CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC EVANGELISM DURING COVID-19: THE CASE OF THE VIRTUAL PUBLIC EVANGELISM CONDUCTED BY THE UEAB FIELD SCHOOL OF EVANGELISM

Rei Towet Kesis

University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, P. O. Box 2500-30100, Eldoret, Kenya
Email address: kesisr@ueab.ac.ke

Abstract

Social life largely manifests itself in the religious practices of individuals within it. The COVID-19 pandemic due to its restrictions especially on social distance and quarantine upended the traditional expression of social life. This also affected religious practices like public evangelism. Some churches and religious institutions chose to engage in virtual public evangelism which was largely alien to a group of people who hitherto depended on and gained a sense of identity from conventional physical attendance to evangelism. This of course was wrought with certain challenges and opportunities. The current study thus examined these challenges and opportunities in public evangelism during Covid-19 using the virtual public evangelism conducted by the UEAB Field School of Evangelism in 2020 as a case. The study's thesis is: while public evangelism during a pandemic requires virtual methods which may run contrary to the benefits attached to the traditional evangelism, such a virtual based public evangelism can still achieve the same overarching goal of reaching the unreachable. The study was underpinned by the constructivist deep mediatization theory. From the interview analysis done on 10 appropriate respondents coupled with a triangulating observation analysis, the challenges, opportunities and lessons learnt were varied and notable. Nonetheless, what became increasingly clear was that challenges should not prevent churches and its institutions from engaging in evangelism. Further, opportunities should be explored beyond the covid-19 era, particularly virtual opportunities.

Keywords: public evangelism, COVID-19, challenges, opportunities, lessons learnt, virtual

Introduction

Religious life is touted as one of the fundamental manifestations of public and social life (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). Despite expanding secularization, religious organizations and their associative activities have a significant impact on both the ethical choices and daily life decisions of individuals (Kidder & Hucks, 2020; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). This is especially true for the Kenyan society where the 2019 census estimated that 85.5% of the total Kenyan population of 47.2 million are Christians; this translates to approximately 40.2 million Kenyans, only 11% are Muslim and the remaining 3.5% representing people of various other religious or non-religious persuasions (Government of Kenya, 2019). This means that religion is a key part of the Kenyan citizen's psyche and practice. The COVID-19 pandemic threatened to disorganize and completely upend the life of human beings who generally exercise that life through religious practice of some kind.

The pandemic posted its first cases in Wuhan Province of China in late 2019. It is a respiratory infection caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that is largely transmitted through respiratory droplets or even smaller aerosols that use the nose and mouth as primary entry points (WHO, 2020). The pandemic has led to millions of deaths and even more millions of infections[1]. To help counteract the ills of the pandemic, health experts and relevant agencies like the WHO advised the imposition of various containment measures which included wearing of masks, washing of hands as often as possible, quarantine and social distancing. The need for social distancing and quarantine meant that almost every social, economic, physical and religious activity was advisedly done largely remotely with limited physical contact among people as much as practicable (Campbell, 2020).

The restricted physical contact as a result of the pandemic upset the general order of religious practices. Religious practices by their nature have a community contact dimension (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). Suddenly, Christians could not attend the churches as they were used to and abruptly, all other church engagements like worship, visitations and public evangelism were either stopped altogether or virtualized (Mubarak & Zin, 2020). Empirical scholarship that has been done to examine the challenges and opportunities created by the pandemic in church life and organization has shown that the social distancing restriction and closure of churches delinked the clergy from their followers and led to significant levels of

moral turpitude (Hove, 2022; Kidder & Hucks, 2020). Other studies have noted that the pandemic increased fear and anxiety and thus caused psychological distress among church members whose physical attendance in brick and mortar churches acted as a form of hope and catharsis (Thomas & Barbato, 2020). Studies have also shown that the pandemic disarranged the general understanding and practice of ecclesial life (Hove, 2022).

