

How Fanatic Followership of Religious Leaders Shaped the Belief of Pentecostal Churches Towards the COVID-19 Pandemic in Port Harcourt

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) ravaged almost all parts of the world and generated several conspiracy theories that either attempted to invalidate or validate the veracity of the pandemic. While most of these theories had some scientific leanings, the big public danger came from normative theories mostly associated with Pentecostal church leaders. However, nowhere was this more ferocious like Nigeria which is considered the church capital of the world. Given the fanatic followership structure of some big Pentecostal churches and the near godlike status of their leaders, these theories imposed anti-scientific beliefs that the disease was unreal. This study looks at how fanatic followership of religious leaders impacted on the belief of Pentecostal churches with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Two big Pentecostal churches namely, Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) and Christ Embassy (Believers' Love World) were purposively selected for this study. The convenience sampling method was used to target 24 members (12 from each church) and 6 pastors (3 from each church) who were reached using accidental and purposive approaches respectively. The In-depth Interview (IDI) technique was used to elicit primary information from the participants. The data were analyzed using the thematic approach. The findings revealed that a cult-like disposition of Pentecostal church leaders shapes the belief system of members as most of the church members in Christ Embassy following their leader believed that the COVID-19 was a conspiracy to reduce global population, while members of the KICC had a huge leaning to the near-scientific disposition of their leader concerning the pandemic. The study recommends a convergence of faith and science while pointing out that church leader should desist from conspiracy education of members to avoid the likelihood of misunderstanding and fatality in the near future.

Keywords: *Fanatic followership, Religious leaders, Belief system, Pentecostal churches, pastors.*

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Background to the Study

Apart from the adherence function, religious fanaticism remains a big global problem especially as it continues to provide a wide range of socio-religious conditions that propel antagonistic behaviours across the world. While the Muslim faith has been trolled for its huge inclination to socially adversarial behaviours arising from the fanatical attachments of most of its followers, there is clearly less emphasis on the subtle but equally deadly fallout of a distinctive kind of fanatical behaviour associated with Christianity especially the Pentecostal variant where pastors or *general overseers* constitute some kind of celestial figureheads. This pseudo-papal status associated with leaders of Pentecostal churches especially in Africa comes with a centripetal character that serves as a huge psycho-spiritual gravity which attracts members to their pastors, bishops or general oversees who are most often referred to as 'Papa' or Daddy (Emeka-Nwobi, 2020). Interestingly, this unique sense of fanatic followership which deviates remarkably from the traditional fanatical followership where members are prepared to die for their religion represents a scenario where followers now willingly stake their lives either consciously or unconsciously for their pastors.

With this kind of unalloyed loyalty to religious leaders which this paper refers to as fanatical followership, members become subservient be it at their peril or not. This further expands the social horizon of exploitation of members that most scholars have alluded to especially within the Pentecostal denomination of the Christian faith. For instance, Igboin (2020), notes that the leaders of the neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria continue to raise the bar of gullibility by teaching their followers to obey spiritual authorities unquestionably even when they are faced with crass suffering. This idea of respect is akin to the medieval logic of the divine rights of king suggesting that spiritual authority figures are ordained by God and therefore followers should see them as representatives of the almighty here on earth. This is backed by the real and imagined miracles performed by these spiritual leaders which further provide additional reason for members to be hoodwinked and controlled.

As a result of the near total control that these spiritual leaders have on their members, they almost certainly decide their behaviour towards societal issues and events. While this has been the case, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) provided a huge global laboratory for most Pentecostal leaders/pastors to test their psycho-spiritual hold on their members using several conspiracy theories that either attempted to invalidate or validate the veracity of the disease. With these conspiracy theories finding expression amongst some of the well-established Pentecostal pastors in the world, it became largely easy to identify a large mass of believers that had no choice but to lean to the views of their spiritual fathers. However, nowhere was this more ferocious like Nigeria perhaps in the attempt to live up to its elevated status as the church capital of the world. Adias (2021), notes that the very foundation of this, provided an unhealthy contradiction between faith and science intertwined by selfish spiritual drive that gave potency to an unholy myth of a wrestling match between man and his maker. Interestingly, these conspiracies mostly centered around the 5G debate and the claim that

Bill Gates along with his cohorts have long nursed the plan to drastically reduce the human population on earth especially in Africa (Xavier, 2020).

