

# **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Church's Socioeconomic Well-Being: A Case of Worldwide Gospel Church of Kenya-Githurai Presbytery**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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*Pandemics such as COVID-19 are known to inflict both positive and negative effects socially and economically on individuals and organizations including churches through the imposition of containment measures such as lockdowns and social distancing. Previous studies have revealed that such pandemics have resulted in church members' financial constraints due to loss of livelihood, besides disrupting church activities. There have been increased cases of psychological and spiritual problems by members. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the church socioeconomic well-being with the major focus on the Worldwide Gospel Church of Kenya-Githurai Presbytery. The objectives of the study are to determine the impact of COVID-19 on the economic status of the church, its programmes and activities and to find remedies taken by the church as a solution to the impact of COVID-19. The study adopted a descriptive research design with a target population of 150 pastors in Worldwide Gospel Church of Kenya Githurai Presbytery. Fifty pastors were selected using a simple random sampling method which is one third (33%) of the population. The data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires, which were distributed through personal emails and WhatsApp Messenger. Both descriptive statistics and content analysis were employed to analyse the data. COVID-19 was found to negatively affect the church socially and economically: the church finances were depleted and as such, the church was unable to meet its financial obligations. Socially, church programmes were disrupted and some members moved to other established churches. The churches need to diversify and invest in income-generating activities and pastors to be tentmakers like Paul the Apostle. The church should also intensify the use of technology in some of its programmes such as holding online meetings, particularly when a majority of the members are not physically available.*

*Keywords: Covid-19, church, social status, economic status, solution*

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## **Background to the Study**

COVID 19 [also known as coronavirus or 2019 Novel coronavirus (2019-nCov)] a highly infectious disease, is caused by a new strain of virus causing respiratory illness with symptoms such as fever, hard coughs and pneumonia in more severe cases. The disease first brock out in Wuhan, a province in China around December 2019. The disease spread rapidly from China to other parts of the world that within months of the outbreak it became a global pandemic. As of April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, the coronavirus had infected a total of 935,957 people with more than 47,245 deaths, and 194,298 recoveries according to the Coronavirus World Gauge. The virus is definitely a global health, economic and social crisis. And as of November 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, over 50,676,072 confirmed cases were reported, and COVID-19 had caused over 1,261,075 deaths in more than 219 countries, areas and territories (WHO, 2020). In Kenya, the number of infected cases which was first reported in March 2020 stood at 64,588 with 1,154 deaths and 43,095 recovered patients, ranking relatively high in Africa.

The fact that COVID-19 has the potentiality of causing numerous infections through person-to-person transmission implies that the number of infections could rapidly rise and could overwhelm the health care system, consequently leading to a high number of deaths. However, timely detection of the persons infected coupled with application of stringent infection control measures, may just minimize human-to-human transmission. Countries have thus implemented various mitigation measures to curb the rapid increase of the infections and fatalities including mass testing and contact tracing, social distancing, lockdowns, quarantines, and personal hygiene like wearing of masks and frequent hand washing among others (Fong et al. 2020). As measures to control the rate of infection through social distancing, the Kenyan government closed down all government offices, community centers, businesses, schools, and churches among others. Further, mass gatherings were prohibited while still, the country imposed lockdown measures, with the exception of movement for essential needs in the month of March, 2020 (Kenya Ministry of Health, 2020). When this took place, the church had little knowledge of the period of time these COVID-19 control measures would take before restoration of church activities. The churches therefore resorted to other ways of conducting their worship services and other church activities.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, like previous pandemics, has brought dire social, economic, physical and mental health consequences. Many world economies faced a slowdown in their economic activities, at individual, organizational and national levels (WHO, 2020). Its effects at the national level, economies have been brought to an abrupt halt. Further, there are possibilities that the achievement of most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be affected. The International Monetary Fund (2020) had projected 3 percent contraction of the global economy in 2020. Compared with the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, the magnitude of the contraction is expected to be even greater. This will be particularly worse for most of the developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, many of whom highly depend on exportation of commodities to China, have weak sovereign balance sheets, volatile currencies and a debt burden which is relatively high, among numerous other external fragilities (WHO, April 2020). However, giving reasons such as prolonged distancing activities, lockdown hence reduced economic activities, recorded steep productivity decline among firms which have continued doing business; and more uncertainty when things would improve, in the latest update, the 2020 contraction was revised by the IMF to 4.9 percent (IMF, 2020b). As a result of this, the implications in the economy will be wide-ranging and uncertainty of when this will end. The repercussions will be felt differently in various sectors as financial markets, production, supply chain and the world economy. Depending on the stringency of the social distancing measures (such as lockdowns), the extent of compliance and length of implementation, there could be variation in the negative economic effects. Besides, the pandemic and its effects together with the interventions placed by the government may result in increased inequality in the economy as well as emergence of mental health distress, and to a large extent some socio-demographic groups may be adversely affected.

