Towards the Possibility of Internet Ministry as an Alternative Pastoral Ministry in Nigeria during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. Many churches and other public places were closed, and social distancing is advocated by the World Health Organization to serve as a means to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. This has hindered the pastoral ministry of many pastors in Nigeria to their church members. This study explores how pastors are making use of the Internet as an alternative means of pastoral ministry and to what extent Internet ministry is effective in pastoral ministry during the pandemic. Some open-ended questions were sent randomly to some pastors through WhatsApp Messenger. The pastors responded either by WhatsApp or email. There were further correspondences with some of the respondents through WhatsApp and phone calls. The findings of the study revealed that while some of the respondents were using the Internet in their pastoral ministry before the pandemic, most of them started using it during the pandemic, and they agreed that Internet ministry, as an alternative means, is effective to a great extent in their pastoral ministry during the pandemic. Many of them are ready to continue their Internet ministry after the pandemic not only as an alternative means, but also as complementary means to the traditional means of pastoral ministry. Some recommendations and suggestions for further study are made at the end of the paper.

Keywords: *Internet ministry, pastoral ministry, COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing, physical distancing, Nigerian church.*

1. Introduction

Almost the entire world was caught unprepared as Coronavirus disease ravaged the world unabated in the year 2020. The disease (also called COVID-19, 2019-nCov, 2019 Novel Coronavirus) started around December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Alanagreh, Alzoughool and Atoum, 2020). It is an infectious disease caused by a new virus that had not been previously identified in humans. The virus causes respiratory illness (like the flu) with symptoms such as a cough, fever, and in more severe cases, pneumonia (Yan-Rong Guo, et al, 2020). The pandemic spread like wild fire to every part of the world within months of its outbreak. In spite of the fact that health and government authorities all over the world did everything humanly possible to stop or curtail the spread of the epidemic, it has defied all odds and it continues to spread to places. Millions of people were infected with the disease. Hundreds of thousands of people died through it. The economic and social activities of the world were crippled (See World Health Organization, 2020). To curtail the spread of the disease, the whole world was virtually locked down. Sadly, it affected the religious lives of people as the restrictions of gathering of people hindered corporate worship in many parts of the world (Adegboye, Adekunle, Gayawan, 2020). One of the restrictions is social or physical distancing. The Church and its leaders have to respond to these restrictions and find alternative means of conducting religious services and ministering to the spiritual needs of church members. One of these alternative means is Internet ministry.

Against the backdrop that churches and other public places have been locked down and social distancing (as advocated by the World Health Organization to curb the spread of COVID-19 pandemic) have prevented pastors from performing their pastoral ministry in the traditional ways through physical contacts, Internet ministry is likely an alternative ministry opportunity for pastors. Therefore, this paper

is an attempt to look at the possibility of Internet ministry as an alternative ministry opportunity in the period of social/physical distancing in religious settings as a way to reduce the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Pastoral Ministry and Digital Media

This conceptual framework is based on a review of Ağılkaya-Şahin (2016)'s "Theoretical Foundations of Pastoral Care in Christian Tradition" and the new media theory. In Ağılkaya-Şahin (2016)'s article, the concept of pastoral ministry is "illustrated in terms of definition, characteristics, subjects, objects, aims, tasks and theology." The aim of pastoral ministry, otherwise referred to as pastoral psychology, is to help persons with their religious and non-religious challenges through a religious framework of interdisciplinary work of theology and human/social sciences (Ağılkaya-Şahin, 2016). This aim varies "according to time and approach" (Ağılkaya-Şahin, 2016). The word "pastoral" is derived from the concept of shepherding as adopted by the Early Church. This concept of pastoral care is based on the qualities underscored in the Bible, "such as consolation, resolution, counseling, and healing" (Ağılkaya-Şahin, 2016). In spite of the fact that it is difficult to give a precise definition of pastoral ministry, however, it can be described as the art of helping "in improving people's religious and ethical development" or "psychotherapy in the context of the Church" (Ağılkaya-Şahin, 2016). Characteristically, pastoral ministry "provides mutual help, enforcement, and possibilities" (Ağılkaya-Şahin, 2016) for people that need spiritual assistance or want to grow in their spiritual lives. Theologically, pastoral ministry is "embedded in Christian scripture" (Ağılkaya-Şahin, 2016). The Christian scripture presents God as the first pastoral minister who did, and is doing, pastoral ministry in creating and sustaining the heavens and the earth, sending Jesus Christ to the world to die for the sin of the world, selecting the first apostles to continue the earthly pastoral ministry of Jesus Christ, and enabling the first apostles to pass on the baton on pastoral ministry to other believers in Jesus Christ (especially the clerics). Although pastoral ministry is not specifically found in the Christian scripture, Ağılkaya-Şahin (2016) concluded his treatise by highlighting some concepts of pastoral ministry found in the Christian scripture and their scriptural references.

The new media theory, on the other hand, is based on the role of digital media in shaping the society in the twenty-first century. Schroeder (2018) opined that "digital media have been responsible for some of the most wide-ranging changes in society over the past quarter-century." Madianou and Miller (2012) referred to this as "Polymedia" and argued that "the profound transformation in the usage of increasingly converged communication technologies has implications for the ways interpersonal communication is enacted and experienced." Having highlighted the shortcomings of Castells' theory of network power, Hjarvard's mediatization theory, Actor-network theory, Schroeder (2018) acknowledged that "Digital media have extended the reach of media into everyday life: in culture, online information seeking has become a more integral part of daily life; information content has become more variegated; and connectedness with others has become more frequent (sociability)." On their own, Madianou and Miller (2012) identified three preconditions need to be met for the new media or polymedia "to emerge as an environment of communication opportunities." These preconditions are: access and availability, affordability, and media literacy (Madianou and Miller, 2012).

