

# Church Attendance in the Post Covid-19 Era: The Case of Bulawayo East Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

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## ABSTRACT

The day the earth stood still! This was an expected event, which caught everyone by surprise. People were expected within a short space of time to come up with safe measures to implement as to save lives. Lives have been turned upside down for the entire human race. The Church found itself on the receiving end and had to systematically respond to this global pandemic through the announcements of closing its doors for worship in a bid to combat the spread of the deadly virus. Early 2021 when Covid-19 pandemic was put under control the government relaxed COVID-19 restrictions and churches responded to this with gladness. The church doors were opened and congregants filled up the pews, however there was a group that has never sat foot to church since churches were closed due to COVID-19 in 2020. When the Seventh Day Adventist church in Zimbabwe opened its doors, the Bulawayo East District ceased most of its online programming to encourage physical worship leaving the group not attending church stranded. The district however came up with strategies to lure members back to church and keep their spiritual lives in check. It is therefore the object of this qualitative study to interrogate the effectiveness of the methods adopted by Bulawayo East Church.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Social distancing, Lockdown, Post-Covid 19, Church attendance.

## INTRODUCTION

On 19 March 2020, the president of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa through the Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020 On Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) declared COVID-19 as a national disaster. The government established a taskforce headed by the then Second Vice President Kembo Mohadi. This taskforce consisted of representatives from different ministries and was further divided into subcommittees that were tasked to monitor the pandemic situation and coordinate the response to the crisis. In the same year the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists declared, "The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest public health crisis in a hundred years." (General conference 2021). The consequences of the pandemic on the church and membership have been devastating. At that time the Seventh-day Adventist Church has lost more than 17,000 members to COVID-19 and by estimate this is a conservative number (Kohler, 2022). We must quickly learn to deal with this new reality and look for the best opportunities to serve those in need.

On 30 March 2020, the first 21-days national lockdown was announced by the president. The terms of this lockdown included the suspension of all non-essential activities, compulsory wearing of face masks for the essential workers and the frontline workers to wear personal protective equipment (PPEs). Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 on Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020 gave detailed information on rules and regulations during lockdowns. The statutory instrument prohibited all forms of gatherings and restricted the movement of the public except those providing essential services. Essential services included hospital services, state security services, emergency services such as fire brigade and ambulance services, water and electricity services, sanitary service, money

transfer and exchange services, and service providers of communication were allowed to continue to operate during the pandemic.

Churches faced an unprecedented crisis with COVID-19 since the congregational worship service was stopped in person, the most influential church meeting among other various church gatherings. Churches followed COVID-19 regulations such as social distancing and non-contacting movement. Church leaders confronted the most contentious issue, whether they open or close places of worship, such as churches, temples and synagogues. As the COVID-19 restrictions got relaxed, church gatherings were limited to 50, this limitation and concerns about radical spread of the coronavirus made it impossible for churches to hold congregation meetings and seemed to be no longer able to effectively administer the church's mission. Despite difficulties, churches have strived to fulfil the role of light and salt in the world even in the COVID-19 pandemic era by devising ways to meet the new forms of the mission of the church. The government relaxed COVID-19 restrictions and churches responded to this with gladness. The church doors were opened and congregants filled up the pews, however there was a group that has never sat foot to church since churches were closed due to COVID-19 in 2020. When the Seventh Day Adventist church in Zimbabwe opened its doors, the Bulawayo East District ceased most of its online programming to encourage physical worship leaving the group not attending church stranded. The district however came up with strategies to lure members back to church and keep their spiritual lives in check. It is therefore the object of the study to interrogate the effectiveness of the methods adopted by Bulawayo East Church.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The Bulawayo East District is known to be a warm and vibrant church that takes care of its members. It is a responsive church that responds to the needs of its members. When COVID-19 came the church quickly adapted to the new normal and reached its members through different media and kept on the loop about the welfare of its members. The transition was smooth and members felt connected again. The Post-COVID-19 era came and there was excitement all over as members looked forward to seeing and fellowshiping with their extended church family. The re-union was as exciting as expected. There is a small group of membership that did not come back to attend church services. The object of this research is unravelling the strategies that the church took to win back its members.