Further, the impact of coronavirus on the whole social life has been very significant, same as religious life. The pandemic has also altered the religious practices which by their very nature have a community dimension. The impact has been particularly great on the church programmes, its activities and development as a whole. This article sought to examine the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the church's socio-economic well-being in the Worldwide Gospel Church of Kenya-Githurai Presbytery.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Previous studies have revealed that churches have limited or totally suspended their religious activities as containment measures were put in place. For instance, to contain the increasing cases of COVID-19 in the country, the Kenyan government stopped all public gatherings including religious gatherings. As a result, many of the churches were by extension hit by financial difficulty due to the fact that they experienced a decline in their members' giving which was attributed to most of their members losing their livelihoods (WHO, 2020). There were cases of psychological problems which resulted in increased cases of suicide and domestic violence in the country which made a group of religious leaders to call for immediate reopening of the churches so as to ease the stress of their members. The church must have also lost some of its members to the pandemic. It is against this backdrop that this article sought examine the impact of COVID-19 on the church's socioeconomic wellbeing.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. To determine the impact of COVID-19 on the economic status of the church.
- ii. To establish the impact of COVID-19 on the church programmes and activities.
- iii. To find remedies taken by the church as a solution to the impact of COVID-19.

### **Significance of the Study**

It is anticipated that the study will be beneficial to the church leadership with regard to the impact of COVID-19 on the church's socioeconomic wellbeing as they will be in a position to know the extent of the impact of the pandemic to the church and take appropriate measure aimed at mitigating its effect on the members. The study will be beneficial to the government and policy-makers as they will be able to gauge the impact of the pandemic on the church and thus make informed policies that will address the effects of the pandemic in the community and the church in particular. The study will also be beneficial to the body of literature as it will add to the already existing body of literature in the area of the impact of COVID-19 on the church.

### **Literature Review**

The effects of pandemics on a country's socioeconomic development are obvious, at least in the short run. The impact as noted by Jonas (2013) ranges from a case where people will forgo consumption of certain goods and services due to social distancing measures; increase in the cost of healthcare also known as direct costs; loss of labour and income, a decline in production and, by extension, an increase in unemployment, also known as large direct cost; finally, the disruption of services such as travel and leisure. Several studies have attempted to analyse the effect of previous pandemics both socially and economically. For instance, according to Jonung and Roeger (2006), generally a global pandemic would result in a decline of 1.6 percent in the European Union (EU) GDP, due to the supply and demand factors. Studies have also compared the effect of previous pandemics and the impact it can have today. For instance, a comparison was made between the Spanish Influenza pandemic and what would occur today in terms of deaths. Barro et al. (2020) argued that, holding everything constant, the 2.1 percent rate of death recorded in the Spanish Influenza pandemic (1918-1920) would translate to about 150 million deaths across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic comparing the 7.9 billion population. According to the author, the 2.1 percent

death rate corresponds to a decline of about 6 percent decline in GDP and a further decline in the private consumption of about 8 percent. These have a direct effect on development.

According to Gourinchas (2020), the economy today can be described as a complex web of interconnectedness that is comprised of firms, consumers, employees, and financial intermediaries where every person depends on one another. As a result of the specialization of productive activities and very high inter-connectiveness, the effect of any interruption of the supply chains and flows will trickle down. According to Baldwin (2020), due to the COVID-19, many people either lost their livelihoods completely or at least partially. This will have a direct negative effect on consumption and levels of savings including their giving to the church. A reduction in savings means diminishing investment and thus diminished capital stock. This will defeat the gains made in the fight against poverty, especially in developing countries such as Kenya where the large majority of people are living on or below the poverty line. In Kenya, according to the Federation of Kenya Employers, at least 1.7 million jobs were lost as a result of COVID-19 (FKE, 2020). These were mostly casual labourers who lived hand-to-mouth and hardly had any savings.