Studies within the Seventh Day Adventist church like that by Kidder and Hucks (2020) writing for Adventist Today show that the pandemic made some members who were hitherto nominal and dormant become active. Conversely, The Pew Survey (2020) showed that the pandemic pushed those members whose church affiliation and commitment were already tenuous to permanently disconnect from the church as a result of online church fatigue. Kolodzieka (2020) writing on the association between the media and religion within the context of the SDA church in Poland during the pandemic observed that while the pandemic freed up space for meaningful participation, it created avenues for digital exclusion and divides. The digital exclusion led to user segmentation which meant that even in public evangelism, a key activity of the SDA Church, one was not sure if every potential convert would get an equal chance to participate and fully engage with the platform due to the costs of digital access and the accessibility capacity driven by network issues. The Secretariat Report for the 2021 Annual Council under the auspices of the General Conference of the

---

[1] At the time of writing, the pandemic had already infected 568 million people around the globe and killed 6.38 million people, the

Kenyan case being 337,000 infections and about 6000 deaths (WHO, 2020).

SDA Church on the other hand found opportunities underlying the pandemic. The report noted that while the pandemic reduced the church's accession in 2020 to 800,000 from 1.3 million in 2019, its lowest drop since 2004, the pandemic offered an opportunity for the church to align its service and practice to the realities of the digital revolution. The report, it should be noted, attributed the drop in membership to a reduction in personal witnessing and more significantly, a decrease in public evangelism.

How does a church meaningfully and effectively engage in virtual public evangelism? This question requires keen consideration because from the outset, the word 'virtual public evangelism' seems like a misnomer because in the traditional sense, public evangelism draws its pathos from face-to-face engagement with potential converts (Widjaja et al., 2021). Nonetheless, to avoid reduced numbers of church members and to curb the loss of the church's missional focus, virtual public evangelism becomes one of the only ways that evangelism can still continue despite the pandemic. And yet, public evangelism done virtually because of the pandemic is wrought with significant challenges which may include user segmentation that advances digital exclusivity and discrimination due to cost, access and availability of virtual enabling gadgets (Widjaja et al., 2021); attitude problems by potential users and evangelism targets owing to various stages of digital adoption; attitude problems towards virtual evangelism by the leaders and managers charged with public evangelism in churches and institutions of higher learning; challenges associated with virtual space fatigue; the preacher-listener disengagement that the virtual platform offers and challenges related to the ability to measure public evangelism outcomes both qualitatively and quantitatively within the virtual space (Campbell, 2020). Contrariwise, public evangelism done virtually may portent significant opportunities not limited to expansion of the reach that virtual platforms offer; the convenience related to ability to listen at any time of the day though saved videos; and a general paradigm shift that aligns the church to the value of the digital revolution which mostly helps to reach younger people who are traditionally outside the scope of targeted converts in most public evangelism endeavors (Afolaranmi, 2020).

Contextually, the issue of public evangelism during the pandemic is a key issue within the University of Eastern Africa Baraton (UEAB). The UEAB Field School of Evangelism is a course that trains pastors in public evangelism. A student cannot graduate without having done this particular course. This created a challenge to the school because graduation was coming and public evangelism could not take place due to the pandemic-related restrictions. One of the key questions was, should the students wait indefinitely until when it is possible again to have public evangelism? Nevertheless, the UEAB Field School of Evangelism conducted a virtual public evangelism in 2021 and baptized 72 people. From this experience this study wants to identify challenges and opportunities in public evangelism during Covid-19 restrictions. This is in the hope that what was learnt during Covid-19 would be useful in underscoring the value of virtual public evangelism going forward. More poignantly, this study makes the proposition that while public evangelism during a pandemic requires virtual methods which may run contrary to the benefits

attached to the traditional evangelism, such a virtual based public evangelism can still achieve the same overarching goal of reaching the unreachable. In other words, if the goal is the same, the methods to achieve the goal can differ in conformity to changing circumstances.

Consequently, this study sought to answer the following three research questions:

i. What are the challenges of engaging in public evangelism at the height of Covid-19 pandemic?

ii. What opportunities for public evangelism emerge at the height of Covid-19 pandemic?

iii. What have we learnt in public evangelism as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

The theoretical Grounding Using the Deep Mediatization Theory

The deep mediatization theory has been propounded by Hepp et al (2018). The general assumption of the theory is based on an acknowledgement that the media and its associated platforms are linked strongly to societal life which includes the practice of religion[2]. Undergirding the deep mediatization theory are two approaches; the institutional perspective that gained prominence owing to the arguments of Hjavard (2011) and the constructivist approach espoused by Hepp et al (2018). The institutional perspective looks at the media as a separate entity with its unique

logic and to which institutions like churches must choose to be dependent on or not. The constructivist perspective on the other hand views the media as an inherent element within every social institution domain (Hepp et al., 2018). Thus Hepp et al. (2013) considered the media and its processes within the constructivist perspective as *"of a communicative construction of socio-cultural reality"* (pg, 54). In other words, institutions like churches should begin to accept the media platforms like virtual spaces as a reality that should be integrated within the church processes and not view it as the 'other' tool.

