

Discipleship amidst Crisis and Health Implications: A Case Study among Pastors in Kenya.

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Abstract

Background: Health is precious to all humanity, but crisis has a tendency to destabilize the norm. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly caused a sense of uneasiness, not just among the common people but also among the clergy. Pastors are expected to disciple members through displaying authentic leadership, unending compassion, inspiring messages, anointed prayers, and wonderful words of encouragement irrespective of the circumstances.

Method: Using a qualitative approach, this study purposes to find out the pastors' health consequences that may arise from discipling their congregations during the pandemic period, and probable strategies to help them thrive and be fruitful in ministry. Eight participants were interviewed and thematic data analysis was done. Nine themes emerged namely: challenging discipleship; dynamic discipleship; universal discipleship; slow and poor nurturing; physical health, emotional health; collaboration; recreation; and innovativeness.

Result: The study results will provide a framework for intervention programs that may contribute to the sustainable revitalization of pastors and consequently foster their overall health and wellbeing.

Conclusion: The study concluded that discipling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived as challenging and demanding because the pastors were not conversant nor prepared for the paradigm shift from traditional face-to-face to online methods of ministry.

Keywords: Discipleship, Mental Health, Crisis, Pastors, Qualitative, Kenya

Introduction

The overall norm of the Church is to make disciples of all nations. Specifically, the mission of the Adventist Church derived from Revelation 14:6-12 is to invite everyone to become a disciple of Jesus Christ through embracing the three angels' messages and proclaiming the everlasting gospel. By doing so, the whole world will be prepared for Christ's soon return. However, crises have a tendency to destabilize the norm. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the world's religious, social, political, financial, and economic structures (Ezechimere, Jacob, & Deborah, 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency

of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30th, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Consequently, the outbreak necessitated the health regulatory organizations including WHO, national governments, and world leaders to impose a range of preventive measures to curb the spread of the disease globally. In response, the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Centre for Disease Control in Kenya issued prevention and containment measures to control the spread of the virus. The measures included a total lockdown of all political, socio-economic, religious, and educational activities in major cities such as Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu. In addition, both international and local air travel were restricted, and guidelines and protocols that included compulsory wearing of masks, hand washing or sanitizing, and social/

physical distancing were instituted (Barasa et al., 2021). The author continues to say that these regulations indirectly affected religious organizations and especially the Church's core mission of discipleship. Hence, the Church ministers had to re-strategize and focus on new ways of discipling their congregations in order to thrive and sustain the ministry.

This study intends to examine the health implications of pastors as they disciple amidst the COVID-19 crisis and explore strategies that may prove helpful in mitigating these challenges to ensure discipleship continues to thrive. Although studies have been done focusing on the experiences of the clergy during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the studies were conducted in other continents like Europe (Francis, Village, & Lawson; Ganiel, 2021), Australia (Kaze, 2021; Pyne et al., 2021), United States (Hays & Shepard, 2020), and Asia (Lai et al., 2020; Paras, Sy, & Tus, 2021). A few have been done in Africa specifically in Nigeria (Church-Hill, 2021; Ezechimere, Jacob, & Deborah, 2021) and Kenya (Barasa et al., 2021) but their focus was on Church members. However, few of the studies addressed mental and physical health outcomes of the pastors. Therefore, the current study is timely and urgent as the health of the clergy is key to their ministry including discipleship.

Literature Review

Discipleship is a significant component of Christianity, yet it has its own challenges, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already demanding work of the clergy. With the preventive and containment restrictions, the needs of the Christians now weigh heavily on the religious leaders resulting in psychological distress (Heseltine-Carp & Hoskins, 2020). This was because the people the leaders are discipling were struggling with loss of their loved ones, fear of uncertainty, and sickness. Most Christians were either affected by or infected with the coronavirus. The clergy, with worries, cares, and challenges of their own, soon became burned out, exhausted, and psychologically distressed (Pyne et al., 2021). A study in England revealed that discipleship drastically changed when coronavirus struck. The researchers indicated that meeting people face to face including congregational

assemblies were branded dangerous and insecure (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020). Further, the study revealed that the clergy experienced high levels of anxiety and worry because they were concerned about the Church's financial and human resources post-covid era. Generally, discipleship during the COVID-19 error has been perceived as challenging, demanding, dangerous, and isolating (Hays & Shepard Payne, 2020; Pyne et al., 2021) by the clergy. On the contrary, others have perceived it as rewarding, and an opportunity for global discipleship and evangelism (Kaze, 2021; Paras, Sy, & Tus, 2021).

