



COVID-19 AND ITS EFFECTS ON CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN CAMEROON

Jennet Tabe Benoni-Wang

Abstract

This paper examines the place of the marital vow of inseparability 'till death' in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It discusses the significance of the marital vow today as inscribed in the Church's liturgy. Using the well-known phrase: "... for better and for worse ...", this study exposes the thoughts/minds of lay people in three local congregations of Kumba Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and the extent of the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic to the marital bed and bond. Interviews considered solely married people of all ages. Findings revealed that even strongest marriages that have lasted (up to) 40 years or above, can face difficulties in the shadow of COVID-19. A few lovers, however, still pledge their inseparability even with the virus. The study concludes that the COVID-19 virus poses a challenge to our understanding of marriage, the family, and the rest of society.

Introduction

Every community and generation attempt to extract meaning from sudden happenings that challenge humanity and grapples with solutions that address these existential problems. In our world today, the major problem which is threatening human lives and affecting every facet of our society is the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. At the close of 2019, an outbreak of coronavirus began in Wuhan, China and quickly spread throughout the globe like veldfire. After almost four years of a socio-political crisis that has bred hardship, pain, poverty, and death throughout Cameroon and especially in the two English speaking regions, who could have imagined another plague called COVID 19? In the struggle to contain the virus, many new rules were introduced locally, nationally and internationally. Amongst these were safe distancing, wearing of masks, regular washing of hands, and application of hand sanitizers among others. Locally, in Kumba, Cameroon where this study was conducted, these rules are implemented to the letter, with major consequences on the non-compliant.

Before long, the consequences of these new norms came to strain many social interactions and relationships. One might imagine that marriage, which is the foundation of society bound by sacred vows, would survive any crisis. Even if marriage endured socio-political chaos, my study argues that the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to melt some formerly strong marriages.

Gathering empirical data through the methodological lens of the layman's perspective from three local congregations in Kumba, Cameroon, we noticed that marriages are threatened by the pandemic in that, spouses fear, doubt and are suspicious of one another; some succumb to untimely deaths far from the presence and warm embrace of their partners, yet others are being buried without the presence of the surviving spouses and their families. The current events across the world demand a contextual understanding of the implications, that is to say the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges it places on love bonds and the marital vows.

This recent pandemic, like the socio-political crisis, is claiming the lives of the community's sons and daughters, causing fear, panic, and pandemonium. Often, when faced with challenges in the external world, the family is the safest place where one finds solace, in the arms and embrace of loved ones. Most Cameroonians turn home, and to loved ones; to spouses, parents, uncles and aunts as sources of solace and warmth, as shoulders to lean on and to find meaning when clouds get darker. Today, however, anyone who quickly runs home, especially with traces of sickness, is suspected of trying to jeopardize the lives of loved ones.

Family space ensured by the strong bond of marriage occupies a prominent place in Cameroonian society. Though marriage continues to be held in high esteem, the pandemic is exposing strange tensions, controversies and dilemmas among couples. The high incidence of deaths alongside the circumstances of lockdown and its repercussions (e.g. unemployment, poverty and increase in depression), is changing the face of and the dynamics of many families. Most of these spouses got married in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC), where the marriage liturgy includes vows of inseparability. Is it possible that the COVID-19 pandemic can destabilize such strong vows taken for life?

One of these vows especially captures attention and it is this that has inspired this study. A synopsis of it goes thus: "I call upon these persons here present to witness that I..., do take you..., to be my lawful wedded

wife/husband... for better, for worse, for richer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part, according to God's holy law."

The paper is approached in two parts: first, it scrutinizes the place of the marriage vow "... for better or for worse...", in the institution of marriage in this era of COVID-19. Second, it reveals data that exposes the strengths and challenges of the marriage vow and bond in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which has put to the test the church's liturgical vows and the commitment of many couples.

Background/Motivation

A prominent and highly respected Christian in one of our local congregations of the Presbyterian Church, Cameroon (PCC) was being carried away as he was gasping for breath to survive. In this pathetic state, most members of his family who suspected COVID-19 were standing aloof. As he was ferried past us to the ambulance, he kept on saying "that woman is not my wife. If I die, let my family know that the woman in my home is not my wife. In shock, we tried to understand how a man was refusing a woman to whom he was married to, and with whom he and their children had lived together for more than a decade. Family members and relatives explained that she refused to stand by her husband, to touch, take care of and support him in his most dire moment, with the excuse that he has contracted Coronavirus, she was not willing to be infected too, or risk dying prematurely. While his wife was renouncing her marital vow for fear of death, the man was renouncing his on account of the shock of betrayal. Even if both survive(d), this marriage will never be the same again.

Marriage in Context

Kumba Presbytery is one of the largest presbyteries of the PCC. The presbytery houses 17 congregations and a large Christian population, most of whom are married and took their marital vows within the church's liturgy. We selected three of these congregations to sample opinions of married people on the implications of the pandemic on the marital bond, one of the foundations of society. We used a layman's perspective, wherein open-ended questions were put to the local congregants requesting them to respond spontaneously or on the spot. We then used a tape recorder to (gather) record responses which were transcribed and analysed. All ethical

checks were observed and data anonymized. The study was transparent and respondents spoke freely with no compulsion.