2.2 Internet Ministry

A growing part of the population of the world has access to the Internet (United Nations, 2019), and the Internet is now making a paradigm shift from citizenship to "netizenship" (Amodu, 2017) The high Internet penetration rate into the society and its great influence on the sustainability of religion in general has created a critical question of how it is possible for the Internet to "upload God" onto cyberspace or to "cyberize" God (Fazlul, 2016). This fact has made it possible for people to use the Internet and other technological tools in Christian ministries in general and pastoral ministry in particular (Afolaranmi, 2009). This is what is referred to as the Internet ministry. It is a way of reaching out to church "members, visitors, seekers and leaders through a variety of Web and Internet technology tools" ("What Is Web Ministry?"). It can also be referred to as an online ministry or web ministry. Some people have even gone to refer to it as the Internet church, online church, cyber church, virtual Church, e-Church or Digital Church, although, Internet ministry is slightly different from the Internet church (Lee, 2010). According to

Caston (2012), "the Internet church is not here to replace the traditional church; it is only an extension of it." The Internet ministry has been described as "the use of online services, apps, functions, and technologies in order to serve people with the intention of helping those people grow in maturity towards Christ" (Knox, n.d.). Obinna (2012)noted that the Church is not using the Internet in general and social media in particular just because everyone uses it in their personal lives, but "as members of the church seek to communicate and connect with one another, social media are used exactly because they meet the need in helpful, efficient, and natural ways."

2.3 Social or Physical Distancing

Social distancing is the act of deliberate keeping a physical space or distance of "at least 1 metre (3 feet)" (World Health Organization) between people to avoid spreading illness. It is not to be confused with social distance that depicts the distance between different groups in society, like social class, race or ethnicity, gender or sexuality, and so on (Pastor-Satorras, Díaz-Guilera, Arenas, 2004). On the contrary, social distancing is broadly, "a way to keep people from interacting closely or frequently enough to spread an infectious disease" where "schools and other gathering places such as movie theaters may close, and sports events and religious services may be cancelled" ("Tips For Social Distancing, Quarantine, And Isolation During An Infectious Disease Outbreak"). In relation to COVID-19, it "refers to efforts that aim, through a variety of means, to decrease or interrupt transmission of COVID-19 in a population (sub-) group by minimising physical contact between potentially infected individuals and healthy individuals, or between population groups with high rates of transmission and population groups with no or a low level of transmission" ("Considerations relating to social distancing measures in response to COVID-19 – second update 23 March 2020"). Social distancing should be best described as "physical distancing" because social relationships are still being carried out even when people are physically distant apart as people still relate through telephone calls and the social media (like Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, Telegram, Instagram, etc.). So, by inference, social distancing as advocated by the World Health Organization is actually physical distancing (Lazenby, 2020).

3. Targeted Population, Instrument and Procedure for Data Collection

The targeted population of this study was randomly selected Nigerian pastors that are young, intermediate or older in pastoral ministry. The instrument used to collect data for the study is a form of open-ended questions sent to respondents through WhatsApp Messenger, and the respondents sent in their responses through either WhatsApp Messenger or email. There were further correspondences with some of the respondents through WhatsApp Messenger or even phone calls, as occasions demanded it. This researcher adapted and employed this means for his data collection because of the current situation in the world that discouraged people from moving from one place to the other and the advocacy for social/physical distancing and staying safe. The time frame of this research is the months of March to May 2020.

4. Data Presentation and Discussions of Results

4.1 Number of Respondents

Out of one hundred and fifty (150) pastors that were contacted through WhatsApp Messenger, one hundred and seventeen (117) responded. This represented seventy-eight per cent (78%) of the total number of people contacted. With this percentage, this researcher is of the opinion that this method of data collection is considerably better, more effective, and more result-oriented to other methods of data collection in social sciences research.

4.2 Years of Experience in Pastoral Ministry

From the number of pastors that responded as shown in Figure 1, twenty-one (21) pastors that represents eighteen per cent (18%) have had pastoral ministry experiences for less than 9 years, forty (40) pastors that represents thirty-four per cent (34%) have had pastoral ministry experiences between 10 and 19 years, while fifty-six (56) pastors that represents forty-eight per cent (48%) have had pastoral ministry experiences for at least 20 years. This result shows that most of the respondents are experienced pastors in their pastoral ministry. It has to be noted here that few of these pastors are missionaries while