People and pastors themselves put enormous expectations on pastors which can be debilitating. They are expected to be "on" meaning they are supposed to be ready to give stellar leadership, inspiring messages, words of encouragement, unending compassion, and anointed prayer which may be overwhelming (Francis et al., 2020). Yet studies have shown that religious leaders experience a great deal of occupational stress. For example, Miles and Proeschold-Bell (2013), postulated that some pastors were emotionally affected and depressed when their followers were experiencing psychological challenges which they could not help them with. In the same line, a study done among 221 clergy examining the association between mental health, physical health, and occupational distress indicated that higher levels of occupational stress were significantly associated with poor health outcomes including diabetes, depression, high blood pressure, anxiety, and chronic stress disorder (Webb & Chase, 2019). Similar studies have suggested that there is a positive association between work-related stress and emotional and physical health. For instance, Wells (2013) revealed that as stress increases, physical and emotional health of the Church pastors decreases.

Notably, an international interdenominational study done among the clergy to explore their lived experiences indicated that the clergy reported being depressed, suicidal, and others suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety because of the nature of their work (Hays & Shepard Payne, 2020). A similar study in the Philippines affirmed the hypothesis that pastors are challenged by emotional, mental, and physical problems due to isolation and the online ministry's

weight. The pastors reported high levels of stress, exhaustion, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and fear (Paras, Sy, & Tus, 2021). In addition, poor work-related psychological health including emotional exhaustion, secondary trauma, and stress has been reported among the clergy (Hendron, Irving, & Taylor, 2012). As pastors strive to disciple others especially during the COVID-19 crisis, they also become depressed, compulsive, and overstressed. Consequently, they may feel spiritually dry, burned out, tired with ministry, and stuck in their own spiritual life (Pyne et al., 2021).

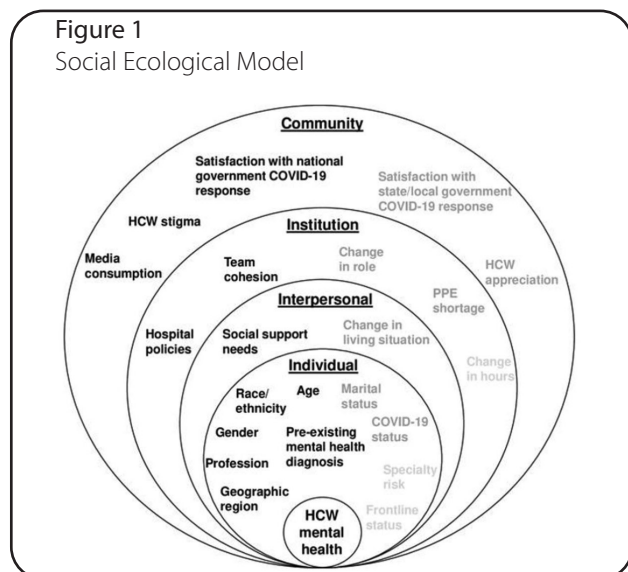
The social media and scholastic personnel have given considerable attention to mental health during the COVID-19 season. In particular, they have focused on the 'frontline workers' who are deemed to be at high risk since they are the primary individuals in contact with the COVID-19 patients during treatment (Chen et al., 2020). However, there are other groups of people who are frontline workers who have been largely overlooked, for example, the faith-based community religious leaders. Even though, they are not directly involved in the medical field, they play a significant role in supporting their members, families, and communities in coping with the pandemic especially those who have been infected, affected, or lost their loved ones as a result of the disease. Lai et al., (2020) continue to say that since the COVID-19 guidelines and protocols were implemented, there has been a paradigm shift in the work and strategies of pastors in regard to discipleship. The shift to online discipling, as opposed to the traditional face-to-face approach, has increased the risk of negative psychological health outcomes for the pastors as they need to look for alternative strategies to disciple virtually (Lai et al., 2020).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has considerably upset the regular rhythms of Christian ministry, pastors and other clergy know that they still need to encourage people to pursue God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. The journey to grow in Christlikeness does not stop in the midst of a pandemic. Therefore, online ministry proved to be an opportunity beyond the COVID-19 pandemic as it has been associated with increased religious revitalization, evangelism, and discipleship

