



ASSESSMENT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC AND ITS EFFECT ON THE FOREIGN MISSION WORK OF THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION

Kolade Oladele Olusola¹ and Ven Dr. Atowoju Ayodele²

¹Intercultural Studies & Administration, Faculty of Social & Management Science, Lead City University Ibadan Nigeria.

Email: kolade2002@yahoo.com

²Intercultural Studies & Administration, Faculty of Social & Management Science, Lead City University Ibadan Nigeria.

Email: atowojuayodeleade@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: *COVID-19 pandemic that began initially like a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan, China, later resulted in unprecedented global disruption. This pandemic has affected every facet of human life including religious life. Christian missions, which was experiencing a major shift in missionary sending direction from the global West and North to the reversed global South and East, was also not spared by this pandemic. This study examined the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the mission work of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in the United Kingdom. The study adopted a descriptive survey design method and purposive random sampling technique to select the respondents. The information and data were gathered through structured questionnaires and interview guides, using electronic means, from members and leaders of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in the United Kingdom. Interviews were conducted among the selected leaders and policy makers in the United Kingdom and Nigeria. The findings revealed that COVID-19 brought about disruptions of conventional missionary and worship methods in the United Kingdom. The study recommends that the Nigerian Baptist Convention does a rework of strategic mission agenda and approaches that can adapt well to the new normal brought by COVID-19 pandemic across the world.*

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 Pandemic, Foreign Mission, Nigerian Baptist Convention.



INTRODUCTION

According to Adewole (2022), the world is experiencing a major shift in Christian missionary work tagged the reversed mission. Supporting this claim, Hudson (2022) also stressed that missionaries from the global South and East are now moving to re-evangelize the post Christian global West and North. Nigerian Baptist Convention, in one of the most historically significant missiological movements, has also launched her foreign mission work into the United Kingdom where the Baptist faith originated from at the beginning of the 1600s². Baptist missions was brought into Nigeria in 1850 by the Western missionaries (Ajayi, 2014). Almost 200 years after it began in the United Kingdom and close to 200 years after it was brought to Nigeria, the Nigerian Baptist Convention's missionaries are now in the United Kingdom for foreign mission works. The choice of the United Kingdom for this research is partly based on this historical development. How has this 'reversed mission' fared especially in the face of the current global pandemic called CoronaVirus Disease 2019. In view of this, the study examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mission work of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in the United Kingdom.

Overview of the Nigerian Baptist Convention Mission Work in the United Kingdom

Historical record shows that the Nigerian Baptist Convention is a very important Christian denomination in Africa, a foremost leading evangelical in Africa, and the second largest Baptist convention in the world with over 8 million members (Okewole 2022). The United Kingdom is a sovereign state located off the north-western coast of continental Europe, and comprising four countries which are England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Ben, 2015). The latter three have developed administrations, each with varying powers, based in their capital cities, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast respectively. In his work, Baldwin (2021) described the United Kingdom (UK) as an industrialized economy. In addition, the United Kingdom has complete religious freedom, but with a century-long decline in church membership and attendance.

During the interview, the pioneer pastor of Baptist mission work in the United Kingdom emphasised that before the Nigerian Baptist Convention officially launched its mission work in the United Kingdom, many trained Baptist ministers had been labouring to advance God's mission of universal reconciliation in the United Kingdom (Oladiran, 2023). Rev Oladiran confirmed that he is the first indigenous Nigerian Baptist Convention trained missionary in the United Kingdom. He planted Divine Grace Baptist Church, London and became the chairman of all Baptist ministers in the United Kingdom. Later, the mantle of leadership of the Baptist Minister's fellowship in the United Kingdom was transferred to Rev Dr Olufela Adenmosun who is the founder of All Nations for Christ Baptist Church, Harold Hill Romford.

Adenmosun supported Oladiran's claim that Baptist mission work started in the United Kingdom through diaspora trained Baptist pastors (Adenmosun 2023). Therefore, Baptist mission work is more of a diaspora mission than a reverse mission. As Baptist trained pastors were increasing, the work was also spreading. In view of this, when Rev Dr Stephen Enyi was the Director, Global Mission Board of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, a trained pastor was officially sent from Nigeria to oversee Baptist mission work in the United Kingdom. According to Enyi (2023), the Global Mission Board of the Nigerian Baptist Convention has the following mission plans in the United Kingdom:



1. To organize and facilitate Church members to reach out through planned witnessing such as home prayer meetings in the house of prospects, meal fellowship, etc.
2. To establish regular discipleship programmes in the Church.
3. To grow the Church to self-sustaining, self-propagating and self-governing by 2020.
4. To organize a viable children ministry, youth ministry, men and women ministry, etc in line with the Baptist doctrines and beliefs.
5. To plant 1 viable Church within 5 years.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interpreting the pandemic as a phenomenon requires a strategic process and procedure in order to provide a workable solution. Therefore, the theoretical framework for this study is premised on strategic theory. Generally, strategy is used to refer to anything from state policy, personal choices and decision direction and business plan (Brian, 2006). According to Smith (2011), strategic theory does not emanate from the viewpoint of a single favoured participant; rather, it deals with a situation in which one party has to think about how others are going to reach their decisions. In relation to this, the outbreak of COVID-19 makes strategic theories relevant to this study. It offers a concise, comprehensive and coherent basis for investigating social behaviour associated with crisis situations like COVID-19 pandemic. Strategic theory in its irreducible essence is the theory of interdependent decision making under conditions of uncertainty such as COVID-19 pandemic scenario (Smith & John, 2011). Strategic analysis is always about situations and not individuals. Strategic theory is mind opening and intellectually liberating for the key actors in Baptist mission, especially the Global Missions Board of the Nigerian Baptist Convention to re-strategise and align with the new normal occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Being a qualitative research, the study adopted descriptive survey design. The choice of this design is confirmed by the nature of the study which focuses on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Nigerian Baptist Convention mission work in the United Kingdom. The study gathered data through primary and secondary sources. The primary data was sourced through structured questionnaires and open-ended interview guides with the aid of electronic means, WhatsApp call, chat, and Google form, while secondary data was sourced from library materials such as academic journals, articles, and online materials. The study employed a purposive sampling technique to engage the chosen population with the focus of the study. The population of the study accounted for two hundred and four (204) respondents. The sample size included one hundred and seventy-eight Church members (178), twelve mission workers (12) and fourteen pastors (14). In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted for 7 key denominational leaders who are directly connected with the mission activities of the Nigerian Baptist Convention home and abroad. The data collected were scored and analysed through

simple percentage, content and descriptive analysis. The results of the analysis were further converted to graphs, tables and charts.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

The first aspect contains demographic information of the respondents such as age range and gender of the respondents.

