



COVID-19: The Great Disruptor of the Church in Kenya

By Dauti Kahura



Who would have ever imagined that the church would one day be closed? This has been the question that I have repeatedly heard among the clergy and worshippers that I have interacted with during this coronavirus pandemic. The disruption was abrupt and precise - nobody saw it coming, no one was prepared for such an eventuality, and the clergy and Christians alike are all agreed on this.

In a hyper-religious country like Kenya, religious activities, like going to church or praying in a mosque or temple, had been taken for granted so much that when the coronavirus crisis happened, it created a sense of confusion and panic. The “responsorial psalm” has been: Why would we even think of contingency measures when such a thing could never ever happen. Not the government, not any (evil) force, not even the devil himself can stop us from going to church.

So, when the global pandemic - an invisible contagion that is threatening the very existence of human life - came to Kenya’s doorstep, it completely upended centuries-old religious practices. “The Church, as currently constituted, will never be the same again,” said a Catholic priest. And when I say the Church, I mean the entire church fraternity, including the Catholic Church”.

Some people, said the clergyman, will never go back to church again. “I’m not sure whether some of my fellow Catholic clergymen are aware of that. The fear among many Christians that if you fail to

go to church continuously it would cumulatively lead to going to hell has been debunked. The people have realised, 'oh, so if you don't go to a church to perform the Sunday ritual, I'll not end up in purgatory' has very much liberated the people from the clutches of the control freak clergy".

The missionary priest who cannot be named because he is not authorised to speak on behalf of the Kenyan Catholic Church, observed that what the coronavirus crisis had done is to alter the relationship between the clergy and the laity. "This has really scared the priests. The power the priest wields over the laity is so enormous, he is literally a god unto himself: He threatens fire and brimstone, he gives favours - whatever favours they may be. He orders the laity around. As he gives favours, he also demands the same from the laity."

The thought of the priest not being the central figure in religious activities has become very scary: "How do you exercise control over people who are not physically in the church? How do you demand offertory, for instance, from people who are not physically present?"

The priest, who is also a university don, noted that coronavirus had created a "new normal" that is threatening the very fabric of Catholicism globally, and especially in continental Africa, where Catholicism is believed to be growing exponentially. "Our church demographics shows the church attendance is over 65 per cent youth. Their Catholic faith is not as entrenched as their parents', who are a dwindling lot. If they get something to distract them from not going to church, they will gladly oblige. They are tech savvy and social media had come define to their lives. Not so the clergy."

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Rev. Francis Omondi of the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) agrees with this assessment. "The Church, as currently constituted, is not ready for change. It is not ready for the new normal, because the priest is still stuck to the idea that he is at the centre of religious activities. The priest has failed to realise that online churches could be the churches of the future. The institution of the church, as we know it, will collapse." What coronavirus has done is to expose the vulnerability of the Church, said the clergyman.

"For the longest time, the expression of Christianity has been the Church - what coronavirus has just done is to teach the contrary," explained Rev. Omondi. "The Church has frozen, it has no idea what to do...the presence of coronavirus has shaken the very foundations of its reigning theological thinking...so the Church is at a gridlock. And the tragic thing about all this is that the Church is not preparing to change...it is not ready to change."

"The study of theology, unfortunately, teaches you not to think critically, not to question your subject matter, as well as not to confront the reality of your worldview with an opposing view," said the Catholic priest. "Theology is the only academic discourse where students are not required to interrogate their central subject: God. You begin from the premise that God is unquestionable, He cannot be criticised or faulted. What is said of him is infallible and true."

With this kind of training and in the wake of the global pandemic, said the Catholic priest, the Catholic clergy suddenly feels like a fish out of water, like an endangered species. "What do you expect to be the reaction of such a person when confronted with a global phenomenon of the proportion of the coronavirus that shakes his very existence and foundation? First, is to be confused. After the befuddlement has settled, he interprets the events of the day as the work of the forces of

the devil, out to wreak havoc and contest God's domain."

When the government finally announced that all churches must shut down in the wake of coronavirus, the Catholic clergy's immediate reaction was to be furious at the state, said the missionary priest. "Who are they to close the Church? Are they God? Only God himself can tell us not to go to church," was their reaction. For the clergy to imagine they could lose their control over the laity in what they consider to be their ultimate realm was unfathomable. For a church that believed it was so powerful that not even the government would issue a decree on Christian matters without consulting it was astounding, according to the clergy.