(Ganiel, 2021). During this period, the pastors were disseminating their services online because people still turn to them for comfort and advice in getting through difficult times. Though this role can be deeply rewarding, it also comes with risks. Adopting the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities and other technological tools in discipling necessitates sitting for long hours, overworking, and long hours of screen time that may lead to negative physical and emotional outcomes (Heseltine-Carp & Hoskins, 2020). Previously, researchers have highlighted that a number of pastors tend to prioritize the needs of their congregation neglecting their own self-care hence, they often experience burnout as they are overloaded both physically and mentally (Greene, Bloomfield, & Billings, 2020). Moreover, online ministry may lead to emotional isolation and feelings of being on call permanently which is unhealthy. Even though the studies presented above suggest that the clergy are physically and mentally affected as they disciple amid the COVID-19 crisis, there is a paucity of research in the African continent specifically in Kenya, hence this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Social-Ecological model which postulates that individuals affect and are also affected by various factors and influences within nested environmental interactions. This model suggests that there is a complex interplay among individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. In this study, the theory fostered the understanding the range of factors that put pastors at risk for mental health during crisis and strategies that can be used to shield them or protect them from experiencing a psychological breakdown. The overlapping rings in the model illustrate how factors at one level influence factors at another level. Further, the model also suggests that to promote health and wellness among the clergy, it is necessary to structure interventions that run across the multiple levels of the model at the same time. Consequently, health and wellness will be fostered over time to achieve a positive impact amidst crises.



The COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected individuals physically and mentally, but also spiritually. The effect has subsequently impacted discipleship for both the religious leaders and their congregation as it is a health threat and a concern worldwide. For this purpose, the following research questions were used to better understand the phenomenon:

1. How do pastors perceive discipleship in the COVID-19 error?
2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted discipleship?
3. How has discipling during the pandemic impacted the health of pastors?
4. What strategies do pastors employ while discipling amidst the COVID-19 crisis?

Methodology

Research Design

The current study used a qualitative approach specifically case study to understand the multi-faceted complex phenomenon of discipling during the COVID-19 period. This design was used because in the context of the pandemic, it allowed the researcher to gain rich, concrete in-depth knowledge about discipling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. As I explored the key characteristics of the pastors, I was able to attach meaning to their experiences and draw implications thereof. Notably, it has been observed that a case study design helps researchers appreciate the different aspects of an individual's life and how those aspects are related to one another (Harrison,

Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). In this case, I was able to relate the experiences of the pastors with their health outcomes. Moreover, this design allowed me to obtain detailed, richer, and greater in-depth information that may not be obtained by other research designs.

Research Setting

The research setting is the entire country of Kenya. Kenya is a country located in the eastern side of the African Continent. It can be divided into eight broad provinces that have a total of 47 counties. The pastors represent the large number of the clergy leading many faith-based communities in the country. The whole country was affected by the coronavirus pandemic since early 2020 just like all other countries globally.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used where eight male pastors from various counties in Kenya were selected to represent the whole country. The criterion used was: (a) pastors who had been in the ministry for at least five years. This was so because they had served before and during the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) pastors who experienced physical or psychological health issues within the last one year; and (c) pastors who are fluent in speaking English.

Data Collection

One-on-one virtual interviews via Zoom were done that lasted approximately 40 minutes each. For triangulation purposes, an extensive literature review on the subject matter was done and self-reported health information from the pastors was reviewed. Cross checking the respondent's self-reported health information acted as validation of the pastor's narrative and facilitated a better understanding of their experiences. Before the interview date, telephone calls were made to book appointments. The interviews were scheduled at the participant's convenient time.