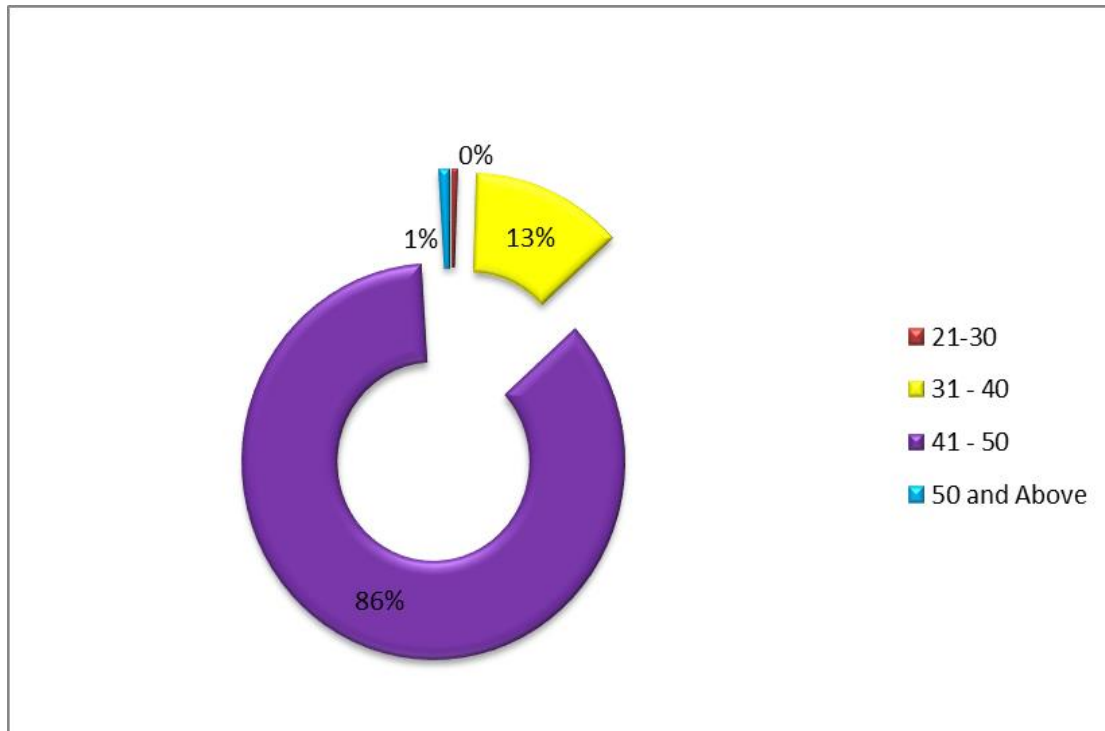


Figure 1: Frequency distribution of the age of the respondents

Source: Field work 2023

Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the age distribution of the respondents. From the graphical representation above, the age of the respondents covers youths and adults in the Church. However, 86% of the respondents are young adults while other respondents are within the youth age.

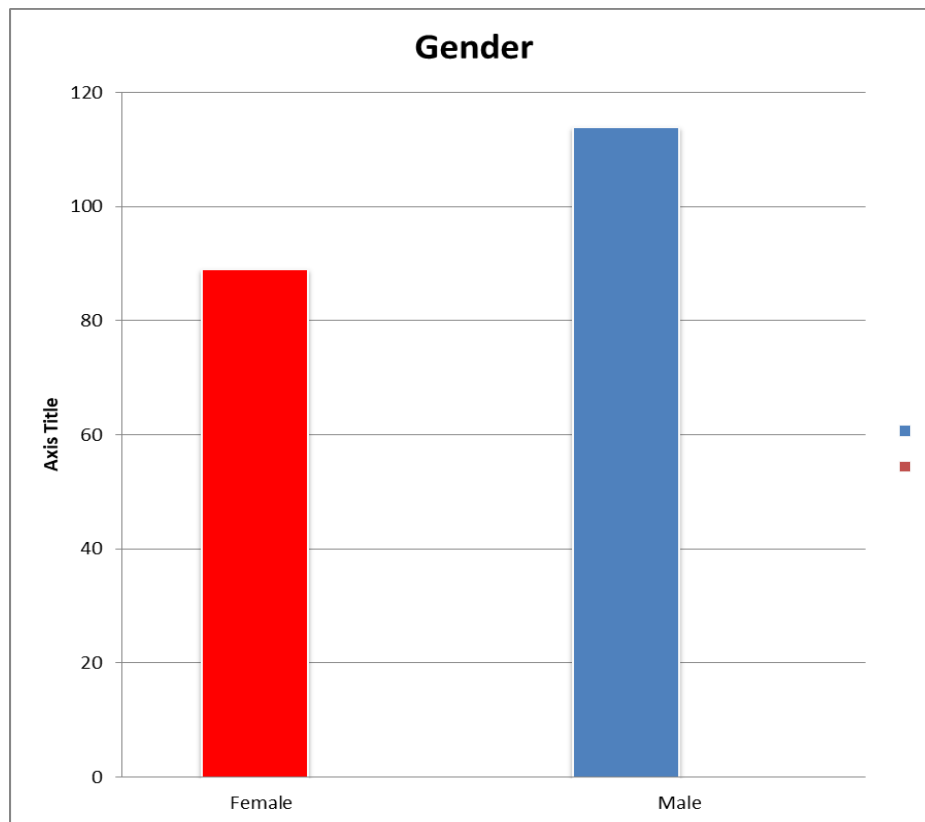


Figure 2: Bar chart distribution of the gender of Respondent

Source: *Field work 2023*

Table 1: A Summary of the Effect of COVID 19 on Foreign Mission Work of the Nigerian Baptist Convention

S/N		SA		A		D		SD		IDK	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	The pandemic prevented physical meetings and programmes that promote mission activities in UK	163	80	40	20	1	1.5	0	0	0	0
2	It necessitated the use of internet and online platforms to reach out to many people and hold programmes	153	75	50	21	0	0	0	0	1	0.5
3	It reduced the financial cash flow from the Global Mission Board of NBC	132	65	70	34	0	0	0	0	2	1
4	It reduced financial contribution for missions from other sources outside the UK	111	54	91	45	0	0	1	0	1	0.5
5	It reduced financial support from members of the Churches mission stations in the UK	104	51	98	48	1	1.5	0	0	1	1.5



