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Recommended Citation

Hooker, A. D. and Talbert, Camille S. () "COVID, Church, & Cuts: A Single Narrative Case Study of Pandemic Impacts on a Bi-vocational Pastor & Barber," *The Journal of Faith, Education, and Community*. Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jfec/vol6/iss1/3>

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COVID, Church, & Cuts: A Single Narrative Case Study of Pandemic Impacts on a Bi-vocational Pastor & Barber

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Introduction

Religion provides individuals with a foundational belief system that guides their actions, behaviors, thoughts, morals, and worldviews. Religion acts as a reservoir of hope and strength from which its members draw from when needed. The COVID-19 global pandemic presented such an occasion where devout and liberal religious affiliates drew continuously and desperately from their respective reservoirs. Because most religious groups, Christian and Non-Christian, engage in corporate gatherings this mandate upended the routines of those most dependent on weekly fellowship.

COVID brought about a sense of hopelessness, fatigue, and devastation. A few studies reveal how clergymen handled and responded to meeting the needs of their faith community. They focused on finding ways to continue weekly fellowships, being a trusted source regarding health-related information, connecting with other ministries to share the clerical load of supporting members, and welcoming new possibilities to replace current traditions and ways of reaching others. Due to the recent and continuing occurrence of the virus' transmission, the data and research on faith perspectives are limited. For this reason, this study aims to add to the current literature exploring how a church leader experienced and flourished amidst the pandemic.

Relevant Literature

During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many churches were mandated to close their doors. Ministers and churches had to pivot to virtual ministry (Vandenhoeck et al., 2021). Churches shifted to virtual worship services, bible studies, and fellowship times using a multitude of platforms (Corpuz, 2021; Funchess et al., 2022; Grimm, 2021; Hayes et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2021; Vandenhoeck et al., 2021). This required pastors to adopt new technology (i.e. Facebook Live, FaceTime, Livestream, Skype, YouTube, Zoom) and adapt their normal modes of ministry to continue shepherding their flocks (Corpuz, 2021; Funchess et al., 2022). Many ministers remained close to their congregation through virtual worship and virtual counseling during these trying times (Funchess et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2021). Although technology was an initial hurdle for pastors and their congregations, many indicate that technology has grown their churches by increasing and diversifying their membership (Corpuz, 2021; Vandenhoeck et al., 2021).

In addition to bringing in new members, the pandemic allowed many believers to band together and rely on each other's social capital and spiritual gifts (Funchess et al., 2022; Grimm, 2021). Many pastors came together across churches to support and collaborate with each other; churches even united for services and bible studies (Grimm, 2021). Additionally, church communities sought out support and resources from within their congregations. Congregants who were medical professionals were revered for their insight, expertise, and wisdom given amidst the constant influx of health and safety information shared throughout the media (Funchess et al., 2022). Many community

members responded positively by assisting each other and their pastors through the lending of their talents, expertise, and brotherly love (Funchess et al., 2022; Grimm, 2021).

During this challenging time, pastors were often disconcerted and carried a large burden on their church community (Funchess et al., 2022). Due to this heavy load, pastors, ministers, chaplains, and other religious leaders were referred to as “spiritual frontliners in the battle against the pandemic” (Corpuz, 2021, p. 134). The change of typical routines and modes of ministry was uprooted and often it was the pastors’ role to navigate this change, without being able to meet in person with any other church leaders or members. This led to new and additional pastoral duties and the call to adapt (Johnston et al., 2021). Moreover, bivocational pastors, individuals who lead congregations and had careers outside of the church, were hit hard during this time as their dual roles were exacerbated (Hayes et al., 2021).

Ministers and believers alike were greatly affected by the inability to gather in their houses of worship. Closing of the church doors isolated many believers at a time when many ethnic communities, significantly the African American community, saw a rise in racial discrimination. The church building has long symbolized “a sacred space for African Americans to gather for not only worship services but also a space for refuge, support, resources, political, and economic activism” (Funchess et al., 2022, p. 93). As all attempted to readjust to the new normal, the African-American community fought another battle as racial tension swelled. Many believers looked to their pastors as not only leaders but also as activists. However, this was not a new role for pastors as some assumed the role of activist during the Civil Rights Movement. Rev. Ralph Abernathy,

Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and Rev Dr. Martin Luther King were three well known preachers and leaders during the fight for social justice (Hampton, 1987). These were a few men responsible for the founding of the Civil Rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), who helped organize and support the nonviolent Montgomery Bus Boycott. Christian leaders extended their care and support for hurting people beyond the walls of the church during the Civil Rights Movement making their work in the care business an ongoing job. Fast forward a few decades with the around-the-clock uncertainty of COVID’s impacts kept clerics, once again, on their toes. This new reality placed a burden on many people of faith.

