

The churches in Africa – a constructive and timely COVID-19 response

Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches, 30th April 2020

COVID-19 has certainly become the most widespread pandemic and disaster the world has seen in the memorable time of our generation. It has affected everywhere with different intensity. As I write this article, Africa is one of the least affected with fewer confirmed infections and fewer deaths because of less advanced statistics and tests. Nevertheless, we are in full awareness that save from the grace of God, if it actually spreads like in other continents, we have much more limited capacity to mitigate it.

We Africans recognize the presence of the almighty God in our lives, from cradle to grave. This pandemic is no exception. Churches are struggling to understand this, and reflect on it theologically and spiritually. Many countries have held national days of prayer for God to rescue Africa from this self-realizing threat. It is not because of desperation and helplessness, but from their customary devotion and spirituality, in times of joy or sadness, success or failure. The roles the churches have been playing are multi-faceted.

First and foremost, churches are opinion leaders in their communities. Their voices to accept the reality and severity of the threat, has been very important, particularly in supporting the members to follow the protocols set by their governments to help prevent the spread of the virus. Second, churches are leading by example. Many have stopped gathering, even where the governments did not ban them. They have changed the way they worship and administer religious rituals like baptism, marriages, Eucharist, either by suspending some altogether or celebrating them without physical contact.

Third, churches are taking practical actions to support government systems and through direct diaconal services. The churches have the widest presence in both rural and urban areas. Churches have become teaching points for people on the importance and how to wash hands and the use of sanitizers. At the same time, many churches have launched localized diaconal services, providing food and other necessities to the very vulnerable families, particularly because African governments are not structured to even know the identity of the most vulnerable or even how to serve them. Congregations have collected and distributed food and cleaning materials to the vulnerable in their communities.

Fourth, it is well known that in Africa, churches contribute a large portion of health services, especially in remote and rural areas. In this way churches are using their medical facilities as frontline responders. We thank God that so far, the virus is mainly in large cities in Africa. But the trend is clear that it spreads even to the countryside. Churches are seriously preparing their facilities to be capable and available for helping those who will need treatment and care. Many of these facilities are not adequately equipped or supplied. Churches need additional capacity to be ready for this major task.

Lastly, let me say a bit about the role of All African Conference of Churches, AACC, which I have the privilege of leading. In addition to supporting the churches in Africa, we are specifically focusing on two aspects. The first one is to work with churches at theological level, identifying and addressing misleading theologies in connection with COVID-19. There are many self-proclaiming prophets and preachers who pretend to speak in the name of God, as if God writes e-mails to them. Many of these are prophets of doom, claiming for example, that COVID-19 has been sent by God as a punishment for world sins (from sexuality to climate), and that the only way is to repent and pray day and night because even medicine will not be found. We propagate theologies of life, of the love of God even in times of pandemic. We discourage apocalyptic interpretations of the pandemic, that it is a

sign of the impending end of the world, while propagating theologies of hope in and for the future.

The second one is defending the dignity of African people against those who are very unhappy that the origin and epicentre of this pandemic is not Africa. We have therefore issued two major statements, one condemning the French researchers who implied the tests for vaccines should be done in Africa, as if Africans are guinea pigs and Africa a testing lab. The second was “condemning the racist, xenophobic discrimination of Africans in China” after very disturbing images which went worldwide showing despicable abuse of Africans residing in China. It is very unfortunate that even when Africa is neither the origin nor epicentre of a terrible pandemic, some evil elements in the world would like to tie it to Africa as they do with all other bad things. God have mercy.

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