

THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND THE RESHAPING OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP PART THREE: CHURCH ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 Crisis and the Reshaping of Christian Worship Part Three: Church Economics.

This essay discusses the economic challenges and financial strain faced by churches in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. As physical attendance dwindled and traditional fundraising avenues were disrupted, churches encountered a financial crunch that impacted their operational capabilities and the livelihoods of their staff. Exploring the decline in donations, the innovative fundraising strategies adopted, and the long-term implications for church infrastructure, this essay aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the economic repercussions of the pandemic on religious institutions.

Keywords: *COVID-19 crisis, churches, economic challenges, financial strain, donations, fundraising.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented global crisis, has profoundly impacted every facet of our societies. Religious institutions, notably churches, have not been exempt from its far-reaching consequences.¹ Beyond community life and the spiritual realm, which we have addressed in the previous two articles published on the theme stated in the title, churches serve as pillars of support within communities, providing guidance, sola-

1 On these consequences, see Cristian Gagu, "The Church and Religious Life of Christians in Pandemic Times", in Ionuț Holubeanu (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference „History and Theology”*, Bucharest, Editura Universitară, 2021, pp. 288-317.

ce, and often, critical social services.² This article explores the economic challenges and financial strain that churches have faced in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis³, showing how the pandemic has disrupted traditional avenues of financial support and therefore has tested the financial resilience of these foundational institutions.

At the core of communities, churches play multifaceted roles as spiritual sanctuaries, community centers, and hubs for social welfare. The significance of churches extends beyond religious rites, encompassing a broader societal support system that fosters a sense of belonging and unity.⁴ However, the economic landscape of churches has been dramatically altered as a consequence of the pandemic. With a decline in physical attendance, churches have grappled with reduced donations, financial constraints impacting staff and operations, and the need for innovative fundraising strategies. This essay aims to investigate the economic challenges and financial strain experienced by churches, exploring the nuanced repercussions of the pandemic on their operational capabilities, community outreach programs, and long-term infrastructure. Through this exploration, we seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of the economic aftermath for religious institutions and consider potential adaptive strategies for financial resilience in the future.

Moreover, the financial strain resulting from the pandemic has added another layer of complexity to traditional church-making. Churches, often reliant on congregational donations and fundraising events, have faced unprecedented challenges in maintaining their physical structures. The economic impact has forced many congregations to divert financial resources to essential services, leaving the upkeep of traditional church buildings in jeopardy. This financial strain threatens not only the immediate mainte-

2 On the role of the churches to build toward the common good, see Marcel Măcelaru, "Bunăstarea umană și binele comun", in Corneliu Constantineanu / Marcel V. Măcelaru / Iosif Riviș-Tipei (eds.), *Pentru binele comun. Realități și perspective ale colaborării dintre ONG-uri, comunități creștine și autoritățile locale*, Arad, Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu”, 2018, pp. 31-40.

3 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Spiritual lessons observed through the Coronavirus Crisis", in *Dialogo. Issue of Modern Man*, 2020, vol.6, no.2, pp. 71-82.

4 On the response to the pandemic, see Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith. Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*, Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2020; N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic. Christian Reflection on the Corona Virus and Its Aftermath*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2020.

nance of physical spaces but also the long-term sustainability of traditional church-making.

Isolation and Its Financial Repercussions

The millennia-long symbiotic relationship between physical church attendance and financial contributions is undeniable. However, this connection has been disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis. In the wake of the pandemic, the traditional landscape of church attendance underwent a seismic shift, marked by a profound decline in physical presence. This transformation, while rooted in the imperative of public health and safety, triggered a ripple effect with significant financial repercussions for churches of all sizes. As congregants retreated from in-person services, the financial lifeline of many churches – donations and tithes – experienced a notable downturn.⁵

The symbiotic relationship noted above, between physical attendance and financial contributions, lies at the heart of the financial model sustaining churches. Congregants, gathering for worship and fellowship, traditionally offered financial support in the form of donations and tithes. However, the advent of social distancing measures and the closure of physical church spaces disrupted this equilibrium. Congregants who once contributed regularly during in-person services found themselves physically disconnected from their faith communities. The tangible act of passing the collection plate gave way to online donation platforms or, in many cases, financial constraints brought on by the economic fallout of the pandemic. Smaller congregations, reliant on consistent weekly donations, found themselves facing immediate challenges in meeting operational expenses. Larger institutions, while potentially more financially resilient, grappled with a decline in the scale and frequency of donations, affecting their ability to fund broader community outreach programs and maintain the standard of services.

