



Caring for the Least of These in Heart, Mind, Soul, and Strength:

The Response of the Christian Church in Kenya to the COVID-19 Pandemic

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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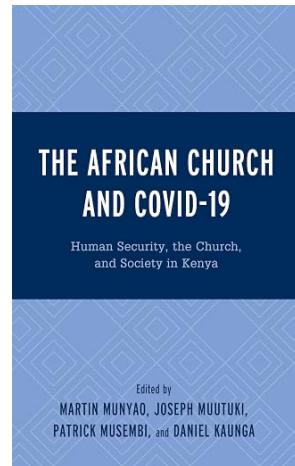
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In numerous teachings throughout the Gospels, Jesus communicated clearly to those who followed Him that caring for the poor, downtrodden, and dispossessed was not an option. Rather, it appears as a prime directive. When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 January 2020, caring for the poor took on new urgency as mandatory lockdowns around the world deprived millions of their jobs, mobility, and food security. In every country where Christianity is present, the Christian churches were obliged to respond to the vast needs of its people and communities. In Kenya, already poor by global standards, with millions living beneath the World Bank's poverty line, the Church was challenged as never before when the country reported its first case in March 2020.

In 2021, in the very midst of the pandemic, a worthy collection of scholars was gathered to assess the response of the Church in Kenya; that is, to analyze where and how the church was succeeding at its mission and where and how it



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often was falling short. Edited by **Martin Munyao**, **Joseph Muutuki**, **Patrick Musembi**, and **Daniel Kaunga**, the result was a collection of essays titled *The African Church and COVID-19: Human Security, the Church, and Society in Kenya*, published in 2022 by Lexington Books. As editor and contributor **Martin Munyao** wrote in the Introduction, “This book wrestles with the question of how the church in Kenya is to articulate the gospel” in a country where “the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the fragility of socioeconomic and political structures in Africa, particularly Kenya, which is the context of interest in this book” (xv).

Twelve chapters, either authored or co-authored by various scholars, address numerous topics to which the church was called to respond, ranging from food insecurity, environmental justice, mental health, and gender-based violence (GBV) to name a few. In general, the authors found much to criticize regarding the Church’s response, and each chapter ended with a concluding section wherein recommendations for the future were made. For the purposes of this review, rather than analyzing each chapter in a piecemeal fashion, I have adopted an organizational framework around the words of Jesus himself. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus echoed the Hebrew *Shema* when he told his followers to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12: 30–31).

Taking love as an action-word, Jesus’s injunction is a call to respond with deeds and not mere words. Interestingly, in this commandment Jesus addresses four key aspects of human health: emotional well-being (the heart), spiritual vitality (the soul), mental acuity (the mind), and physical health (strength). It is argued here that for the Church to best meet the needs of its people and communities, it must take a holistic approach to its calling by addressing each of the four human needs articulated above. In such fashion, the church can both answer its own call to love the Lord as Jesus expressed and heal and empower its people to have the vitality to do the same. Each of the twelve chapters fits into one of the four categories of heart, mind, soul, and strength, and it’s on this basis and framework that the essays will be analyzed.

Taken in the order expressed by Jesus, **John Mudegu** addresses issues of the heart in chapter 8 by writing about the Church’s handling of mental health cases during the pandemic. Throughout the world as well as Kenya, the WHO identified mental health and emotional trauma as a major public health crisis resulting from the effects of insecurities brought on by the COVID-19 experience. In Kenya’s case, **Mudegu** found that the Church was “ill-prepared to deal with mental health management” (115). With Kenya itself lacking the infrastructure to address the emotional distress brought on the pandemic,

coupled with an ill-prepared church, depression and suicide rates increased markedly.