Cases of violence, particularly gender-based violence (GBV) and child defilement, have been on the rise (Wenham, Smith & Morgan, 2020). The rise in cases of stress are due to the worsening economic situation of families together with isolation due to stay-at-home orders and quarantines (UN Women, 2020). Since the countries responded to the COVID-19, there have been increased reports of IPV in several countries (WHO, 2020). In France, the reported domestic violence cases are up to a 30% increase since March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020 when the lockdown was initiated (UN Women, 2020). The cases in China increased three times higher in the month of February compared to the previous year (Usher et al., 2020).

Job loss is the other impact due to the pandemic by the members of the church. This has extensively been documented (Kahn et al., 2020; Béland et al. 2020; Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Coibion et al., 2020). For instance, in the US, the rise in cases of unemployment was partly attributed to the COVID-19 measures of social distancing and lockdown policies (Rojas et al., 2020). Explaining the rates of unemployment in the US, Gupta et al. (2020) note that there was a 1.7 percent point fall in employment for every extra 10 days of lockdown and restricted movement in the period 12<sup>th</sup> March to 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

In yet another study on the effect of COVID-19 on unemployment in the US, Coibion et al. (2020) note that the loss of employment was more severe than what meets the eye going by the sharp increase of the unemployment insurance (UI) claims. The rate of labour participation equally fell sharply as well as a rise in “discouraged workers”. These negative effects of COVID-19 were not only felt in countries which imposed measures, but also in such countries which never imposed government mandated lockdown as South Korea as they too experienced a drop in local employment due to increased infections (Aum et al., 2020). However, in countries where mandatory lockdown measures were imposed such as the America and the UK, the increase was exponential.

Adams-Prassl et al. (2020) did a comparative study of inequality in job or income losses with regard to the job type and personal characteristics in the UK and the USA. According to the study, there was a higher likelihood of losing a job for persons who cannot perform their tasks at home. At the same time, the study revealed that youths and non-graduates had a higher risk of experiencing a drop in their income.

The other effect of COVID-19 on the church socioeconomic wellbeing is with regard to health. Studies such as Goldstein and Lee (2020) and Lin and Meissner (2020) and many others have documented pandemics’ impact on the mortality and physical health. Yet still other studies such as Chatterji and Li (2020), Brodeur et al. (2020c), Tubadji et al. (2020), Davillas and Jones (2020) and de Pedraza et al. (2020) have documented the worsening mental health status and wellbeing. These studies found that the outpatient visits had declined

by up to 67 percent from April 12<sup>th</sup> –June 18<sup>th</sup> 2020 as compared to the previous year same period, was attributed to COVID-19.

The problem of public mental health due to the lockdown policy effect is enormous. Armbruster and Klotzbücher (2020) noted that the COVID-19 control measures, particularly the lockdown, led to an increase in the demand for psychological assistance in Germany. The authors noted that the calls for assistance were associated as a result of mental health issues, mainly loneliness and depression. Brodeur et al. (2020) also reported that the search intensity on “boredom” and “loneliness” has substantially increased in the lockdown period in the United States and the nine Western European countries in the initial few weeks of lockdowns.

### Methodology

This was a descriptive research design in which the target population was comprised of over 150 pastors in Githurai. The researcher used a simple random sampling method to select 50 pastors which represents one third (33%) of the target population. The data collection tool was a semi-structured questionnaire with mostly open-ended questions which were sent to the respondents through either personal emails or WhatsApp Messenger. The researcher further reached out to other respondents via WhatsApp Messenger or made phone calls directly to the respondents. These methods of data collection were as a result of the current situation which discouraged people from meeting face to face or moving from one place. The researcher mainly employed descriptive statistics and content analysis to analyse the data. Presentations were made in narratives, graphs and tables.

