The Coronavirus (COVID-19) broke out in Wuhan, China in December 2019, and on the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a global pandemic. Normal life in many places has since been affected. COVID-19 is not just a healthy issue. It has also revealed different layers of socio-economic inequality in most of the countries. For instance, in the United Kingdom people from BAME (BLACK ASIANS AND MINORITY ETHNIC) communities appear to be disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In the United States of America which has a higher number of Minorities than the UK, people of color (African Americans/Hispanic/Native Americans), have been some of the most affected. According to Sherita Golden (John Hopkins Medicine 4/2020), disproportionate rates of COVID-19 illness and death in Black, Latino/Hispanic and Native communities are more than in white communities. These communities, says Golden, “share common social and economic factors, already in place before the pandemic, that increased their risk for COVID-19”. She further observes that risk factors for people of colour include, living in crowded housing conditions, working in essential fields, inconsistent access to health care, and stress and immunity. Some of these factors also apply to communities at risk in other parts of the world.

The language and approaches used to mitigate COVID-19 seem to be more in favour of people and communities that are privileged and well resourced, than communities living in poverty. When authorities talk about lockdowns and social isolation/distancing this does not necessary cover everyone. Disadvantaged communities and groups cannot afford to go into lock down without compromising their lives and livelihoods. Local downs disadvantage people living in poverty. For instance, when schools closed, children from poor communities have been left behind as they cannot afford to attend school online. This will ruin their future outcomes. People living in poor communities cannot afford to go into lockdown because they earn on a daily basis. When authorities and many others treat COVID 19 as a health crisis, people living in poverty view it as an economic disaster. Simple health recommendations like washing one’s hands and social distancing are problematic for people living in poor communities. For them access to water is a luxury. For people living in poverty, every day is a crisis and COVID-19 has simply added another layer to their multilayered crisis.

As I reflect on the impact of the Coronavirus I am focusing on my social location, the African continent. However, my observations are influenced by global events as seen on international news, social media and chats with friends around the world. Therefore, I am hopeful that much of my reflection will resonate beyond my social location.

The Church and past pandemics
COVID-19 is not the first major pandemic in human history, although it has a much broader impact than any other pandemics in the past. Certainly, this pandemic may not be the last one. Some of the deadliest pandemics in history include: the Third Cholera Pandemic (1852-1860), The Asian Flu Pandemic (1957), Typhus Fever (1945), Cocoliztli Epidemic (1576), Plague of Justinian (541-542), Antonine Plague (165-180 AD), The Third Plague Pandemic (1855), The Black Death (1334) and The Great Flu Epidemic (1918). Most of these pandemics killed millions of people and paralyzed communities and livelihoods.

The Church has not been spared by the outbreak of COVID-19. Sadly, during the Coronavirus outbreak in Italy, the Catholic Church has lost over a hundred priests and lay ministers who had put their own lives at risk in their ministry to those affected by the Coronavirus. This pandemic has brought fear of an uncertain future and this fear is amplified by the fact that the Coronavirus is spreading from person to person easily resulting in high numbers of mortality. There is also a challenge of asymptomatic spread. This is scary! During the pandemic the doors of the Church are closed, and the Church halls are dead silent. As the Coronavirus continues to spread the church needs strong, courageous and wise leadership in order to respond to the emerging challenges.
The Church in the modern era has a lot to learn from the responses of the early Church during past pandemics. The early Church while in its infancy in 240AD experienced the devastating effects of a new illness which broke out in the Roman Empire. This outbreak lasted for about twenty years as it continued to reoccur every winter season. The disease which was ably described by Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage and Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria was an outbreak which impacted the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. The disease outbreak also had an emotional toll on all those in the Church who decided to care for the sick.

The response of the early Church to pandemics resulted in an influential religious institution. Rodney Stark in his book The Rise of Christianity (1996) has highlighted the impact of the Church’s ministry to the sick and dying during the pandemic leading to the ultimate Christianization of the Roman Empire. Pontius, a deacon during the early Church shows that while inhabitants of the City of Carthage were fleeing from the pandemic in the city to self-isolate in the rural area, Christians did the opposite. They stayed behind to take care of the sick, irrespective of their faith. In the next century when there was another pandemic, Eusebius of Caesarea records that Christians once again were at the forefront in the care of the sick. When Christians in the early Church reached out in love to the sick and the dying, this did not go unnoticed by those outside the Christian faith. Stark (1996) observes that these acts of mercy led to higher number of new converts in the early Church.

