Virtual Watch Night Services: A Post-Pandemic Era Adaptation in Nigeria

by

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Abstract

Watch night services are integral part of worship in African Christianity either to praise the Almighty God or for intercession of various kinds. Some Christian denominations believe that worship would be incomplete without watch night services. However, in recent times, Christian denominations in Nigeria are divided on grounds of the continuity of the watch night services in respect to prevailing insecurity situations in the Nigerian society. Some church members have suffered robbery attacks, young girls have been raped and some members have been kidnapped on their way to, and back from the watch night services. The situation is so bad that some churches employ local hunters or vigilante groups, to ensure adequate security during watch night services. Other Christians continue the services believing that the God they are serving would keep them safe from all forms of physical insecurity during the night watch services. Yet, some groups of Christian opine that the virtual watch night services adopted during the COVID-19 era would be the best. The Nigerian Christian is indeed confused about the best approach to watch night services. This ethnographic study did a random survey of 15 churches in Agbowo, University of Ibadan area in Oyo State in the last Fridays of January and February, 2023 Findings reveal that majority of churches have not avail themselves of the opportunities the virtual watch night services do offer. Watch night services are biblical.. The church need to avail herself of the opportunity the virtual watch night services offers to avert the attendant insecurity of the physical watch night services.

Keywords: COVID-19; insecurity; Night watch services post-pandemic;; prayer

Introduction

COVID-19 as an infectious disease had a debilitating effect on personal well-being, lifestyle and on religious life (Adetunji and Oyekan, 2020, p.2994). Magezi (2022) reports that it has a negative effect on the worship, fellowship, preaching, and teaching of the word of God, on the mission, evangelism and pastoral ministry of the church, and on the economic life of the church (p.5). It affected the operating, investing and financing activities of the church because there was the scarcity of cash inflows (Osei-Kuffour et al., 2022, p.8). The effect of COVID-19 was so real that Karbon et al. (2022) and Aluko (2020) aver that it is a curse from God to punish humanity for such acts as homosexuality, human trafficking, kidnapping, sacrifices, and corruption that are not biblical and for which Christians must ask for forgiveness. However, Adewale (2022) opines that God used the pandemic to restructure the church in order to become a formidable force. The pandemic brought about new means of grace and new ways of conveying the sanctifying grace of God in the area of the biblical activities are handled (Adewale, 2022). Oyekan (2021) opines that COVID-19 affords Christians to change their social ministry from 'giving to the needy', to empowering the needy. The faith-based organization did share the burden of the local, state and Federal government by providing relief materials to the citizens (Bankole, 2022; Ekpot, 2022). Religious attitudes differ towards the pandemic, yet they must

obey the government's order to shut down worship places to curb the spread of the disease. In the educational sector, Oyekan, Adetunji and Bafeto (2020) note that the experience during COVID-19 educatio n can no more be tied to the four corner called physical classroom.(p.4818).

Watch Night Services in the Pre-COVID-19 Pandemic

Traditionally, watch night services involve praying through the night. In most cases, the service starts at about 10:00 pm and ends at 5:00 am, the early hours of the following day. It is usually done by individuals, groups of people, churches and in some cases, denominations. Also referred to as the all-night vigil, it has its root among the African -Instituted churches (AICs), found its way into the Pentecostal denominations and has become a signature of emerging Christianity, even among the evangelical churches (Jenkins 2009, p.45). Today, watch night services are not only about prayers. To some, it is the praise night where worshippers sing and dance, using instruments and a public address system (PAS) throughout the night. For some, especially the youth, the watch night services avail the opportunity for choir rehearsals and the playing of musical instruments.

Those who do watch night services exhibit certain characteristics. Firstly, they believe that services done, and especially prayers said in the nights have potency as against those done in the day. To them, such services are void of distractions. More so, it would not allow the devil to overpower them because of the beliefs that the devil acts in the night. African and Asian's pagan societies have an influence on their disposition towards the watch night services since dark forces do evil spiritually during the night. There is therefore the need to dislocate and harm them More so, Christ and his disciples prayed to dispel the darkness on the night that Judas betrayed him (Jenkins, 2009, p.45; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005, p.105). Secondly, they believe that other people must be part of the service. This is the reason for the use of the Public Address System (PAS). The group sing on top od their voices during the night and preaxh in such a way that it would be very difficult for anyone to sleep when the service is ongoing. More so, Jesus and his disciples prayed, severally during the night (Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12, 9:18, and Acts 16: 25). Thirdly, the strong believe was that when Christians gather for services during the night, they are secured because they are shield from spiritual attack of the devil, as well as protected against the attack by the kidnappers, armed robbers who they believe have regards for the house of God and the worshippers theire in. More so, Christians, should " ...not be afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do" (Luke 12: 4).