5 See, on this decline, Francis Osei-Kuffour, Williams Kwasi Peparah, Dickson Marfo Sarfo and Bright Osei Yeboah, "COVID-19 Impact on Church Cash Inflows in Ghana as Moderated by Location Profile", in *Applied Finance and Accounting* 8-1/2022, pp. 6-16. See also Abdalla Hamadi Salimin, "Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic on Religious Activities and Faith of Worshippers in Kenya", in *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences* 20-1/2021, pp. 1-18; Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Spiritual lessons observed through the Coronavirus Crisis", in *Dialogo. Issue of Modern Man*, 2020, vol.6, no.2, pp. 71-82.

Beyond the direct impact on congregational giving, the decline in physical attendance manifested in financial strain on church staff and operational capabilities. Also, the financial strain stemming from reduced donations posed challenges in maintaining church buildings and facilities. The physical spaces that served as centers for worship, community events, and social outreach suddenly faced the threat of disrepair. Operational capabilities, from technological upgrades for virtual services to staffing needs, felt the brunt of the financial strain. Outreach programs, once vibrant and impactful, faced cutbacks or suspension, limiting the positive impact that churches traditionally had on their broader communities. As such, the financial strain extended beyond buildings and staff to the very heart of the community-oriented initiatives that define many churches. As financial resources dwindled, the ability to engage in meaningful outreach became compromised, leaving congregations grappling with the challenge of serving their broader communities during a time when such services were needed most.⁶

To summarize, the decline in physical attendance, as explored in this essay, emerges as a harbinger of profound financial challenges. Churches, both large and small, found themselves at the crossroads of adapting to the changing dynamics of congregational engagement and addressing the pressing need for financial resilience. The subsequent sections of this essay delve into the innovative fundraising strategies and some long-term implications for church infrastructure, offering an exploration of the multifaceted repercussions of the decline in physical attendance.⁷

6 On the role of churches in times of crisis, see Xolani Maseko, "Ecclesiological Response to Covid-19 and the Question of Meaning in Context", in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48-3/022, article 10385, pp. 1-11; Jones Hamburu Mawerenga, "Rethinking Ecclesiology and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malawi", in *African Theological Journal for Church and Society* 2-2/ 2021, pp. 58-87; Gernaída. K.R. Pakpahan, Fibry J. Nugroho, Priskila I. Benyamin, Frans Pantan and W. Wiryohadi, "Pandemic Ecclesiology: Church Re-actualisation during the Pandemic", in *HTS Teologiese Studies* 78-4/2022, article 7201, pp. 1-8.

7 For other factors that may cause church financial crises, see Thomas M Gannon and David F. Schwartz, "Church Finances in Crisis", in *Social Compass* 39-1/1992, pp. 1-120.

Innovative Fundraising and Financial Adaptation

Amid the financial challenges wrought by the decline in physical attendance, churches found themselves compelled to embark on a journey of financial adaptation and innovation. The need to secure funding for ongoing operations, maintenance of church facilities, and support for community outreach programs became more urgent than ever. This section examines the creative approaches and innovative fundraising strategies adopted by churches in response to the shifting landscape of congregational engagement.⁸

Firstly, as physical attendance waned, churches swiftly turned to online platforms to bridge the gap in financial contributions. The surge in online giving became a central component of churches' financial adaptation strategies. Congregants, physically distant yet spiritually connected, embraced the convenience of virtual donation platforms. The dynamics of this transition includes factors that contributed to the success of online giving and its role in sustaining churches during challenging times.

Secondly, beyond the realm of virtual donations, churches sought creative approaches to fundraising campaigns that resonated with congregants facing unprecedented challenges. This included a series of actions and initiatives undertaken by churches, from virtual charity events to collaborative community projects. Also included unique strategies employed by different religious institutions, showcasing the innovative ways in which churches adapted their fundraising approaches to navigate the financial constraints imposed by the pandemic.

Within this discussion, effectiveness becomes a central metric in evaluating the impact of creative fundraising campaigns. Such evaluation assesses not only the financial outcomes but also the broader community engagement and support generated by these initiatives. By understanding the success factors and potential pitfalls associated with innovative fundraising, churches can glean valuable lessons for future financial adaptation. In the face of unprecedented challenges, churches need the ability to adapt and innovate in their fundraising endeavours. This would require a

⁸ For more on such strategies, see R. Brian Stolarczyk, "Theological and Financial Integrity in Church Budgeting. A Study of the Effects of Budget Theory Education Using a Two Kinds of Righteousness Framework", DMin Thesis, St Louis, Concordia Seminary, 2019.

holistic understanding of the multifaceted strategies churches employed to preserve membership and eventually thrive in a landscape reshaped by the decline in physical attendance. However, there are clear long-term implications for church infrastructure, an enduring impact financial adaptation has on the structural and communal facets of religious institutions.