Although several works have been done since the wake of the massive conspiracy theories that graced the origin and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the scientific attempts at developing and implementing vaccine programmes for the disease, this study draws its intellectual rigor from two polar extant set of academic literature. The first set is a group of scholars who see the religious leaders' hold on their followers as tyrannical as well as manipulative (Ukpong, 2006; Anselm, 2020) and the second cluster of scholars are those who converge around the analysis of the COVID-19 related conspiracies (Wonodi, et al., 2022; Ayandele, Okafor & Oyedele, 2021). While the first set of scholars exposed the fanatical followership associated with church members in Nigeria, the second set illuminated the dimensions of the conspiracy theories that heralded the COVID-19 pandemic especially the vaccines. Although these scholarly works have contributed to the understanding of the subject matter of our study, none of them was able to show how the COVID-19 conspiracy preyed on fanatical followership as a basis to determine the behaviour towards the disease. To address this gap in knowledge, this study is focused on how fanatic followership of religious leaders impacted the belief of Pentecostal church members about the COVID-19 Pandemic in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. In light of this, the objectives of the study are to examine; 1) the level of control that some Pentecostal church leaders have on their followers and 2) how the fanatic followership shaped

Conceptual Framework

There are a few dominant concepts associated with this study. These are fanatical followership, religious leaders, beliefs of Pentecostal churches and COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, the focus is to provide a framework that will guide a proper understanding of how these concepts are related and what they mean in the context of this study.

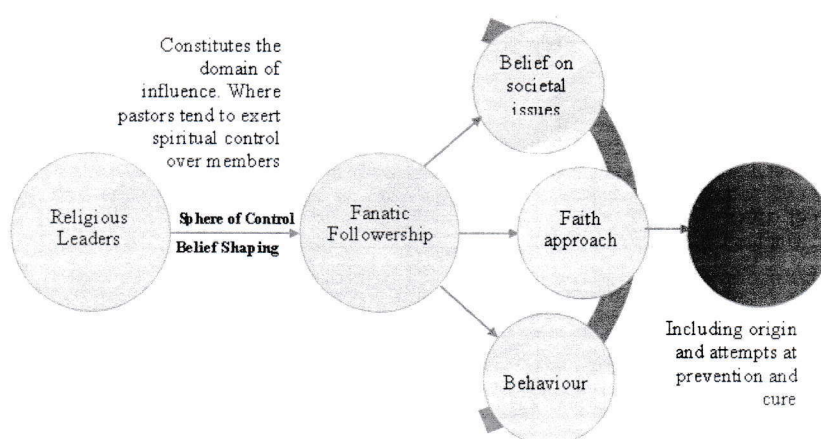


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework as captured in Fig. 1 above simply shows the flow of control from the religious or spiritual leaders to members who become largely transformed to fanatic followers as a result of belief shaping. However, the outcome of this is that the belief and behaviour of these followers towards societal issues, now rely on their fanatic relationship with the spiritual leaders in their various churches. Interestingly, this is further strengthened by the faith approach which continues to have significant influence on their attitude towards many issues and events, especially diseases and in particular the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious leaders in this framework refer largely to pastors or general overseers of Pentecostal churches who command the followership of their members at a fanatic level. On the other hand, fanatic followership as used in this study, captures a distinct section (usually significant) of the church that have an unusual or beyond the normal zeal to believe any idea or opinion of their spiritual leader with no sense of their own views and notwithstanding broader societal opinion.

