



Four (4) Years after COVID-19 Pandemic: Reviewing the Experiences of the Anglican Church of Nigeria in the Light of Church-State relations

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Dates:

Received: 12 Jun., 2024

Accepted: 26 Jul., 2024

Published: 20 Sept., 2024

Citation:

Okwor, C. O., & Eze, E. (2024). Four (4) Years after COVID-19 Pandemic: Reviewing the Experiences of the Anglican Church of Nigeria in the Light of Church-State relations. *Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies*, 12(2), 1–6.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1381062>
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Abstract

Conversations on church-state relations in Nigeria have mainly been negotiated around the disposition of Nigeria as a secular state, the doctrine of subordination of the church to state laws and mutual understanding and co-operation. Adopting qualitative approach and descriptive narrative the study specifically assessed how the disposition of the leadership of the church coordinated the experience and enhanced compliance of its members to government directives during COVID-19 pandemic. Data for the study were collected using participant observation and key informant interview (KII). Data were generated from; (i) letters from the Primates, (ii) websites of church of Nigeria (CON) and Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), (iii) interview of Key Informants in dioceses south-East of Nigeria and (iv) participant observations. The findings reveal that church leaders influenced the extent their members responded to state directives, and thereby complemented government's efforts in reducing the spread of the disease. However, state's use of security forces to enforce compliance signaled mistrust. This suggests that co-operation of the church with state was helpful in handling the outbreak of the disease. Essentially, greater collaboration and cooperation between the church and the state in dealing with issues of public concern in the future cannot be overemphasized.

Keywords: Four years after, Anglican Church of Nigeria, COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, Church-state relations

Introduction

On February 27, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Nigeria (Ossai, 2020; Igwe, 2021). An Italian citizen who works in Nigeria upon return from Milan to Lagos tested positive. From him the virus spread to other states. The spread was so rapid in two months that only two states of Kogi and Cross-River, out of 36 states and FCT (Abuja), were reported without the virus (Ossai, 2020). Consequently, the Nigeria Centre for Diseases Control (NCDC) prescribed, regular hand washing with soap and water, use of sanitizer, social distancing, use of face mask, as measures to check its spread (<http://ncdc.gov.ng>). Initially, worship centres (churches and mosques), were required in addition to the above measures, to maintain a social distancing of about two (2) meters in sitting arrangements and not more than 50 persons per worship session (Igwe, 2021). The states of Lagos and Ogun, including Abuja, were epicentres and stricter measures were applied in ensuring compliance. However, a stricter measure of total lockdown of public areas; markets, restaurants, night clubs, viewing centres and worship places, with effects from March 22, 2020, was announced sequel to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO; Amaechi, 2020; Ajayi, 2020; Ayeni, 2020; Cucinota & Vanelli, 2020). To ensure compliance, the federal government detailed security agencies based on the peculiarities of each state (Ayeni, 2020, Olarenwaju, 2020). Outright demolition of structures or confiscation orders was given in the states of Ebonyi and Rivers. Religious leaders felt they would have been consulted; a development which some church leaders criticised as capable of breeding mistrust between church and the state (Adeboye, 2020).

Historically, the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion (CONAC) was inaugurated on the Feast of St. Mathias, 24th February, 1979 with Timothy Olufosoye Omatayo as its first Archbishop. Nwankiti (1996) observes that “on that day the churches started by the CMS missions to Nigeria, including Bishop Crowther’s Niger Delta Pastorate mission churches, all fused together and become the Church of Nigeria” (Nwankiti, 1998). Thus, CONAC is the product of the missionary enterprise of the 19th Century missions of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Church of England among the Creoles and repatriated freed slaves in Sierra Leone (Agha, 1999). From Freetown, Sierra Leone the CMS sent out missionaries to a territory that later became known as Nigeria. Churches were established in Badagry, Abeokuta, Ibadan and Lagos from December 25, 1842 and the subsequent Niger Mission of 1857 and the Bonny Mission of April 29, 1869. Henry Venn’s idea of a native pastor, led to the consecration of Samuel Ajayi Crowther as Bishop in Canterbury Cathedral in 1864. The Church has since, grown tremendously such that there are 14 provinces, one hundred and forty dioceses and over ten thousand churches (www.anglican.ng.org). The Province of Church of Nigeria has extended to China and the USA, following the rift in the world-wide Anglican Communion over gay marriage controversy. It is currently led by the Henry Ndukuba, who was presented as the Primate at the peak of COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed COVID-19 pandemic and the measures adopted in mitigating its spread revealed their perceptions of the disease.

