

Megacostalism and the pandemic: Developing a megacostal theology of care beyond COVID-19

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Megacostalism is a concept developed here to refer to the growing trend of mega Pentecostal churches in Africa. The mega Pentecostal churches are popular in the United States of America with leading pastors such as T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, Joel Osteen, and so forth. There is an interesting growing trend of this type of churches in Africa particularly in West Africa in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana. There has also been a development of mega Pentecostal churches in South Africa after 1994. This article assesses this phenomenon by paying attention to how such churches dealt with the challenges of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as opposed to smaller churches. The study will use a case study method to assess the COVID-19 experiences in churches such as the Rhema Bible Church in Randburg, Christian Revival Church and Doxa Deo. This article will attempt to address these research questions through a conceptualisation of megacostalism. In addition, the study will look at how different mega Pentecostal churches dealt with COVID-19 to develop a proper megacostal theology of care beyond COVID-19.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article is interdisciplinary between theology and the health sciences among the mega Pentecostal churches in the context of Pentecostalism. The study makes an important contribution to both the study of theology and epidemiology in the understanding of challenges posed by pandemics such as COVID-19 and how to address such challenges through a theology of care.

Keywords: megacostalism; pandemic; COVID-19; megacostal theology; Pentecostalism.

Introduction

Pentecostalism is a movement that has always been able to draw crowds from different parts of the world (Anderson 2013:2). Since its inception at Azusa Street Revival, Los Angeles, United States of America (US), Pentecostalism is known for large gatherings whereby thousands of people can gather in one meeting. Equally, in South Africa, the Bree Street Revival at the beginning of the 20th century in Johannesburg attracted a lot of people coming from different parts of the country. This phenomenon is very popular in the US, particularly with churches belonging to the faith movement which became prominent in the last quarter of the 20th century. Pastors such as T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar of Christian World Changers, Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church and Joyous Meyer of Joyce Meyer Ministries have emerged to lead megachurches in the context of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity (Bowler 2018:4). In Africa, western countries such as Nigeria and Ghana are also leading in terms of mega Pentecostal churches. Living Faith Church Worldwide of David Oyedepo and Redeemed Christian Church of God of Emmanuel Adebayo are among the mega Pentecostal churches in Nigeria (Adebayo 2020; Adedibu 2023; Ojewole & Ehioghae 2018; Ukah 2020). In South Africa, there are churches such as Christian Revival Church, Doxa Deo, Rhema Bible Church, and others that are also mega Pentecostal churches (Kgatle 2022a:1).

This article argues that during the pandemic, these mega Pentecostal churches faced enormous challenges as compared to smaller Pentecostal churches in South Africa. The article aims to develop a megacostal theology that will be able to address future pandemics in the context of megacostalism. This will be achieved by the conceptualisation of megacostalism in the context of Pentecostalism. The background to the challenge of the mega Pentecostal churches during coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) will be outlined in detail. The article will use a few cases of mega Pentecostal churches in South Africa to demonstrate how these have faced various challenges during COVID-19. The article will develop a megacostal theology of pandemics in a way of wrapping. But first, we need to understand what is meant by megacostalism.

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Megacostalism in an African context(s)

Megacostalism in this article is constructed by using two phrases and/or words 'mega churches' and 'Pentecostalism'. Therefore, 'megacostalism' becomes the study of the mega Pentecostal churches in the context of Pentecostalism. These remain Pentecostal churches but have grown to the level of becoming mega churches given the size of their membership and the carrying capacity of their church buildings (Young-Gi 2000:99). Mega Pentecostal churches in this article are also discussed in the context of the church building as opposed to church gatherings. For example, churches such as Enlightened Christian Gathering that used to operate in Pretoria showgrounds, South Africa, had large gatherings but did not have a church building (Kgatle 2021:22).