Literature Review

Just as highlighted in the statement of problem and by extension the objectives, this section looks at two independents but mutually reinforcing strands of literature. The first is focused on general scholarly works that have attempted to look at the hegemonic and manipulative or control role of religion and especially pastors on their followers. This strand of literature derives from the theoretical position of Karl Marx who provided a materialist understanding of religion with a firm assumption that religion serves as the opium of the masses (Pedersen, 2015). In this sense, Marx's views on religion underscores its manipulative tendencies in relation to its adherents. On the other hand, the second aspect of the review delves into recent literature that have focused on religious enabled conspiracies in relation to the COVID-19 in particular and global pandemics in general. With regard to the first phase of the review, the works of scholars like Dare, Onyekwere, Obiajulu and Bernard (2016); Anselm (2020) as well as Ayandele, Okafor and Oyedele (2021) are largely relevant. For instance, Dare and Onyekwere (2016), provided the formative argument suggesting that religion, just like Karl Marx noted is actually a sedating enterprise that makes adherents to be gullible. This gullibility provides the necessary foundation for spiritual leaders to have control over members in a puppet-like manner. While the above views are largely generalized, Ukpong (2006) on the other hand was particularly concerned about the hegemonic or what he termed tyrannical control that Pentecostal pastors have on their followers. In his own words, "it is easy to see that in Pentecostal churches, the personality of the pastors often referred to as 'Papas' or 'Daddies' attracts more respect or admiration given the belief in their person as instruments or mediums of divine power (43). Given this somewhat celestial hold on their members, most pastors tend to use this as a manipulative weapon to the extent that followers rarely question the opinion or actions of such men of God. Ayandele, Okafor and Oyedele (2021), note that a significant number of such fanatical followers tend to listen and believe in the views of their spiritual fathers (i.e. the pastors or papas) than constituted political leaders given the deified status that they have come to attribute to religious leaders.

In light of the arrogated divine rights of pastors over their followers, you find situations where the latter tend to socially ostracize members who question the views of their spiritual leaders, and this gets even worse when someone outside the group dares to say anything bad or demeaning about their leader. Interestingly, apart from spiritual influence, there is the socio-economic dimension to the debate on fanatical followership of Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria where it is believed that the failure of the state to address widespread poverty and the ability of the church to relatively provide support for a number of its members provides the necessary condition for followers to respect their pastors unconditionally. On this ground, Peter (2019), argues that amidst the inability of the government to provide for its citizens, the church is at the forefront of providing socio-economic empowerment for the needy thereby attracting their unalloyed loyalty. This is perhaps why even at the detriment of their lives (Raimi, 2020), they lean onto the understanding of their pastors defying scientific and government caution on deadly diseases such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second strand of the literature review is drawn from the works of Ndinojuo (2020), Augoye (2020) Ayendele, Okafor and Oyedele (2021). These scholars converge on the opinion that the willingness of religious followers to listen to their spiritual fathers even at the risk of their lives found expression during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic when amidst government's lockdown directive, a significant number of followers damned the chances of contracting the disease and attended religious gatherings in churches as a show of respect for their pastors. This show of loyalty was further cemented by notable pastors who disseminated conspiracy views on the origin and motif of the virus especially the 5G and population reduction perspectives. For instance, it is in public domain that Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of the Christ Embassy church was a major enabler and champion of a massive conspiracy theory suggesting that the 5G telecommunication network was responsible for the emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China (Ndinojuo, 2020). Despite not being able to provide proof for his theory, there is every chance that his over 13 million followers across the world (Haylon, 2018) likely bought his views on the relationship between the 5G and COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from Pastor Chris, several others kicked against the global lockdown especially in Nigeria with many of their followers supporting them on social media. In fact, Ayendele, Okafor and Oyedele (2021) note that a good number of the pastors made sure their followers were attending churches despite the lockdown coalescing under the audacity of faith that the virus cannot come near them.

In addition to the 5G and population reduction conspiracies, most of the pastors argued that worship centres should be seen as essential service and accorded the same privilege as markets, banks, and other businesses that were allowed to operate. On the other hand, you have some religious leaders also of the Pentecostal denomination who shared some level of sentiment for scientific explanations of the causes and dimensions of COVID-19 pandemic. This cluster of pastors like Matthew Ashimolowo of the KICC among others trolled Pastor Chris for misinforming the people (Augoye, 2020). Thus, given the level of fanatical followership of spiritual leaders especially in Pentecostal churches, there is

every chance that this divergent views on the possible causes of the COVID-19 pandemic may have had significant influence on how the followers viewed the pandemic. This is the major focus of this study.

Method

This study adopts the qualitative research design and relied largely on the in-depth interview technique for data collection. The purposive sampling technique was used to target two relatively big Pentecostal churches namely, Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) and Christ Embassy (Believers' LoveWorld) given the polar views of their spiritual heads with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. The convenience/accidental sampling method was used to target 24 members (12 from each church) and 6 pastors (3 from each church). The data were analyzed using thematic method. In addition, secondary information sourced mostly from published materials were used to triangulate the primary data.

Results & Discussion

This section is organized under two main themes that align with the objectives of the study.