Data Analysis

Since the interviews were done virtually, the data were automatically recorded. Later the data were transcribed and encrypted ready for analysis. Using thematic analysis, I identified the

common ideas, words, topics, and patterns that were repeatedly reported (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) that involved data collection, data display, data reduction, and drawing conclusions was utilized. After the whole process was done, the participants were given a chance to review the findings of the study. This was done to ensure that everything was accurate and legitimately presented in line with the interviews. The findings indicated the pastors' perceptions about discipling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the health consequences associated with the crisis.

Ethical Considerations

The respondents knew and understood fully the purpose of the study and that it was voluntary. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any penalty. They were not coerced and confidentiality and privacy were guaranteed by the researcher. The respondents were aware that the study was purely for academic purposes and that the findings were to be used as a basis for intervention programs that may be beneficial to them. Finally, an informed consent was signed before the actual interview was carried out.

Researcher's Reflexivity

As a researcher, I am interested in mental health and wellbeing of people and especially leaders who are in positions of influence. In this case, the mental health of pastors is important as they are entrusted to shepherd and disciple their members. I believe that the information they have provided will be a basis for an intervention program that can help them thrive amidst the crisis and thereafter. From experience and literature review, it is evident that most mental health intervention programs are successful if well implemented.

Limitations of the Study

The sample comprised eight participants affiliated to one religious' organization. Hence, the findings obtained in this study may not be applicable to other clergies in various Christian organizations. Further, the study was under the assumption that the participants answered the

questions truly and honestly.

Results and Discussions

All eight respondents reported that discipleship has been a new experience and an interesting process, especially during this pandemic period that had to be done. One of them with reference from 2 Timothy 4:2 said

We have been called to Minister instantly in season and out of season. Therefore, we are obligated to fit in any situation for service, but the perception has dramatically shifted and for some, it's taking too long to decide on how to continue with discipleship during the COVID period.

How Pastors Perceptive Discipleship amid COVID-19

The clergy had various perceptions as regards to how discipleship has changed during the COVID-19 crisis. Most of them alluded that it was not business as usual and ministers had to go back to the drawing board to restructure how to disciple in this unique situation which was not anticipated. The following two themes emerged.

Challenging Discipleship. Discipleship has been a challenge due to the new World Health Organization (WHO) rules and regulations imposed to prevent and control the spread of the coronavirus. One participant said, "Discipleship in the COVID-19 era faces a myriad of challenges due to the traditionally flexible methods that we were used to in the past". He continued to say that the situation has contributed to poor discipling because the laity became reserved due to coronavirusphobia. More so, this has trickled down to spiritual deterioration as ministers are not able to follow up their members. Another participant said that discipleship has been threatened with the pandemic because it is dangerous to minister during this period as people fear one another. This has made discipling "difficult and limiting" as one participant put it. Another participant said that discipleship has become more demanding compared to the traditional face to face method. This is because the clergy has to put more effort so as to reach the faithful. One participant shared his observation, "members have put on spiritual masks and kept spiritual social distances," and

this has made it even more challenging to disciple effectively. These findings are in line with the literature reviewed. For example, Francis et al., (2020) found that the work of a religious minister has become more dangerous and insecure during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another researcher echoed similar sentiments that discipleship in the COVID -19 era is challenging and demanding to the pastor (Hays & Shepard, 2020; Kaze, 2021; Paras et al., 2021).

Dynamic Discipleship. This was the second theme that emerged. The pandemic has made discipleship unpredictable. It keeps changing constantly as people were not sure what their next step would be. The new norm was not normal, and people did not know how to move forward; most of them became confused. Most pastors felt lost and clueless because the environment has drastically changed. One participant said:

“Discipleship has undergone a very drastic and unpredictable process, the powerful door to door visitations is no longer there. There is suspicion amongst both the visited and the visiting pastors to the effect that either of them may be asymptomatic. Face to face contact has been declared unhealthy.”

Therefore, the ministers had to find new ways to deal with these perceptions and it was not easy as the Church was not prepared. In addition, “most churches lack resources and infrastructure to engage in online discipling.” Paras et al., (2021) agrees with the current finding that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed significantly to the dynamical way discipling is done currently. Moreover, they suggest that pastors also need to be active and adaptive to the situation if discipling has to continue.