Some evangelists such as TA Ralekholela had a great following in their evangelism projects but this did not necessarily translate into the mega church level (Ralekholela 2016:1). Equally, some classical Pentecostal churches such as Apostolic Faith Mission have a super-mega membership but this spread across different church satellites or assemblies with few auditoriums in places in Boksburg, South Africa, and other areas (Clark 2016:17). The focus here is the mega Pentecostal churches which are restricted to the large church auditorium rather than the large church gatherings or large followers. But to a certain extent, the mega Pentecostal churches will include the church membership or attendance in the church auditoriums.

Mega Pentecostal churches are a growing trend in Africa (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:43). Most Pentecostal pastors in Africa desire to build a mega Pentecostal church as a sign of growth and influence. This phenomenon is largely influenced by the growth of Pentecostalism in the Global South particularly in Africa (Parsitau & Mwaura 2010:3; cf. Kgatle 2022b:1). In other words, as the movement grows in numbers, there is a demand for the building of large church buildings which is the basis of mega Pentecostal churches. In addition, Pentecostals have always believed in the idea of gathering in a church building unlike, for example, African Initiated Churches (AICs) like the Zion Christian Church whose members do not mind fellowshiping in an open space. Hence, the greater the number of Pentecostal believers the greater the demand for a large church building. But on the other hand, we cannot rule out the reality that the fancier the building is especially those built with other lifestyle facilities and shops, the greater the crowds will be attracted to the same. Another factor contributing to megacostality is urbanisation as people in Africa move towards the cities in search of jobs and other economic activities, they too place a greater demand for the building of larger churches (Parsitau 2007:83).

Nigeria is Africa's home for mega Pentecostal churches. In Lagos, the church building such as Living Faith Church Worldwide also known as the 'winners' chapel' of David

Oyedepo can seat about 50 000 people to full capacity which is one of the mega Pentecostal churches in Africa (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:58, 2019:390). Winner's chapel was the largest until David Oyedepo's spiritual son, Paul Enenche built a 100 000 seater auditorium also known as the 'glory dome' under the Dunamis International Gospel Centre in Abuja, Nigeria (Ogunnubi, Folarin & Ogbonna 2022:167). The auditorium was dedicated on 24 November 2018, and is reported to be the largest church building not only in Africa but in the world (Ogunnubi et al. 2022:167). The author has observed other mega Pentecostal churches elsewhere in Africa, for example, Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa which was founded by the late Ezekiel Guti, the Bread of Life Church International in Lusaka, Zambia, led by Bishop Imakando, The Miracle Centre Cathedral in Kampala, Uganda, led by Robert Kayanja, Action Chapel International in Accra, Ghana led by Duncan Williams, also in Accra Ghana is the Lighthouse Chapel International led by Dag Heward-Mills, and so forth. This is not an exhaustive list as there are many other mega Pentecostal churches in Africa depending on what we mean by mega in terms of quantity. Some Pentecostal churches in Africa have a membership of 1000 or more which is small compared to say 'the Glory Dome'.

Therefore, what we call mega in South Africa is small compared to the Nigerian context. Of course, there are other contributing factors such as the population of the country or even a Christian or Pentecostal church's population. Currently, there are about 213.4 million people in Nigeria as compared to 59.39 million people in South Africa. This might explain why there is a larger church auditorium in Nigeria than in South Africa. Nonetheless, in the South African context, churches such as the Christian Revival Church of Pastor AT Boshoff with a membership of 20,000 would be classified as mega Pentecostal churches (Orogun & Pillay 2023:2). Another church of note is Doxa Deo with a membership of about 30 000 people which is also affiliated to the Apostolic Faith Mission discussed above (Botha 2006:3). The last church under discussion in this article is the Rhema Bible Church in Randburg, Johannesburg, which was founded by Pastor Ray McCauley, now led by Joshua McCauley (Jentile 2016:28). Rhema Bible Church has an auditorium with a carrying capacity of 7500 people per Sunday. These churches were selected by looking at the number of their members, the carrying capacity of church auditoriums, and their influence on society. The next section discusses the cases of mega Pentecostal churches and COVID-19 experiences in South Africa. These cases will later become valuable in the development of the megacostal theology of care beyond COVID-19.