The vow – “to have and to hold from this day forward ...” - that is taken during the solemnization of marriage where the couples are made to hold each other’s hand and pledge their unending, unbreakable allegiance to one another in all circumstances; better or worse. Amongst other threats against the married (stead) such as infidelity, infertility, HIV/AIDS and STDs, is the COVID-19 pandemic that is threatening to extinguish marital bond the most. This is so because the disease brings fear of death very close to the people, it is like a death sentence. Once one is declared a patient of the virus, no one wants to be infected and so people stay away from infected persons as much as possible, even couples. Statistics from empirical data collected in three local congregations of PC Kosala 2, Teke and Mambanda Native reveal varied and difficult challenges on the marital state and the family. The question that was asked to the study participants is as follows:

If you suspect that your spouse is having COVID-19, or he/she suddenly reveals that he/she is infected with the virus, what will you do?

Statistics on Respondents:

	<i>Mam- banda Native</i>	<i>PC Kosala 2</i>	<i>Teke</i>	Total	Altogether
Men	11	14	13	38	79
Women	9	8	24	41	

Analyses of responses from respondents

Responses were grouped as follows:

Men's responses

- “When we get to that bridge we will cross. We are not there yet.”
- “I will “palapala” (I will fight the situation when it arises)”.
- “I will first of all be very afraid, then I will carry her to Dr Dewah but not to the hospital.”
- “I will move her into a separate room so that I do not risk my life.”
- “I will not pretend, because this matter has no pretence anymore. I will call Doctors Without Borders to come and take her away fast. If she goes and she is healed, I will bring her back. If she is not healed, she will stay there. Until she is cured, I cannot go beside her.”
- “I will make a special room in my house and quarantine her and leave her there alone”.
- “First my heart will skip seriously and beat terribly. My heart will worry me seriously because my wife is part of me. Then I will place her in God’s care, for only He will know what to do. I will beg Papa God to help me.”
- “I will take very serious measures, knowing that people contract the disease everywhere. And since I love her, I will hold her by the hand and we will go to the hospital. It is better if it is death, let us die together.”
- “I think that I will expect my wife to understand that we cannot die with the children. Because if it were me, I would be expecting the same treatment, that she quarantines me. If she is well, that will be fine, if not, then I will call doctors to take her away.”
- “As soon as she enters the house, I will make sure that I cover my nose and she stands very far to talk to me, so that at least I am safe first.”

Women's responses

- “I will first thank God that he has even revealed that he has corona, because many of these men do not reveal their status in most cases.”

- “I will put my ‘cover nose’, and I will console him now. Then I will tell him that you know the truth that not so? Rather than all of us to die, it is better for papa alone. So I will tell the children to leave papa alone in his corner and we will quarantine him and call the doctors. If he dies ooh, oooh! If he gets well oooh, oooh!”.
- “I will wait until he gets well then will satisfy him again sexually.”
- “With this disease we cannot come together no way.”
- “I will put on my mask, then I place him in our room. Then I find herbs and cook and cover him well. While doing this, I will isolate myself from the children as well. I will cook some herbs for myself too and drink and cover alongside him.”
- “I will support my husband because when we were getting married, it was said “for better or for worse”. If I leave him, it will mean only for better, and not for worse.”
- “I will cook herbs for both of us and we drink.”
- “This “for better or for worse” thing cannot work with coronavirus, no way. No one wants to die with another person, even if it is your better half.”

Both men and women’s responses were strict on isolating the other member of the couple until some form of sanity returned to their health situation. The responses revealed the fear factor, the unknown factor, the betrayal factor, and the stigma factor that have suddenly been exposed by the pandemic. The question that steadily comes to mind is: Has COVID-19 become bigger than love and the marriage bed? This is because as soon as a symptom is noticed, many couples keep their distance immediately and also abstain from sex and other emotional expressions even without any diagnosis.

It is important also to note the distinction between the responses of men and women. There exist multiple gendered undertones. Some people said they would quarantine their spouses at home rather than take them to the hospital to a medical doctor. This is as a result of the recent scandals that erupted from the local and public hospitals around the country, reported on national and local television news, where family members of deceased

persons fought with doctors who declared their relatives COVID-19 positive. They reported that these relatives left home for the hospital to do their regular high blood pressure checks, but were hospitalized with Coronavirus.

Conclusion

The study is a light-hearted survey of people's inner struggles with the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic that is changing many people's lives in Cameroon. Three congregations were engaged due to their struggles with the pandemic and practical prevailing realities such as love and health. From them, we come to the understanding that the COVID-19 pandemic is radically changing the face of the globe. If the pandemic continues ravaging the society and in some cases separating couples the way it is doing, either through death, quarantine/intentional isolation, are we sure we will still have partners who will live together in sickness and in health, for better and for worse? And if love and marriages fail, what happens to the home and the rest of society? We are searching.

References

Book of Divine Services Volume III. Produced by Presbyterian Printing Press (Press Print), 1982.