How COVID-19 Impacted Discipleship

COVID-19 pandemic has impacted discipleship both positively and negatively contextually. One participant claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected discipleship both directly and indirectly, “Church attendance has been affected, fellowship, stewardship, in-person outreach, and evangelism, which are all part of discipleship have been affected in one way or the other.” To elaborate more on the impact of coronavirus on discipleship, the following two

themes emerged.

Universal Discipleship. The third theme that emerged was universal discipleship. All the participants unanimously agreed that discipleship is now borderless. Depending on the context, discipling has become better, convenient, more effective, and has reached many. One participant hypothesized that “the urban majorities are more confined in their space and mostly prefer virtual interaction which has no geographical boundaries, this has enhanced discipleship.” Majority of the participants reported that discipling in the urban regions has greatly benefited from the pandemic. One participant said, “my ministry has improved significantly, my services in the area where I deal with youthful congregations proved to be more effective than it was in the past.” Another participant also reported that he could connect to his members, distance notwithstanding. He said “the diaspora members are also reached once they tune in wherever they are, there is connection irrespective of distance.” These findings are in line with those of Paras et al., (2021) who indicated that the way to disciple amid the COVID-19 pandemic is to embrace global discipling where there are no boundaries.

Slow and Poor Nurturing. This was the fourth theme that emerged. All the participants agreed that discipling has slowed down because of the WHO rules and regulations on coronavirus that are mandatory in all countries. The rules necessitated restriction of face-to-face interactions, and people had to shift to online discipling. However, this has proved difficult and ineffective in rural areas where Internet is poor or lacking, and the people there are used to the traditional face-to-face discipling. He said, “rural audiences are more out-going, reachable, and open to creative methods of physical discipleship. While they casually observe the COVID-19 rules, they are not willing to embrace the online interaction.” Similarly, another participant added “majority of the older members reside in the rural area. They are ignorant about the Internet hence; they have not benefited much. Sadly, they have lost the benefit of unceasing fellowship and vibrant discipling.” In addition, pastors expressed the difficulty and sluggishness that accompanied online discipling. One said “traditional face-to-face interactions were very effective. However,

with the new online interactions, things have been slow because not all members or even the public can access social media.” Others feel that online discipling results to “poor spiritual nurturing as members do not have an opportunity to exercise their talents because of lack of social interaction.” Consequently, this has led to dissolution and distortion of God and has resulted in poor discipleship.

The findings are in line with those of other scholars. For instance, Doherty (2021) revealed that Church attendance has declined steadily since COVID-19. Even those who have adapted to virtual worship tend to use Internet for other purposes other than discipling. Moreover, since discipleship applies to everyday life, it is clear that some have conformed to worldly pleasures instead of worshiping or discipling using social media (Williams, 2020). The Bible supports congregational gathering for better discipling. Hebrews 10:25 says that brethren should never give up fellowship meetings for this is how they encourage one another as they wait for the Day of the Lord.

How Discipling During COVID-19 Era Impacted Pastors' Health

Circumstances change but the Bible remains constant. In Matthew 28:19, Christ's disciples are commanded to “go and make disciples of all nations...,” and so even in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, discipleship needs to continue. However, ministers are faced with health problems as respondents reported.

Covid-19 requires distancing, yet a pastor is the person one needs when he/she is on the crossroads, especially when members are affected or infected. They fear and the only person they need at the moment is the pastor thereby putting his life at risk.

When participants were asked how discipleship amidst the COVID crisis has impacted their health, two themes emerged: (a) mental health and (b) physical health.

Poor Mental Health. The fifth theme that arose was poor mental health. All the respondents reported that discipling during this pandemic period has been associated with poor mental health outcomes. One participant said, “during

this era, it is not easy to engage in discipleship; myself and my members have been socially isolated. This has led to feelings of loneliness, fear and stress. As a pastor I feel emotionally drained and burnt out. Moreover, some of my colleagues (the lay preachers) lost their jobs and I am overburdened as members are even more demanding.” This era has been associated with fear and psychological distress. One participant also mentioned that

The workload is overwhelming; I feel stress and fatigued most times. I become anxious and fearful because I do not want to mingle with other people because I do not trust anyone and this has led to feelings of mental exhaustion resulting to poor emotional health. In fact, sometimes I think I get depressed.