The cases of mega Pentecostal churches and COVID-19 in South Africa

Given their size, the mega Pentecostal churches were severely affected during COVID-19. One area that affected these churches is the finances. These are churches that

depend on their large following to make contributions to the church. When COVID-19 happened some of these church members lost their jobs and businesses and were therefore not able to make contributions. In addition, the members of these churches normally contribute when in church; therefore, when the gatherings were restricted, they could no longer contribute to the church. This in one way or another affected the income of the mega Pentecostal churches in South Africa.

If this was a challenge to smaller churches, then it was even a greater challenge with the bigger churches which have bigger loans, bigger buildings and more employees. Therefore, churches such as Rhema Bible Church, Doxa Deo, and the Christian Revival Church were affected financially by COVID-19 (Magezi 2022:8).

Another area of concern during COVID-19 was the fellowship of the saints (Kgatlé 2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 lockdown restrictions particularly the social distancing rules affected churches in South Africa as much as they affected other businesses (Baron & Pali 2021:9). This was even severe in the early stages of the lockdown; however, even with small changes in the number of people who could gather, the mega Pentecostal churches were still affected. When they restricted the number of attendees in the church, particularly during hard lockdown, this affected the mega Pentecostal churches in South Africa in a big way as opposed to smaller churches. For example, when only 50 people could gather in a church building, a church with a membership of 100 was less affected than a church with a membership of 20000 as is the case with the Christian Revival Church. When the pastor is used to the crowds of 20000 people, it might not be easy to downgrade to the crowd of 50 people. Hence, churches such as Christian Revival Church went completely online during the hard lockdown of COVID-19 as the meeting of 50 people could not make financial sense to them. The advantage is that for the online service, they were now able to reach an even larger audience outside South Africa.

The last area of concern is how the mega Pentecostal churches were restricted from taking care of the needs of their congregants during COVID-19 (Ukah 2020:323). The mega Pentecostal churches normally service their followers on-site during church attendance as opposed to a smaller church where the pastor could manage to visit all congregants in their houses. For a mega Pentecostal church of 20000 people, this is not possible. Therefore, the point of contact becomes the church building and with the lockdown restrictions, this was interrupted in a big way. This became a challenge when the church members in these mega Pentecostal churches were faced with grief because of the loss of their loved ones (Kgatlé & Segalo 2021). When there was no fellowship of the saints, this meant that the members of these churches were practically on their own. In the next section, the article explores the theology of care as the theoretical framework relevant to the development of the megacostal theology of care beyond COVID-19.

The theology of care: Theoretical framework

The theology of care is centred on the nature of God as a caring God. His is not only human care but also nature and environmental care. He demonstrated this when he sent his son to the world to sacrifice his life for the world. John 3:16 states, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life'. Thus, in loving the whole world, God has demonstrated that he cares for the world. Therefore, the theology of care is seen in the relationship between God and human beings. It is from this relationship according to Johnston (2014:113) that God demonstrates his caring spirit towards the poor, the sick, the weak, the marginalised, and so forth. Therefore, God must not be perceived as the one who stays in heaven but as a transcendent God who comes down to the world through his son to show human beings and nature that he is a caring God. In loving God, humanity should take after him in caring for others as this in itself is the very centre of the theology of care. It is also expected of the clergy to take up the nature of the caring God in taking care of the flock of God, in this context the church in the 21st century.

The theology of God is also centred on human beings becoming interdependent with one another rather than living in isolation. In this way, the theology of care is not only seen in the relationship between God and human beings but also between human beings and other fellow human beings. The theology of care is much connected to the African philosophy of ubuntu which in essence is a philosophy of being together rather than being in isolation. Therefore, the theology of care encourages the community of believers as opposed to living in isolation. In this way, the theology of God becomes an instrument that human beings can use in caring for one another in emulating the nature of God. When an individual is aware of the caring nature of God in their own lives, they can transfer it to fellow human beings. In the words of Ramsey (2012:123), the theology of care can make a transition from a church as an audience of sermons to becoming a caring community that cares for one another. This is the theology that can sustain the church even during trials and tribulations as they would be grounded in a caring and loving foundation. In the end, the believers who fellowship in a caring church will have a sense of belonging even if they are found amid the crowds.