The researcher intends to use this research to formulate a model that can be used to win back such groups in this church and elsewhere due to COVID-19 and any other disruption to regular church attendance.

### **Area of Study**

The study on the responsiveness of the church post-COVID era will be conducted at Seventh-day Adventist Church Bulawayo East District in West Zimbabwe Conference; the catchment areas are Bulawayo East Church, Beacon of Hope Church and Parklands Church. The focus of this research will put particular interest on formulating and implementing strategies meant to enhance church responsiveness towards its members that have not returned to church post COVID era to improve membership retention.

During COVID-19 pandemic fellowship and worship services became difficult to conduct as national lockdowns, social distances, ban on gatherings masking and sanitising was proclaimed in almost all the countries. Churches had to come up with ways of doing church different as to protect its members from contracting and spreading the virus (Rainer, 2022). The churches quickly moved to online and social media platforms to do their worship services and fellowship.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The announcement by the government that churches can now have physical worship services was received

with great joy. Church members however did not flock back to church as they were expected. Attendance to church services was slow as people still saw COVID-19 as a great threat to their lives. After about three months many churches were fully back to the attendance records. Pillay, (2022) observe that currently there are still some members who have not yet gone back to their churches. Several reasons have been cited as holding back these members.

### **Dropping attendance figures after COVID-19**

During post COVID-19 church attendance dropped significantly even with the announcements by both the government and church organisation. In United States the churches have indicated that on average 20% of their members have not returned to church (Rainer, 2022). The reasons given for the reduced church attendance range from personal reasons to health related considerations. While the rate of the spread of the COVID-19 infection has fallen significantly, health specialists still maintain that the disease is still a threat especially to people with known health conditions (Pillay 2022). Sharp, (2022) posits that some members got so much used to online worship systems that they could do within the comfort of their homes. For such members it is now difficult to learn the new habit of going to attend church. Church members who used to have a lot of issues with church leadership are also finding it difficult to return to church, they want to do church in their own ways without a lot of administrative controls (Earls 2022).

### **Strategies being adopted to bring back church members**

Churches world over are concerned about their dwindling member attendances to their worship services in the post COVID- 19 period. Churches have taken several strategies to try and lure members back to the church. Literature on this area indicates that while the churches might want to go all out to bring back their members they are controlled by the different governmental proclamations that have grey areas (Sharp 2022). The churches are left with limited choices in bringing back their members. Earls (2022) states that the lack of the church to take broad steps in reclaiming their members should never be viewed as lack of being responsive or uncaring to the affected members. The passive methods the churches are adopting should be seen in the bigger picture of the current situation on the ground where COVID-19 is still a threat. The church while calling its members back to church it should also be mindful of their health conditions and make sure the churches or large gatherings are good for them (Earls 2022).

Rainer (2022) argues that most churches took passive actions like praying for the affected members, sending encouraging announcements and posting invitations to the members using social media platforms. All these passive methods although not very effective have seen few members coming back to church. Earls (2022), emphasises the role played by small group visitations to the members who are not yet back to church. Visitations make the affected members feel loved and connected to the church hence decide to join in the fellowship.

The church can also have worship services in the homes of the members who are not yet coming back as a way of demonstrating that its n safe to congregate a long as the COVID-19 health protocols are observed (Pillay 2022). The church leadership should invest more on health materials so that it is easy to fully comply to the COVID-19 protocols. With this initiative members begin to have confidence in the church precautions measures and become willing to attend church.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

In this study, the research design was taken as the plan of how the researcher intended to conduct the research. Concurring with this view, Patton (2002) refers to a research design as the plan of how, when and where data are to be generated and analysed. This study used the qualitative approach to explore the pastor's, elders, directors and church member's experiences and attitudes on the church members who have

not returned to church after Covid 19.