### Findings

#### Respondents’ Biodata

The study sought to determine the respondents’ biodata of gender, age, level of education, theological training, level of theological training, positions in the church and the duration served in the position. The responses are as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Respondents’ Biodata**

<b>Biodata</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Gender	Male	14	93.3
	Female	1	6.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>
Age	25 years and below	0	0
	26-30 years	1	6.7
	30-40 years	3	20.0
	41-50 years	7	46.7
	51 - 60 years	3	20.0
	60 years and above	1	6.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>
Level of education	Secondary	5	33.3
	College	7	46.7
	University	2	13.3
	Post University	1	6.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>
Have theological training	Yes	15	100
	No	0	0

	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>
Level of theological education	Certificate	5	33.3
	Diploma	7	46.7
	Graduate	2	13.3
	Post-graduate	1	6.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>
Position in the church	Elder	1	6.7
	Associate pastor	3	20
	Senior pastor	11	73.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>
Duration in the service	Less than 5 years	0	0
	5 - 10 years	3	20.0
	11-15 years	7	46.7
	16 - 20 years	3	20.0
	20 years and above	2	13.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>

The study findings show that the respondents were largely male (93.3%) as only one was female. The pastoral council in the WGCK, Githurai Presbytery is therefore male-dominated. With regard to age, the results revealed that most of the respondents (46.7%) were in the age bracket of between 41 years and 50 years. The findings further show that 20% were aged between 31 years and 40 years and another 20% were between 51 years and 60 years. The results of the study show that most of the respondents (46.7%) have a college education while one third (33.3%) have secondary education. All the respondents had theological training of which 46.7% had diplomas and 33.3% certificates in theology. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents (73.3%) were senior pastors in their churches. As to how long they have been in the service in the same position, 46.7% of the respondents have been in the service for between 11 years and 15 years while 20% have served for 5 years to 10 years and another 20% served between 16 and 20 years.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on the Economic Status of the Church**

In this section the study sought to determine the effect of COVID-19 on the economic status of the church. The respondents were therefore asked to state the extent to which they agreed with the statements regarding the economic status of the church on a scale of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly disagree. The results are in Table 2.

Table 2: Impact of COVID-19 on Economic Status of the Church

	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Giving by members has declined	6.7	6.7	20.0	46.7	20.0
Several members of the church lost their jobs	0.0	6.7	26.7	53.3	13.3
The church projects stalled	0.0	6.7	20.0	60.0	13.3
The church has been unable to meet its financial obligations	0.0	6.7	13.3	66.6	13.3
The church has been forced to borrow to pay its bills	0.0	13.3	33.3	46.7	6.7

The needy cases in the church increased	6.7	6.7	20.0	53.3	13.3
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The results show that generally, COVID-19 had impacted negatively on the church's economic status according to the study findings. The results show that respondents generally agreed that the members' giving had declined (66.6%). The study findings further show that according to a majority of the respondents (66.6%), several of their members had lost their jobs and businesses. A majority of the respondents (73.3%) also noted that the church projects had stalled due to COVID-19. A majority of the churches (80%) have been unable to meet their financial obligations and as such, 53.4% of the WGCK churches in the Githurai Presbytery have been forced to borrow money to pay their bills. Most of the respondent churches (66.6%) have recorded an increase of economically needy cases amongst their members. In a focus group discussion, the members explained that their churches had indeed experienced a decline in their finances as church giving went down. They explained that the number of those tithing had declined even among those who were still employed. The respondents attributed the members' unwillingness to give to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic as no one knows how long this will continue and as such, people are just cautious and want to retain what they have. Respondents however noted that there are those who have remained faithful in their giving and paying their tithes no matter what every month. This has kept the church going. The respondents, however, noted in the discussion that the churches were unable to meet such needs as paying salaries and other bills like electricity, rent, and water. The respondents noted that COVID-19 did not only impact negatively on the church as there have been some positive impacts it has brought. For instance, people were innovative and took the opportunity brought about by COVID-19 such as the production of face masks from fabric materials and sanitizers among others to generate income.

