



# DOMESTIC RELIGION AND HOME CHURCHES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD:

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN E-WORSHIP AT HOMES BY CHARISMATIC CHURCHES IN GHANA DUE TO COVID-19

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### Abstract

*The article discusses domestic religion in the ancient Jewish homes, Greco-Roman homes, and church service at homes of the early church members to draw polemic lessons for the role of women in e-worship service at homes of members of the Charismatic Churches in Ghana due to COVID-19. Domestic religion is a common phenomenon in the ancient Mediterranean world. In ancient Jewish homes, particularly during the patriarchal era, there were designated rooms for worship and offering of sacrifices to Adonai. A similar phenomenon was found in Greco-Roman homes. The early church started in the homes of some members of the Jesus movement. The presence of the divine is not limited to buildings dedicated to mass worship but individual families could worship God/god in their homes. The demand by Charismatic Church Pastors for the members to shout amen, praise the Lord, dance, jump at homes while watching the virtual service at home through television, Facebook, YouTube, etc. strikes the cord of domestic religious activities in the ancient world. This article argues that members of the Charismatic Churches can adapt domestic religious principles in the ancient world, and the early church emphasizing the role of women in worship services during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

### Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has forced many governments including Ghana to suspend social gatherings, including church services in an attempt to control the spread of the disease. Ghana had its first confirmed COVID-19 cases on 12 March 2020. Consequently, His Excellency President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo announced the suspension of all social gatherings in Ghana on Sunday night of 15 March 2020. Since the church is a social entity and there was no prior arrangement for distance worship services, although members who were not able to attend physical

church service due to work or travel engagements could participate in the service by watching or listening to proceedings through any medium, the suspension had a toll on the church and its members.

The Charismatic Churches in Ghana directed its members to listen to them on radio stations and actively participate in the e-worship service on Television, Facebook, YouTube, etc. In a pastoral letter to the branches of the Church, Most Rev. Dr. Charles Agyinasare encouraged all branches of the Church (Perez Chapel International) to observe the directive of the President and added that “we will conduct all our worship services on Precious TV (PTV) and my social media platforms (Facebook and YouTube: Bishop Charles Agyinasare).” On 22 March 2020 during the second virtual service, Agyinasare encouraged members of the Church who were watching or listening to him to be active by responding amen, praise the Lord, etc. Pastor Mensa Otobil also advised the congregation to respond to the preaching of the gospel in their homes. Preaching in Charismatic Churches is a participatory act by both pastors and members of the congregation. In other words, members were expected to respond affirmatively to the preaching. A concept George Ossom-Batsa (2007:91-104) referred to as participatory communicative perspective of preaching the Bible in the African context.

The challenges of participatory response to Church service at home as if one was in physical church service is that the home has been partly converted into a worship place during moments of virtual church service through the organizational skills of the woman of the home (if any). A phenomenon that is new to the family although some families gather for devotions, it may not be to the extent of responding to virtual church service through Television or any other social media platforms. The challenge will be aggravated if members of the family attend different Churches and the virtual Church service is held at the same time on Television. How should the Ghanaian home be organized to participate in e-worship services through any distance medium such as Television, Facebook, and YouTube? How can negative effects be minimized on the family and opportunities be maximized to worship through distance medium as a coherent family unit?

In this study, Charismatic Churches refer to Charismatic Churches that began in Ghana in the early 1980s such as Perez Chapel International (PCI), Action Chapel International (ACI), International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), and Light House Group of Churches among others. My

procedure is to (i) define terms and concepts related to the study; (ii) examine Christian worship during Pandemics/Epidemics in the 20th century; (iii) discuss religion at homes of ancient Jewish, Greco-Roman, in the Gospels, and the early church (iv) assess the role of women in e-worship of Charismatic Churches due to COVID-19; and (v) draw a conclusion.

## Definition of Terms and Concepts

There are terms related to this study that need to be explained. These terms and concepts feature prominently in many distance communication models. Drawing from distance education, this paper argues that worship service during pandemics and epidemics where social gathering for worship service is restricted can be referred to as Distance Worship Service (DWS). DWS is a one-way real-time online interaction. The clergy/pastor conducts worship service for members of the Church through distance medium. The members could not interact with the clergy/pastor through the audio-visual medium but through text communication that may not be made known to other members. It is the prerogative of the clergy/pastor to make the comments of members known. The terms and concepts that need explanation are "Independent Theory," "distance," "autonomy," "devices," "e-worship service," "m-worship service," "epidemic," and "pandemic."