some are teachers in pastors' training schools. This exception is reflected in the responses of these particular pastors.
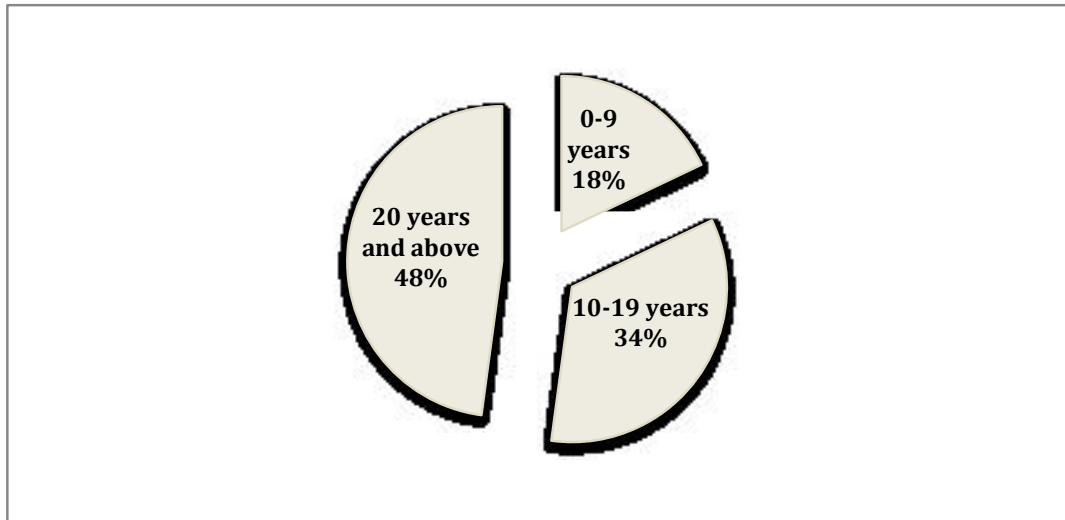

Figure 1: Years of Experience in Pastoral Ministry

4.3 Major Traditional Ways of Pastoral Ministry before COVID-19 Pandemic Period

Pastors have been performing their pastoral ministry in various ways before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic that caused some restrictions to curtail the spread of the pandemic. The respondents identified some of these ways as represented by Figure 2. These responses do not mean a pastor chose only one response. They had the opportunity of identifying as many ways as possible. The responses indicate that each of them has been using many ways to perform his pastoral ministry before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.

A quick glance at Figure 2 shows that preaching from the pulpit is the most recognizable way many of the respondents (42 respondents representing 35%) indicated as the traditional way of engaging in pastoral ministry before the COVID-19 pandemic period. Other more recognizable ways are regular church activities (23 respondents representing 19%) and congregational meetings (19 respondents representing 16%). These two similar ways are the conventional gatherings mostly on Sundays and some other days during the week. Other ways that have respondents between 10 and 20 (representing 8% and 17%) are prayer from the pulpit, Bible study and teaching sessions, use of social media platforms, house fellowship/cell group sessions, and printing of religious literatures. Worthy of note amongst this list is the use of social media platforms (12 respondents representing 10%). A further glance of Figure 2 also reveals that some of the respondents have been using other specific aspects of the Internet like websites, online live streaming, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram in their pastoral ministry before the pandemic. This indicates that some of the pastors were not new to Internet ministry even before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, some of the respondents indicated other ways as reflected in Figure 2.
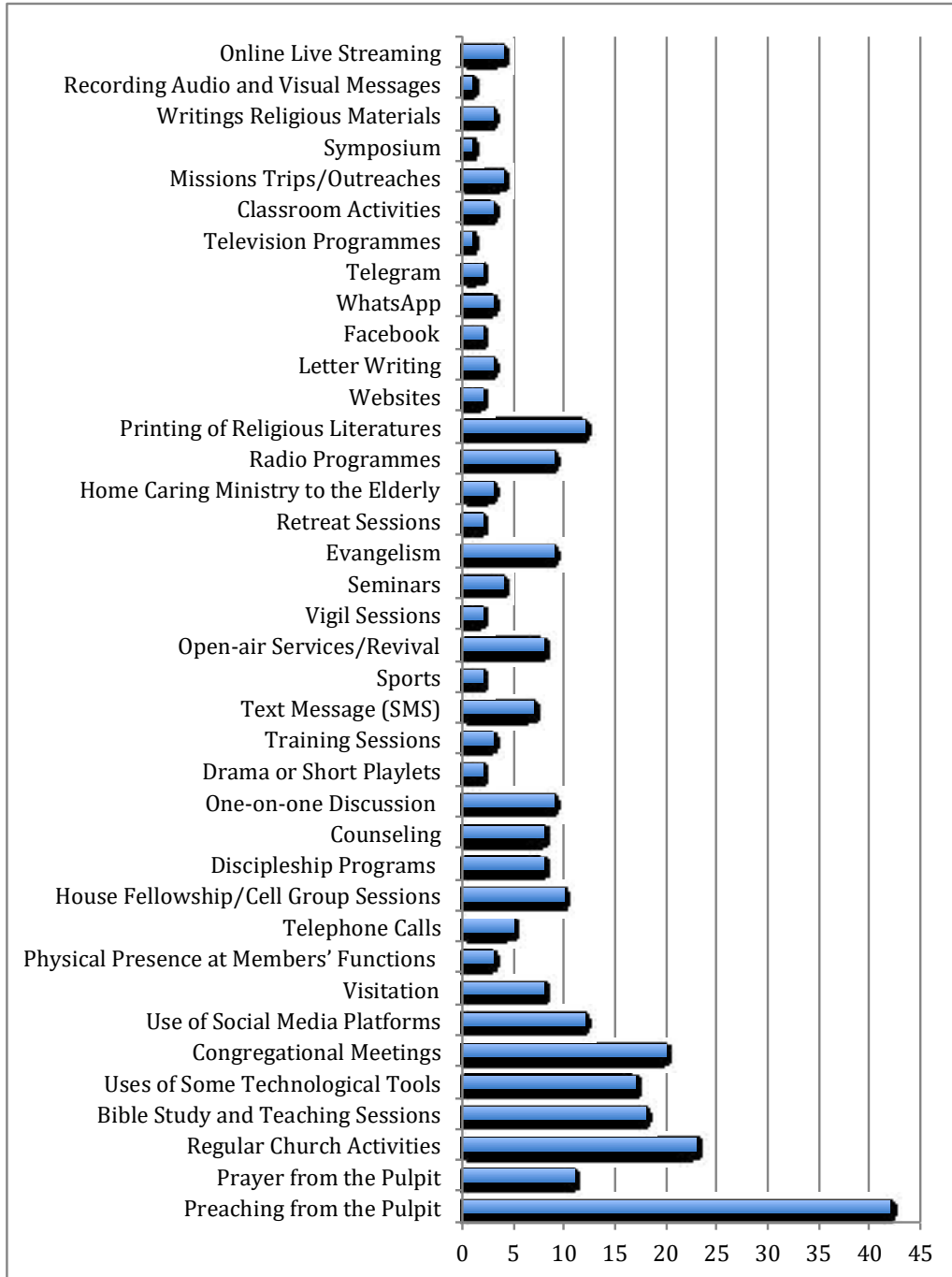
Figure 2: Major Traditional Ways of Pastoral Ministry before COVID-19 Pandemic Period

