so they are using technology to do that which had not been using specifically to that extent prior to the lockdown and social distancing. Face-to-face interaction among church members had therefore migrated to digital, in a way confirm the assertion by Biri (2013) that ICT has enabled churches to defeat geographical barriers and reach their audience. Churches are no longer meeting in terms of the church buildings as was the case before the lockdown. The practice of delegating people to visit church members had also ceased in compliance with the prevailing regulations.

The lockdown was said to have put pressure on some of the pastors who had been full time in the Ministry not engaging in any economic activity. Such pastors were sustained by ministry work that they had been doing through the offerings and the tithes from the church. These church offerings had significantly diminished during the lockdown period a situation which that pastor had to look for alternative ways of putting food on the table. This further took away the pastor’s focus from ministering or helping the congregants. This has created divided attention on the part of
pastors who now have to assume the role of funding their families to supplement whatever they are getting from the church.

There is no doubt from the findings that the church landscape has been transformed by the regulations inspired by COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. This led us to probe the question whether the church has been compromised and also if it is doing enough to reclaim its position in the society. The responses that were given showed that the church and its leadership believed that they had a much higher role in the society that included the governance of the country and the attendant decisions that affected people in their daily activities. The following were some of the responses:

The way we operate has been compromised and our role in the community is also seemingly non-existent and we feel as well that the current situation is making the least privileged members of the society getting excluded from church issues. This is because as the church has gone digital, we look at the price of data its very high it means probably a small percentage of our membership is able to enjoy services from the church and there are a lot of other things that we can't do such as weddings that have been stopped, funerals are happening and the church has been one of the pillars to do with funerals but now people are just being buried with their immediate relatives, and that whole fellowship and that spirit of being together has been severely compromised. All the crusades that were lined up as a mandate of the church to reach out have all been halted. So that limits us because we are mandated to preach the gospel to everyone but now we can't because of the lockdown.

What was clear from the responses was an acknowledgement that the church had been compromised in many ways. Many of its activities were disrupted and could not easily be replaced with alternative platforms. An expression of helplessness was also clear from the responses showing that state regulations on COVID took precedence over the traditional conduct of churches.

9.6. Adequacy of the available platforms to sustain church activities
Just like many other institutions in Zimbabwe, churches devised ways to remain afloat under the COVID-19 lockdown. The adoption of digital platforms as a medium of communication enabled church activities to continue. In our investigation, we sought therefore to understand the adequacy of such platforms as well as challenges inherent within the new order. The following were the sentiments of the respondents on the issue:

The digital platforms are very exclusionary in nature because there is an assumption that a lot of things are actually in existence. so from the administration of the church side we can organize and say we are going to have our service over the platform but we don't know whether our people have enough smart phones, we don't know whether the people have digital data, we don't know if the network in the area is also good enough to allow uninterrupted service, so I am very clear that people are excluded, it's not adequate.

The quality of digital platforms we are using to broadcast sermons is not the best because there is poor lighting, there is poor cameras, poor technology, so the quality of the word is compromised the hearers cannot participate. Some of the platforms like Facebook are not a two-way communication, it is a one-way communication so even the preacher does not know how the audience is reacting and if somebody wants to be prayed for you can't have physical proximity to pray because of the inadequacy of the technology.

This finding confirms Magezi (2015)'s finding that the use of ICT to spread the gospel in Zimbabwe has not been without its own challenges.

9.7. Socio-effects of COVID-19 lockdown on the church
Despite effects of the lockdown on the operations of the church, there were socio-effects of that which were being observed by the respondents among the congregants. It was mentioned that new problems like loneliness, depression emanating from social isolation were on the rise. This was mainly due to the new social order that people found themselves in. It was established that people
have found themselves disconnected from the usual social networks that gave them support on many issues of life. The immediate contacts that many people had access to become close family members of which it was indicated to be inadequate to deal with the many social challenges that people face. Lockdown had created a cocktail of challenges for people that affected primarily their livelihoods. This in-turn ended up negatively affecting even marital relations as people unusually spent more time together due to lockdown. It therefore followed that the chances for conflict increased significantly, yet social support networks for people diminished. These findings therefore diverge from what Ukah (2007) observes in Nigeria that during times of economic hardships, people find refuge in Pentecostal churches which offer them hope in the form of deliverance from the yoke of evil spirits. In this case, instead of finding refuge from churches, people suffer alone, which is quite a disgrace.

