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Disembodied Congregations: Covid-19 and Internet Churches among Christian Communities in Lagos, Nigeria.

As smart phones and computers become intrinsic part of our daily routine, the popularity of Internet churches is steadily increasing across the globe. Accordingly, the Western hemisphere is leading in the aspect of digital churches. In sub-Saharan Africa, the phenomenon of Internet churches only became a recent phenomenon. In other words, the development of online fellowships is a recent event in the history of Nigerian Pentecostalism. In the midst of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Nigerian government issued several bans on large gatherings and open religious worship. For example, many Pentecostal churches suspended physical meetings and at first posted only sermons online before turning to Zoom to hold services and, much later, small-group meetings through Facebook, WhatsApp, and other online applications to serve as the “synagogues” for worship. Others stay tuned to television for live or recorded sermons of their favorite “man of God” by becoming members of imagined communities. In other words, the relevance and popularity of these online platforms became the quintessential for the survival of the church. During the lockdown, many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria were confronted with new multifaceted problems of organizing, ministering, and catering to their members during the Covid-19 lockdown. This paper analyzes the effect of the Coronavirus pandemic on the spatial congregation in Lagos, Nigeria with specific question; how does the countermeasures of the Nigerian government to fight the COVID-19 virus pandemic impact religious gatherings, which essentializes the definition of a church in the Nigerian parlance?

Keywords: Pentecostalism, digital religion, Covid-19, dis-embodied church, lived experience, imagined community, Nigeria