Although the pandemic “revealed our current realities” it also allowed us to imagine “future possibilities” (Grimm, 2021, p. 145). The pandemic revealed many lessons including what it means to remain faithful in adversity and stay steadfast and strong as a community of disciples (Grimm, 2021). COVID also pushed many believers to take more ownership of their spiritual growth rather than relying on pastor-led programs (Johnston et al., 2021). This increased many members’ walks with the Lord. Additionally, the pandemic allowed ministers to re-think, re-imagine, and re-focus their ministry (Funchess et al., 2022; Hayes et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2021). New traditions were born out of this time and while the pandemic may end, many church members and pastors appreciate the ability to connect virtually, from diverse locations and schedules (Funchess et al., 2022). Despite the many trials and frustrations, Christians across the nation were able to look within and draw strength and hope from God.

Methodology

Participant Profile

Pastor Richardson (pseudonym), a 30-year-old African American, husband, father of three girls, and brother to three siblings, spent his life immersed in religion. He grew up in the Christian faith as a child of preachers and grandchild of preachers. Early in life, his participation in ministry was as a drummer alongside his mother, a singer, pianist, choir director, and minister. Immediately after high school he went to and completed barber college before transferring to a junior college. After his time there, he transferred to a four-year university to become a teacher but was academically dismissed. All the while, he worked full-time as a barber in a shop near his home church. His membership at The Well Church (pseudonym) came about after the loss of a previous pastor caused a church split. The then leader of the Men's Ministry went on to pastor The Well Church and Pastor Richardson followed him there. His service in ministry progressed from drummer to Sunday School teacher, and now as assistant pastor. He still holds his profession as a full-time, local barber. Additionally, Pastor Richardson is currently enrolled in seminary school.

Modes of Inquiry

This single case narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) aims to highlight the lived experience of Pastor Richardson during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an interpretive approach (Green & Thorogood, 2018) the authors attempt to answer: How has this assistant pastor's and congregation's faith shifted during the recent global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic? Pastor Richardson's story was captured through a

semi-structured sixty-minute interview. The four questions and prompts that guided this interview were:

1. How was your church's membership, attendance, and involvement affected during this time?
2. Tell about specific events that have affected your community (COVID-related or not).
3. In what ways has your community been able to grow stronger?
4. Tell what your thoughts are on growing and moving forward.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes the framework of Pastoral Care (Clebsch & Jaekle, 1964) to interpret the effects COVID had on Pastor Richardson's ability to operate in his role as a church leader. In some of their later work, Clebsch and Jaekle (1994) clearly define Pastoral Care as a ministry to cure souls via the helping actions of Christian persons aimed at healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling persons with troubles. The Pastoral Care framework is a lens through which Christians and their leaders see their role and responsibility regarding how they show and provide care for one another, those in need, or those who are suffering (Hauerwas, 2019). In their work, Clebsch and Jaekle (1964) not only laid out how pastoral care manifested throughout history, they also highlighted how manifestations of care differed from one era to the next. Because the various ways in which care was shown to those in need of it differed throughout time, the authors identified four basic repeating components of Pastoral Care: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling (Clebsch & Jaekle, 1964). These components reflect the complexities church leaders deal with when facing the myriad of human experiences and being tasked with the transmission of wisdom, resources, and

authority associated with the Christian faith to others (Clebsch & Jaekle, 1994). Each component can be exhibited through several means and modes as is reflective of the context, the care recipient's needs, experiences, troubles, and circumstances. Though there are four components of Pastoral Care, this study revealed that only three were reflected in the participant's experience: sustaining, guiding, and reconciling. In our findings section we expound on these three components.