4.4 Ways of Pastoral Ministry During COVID-19 Pandemic

A question was posed to the respondents on how they are doing pastoral ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic period. This is a subjective question that allowed the respondents to give as many answers as possible. As shown in Table 1, there are still some traditional ways of pastoral ministry like physical ministrations to limited number of people (10 respondents), house fellowship/cell church (43 respondents), telephone calls for counselling and prayers (41 respondents), multiple number of services per Sunday (13 respondents), visitation (13 respondents), personal counselling for few emergencies (12

respondents), distribution of relief packages (5 respondent), weekly radio broadcast (14 respondents), and sharing of God's Word early in the morning (5 respondent). However, most of the ways indicated as shown in Table 1 as the ways of pastoral ministry during the pandemic are Internet-inclined. While 48 respondents (representing 41% of the total respondents) generally indicated available social media platforms as the ways of doing pastoral ministry during the pandemic, many other respondents were more specific by indicating the kinds of social media platforms they used in their pastoral ministry.

WhatsApp Messenger – "a cross-platform mobile messaging app that allows you to exchange messages, images, audio or video without having to pay for SMS but with the use of the Internet" (Afolaranmi, 2020). – with 74 respondents (63%) leads the specific social media platforms used by pastors in their pastoral ministry. In further explanations on how this instant messaging app is being used, WhatsApp group feature is very prominent as pastors created or joined existing WhatsApp groups to disseminate information to their church members. Other ways of using WhatsApp Messenger are doing vigil through the app; holding meetings through the app; making WhatsApp video and audio calls (at times for counselling and prayer sessions); sending audio messages through the app to individuals and groups of people; sending typed Bible study outlines, and/or making audio summaries of the Bible studies through WhatsApp; and recording sermons and posting such to church members very early on Sunday morning or sending such recorded sermons to house fellowship leaders to be played in their house fellowship centres (To know more on using WhatsApp in pastoral ministry, see Afolaranmi, 2020).

Facebook – "a web-based, interactive network that allows users to share information and thoughts over a wide area" (National Association of Countries) – with 55 respondents (47%) is the second most used social media platform amongst the respondents. With features like Facebook personal and group wall postings, sending private messages (in Facebook Messenger) and other similar features, some of the respondents listed how they used Facebook in their pastoral ministry (for explanations on these Facebook features, see Afolaranmi, 2012). Additional 19 respondents (16%) specifically indicated Facebook live streaming of their Sunday morning services and mid-week meetings as a way of doing the pastoral ministry.

Zoom – "a relatively new easy-to-use "video conferencing program that allows for multiple participants, audio and video sharing, screen sharing, working on a whiteboard and recording" (Center for Innovation in Teaching and Research) with 37 respondents (32%) is the second most used Internet platform. These respondents explained that they use this application mostly to hold meetings. Other church activities the pastors use Zoom for are Sunday School preparatory classes, prayer sessions, and other departmental activities. However, some of the respondents complained that using this application is more expensive compared to other aspects of the Internet.

The fourth most used Internet platform is YouTube with 32 respondents (27%). YouTube "is an extremely popular web-based platform for uploading, sharing and viewing videos" (National Association of Countries). The pastors that indicated this explained that they record their sermons and teachings on the Bible and upload them on YouTube channels that they have created for that purpose.

Text message or short message services (SMS) – "a means of sending text messages to mobile devices like cellular phones, smartphones and PDAs" (Afolaranmi, 2009) – is the fifth most used platform by the respondents. This is classified as an Internet aspect because it can be done "at cheaper rates, more conveniently and to many people at a time through the Internet" (Afolaranmi, 2009) (otherwise called web-based SMS or simply bulk SMS). The pastors use this to disseminate relevant information and prayer wishes to their church members.

Telegram Messenger – "a cloud-based instant messaging and voice-over internet protocol service" (Oloo, 2018) – is the sixth most popular Internet platform indicated by the respondents. The pastors use this instant messaging app in a similar way they use WhatsApp Messenger as explained above.