Theme I: Level of Followers' Loyalty to Spiritual Leaders

With regard to theme 1 which relates to the first objective of this study, a significant number of the interview participants unanimously agreed to the fact that they are loyal to their religious leaders who they refer to as Papa or Daddy as the case may be and the reasons for this sense of loyalty lies in their belief that their pastors are chosen by God. Most of them even share the belief that any form of disloyalty will adversely affect the efficacy of the prayers of the men of God. Interestingly, there are a few of them who tie their loyalty to the spiritual leaders because they consider them as a key source of their material progress. Hence, an interplay of spiritual and material wellbeing attributed to the pastors' prayers tend to drive the unalloyed loyalty of members. For instance, one of the interview participants notes that:

“Our Papa is called and ordained by the most high to carry on the work of God here on earth and so I follow him because he is a true man of God who has been very instrumental to my Christian life. In as much as I pray on my own, Papa speaks to God on my behalf and God answers with immediate effect” (*Female Interview Participant/KICC/Aged 26 years old*).

The fact that church members especially the Pentecostal ones are strongly tied to their pastors under a bond of loyalty clearly resonates with previous works. Ayendele, Okafor and Oyedele (2021) had in a previous article expressed the view that religious leaders of the Christian faith in Nigeria through their healing and miracle sermons in addition to their prosperity disposition continue to attract a significant degree of loyalty from their members. The fact that most of the churches have now assumed the role of the state in

terms of providing some degree of socio-economic succor to members and the spiritual leaders serving as *de facto* presidents of their own society (the churches that they own), loyalty has moved from constituted political authorities to the *general overseers*. Ukpong (2006) noted that in the midst of widespread economic hardship, poverty plays a huge role in defining and sustaining the fanatical followership of religious leaders in most churches in Nigeria. This position resonates with the views of one of the interviewees who expressed the opinion that "I am loyal to my Papa more than any government because he has opened my eyes to several economic possibilities through his preaching and above all, he spends so much in providing scholarship and empowerment for youths and widows respectively in the church and the society in general" (*Female Interview Participant/KICC/Aged 36 years old*). Another participant corroborated this view by noting that:

"To be frank with you, I am very loyal to my pastor and Papa because of his ability to preach the right things that improve my economy as well as my spiritual life and most importantly, I have strong respect for his views because he is led by God and whatever he says is a product of the communication between him and God" (*Male Interview Participant/Christ Embassy/Aged 32 years old*).

Although the socio-economic dimension of the fanatical followership has been largely polarized in terms of where the gains reside, with many outgroup analysts believing that the pastors are the ones milking their members (Igboin, 2020), the members themselves tend to believe in their pastors' prosperity preaching. This belief is nested on the faith approach to worship as captured in Fig. 1 above and this seems to guide the attitude and behaviour of members as they continue to look forward to socio-economic breakthroughs. Mboya (2016) refers to this as the message of hope and this according to him is needed to mitigate the issues of material needs which precipitates other problems such as health needs found in healing and miracles.

Apart from the spiritual (healing/ miracle) and socio-economic enablers of the loyalty of most followers of the churches identified in this study, there is another dimension associated with a feeling of protection that followers seem to believe that they get from their pastors. In this regard, a good number of the participants believe that the grace upon their leading pastors serve as some kind of protective shield for them against any form of evil machinations of the devil. This is perhaps why most of them tend to call on the God of their pastor whenever they pray in the belief that he will answer them in the same manner he answers their pastors. In support of this, an interview participant expressed the views that "the God of our church is our protection, and this is made possible by the Grace upon our pastor" (*Female Interview Participant/ Christ Embassy/Aged 41 years old*). This protectionist belief serves as a major source of loyalty when considered from the point of view that any member who is not unshakably loyal is likely to fall out of the grace coverage of the spiritual father and by extension, such a member is likely to fall victim to the devil. This is perhaps why despite the global scare imposed by the COVID-19, members' behaviour towards the pandemic were largely defined by the directives of their pastors and not the government's lockdown measures as we shall find below.

