



Research Programme on Religious Communities
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POLICY BRIEF

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“More than just having church” – COVID-19 and African Initiated Churches

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Abstract:

The corona pandemic continues to affect people's lives all over the world. In many countries schools and businesses are closed, and the future development of the situation remains uncertain. In African Initiated Christianity, the pandemic was met with different reactions. Most church leaders support their communities with prayer, advice, food or hygiene articles. They often do “more than just having church”, as one pastor phrased it. However, there were also instances of church leaders who were exposed for sending out misleading healing promises. The COVID-19 pandemic underlines the need for cooperation between state and religious actors in the implementation of public health measures. In many countries, African Initiated Churches are cooperating with their governments to implement corona prevention measures. At the same time, church leaders criticise fundamental problems such as unemployment and inequality that have become even more visible in the light of COVID-19.



Church service at Covenant House Family Church, South Africa

“More than just having church” – COVID-19 and African Initiated Churches

“Now more than ever, Ghanaian Christians don’t need false prophets”

In many African countries, African Initiated Churches are important community agents who reach people on the ground. The corona pandemic has highlighted the different roles they play in their local communities and their relationships with governments. It also underlined their status and influence – which is in many cases also acknowledged by the governments. While many churches try to support their members and the wider community, some also have been exposed for their empty promises. Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, a Ghanaian media anthropologist describes how the coronavirus pandemic has exposed “false prophets”, especially Pentecostal pastors, who gained attention claiming to have healing powers but were unable to fight the coronavirus.¹ While some of these pastors had previously been accused of corruption, mismanagement or other delicts according to the author it is now “the first time in recent Ghanaian history, [that] there is a vigorous public debate that casts critical scrutiny on the practices and ideologies of some of the Pentecostal Christian churches and of their charismatic leaders.”

In fact, spiritual healing plays an important role in many African Initiated Churches, not only in Ghana. Specific rituals and ceremonies are used to contribute to coping with spiritual, social and also physical problems. While this can become problematic in cases where spiritual healing is considered the only possible treatment for diseases, it does not mean that African Initiated Churches reject conventional medicine – as a South African church leader pointedly stated in an interview in 2016: “God does not prevent you from taking a pill.” A joke that was shared in a WhatsApp group of a Pentecostal pastor in Uganda illustrates a similar perspective. It tells the story of a man who “went to church on Sunday and gave testimony that he was infected with the coronavirus and that miraculously God had healed him.” After he finishes, he wants to pass on the microphone, but neither the next speaker nor the pastor or the senior pastor want to take it and the senior pastor tells him to keep it: “It’s a gift from our church for your marvellous testimony. Please take it home.”

An example on a wider scale is the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC). OAIC issued a letter to its member churches already in March 2020 pointing out the importance of personal and communal hygiene and the duty of the churches to “protect the weak”, because “poverty and other forms of economic exclusion undermine the ability of many people to protect themselves from the infection and consequently from the transmitting of the virus.” Besides these practical aspects of the churches’ work, OAIC also highlighted the role religious teachings can play in this situation. The organisation urged its members to “pray in an informed manner” and underlined the “need to re-examine any theologies or beliefs that can lead to the denial of the disease.”²

In order to find out how religious leaders are affected by, and also how they are dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development is currently conducting an online survey entitled “Religious Leaders Perspectives on corona” (see also [Policy Brief 03/2020 “Religious Leaders Perspectives on Corona – Preliminary Findings”](#)). Preliminary results show that belief in the power of prayer does not hinder African Initiated

¹ <https://www.coronatimes.net/ghana-christians-dont-need-false-prophets-covid-19/>.

² <http://www.oaic.org/?p=2033>.

Churches from calling their members to adhere to corona-related measures taken by governments: While 57 of the 67 respondents from African Initiated Churches stated that they told their communities to pray for the end of the coronavirus pandemic, 51 church leaders also stated that they called people to wear a mask when they leave their homes and 48 respondents told their members to wash hands regularly.

Cooperation with the Government?