These attitudes are not without their negative outcomes. In the first place, some worshippers, both young and old, have been so indoctrinated to the extent that they partake in watch night services, almost every day. This affects the health systems of many of them since sleeping contributes, greatly to good health. Ellison, et al. (2019, p.253), Ellison, et al. (2011) and Zarhin (2022) argue that organisational (service attendance) and non-organizational (prayer, scripture reading) religious activities mitigate the quality of sleep and affect the worshipper's life events. A survey carried out by a group of researchers reveals that atheists sleep better than Christians (2020). When religious activities are not relaxed, there is serious health problems as kidney failure (Purwanti, et al., 2020, p. 50), affects physical well-being (Ismaila et al., 2022, p.18), cancer attack (Walker, n.d.) and damage mental health (Almarzouki et al., 2022, p.13). Also, there used to be frictions between the worshippers and people within the community. The watch night services constitute nuisance to the community that both Christians and Muslims come together to charge some churches to the court of law for disturbing the peace of the community during watch night services by the use of PAS, clapping, singing and prayers. Furthermore, the insecurity in Nigeria (Bello, et.al., 2022; Obiorah, 2020; Oyewole, 2016; Oghuvbu and Oghuvbu, 2020; Okudolo and Salawu, 2022; Edomwonyi-Out and Edomwonyi-Out, 2020; Igbini, 2022; Abioro and Mutambara, 2022) before the COVID-19 pandemic found its way into the church to the extent that armed robbers would go and rob those who were

worshipping of their belongings, and they also attack them when going home in morning. Some were kidnapped, ladies were being raped and some were even killed. The calls to stop using PAS for health reasons, or stop attending watch night services yielded little or no results.

Although Roza (2017) observes that poverty and poor economic conditions predispose worshippers to skip sleep for physical, mental and spiritual well-being, Wu (2014) insists that sleep is God-given (Psalm 127:2, I Kings 19, Matthew 8:23-27) and "...a daily nightly event, it is religious ecstasy yet quite routine ordinary" (p. 126).Hence, McCullough and Willoughby (2009) advocate a religiousness that influences self-regulating and promotes self -monitoring for sound physical and mental health (p.80). in order to prevent deaths, and be in better health, the government, employers, schools and individuals need to promote good approach to sleep(Cramer and Espie,n.d. p.20).

Watch night services during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all worship activities, including watch night services, were seized during the pandemic era.Church members must observe social and physical distance (Falaye, 2020), the faith of many worshippers, especially the unserious ones began to sink (Alice, et al. 2021), and religious markets and audiences changed (Frederick, 2020). It was compulsory for all churches to shut down their church buildings. In many places within Nigeria, law enforcement agents were put in place to arrest churches caught violating the shutdown order.

As a result of this, worshippers were holding the watch night services at home, either as individuals or as groups within the church. Many churches swiftly resulted to holding virtual/online watch night services (Bankole, 2022; Pillay, 2020). Churches' use of ICT tools such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Mixlr, Zoom, Vimeo and so on increased (Wobodo, 2022). Most times, the church leader, and the media crew do streamline the services and members would be responding from home. Some members would bring their offering to the church or deposit such in the church's account.

Village& Francis (2021) highlights the attitude of the laity towards the virtual church. They opine that the online sustained the life of the church because the church moved to the digital age, giving the church the opportunity of rethinking the Church's future. More so, online worship is a great liturgical, pastoral and evangelistic tool. Yet the majority (79%) of the laity insists that efforts should be made to maintain local churches.Dami (2022) avers that the online church, which allows church members to be in their homes and worship is a going back to the bases because the Early Church used the homes as worship places, and the church is able to review some of her long-held theological practices and traditions. There is, therefore, a constant and consistent call for the rethinking of the Christian tradition of physical worship to the use of technology, the internet and the upgrade of the ICT facilities to accommodate the covid-19 restriction of physical worship (Kauwa, 2022). A survey carried out by Afolaranmi (2020, p.168) reveals that online prayer sessions increased when compared to physical ministration (p. 168).