Though, both the state and the church viewed the pandemic as emergency situation that required urgent attention, their perceptions differed, engendering different intervention approaches. From the protocols, it was clear that the state viewed the pandemic as a natural outbreak of disease that required scientific and clinical measures. However, the church viewed the outbreak largely as a spiritual issue which required being handled spiritually (Ossai, 2021; Igwe, 2021). For instance, Archbishop Chukwuma reasoned that asking the church to close down would amount to stopping members from coming together to pray and ask for God's intervention (Anyanwu, et al, 2020). Many other church leaders shared similar views (see Igwe, 2021; Ossai, 2021). Thus, overall perception of COVID-19 especially among Nigerian Christians, who constitute a vast majority of the population, conflicts with the position of government. This attitude of not regarding the pandemic as just a state affair, or "simply health matter" is not peculiar to Nigerians (see Wild-Wood, 2021).

Uzukwu (1989) opines that the theory of "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" as recommended in the scriptures has often been used in negotiating church-state relationships and separating secular from spiritual issues, arguing that the church and the state are two powers on earth which duties have been well arranged for mutual interaction on this basis. Further, he notes that the church, has never turned away from teaching her members to obey the state in civil matters maintaining that giving to God what is God's and to Caesar what is his, is predicated upon the fundamental doctrine of the indirect subordination of the state's purpose (the civic common good), to the church's purpose (the salvation of souls) (see also Pole, n.d). In this sense, the state's laws, rules, guidelines and orders on civil matters are binding on the church. This position is well enshrined in the articles of religion of the CONAC (see BCP, article of religion). Therefore, the study is concerned with the experiences of the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion (CONAC) during COVID-19 pandemic in relation to church-state relations in Nigeria. It focuses on how the "Primal" directives issued in the wake of the pandemic, major events of the church and coping strategies adopted by the church, during COVID-19 pandemic are in tandem with this relationship (see Appendix 1 & 11). Overview of church-state relations in Nigeria as background information to the study is enunciated below.

Overview of Church-state relations in Nigeria

Certain clarifications are necessary in discussing church-state relationship in Nigeria. First, Nigeria by virtue of its constitution is a secular state which advocates separation of religion from state affairs. Second, there are two dominant religions in Nigeria; Christianity and Islam which geographical spread tends to divide the country into what is called Muslim north and Christian south. The church does not enjoy state support in the North as their counterparts in the South. Third, Christians and Muslims have different attitudes to relationship between religion and the state (Uzukwu, 1989). For Muslims, there is no difference between religious practices and state affairs; a clear departure from Christian position of separation of religion from the state. Fourth, Churches in Nigeria are under the umbrella of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which forms the basis of relationship with the government at all levels (local, state and federal). For example, when national mosque was built in Abuja with state fund, a national Christian Centre was also built for CAN. Thus, in matters of church-state relations, no church denomination has a unique experience in Nigeria. On this basis, experiences of churches during COVID-19 are the same (Ossai, 2020).

Significantly, the Church of Nigeria (CONAC) and the Nigerian state have had a long-standing relationship dating back to the colonial

times when foreign elements dominated both the church and the state. It started between the Church Missionary Society (CMS) which later gave birth to CONAC and the British government. This relationship was predicated upon the fact that many things were of common interest to both institutions. As Uzukwu (1989:40) rightly observes; "... in the Christianization of southern Nigeria, as from the mid-19th century, the colonial will and the desires of the propagators of Christianity often tallied". For instance, the ill-fated 1841 and 1843 expeditions on the Niger River had the permission of the British parliament to have on board government officials, military personnel and missionaries (see Adiele, 1996). The argument then was that both needed each other to push their interests in the colony. The British government was aware of the influence which religion exerts on the people and used in many places, missionaries to soften the ground and later introduced government and commerce. In exchange, the colonial authorities provided military assistance and other logistics to the missionaries especially in areas where their activities met with resistance such as in Igboland. Again, the understanding that both authorities have the people to deal with necessitated mutual understanding, co-operation and partnership. Adiele (1990) reported that in this state of mutual co-operation, the church championed education and provision of health-care in Nigeria up to the time of independence.

