

Does social distancing in churches contradict the message of the cross?

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Today is my second time attending a church service after the government lifted the ban on Friday and Sunday worship for Muslims and Christians respectively. The first was for my mom's memorial service. I did not quite pay attention then to how Christian worship has been so altered and perhaps watered down by state rules regarding worship during this Covid-19 pandemic.

Christianity's central creed is the divine powers of Jesus Christ and His authority over all creation—visible and invisible. But sitting here in one of the most popular ministries in Sierra Leone, the clergy and the laity are hidden behind face masks and spaced out from one another in compliance with government's regulations. Anointing oil and healing hankies have suddenly given way to hand sanitizers and Veronica buckets all around.

Coronavirus is knuckling over our churches to fear, panic and anxiety. Instead of the hallmarks of love, hope and faith, the current worship atmosphere in churches is stained with fear, suspicion and edginess—the very things worshippers leave their homes every now and then to overcome in worship and fellowship. They now sit right there in the midst of people oppressed by fear, downtrodden by long uninterrupted years of political ineptitude, left for dead by the enduring social and health malaise.

Christianity has always thrived on mirroring the unity of the Holy trinity and the power to unite folks from all tribes, nations and backgrounds in the love of Christ. And so, Christian worship is not just a mere gathering; it is about fellowship. Christians are expected to come together in church; but social distancing is now forcing them apart in the very place where they are commanded not to forsake their “coming together”.

The coronavirus pandemic has not only ravaged nations and communities, it has also attacked the evangelistic authority of the church and sabotages its message of salvation and liberty from sin and all manners of oppression—body and soul. That glimmer of hope over fear, love over suspicion and victory over despondency which the church provides, is fast tapering off. What is the church without laying of hands on the sick and the oppressed? Christians believe in Christ's healing authority over all infirmities, but it seems there's a discordant spectacle right inside the churches where such super-natural display of such

authority ought to be. The current worship arrangement is antithetical to fellowship. In short, social distancing breeds dis-fellowship right inside the churches.

Don't misconstrue this; I am not inciting rebellion by the church against the rules formulated by the state to curb the spread of Covid-19. I am saying that the church's authority is under attack and therefore, it has a vested interest and an added responsibility to exercise authority in the power of Christ over all creation to defeat and eliminate Covid-19 in our world. Whether by increasing supplications for greater wisdom to the medico-scientists; divine protection to the healthcare professionals in this fight and peace of mind to a hurting world, the church has to do so much in prayer, more than ever before to exercise the power and authority of Christ over all the earth. This is as much a fight by the church as the state's—because social distancing in the church distances the message of the power of Christ away from belief, assurance and reliance in the current manner of worship.