Similar to former epidemics such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa (2014–2016) and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the corona pandemic has highlighted the importance of close cooperation between state and religious leaders to implement public health measures. Already in the beginning of lockdown measures in several countries, criticism was raised on the behaviour of (Pentecostal) pastors in different African countries who spread wrong information on the coronavirus or called their church members to continue to take part in mass services.³ A prominent case highlighting different ways of interaction between church leadership and government is Bishop David Oyedepo, founder and leader of *The Living Faith Chapel International* (a.k.a. *Winners' Chapel*), a Nigerian church with millions of members worldwide. Even though the Nigerian government had put an indefinite moratorium on religious gatherings, Bishop Oyedepo decided to hold church services on Sundays.⁴ This provoked severe criticism from the government and the wider society. The church quickly responded by publishing a statement indicating that Oyedepo had been in touch with the government to clarify the issue and to ensure the church's support for the government's measures. The church has since donated medical equipment like ambulances, COVID-19 test kits and hand sanitisers to the government on various occasions.⁵

In South Africa, President Ramaphosa explicitly called on religious leaders for support in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic when he banned mass meetings with more than 100 people in March 2020.

It is also necessary to clarify that the regulations around gatherings of over 100 people also apply to funerals, over which our religious leaders preside. We call upon you to engage with bereaved families in the preparatory stages to impress upon them to confine the burial congregation to only close family wherever possible.⁶

Responding to this call, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), the largest church in Southern Africa, cancelled its Easter gathering, which normally attracts millions of people every year.⁷ A Youtube video posted by The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa in April shows President Ramaphosa visiting the ZCC's headquarters to thank the leaders for not holding their Easter Ceremonies and to inform them about the ongoing measures the government was taking with regard to the pandemic. The video

³ <https://globalvoices.org/2020/05/15/nigerian-pastor-spreads-covid-19-conspiracies-and-disinformation/#>.

⁴ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/383340-coronavirus-oyedepo-holds-service-vows-to-keep-winners-chapel-open.html>.

⁵ <https://tribuneonlineng.com/covid-19-winners-chapel-donates-ambulances-to-lagos-and-ogun-states-test-kits-food-others/>.

⁶ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2020-03-19-ramaphosa-asks-religious-leaders-to-help-contain-spread-of-coronavirus/>.

⁷ <https://www.enca.com/news/coronavirus-zcc-cancels-all-moria-events-until-further-notice>.

prominently displays that hand sanitiser is used at the entrance of the church and that President Ramaphosa and Bishop Lekganyane, the spiritual head of the ZCC, greet each other with an elbow bump instead of shaking hands.⁸ The ZCC also plays an important role in the current situation as it runs its own insurance trust, the Kganya Benefits Fund Trust. In order to support its members, the church announced that Kganya intended to continue to cover expenses e.g. for funerals even though people were at that time unable to pay the insurance fees due to lockdown restrictions.⁹

“More than just having church”

Many religious communities are trying to stay in touch with their members through online ceremonies and services. Especially in rural areas or informal settlements, African Initiated Churches use social media to reach as many people as possible. As Pastor Don Makumbani, founder and leader of the Covenant House Family Church in Polokwane, South Africa, explained in an interview (conducted digitally via video-chat) in late July 2020:

To cater for those who are not able to access us on Facebook, on YouTube, we also do audio-recordings of the same service and send them out on WhatsApp. In that way we are able to also cover those who don't have the luxury.

Moreover, while the church used to hold two services per week online, Pastor Makumbani decided to convert one of them into a dialogue with practitioners. Different people, e.g. medical experts, are hosted by the pastor to talk about topics such as how to maintain physical and mental health in these stressful times or how the experts themselves deal with the situation where they have to take care of people who are infected with or dying of COVID-19. He underlines: “We are talking about issues that are relevant to the people more than ... just having church.”

Besides sharing prayer, encouragement and information, African Initiated Churches also provide material support to people in acute need. More than half of the survey participants from African Initiated Churches reported that their churches distribute food during the pandemic and more than 40% of them provide financial support and hygiene materials such as hand sanitisers and disinfectants. Pastor Makumbani's church is situated in a peri-urban area close to an informal settlement, where needs are particularly urgent: “In the middle of this whole lockdown issue we realized that there are people who were not able to even afford a meal.” The church has recently been able to donate food parcels to more than 170 families. Following this event, the church was approached by the People Matter Foundation, a South African Non-Governmental Organisation. The two institutions began cooperating in order to reach more people in the area.