On the other hand, there were some people who were reported to have suffered loneliness as their living space had no other people to share their sorrows with. Respondents who were predominantly church leaders and elders indicated that they had received unusually high cases of domestic conflicts. Such people required counseling or someone to talk to. Cases of loneliness were also recorded from congregants based in the diaspora who increasingly found the burden of losing livelihoods and missing their relatives too high to manage. In this vein, Manyawu (2008) comments that Pentecostal adherents rely on mutual relationships for support and assistance in times of need; hence, isolation has shattered the lives of many. It was also observed that people generally have social challenges but the lockdown had compromised or eliminated the communication channels usually utilized by people to get help. The social network system in Zimbabwe and Africa at large plays a huge role in the wellbeing of families and people in particular. Such networks have relatives, friends, church mates, workmates, schoolmates, neighbors as well as other unmentioned relations. Such networks rely on frequent interactions which are primarily face to face. People then rely on such networks whenever they need help. The lockdown significantly compromised the effectiveness of these networks; hence, the many problems were explained by the respondents. One of the respondents had the following to say:

People generally depend on social network for survival and the general wellbeing especially so for people with limited resources. They do not have enough resources to be self-sufficient and at some point, they require the help of their social network. Covid 19 lockdown has really weakened the social networks and hence you find many people facing challenges that they cannot solve on their own.

9.8. The inclusivity of church’s engagement methods with the members

We had to also ask the respondents to comment on the inclusivity or exclusivity of the various mechanisms that had been put in place by the church to remain functional. Looking at existing literature, and the findings of this research, a point of convergence is noted where Allen (2008) observed that the use of technology poses pastoral challenges to the church. From this study, one thing that stood out from the conversations was that, digital platforms by their nature were exclusionary. This then clearly shows a challenge posed by the use of different technological platforms rather than face-to-face church services. People needed to have access to various enablers for them to participate in the activities of the church. Classes among the church members were explained to be shaping the participation of the people in church activities. The following were some of the sentiments shared by respondents:

We have noticed that our main effort was focusing on the church in general but we have the children’s ministry being left behind, the ladies being left behind and the youth being left behind, man being left behind so we have introduced some segments which are focusing on youth, specifically women, man we haven’t done that much but something that we are working on it.

We have realized that some of our platforms particularly the video Facebook platform are very expensive so we are beginning to introduce WhatsApp mainly for some of our midweek services so that we know people can easily participate and we are also aware of their retention capacity, if somebody misses the WhatsApp because his money is not there, he
doesn't have money, the record is still there when they load in their money they can still see these messages and catchup.

Through the office of the Pastor, we have been phoning some individuals just to find out how they are doing and as leaders we are also trying to phone individuals especially those that we are failing to see on our platform, we either phone them text them to just find what they are doing there are some cases that I know the Pastor has been dealing with where he has actually being phoning people praying with them over video just to be able to access quite a number of members.

The above were some mitigating measures that were shared by the respondents in a quest to broaden the inclusivity of the church. It was also established that the longer this lockdown is going to be, inclusivity is going to be further compromised because people’s resources are running low. Even among the church leadership including the pastor, coffers were said to be running dry. This is also against the background that people are battling to put food on the table for their families. The other issue that was mentioned is the high cost of data in Zimbabwe, which eliminates a lot of people from actively accessing such digital platforms. For pastors to be able to send messages, they now require more because of the frequency with which they are communicating with congregants. What was clear was the disproportionate participation of congregants in church activities due to limited resources. The following was said by one respondent:

We are coming to a point where people even those with the smartphones are unable to go on WhatsApp or worse still go for a Facebook live sermon – few people are going to be able to do that so it’s a very compromising situation, inclusivity right now is actually going down. The number of Amens you find when you send a scripture or the number of Amens you get when you send an audio note are dwindling, are dying down because people’s resources are running low and they are choosing to use their money for their own physical sustenance as a family that is if they even have the money to do that.