However, the post-independence relationship between the church and the state takes a different dimension which Uzukwu (1989:41) captured thus:

it appears that government, military or civilian, is swayed either by religious or political motives.... a Christian or Muslim head of state could believe that his religious affiliation obliges him to grant privileges to his own religion, or, alternatively, the head of state could see granting privileges to one or the other religion or playing one religion against the other, as a way of political gains

Going further, from the end of Nigeria-Biafra civil war, most policies of successive governments were devised to keep the church away from socio-political life and development of the Nigerian state. For example, schools and hospitals established by the church were taken over by the state without compensations. Afterwards, the church was told to mind her business; a condition which restricts the church to continuing in place of prayer and work for social moral order. Although, the state invites the church for prayer for the nation at any national gathering to celebrate events of national importance such as Independence Day, Army Remembrance Day, Democracy Day etc.

However, collaboration is witnessed between the state and the church in emergency situations as recent events have shown. Studies by Ukeachusim et al (2015) reveal that the church played significant role in partnering with the state when Ebola virus broke out in 2014. The state recognised the capacity of the church for grassroots mobilization and utilized it for mass awareness campaign on Ebola virus. But this was not the approach at the dawn of COVID-19 outbreak. Rather than engaging the church in the fight against the virus, the campaign was turned against the church as initial directives including limiting number of persons in a single service to fifty (50) were abused by security agencies detailed to enforce compliance (Ajansi, 2020; Edem, 2020). Though the church was supported with hand sanitizers, face masks and other palliatives, the leadership of the church felt they would have been consulted before the closedown order was given.

Methodology

The study aimed to explore the experiences of the church of Nigeria Anglican communion and their relationship with the state during COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting qualitative approach and descriptive narrative both primary and secondary data were collected using

participant observation and Key Informant Interview (KII) as the main instruments. Interviews were conducted one-on-one and by telephone with selected members of the clergy and lay faithful within the Enugu province of the CONAC which has ten (10) dioceses spread in the states of Enugu and Ebonyi, South-east of Nigeria. Primatial letters at the time provided useful information. Participant observation drew from regular briefings by diocesan Bishop and experiences of pastoral engagements at the period. Interview questions were designed to reveal (i) the experience of bishops with their clergy, (ii) clergy with members and (iii) perception of COVID-19. Websites of church of Nigeria (CONAC) and Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) supplied useful information on church and state dispositions. Opportunities offered by the 2020 All Anglican Clergy Conference were utilized in gathering data. Secondary data were sourced from newspapers, textbooks and Book of Common Prayer of the church. Descriptive narrative was used in analyzing data.

Official Directives of the church on COVID-19 pandemic show proclivity for obedience

Instructively, letters of the Primates to the churches reflect the official position of the Anglican Church on COVID-19 pandemic (see appendix 1 & 11). The Church of Nigeria was going through a transition when COVID-19 broke out. Major events of the church at the period were either postponed indefinitely or modified to suit COVID-19 protocol. In a proactive manner, the then retiring Primate, wrote a letter dated 12th March, 2020, entitled COVID-19: A pastoral approach (www.anglican.ng.org). The letter suggested certain steps “as guides against contacting and communicating the virus among our people”. First and foremost, the church was encouraged to trust and obey God who is “well able to help us in the time of trouble (Psa. 46:1)”. Significantly, the letter addressed administration of Holy Communion and associated behaviours which bring people in physical contact.

Participants in the study agree that sharing of one chalice by all during the Holy Communion was substituted with smaller communion cups which provides for individual communication. They recalled that use of smaller cups had earlier come to limelight when Ebola virus broke out in 2014. Thus, its wider acceptance when COVID-19 broke out. However, opinions are divided among both the clergy and laity on observing this new behaviour. Some are of the opinion that it is not Holy Communion without the Chalice. For instance, Agu Nkpume (personal communication) said, “it has become a love feast if we use the smaller cups in place of the chalice. I advise you priests to suspend Holy Communion for now”. Controversy such as this notwithstanding, the instruction not to use chalice was adhered to. In some areas, especially in the rural churches that could not afford the smaller cups, a safer approach of suspending communion throughout the period the pandemic lasted, was witnessed. Participants observe that other associated behaviours such as handshakes and hugging during the exchange of peace were replaced with non-contagious gestures of hand waving, mutual bowing, or making of the sign of the cross, to which members adjusted.