COVID-19 brought a big relief to the community as noise from the watch night services was greatly reduced because almost all forms of watch night services were discouraged. The virtual watch night services enhanced the relationship between different denominations and community members. Conflicts that were springing up as a result of noise in the middle of the night seized. Issues of insecurity attached to the watch night services were brought to the barest minimum.

Members have direct contact to their leaders, and each member's voice could be heard on the church WhatsApp platforms, or during Zoom meetings. Prayers were said on issues and problems immediately, and issues that require medical attention were attended to immediately

unlike what was happening before the lockdown, where members would prefer to go to watch night services either because of their beliefs in divine healing or because of poverty.

However, some people say that a virtual church is not a church, especially with the issue of the sacraments and laying on of hands. They insist that watch night services conducted online were not as potent as the ones conducted in their physical church buildings. This group of members insists that the virtual watch night services would not replace the physical watch night services. Lord (2002) highlights four factors of interaction that may make virtual church acceptance difficult to Christians. These are, worshippers are distanced geographically, they use text-based communication which in some cases may not be detailed, there are delayed responses at times because the respondent may decide not to respond immediately or may ignore the communication and members may assume identities not their own (p. 200). Besides, the Eucharist and the Baptism cannot be done virtually. The laying of hands on the sick and the showcasing of the Holy Spirit baptism which is exhibited through glossolalia were also affected (Mahiya & Muris, 2022). These require the physical presence of clergymen, priests or pastors. Yohannes (2017) argues that contextualising the virtual church could be a problem when one considers differences in geographical locations, different time zones and different political dispositions and the internet could be factors militating against proper coordination of fellowship in the virtual church (p.17). Kimaru (2019) declares, "...churches are transformed by modernity and how modernity is not a threat to the existence of religion but rather conformation of religion into its tenet and therefore challenging its authority as a source of religious information"(p.65).

As cyber warfare with its debilitating effect on political and economic life of nations (Djaja 2020, p.3), so is the church vulnerable to malware, phishing and technical cyber threats (Lott, 2019). These include child and adolescent bullying (Apostolides, 2017, p.3), online financial exploitations (CISA 2020, p.81) information on congregation members and attendees, donation and credit card information (Lott, 2019) Comparing traditional and cyber spiritualily, Gálik(2015) notes that in traditional spirituality the human body plays a vital role because when worshippers come together, come closer, they are psychologically relieved as worshippers are able to share their pains and feelings. Besides, traditional spirituality allows the church to monitor the spiritual development of the worshippers.(p.10). Yet, according to Gálik(2015) cyber spirituality is filled with cyber-shamanism and techno-shamanism. Traditional shamanism, according to Gálik(2015) is about gaining experience and knowledge and using it for the benefit of the worshippers' overtime, while cyber-shamanism involves pre-programmed artificial world of images. Techno-shamanism which uses digital media as tools working with the unconscious contents of the mind to lead to self knowing leads to authentic spirituality should be adopted (p.12). In like manners, Iqbal (2016) avers that religion–online uses the world wide web (www websites) as a medium to publicise their religions while online–religion (cyber-religion/digital religion) is about using the www websites as environment for expressing and doing religion, and online-religion helps to debunks the view that there is secularization of the world as a result decline of religion in modern societies (p.24). Le Duç insists that the church needs to change because the same church would not be holding the heavy scroll of the Old Testament with the invention of the printing press. According to Le Duc (n.d) although the internet facilitates escapism, it is part of everyday life and people turn to internets to find answers to various questions, even about religion. The Church needs to put 'answers' on the internet so that members would not be learning from those who put their contents on the internet (p.134).

Giese (2020) insists that the virtual church is not a church because it minimizes biblical anthropology and God's dwelling in the church is in a place(p.366). Campbell (2005) insists that virtual churchgoers see the online church as a supplement to the physical gathering based on such issues as the sacred place, discipline, and authority. Estes (2009), Rusell (2016)and Kaburuan et al (2012) on the other hand argue that the virtual church met the church metaphors as "the body

of Christ " or " the people of God." The presence and works of God are not limited by location, space or time (Blythe and Wolpert, 2004; McNeill, 1960).