"Independent Theory" was propounded by Michael Grahame Moore (1989:1-7). He identified three forms of interactions in distance communication where an expert (individual) addresses a group: (i) expert-audience; (ii) audience-audience; (iii) and audience-content. It emphasizes the independence of the expert to initiate the on-line interaction and the autonomy of the audience. In other words, although the interaction is initiated by the expert, it is the audience who decides when to participate in the on-line interaction. Expert-audience/Pastor-Congregants interaction is critical in DWS. If a congregant will do well to understand the preaching of the Pastor, it is largely dependent on the type, frequency, activities, and appropriate interaction that are designed for teaching and learning, which would motivate the congregant to join the DWS.

"Distance" worship service is where the church members are not worshipping together (physically) in the building/auditorium with the clergy/pastor as a result of the need to control a disease/disaster. The clergy/pastor

gets connected to the members through distance communication media. This is different from church members who may join worship service through distance communication media due to work or any other schedule that takes them out of their usual place of residence.

“Autonomy” in distance worship service in Charismatic Churches in Ghana is the pastor/clergy. He/she initiates the worship service. It reflects the Independent Theory of distance communication propounded by Moore (1989:1-7). Because it is usually a live programme, which has to be started by the clergy/pastor and the distance Church member may not tune-in to those media if the clergy/pastor is not present on them. That notwithstanding, the Church member is independent to decide whether to tune-in, log-on, or not.

“Devices” refer to electronic equipment used by the Church member to get connected to the clergy/pastor. The devices include television, smart-phone, tablet, computer etc. In some distance communication systems, the devices were provided by the institution that is hosting the programme.

For example, in distance education, the computers used by the students were provided by the School at a venue where the students will go to access the uploaded notes for study. The University of Ghana (UG) distance learning centres are provided by UG at all regional centres of distance education in Ghana (<http://www.ug.edu.gh/distance/accessing-course-materials-online>). But the devices for distance worship are provided by the church member because it is an emergency and it is assumed that many of the members of the Church might have some of these gadgets already. However, I have not yet found research that indicated the percentage of members of the Charismatic Churches in Ghana who have distance worship devices.

Generally, in distance learning, there are options or modes. One of them is “e-learning”, which is characterized by moving to a particular venue periodically where information is uploaded on the computer to be accessed. In distance worship service, there is no e-worship service where church members would have to go to access worship service. Although the use of television in a fixed location in the home and used to connect to the worship service may be considered as an e-worship service, it is however provided by the member. Since many Charismatic Churches in Ghana conduct their main weekly service on Sundays when many of them will be at

home as part of health directive to control the spread of the pandemic, e-worship service is ideally put in place.

M-worship service is where palm devices, smart and mobile phones, tablets, etc. can be used to join the live worship service at any location other than home. It can be related to m-learning in distance education where palm devices, smart and mobile phones, tablets, etc. were used to access information at any location that an internet network is available (Keegan 2005:25-28). M-worship services usually require internet data while e-worship service through television does not necessarily require data. M-worship service allows the member to practice his/her faith at varied locations during worship services while the e-worship service allows for corporate participation by the entire family – communal worship. The e-worship is the distance worship service that the Charismatic Church in Ghana encourages because it supports the stay home health directive. The home and the woman/wife are critical elements in the e-worship service.

According to David M. Morens, Gregory K. Folkers, & Anthony S. Fauci (2009:1018–1021), epidemic is a milder form of a pandemic. They explained that although an epidemic and a pandemic are concerned with novel diseases, an epidemic has a limited geographical spread, less infectious and contagious. Conversely, they argued that a pandemic is characterized by a wider geographical spread with a limited period. A pandemic is highly infectious, severe, contagious, and transmitted from human to human. It is very difficult to control. Both pandemic and epidemic affect the worship life of Christians and eventually introduce a new form of worship that is aided by technology.

## **Christianity and Pandemics/Epidemics**

Christianity has gone through several pandemics and epidemics successfully although without challenges. In this section, the “Spanish influenza” or “Spanish flu”, of 1918-1919 which some scholars refer to as a pandemic or an epidemic due to the angle from which they see the disease or experienced it is discussed (Yount 2018; Phillips 2008:34-36). The choice to discuss the “Spanish flu” is due to the assertion that it is the deadliest outbreak of a disease in the modern period that destroyed human social life and relations (Barry 2005:17), probably next to COVID-19.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, five epidemics have been observed but the one that caused the most havoc/disaster is the “Spanish

flu". The "Spanish flu" was officially reported in Spain in March 1918. It was caused by a virus known as H1N1. "The death toll was once estimated to be 40-50 million worldwide and has in recent years been corrected to reflect twice that number" (Paget 2020). The figure shows that the church and its members will be infected and affected. Members of the church that may not be infected will be affected by family relatives that may be infected. The Spanish "flu brings new challenges. Not least it brings the challenge that the Church itself may see 25% of its ministers and faithful ill, bringing consequent issues for ministry and also possible financial strain. The numbers of very ill and dying people may overwhelm the Church's ability to provide pastoral care" (Donnelly and McManus 2006:657-663). The Spanish flu infected and affected both members of the church and the clergy. Social distancing and the wearing of face masks were prescribed such that transport managers would not allow persons without face masks to board public transport (Yount 2018).