The theology of care is not abstract but can also be put into action through caregiving (Moschella 2016:120). To help an individual who is in need or pain, it is not enough to speak about care but to demonstrate that one cares about them. The theology of care will not make an impact until there is a sign that those who care can become part of the people in pain (Federschmidt & Louw 2015:44). In other words, the carer in the theology of care puts on the shoes of an individual in pain and shows them that they care for them. This is one way how people can know that their lives matter when there is a demonstration of someone cares about them. Religious

experiences happening in a church setting should not be an excuse for the actions of caregiving. The theology of care is not only about doing church in the form of songs and sermons but also about being able to step in and help the people of God. Therefore, taking a step towards helping an individual is more impactful than a sermon on the podium as this demonstrates that the clergy cares for the people of God. The audience in the church is not only the objects of sermons but will want to experience care in actions not just in words alone.

The theology of care is also demonstrated in sharing in fulfilling the saying 'Caring is sharing'. Sharing itself is an expression that an individual cares for the one who is lacking. The world would be a wonderful place even with challenges if those who have can be able to share with those that do not have. This is an important aspect of the theology of care particularly during pandemics because there will always be needy people in a challenging time. Therefore, the church should be defined beyond evangelism, preaching, and singing into tangible works of sharing in demonstrating love and care for each other. Equally, praying and worshipping in church should not become ways of escaping the importance of sharing with another in the fulfilment of the theology of sharing (Swartley 2012:13). This is what Christ did on Golgotha, he did not only pray and heal the people but he also shared his life with humanity by dying on the cross. Therefore, the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ demonstrate the sharing of Christ's life with the rest of humanity. This is important if the church has to implement the theology of caring, it should be able to encourage the sharing of resources with one another. This is important in dealing with the challenges of pandemics such as COVID-19.

In summary, the theology of care is known as a theology of caring for one another, the theology of community, the theology of sharing, and the theology of caregiving in support of those who are in grief. This kind of theology is in contrast to selfishness, individualism, and so forth. These aspects of the theology of care are discussed below in the development of the megacostal theology of care beyond COVID-19.

The megacostal theology of care beyond COVID-19

As discussed in the preceding sections, pandemics such as COVID-19 came with the challenge of social distancing which produced social isolation. The mega Pentecostal churches in the development of the theology of care are expected to encourage the fellowship of the saints. This calls for alternative ways of fellowship within the mega Pentecostal churches. Some of the mega Pentecostal churches such as Christian Revival Church were engaged with their followers through online meetings. Online platforms such as Teams, Zoom meetings, and others became alternative ways where the mega Pentecostal churches insisted on fellowship of the saints during pandemics. This means that the fellowship of the saints does not only take place at the church auditorium but can also take place on an online platform. In future pandemics, the church needs to be ready to continue

fellowship even when this is not possible in a church building. This is pivotal for mega Pentecostal churches as, discussed previously, they were mostly affected by COVID-19 as opposed to the smaller churches. Therefore, the theology of care is important in encouraging believers to gather even when circumstances dictate lack of fellowship.

The theology of care is a theology of community rather than being too individualistic. Here, mega Pentecostal churches do not only have to learn from the theology but also from the African philosophy of ubuntu. This is a philosophy that encourages the coming together of the saints. It says, 'motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe' loosely interpreted as 'human beings exist because of others'. In the context of the church, this means that 'a pastor exists because of the congregants'. This philosophy teaches us that the mega Pentecostal church is not about the pastor alone but the people of God. However, in most of these churches, the pastor becomes more of a celebrity and does not care about the people following them. The mega Pentecostal churches have produced the one man syndrome where the individual pastor is magnified than the rest of the community in these churches. In reversing this, a megacostal theology of caring is expected to uplift the community rather than the individual. This also means that during pandemics such as COVID-19, the concern should be the community rather than the individual which is the person of the pastor.