Another participant shared his concerns, “discipling online necessitates long sitting periods which sometimes is stressful and strenuous on my mental health.” These findings agree with other scholars. For instance, Paras et al., (2021) and Hays and Shepard-Payne (2020) conducted studies that revealed that ministry during the pandemic has been associated with anxiety, fear, stress, exhaustion, loneliness, and depression. Another study showed that pastors reported to be stuck in their spiritual life as they experienced psychological distress and burnout (Pyne et al., 2021). Similarly, Miles and Proeschold-Bell (2013) postulated that the clergy underwent occupational distress during crisis, moreover, pastors became emotionally unstable and depressed.

Poor Physical Health. Poor physical health arose as the sixth theme. Most participants reported that they experienced some physical health issues as they disciplined during the COVID-19 period. Precisely they indicated that pastors are vulnerable and at risk of contracting coronavirus. One of them said, “Pastors have been infected on duty and some have died. We are at risk. Myself I have been infected in the line of duty and I was isolated for 21 days, after that I was not able to work for two months.” Others see discipling during the pandemic as a health hazard:

Interacting online for long periods of time

necessitates sitting for prolonged hours and this has resulted to an -understandable pains that are not explainable. Sometimes I experience back pains; general body aches; aching eyes due to overutilization of the laptops, and discipling platforms; and aching ears because of using the phone extensively.

Another health issue pastors battle with is living a sedentary lifestyle which has exacerbated the high levels of being overweight and obesity (Webb & Chase 2019). Participants reported that “preparing and presenting online is accompanied with prolonged sitting without movement hence no time for exercise.” The demanding nature of online ministry means more time spent on material preparation which otherwise could have been used for physical activity. Literature is in agreement with the current study. For instance, Heseltine-Carp and Hoskins (2020), found out that the clergy recorded high levels of physical and mental challenges during the COVID-19 period as compared to previous years. Similarly, other scholars indicate that pastors prioritize the needs of their congregation forgetting their own physical and emotional health (Greene et al., 2020). Gospel ministers continue to record poor physical health because they are frontline workers just like the healthcare personnel, but they did not take the necessary precaution, such as using any protective gear (Chen et al., 2021). More often than not, pastors are prone to occupational stress especially during this pandemic period. Wells (2013) concluded that as stress levels increase, the physical and emotional health of the clergy decreased.

Strategies Pastors Use

The last research question was on strategies that ministers find useful to help them thrive in discipling amidst the corona pandemic. Here, three themes emerged namely collaboration, recreation, and innovativeness.

Collaboration. This was the seventh theme that emerged. Collaboration is the process of linking or interacting with others to enable one operate as intended. All the participants agreed that adapting to the new norm and partnering with other people in one way or another was a strategy that worked well amidst the crisis. One participant

echoed, “For discipling to succeed we had to involve every member and utilize all relevant instruments available, including delegating responsibilities to home Church/residential cell groups, and all Church departments.” He continued to say that quick adaptation to online discipling was key. “The quicker we learnt how to disciple using technology, the better it became. We were able to streamline live all our services to reach out after incorporating zoom and other online channels.” In addition, “we were able to create more online content regarding discipleship and we embraced social media as a new way to reach out” another participant said.

Actually, the younger generation has embraced online fellowship well because they interact with technology often. One participant shared, “the world and especially the young generation moved to the online platform way before the pandemic hence they easily embraced online discipling through utilization of virtual platforms, WhatsApp, and telephone calls.” On the other hand, face-to-face discipling necessitated an alliance with other faithful. The pastors utilized interfaith worship where they focused on spirituality rather than denomination. Hence in home churches, Christians from other denominations joined. These findings coincide with previous literature. For instance, studies show that COVID-19 created a paradigm shift from the traditional face-to-face way of working to online working and it was more pronounced amongst the youth (Kaze, 2021; Lai et al., 2021). Surprisingly, contrary to the findings of this current study, literature records that people tend to deliver their services effectively using online platforms as compared to face-to-face. For instance, a study done by Ganiel (2021) disclosed that there was religious revitalization and increased discipleship during the COVID-19 pandemic period. On the other hand, collaborations and formation of health networks contributed significantly to the spirituality and mental wellbeing of the young generation specifically those who reside in urban areas (Al-Dmour, Salman, Abuhashesh, & Al-Dmour, 2020). In addition, ministry specifically discipleship thrived during the pandemic period as evangelism became borderless (Kaze, 2021).