Hall and Kołodziejska (2021) have applied the constructivist deep mediatization theory to the religious spaces like churches. They have argued that there are generally two responses of churches to media resources that enable virtual worship, evangelism and engagement. The first church responds by delineating the virtual platforms as tools to be used and discarded at a moment's notice depending on the attitude of the leader, the availability of resources, the crisis at hand and the perceived usefulness and benefits of the system. The other church looks at the media resources as part and parcel of the church's operations, believing that the virtual space is where its members are or are going and thus believing that the church and virtual or media resources are inextricably linked to one another. The churches with the latter perspective would thus spend their time, energy, resources and attitude to fully adopting virtual platforms in all their activities either as complimentary to the traditional church programs or in extreme cases as the key force of the entire church

---

[2] The deep mediatization theory is here applied because apart from its coherence with the thesis of the current study, it has also been

applied by Kołodziejska M. a scholar who has done extensive studies on media and religion within the SDA Church

program. The first batch of churches takes on the institutional perspective of the mediatization theory while the second adopt the constructivist deep mediatization theory. The current study seeks to align itself with the constructivist deep mediatization theory owing to the study's key proposition that while public evangelism during a pandemic requires virtual methods which may run contrary to the benefits attached to the traditional evangelism, such a virtual based public evangelism can still achieve the same overarching goal of reaching the unreachable.

Public Evangelism and the pandemic; Challenges and opportunities

Digital advancement has led to a revolution in the way human beings live (Togaresei, 2015). Prior to the advancement, 'God' within religious spheres would only be accessed through routinized, standard and predictable and even more conventional methods (Nyamjoh, 2015). Especially in the African context, gospel transmission was in churches, Face-to-face or in worship communities. There is still persistence of this worship methodology in typical churches across Africa, a continent where Amanze and Wogu (2015) says shows untapped potential for the utilization of the internet for evangelism and soul-winning. However, there are several literature that speak to the implementation of the internet for public evangelism. These studies show that the internet has been used to spread the gospel faster, wider, more cheaply in some cases, conveniently and effectively (Amanze and Wogu, 2015; Togaresei, 2015). Nonetheless, scholars like Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) have noted that the level of adoption and the acceptable attitude among church stakeholders is largely dependent on availability of the internet and

virtual program supporting infrastructure, the liberal or conservative models espoused by the leaders and the commitment to use the virtual platforms.

Kidder and Hucks (2020) in their study of the obstacles and opportunities created by the pandemic for the SDA church noted that the pandemic renewed the faith for some but created a crisis of faith for others. From their analysis, it appears that those who faced a crisis of faith were more than those whose faith were renewed largely owing to the 30 to 60% loss of members in in-person attendance during the ease of restrictions when compared to before the pandemic. This crisis of faith infers that churches would have less manpower (quantitatively) who are also less committed (qualitatively) to offer any robust public evangelism opportunities. However, Kidder and Hucks (2020) did a scouting research to examine SDA churches worldwide and how they responded to the pandemic. They observed that 10 to 15% of the SDA churches did almost nothing during the heat of the pandemic. Another 10 to 15% engaged in visitations, worship services and a bible study done online. These churches also performed virtual evangelistic meetings and it is in only these churches that there were no losses of members; in fact others added. Further, tithes and offerings shot up in the active churches, in fact more than before the pandemic. The remaining percentage only offered worship services via Zoom. Based on this finding, it appears that virtual public evangelism aside from gaining new coverts created the opportunity for the maintenance and commitment of baptized bona fide members.