Long-Term Impact of Changed Church Economics

The financial challenges unleashed by the decline in physical attendance and the subsequent innovative fundraising endeavours have cast a long shadow on the infrastructure of churches. Firstly, from historic cathedrals to small multipurpose halls, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a re-evaluation of how worship spaces are sustained, maintained, and adapted to meet the evolving needs of congregations. Moreover, the financial impact extends beyond the immediate operational needs to the very maintenance of church buildings and facilities. Historical landmarks and modest community structures alike bear the brunt of economic constraints, raising questions about the long-term viability of these worship spaces. Thus, any reimagining of church economics ought to account for challenges associated with preserving the physical infrastructure of churches in the face of financial adversity.⁹

Secondly, as churches grapple with reduced donations and financial strain, operational capabilities face significant constraints. This comes down to how churches, both large and small, navigate the economic challenges of maintaining day-to-day operations. From staff salaries to utilities, the economic strain placed a burden on the very core of church functionality. And evidently such constraints have an influence on decision-making processes and operational priorities.

Having said the above, it follows that churches first need to that recognize the imperative to adapt to economic challenges, and subsequently employ measures to preserve their infrastructure. These may include a whole range of actions, from cost-effective maintenance strategies to energy-efficient initiatives, all aimed at ensuring the longevity of physical spaces. Also, strategic planning emerges as a critical component in mitigating the long-term economic impact on church infrastructure. One cannot deny

⁹ On such re-imagining, see Jamie Dunlop, *Budgeting for A Healthy Church: Aligning Finances with Biblical Priorities for Ministry*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2019.

the importance of strategic foresight in navigating the uncertain economic terrain. Churches that engage in comprehensive planning, encompassing financial forecasting, infrastructure maintenance schedules, and community outreach initiatives, position themselves for greater resilience in the face of economic uncertainty.

In conclusion, the long-term economic impact on church infrastructure includes a complex interplay of financial constraints, adaptive measures, and communal support. As churches confront the enduring challenges posed by the decline in physical attendance, innovative fundraising, and the need for financial adaptation, the strategies employed can be used as examples which contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how these sacred institutions navigate economic uncertainty. Subsequently, one can delve into the broader implications for community outreach programs and the spiritual and mental well-being of congregants, offering a holistic exploration of the multifaceted repercussions of the economic shifts in the realm of religious institutions.¹⁰

Conclusion

The journey through the economic landscape reshaped by the decline in physical attendance draws to a close, revealing a nuanced tapestry of resilience, innovation, and communal support within churches. As the economic impact reverberates through the halls of church infrastructure, the enduring spirit of adaptation and strategic planning emerges as a beacon of hope in the face of uncertainty.

The multifaceted impact of the economic challenges on church infrastructure extends far beyond the physical structures themselves. From operational constraints to the maintenance dilemmas of historic landmarks, the economic ripple effect prompts a deep reflection on the holistic well-being of religious institutions. The challenges posed by financial constraints necessitate a delicate balance between the preservation of sacred spaces and the adaptability required to meet the evolving needs of congregations.

10 See Tom Nelson, *The Economics of Neighborly Love. Investing in Your Community's Compassion and Capacity*, Downers Grove, IVP, 2017. See also Stephanie Ann Puen, "Business, Economics, and Theology. Working for the Holistic Flourishing of Creation" in *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 27-4/2020, pp. 464-469.

The resilience of churches is showcased in the adaptive measures employed to navigate economic challenges. From cost-effective maintenance strategies to strategic planning for future financial resilience, religious institutions prove their capacity for innovation. The effectiveness of these adaptive measures, providing tangible examples of successful strategies that safeguard the integrity of church infrastructure while addressing economic constraints.

Crucially, the exploration of church infrastructure's economic impact emphasizes the importance of community engagement and collaborative efforts. As churches forge partnerships with local businesses, community organizations, and congregants, a communal network of support emerges. Such actions underscore the symbiotic relationship between churches and their communities, highlighting how collaborative endeavours contribute to the financial health and sustainability of church infrastructure.

In conclusion, the economic challenges faced by churches in the aftermath of the decline in physical attendance beckon a holistic approach to financial resilience. Churches¹¹ must navigate the delicate balance between preserving their sacred spaces, fostering community engagement, and strategically planning for the future. As the lessons learned from this economic journey become guiding principles for the road ahead, churches are poised not just to survive but to thrive in a landscape forever altered by the events of recent times.

The exploration of the long-term economic impact on church infrastructure serves as a testament to the enduring strength of religious institutions. The challenges faced have prompted reflection, adaptation, and a renewed sense of community responsibility. In the ever-evolving story of churches responding to adversity, the chapters written in the wake of economic challenges speak not only of resilience but also of a steadfast commitment to preserving the sanctity of the spaces that have long served as spiritual anchors for congregations.

11 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Biserica lui Dumnezeu, sursa unui Râu al Vieții și al Vindecării" ("The Church of God, the source of a River of Life and Healing"), *Argeșul orthodox*, 2012, XI, nr.564, p.5.

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