Theme II: Fanatical Followership and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The discussion on the level of loyalty to the leading pastors or spiritual fathers amongst the interviewees drawn from the two churches under theme 1 as discussed above, revealed some significant measure of consistency in terms of responses. This is also the case with theme 2 but this time, the behaviour component of this loyalty largely reflected the views of the spiritual fathers in relation to the pandemic, hence the difference in the behaviour associated with the members of the two churches regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the members shared the opinion which suggest that they were and are still not afraid of diseases especially because the God of their commission or church will not let such diseases to reach them. This belief stems from the faith approach that most of them have come to adopt in their daily endeavours. Hence, a good number of the interviewees believe in the healing power that their spiritual leaders carry and are of the opinion that even if they contract any virus or disease, they will eventually be healed. One of the pastors that was interviewed notes that:

“It is really sad that most of us do not believe in the power of God to heal us from any sickness even the most dangerous ones as he has done in the past and this really breaks my heart to see people who call themselves believers becoming scared of illnesses that have no power over them and this is because as Christians most of us do not know what we carry inside of us” (*Male Interview Participant/Christ Embassy/Pastor/Aged 45 years*).

Interestingly, the views expressed by the pastor above resonate with most of the interviewees who believe that Christians should not be afraid of any disease, not even COVID-19. Most of the church members interviewed as well as the pastors leaned to the understanding of their spiritual leaders, and this influenced the way they viewed the pandemic. As would expect, interviewees associated with Christ Embassy shared the views of their spiritual leader, Pastor Chris, who as mentioned earlier was a titanic champion of a robust conspiracy theory of 5G's connection to the origin and spread of COVID-19. While on the other hand, you find the members of the KICC church tilting towards the slightly moderate views of their spiritual leader, Pastor Ashimolowo, who debunked the 5G conspiracy theory as espoused by his counterpart. This clearly shows how fanatical followership works because such kind of followers is willing to tail their leaders to any length notwithstanding the consequences associated with this level of followership. One participant associated with Christ Embassy notes that:

“The idea that the COVID-19 virus came from a livestock market or a laboratory in Wuhan, China is completely false and that it was a product of a global conspiracy by a certain set of persons working to expand the hold of the antichrist around the world and they resorted to use the 5G telecommunication medium to ensure that this happens. 5G emits chemicals that are responsible for the virus, and they know this but have refused to agree” (*Female Interview Participant/Christ Embassy/Aged 39 years*).

The above interviewee's opinion resonated with almost all the Christ Embassy participants in this study except one who shared a moderate view of the pandemic and argued that his pastor may be right, but his views have not been proven yet. Interestingly, this interviewee said he just joined the church, and this may have influenced his moderate views on the matter. It is clear therefore, that this leftwing view of the COVID-19 as a conspiracy in itself amongst the members of the Christ Embassy church was sparked by the fanatical beliefs that followers have on their spiritual head. Ibrahim (2020) notes that the spiritual leader of Christ Embassy presented to his audience the biggest conspiracy theory about the COVID-19 pandemic and linked it to the 5G with a rather audacious view that people like Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci have formed an unholy alliance (antichrist union) to depopulate the world (Plate 1 below captures his teachings).

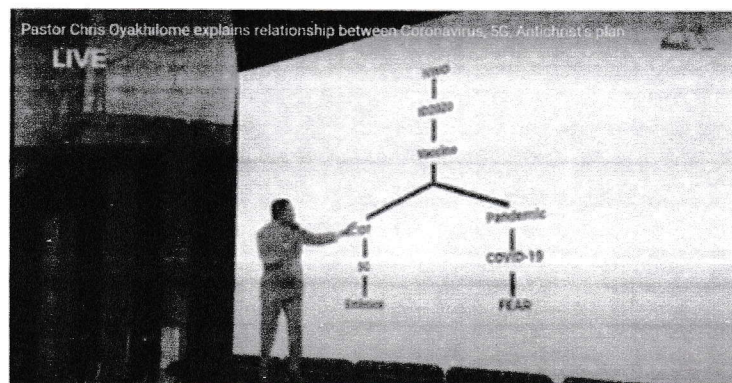


Plate 1: Pastor Chris's popular teaching on 5G and COVID-19. Source: Nwachukwu (2020)

The views of the spiritual leader gradually informed the belief and behaviour of his members towards the COVID-19 pandemic. This is perhaps why most of the interviewees acknowledged that they continued to attend service despite the lockdown and social distancing measures put in place by the government. Interestingly, this fanatical leaning to the views of the pastor also affected the behaviour of his followers towards COVID19 vaccination as none of the participants in this study had taken vaccine because they believed their pastor that the vaccines were linked to nanotechnology and associated particles derived from the 5G network (Xavier, 2020).