The Church has not always responded positively to calamities that confront human existence. For example, when a new pandemic broke out in the fourteenth century, known as the Black Death, it is reported that most of the clergy abandoned their posts in fear of contracting the disease. However, there were also exception cases. During a plague outbreak, in Milan in 1575, Bishop Charles Borromeo lived by the mantra work as though everything depended on ourselves and pray as though everything depended on God. During the plague Bishop Borromeo devoted himself to prayer and action. It is reported that he sold his own possessions in order to raise resources to fund the relief program. He also mobilized the wealthy citizens of Milan to help fund relief efforts. Borromeo did not end there, he went on to mobilize the clergy to look after the sick with material and spiritual support. He was so immersed in the work of supporting the sick such that he asked members of his household to treat him as though he had the plague. When in public he practiced social distancing by carrying a long pole to keep health looking people away from him.

The Church’s response to COVID-19
When the COVID-19 story is told and written, what will the commentators say about the response of the church? The Coronavirus has brought up a crisis of the purpose of the church amid human suffering. In most parts of the world the Church has closed her doors for fear of spreading the virus or becoming an epicenter at community level. Church leaders need to ask themselves: if the Church continues to be in lockdown, how will it leverage its influence in the post COVID-19 era? This is a critical question which needs thought provoking responses. The Church like indicated earlier, has three options: first, to be a follower in the implementation of tangible solutions to the pandemic affecting everyone in the community where the Church is located; second, cower away with justification of scriptures and finally, let the authorities determine how to counteract the challenge or defy with disdain of the empirical evidence provided of the danger and carnage the virus is creating in the name of FAITH and in the name of Christian relevance and then carelessly engage.

The coronavirus has impacted Christians in several ways. Christians can no longer meet in person for their weekly worship services. Instead, online worship through initiatives like livestreaming, radio, television and drive in church services have become the new normal. However, most Christians still miss their in-person church programs such as church services, partaking in holy communion, prayer meetings, Sunday School or Home Bible Studies. In extreme cases of lockdown, Christians have been unable to use Church buildings for individual private prayer or hold funerals in church to celebrate the lives of the departed. We are yet to see the extent to which the sudden disruption to in person worship services has impacted the spiritual lives of Christians. A Gallup report by Frank Newport shows that “the most dramatic result (in religion) has been the exceeding quick shift in religious services from in person to online worship”. 

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In the Post COVID-19 era the church will have a challenge to restate her purpose of being a healing community in a world dominated by human loss and suffering. The closed church is problematic. In most communities it is unthinkable to have the church close its doors at a time of great human suffering. The church has always being present and taken a lead in relief efforts at community level. With worship services suspended the church could have at least made available her church halls to be used as additional space for accommodating the sick. It is for this reason that the church needs to do three things while facing the challenge of the coronavirus: first, critique what the Church has done during COVID-19, second, relook at the role of the Church at community level in a new way and lastly, the need to add a new content to what the Church has been doing. This calls for a deep introspection.

The coronavirus has also raised questions of the role the clergy played at community level. They are in self isolation, just like their members. COVID-19 has impacted the role of the clergy as they can no longer be seen as the main interpreters of what is happening during the coronavirus outbreak. The role of the clergy has come under spotlight and as a result they need to have the humility to recognize the faith and responses of the ordinary church members to the pandemic. The Coronavirus has raised questions of the role the clergy play at community level during crisis moments. The relevance of this question arises when the clergy fail to play their catalyzing roles during difficult times. A critical outlook on the role of the clergy is very important, even more so when the coronavirus is still with us.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 the Church has entered uncharted territories where there are rapid changes. Her members are asking new questions regarding their continued existence on this planet. The fear of death is everywhere! The Church has in some cases failed to respond in solidarity with secular institutions by displaying signs of faith, hope and love, amid messages of lockdown, social distancing and isolation. The resources of the Church have also been greatly impacted hence affecting her ability to effectively respond to COVID-19. There is a predicted downturn in church income which may continue for the most part of the year 2020. This will impact negatively on the church’s ministry of charity; Lack of resources may also affect the desired renewal of the church post COVID-19.