More importantly, the Primatial directives did not leave the impression of handling the disease from the framework of faith alone. Participants said they encouraged their members who showed signs of COVID-19 to access medical examinations. Some of the participants who are priests in the rural areas reported that they used the time of service to teach their members other non-pharmaceutical protocols such as personal hygiene, regular hand washing to avoid contacting and communicating the virus. They also agreed that specifically, water, soap, hand sanitizers, face masks were provided

during church services. One of them said; our pastor made sure that wearing of face mask becomes a passport to gaining entrance into our church”.

Participants acknowledged the usefulness of information flow in gaining insights into COVID-19, which the church utilized to engage in mass sensitization of her members. Relevant information was relayed through official social media handles of the church, ACNN TV, newsletters, diocesan bishops, etc. copies of important safety tips from the World Health Organisation (WHO) or Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) were made available to members to read and implement. Participants revealed that Diocesan bishops encouraged their priests and churches “on complying with the directives of government on the observance of the different precautions given to curb the challenge of COVID-19. Leveraging on the directives of the Primate, some of the diocesan bishops gave specific instructions to their clergy to observe Primate’s directives to the letters. Going further, they maintained regular interactions with the senior members of the clergy (the Archdeacons) to ensure that the directives were carried down to the grassroots. The bishop of Nsukka, specifically in a letter dated April 08, 2020 directed that “all vicars and lay pastors should encourage their members to stay at home and link up with the Diocesan or parish (where applicable) on radio/online services and programmes”. Similarly, the Bishops of Ngbo and Ikwo recalled that they maintained constant interaction with their clergy which ensured that no single church their dioceses defaulted. Information flow contributed in no small measure in ensuring that no one oversimplifies, underrates, overrates, overreacts or over-spiritualizes COVID-19.

Major events including Sunday services were affected by COVID-19

The outgoing Primate, Nicholas Okoh, was due for retirement on March 25th and the presentation of his successor, the Most Rev. Henry Ndukuba, who was elected in September 2019³⁴, was slated to take place a day after. As it has been the tradition of the church, activities were lined up for the two events. Two major events usually herald retirement of a Primate; a send-off package which takes the retiring Primate round the provinces before a grand finale in Abuja and a valedictory standing committee meeting of the church which he presides for the last time to give account of his stewardship. Both events have been scheduled and the church was making the necessary arrangements when the disease broke out. The last standing committee of Primate Okoh was scheduled to hold on March 22-March 25, 2020; that would culminate in his retirement on the 25th March and presentation of his successor on 26th March, 2020. In compliance with the directives of the federal government the two events were not observed as planned (Adebayo, 2020).

Information from the website of CONAC shows that the two major events and other activities of the church were modified, with immediate effect, as shown below;

- (1) Fifty (50) persons to be present at the valedictory service of the retiring Primate and presentation of his successor. Two persons were to represent each of the fourteen (14) provinces
- (2) Suspension of the send-off dinner
- (3) Indefinite postponement of the church’s standing committee scheduled to hold between March 21 and March 25, 2020.
- (4) Postponement of Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) scheduled for June at Kigali, Rwanda (www.anglican.ng.org)

Participants in the study observe that these decisions were communicated to the bishops by the time some of them have arrived or on their way to Abuja for the events. For instance the bishop of Nsukka, recalled that he was already in Abuja when he received the

news and had to leave immediately as his Archbishop and one lay member were asked to represent the Province of Enugu. He said that in compliance to the order, those who received the information while on their way to Abuja returned home. Such were the experiences of some bishops of the church who left their dioceses to attend events of their national church but had to turn back mid-way. It is to the credit of the church that they did not dare the government on COVID-19 directives to attend such significant event as the send-off of the Primate.