"The Church had become imperial," said Rev Omondi. "Of course, this wasn't always the case. Yet today the Church in Kenya finds itself in a bind. The government has found a way of dealing with the imperial Church." The reverend said that from henceforth, the government will be dictating to the Church, what it should be and how it should operate. "It is high time religion was deinstitutionalised"

The onset of coronavirus is a wake-up call for Christians. Can one be Christian without the institution of the Church? The reverend believes this is possible: "The strength of the Islamic faith is that, unlike Christian evangelists, pastors and priests, the imam is not the centre of Muslims' religious activities. The Muslim is not dependent on the imam to practise his faith. The Muslim faithful prays at home, at work, when he is traveling, wherever he is, essentially. The Muslim is his own imam; he leads prayers for himself, for the family. He doesn't need to go to the mosque if he doesn't have to," explained the reverend. "Muslims do not rely on the government to be told how to go about religious activities in these times of coronavirus," he explained.

The reverend observed that Muslims had not been affected by the coronavirus or the government edicts on the pandemic. "It is true the Anglican Church has been gravely affected by the pandemic: financially the church has been hit hard - giving of offerings has gone down, leading to some churches closing some programmes that were on their agenda. You cannot demand money, whether in the form of offering or tithe, from people who are not coming to church, from people whose income is no longer guaranteed or who have lost their jobs entirely."

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The mosque, unlike the church, does not rely on offerings and tithe of Muslims to run their operations, said Rev Omondi. "When a Muslim gives charity to the less fortunate members of his community, it is an act of giving his offering."

"Some of my brother priests have been holding secret masses for the people, in total defiance of the government's order," revealed the Catholic priest. "This was even before the government relaxed its rule and limited the number of people who could attend religious holy places to 100, which they were not been happy with. I thought this was dangerous and stupid. Why would someone, because he has been bestowed with some powers, endanger the lives of so many people? Don't these priests care about the people's well-being?"

This situation is not helped by the fact that one fairly young Catholic bishop claimed that the government had no jurisdiction over the Catholic Church. "If people can be allowed to shop at supermarkets, why can people not be allowed to attend church?" questioned the bishop. In a bizarre argument, he countered that the Church had holy water, which it would sprinkle the congregants

with, hence protect them from the coronavirus.

“Without a complete mental shift, the Church will find it very difficult to not only combat the pandemic, but also fit into the new normal. With this kind of thinking coming from its supposedly top echelons, does anybody really need to be convinced not to go to church? Yet the laity is also not blameless. Conditioned to observe religious rituals every Sunday, some of the Catholic faithful have been encouraging their priests to hold secret masses,” said the priest.

The Catholic Church, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, has been beaming masses live on Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and Capuchin TV. “Yet,” said the priest, “some Catholics have been coming to me and saying, ‘Father, can we hold mass for so and so, who my son is named after? Father, my grandmother has not received the Eucharistic sacrament for three weeks and she would like you to preside over a mass for her to feel better’”. Used to not missing mass, some Catholics have been looking for every excuse to relive the experience of an actual mass service by enticing priests to go against coronavirus protection.

“Coronavirus is the great disruption that nobody could foretell, or predict,” said a senior pastor at the Maven Church. “Never did we imagine that the Church would ever be closed for whatever reason, but here we are, this is the new normal and let’s be candid, things will never be the same again for the Church. It is the Church that will be forward-looking that will survive the tumultuous times of the coming years. We cannot pretend COVID-19 has not hampered our church operations, the way we relate with Christians and the impact we’d like to have on our community.”

For the Mavuno Church leadership, the coronavirus crisis has become a catalyst for scenario-building that the church had already begun exploring: How can the church move from being just a Sunday service ritual to being a church that is lived daily within the hearts and minds of Christians? What will the church be like in the next 15, 20 or 30 years from now? As the church is intent on growing exponentially, how should that growth be? What should dictate that growth? What kind of a Christian is the church looking forward to in the coming years? Who will be an integral part of its formation?

“These discussions, which began two or three years ago, were difficult conversations among the Mavuno Church community. Not only among the worshippers, but also among the pastors and deacons,” explained the pastor, who asked that his identity be hidden. “There were Christians who felt they were being involved in matters that don’t concern them. ‘I faithfully come to church, I give my offering, I pay my tithe regularly, what else does the church demand of me?’ posed some worshippers. The church leadership position was that there was more to a Christian than just giving his offering and observing the commandments of Malachi 3:10.”

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The pastor told me that the coronavirus pandemic had taught the Mavuno Church leadership a lesson on the problems of a bifurcated church: the dichotomy between the gathered versus the scattered church. “We would like to be the scattered church, a church that, in a manner of speaking, is not tethered to one place. A church that grows organically, that is found in the hearts and minds of our people, a church that perhaps in the next 30 years or so should really transform into a movement.” The pastor added that in their discipleship programme, they hoped their followers

would see the interconnectedness of action, practice and the Word.

“Take the example of the big congregation churches that host anywhere from 5000 to 20,000 worshippers. Right now they are not in a good place. Why? They just cannot meet. Because they are used to meeting in one place and they know no better. Even after the government relaxed the rule on the right to attend church and allowed 100 people, it brought even more confusion. Who do you admit and who do you leave out? And just how many services can you hold on a Sunday?”