The current health crisis has refocused believers on what Church is and is all about. There is a realization that Church is more than the intricate programs designed by the clergy. The centricity approach of how the clergy have carried out the mandate of Christ is under spotlight. Before COVID-19 in most Churches everything seemed to be designed from the top by the clergy. This seems disempowering to most church members as they do nothing outside the church programs, hence leading to failure to function as light and salt to their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communion, prayer meetings, responding to the needs of people in their neighborhood have always been controlled, directed, monitored from the top. The proximity of the influence of Christian lives seems to be measured by clergy led programs. Now that the Church in most communities is closed, Christians are on their own and are asking themselves what they can do to help a hurting community.

A new Passion
The shock and discomfort of the coronavirus has led to new passions among Christians. The New American on 3rd June 2020 reported that during the COVID-19 crisis internet searches for prayer jumped to highest level ever recorded. The New American quotes University of Copenhagen Professor in a paper submitted to the Centre For Economic Policy Research (CEPR) that “in times of crisis, humans have a tendency to turn to religion for comfort and explanation”. Sales of Bibles have also increased during the pandemic. Tyndale House Publishers also reported in the New American that sales for the Life Application Study Bible went up by 44 percent, 60 percent for the Immerse Bible, while on their Facebook page for the Living Translation engagement went up by 72 percent. This shows that while Christians have been left alone to self-isolate, and face head on challenges associated with uncertainty, illness and death, the majority have not been passive. They have gone on their knees to pray for themselves and their community and reread the Bible in the light of the novel Coronavirus pandemic experience. This season can be a time of spiritual transformation!

Prior to the Coronavirus most Churches invested a lot of time and resources in leadership training and development at the expense of discipleship. Times have changed: The church can longer meet in a
physical, and most Christians have been left on their own without support from their leaders. While in lockdown with minimal support from the clergy, church members have been left on their own to face challenges associated with vulnerability and mortality as they wrestle with pain and fear brought about by COVID-19. While in lockdown, Christians are raising questions about life and death with no appropriate theology to answers questions that are arising. This is the reason that the church needs to invest more in discipleship and integral mission training.

**Final Thoughts**

What has COVID-19 revealed? COVID-19 is a time for introspection by the global church. The shallowness of the church’s theology, a lack of a contextual theology, a lack of in-depth teaching to equip the saints, a lack of intentional discipleship. Therefore, the church needs to overcome its COVID-19 constraints in order for her response to be effective. The church also needs to rethink her role during the COVID-19 outbreak by developing a new form of breadth and depth in terms of her response to emerging issues. During the COVID-19 some of the solutions the Church has come up with have not benefitted everyone. Responses like the online church have been elitist in nature and have excluded Christians from poor communities. Most Christians living in poor communities do not have access to broadband internet, electricity, smart phones, laptops, tablets etc., This then begs the question: is the online church the solution to the challenges brought about by the coronavirus? Why not invest a bit more in small groups and the house church movement?

The response of the Church during COVID-19 calls for self-criticism. The church in the majority world has been trapped in a donor-partner relationship with the church in the global north. This is problematic. For some time now, most responses at community level have tended to be culturally loaded and not very effective in mitigating the needed change. When COVID-19 broke out at a global scale the Church in places like Africa was caught off guard with no appropriate response to the emerging challenges at community level. Since the Church in the global north had also gone into lockdown, the project machinery in Africa had ground to a halt. To change this situation, clear and distinct ideas which are constructed locally need to emerge to respond to COVID-19. The Church in any part of the world needs to device appropriate approaches to locally mobilize resources to respond to emerging needs. Insufficient criticality in terms of imported relief models from other contexts tend to negatively impact the church’s response to emerging local needs.

In conclusion, we need to ask ourselves, what is God saying to the Church during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Church needs to find a new way of being reflective about the loving God and human suffering. The Church also needs to reaffirm that the rereading of the Bible in this COVID-19 era will serve as a meaningful guide to reflections on God’s faithfulness during seasons of great suffering. The Church also needs to relook at her at community level in a fast-changing context. The Church also needs to ask herself: what works and what does not work in the current responses to COVID19. Honestly answering these two questions will help the Church to come to an understanding of the actualities and constraints which have affected the ministry of the church during COVID 19.