Space would not permit to discuss other specific Internet aspects used in pastoral ministry during the pandemic as indicated by the respondents. The numbers of respondents that indicated each of these aspects are shown in Table 1 above. As stated above, what this indicated is that respondents used various Internet aspects and platforms in their pastoral ministry during the pandemic.

Ways of Pastoral Ministry During COVID-19 Pandemic	Numbers of Respondents
WhatsApp Group	74
Facebook	55
Social Media Platforms	48
House Fellowship/House Cell Church	43
Telephone (for counselling and prayers)	41
Zoom	37
YouTube Media Channels of the Church	32
Text Message (SMS)	29
Facebook Live Streaming	19
Telegram Messenger	17
Sunday Service Online	16
Email	15
Teleconference	15
Recorded Messages and Songs	14
Weekly Radio Broadcast	14
Multiple Number of Services per Sunday	13
Conference Call	13
Visitation	13
Online Prayers Sessions	13
Family Fellowship	12
Typing of Messages	12
Website Posting	12
Personal Counselling (for few emergencies)	12
Twitter	12
Instagram	12
Video Recording	12
Physical Ministration	10
Internet Radio	8
Transferable Videos, Audio and Text	7
Webinar	6
Imo Messenger	6
Distribution of Relief Packages	5
Print Media	5
Use of Google Forms	5
Online Class Sessions	5
Sharing of God's Word Early in the Morning	5
Television	5
Paying Tithe through Online Banking Transfer	5
Google Classroom	4

Table 1: Ways of Pastoral Ministry During COVID-19 Pandemic

4.5 The Extent of Internet Ministry as an Alternative Pastoral Ministry

A question was posed to the respondents to tell to what extent they do see Internet ministry as an alternative ministry opportunity in the period of COVID-19 pandemic. Since the question was an open-ended one, there are varies of responses from the respondents. Table 2 is an overview of answers. Sixteen (16) respondents (representing 13% of the total respondents) were of the opinion that Internet ministry, as an alternative means of pastoral ministry, is very effective. Ten (10) out of these respondents went further to add that it helps to bridge the created gap during the pandemic. This gap is the restrictions of large gatherings and movement from one place to the other. To some of them, it is a very effective and efficient means of communication to church members and with instant responses from the church members. Ten (10) respondents (8%) agreed that Internet ministry is effective to a great extent. Another (10) respondents (8%) agreed that Internet ministry is effective as a viable alternative means in pastoral ministry. However, some of the respondents added that its viability is felt most in the urban areas. While five (5) respondents (4%) argued that Internet ministry is the best alternative method of pastoral ministry, nine (9) respondents (7%) viewed that it just as an alternative, but not the best means of pastoral ministry. These respondents argued thus because of the challenges of using the Internet among many people especially the older generation that are not Internet-compliant and the Nigerian society that is still not relatively Internet-friendly. Seven (7) respondents (6%) agreed with this by viewing Internet

ministry as what is only an alternative presently because of pandemic. Eight (8) respondents (7%) agreed that Internet ministry is the adequate and widest platform for ministry. The seven (7) respondents (6%) that saw Internet ministry as a global platform for pastoral ministry would agree with this opinion. This is so because one can reach millions of people at a time through the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2020). Six (6) respondents (5%) regarded Internet ministry as a very valuable evangelistic tool. The global reach of the Internet makes it easy for pastors to spread evangelism, which is a major aspect of their pastoral ministry especially to people beyond their church members. Another six (6) respondents (5%) thought that Internet ministry is only a complementary option. These respondents argued that Internet ministry cannot replace the traditional ways of physical pastoral ministry, but they agreed that Internet ministry could complement the traditional ways. In spite of this, three (3) respondents (2%) argued that Internet ministry is far better than the other traditional methods of pastoral ministry. Other less popular responses (with their numbers of respondents in brackets) are that Internet ministry is: not an option, but a must for pastors (4); effective only in elite environment (3); effective to an extent (3); somehow difficult (3); easy and easily accessible (3); and very cheap compare to using church building (2). From the analysis above, it is evident that most of the respondents agreed that Internet ministry is very effective as an alternative means of pastoral ministry.

The Extent of Internet Ministry as an Alternative Pastoral Ministry	Number of Respondents
Very Effective	16
To a Great Extent	10
A Viable Alternative	10
Just an Alternative, Not the Best	9
The Adequate and Widest Platform for Ministry	8
One of the Best Ways	7
Only Alternative Presently	7
It is a Global Platform	7
A Very Valuable Evangelistic Tool	6
Only a Complementary Option	6
To a Very Great Extent	5
The Best Alternative Method	5
Not an Option but a Must for Pastors	4
Effective in Elite Environment	3
To an Extent	3
Far Better than the Traditional Method	3
Somehow Difficult	3
It is Easy And Easily Accessible	3
Very Cheap Compare to Using Building	2