However, health agencies, institutions, and some governments found that "there is also a consensus that these agencies will need the resources of the Church to provide for a pandemic, such as a clergy, in their roles as community leaders, reinforcing government health guidance, reassuring a frightened public and clergy and volunteer laity visiting the sick" (Donnelly and McManus 2006:657). Hence, the leadership of the church was a frontline agency in the fight against the Spanish flu. There were no church services. Pastors would have to use the available medium – newspapers to print their sermons and distribute them to members' doorstep. Recalcitrant members of the church flouted the restrictions to meet at homes (in groups) and open spaces or parks for prayer meetings (Yount 2018).

Some diocese of the Anglican Church in the U.K. decided to print prayer and liturgy books and distribute them to members of the Church to guide them to worship at their various homes. This idea was emulated by other Churches. "The diocese is considering the distribution, if necessary, of a Liturgy of the Word booklet to enable the faithful to worship at home. The New Zealand Bishops plan to do this and are currently developing catechetical material." (Donnelly and McManus 2006:660). It is obvious that during epidemics or pandemics, the home is the immediate option for worship service with the help and guidance of the clergy through making available materials and information for individual home worship service.

During the Spanish flu, individual homes served a dual purpose for worship service and the abode of families for protection and security. In this context, the priest/clergy is the leader of the worship service which may be a male or a female. Epidemics and pandemics affect religious roles and functions. The role of the clergy as the leader of the worship service is being temporarily transferred to the leaders/heads of homes (Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis & Schjoedt 2020:115-117). It implies the re-organization of the home to reflect religious ideas in addition to its primary function as the place of family abode. The leader/head of the home would lead the service based on his/her knowledge about God and the Church although materials may be made available for the service. He/she will administer the Holy Communion if necessary.

The difference between the worship service during the Spanish flu and COVID-19 is technology. During the Spanish flu, information was given to members of the church through postal mails, print newspapers, and personal delivery at doorposts. During COVID-19, technology has allowed church members to see or hear the clergy through television and social media and follow through the worship service. The challenge here is television or electronic devices, electricity supply, and internet service and data. The common issue between the two is that the “home” has greater religious responsibility. Not only the “home” but persons who join the worship service through m-worship medium imply that the location where they are have been converted to a place of worship as they respond to the preaching.

## **Religion at Homes of Ancient Jewish, Greco-Roman, in the Gospels, and the Early Church**

Ancient Jewish homes during the patriarchal period served a dual purpose. Many houses were built to have a room for worship services to Adonai. The architecture of houses depended on the economic and the religious status of the head/leader of the family. Thus, the building materials available and the artisans to undertake the project are all determined by the head/leader of the family. A key component that distinguishes a home from a house is a room dedicated to offering sacrifices to Adonai (Wright 1969:118-120). The father/head of the family is the priest and in his absence, the first son of the family acts (Wright 1969:118). This practice is not limited to ancient Hebrew Patriarchs. It was a norm that a home must

have a dedicated place for God/gods for worship. The stealing of the *teraphim* (household gods) of Laban by Rachel demonstrated the significance of having a visible deity in the home (Ntrel 2006:8) and implied that she would find a place for the *teraphim* in the home of Jacob.

The worship service is usually around an altar. “The religion in the homes of those early days largely centred about an altar upon which animal sacrifices were offered unto God.” (Wright 1969:119). The purpose of the sacrifice was to seek forgiveness of sins and the favour of Adonai. This domestic worship where the father is the priest was transferred to the Levitical priesthood after its establishment by Moses (Wright 1969:120). However, the transference did not mean to be termination or ban, but the appointment of formal intermediaries. Therefore, domestic religion continued on the quiet in many homes (Pearson 2000:298-302).