In this study purposive sampling was used because the nature of the study requires that participants have specific characteristics that form the criteria for the selection. The researcher needed people who because of their positions in the church were capable of responding to research questions that were sought. The selection criteria that was used is presented in Table 3.1

Table 1: Selection criteria for the participants

Participant	Institution	Number	Justification
Pastor	Byo East Church	1	Have a bird’s eye view of the church’s operations, the programming and related activities. Has insights into the administrative issues relating to the church.
Church elders	Byo East Church	2	Act on behalf of the pastor. Have lived experiences in the developing and implementing the programmes of the church.
Church board members	Byo East Church	3	Have lived experiences in the developing and implementing the programmes of the church.
Church clerk	Byo East Church	1	The custodian of church documents holding all policies and board minutes...

In this study data generation included procedures that were used as well as the tools used to generate data with the aim of answering the research questions. Accordingly, the data generation instruments used in this study were face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

## DATA PRESENTATION, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the data from three different research instruments used in this study. The first data presentation is the demographic profile of the participants who participated in this study. Following is data coming from the focus group that was held comprising of the church pastor, church clerk, 3 church elders and 3 church board members. The third part of data presentation will come form 5 interviews that were held with the pastor, 2 church elders, and 2 church board members. The last set of data would come from document analysis that was conducted using church documents like church policies, circulars and church board minutes.

### Demographic Profile of Participants

Understanding the demographic characteristics of participants provides some insights that help the researcher deal with the data she collects from them. These characteristics offer variables that are essential in determining the knowledge, the attitude and the possible behaviours of the respondents. The different lived experiences of the participants add rich details to the study. To begin the process, the researcher gathered the biographic data of the participants which are presented on the table below.

Table 2: Age range distribution and Gender of participants

AGE RANGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
16 – 28	1	1	2
29 – 40	1	3	4
36 – 50	1	1	2

The research tried to incorporate all the age groups in the study such that it remains representative in nature. The gender issue was also taken into consideration, however since the study sample was church leadership, males tended to dominate the group as seen from the table above, where only 3 out of 8 are females.

### **Distribution of participants according to academic qualifications**

There is a high literacy level among the participants of the study. All the 8 participants indicated that they hold tertiary qualifications ranging from college diplomas to masters degrees. The explanation of this is that the study is located in an elite area where education is highly valued. Also the church will want highly qualified people in the leadership roles.

### **Data presentation the focus group discussions**

Following are the views submitted by the focus group discussion. The focus group comprised of the pastor, church clerk, three church elders, and three church board members. The main question they were responding to was:

Why is the church not reaching out to the members who have not returned to church after COVID-19?

#### **Focus Group -Responses:**

**Researcher:** Good friends, I am carrying out research the responsiveness of your church to those members who have not come back to church after COVID -19. Are you are aware of such members?

**Group:** We are aware there are such members.

**Researcher:** Okay, What is the church doing about these members?

**Church clerk:** As a church we feel they will come when they are assured that their health is not at risk. We all came at different times after assessing the situation. So I think let's give them adequate time they will come.

**Researcher:** Are we all in agreement with what has been said any different views?

**Group:** Yes that is our view as a church.

**Andrew:** Another point is that as a local church we rely on the directives from our conference which is our administrative body, so if they have not said anything along those lines, there is little we can do.

**Researcher:** So the local church has to align its programming to that of the conference?

**Sarah:** In cases where there are grey areas but in all other cases the local churches can do their own initiatives. In this case even the government policy is not clear, what happens if people contract the virus at church, what measures should the church take to make sure their members are safe.

**Researcher:** Following and learning from the discussion.

**Pastor:** While that is our view we still love our members we are praying for them and we continue inviting them to come using online means.

**Researcher:** I am following. Why not visiting them in their homes and encourage them to come back?

**Elder Martins:** I appreciate that, however in this case there are some restricting forces, like COVID-19 is still a threat to people, some members lost their loved ones and are still taking all necessary precautions. So if as a church we take an active role in bringing them here, if something happens the church will be responsible and a lot of things will be expected from the church. So for safety the church announced that the doors for worship are now open, encouragements to attend are done, but to individually follow people in their homes is not yet done. Also we are not aware if these members will allow us in their homes they are still self-isolating.