The other difficult discussion the church had way before the onset of the coronavirus was the issue of bi-vocational obligations - church workers, including its corpus of pastors and deacons, should look for an additional job or business to supplement their incomes and be productive when not busy with church work. “This was the most difficult discussion: so what if you couldn’t get an additional job? What if you are not business oriented? Was the church suggesting it couldn’t fully take care of its workers?”

Rev Omondi said the Anglican Church was now grappling with this very question: “How do we encourage our priests to look for alternative productive engagement to supplement their church income? Because coronavirus has just shown that it will be increasing untenable for the church in the future to guarantee prompt salaries to its clergy and other workers. The priest said that many Anglican priests, over time, came to view the Church’s work as full-time employment. “This shouldn’t be the case - church work should be a vocation, not a career.”

Away from canonical conversations, and on a more practical note, the Mavuno Church pastor said the church had taken practical measures to mitigate and vitiolate the coronavirus crisis. “We decided we’ll not send any worker home, but they will take a pay cut. The senior pastors took a 45 per cent pay cut, while the other workers took a 10 per cent cut. We also initiated a programme called ‘Spread the Hope’ where the church community members are encouraged to give relief food to the less privileged in their respective localities.”

The pastor said their annual June assembly of nearly 3,000 people dubbed, “The Fearless Summit”, usually held at the Hill City campus in Athi River, had gone virtual. To the surprise of all, the one-week online meeting that had attendees from all over the world attracted a virtual total viewing of over 18,000. For a church that has a 30-year-old vision, the coronavirus crisis was a wake-up call to consider alternative possibilities.

But even as the Mavuno Church toys with the idea of infinite possibilities, Rev Omondi observed that with the advent of coronavirus, the Christian religion has lost its power and mystique. “At a time when Christians hoped their religion would come to them in their greatest hour of need, it has failed them: it cannot perform miracles, it cannot cast away the pandemic, its clergy have failed to exorcise the demons of the devastating coronavirus, pastors who claim to pull miracles have just vanished.”

Hassan Mwadzaya believes that the coronavirus pandemic has shown why going to a mosque is not so crucial to Muslims. “During the existence of Islam, Muslims have been faced with floods, plagues, even torrential rains that made attending prayers in a mosque impossible and risky. So this is not the first time mosques have been closed because of a situation where going to the mosque might endanger the lives of believers. Throughout their lives, Muslims are taught that Islam is a way of life - *fiqh* - and therefore nothing should stop a Muslim from observing the tenets of Islam.”

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Once the coronavirus became a global crisis, the Muslim world responded accordingly and promptly, said Hassan. “Way before many countries thought of shutting down their religious places of worship, Kuwait was the first Islamic country to implement the standard operating procedures in dealing with the pandemic - it ordered all mosques closed and from then on, the *adhan*, the call to prayer, ‘*hayya alal swalah*’, which means come to prayer, became, ‘*aswattu min bayyutukum*’, which means pray in your homes.”

Here in Kenya, said Hassan, just like in Kuwait and all the over the Islamic world, the *adhan hayya alal swalah* became *aswattu min bayyutukum*. At Jamia Mosque in the centre of the capital city Nairobi, where he goes for his prayers, “the mosque was soon shut down, not really because the government said all religious places should be closed, but because the mosque’s central committee had already consulted Muslim doctors who had advised that the mosque would have to close down”.

“We Muslims are not afraid of the coronavirus,” said Hassan. “The World Health Organization, and indeed the Ministry of Health of Kenya guidelines on the measures to curb the pandemic are not anything new to us Muslims and therefore do not affect us. The Muslim way of life in itself is a life of cleanliness and observance of greater hygiene. As a Muslim, I’m required to wash my hands, my face and feet 15 times a day, that is five times three, every time I go to the mosque. Water is a prerequisite in all mosques. The coronavirus pandemic may be a disruption, but it has not stopped the Muslim from going on with his religious life and observing his religious obligations like giving *zakat* (alms) and *sadaqa* (charity).”

“The mosques will remain closed until such a time that the Muslim experts - religious and medical - and not the government,” said Hassan. “A mosque is not only a place of prayer, but a place also for brotherhood and camaraderie. You cannot decree that only a 100 people should attend a mosque. How do you select who should attend and who shouldn’t, for instance? So at Jamia Mosque, we have decided the mosque will remain closed to all people until it is safe to be opened to every Muslim.”

Christians in Kenya seem to be learning from the Muslim faithful; many are choosing to pray at home or wherever they happen to be. “Even with 100 people being allowed to go to church, people have refused to go back,” said Rev Omondi. “People have found new ways of doing church and the priests and pastors better prepare for this stark reality.”

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