Mudegu attributes the Church's lack of preparedness to a propensity to blame mental and emotional ill-health on either demonic attack or on a lack of faith on the part of the sufferer. Observing that many Christians in Kenya "generally view believers who present with mental illness as living in sin, backslidden, or under the influence of demons," the result was a Church that too often limited its response to "prayer and exorcism" (117). Concomitantly, church members who showed signs of mental illness typically did not "seek professional help based on the view that the conditions arise because of their lack of enough faith in God" (122). Compounding their unwillingness to speak openly of their emotional trauma was a fear of being ostracized by fellow church members. In conclusion, **Mudegu** writes, "Mental illness represents bondage that denies victims the full enjoyment of abundant life promised by Christ" (126), robbing the believer of the ability to love the Lord with all of his or her heart. As such, the author calls for church leadership to move beyond a response based solely on prayer and exorcism and to develop policy guidelines on handling mental health issues based upon guidelines set forth by the WHO. Doing so will empower the church to love the Lord with their own hearts by healing and strengthening the hearts of its faithful in the event of a future crisis.

The importance of loving the Lord with all of one's mind was best expressed in Chapters 10 and 11. Both chapters address the paltry attention paid to education when school children were sent home during the lockdowns. Well-documented are the lingering effects on these children in Kenya and elsewhere. In a country already beset by low learning outcomes and regional disparities in terms of resource distribution, the pandemic had "damaging effects on the gains made since independence" (147). Recognizing that the disruptions offer a chance to rethink education delivery and provide the government with the chance to do the right thing, **Evelyn Jepkemei** and **Martin Munyao**, writing in chapter 10, challenge the church to "reimagine ways of pushing for education reforms that serve all the underprivileged children" (158). In chapter 11, **Wandia Njoya** sharply criticizes the Church for its history of *not* pushing for more equality and availability in education. **Njoya** calls for the Church to repent of its history of allowing "institutional considerations, rather than spiritual or social ones" to carry the day in its "position on education" (168). The two chapters illustrate that if the Church can meet **Njoya's** challenge of departing from its institutional-first mindset, and embrace the call of **Jepkemei** and **Munyao**, then perhaps beauty can be brought from the ashes of the pandemic by re-envisioning an educational approach that will free the minds of Kenya's children to love the Lord with their intellects and build-up the nation.

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Chapters 2, 5, and 6 speak to the soul of the Church itself and call into question its willingness and ability to love the Lord in spirit. In such fashion, in chapter 2, **Chammah Kaunda** challenges the postcolonial church to liberate itself from “perpetuating a neocolonial story of injustice” (19). At the heart of **Kaunda’s** criticism is his observation that the Church, while remaining a trusted institution, has at times “given moral and religious sanction” to the state to “perpetuate significant injustices,” making it a “dangerous liability on the continent” (19). After analyzing the myriad ways in which the church has safeguarded its own power, wealth, and status, the author calls for the church to undertake a “radical rethinking of the function of Christianity in Africa” by embracing “the Christ who sides with and empowers the margins and marginalized through the Holy Spirit,” never more so than during the pandemic (26).

In chapter 6, **Sylvia Tuikong** likewise challenges the Church to greater boldness in the fulfillment of its calling. Her chapter takes a more global approach by analyzing the various ways in which the churches in other countries responded to the crisis, many with great success. The author makes clear that the severe and global nature of the resulting humanitarian crisis necessitated an urgent and coordinated response. Considering the severity of the crisis, one which taxed the resources of the church to its limits, **Tuikong**, in similar fashion to **Kaunda**, calls for the church to take sides with the marginalized by boldly urging “privileged individuals in society to help the less fortunate by donating essential commodities such as food clothing, and shelter” (92–93). For **Martin Munyao** and **Maureen Muturi**, writing in chapter 5, the calls of **Kaunda** and **Tuikong** can be made most effective by promoting interfaith unity across both diverse churches and national borders in the name of the Holy Spirit, a unity they found severely lacking during the pandemic. As they conclude, “The post-COVID-19 church must rise above religious prejudices and take its place in the ecumenical framework . . . the entry point is interfaith engagement” (79). Here, the Church would do well by remembering the words of the Apostle Paul that the Church is one body with many parts (1 Cor 12:12).

Often it has been said that one cannot worship the Lord on an empty stomach. While this is perhaps debatable, it serves as a reminder that human strength starts with a well-nourished body, and while one may pray and sing to the Lord in the midst of hunger, loving God with all of one’s strength requires the church to address the physical needs of its people. Throughout the developing world, Kenya included, food scarcity was a severe problem when already under-employed people were faced with massive job losses.