Watch Night Services in Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

Churches in post-COVID-19 Nigeria are relaxing the COVID-19 restrictions on worship and watch night services. Many are back fully, with the attendant health hazards, psychological trauma and insecurity. Paul Robinson (2020), chief executive officer of Release International notes that discrimination against Christians increased around the world after the COVID-19 pandemic and that the situation has become so worse for Christians and religious minorities. Likewise, a data collected by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) in 2022 reveals that attacks on Christians rose after the COVID-19 pandemic (Mwai, 2022; Ossai, 2021): in the whole of 2020, a total of 18 attacks on church premises and people linked to them were reported; in 2021, there were 31 attacks on church premises and people linked to them; and as at June 2022, there were 23 separate attacks on church premises and people linked to them. Some attacks on the church and her members are represented in Table 1:

Tab. 1 POST-COVID-19 ATTACKS ON THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIANS

DATE	LOCATION	NO. OF CASUALTY	CAUSE OF ATTACK	TIME OF ATTACK
June 5, 2022	St. Francis Catholic Church, Owo, Ondo State	21	Gunmen with explosives	Sunday Worship
25th August 2022	Truth and the Spirit Prophetic Church, Oko-Oba, Lagos state	1	Oro worshippers	Watch Night Service
January 25, 2022	Celestial Church of Christ, Jakande. Lagos State.	Prophet Awotidoye matcheted	Thugs armed with guns and matchets	Weekly Activity
August, 4, 2021	Redeemed Christain Church of God, King of Kings Parish, Maidan village, Ikosi Ketu, Lagos State	Pastor killed	Gunmen	Sunday service
August 2022	Comfort Life Mission International Church, 13/15, Ewenla Street, Pab Bus stop, Ikotun, Lagos.	2	Stampede in church	Congregational service
December 18, 2022	Mallagum in Kaura County, Kaduna	40 Christians killed	Fulani herdsmen	9:45 pm
Dec. 25, 2022	Southern Kaduna, Nigeria	1 killed, 53 worshippers abducted	Fulani herdsmen and other terrorists around	Christmas day service

The above table does not include several incidents of robbery cases in churches during watch night services, and ritual killings of those going or coming from the service.

The issues among Christians are two. Must Christians worship at night? What was the practice in the early church? Where were the early Christians worshipping in the early church? In other words, issues are being raised as to the time and place of worship. On the time of worship,

Pritchard (1974) notes that evidence from Acts 20:7 and Pliny's letter (X.96) indicate that there is a weekly evening eucharist and daily morning (before dawn) and evening meetings (17).On the place of worship, Pritchard (1974) notes that there are indications that the early Christians met in the Jerusalem temple, and private houses (Acts 2: 46 and 5: 12). Therefore, in view of the health hazards, especially the series of attacks on the Christians and the church universal, Christians need to rethink the watch night services and move large, towards virtual watch night services.

Cyber-African Christianity and the Era of Virtual Night Vigils.

The total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Nigeria as of September 2021 was 200,957, and a total of 2,647 deaths. With doses of vaccines administered, the number of people infected with COVID-19 disease reduced greatly and everything seems to be normal and people are adapting to the 'new normal'. Total number of reported cases as at 2022 was 265, 105 and 3, 155 deaths. However, as at March 2023, the world Health organization puts the number of confirmed cases in Nigeria at 266598, total number of deaths at 3155 and total number of recoveries at 163984 (WHO, 2023). Noticeably, there is yearly increase in the number of reported cases of people infected with COVID-19. By implication, COVID-19 has come to stay and the church must shift in her conduct both in time and place of the watch night services in the midst of the present insecurity in Nigeria. In such a time as this, virtual Church would be the best to curb the spread of COVID-19 among Christians, and to militate against the incessant attacks being experienced by Christians as a result of physical watch night services.