The Greco-Romans believe in gods/spirits that are responsible for every day of the week and that attending to them bring favour. Hence, there is room for varied forms of gods/spirits in Greco-Roman homes (Pearson 2000:299). Protective gods such as Genius, Lar Domesticus, and Penates are among the principal deities in Greco-Roman homes (Pearson 2000:299). This domestic religious practice was brought to flux during the reign of Alexander the Great due to frequent social movement (instability) of families (Pearson 2000:299). It is an ancient Hebrew and Akkadian psychology of religion that portrays the parental role of deities at homes to seek the welfare of the family (Bosworth 2015:681-700). According to Pearson (2000:299), the situation led to domestic religious syncretism because the movement allowed for introduction to other deities that were added to existing ones even by Hebrew people.

There were religious activities in homes in the Gospels. Activities/ practices that take place in religiously dedicated buildings were also performed at homes. The use of non-religiously dedicated venues for public religious activity was to indicate that what happens in the religiously dedicated auditoria could equally take place in other non-religious accommodations. In the Narrative of the healing of the paralytic man (Mk. 2:1-12), Jesus declared that the sins of the paralyzed man are forgiven. This declaration is exclusively performed in the Temple by a priest after the victim had offered mandatory items for sacrifice. The primary audience (Jews) of the passage would understand the incident as the religion of the patriarchs where an altar is set up in a house and sacrifices were offered periodically



to Adonai for a favour; and the secondary audience (Romans) would understand it as a meeting for worship of household deities for protection (Aryeh 2018:1-20).

Besides, it also resonates with the domestic religion that Luke portrayed of Jesus and some key persons in society. For example, the invitation of Jesus by a Pharisee to dine with him (Lk. 7:30-50), which led to a religious activity of forgiving a sinful woman; Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha in their home and teaching them (Lk. 10:38-42); and Jesus' dining with Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10), which led to Zacchaeus' repentance from cheating in tax collection and the recompense to those he might have cheated earlier. This domestic religious fellowship that Luke sought to portray is premised on dinner or meals, which is a religio-cultural practice in the ancient world. This religio-cultural element of inviting Jesus for dinner or meals, which Luke presented, lay behind the idea of Jesus going to the house of Simon after the Synagogue service for the Sabbath meals (Destro & Pesce 2003:211-238). This phenomenon facilitated the establishment of house Churches in early Christianity (Pearson 2000:302).

The early church started in the homes of some individual members of the Jesus movement. It can be argued that domestic religion gave rise to the conversion of households in the book of Acts because household God/gods were worshiped by almost all the occupants of the home to show the spiritual parentage of the family. The conversion of the Philipian Jailer and his household (Acts 16:33), the conversion of the household of Crispus (Acts 18:8) points to family units that have accepted to worship God in their homes because Christian worship places were not established at the time. Hence, household Christian worship at homes was occupying the vacuum that had been created by the demise or weakening of domestic religion during the period of Alexander the Great (Pearson 2000:301). However, it is not clear who led the worship service but it is likely to be the head/father of the family. Nonetheless, the input of the woman/wife to organize the home for the worship service is indispensable. Since Christianity is a new religion that barely had liturgy, the conduct of the service is likely to be dependent on the brief Christian instructions received towards conversion and the religious intuition of the leader.

Christianity moved on from household conversion to become a domestic religion, without *teraphim*, altars, and other images. It had achieved the status/concept of religion in the Mediterranean as part of the home. The

homes were later opened for other early Christians to join in worship service. Probably, these early Christians who joined other homes had limited space to gather for worship or were individuals who could not convey worship service in their homes.

The use of *oikos* (oikos) meaning 'home' and *ἐκκλησία* (ekklesia) meaning 'assembly/gathering' in 1 Corinthians 16:19 have varied nuances. However, the reference to a group of Christians in Ephesus who meets in the home of Aquila and Priscilla as argued by Robert Banks (1980:38) is favoured. This is based on historical evidence that there were no dedicated church buildings at the time in Ephesus, and Paul's salutation to the Church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in Romans 16:5. Comparing the use of Aquila and Priscilla's home for Church services, the gathering of the disciples after the ascension (Acts 1:13), Eutychus falling from the upper floor during worship service in a home (Acts 20:6-10), and Saul moving from house to house to arrest Christians (Acts 8:3) suggests that homes of wealthy early Christians were used for worship service. It is a reflection of the use of halls on the upper floors for meetings among the ancient Mediterranean people (Petersen 1969:264-272). "It was in the homes of the faithful, in different parts of the city (Rome) that, these Eucharistic gatherings were held, and it would seem that the historic titular churches of Rome today, each of which is assigned to a cardinal are the direct descendants of these humble assemblies" (Petersen 1969:261). Christians whose homes were used as venues for worship services were referred to as the faithful and those ancient homes have become cathedrals today in Rome (Petersen 1969:261).