**Researcher:** Very interesting, what do you think the church can do to assist affected members?

**Marvis:** By encouraging members who are very close to the affected members to visit them on individual basis as show them that physical worship is now happening. Maybe this way the church is not put at risk.

**Researcher:** Thank you, any other ways to win them back.

**Elder Ray:** We are also praying for our members and also sending services online to them.

**Researcher:** Thank you so much friends, the discussion was an eye-opener.

### Central themes emerging from the focus group discussion

From the Focus group discussion the themes that are coming out are that the church has done very little in terms of reaching out to the affected members. The key reasons are that the church is restricted by the church policies and government proclamations. This observation is similar to Earls (2022), who stated that the churches are taking on passive strategies due to the fact that government proclamations in this area has a lot of grey areas. The fact that COVID-19 threat is still around makes it difficult for the church to be seen in the forefront of encouraging members to come to church. The focus group discussion proposed that visitations by the members close to the affected members, making online encouragements and praying for the affected members as ways of reaching out the affected members. The following table summarises the key themes coming out from the focus group discussion.

Table 3. Themes as proposed by the focus group.

Themes	Evidence from the interview extracts
Passive efforts	As a church we feel they will come when they feel its safe to do so.
Visitations by close to the homes of the affected members.	Encourage close friends to visit the affected members in their homes.
Online encouragements and prayer.	We are praying for them and continue encouraging using online means.

### Pastor's Responses:

Following are the views submitted by the pastor based on the question:

Why is the church not reaching out to the members who have not returned to church after COVID-19?

**Researcher:** Good morning Pastor.

**Pastor:** Morning Madam.

**Researcher** I am carrying out a short research on the responses of churches towards members who did not go back to church after COVID-19. Would you have time for few questions?

**Pastor:** Sure learning is always good for me as a pastor.

**Researcher:** Do you have church members who have not come to church after the re-opening of churches? If so what has the church done about such members?

**Pastor:** Yes, we have such members. The church can do little in this case as you know COVID-19 is still with us every day we hear of new cases being reported. So there are some people who are still isolating themselves. If as the church we become so much persuasive to such members and they contact the virus, their relatives and the government will blame the church for negligence and not following all COVID -19 protocols. So the church can only encourage but leave the individuals to take their choices.

**Researcher:** Good observations Pastor. So what should be done, is the church going to just ignore these members?

**Pastor:** We don't ignore them, we like them and we try and give them online services and we encourage members close to them to visit them, it's safer that way than visiting as a church.

**Researcher:** That's great, hoping it will work out.

**Pastor:** The government should be clear on this issue, but we will do our best to serve our members.

**Central themes emerging from the Pastor's responses.**

The interview with the pastor reinforced most views from the focus group discussion. The pastor felt that due to lack of independence of the local church on such cases the church was safe to take a passive response and wait for members to come instead of the church going out to actively invite them. The individual visitations were proposed as the most effective way of reaching out to the affected members. Table 4.2 below captures the themes obtained from the interview with the pastor.

Table 4. Themes from interview with Pastor

Themes	Evidence from interview extracts
Passive response	The church can do little in this case
Individualized efforts	Those close to affected members to visit them on individual basis
Fear of unknown eventualities	Covid -19 is still a threat

**Elders 'Responses:**

Following are the views submitted by three church elders based on the question:

Why is the church not reaching out to the members who have not returned to church after COVID-19?

**Elder Martins:**

**Researcher:** Good day elder, I am carrying out research the responsiveness of your church to those

members who have not come back to church after COVID -19. Are you are aware of such members?

**Martins:** I am aware there are such members.

**Researcher:** Okay, What is the church doing about these members?

**Martins:** As a church we have not done much, we are hoping that when these members are convinced that their health is no longer at risk they will come back to church.

**Researcher:** Why not visiting them and encouraging them to come back?

**Martins:** I appreciate that, however in this case there are some restricting forces, like COVID-19 is still a threat to people, some members lost their loved ones and are still taking all necessary precautions. So if as a church we take an active role in bringing them here, if something happens the church will be responsible and a lot of things will be expected from the church. So for safety the church announced that the doors for worship are now open, encouragements to attend are done, but to individually follow people in their homes is not yet done. Also we are not aware if these members will allow us in their homes they are still self-isolating. As a local church we rely on the conference which is a higher organisation to give us directions on this case. Our hands are tied up.