In view of the disproportionate effect of digital platforms as they were being used in churches, we established that there was an emergence of new dynamics around member commitment. We were also interested to understand how the church was balancing issues of member commitment in the face of potentially exclusive nature of the digital platforms. Considering the difficulty in measuring one’s commitment from a distance as was during the lockdown period, there were challenges that were noted. The following was one respondent:

You know within a church environment commitment you can measure one’s commitment by attendance, you can measure it by participation within the church, then the paying of tithes and the like but now we have already seen a decline on our side in terms of people that are tithing and that in my view you can argue and say how many people that did not tithe, did not do so because they were not paid.

The unavailability of face-to-face interaction among members led to limited encouragement and therefore reduced participation in church activities. The question whether the church is still a sanctuary for vulnerable people was also explored with the respondents. It was clearly admitted that the church had ceased to become a sanctuary for the vulnerable in many ways. Its inaccessibility to the ordinary person due to the barrier of the lockdown became the chief reason for this. It was pointed out that a lot of vulnerable people cannot get access to the elder, their deacon, or their pastor hence is left to just perish on their own. Vulnerabilities were defined to include people in poverty; those with diseases, people with marital issues, and victims of violence who have to depend on the church. As the physical church is closed, the pastor inadvertently becomes accessible to the rich through digital channels.
9.9. *New role of the church in the face of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe*

The role of the church in society has always been crucial as it nourishes the spiritual and social well-being of people in society. The pre-COVID church as a voluntary organization enjoyed freedom of worship; hence, unmitigated face-to-face interactions were permissible. With the relentless COVID-19 virus showing no signs of slowing down, it is being predicted that social distancing may be the new norm. This was the clear acknowledgement from the respondents who indicated that the church was undergoing soul searching as it sought to reposition itself in the new normal. The church’s role was said to be even more crucial than ever as social and spiritual wellbeing of people was at its lowest due to the many challenges being faced. There was also a clear acknowledgement from respondents that the church was being treated as a less important stakeholder in as far as national public health issues were concerned. This came from the lack of consultations on the suspension of church activities that had happened in the country. All respondents were very clear that the church could be the source of a solution only if it is fully utilized to deal with diseases and illnesses.

It also emerged that the church was limited in capacity to deal with crisis such as the COVID-19. The available mechanisms to keep the church operational were viewed as elitist and hence exclusionary. The new of the church hence needed to explore measures to reach out to the vulnerable in society. These vulnerable people were the most in need and yet the most inaccessible, hence creating an internal contradiction. The church as an inclusive sanctuary for the neediest people was said to have failed to perform this role. The new church as some respondents needed to reclaim its mandate of being a sanctuary for the vulnerable. There was also mention of the need to engage the authorities being the state in order for the church to contribute more to solving national problems.

10. Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated how COVID-19 lockdown has affected the operations of churches in Zimbabwe. Key policy pronouncements of social distancing and staying at home had direct and indirect implications on church members as well the administration of the church. The paper has shown that the mobilization of resources required to run a voluntary organization such as a church from its members has been significantly affected. Although the paper showed that adoption of digital platforms to communicate emerged as the most obvious option, there are some challenges that were highlighted. The execution of the mandate of the church was negatively affected by the prevailing circumstances as was heightened by the respondents. The paper also concludes that the church regrets the way it was “sidelined” in the promulgation of the policy position on COVID-19. There was a strong sentiment that the state could have engaged the church more as they also had the capacity to provide solutions to the problem. The paper also concludes that the church was ill-prepared to deal with the aftermath of the lockdown at many levels. This then led to many respondents concluding that the role of the church in a post-COVID era needed to be redefined.

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