### Impact of COVID -19 on Church Programmes

The study sought to determine the impact of COVID-19 on church programmes. The respondents were therefore asked to state their level of agreement with the statements regarding the effect of COVID-19 on the church programmes on a scale of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Impact of COVID-19 on Church Programmes

	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
There was no fellowship of members	6.7	6.7	13.3	46.7	26.7
The church could not hold corporate prayers due to ban on social gathering	0	6.7	20	53.3	20
The spirituality of the members was affected as Christians stayed at home for nearly three months	6.7	13.3	20	46.7	13.3
Though the church conducted its services, it was online	6.7	6.7	13.3	60	13.3

The study established that COVID-19 negatively affected the church programmes as shown by the findings. The results revealed that most of the respondents (73.4%) indicated that due to the COVID-19 guidelines/rules such as a ban on social gatherings, it was impossible to hold fellowships and as such no fellowship meetings were allowed. A majority of the respondents (73.3%) further noted that the church could not hold its routine corporate prayers as a result of these rules. The long stay at home of nearly three months from around March 27<sup>th</sup> when the government imposed the COVID-19 regulations to July 9<sup>th</sup> when some of the restrictions such as social gathering were to some extent eased, according to most respondents (60%), some members had grown cold spiritually and even no longer wished to attend church, although there is an injunction in Hebrews 10:25: “.do not neglect the gathering of brethren.” The majority of the respondents (73.3%) further noted that on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020, although the church was allowed to have a few members (15 to be precise) in the church service, it was only to facilitate for the online service.

In the focus group discussion the respondents explained that the coronavirus measures of curfew, ban on social gatherings, and social distancing made it difficult for the church programmes such as overnights vigils, fellowships and evangelism, which were rendered impossible. The respondents indicated that the church had lost some of its members to established churches, especially those which owned their TV station and who welcomed membership no matter the location. They noted that they lost some of their dependable members to other established churches who took advantage of the lockdown to present some of their best programmes on TV, thus luring their members through such programmes. The respondents further noted in the discussion that even though the church later embraced online services, the interaction with the members was never effective especially for the churches whose members are mostly from poor backgrounds and lacking internet access. Some members had smart phones but never knew how to use them and therefore attendance to the online services was poor as only a few were able to follow.

On a positive note however, the respondents noted that due to the challenges imposed by the pandemic, the church embraced some innovative ways of doing things such as the use of social media, including online streaming through Facebook and YouTube to preach. This broadened their scope of reach as they were not limited to regular members but to the rest of the world. The church also embraced platforms such as Zoom to hold meetings which were effective as all were able to attend from any location. The practice of washing hands has also enhanced the hygiene in the church and social distancing minimized the rate of infections not only of COVID-19 but also other infections such as the common flu and other diseases.

### **Remedies by the Church to Mitigate Effects of COVID-19**

In the group discussion, the members explained that there was a need for the smaller churches to invest in income-generating activities and stop relying wholly on tithes and offerings for the running of their activities and projects. Respondents cited examples of established churches such as Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) and the Methodist Church among others who were never affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. CITAM never even rushed to have in-person services when the window was opened allowing a few members to attend services. The respondents further noted that the pastors should learn to “make tents” besides their work of preaching like Paul did. This time, however, the pastor’s intention may be to cushion himself/herself from the effects of such pandemics as coronavirus, rather than to be free of depending on members for one’s livelihood. The respondents also noted that the church should embrace technology and make it part of them by promoting some programmes in social media even when there is no such catastrophe.



## Conclusion

The study established that COVID-19 negatively affected the church both socially and economically. Economically, the church was unable to meet its financial obligations like the paying of rent and other bills, besides the stalling of the projects. This resulted in the decline of giving by the members in terms of tithes and offerings either as a result of job and business losses or just being cautious due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Socially, the study established that the programmes and activities of the church were disrupted and some have not resumed to date. The study established that the church lost some of its members by either some growing cold in faith while others joined other churches. The study established that the churches needed to diversify and invest in income-generating activities and the pastors to engage in 'side hustles'.

## Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:

- 1) The church should diversify and invest in other income-generating activities so as not to depend solely on tithes and offerings especially during such hard times as those due to coronavirus.
- 2) The pastors to start earning a livelihood outside the church in order to cushion themselves in such times as the pandemic which has resulted in a decline in members' giving as a result of mass job loss.
- 3) The church to intensify the use of technology in some of its programmes such as holding of meetings especially when most of the members seem not to be available for physical meetings due to other assignments.

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