Kolodzieka (2020) examining the SDA Church experience in Poland noted that the pandemic infused innovativeness, creativity and expanded the reach of people

listening to sermons and lessons in its public evangelism framework. The virtual public evangelism process allowed churches in Poland that employed it the opportunity to reach 67% more people than they otherwise would have reached if the public evangelism was face-to-face or in brick and mortar spaces. In fact, virtual public evangelism according to Kolodzieka (2020) transcended the evangelism confined by space and time. However, the scholar noted that one of the significant challenges that public evangelism confronted was the inadequacy mediated by costs of virtual-enabling resources like video cameras with High Definition (HD) capacity or higher, steady and speedy network processors and internet and individual access to phones, laptops or even Television sets that would enable viewership. This according to Kolodzieka (2020) created user segmentation which reinforced digital exclusivity.

Plüss (2020) examines the extent the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the ecclesiastical rigors of the church and ecumenism. In his historical examination of the pandemics and plagues from the Plague of Cyprian that occurred in the Roman Empire between 249-262 AD, to the Bubonic plague in the Byzantine Empire between 541-549 AD and later the Black Death in the 14 century that wiped out close to half of Europe's population; Plüss (2020) observes that laxity on the part of the church not to engage in enduring evangelization and discipleship led to the flourishing of various false teachings. During the Black Death for instance, Mysticism was the key falsehood that thrived. Could it be that the spiritual situation presented by the pandemic is no different from those presented in the aforementioned years? Could it also be that in the present age, the engagement of public evangelism even virtually in response to a crisis like the pandemic is necessary to keep Truth alive?

Within the Kenyan set-up, Kilonzi and Omwalo (2021) make the argument the COVID-19 upended pulpit religiosity that was focused on physical churchgoing. They argue that the virtual exercise that was forced on churches as a result of the pandemic has helped to eradicate the myths and misconceptions regarding worship and other religious practices. They then argue that the virtual platform would change the way the church operates and evangelizes for years to come and as such, forward looking churches must quickly embrace virtual tools used in practices like worship and evangelism if they are to remain effective.

While the studies reviewed have in various ways analyzed the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic offers to public evangelism especially related to virtual evangelism, there is paucity of studies that have looked that the issues within the contexts of the SDA church in Kenya. Further, few studies have sought to meaningfully to appraise the scholarly filed on what lessons have been learnt in public evangelism during the pandemic. Consequently, the current study sought to fill a significant gap. In fact, the findings of this study in filling this gaps will benefit evangelists in preparing to serve at such crisis times, it will offers suggestions to address challenges and will offer pointers that will help take advantage of the opportunities provided so that the church can maximize.

Methodology

This was a qualitative case study of a UEAB virtual Field School of Evangelism done in 2020. The case study was

appropriate because it critically and intensely examined that single project implemented by a single entity in order to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of public evangelism during the pandemic. The qualitative case study[3] was grounded on the constructivism paradigm which unlike positivism believes that there are various avenues of accessing the truth and not just one objective way (Stake, 2008). As such, this study used subjective mechanisms to mostly examine the 'What' and 'why' questions which are not only aligned with the case study design but offers an in-depth, credible and trustworthy examination of the study variables.

The study targeted 10 selected respondents who represented 5 members of the UEAB virtual Field School of Evangelism and 3 members among the baptized members who also constituted the listeners and 2 members among the listeners who did not make the choice to get baptized but who were present in the virtual public evangelism program. The combination of the three sets of respondents helped to enhance the study's credibility, dependability and to some extent, its transferability.

The study employed interview schedules to access qualitative data from the selected respondents. The interview schedules were used to gain non-numerical data which constituted insights, opinions, experiences, attitudes and perspectives from the

respondents regarding the challenges and opportunities present in public evangelism employed by the UEAB virtual Field School of Evangelism during the pandemic. Interviews are instruments that are mainly employed in case study research and are useful because apart from giving in-depth responses allow the researcher to access non-verbal cues that add on to a better understanding of the responses (). Where it was impossible to gain face-to-face interview opportunities with the responses, the virtual meeting platforms, Google Meet and Zoom, were used. To advance data triangulation[4], the study also used observation through field notes generated by the researcher.