Table 2: The Extent of Internet Ministry as an Alternative Pastoral Ministry

4.6 Aspects of the Internet Explored in Pastoral Ministry during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Apart from an earlier question about general ways of pastoral ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic, another question was posed to the respondents on specific aspects of the Internet they explored in their pastoral ministry during the pandemic. Figure 3 shows an overview of the responses of the respondents. The responses to this question are similar to the responses to the earlier questions as discussed above.
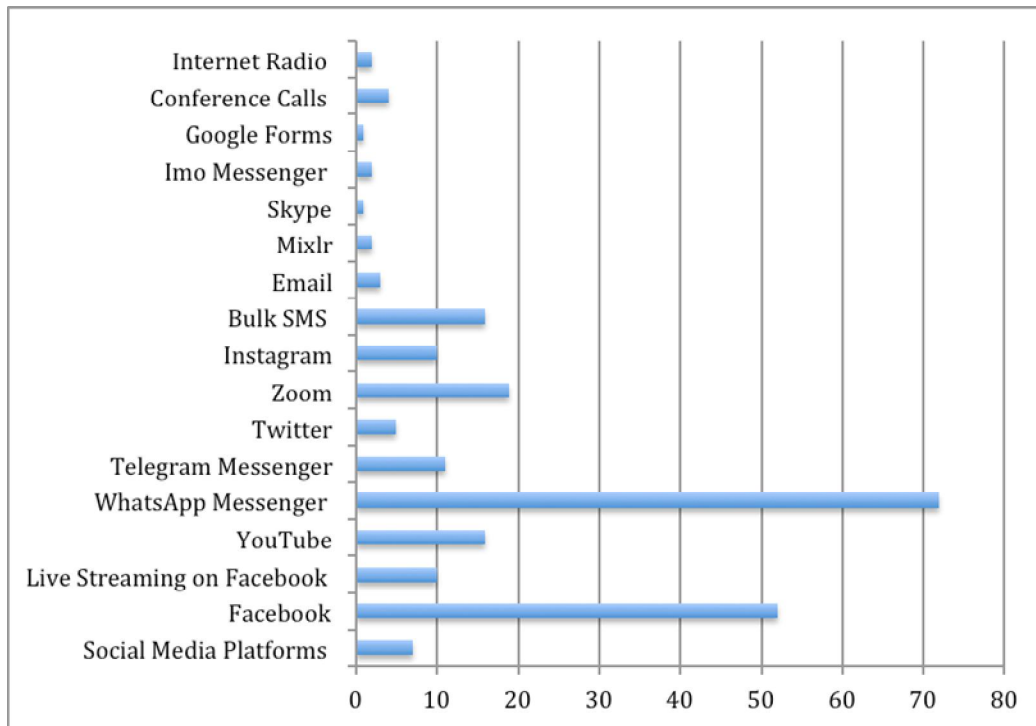
Figure 3: Aspects of the Internet Explored in Pastoral Ministry during the COVID-19 Pandemic

4.7 Effectiveness of the Aspects of the Internet in Pastoral Ministry during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Another open-ended question was posed to the respondents to see the effectiveness of the aspects of the Internet employed in the pastoral ministry during the pandemic. The difference between the earlier question and this question is that the earlier question aimed at finding out the extent of Internet ministry as an alternative ministry opportunity while the latter question aimed at finding out the extent of the effectiveness of the aspects of the Internet used in pastoral ministry. The respondents gave various responses. Figure 4 is an overview of how the pastors responded. From the data given as shown in the overview, only sixty-six (66) respondents representing 56% gave definite responses about the effectiveness of the aspects of the Internet used in their pastoral ministry during the period under consideration. The pastors other gave unclassified responses. Whether identified definite responses or unclassified responses, each pastor has stated reason(s) for given his responses. Some of these reasons are analysed below.

Many of the thirty-seven (37) respondents (representing 31% of the total respondents) that identified the aspects of Internet used during the period under consideration as very effective went further to corroborate their views by pointing out that the Internet is a global platform that enables them to reach more people than their congregations every day. This feedbacks according to some pastors are natural and honestly spontaneous from targeted recipients as do not at times demand for such feedbacks. Many of them submitted that the Internet enables them to get feedback through comments and messages both on social media and phone calls.

Some of the ten (10) respondents (8%) agreed that the Internet is effective did so because it makes ministry to the members easy, affordable, and safe. These respondents argued that the Internet does not involve the risk of peoples' lives in transportation especially during the period of restrictions of people's movement because of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the pastors in this category added that Internet ministry has been effective for him and his congregation because he has been introducing people to it even before the challenge of COVID-19. Another respondent argued that the effectiveness of Internet ministry in his pastoral ministry is because of "concerted efforts and determination" on his part and the part of his congregation.

Some of the five (5) respondents (4%) that said that the Internet is reasonably effective and the six (6) respondents (5%) that said that Internet is partially effective supported their views by some reasons that can be classified as challenges of the use of the Internet in Nigeria in particular. These challenges include the level of technological literacy or education of many people, relatively high cost of access to the Internet, slow and unstable Internet connectivity, errant power supply, rural and semi-urban settings of some parts of the country, access to technological tools, and some Internet vices like Internet fraud, cyber bully, fake news through the Internet, distractions and Internet addiction. Some other challenges that make the Internet reasonably or partially effective are not being able to do some things corporately at the same time like singing, saying Amen, and saying the benediction together. While few pastors have tried to administer Lord's Supper online, it has not been effective as when the pastors were together with the people that were partaking in the Holy Communion. It has been argued by some pastors that there are natural and spontaneous feedbacks in Internet ministry. However, the very extent of the spiritual impact in the lives of these recipients is not quantifiable because of the limited and unverified feedback. A respondent was even of the opinion that getting feedbacks is not the only way to measure the effectiveness of using the Internet in pastoral ministry. As effective as Internet ministry is to some pastors, some other pastors argued that it is not the best for old people, villagers, illiterates and the poor who cannot afford good Internet-enabled phones, Internet data, or alternative power to charge their phones. Most people in these categories that constitute substantial quantity of the Nigerian population do not have access to the Internet. So, these people are not on many social media platforms that pastors are using now to do pastoral ministry. A pastor was of the opinion that the effectiveness of the Internet in pastoral ministry depends on the users and most especially the recipients. In his words, "[The aspects of the Internet] have their place [in pastoral ministry]. Some have worked well and others have not – especially because of the participants involved." Another pastor corroborated this by arguing that he does not see the use of the Internet in pastoral ministry as effective if the people are not willing because its effectiveness and modifications are totally based on the willingness of people to participate in the church services and programmes through the Internet.