Theology of care is a theology of communal sharing. In the books of Acts 2:42–47, we learn that the early church was not only concerned with prayer and fellowship but was also concerned with the livelihood of other believers. Acts 2:43–44 states that 'All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need'. Mega Pentecostal churches have produced super-rich pastors who live lavishly in mansions and drive expensive sports cars while their congregants live in abject poverty. Some of the super-rich pastors in mega Pentecostal churches own private jets with high maintenance and running costs while most of their followers live in poverty. This calls for a theology of communal sharing in caring for those who are in need during pandemics. This is a call beyond charity but a move towards the empowerment of those who desperately need help during pandemics. Coronavirus disease 2019 is a perfect example in demonstrating that it does not help for the clergy to continue to live lavishly while their followers are in pain and grief.

The theology of care is a theology of caregiving. One of the challenges of COVID-19 was caregiving to an individual who was in pain such as those who were hospitalised and those who were mourning the death of their loved ones. In a small church of 100 people, the pastor can manage to identify those who are in pain and grief. However, in a mega Pentecostal church of about 20000 members such as a Christian Revival Church, it is not easy to identify believers in pain and grief. This calls for an alternative way of giving care to people in grief and pain. Pandemics such as COVID-19 call for mega

Pentecostal churches to come out of their comfort zone of preaching in the crowds in the auditorium to give care, particularly to those who are in grief and pain. Coronavirus disease 2019 and other pandemics have a propensity to reproduce pain and grief. This calls for a theology beyond preaching but a theology of caring. This means that as part of the staff, mega Pentecostal churches require full-time caregivers who will be able to assist congregants during pandemics such as COVID-19. Future, pandemics might challenge the mega Pentecostal churches to think outside the box in being considerate of those in pain and grief.

This means that a mega Pentecostal church is required to decentralise its administration to be able to reach everyone on the ground. It is easier to preach to the crowds than to take care of everyone in the crowds. This calls for the decentralisation of the mega Pentecostal churches into small groups that can be manageable during pandemics such as COVID-19. Strategies such as family church, cell group meetings, and so forth are helpful in mega Pentecostal churches to be able to reach the people on the ground when pandemics emerge in the future. This means that a mega Pentecostal church relies not only on the senior pastor but also on other pastors ministering in small groups to be able to reach those in pain in hospitals or even those mourning the loss of their loved ones. Many of the mega Pentecostal churches such as Christian Revival Church, Rhema Bible Church and Doxa Deo will be required to revisit their theology of care to adequately deal with pandemics that might emerge in the future.

Conclusion

This article looked at the concept of megacostalism as a phenomenon referring to the growing trend of mega Pentecostal churches in Africa. These churches are starting to become popular in Africa, particularly in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana. These churches also contribute to the popularity of mega Pentecostal pastors such as David Oyedepo, Chris Oyakilome, and others. In South Africa, a few mega Pentecostal churches have emerged including the Christian Revival Church of Pastor AT Boshoff, Rhema Bible Church of Ray MacCauley and Doxa Deo, Pretoria. This article was interested in the intersectionality of megacostalism and the pandemic such as COVID-19. The mega Pentecostal churches experienced major challenges during the pandemic as compared to the smaller Pentecostal churches. This has an impact on how churches like these will deal with future pandemics drawing from the lessons of COVID-19. Therefore, it is pivotal to develop a megacostal theology of care that will deal with the challenges of future pandemics. This article firstly suggests that a theology of care should be able to encourage followership outside the megachurch building. Secondly, a theology of care builds some level of interconnection between the believers in the mega Pentecostal church where for example the gap between the rich and the poor is bridged. Thirdly, this theology of care does not encourage the big man or big woman individualistic syndrome produced by mega Pentecostal churches. Rather, it

encourages the community of believers whereby the pastor of the mega Pentecostal church is one with the believers. Fourthly, the theology of care encourages the sharing of resources with others. Lastly, the megacostal theology should be able to deal with the issue of how clergy can support the multitude of their members during grief.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

M.S.K. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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