6	The pandemic caused death of Church members and their loved ones and it affected the mission negatively	0	0	33	16	64	31	103	50	1	1.5
7	The pandemic claimed lives of workers/representatives of the Global Missions Board in the UK	3	1.5	38	19	59	30	103	50	1	1.5
8	The lockdown affected mission strategies significantly in a negative way	115	56	85	42	2	1	1	1.5	1	1.5
9	The busy schedule of the medical professionals affected their availability for mission works	75	53	47	33	19	13	0	0	1	1
10	The pandemic prevented the Church from executing planned outreaches	92	55	52	31	21	13	0	0	1	1

Source: Field work 2023

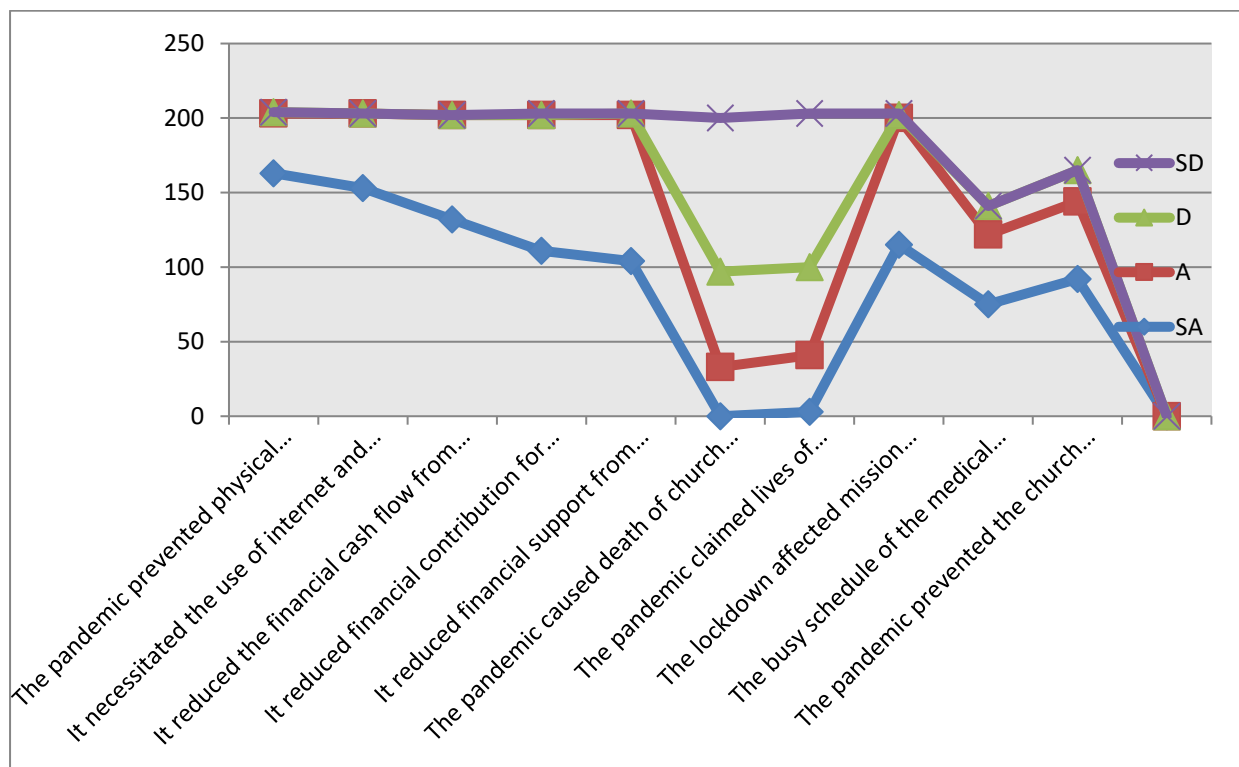


Figure 3: Line chart of the effect of COVID 19 on Foreign Mission Strategies of NBC

Source: Field work 2023



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Almost a hundred percent (100%) of the respondent strongly agreed that the pandemic really prevented physical meetings and programmes that promoted mission activities in the UK. When Boris Johnson, the UK prime minister with agreement from the other three heads of government ordered a stay-at-home on 23rd March, 2020, the order affected Church worship gatherings (The Guardians, March 24, 2020). Also, seventy-five percent (75%) strongly agreed that COVID-19 forced most Churches to result in the usage of internet and online platforms. Twenty-one (21%) agreed to the same. Even after the relaxation of order preventing physical gathering, most online worship platforms were still sustained. This was corroborated by the pastor of Beloved Group Baptist Church, South East London in an interview with him that aside regular Church meetings, they were also unable to do any form of outreach – any form of mission during the COVID time (Abraham 2023). The pastor also stressed that online service was not effective as a physical gathering but it was a standing method that worked a bit to keep the Churches together. It was a surprise when the pastor said that not all their members are very good with technology.