The data from the interviews were recorded using audio recorders for interviews done face-to-face and recorder capacities in Zoom and Google Meet for interviews done virtually. The data was later transcribed and input in Atlas.ti Software which generated codes from which the themes aligned to the study variables were derived. The present study used a deductive approach[5] considering that the generation of themes was based on an already ascertained assumption. The three key themes were thus:

i. Challenges of engaging in public evangelism at the height of Covid-19 pandemic

---

[3] Qualitative is differentiated from quantitative because while the former uses statistical and numerical tools to describe or explain data, the former uses non-numerical data to access insights, experiences, opinions, perspectives, attitudes among other qualitative-based elements.

[4] Data triangulation is particularly important because the use of two or more data collection options helps to advance credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative data. See ..()

[5] The present study already has a thesis it seeks to test. If in any case, the study sought to develop new theory, inductive research approach would have been used.

ii. Opportunities for public evangelism emerge at the height of Covid-19 pandemic

iii. Lessons learnt in public evangelism as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

The data was later analyzed using thematic analysis which examined the text from the interview responses and categorized the text into applicable themes from which interpretations and conclusions were drawn. The study adhered to the relevant ethical considerations. First, the study accessed informed consents from the respondents; consent that explained the purpose, benefits (there were no financial or material benefits) and potential risks, if any, to the respondents. The study also assured the respondents that their names will be garbed in codes to ensure their anonymity. They were also guaranteed confidentiality with the researcher explaining that this study was purely for academic purposes. The respondents were also allowed to withdraw at will from the study at any time of the study.

Findings

The findings were largely categorized with four sections; demographic data, the first theme on challenges confronting public evangelism during the pandemic; theme 2 on opportunities that could accrue from virtual public evangelism done during the pandemic and the last them of lessons learnt going forward.

Demographic Data

The 10 respondents had varied demographics characteristics as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Data of the Respondents

UEAB School of Evangelism		Baptized Members	Evangelism Participants
Characteristic	**Result**	**Result**	**Result**
Gender	Male (3), Female (2)	Male (1), Female (2)	Male (1), Female (1)
Age	20-30 (3) > 30 (2)	20-30 (1) > 30 (2)	20-30 (1) > 30 (1)
Frequency of Attendance	4 (14 days) 1 (10 days)	2 (14 days) 1 (9 days)	1 (10 days) 1 (3 days)
Total	5	3	2

The demographic data (Table 1) shows that both genders were represented among members of the UEAB School of Evangelism, baptized members and evangelism participants. The ages of the respondents were also almost evenly divided between those 20-30 years and those above 30 years. This implies that the challenges and opportunities discussed forthwith are issues felt among respondents who fall within the ages that need to be the primary target for public evangelism going forward. Further, the respondents with the lowest frequency of attendance in the evangelistic campaigns were 3 days and the highest frequency was 14 days (full days).

30

This suggests that the respondents were adequately engaged in the evangelistic campaigns as administrators and participants to credibly answer the challenges and opportunities related to the virtual public evangelism exercise.

Theme 1: Challenges of engaging in public evangelism at the height of Covid-19 pandemic

From the outset, it became apparently clear that all the respondents initially attached challenges confronting virtual public evangelism to attitude. There were some of the respondents who felt that virtual evangelism was not aligned to both the biblical precepts and SDA church policy. This group unfortunately did not back these assertions with any evidence but assumed that their observations were true largely based on the fact that physical, face-to-face evangelism was always the conventional method used and any deviation must be misaligned to policy and the bible. One of the respondents, a key member of the UEAB School of Evangelism, propounding the above-mentioned assertion said:

> *I have never seen public evangelism being done virtually and to me it must not be in line with church policy. The devil has brought the pandemic in order to force us to do that which is not biblical (UEAB School of Evangelism, 1, 2022)*

Another group was more amenable to public evangelism being done virtually. They were the more optimistic group and these were largely respondents who were between the 20-30 age brackets. The researcher felt that within this group, there was relief that the university appeared to be embracing virtual platforms as a key medium for evangelism. In fact, one of the

respondents within the baptized group put it more succinctly:

> *It's about time public evangelism is done virtually. I think the church has often been controlled by old-fashioned beliefs that virtual engagement is the devil's tool. I personally enjoyed the virtual services because I was able to participate at my convenience (Baptized Member, 2, 2022).*

What the respondent was presenting was a positive attitude towards virtual public evangelism. This implies that attitude is a key challenge the confronted public evangelism during the pandemic. It can further be inferred that if the UEAB School of Evangelism and the university in general had entrenched negative attitude towards virtual public evangelism, the evangelism that eventually took place would have been deferred and the graduates in waiting told to wait until after the pandemic when the traditional public evangelism model would have resumed. The fact that attitude was a key challenge facing virtual evangelism is further reinforced by the field notes written by the researcher in the observation process. The researcher observed the discussions that led to the decision to engage in virtual public evangelism and the notes show attitude as a challenge.