On the other side of the fanatical divide, you find the followers of the spiritual leader of the KICC who share in the near scientific views of their pastor. The fact that the spiritual leader of this church made it quite open that he was not in support of the 5G debate made a huge difference amongst his followers as most of them did not buy into the conspiracy. Most of the interviewees affiliated to the KICC expressed the views that the COVID-19 pandemic was unrelated to the 5G and that they believe in the views of their leading pastor. In fact, one of the interview participants shared the following view:

Honestly speaking I did not buy into the conspiracy theories that made the rounds about the origin and spread of the COVID-19 virus and that is simply because my pastor made it clear that we should allow the scientific world to deal with the issues of science. He advised us to obey constituted authority on the matter and that is why during the lockdown, our churches followed all protocols to ensure that the virus was contained (*Female Interview Participant/KICC /Aged 39 years*). The above submission is another clear indication of the influence of spiritual leaders on their followers notwithstanding if the leaders' views are true or not. While in the case of the KICC, the views of their spiritual leader or the leading pastor corroborated the stand of the scientific community on the causes and spread of the COVID-19 virus, it nevertheless represents a typical case of fanatical followership. This reflection of positive fanatical followership in the context of the discussion was made even clearer as about three (3) out of the eight (8) interviewees had been vaccinated in line with the directive of their leading pastor who himself is a champion of COVID-19 vaccine uptake in minority communities in the United States (KICC, 2021).

Notwithstanding the difference in the belief and behaviour of followers with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic in the two churches studied, it is important to note that both layers of reactions helps to illuminate the power of religious leaders over their followers. The level of fanatical followership of Pentecostal church leaders goes to show the degree of influence that these men of God have over the members, and this has significant implications for how they view events in society as their reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination programme have shown. Most of the participants admit to being ready to do anything even if it means staking their lives to obey their spiritual leaders or Papas. The fact that despite the widespread deleterious impact of the COVID-19, some members were equally yoked with their leading pastors in the belief that the pandemic was a hoax and deadly ploy by some antichrist persons to undermine the church, clearly shows that fanatical followers' belief can be shaped by their pastors even in the deadliest of situations.

Conclusion

This study examined how fanatical followership shaped the belief of selected Pentecostal church members towards the COVID-19 Pandemic in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Based on the findings, it is easy to conclude that a good number of the members of Pentecostal churches studied have a peculiar kind of loyalty to their leading pastors which can be described as fanatical followership. This extreme status of followership accounts for why such members are willing to obey their leading pastors even when there is every chance that such views held by their pastors can be life-threatening. This position was largely confirmed in this study as is the case with participants who were divided in their views of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated vaccines. The fact that members' views towards the origin and spread of the virus as well as the vaccination programme that followed were shaped by their loyalty to the leading pastors of their various churches goes a long way to show that pastors have significant role to play in terms of ensuring that they disseminate the right information to their members.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the conclusion reached, two broad recommendations have been proffered here to guide followership and behaviour of members especially during the period of global pandemics such as the COVID-19.

- i. **Hybrid Faith and Science:** It is particularly futile to continue to see science as antichrist even though we know that the scientific community comes with extreme worries on some occasions. This notwithstanding, religious leaders have the opportunity to be scientific about their views as this does not in any way reduce the level of their spirituality. There is every need for leading pastors to (in addition to practicing their faith) promote information that are verifiable rather than those based on conspiracy and myths. Hence, the Matthew Ashimolowo effect should be encouraged because given the context of uncertainty associated with the origin and spread of the virus, spiritual solutions alone would not have been the most appropriate approach.
- ii. **Sanctions for Misinformation:** While the United Kingdom media regulatory agency, Ofcom, fined the leader of the Christ Embassy church about 125,000 USD for his role in spreading the conspiracy theory about COVID-19, the Nigerian government did nothing of such. There is every need to sanction religious leaders believed to be misinforming their followers and the general public in order to avert the chances of experiencing the popular mass suicide that occurred in Jonestown, United States, in 1978 where 900 members of the People's Temple took their lives believing that they will go to heaven as preached by their pastor. Given the level of fanatical followership of religious leaders believed to be representatives of God on earth, there is every need for regulatory measures to mitigate mass loyalty that could lead to fatalities. Nigeria and indeed Africa was simply fortunate that the COVID-19 pandemic did not unleash its vampire appetite for lives as was the case in most parts of Europe and the United States.

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