After the interview, the recording was transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed for patterns. The two researchers engaged in both inductive and deductive analysis of the data. Initially, the two researchers separately engaged in open coding to gather a feel for the essence of Richardson's experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2020). Then the two researchers came back together to check for similarities. Then, separately, the researchers applied the *a priori* framework of Pastoral Care (Clebsch & Jaekle, 1964, 1994) to develop categories. Then the two came back together to discuss their separate application of the framework and agree upon categories and themes. The first author then engaged in member checking with Pastor Richardson to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (Miles et al., 2020).

Positionality

The first author is a member of the assistant pastor's church and knows the participant personally. Both the first author and pastor have been members for eleven years and they are related. The first author serves as a church administrator where she not only organizes and navigates worship service but also, in the wake of the pandemic, sets up and monitors Zoom connections. Though the author serves in ministry just as the associate pastor does,

she understands that her roles and responsibilities differ. She also, recognizes that her responsibilities give her a limited perspective on what it means to provide pastoral care. Because the connection to and relationship between the first author and the participating pastor presented a possibility of bias, a second author collaborated in this research. The first author provided an avenue to connect with a willing participant for the study and the second author provided an avenue for monitoring bias and maintaining the integrity of the research throughout data collection and analysis. The first author already had an established relationship with the participant, which led to the added benefit of the participant's willingness to share with the second author, who led the interview and data collection. The first author's unique role allows her to speak from first-hand experience, countless observations, and a myriad of informal conversations.

This study used an interpretive approach to investigate how Pastor Richardson navigated through and interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the church. The following findings also share the participant's experience with the adaptations of held traditions of care and the development of new traditions.

Findings

Guiding: Technology for Convenience and Accessibility—Hebrews 12: 1-3

The Well Church followed the national and state mandates that required establishments and institutions of gathering to shut down. Pastor Richardson described how a new medium was needed to continue one of the main functions of his pastoral care, guiding. This occurred with weekly worship and made fellowship accessible to everyone. Thankfully, many in the

church, including the first author, were able to help navigate new technology. The church leaders first attempted to reach members through Facebook. After realizing this platform did not align with the intimacy that the congregation was used to, they transitioned to using the Zoom platform. The Well Church did not have a musician or choir that led praise and worship. The first author served as media administrator and would assist with microphones, audio, videos, and slides. The worship portion of the service consisted of a display of lyrical videos where the congregation would sing along. Transitioning to Zoom maintained regular worship routines set before the pandemic. Zoom was also used for Wednesday night Bible study. These meetings were an integral component of the pastor's ability to guide his community. Pastor Richardson believes that "preaching on Sundays is encouragement" but "Bible study and Sunday school is learning." Thus, it was essential to continue Bible study and learning during the pandemic. In other words, Richardson believes that his pastoral role of sustaining his members was possible through these online platforms. Through this difficult transition, Richardson and his community were reminded of Hebrews 12:1-3:

Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider him that hath endured such gainsaying of sinners against himself, that ye wax not weary, fainting in your souls. (ASV, 1901)

Despite missing the face-to-face contact that usually happened, the church members persisted and fixed their eyes on Jesus, and Zoom provided a new level of convenience. Pastor Richardson explained that before the pandemic, due to various work schedules and commute times, Bible study attendance averaged ten to fifteen members. However, with Zoom, attendance and commitments increased to an average of thirty members each week. Thus, despite the lack of in-person gatherings, the church community did not lose heart; in fact, The Well Church's ministry grew during these difficult times. Pastor Richardson was able to continue guiding and sustaining his believers through new technology and will continue to use Zoom to grow his congregation.

Sustaining: Ministry Growth -- Hebrews 3:12:13

Pastor Richardson is a barber by profession. He works in the same community as The Well Church but is not the personal groomer for all of his church members. Moreover, he is still able to serve in his role as a counselor and spiritual leader while working with non-members and unbelievers of the Christian faith. Richardson's however, coworkers knew he was a minister, although it was not his primary role in this environment. When he was behind the chair, he was simply seen as Richardson the Barber. This unique role still allowed him to bear much fruit (John 15:5, ASV, 1901) and use his pastoral care function of guiding others outside of the church. Richardson describes that his

profession allows him a great space to minister to “people from different parts of life” including people who do not have a church family. Additionally, Richardson was able to exercise the reconciliation function of pastoral care for his patrons who were not followers of the Christian faith. This lifestyle was used as an example in his messages and lessons for members during the pandemic.