The other notable challenge that was shown through the interview was the detached feeling that virtual public evangelism created especially where door-to-door-visitations were viewed as necessary. One of the participants who attended for fewer days and who fell in the not baptized group had this to say on this challenge:

> *While I appreciate the fact that virtual public evangelism was*

necessary due to the extraneous circumstances, a key challenge for me was the disconnected feeling I got. I felt like the preachers were speaking to me from a long distance and the fact that they could not visit me face-to-face appeared to me as out of order and disconcerting (Evangelism Participant, 2, 2022)

An analysis of the words used by Evangelism Participant 2 (2022), words like disconcerting and disconnected signpost the feelings of detachment that lack of door-to-door visitations created. The other notable challenge was user segmentation and exclusiveness created by the inability of some participants to experience the same value of virtual public evangelism as others due to incapacitation in terms of bundles and network access. One of the not baptized members had this to say:

My phone is not the quality type phone that would allow me to access a strong bandwidth. Consequently, I was often locked out of the meetings due to buffering issues. I would have attended all days were it not for that (Evangelism Participant, 1, 2022)

Other respondents mentioned network issues and challenges in accessing quality videos when they needed them. One can argue that the segmentation exists even in face-to-face evangelism where members are unable to afford transport to attend the meetings. While this is a valid assertion, the feelings of the respondents cannot be ignored.

Among the respondents from the UEAB School of Evangelism, resourcing challenges were predominantly mentioned. One of the respondents was more elaborative on this when he said:

It was our intention to ensure that the virtual public evangelism was done effectively. This meant using top-notch virtual enabling gadgets and accessing speedy internet. This not only requires high-end gadgetry but demands highly qualified human resources and reliable service providers. While the university could afford this to a significant extent, I kept thinking of my local church back at home and made the conclusion that the my church, under the circumstances, cannot do virtual evangelism with the same quality (UEAB School of Evangelism, 5, 2022).

What the respondent did here is extrapolate the challenge that would have confronted the university to his local church. Other challenges associated with public evangelism during the pandemic noted by the respondents included ineffectiveness in receiving new members, gauging the progress status of the target audience in terms of their responses to what is being presented, a situation that physical ushers and evangelism teams are effective at. One other challenge that was noted was virtual meeting fatigue. One of the respondents alluded to this by arguing that he realized after using virtual spaces like Google Meet and Zoom for about 3 months that he was anxious about potential subsequent meeting.

Theme 2: Opportunities for public evangelism emerge at the height of Covid-19 pandemic

From the responses, there were certain opportunities created by public evangelism during the pandemic that were mentioned by the respondents. One key opportunity noted was the manner in which virtual public evangelism aligns with the digital revolution that the world has been in for a while now and how the virtual space creates a perfect avenue to reach the Millennial and Generation Z generational cohort that has so far been neglected in most public evangelism endeavors. One of the participants who fall within the Gen Z group (born after 1997) said it better, thus:

> *The use of virtual evangelism ensures that people my age are widely accessed. My age group spend much time on their phones or in virtual spaces and what best thing to do than to at least have something spiritual going on (Evangelism Participant, 1, 2022)*

The other opportunity was pegged on the wide accessibility that the virtual spaces created. One of the baptized members better illustrated this point by saying:

> *If you have an evangelistic crusade done in Kenya, only people who are physically there will attend and benefit. However, if you have a virtual meeting, everyone in the world would attend at their convenience (Baptized Member, 1, 2022)*

Another identified both convenience and the availability of a record for future use as

key opportunities presented by the virtual public evangelism. He thus noted that:

> *With public evangelism done during the pandemic and hence virtual, any person can access the recorded videos even after the service proper is finished. The availability of that video record also ensures that the sermons and teachings are published for posterity (UEAB School of Evangelism, 1, 2022).*

In a general sense, based on the assertions of some of the respondents, virtual public evangelism possesses the potential to advance the spiritual lives of young people in a way that leads them to full commit to the missional objectives of the church. One of the respondents spoke on this:

> *For a while now, the church has been bleeding out young people who feel disenfranchised from it. The virtual space, an area that they thrive in, may offer them a platform to better express their faith. What better way to do it than to integrate virtual public evangelism and have them run it (UEAB School of Evangelism, 3, 2022).*

The opportunities identified can be expanded when more knowledge regarding the use of virtual platforms for public evangelism are exposed.

Theme 3: Lessons learnt in public evangelism as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

The respondents were also asked to describe what they learnt in the public evangelism held during the pandemic. The lessons were many and various. One of the

lessons was that the church should continue with public evangelism especially during a crisis. Based on the assertions of the baptized members, it appears that messages of hope are valuable especially during a crisis that creates psychological distress characterized by fear, anxiety and even depression. This result particularly helps to affirm this study's thesis that, while public evangelism during a pandemic requires virtual methods which may run contrary to the benefits attached to the traditional evangelism, such a virtual based public evangelism can still achieve the same overarching goal of reaching the unreachable.

The other lessons learnt, based on the interview and observation data were that: public evangelism requires visitation and consequently, there has to be a way that virtual opportunities can be leveraged or integrated to ensure that physical visitations and follow-ups are included in the public evangelism format. Basically, public evangelism requires direct contact with the candidate who has made decision for Christ. Further, from the respondents it was clear that public evangelism requires attendance of the target audience in some format or the other. One of the respondents was clear about this when he said:

> *The experience with the public evangelism organized by UEAB School of Evangelism was that despite the virtual format, the attendance of the target audience cannot be ignored. It helps determine the effectiveness of the meeting, it motivates preachers, it helps the evangelism team to measure the deliverables of the meeting and helps to get new converts*

(UEAB School of Evangelism, 2, 2022).

The other lesson was that despite the use of virtual platforms to engage in public evangelism, one thing an evangelistic team cannot escape is the need for a physical church to baptize the new convert. Consequently, based on the views of the study participants, virtual public evangelism cannot operate on its own; it requires some contribution from the brick and mortar church organization.

Discussion of Findings

The finding that there were challenges associated with public evangelism during the pandemic as practiced by UEAB aligns with the findings from Kolodzieka (2020) who noted that religious practices done during the pandemic and thus largely done virtually created user segmentation and exclusivity. Other studies also agree with the present result that virtual public evangelism creates detachment between the preacher and the participants which then reinforces the need for face-to-face visitation and follow-up. In situations where there is inadequacy or unavailability of virtual-supporting infrastructure, the participants may be disenfranchised (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

As far as the findings on the opportunities theme is concerned, The Secretariat Report for the 2021 Annual Council agree when it argued that the pandemic offered an opportunity for the church to align its service and practice to the realities of the digital revolution. Further the findings on opportunities in public evangelism during the pandemic coheres with literature that showed that such virtual-based evangelism created avenues for the expansion of the reach that virtual platforms offer plus increasing the convenience related to ability

to listen at any time of the day though saved videos (Asamoah,-Gyadu, 2015; Campbell, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results, the notable challenges that confronted public evangelism during the pandemic enacted by the UEAB School of Evangelism were attitude problems, inadequacy and unavailability of virtual supporting infrastructure and resources, virtual meeting fatigue, the disconnectedness that participants felt as a result of the virtual space and ineffectiveness in measuring the evangelism deliverables especially where physical attendance is required. The opportunities included the enhancement of the generation Z involvement as keen technology adopters, wide accessibility created by virtual spaces, convenience and the availability of a record for future use and the possibility of spiritual progress on the part of young people. The lessons learnt included the fact that the church should continue with public evangelism especially during a crisis. Also, public evangelism requires visitation and follow-up. Moreover, evangelism requires direct contact with the candidate who has made decision for Christ.