Recreation. The eighth theme that arose was recreation. Another strategy majority of

participants said worked was recreation. The Bible in Ecclesiastes 12:12b, suggests that too much work wearies the body hence the need for rest. Rest is important to humankind. It allows the mind, body, and soul to get renewed and start anew with more strength and focus. The clergy need to slow down and rest because that is how God has created us. Matthew (NIV) 11:28 says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." Pastors had to find a way to rest, one participant said, "On Mondays, I walk for 6 to 8 hours to clear my head, and at the same time exercise for health benefits." Another one reported, "I normally take time out, that is what works for me because I get to go out for a nature walk. I change the environment for a while and when I see how beautiful creation is, I am refreshed and rejuvenated, ready to work again." It is also important to spend time with the family. One participant said, "Whenever I feel burnout, I go out with my family." Another participant stated that physical activity was a good distraction for him. He said, "I find exercise refreshing and it also lessens my stress." Others said that they used prayer as a strategy to restore their mental health. One participant testified, "the other key element during the pandemic was ceaseless withdrawal in prayers as Jesus did (Luke 5:16), the Lord has the power to nurture the membership more than we can."

Innovativeness. The ninth and last theme that emerged was being innovative. The pastors had to look for ways to introduce new techniques or establish successful ideas to create value in online discipling. They had to be effective and efficient in delivering services to their members irrespective of the pandemic. To attain this, good and clear organization was of essence. One participant attested, "The virtual platform requires discipline in time management so that viewers are not kept waiting." Similarly, another affirmed, "during the pandemic it forced me to rearrange most of the programs giving schedules for consultation." On the other hand, others felt that spicing up the discipling was necessary. One respondent had this to say:

The other way to promote discipling is to invite guest speakers from around the world. People tend to pay more attention to new speakers because they believe they have

something new to present and so for each program, I had a different speaker."

Another participant also acknowledged that he had to be creative. He said, "I had to find a slot in the radio to present some spiritual and health nuggets where I arranged with several other pastors to present at different times of the week and these proved effective." Notably, most participants agreed that a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online discipleship was more effective as compared to any one of them separately. One participant stated that, "combining face-to-face discipling while adhering to the health protocols and online ministry was more effective most especially for transitional purposes." Another way was to train the trainer. Pastors trained lay people to help them preach online. He shared, "we had to empower lay preachers to be equipped for online services." In addition, all meetings were done using Zoom, they were encouraged to use media communication and motivated to help other members be active in the online platforms." Another innovative way some pastors utilized was formation of spiritual support groups. The groups acted as buffers for Church members who were stressed. One participant said that the group was effective in alleviating stress and that it helped train and equip them with needful resources for service. These findings are similar to those of Thomas and Barbato (2020) whose study among Christians and Muslims discovered that they resorted to prayer and fasting as a mechanism whenever they were stressed during the COVID-19 crisis. On another note, the findings were in agreement with other scholars whose study provided evidence that professional training on use and dissemination of religious information on social media platforms yielded better results including effective and efficient discipleship (Chan, Nickson, Rudolph, Lee, & Joynt, 2020).

Conclusion

The study concluded that discipling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived as challenging and demanding because the pastors were not conversant nor prepared for the paradigm shift from traditional face-to-face to online methods of ministry. What was termed as the new norm was not normal at all and nobody

was knowledgeable on the matter. Although discipleship had become universal hence borderless, it had its own mishaps. It progressed slowly especially during the adaptation period and it proved difficult to nurture disciples since following up people online turned out to be illusive and ineffective. Evidently, the pastors' health was negatively impacted both physically and mentally because their ministry was overwhelming during the pandemic period. However, collaboration through networking proved helpful. Recreation, and innovativeness helped the pastors thrive in discipling amidst the coronavirus pandemic period.

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