One area of growth for the church community was the emphasis placed on living up to the biblical standards learned from weekly church meetings. The time away from work and other environmental distractions gave members a chance to examine the fruit of their lives. Richardson shared that the third chapter’s twelfth and thirteenth verses of the Bible book, Hebrews, served as a guide for the clerical team at the church:

Take heed, brethren, lest haply there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God: but exhort one another day by day, so long as it is called To-day; lest anyone of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (ASV, 1901).

Pastor Richardson’s church community thrived with the ease of connectivity to Bible study. Many congregation members spiritually flourished with the in-depth learning opportunities that the virtual church offered. Pastor Richardson shared that congregant numbers decreased during the pandemic due to changes in membership and death (all unrelated to COVID). Nevertheless, he described the pandemic as an eye-opening experience as it made each member, himself included, re-assess and re-examine their faith and

commitment to God. Richardson continued by explaining that if followers say they believe that He’s (God) sovereign and He’s on the throne it is time to prove, and trust what you say because there is a lot of lip service in the faith. Members at The Well Church, alongside their leaders, learned that their lifestyle should align with their beliefs. In this way, Richardson provided the pastoral care function of sustaining.

Additionally, The Well Church experienced growth with its praise team. Before the pandemic, The Well Church did not have a consistent praise and worship team; some members would volunteer to sing and lead songs monthly. Many of these volunteers left the church, which brought a temporary halt to the voluntary praise team. Inspired by virtual Wednesday Bible study lessons and Sunday sermons, members committed weekly to permanently revive the praise team. Once the church could gather in person again, the praise team increased the frequency of Sunday performances. Church members, the first author included, increased their understanding of how service in the ministry (such as singing for and leading praise and worship) fosters spiritual growth. Members shared that their service yielded healing and reconciliation. The continued commitment to leading the praise and worship yielded many blessings for the praise team and the congregation as a whole. The Well Church body grew stronger, not through new membership, but through more consistent attendance and commitment of its congregation. The congregation grew in their sustained commitment to the ministry, service, personal faith, and individual walks with the Lord.

Reconciling: Personal Growth-- Proverbs 3:5-6

COVID-19 isolation brought many believers face-to-face with underlying

issues, strongholds, and ignored realities in their lives. Many believers needed pastoral care in the area of sustaining their faith during these challenging times and reconciling their current realities and their relationship with the Lord, including the pastor. Pastor Richardson is a self-employed small business owner. In the ten years that he has been a barber, he has never taken a day off from work. Though the time at home with his young family was a breather, he explained his struggle with lack of income. If he did not cut hair, he did not make money. He had to wrestle with disobeying government mandates to isolate or trust that God would provide for him and his family. At this moment, Richardson was reminded of the word of the Lord in Proverbs Chapter 3 verses five through six: “Trust in Jehovah with all thy heart, And lean not upon thine own understanding: In all thy ways acknowledge him, And he will direct thy paths” (ASV, 1901).

In doing this he was able to see that the time home, off of work, was a blessing in disguise as it allowed more intimate time with his wife and daughters. Richardson also came to realize and understand that his family should come first before any and everything, including his work as a barber. The time spent off from work with his wife and children showed Richardson just how much work was needed to invest in, grow with, and show he valued his family. In short, Richardson was able to use the pastoral care functions of sustaining and reconciling his relationship with his family and the Lord.

Moreover, the pandemic changed his perspective and outlook on life. Richardson compared his COVID experience to a football team’s max-out days. He describes that players build up their strength through assigned weightlifting and targeted exercises. These practices continue until it is time for them to prove and show their

improvements on the max-out day. At this time players take turns showing their strength by responding to a variety of pressures and weights. Usually, those who tap out quickly or against lighter loads are the ones who missed practice days or who did not correctly prepare. However, those who stand the test, persevere, and handle the heaviest loads, are those who applied and committed themselves in preparation. Just as with max-out day, Richardson explained how the pandemic tested him. Through the pressure of the pandemic, he continued to commit himself in which he developed a newfound trust in God to guide him. This renewed vision sustained him and affirmed him in a mindset where he could rest in the Lord. The uncertainty that the pandemic brought about was conquered by God’s provision and revelation in his life.