Further, despite the use of virtual platforms to engage in public evangelism, one thing an evangelistic team cannot escape is the need for a physical church to baptize the new convert. Conclusively, therefore, all types of evangelism have challenges and opportunities. The study thus recommends that challenges should not prevent churches and its institutions from engaging in evangelism. Further, opportunities should be explored beyond the covid-19 era, particularly virtual opportunities. Theoretically, churches and its institutions

should espouse the constructivist deep mediatization theory where the church looks at the media resources as part and parcel of the church's operations, believing that the virtual space is where its members are or are going and thus believing that the church and virtual or media resources are inextricably linked to one another. In that regard, church institutions should spend their time, energy, resources and attitude to fully adopting virtual platforms in all their activities as complimentary to the traditional church programs.

References

Afolaranmi, A. O. (2020). Towards the possibility of internet ministry as an alternative pastoral ministry in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Information Technology and Language Studies*, 4, 12-26.

Amanze, P. O., & Wogu, C. N. (2015). Internet evangelism: An effective method for soul-winning in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Nigeria. Asia-Africa *Journal of Mission and Ministry* (AAMM), 11, 149-170.

Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. (2015). " We are on the internet": contemporary Pentecostalism in Africa and the new culture of online religion. *New media and religious transformations in Africa,* 157-170.

Campbell, H. A. (2020). *Religion in quarantine: The future of religion in a post-pandemic world*. Peacock, Publishers.

Hall, D., & Kołodziejska, M. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic, mediatization and the polish sociology of religion. *Polish Sociological Review*, 213(1), 123-138.

Hepp, A. (2013). *Cultures of mediatization*. John Wiley & Sons.

Hepp, A., Breiter, A., & Hasebrink, U. (2018). *Rethinking transforming communications: An introduction. In Communicative figurations* (pp. 3-13). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Hjarvard, S. (2011). The mediatisation of religion: Theorising religion, media and social change. *Culture and religion*, 12(02), 119-135.

Hove, R. (2022). The pastoral presence in absence: Challenges and opportunities of pastoral care in the context of the global Coronavirus pandemic. *Pharos Journal of Theology.* 103. 10.46222/pharosjot.10319.

Kidder, S. J., & Hucks II, W. E. (2020). From Obstacles to Opportunities: Churches Rising Above the Challenges of COVID-19.

Kilonzo, S. M., & Omwalo, B. O. (2021). The Politics of Pulpit Religiosity in the Era of Covid-19 in Kenya. *Frontiers in Communication*, 246.

Kołodziejska, M. (2021). What can the COVID-19 pandemic tell us about the connection between media and religion? The case of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Poland. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, 1-15.

Mubarak, N., & Zin, C. S. (2020). Religious tourism and mass religious gatherings—the potential link in the spread of COVID-19. Current perspective and future implications. *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*, 36, 101786.

Nyamjoh, F. (2015). "Foreword," in *New media and Religious Transformations in Africa.* Editors R. Hackett, and B. Soares (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).

Pew Research. (2020). 53% of Americans Say the Internet has been ess¥ential during the COVID-19 Outbreak. Pew Research. Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/04/30/53-of-americans-say-the-internet-has-been-essential-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/ (accessed on 23rd July, 2022).

Plüss, J. D. (2020). COVID-19, the Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism. *Transformation*, 37(4), 286-296.

Secretariat report to the Executive Committee during the 2021 Annual Council (2021). Report of the General Conference, 2021. Retrieved from https://adventist.news/news/the-seventh-day-adventist-church-works-to-overcome-challenges-of-covid-19-and-reach-people-for-christ.

Stake, R. E. (2008). Qualitative case studies. Kick Publishers, India.

Sulkowski, L., & Ignatowski, G. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on organization of religious behaviour in different Christian denominations in Poland. *Religions*, 11(5), 254.

Thomas, J., & Barbato, M. (2020). Positive religious coping and mental health among Christians and Muslims in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Religions*, 11(10), 498.

Togarasei, L. (2012). Mediating the gospel: Pentecostal Christianity and media technology in Botswana and Zimbabwe. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27(2), 257-274.

Widjaja, F. I., Abraham, R. A., Simanjuntak, F., Boiliu, N. I., & Harefa, O. (2021). Fruit in the unfruitful season: A case study of the Indonesian Bethel Church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42(1), 1-8.