The two (2) respondents that decided that the Internet is not effective and the other two (2) respondents that agreed that the Internet is not very effective as well as some other unclassified respondents argue in line with some of the pastors that viewed the Internet as reasonably or partially effective. They went further to argue that some aspects of worship like baptism cannot be done through the Internet. They also argued that engaging in pastoral ministry through the Internet cannot replace the traditional physical pastoral ministry engagements. The face-to-face encounter still plays a major role in pastoral ministry both on the part of the pastors and on the part of the church members. The mentality of many church members towards the use of the Internet is another factor as the Internet ministry is still relatively new phenomenon in Nigeria. Using the Internet is even considered as worldly and sinful by some church members and even some pastors. According to these few pastors, as good as the Internet is, it will not be effective in pastoral ministry until the church members accept it as another means of engaging in pastoral ministry. These pastors argued further that a lot of church members that are not Internet literate are struggling to benefit from the new alternative way of pastoral ministry. One of the pastors confessed that it has not been easy for him to use the Internet in his pastoral ministry because he has been lazy in using the Internet and other technological tools.
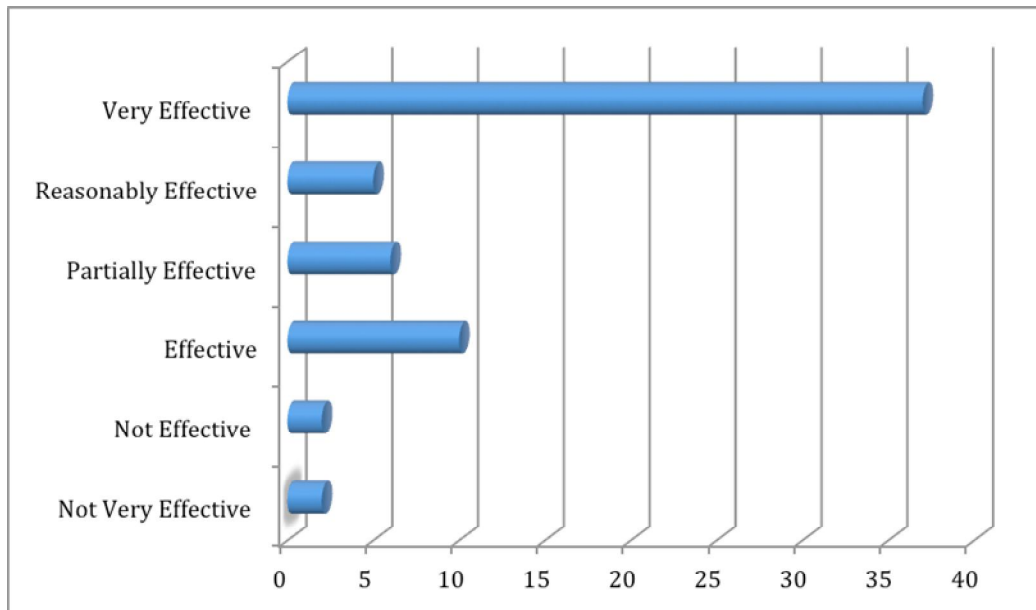
Figure 4: Effectiveness of the Aspects of the Internet