Discussion

Pastor Richardson’s experience during the COVID pandemic echoes many other pastors’ during this time. Like many other church leaders (Corpuz, 2021; Funchess et al., 2022; Grimm, 2021; Hayes et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2021; Vandenhoeck et al., 2021), Richardson’s congregation was able to move to an online platform to worship and fellowship together. These meetings allowed for more convincing and connectivity between its members (Vandenhoeck et al., 2021). As a result, like many other pastor’s congregations, Wednesday night Bible study attendance grew (Funchess et al., 2022). The congregation of members participating online still allowed Pastor Richardson to continue in his role of pastoral care by remaining connected to the unique spiritual needs of members.

Although Pastor Richardson and other church leaders felt an increased burden (Funchess et al., 2022; Haydes et al., 2021;

Johnston et al., 2021; Vandenhoeck et al., 2021) of their increased role as spiritual frontliners (Corpuz, 2021), he was able to trust in the Lord. Although they were unable to meet in their church building, they were able to re-think, re-imagine, and re-grow specific areas of their church ministries. The pandemic showed Pastor Richardson, like many other ministers, that they could adapt and change their current worship practices (Hayes et al., 2021). This required Pastor Richardson to practice putting his trust and reliance on the Lord not only for his well-being but as a model to his members for theirs as well. New traditions of online Bible study, live streaming church, increased overall consistent church attendance, and the growth of the praise and worship group were born during this trying time. Other pastors also revealed similar takeaways from the pandemic, including keeping online services (Funchess et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2021). Overall, many believers, like Richardson, prevailed and learned how to lean more on the Lord than focus on their circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic (Funchess et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global crisis brought about challenges and blessings for members at The Well Church, a small nondenominational African-American church in a metropolitan area. For this study, the assistant pastor was interviewed and shared how his Christian faith perspective impacted and influenced his views and actions during the pandemic. Findings show that the global crisis allowed room and time for him to reflect on his unique role as a Pastor and Barber to utilize the four functions of Pastoral Care (Clebsch & Jaekle, 1964) to reshape his walk of faith and the faith of his community. Overall, the

members of The Well Church did not increase in number but in faithfulness to the church community and to God. The participating pastor shared how with the expertise and help from knowledgeable members, the transition to online and virtual worship improved the consistency in current member attendance. Examples of increased faithfulness to the church community were a result of the accessibility and convenience provided through the integration of technological communication platforms like Zoom. With Zoom, attendance averages of ten to fifteen grew to thirty members tuning in each week. Through this, members were now consistently attending weekly Bible Study where they were engaged in thought and action-provoking lessons. These lessons challenged members to re-examine if what they profess about God aligned with how they lived, behaved, and served in ministry. As a result, there was an increase in participation and service as members volunteered to join and revive the praise and worship team. Once mandates were lifted and gatherings transitioned back to in-person, the frequency in which the worship team performed increased. Also, because of age differences and health conditions, the church has continued using Zoom as an avenue for members to remain in fellowship with the ministry. Sundays, they offer in-person and online options, while Wednesdays are solely virtual. Increased faithfulness to God was evident in Pastor Richardson's learning to trust God to provide for his family when mandates prevented him from continuing his work as a local barber. When cutting hair at the barbershop stopped he was no longer able to provide financially for his family nor spiritually and morally as a counselor to the community via patrons. He shared how the Lord helped him grow in his roles as a father and husband through the pandemic. He came to learn that service to his family was

to come first before service to the community, his job, and the ministry. The COVID-19 global pandemic brought with it unforeseen and never-before-experienced trials. The upheaval of daily routines and work lives left many looking for answers as they silently suffered. Government mandates to limit gatherings magnified mental health issues. However, the small community of believers at The Well Church came closer together and grew stronger. Perspectives and viewpoints changed as dependence on God's power and provision strengthened them. Because of his faith, Pastor Richardson gained a new attitude about life and his future: "At this point in my life, I've stopped planning. I don't write down plans because the Lord has shown me my plans are never His plans. So, it's just best to wait and pray!"

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