Emergence of Family Church and Recovery of Priesthood of all Believers

As already observed above, the rapid spread of the virus across the states in Nigeria and its declaration by World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic, necessitated further stringent measures. By March 22, 2020 the announcement of stay-at-home order and total lockdown of public places including gatherings for religious worship and activities no doubt placed the church in a difficult situation. Participants in the study observe that government directives which affected the very life and known traditional mode of operation of the church, which is by assembly (gathering together) were observed. For instance, the Bishop of Nsukka, in a letter dated 8th April, 2020 and titled "Update on Diocesan Directive on Precautionary Measures in Curbing the spread of COVID-19" directed the suspension of every church programme and activity including Sunday services. Priests were to encourage members to stay at home and link up with electronic media and online platforms for worship and other programmes of the church. Alternatively, those who did not have access to the above platforms were encouraged to gather at family level for worship, prayer and study of the word of God.

Suspension of all religious activities gave rise to the need to seek for alternative means of providing spiritual nourishment and guidance. Though home cells and house fellowships existed in some areas prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were strengthened or created as an alternative way of meeting for worship and prayer. Irekamba (2020) observes that one of the ways used by the church to cope during lockdown was the creation of house fellowship. This he noted was being practised prior to lockdown but was helpful in coping with the situation as it provided succor during COVID-19. Nwaka (2020) corroborates this by revealing that in compliance with government directives, churches adopted new ways of exercising their faith by developing home cells. Magbo Itodo (personal communication) confirmed that during the lockdown, groups met in house fellowships for worship. In his words "Our church was divided into thirty nine worship centers and some of us functioned as pastors to look after them". Similarly, Jon Jon (personal communication) noted that house fellowship was adopted and members were encouraged to attend worship sessions and prayer meetings where some members of the congregation were appointed as their pastors.

Discussion on the findings

The findings of this study indicate that church leaders have much influence on the extent their members respond to state directives and greater capacity to reach people at the grassroots. Conscious of this fact, the Church adopted a holistic approach (attitude of prayer – spiritual and directives of government - scientific) in engaging the outbreak of COVID-19 as evidenced in the letters written by the primates. The letters as proactive as they were contain stipulated guidelines on how to tackle the disease and were circulated to all the dioceses before government protocols and subsequent order to sit at home. Arguably, the church took proactive measures ahead of the state.

It is clear that church members demonstrated absolute trust in God and were optimistic that victory over the outbreak can only come from God. They showed trust in God's ability to protect them; *Obara Jisos kpuchitara anyi, onweghi ihe geme anyi* (we are shielded by the blood of Jesus, nothing will happen to us), was a general confession at this time; a position which made some people unwilling to observe the protocols (Igwe, 2020). The biblical text provided by the Primate and related texts such as Psalm 91 and ancient hymn "Oh God our Help in Ages past" were frequently used in churches when worship services of not more than fifty persons were allowed and later in household prayers when church buildings were closed.

Findings also show that keeping good contact and communication with their members, offering prayers and encouragement to them did not pose much challenge to priests and bishops. Television, radio and different means of online services and channels of communication were adopted to keep members in the place of worship and prayer. The Advent Cable Network Nigeria (ACNN) which is owned by the church was helpful. Social media facilitated information flow between the leadership of the church and members. It was easy for church leaders to pass information across to members and as Igwe (2020) observed such information is regarded as authentic because of view of members that their leaders are knowledgeable.

Although, the church has been using both electronic and social media prior to outbreak of COVID-19 for mission purpose, the media became sole channels through which members were reached during COVID-19. This was enhanced by the temporary suspension of Church activities within which congregational (face-to-face) worship services were not observed. Church services and weekly activities were streamed live in different digital platforms. Irekamba (2020) notes that social media such as; Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Zoom were channels adopted to undertake church activities. He observes that members were encouraged, lifted and empowered using different social media platform during lockdown. Therefore, the quest for spiritual fulfillment and satisfaction which have been the drive of those moving from one crusade to another at least were not dashed as electronic media and different social media platforms were of benefit to an extent in satisfying the spiritual yearnings and quests of church members. Therefore, the church became more digitalized and various media platforms; electronic and social media were explored in reaching out to the members. This of course helped in giving hope to the members of the church.