Membership of the early Churches in homes mainly consisted of members of the extended family, business associates, and neighbours. A successful service is dependent on the critical inputs of the wife of the owner of the home if it is a male and the slaves in the home. The woman (wife) is responsible for arranging activities in the home such that it aided the worship service. She directs the servants in the home to keep the meeting hall tidy, provide meals for persons who would like to eat, and assist the elderly and weak to climb up the stairs (Aryeh 2019:128). It means that the leadership role of women in home Churches is critical such that she would be expected to convert or transform the family home into a worship venue consistently.

## Women in Distance Worship of Charismatic Churches due to COVID-19

COVID-19 pandemic has forced governments to implement social distancing directives that had to compel Churches to embark on distance worship service at home. Many of the Charismatic Churches have encouraged their members to gather around the television or any other medium used to reach them and be active by responding “amen”, “praise the Lord”, “I receive it” etc. as if they are in the physical church auditorium. They are expected to open the Bible as the scriptures are being mentioned by the pastor, take notes, dance to worship songs and give offerings and tithes through e-payment platforms. The concept has some commonalities and shares some differences with how Christianity dealt with the Spanish flu, ancient domestic religion, and the home churches of early Christianity.

Domestic religion during the patriarchal era, some epochs of the Greco-Roman periods, and early Christianity were largely due to the lack of a central dedicated place of worship, and the desire to indicate the spiritual parentage of the home. Women were not found actively performing religious rituals in the domestic religion of the patriarch and the Greco-Romans. However, women’s role in the ancient world was to show hospitality to visitors by washing their feet, or they sometimes direct servants to do it on their behalf (Coleman 1984:77-78). They also prepare the meal for the breaking of bread in the early church and the servants serve the congregants (Button & van Rensburg 2003:1-28). As managers of homes, the woman (wife) would be expected to control the children from making unnecessary noise and drawing attention from the service.

The important role played by women in ancient religious homes is not different from the contemporary situation due to COVID-19. Because there is no distance worship service for children in the family, they will have to worship together with their parents and other members of the family. In traditional Ghana, women (wives) are the managers of the home. They are generally responsible for the health needs of the family by preparing healthy and nutritional meals for the family, maintaining family and social hygiene, instilling moral values among children, and playing a supportive and advisory role to their husbands. Hence, in the distance worship service, the wife serves as the *diakonos* (deacon) who would prepare the area/room where the entire family unit will meet for e-worship. Unlike in the domestic religion and during the Spanish flu

where the father/head is the leader/priest, in the e-worship of COVID-19 pandemic, the pastor is the leader through the medium being used. The woman/wife plays a supportive organizational role. It partly relates to the home Churches of early Christianity where the head/father of the home is not necessarily the person who presides over the worship service but the role of the wife as the person who prepares the ground for worship service is not negotiable. However, care must be taken so as not to allow the wife to exert too much authority that would lead to undermining the authority of the husband/man. E-worship service would help expose the good potential of women/wives in Christian worship service.

Conversely, E-worship could lead to schism after the restrictions on social gathering are lifted because some women may assume egocentric tendencies which they may find difficult to submit to other leaders/persons. However, some of the e-worship homes that invite neighbours to join may become cell meeting centre for the Charismatic Churches as seen in the case of some of the homes used for worship services in the early church in Rome. Hence, this article enjoins the leadership of the Charismatic Churches to observe the E-worship in homes to improve it to the level of cell meeting after the social distancing restriction is reviewed. Since the Charismatic Churches do not frown on the leadership of women in the Church, it is hoped that the effort of women during the pandemic period will be honored by making them the leaders of the home cell meetings. This will emphasize the position of women in the Charismatic Churches as being able just as men to be used by the Holy Spirit to lead.

## Conclusion

In this article, the author argued that Christian worship has experienced many pandemics and epidemics that necessitated the suspension of physical contact worship. Although the technology was not available for e-worship service, guideline manuals were supplied through mails, and newspapers to members to be used to conduct worship services at home. It is an indication that Churches today must emphasize the need to adapt family worship as seen in the ancient world, particularly during pandemic periods. The COVID-19 pandemic that has led to E-worship service laid more responsibility on the wife (woman) of the home to set-up the room for the e-worship service. This phenomenon will develop the leadership

potentials of women in the Charismatic Churches in Ghana. The e-worship service is likely to develop into cell meetings at home. The article, therefore, calls on the leadership of the Church to make women the head/leader of the home cells to demonstrate appreciation for their work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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