4.8 Aspects of Internet Ministry that will still be considered in Pastoral Ministry after the COVID-19 Pandemic

The respondents were asked what aspects of Internet ministry they will still consider to be using in their pastoral ministry to people after the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are many responses as expected, Figure 5 is the overview of the major responses. While some pastors simply said that they will consider information and communication technology (ICT) or Internet ministry in general, some responded that they would explore the available aspects of the Internet as the needs arise. Other pastors mentioned Google Drive, Google Forms, recorded messages to be sent by available social media platforms, short message services (SMS) either by bulk SMS or directly sent on their phones, online Bible studies, and the likes. While a pastor specifically stated, "ministering through the Internet won't stop even after the [COVID-19} pandemic, because I believe that is where the world will gravitate either now or latter," many of the pastors were sincere to state that they would go back to the old traditional ways of engaging in pastoral ministry. However, some of these pastors added that they would as well explore the opportunities that Internet ministry has provided "as a supplementary tool". According to a pastor, the Internet ministry "has come to stay and any church that draws back from it may lose impact and significance in this world that is now digitized and technologically inclined."
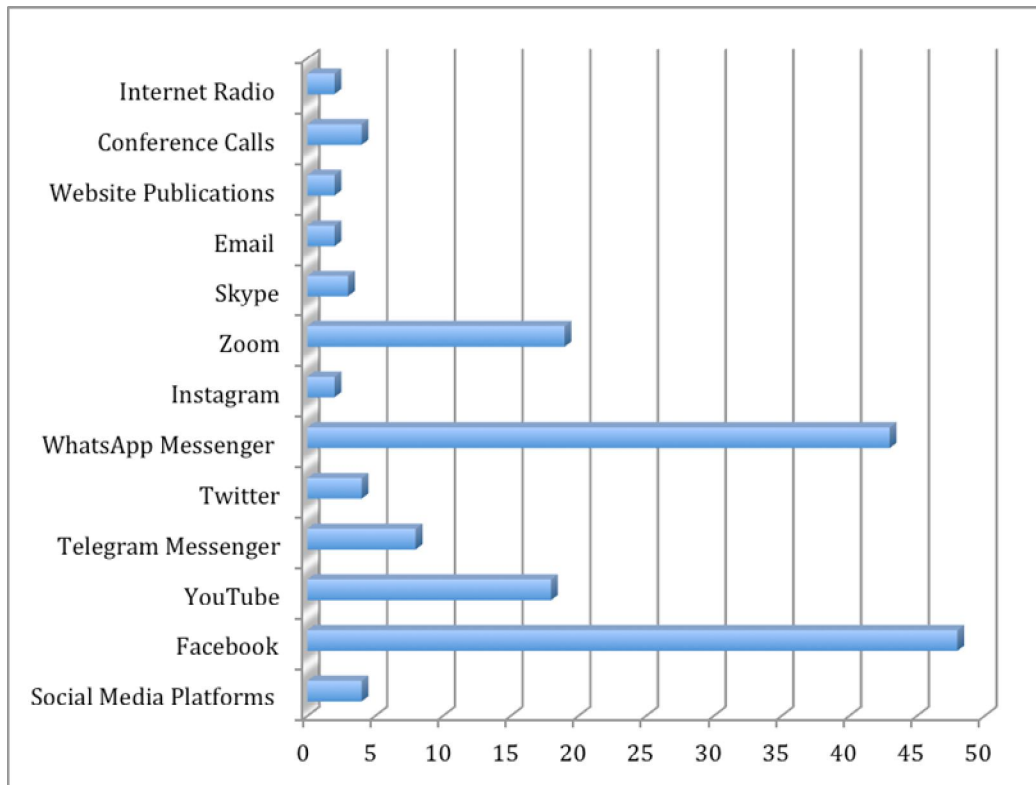
Figure 5: Some Aspects of Internet Ministry that will still be considered in Pastoral Ministry after the COVID-19 Pandemic

5. Limitations, Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Study

This study aimed at exploring the possibility of Internet ministry as an alternative means of pastoral ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. As stated earlier under "Targeted Population, Instrument and Procedure for Data Collection", this research was limited only to pastors of the selected churches in Nigeria. It did not include other pastors in other churches. The scope of the research does not include the other members of the churches. A wider scope would have included the other members of the churches if the objective of the research has been to appraise the responses of the church members. There are very few documented resources on the subject matter as it is a relatively new one. This is qualitative research, but time constraint and the advocacy for social/physical distancing and staying safe could not allow this researcher to have a face-to-face interview with the selected pastors and other church leaders. However, the research has revealed that the Internet ministry has to some extent become an alternative avenue for pastoral ministry. Therefore, these recommendations (as extracted from the additional comments given by some of the respondents) are made:

1)   Pastors should embrace the use of the Internet and other technological tools in their pastoral ministry. While the traditional physical means of pastoral ministry should be continued as much as possible, pastors should be thinking of how to make Internet ministry not only an alternative ministry, but also as supplementary to the traditional ways of pastoral ministry.

2)   Pastors should learn how to use the Internet and other technological tools in their pastoral ministry and continue to update their knowledge of these tools as they advance almost everyday. Pastors should be broadminded and humble to learn from church members and those that are professionals in technology-related fields. Pastors should be more open, creative, innovative and ICT compliant.

3)   Pastors as well as members of churches should be sensitized about the efficiency of the Internet and other technological tools in pastoral ministry.

4)   While Internet ministry cannot be a substitute for physical church worship, less emphasis should be laid on so-called traditional physical means of pastoral ministry to curtail the spread of COVID-19, and more emphasis should be laid on Internet ministry that is more in line with physical distancing as a means of curtailing the disease.

5)   Pastor should work and improve on their physical outlook, spoken English, good grammar, spelling and be mindful of their words as they use the Internet in their pastoral ministry.

6)   Every church should have as much as possible well equipped functional multimedia unit manned by professionals in technology-related fields and/or teenagers/youths who are well versed in information and communication technology.

7)   The government and concerned authorities should make access to cheap and fast Internet connectivity available for the citizens.

8)   The government and concerned authorities should work on providing stable power supply, as the Internet and other technological tools cannot be effectively used without fully charged technological tools.

9)   Pastors' training schools, colleges of theology and theological seminaries should include courses like "Introduction to Internet Ministry", "Principles and Dynamics of Internet Ministry", "Internet Ministry Practicum", and similar courses on Internet ministry into their curricula.

10)   Online learning should be introduced or adopted for some courses of these academic institutions in the course of training both would-be pastors and pastors in the field to accustomed these pastors to Internet ministry.

Based on the outcome of this study, it is recommended, therefore, that there should be further study on the theological/biblical foundation for Internet ministry; the contents of messages and other information that pastors are disseminating through the Internet in their pastoral ministry; the reliability, validity, and effectiveness of feedbacks from the recipients of Internet ministry; and finally, challenges, problems as well as disadvantages of using the Internet in pastoral ministry.

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