In Chapter 3, **Joseph Muutuki** addresses the issue of food scarcity during the pandemic by challenging the Church to move toward “thinking of

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alternative food security mechanisms . . . more so within organized spiritual contexts” (32). For **Muutuki**, this will require the Church to depart from what he sees as a lingering vestige of colonialism. Noting that the power structures within the African church were copied from the Western model during colonialism, the result is a paradigm wherein the Church has succumbed to a mindset of domination with leaders who either have power or want more power. Such an approach left church leaders more interested “in the growth of the church numerically and the infrastructure of buildings” and less interested in embracing new approaches to rapidly changing circumstances, especially in the face of extreme poverty and hunger (38). The author concludes by proposing that the “power structures of the church be changed in the post-COVID-19 era to address the marginalized poor of its members,” perhaps by “providing seeds for agriculture . . . rather than giving food handouts as a form of evangelism” as was done by the Western missionary [colonial] approach (42).

While not specifically addressing food scarcity, **Natalia and Peter Gitu**, in chapter 1, and **Peter Durito**, in chapter 4, speak to other issues impacting the strength and health of the suffering. In the midst of considerable uncertainty about the nature of viruses, the **Gitus**, themselves doctors, begin the first chapter of the book by providing some basic information about COVID, or at least the best information available in 2021. The authors were also concerned with structural deficiencies in Kenya, which they feared would stymie an effective pandemic response. They cited, for example, a lack of hospital beds and ventilators, a shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health care workers, and hesitancy about the initial round of vaccines. Regarding the role of the Church, the authors called upon its leaders to help combat the world-wide misinformation campaign about the virus, known as the “infodemic,” which “causes confusion, mistrust of health advice, and risk-taking behaviors” (8). One of the more desultory effects of the infodemic was hesitancy to accept and receive the vaccine, which many believers considered the mark of the beast in Revelation. In all these matters, the authors implored the church to “remind their congregations science and religion do not contradict each other” and to “incorporate health science” into the church’s educational curriculum (13).

In chapter 4, **Peter Durito** called upon the Church to address and mitigate environmental injustices. After documenting numerous incidents across Kenya of various communities suffering from abnormally high rates of sickness and chronic illness resulting from the dumping of toxins into their local environments, **Durito** urged church leaders to take the pandemic as an opportunity to support and promote environmental justice measures, especially as pollution and ecological degradation disproportionately affects the poor. By doing so, the Church can answer Christ’s call to care for the “least of these” by

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remembering that “human beings are cocreators with God and therefore should protect the environment” (61).

Finally, while millions in Kenya could be numbered among the “least of these,” no group elicits greater sympathy than the thousands of young girls who were the victims of gender-based violence (GBV). As defined by the United Nation’s Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, GBV is any act that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm to women, although males are also frequently subjected to this gross violation of human rights. Owing to the stay-at-home orders, lack of access to educational and church facilities, and desperation born of impoverishment, abundant evidence suggests the women “suffered Gender-Based violence more than ever during COVID-19” (183). Considering that rape and sexual trauma, the worst manifestations of GBV, crushes a person wholly in their heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Church must respond strongly to this issue for it to be an effective instrument of God’s love and grace.

To this end, **Patrick Musembi, Joseph Muutuki, and Josephine Munyao**, in chapter 7, admit that COVID-19 did not create GBV. Rather, they argue, it was always present but was exacerbated during the pandemic, exposing the vulnerability of the family unit. For these authors, GBV is a “symptom of underlying gender inequalities, power imbalances, and if often condoned by traditional cultural and religious institutions” (100). They conclude by challenging the Church to reassess its role and renew its efforts to change the kind of gender imbalances in society which ultimately account for GBV.

