

The Impact of COVID-19 on Seminaries in Northern Nigeria

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Directive to Close Schools

The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was announced on February 29, 2020. On March 19, 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education closed schools. As of August 5, 2020, Nigerian schools are still closed, with the exception of students taking final year examinations. Now, Nigerian schools are trying to decide how to continue to educate (Sibisi 2020). Unlike public institutions that are sponsored by the government and private universities that have many donors – both of which can move their classes online – most seminary faculty and students, especially in Northern Nigeria, are still waiting at home. In Northern Nigeria alone, this situation impacts over 20 seminaries with approximately 14, 000 students.

E-Learning Recommendations

Seminaries might seek guidance from UNESCO, “COVID-19: 10 Recommendations to plan distance learning solutions,” which suggests that schools

- Assess the capabilities of students, teachers, and infrastructure to adopt high-technology and low-technology solutions.
- Explore options for distance learning, including virtual lessons, downloadable lessons, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), ZOOM, mobile-phone and social media blasts, accessible material readers, radio, and television.
- Train teachers to instruct students through distance learning tools.
- Appreciate that distance learning is not interactive and work within that framework.
- Blend approaches and limit the number of applications and platforms.
- Emphasize tools that are compatible with smartphones, which are more common.
- Engage in agreements with telecom providers to lower the cost of

accessing resources.

- Create support communities among teachers and students to cross-reference questions.
- Ensure accessibility for students with disabilities.

The tips that do not rely on the internet could be followed; however, anything that requires internet access cannot be adopted by most Northern Nigerian seminaries.

Challenges

Even for schools around the world that successfully moved online, the temporary cessation of face-to-face activities was a huge disruptor (Friedman, Hurley, Fishman 2020). This disruption is even more serious in Northern Nigeria, which does not have reliable electricity, internet, or phone networks. Furthermore, most Northern Nigerian seminaries focus closely on forming pastors. Such formation occurs both within and outside the seminary, as students and faculty share life (Uchem, 2002, 2). Our classes are face-to-face. Everyone has to be on campus. Online education may be suitable for content-heavy courses that emphasize intellectual formation, but many in our seminaries wonder whether spiritual formation can be addressed without face-to-face discipleship. In our context, distance learning often becomes purely an intellectual exercise, with little opportunity for reflection. Basic intellectual development without accompanying spiritual maturity is already a problem at some seminaries, where students are expected to ingest and regurgitate material (Uchem, 2002, 8). Thus, especially in online environments, students do not have opportunities to question, be convicted, and grow. Even those involved in successful online programs acknowledge the hurdles to this kind of soul formation, which is vital if new pastors are to minister to spiritual needs (Brown 2016).

Beyond this spiritual question, seminaries in Northern Nigeria face the following challenges.

Funding: Most seminaries in Northern Nigeria are not adequately funded in normal times. Now, tuition fees collected in the spring of 2020 have been exhausted. Students cannot be asked to make further payments when they are not in classes. Denominations might try to help seminaries absorb the shock of COVID-19, but most congregations themselves are struggling to pay their pastors. Because Sunday worship services are permitted but with tightly restricted numbers, pastors (and seminaries) have no regular income from offerings. Therefore, seminaries are at the mercy of individual givers. Exacerbating this situation, the measures necessary to contain the virus have triggered an economic downturn,

endangering students' ability to pay tuition in the future and congregations' and individual donors' ability to give (Adrian and Natalucci, 2020).

Internet Access: Many seminaries do not have money to buy infrastructure or hire personnel to help them go online. For seminaries without regular electricity or telephone services, purchasing laptops, routers, or bandwidth is not even an option.

Faculty & Staff: Faculty struggle to teach from home because they do not own adequate technology. Many seminaries are laying off these faculty because they cannot afford to pay them. The situation of non-teaching staff is equally endangered. Furthermore, faculty who are still employed are being expected to educate online, though they do not know how to use available tools. Even worse, the few faculty who do have technological expertise are being asked to address technical difficulties while managing their own teaching.

Students: Most students had to return home when seminaries closed and often exhausted their income on travel. Some could not afford to return home; they have now exhausted their resources. Seminary closures have created tensions because many families, especially in rural areas, did not understand why seminaries closed. They had struggled to get the money for school fees in the first place and are now frustrated when students return without a complete academic year to show for that money. At home, some students have no way to support themselves. In addition, in the few places where students can access online education, seminaries may be asking them to keep studying, forcing them to adapt to new learning methods.

In addition to these issues, students face the discouragement and uncertainty of disrupted careers. Final-year students are stranded without an official degree and unable to find a job that would support them. Most seminaries cannot conduct examinations – a particular problem in rural areas, across which students are widely scattered. Furthermore, students face uncertainty about when any normal schooling can resume. Closures of seminaries and of the economy mean that some students may never finish their degrees. Many Northern Nigerian pastors are close to retirement, so if these problems are not addressed, some churches will not have pastors.

The Way Forward

Seminaries need to find solutions so that they can continue to educate during the pandemic and provide pastors for the Church.

Funding: Institutions should consider asking donors who have made restricted gifts in the past to release these restrictions. That way, funds can go to areas of immediate institutional need.

Internet Access: Seminaries should seek NGOs that can help them reach rural areas with internet. They should request free access to journals and electronic textbooks from academic publishers. If students can access these resources, their studies may not be as drastically affected (though they may still complain about paying for data to download material).

Faculty & Staff: Seminaries should think creatively about encouraging faculty. Faculty should collaborate to focus on final-year students or others in tenuous situations and to troubleshoot online platforms where those are available (rather than one person bearing the whole load).

Students: Seminaries should explore using WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter to contact students in rural areas that have telecommunications access. Faculty could organize one-on-one lessons via phone calls, or they could email assignments. Students who do not have computers or consistent access to networks could download resources to phones. Some phones can support apps offline, and they are easy to carry, cheap, and do not use as much power as laptops.

Long-term, seminaries need to think about building robust donor bases. They also need to find ways to gain consistent access to water and electricity, especially in rural areas.

Conclusion

The whole community – faculty, staff, students, churches, denominations, NGOs, even the government – can help Northern Nigerian seminaries address these challenges. If seminaries survive, they will emerge from the pandemic stronger, equipped to meet future crises.

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