Also, another challenge associated with online service revealed during an interview with the pastor of Beloved Group Baptist Church was that many members who attended Bible Study experienced divided attention. For instance, during Bible Study, some members were also busy in their kitchen cooking. You could hear that they were not concentrating. In his opinion, the platform was just to keep them together for that period and to continue to engage members rather than losing everybody all together. Some members feel it is not the same as being in Church; they just did not see any value. As a result, many refused to join because they claimed that were not enjoying service online (Abraham, 2023).

Consequently, over ninety percent (90%) of the respondents admitted that cash flow from the Nigerian Baptist Convention Global Mission Board significantly reduced. This was a major setback to NBC mission activities in the United Kingdom. The shifting of the Church gathering to cyberspace impacted also on the financial life of the Church. Although few churches continued to receive tithes and offerings through bank transfer, some other people could not give to the Church during the lockdown. This significantly affected the Nigerian Baptist Convention's 20% of 20% contribution to the Global Missions Board and this affected the funding of the mission activities in the United Kingdom (Adewumi, 2023).

The ban on physical gathering was revolutionary in nature in the sense that it was forced, fast and sudden. Churches had no luxury of options; they were just forced to shut down physical gathering. All major annual festivals like Passion Week, Easter and Christmas could not be celebrated onsite. The only workable option the Churches had was electronic platforms. The Churches had to adjust to digital worship, digital tithes, digital sermons and mission. The Churches had to adjust to these new radical shifts to service being closed by the government. It is true that Church buildings were closed but God's people remained alive and active. The COVID-19 pandemic simply helped the church to return to its roots – the Church has returned home. During the COVID-19 pandemic restriction, the church literally existed in each home.

The observed challenge of the digital Church was the fact that those who could not access or operate the internet and electronic gadgets were excluded from the digital worship. Observing religious sacraments also poses its own challenges. The Lord's Supper and Baptism could not be physically conducted during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.



The study further confirmed reduction in financial contribution from members of the mission Churches and stations in the United Kingdom. About ninety-nine (99%) of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the financial contribution of the members of the churches in the UK significantly reduced. Economic activities during the COVID-19 lockdown were seriously affected. This affected the tithe and offering contributions of the members and invariably the Church at large.

The study confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown affected mission activities of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in the UK significantly. Medical professionals were not available for mission work during the lockdown. More so, ninety-eight percent (98%) of the respondents admitted that the effect of the lockdown negatively affected mission outreach and evangelism. Planned outreaches of the churches could not be executed because of the government restrictions on movement and physical gatherings.

CONCLUSION

The “new normal context” brought by the entrance of COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the life, mission, traditions and the theology of the Church. The lockdown’s order to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic forced Churches to ‘do Church’ in different ways. The church had no luxury of choices for the changes were sudden and fast; Churches were forced to close and in the struggles to stay open; they had to resort to pragmatic, creative ways and radical shifts. The traditional onsite physical gathering was replaced with an online electronic platform. People also gathered at home, each family becoming a Church of some sort.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian Baptist Pastors’ Fellowship in the UK should work towards a more formidable, convergent mission movement that will set kingdom purpose above personal interest. The fellowship should seek a better collaboration with the home convention in coming up with better mission policies and strategies that will jointly guide the various mission activities ongoing in the UK. The cluster Churches should seek for a more synergetic partnership that can result in bigger and stronger Church formation that can thrive better. More efforts should be made to go beyond diaspora mission.

This study has underscored the need for the church to learn to see mission beyond the confines of our ecclesiological understanding. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped us to see the state and situation of the world rather than to focus on the inside of the Church. The church should take further advantage of alternative ways of reaching the world, exploring and deploying new available technologies. The Church life, worship and ministries should be made accessible to the outside world. The Church and mission agencies should pioneer new ways of connecting with people beyond the known traditional mission tactics. The COVID-19 pandemic has further taught the church the reality of the fact that the future of global mission will be indigenization. The mission agencies and missionary workers must enculturate the gospel in places and communities that seem inaccessible. Mission must also become integral in the sense that the Church’s approach becomes more of reaching the whole person and the whole community resulting in transformation throughout the entire created order. The urgency of human needs



due to the ravaging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has given more platforms for the Church to showcase the relevance of the gospel to every aspect of human life. Mission agencies working in the UK and other foreign fields should take good advantage of the new awakening.

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