In chapter 12, **Sylvia Muriuki** leveled some of the sharpest criticisms in the book at the Church for its disregard of GBV during the pandemic. She argues that in many communities across Africa, the prevalence of exclusive male leadership, the adherence to a rigid patriarchy, and the subordination of women “have nurtured an environment of gender-based violence” (182). She maintains that in the face of these cultural tendencies, worsened by the lockdowns, the Church failed to attend properly to the upsurge in gender-based violence. She notes, for example, that while the church preached “hope to Christians as evidenced by the content on social media and online platforms,” programs on GBV “were conspicuously missing” (187). **Muriuki** boldly declares that the church cannot truly live up to its mission if it disregards GBV. As such, she advocates for the church to press the government for more stringent laws against GBV, to direct more funds towards community projects to protect the vulnerable, and to develop a comprehensive strategy for addressing violence in the family.

For this reviewer, *The African Church and COVID-19* was both heart-wrenching and inspiring. For those who lived through the pandemic in the

relative comfort of the West, the book was a window into the hard-ships and suffering endured by Kenya's most vulnerable, and of course across much of the developing world. None of this seeks to suggest that the Western world was left unscathed. Millions across all parts of the world saw their churches, schools, and businesses shuttered. Millions of others either lost their lives or lost loved ones. Even many of those who were relatively affluent by global standards needed financial aid or food assistance from their churches or governments to survive. But at its most basic level, the information and data provided by the authors was a sad and wrenching reminder of the consequences of under-development.

For tens of millions in Kenya and hundreds of millions around the world who live on the margins of survival, COVID-19 was a crushing experience. And while the worst of the pandemic is now in the world's rearview mirror, millions still live with the consequences and will continue to need assistance from their governments and faith-based institutions. The authors of this timely book have provided a worthy blueprint for how to best help those in need. Moreover, as the reminders that another global virus could erupt at any time come on a seemingly regular basis, humanity and Christian charity demand that more be done to promote global development, even in the midst of presently fraught times for the world, to equip and prepare developing societies to weather future storms.

In the face of such sadness and loss recounted by the tales of suffering and hardship in the book, this reviewer found it inspiring that a group of Kenyan scholars were able to collaborate honestly on the shortcomings of their own society. All of the contributors, as noted in their biographies in the final section of the book, are experts in their fields and were thus able to make trustworthy and keen insights into what the churches could have done better, and ought to do differently going forward. Self-examination is a vital tool for improvement and these scholars are to be commended for undertaking what must at times have been a disheartening series of realizations.

My main concern, however, is that such a book can lead one to think of the shortcomings elucidated by these authors as a uniquely Kenyan or African problem, especially as many of the contributors wrote openly about how some of the cultural and social mores in their own society worsened the pandemic's effects. I contend that much of what was recounted in the book is decidedly *not* unique to Kenya or Africa. In terms of providing food, financial aid, and medical assistance, most Western countries were of course better equipped to assist their people owing to their comparative wealth and development. This much is beyond argument, although even here societal efforts to address the mental and emotional ill effects of COVID have been lacking.

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Yet, many of the issues highlighted by the authors have reflections in the West. Across America for example, the misinformation campaign engendered by the “infodemic” phenomena hindered a more effective national response. Millions who were goaded on by unverified social media posts distrusted the scientists and public health experts, refusing to comply with mask mandates and stay-at-home orders. False allegations swirled abundantly about the vaccines, leading millions to decline the shots. As in Kenya, many are the churches and pastors who should engage in their own self-reflection. Thousands of churches and millions of believers across America resisted the public health crusade to help lessen the virus’s impact. Many chose to weather the pandemic through faith and prayer alone, as many did in Kenya, arguably exacerbating the spread of COVID. Numerous high-profile church leaders resisted moving their services to an online platform, or else refused to cease their in-person gatherings altogether.

In conclusion, I would encourage a similar project, written now in the aftermath of the pandemic, to assess what if any changes have been made by the churches. These same contributors or other scholars would contribute much to the dialogue by ascertaining the degree to which policy adjustments have been made by church leaders in anticipation of a similar event in the future. In the hopeful case that no such event occurs again, the policy changes advocated in *The African Church and COVID-19* could only serve to benefit Kenya if not the wider world.