Findings also show that by adopting house fellowship and encouraging some members of the church to lead worship sessions in their homes (Igwe, 2020), the priesthood of all believers (1Peter 2:9), characteristic of the Apostolic tradition, was recovered. There was more emphasis on individual and personal worship than corporate worship. Members of the church were encouraged to see themselves as priests and able to pray and deliver themselves from their physical and spiritual problems. Miracle and healing centres ceased operations as it became a reality that with COVID-19 they can exercise their faith without a mediator. As Irekamba (2020) observes, COVID-19 opened the eyes of church leaders to understand better that the church is far more than the building where the people gather to worship but the believers themselves. Notably, COVID-19 redirected the church leadership during lockdown. There was continued emphasis on the people as the church and that whether or not members congregate in the church (building) that they can still worship God. "You are the church" was a statement which re-echoed from church leaders. Igwe (2020) observed that sermons were preached to give people hope during the pandemic while other practices commonly observed in the

orthodox churches were either modified or suspended (Chukwuma, 2021).

Although, “the information most churches passed on how to respond to COVID-19 was based on their teaching that God can handle every situation that befalls humans (Igwe, 2021:3), studies reveal that religious organisations including the church adopted efforts of the government. Studies by Wild-Wood, et al (2023:8) show that for a faith community, “an integrated mixture of medical and faith practices which they understand to be holistic and uncontroversial” were encouraged. Similarly, Ayeni (2020), Uma and Abiazem (2020), indicate in their studies that church denominations such as the Roman Catholic, the Redeemed Christian Church, the Methodist, etc. complied with the directives of the government. Ossai (2021) maintained that the cooperation of religious leaders with the government helped in ensuring that there was peace in Nigeria during the pandemic. Kangamina et al (2020) revealed that in other climes state-church relationship was helpful in mitigating the spread of the disease in north eastern Congo where religious leaders assisted health workers in information dissemination and providing other logistics.

This study focused only on the experiences of the church of Nigeria Anglican communion in the light of church-state relationship. It failed to articulate the experiences of other mainline church denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist church of Nigeria, the Presbyterian church of Nigeria, each of which control large populations of Christians in Nigeria. Studies by Igwe (2020) and Ossai (2021) show these church denominations share in the same perceptions of COVID-19. It will be interesting area of study to show how their experiences during COVID-19 translate to cordial or otherwise of church-state relations in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study shows that the outbreak of COVID-19 exposed a church that is ever willing to obey the state in civil matters as reflected in the official letters of the church. The letters written by the Primate helped in enlightening the members, which forms a large population of the state, to adopt a balance approach in handling the pandemic which enabled members to be in the place of prayer as well as observing the protocols. By discouraging “over-spiritualizing” the disease as witnessed in Pentecostal circles, the church influenced positively, the people’s attitude to COVID-19 virus. The letters issued by the Primate are not only instructive on the position of the church on the directives of government on COVID-19; they equally demonstrated the capacity of the church to take proactive steps in any emergency situation. Both the spiritual and scientific frameworks needed in overcoming the disease were acknowledged and employed. The leadership of the Anglican Church adopted and encouraged both scientific and spiritual approaches (Primate letter, see Appendix).

Moreover, the church has a long-standing tradition of obeying the state in temporal issues. In spite of the use of law enforcement agencies of the state to enforce compliance to COVID-19 protocols, it is worthy to note that church members obeyed and followed the directives from their leaders (Igwe, 2020). Use of security agencies rather demonstrated mistrust in church-state relations, as this is not the first time the church was faced with a similar challenge. It is on record that the church co-operated fully with the state when Ebola virus broke out in 2014 (Ukeachusim, et al, 2015). Studies have shown that the church is better positioned to deal with the people and that the population has more confidence on the church than they can trust the state. In this instance, government failed to realise that in a deeply religious society as Nigeria, religious beliefs and practices shape people’s thought, behaviour and their overall response to

emergency situations. What this portends for church-state relations is a call for mutual trust and understanding in future dealings.

Conflict interest

The author(s) declares that he/she has no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

The author(s) declares that this article was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and principles for research.

Funding

The author(s) declares that this research received no funding from any agency/organization.

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Appendix 1