New and Old Problems

Pastor Makumbani's case is just one example showing how already existing challenges like poverty are exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and the related lockdown measures. Besides providing insight into the current engagement of religious communities, the online survey also highlights their perception of existing and growing problems in their respective countries. Religious leaders were asked

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fC3obK2CKg>.

⁹ <https://mykganya.com/covid-19.php>.

to select the five biggest problems their community is facing at the moment. Some of the often-named items, such as “closure of educational institutions” reflect challenges of the current situation. However, the problems tagged most often are long-term challenges in the respective contexts. The problem which was clearly mentioned most often is unemployment. It was selected by 52 of 68 leaders of African Initiated Churches and was closely followed by “poverty” (49). Moreover, 45 of the church leaders ranked “reduce inequalities between rich and poor” as extremely or quite important for the future. Besides these social and economic challenges, there is an increasing concern for ecology. Forty-nine representatives of African Initiated Churches consider it extremely or quite important to “strengthen environmental protection.”¹⁰ The same importance is attached to “increase international cooperation”. Forty-eight church leaders ranked this option as extremely or quite important in order to react to old and new challenges created or increased by the corona pandemic.

Conclusion and Implications

The examples above show that most African Initiated Churches and their leaders have not only complied with the measures introduced by their governments, but actively support corona-related measures and relayed public health advice and regulations in their congregations. However, especially in the early stages of the pandemic there were also instances of church leaders publicly advocating a purely spiritual response to the coronavirus, contributing to misinformation among their adherents. The corona pandemic highlights the importance for governments and development cooperation to engage and cooperate with religious communities in order to implement health-related regulations. Not only do religious communities influence people’s attitudes towards distance-keeping and other public health regulations during the pandemic, but they often practically support people in their local communities, or in some cases even nation-wide.

Existing problems like unemployment, poverty and inequality have been exacerbated by the pandemic in many countries. Our previous research has shown that African Initiated Churches are active in these areas and provide immediate (material) relief as well as infrastructure like schools or skills training opportunities.¹¹ Many of the church leaders’ responses to the current situation again exemplify that the churches are important community-level providers of social services.

¹⁰ See also [Kurzstellungnahme 04/2019 – Ökologische Nachhaltigkeit in African Initiated Churches](#).

¹¹ See e.g. [Kurzstellungnahme 01/2019: AICs in Ostafrika – Unabhängigkeit, Bildung, Landwirtschaft; Potenziale der Zusammenarbeit mit African Initiated Churches für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Ergebniszusammenfassung des Forschungsprojekts und Handlungsempfehlungen für die deutsche Entwicklungspolitik](#).

Zusammenfassung auf Deutsch

“Mehr als nur Kirche sein“ – COVID-19 und African Initiated Churches

In vielen afrikanischen Ländern sind African Initiated Churches wichtige gesellschaftliche Akteure. Auf die fortdauernde Corona-Pandemie reagieren sie mit verschiedenen Maßnahmen. Die meisten Kirchenleitenden unterstützen Kirchenmitglieder und Menschen in ihrem Umfeld mit Gebeten und Informationen sowie der Bereitstellung von Lebensmitteln und Hygieneartikeln. Dabei müssen sie oft „mehr als nur Kirche sein“, wie ein Pastor es zusammenfasst. Dennoch gab es gerade zu Beginn der Corona-Pandemie auch Fälle von Kirchenleitenden, die falsche Heilungsversprechen verbreiteten oder Mitglieder dazu aufriefen, weiterhin zu großen Gottesdienstveranstaltungen zusammenzukommen. Die Corona-Pandemie verdeutlicht, wie wichtig eine Zusammenarbeit von Regierungen und religiösen Akteuren für die Umsetzung von Gesundheitsmaßnahmen ist. Viele African Initiated Churches kooperieren mit Regierungen in der Durchführung von Maßnahmen zur Eindämmung der Pandemie. Zugleich kritisieren Kirchenleitende jedoch auch grundlegende Probleme wie Arbeitslosigkeit und bestehende Ungleichheiten, die durch COVID-19 noch verschärft wurden.

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