Christianity must be made relevant and authentic in Africa, and "… must scratch where the modern African Christian is itching"(Kunhiyop, 1997, p.9). Transnational migration and religious globalization in African Christianity (van Klinken, 2015, p.39) are made possible because African Christians have agents for transformation and change (Pillay, 2017, p.12). Christians in Africa needs to embrace technology for better evangelism and greater exploits. If African Christianity would survive, it needs to align with virtual spirituality. Cho (2013) has long advocated a virtual church, a product of postmodernism, long before the COVID-19 pandemic so that the church would not be missing the "Net Generation" (Gen N) of young people (p.183). The virtual church draws people to God with no known local church community. Cho (2013) insists that virtual church leadership would provide virtual community, virtual ministry and virtual pastoring especially for young people who are entangled in the internet (p.184). Lee (2010) opines that the virtual church makes execution of the all nations(παντατα εθνη) of the Great Commission more accessible to a larger audience in the international space, aids reclaiming of God's reign on the internet, enhances offline discipleship training and mentoring and empowers Christianity to build a global church online (p. 39). Afolaranmi (2020) posits that the internet ministry is an alternative pastoral ministry that should be explored even after the COVID-19 era (p.23). Media revolution and multimedia and the development of communication technology are two major backgrounds for "internet ministry" also refers to as the virtual ministry even before the advent of COVID-19 (Lee, 2010. p.36).

The Church of Fools was probably the first official Online church opened on the 11th of May 2004, and sponsored by the Methodist Church of England (Kluver& Chen, 2008).The virtual or online church has been practice in Nigerian denominations such as Christ Embassy Church, Deeper Life Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracle, and The Redeemed Christian Church of God among others(Kimaru,2019;)

Selected Examples of Night Vigils in the Bible
A. Jacob-Genesis32:24--32
Jacob, the second son of Isaac, had just parted ways with Laban, his father in-law and was going to face his brother, Esau, he betrayed before running away fro home. On the way he prayed fervently, holding on to God till daybreak.

B. Jesus, the Christ

Jesus variously prayed during his life time. In Luke 9-28-35. Jesus took Peter, John and James to pray on a mountain. It must be around the niht because His disciples were asleep. Jesus prayer in Mark 1-35-39 woukld also be counted as a watch night prayer because he rose "…long while before daylight…and there he prayed". It can also be confirmed with a high level of certainty that he was praying (Luke 22-31-32), in the incident of Peter's denial. He told Peter, 'before the cock crows'. The cock start crowing from aroun3:00 am, which is still a time for sleeping for many people. Finally Jesus prayed in the night (Mark-14-32-42) when he was facing betrayal, execution, and divine abandonment.

C. Peter- Acts 12: 1-16

Herod the king was harassing the Christians. He arrested Peter and kept him in prison. The Church member were gathered together in the house of Mary, the mother of John, together praying to the extent that when Peter got to where they were gathered, prayer was ongoing, in the night.

Towards a Biblical Foundation for Contemporary Practice of Virtual Night Vigils

The four biblical examples for watch night services is an indication that there is biblical foundation for watch night services. Hence, it would be difficult to eradicate, especially in African Christianity where there is the strong believe that evils are prevalent in the night and that prayer is a tool to attack such evils.

A random survey of 15 churches in Agbowo, University of Ibadan area in Oyo State in the last Fridays of January and February, 2023 reveals that inspite of the insecurity situation in Nigeria, Christians continues to do physical watch night services. However, there were 6 cases of robbery attacks while going home, and only one rape incident. Nevertheless, these seemingly minute cases mean so much! Only 4 of these churches made provision for online participation.

The church leadership should educate its members to see the church not as a building but as a community of believers. It is important to understand that Christian bodies are the temples of God, they should not defile them, so as to present themselves as holy, acceptable to God all time and everywhere. Virtual watch night services should be encouraged..

Conclusion

Watch night service is biblical and it a good act of worship that should be encouraged. However, due to the fear of occasional infection of COVID-19 and gross insecurity in the Nigerian system, Christians should shift to virtual watch night services immediately to stop all the problems associated with physical watch night services.Christians need to accept the offer of virtual watch night services. Bloesch (2007) opines,

> Prayer in biblical perspective is spontaneous, though it may take structured forms. But the forms themselves must always be held tentatively and placed aside when they become barriers to the heart's conversation with the living God. True prayer, in the prophetic or biblical sense, bursts through all forms And techniques (p.691).

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