**Researcher:** Very interesting, what do you think the church can do to assist affected members?

**Martins:** I think we can encourage members who are very close to the affected members to visit them on individual basis not as a church, maybe this way the church is protected. Also the government's proclamation on opening of the churches was not clear.

**Researcher:** Thank you. Good day.

**Elder Ray**

Good day elder, I am carrying out research the responsiveness of your church to those members who have not come back to church after COVID -19. Are you are aware of such members?

**Ray:** I am aware there are such members.

**Researcher:** Okay, What is the church doing about these members?

**Ray:** As a church we have done less, we are hoping that when these members are feel it's now safe they will come back to church.

**Researcher:** Why not visiting them and encouraging them to come back?

**Ray:** I see, with COVID -19 it's not like all other members, these members are not coming because of a life threatening scenario, and if the church becomes forceful in this area, it will be responsible for the eventualities that might happen. The church has to be very cautious on how it deals with this subject. Also some of the members are not free to be visited at this time. We also have to act in agreement with our higher organisation like the conference.

**Researcher:** Very interesting, what do you think is the way forward for the church in such times?

**Ray:** I think we continue encouraging members to come back to church. Those of us who are very close to



the affected members to visit them on individual basis not as a church. So that the church is protected. The government need to come clean on this issue. The government stance should be in black and white as it is now there are a lot of grey areas, so that the organisations are protected if members contact the virus within their premises.

**Researcher:** Thank you. Good day.

**Central themes emerging from the elders’ responses.**

The main common views that can be deduced from the church elders is that the church has done very little in reaching out to its members, the church is dependent on the conference its administrative body and that the lack of clarity on the part of governmental stance on COVID-19 makes it difficult to be actively involved in bringing back all its members to church. The issue of encouraging members to come to church through various social media platform and visiting them through the use of those very close to them came out clear from the interviews with the elders. Table 4.3 summarises the themes emanating from the interviews with the elders.

Table 5. Themes from interviews with church elders

Themes	Evidence from the interview extracts
Passive efforts	We have not done much
The local leadership has no power in this area	We have to act in agreement with the conference, waiting from directive from higher office
Lack of government policy	The government stance has a lot of grey areas, making it risky to take an active part, government proclamation not clear

**Church board members’ Responses:**

Following are the views submitted by two church board members elders on the question:

Why is the church not reaching out to the members who have not returned to church after COVID-19?

**Church board member Mavis**

**Researcher:** Good day Madam, I am carrying out research the responsiveness of your church to those members who have not come back to church after COVID -19. Are you are aware of such members?

**Marvis:** Yes we have such members.

**Researcher:** Okay, What is the church doing about these members?

**Marvis:** As a church we have little to do to convince these members as they still believe that COVID-19 is with us.

**Researcher:** Why not visiting them and encouraging them to come back?

**Marvis:** Visiting them is a good option but these members are self-isolating and may not want visitors in

their homes. Some of these are aged people who think they are very vulnerable to this virus. So for safety the church announced that worship services have resumed and all those willing to come came, the church continues will such invitations. Individual visits are encouraged especially by those are very close to the affected members. This approach has brought in some of the members to the fold.

**Researcher:** Very interesting, what do you think the church can do to assist affected members?

**Marvis:** Encouraging members who are very close to the affected members to visit them on individual basis not as a church. This has yielded some

**Researcher:** Thank you. Good day.

### **Church board member Andrew**

**Researcher:** Good day sir, I am carrying out research the responsiveness of your church to those members who have not come back to church after COVID -19. Are you are aware of such members?

**Andrew:** I am aware of that.

**Researcher:** Okay, What is the church doing about these members?

**Andrew:** Unfortunately we have not applied ourselves to this issue

**Researcher:** Why not visiting them and encouraging them to come back?

**Andrew:** Covid -19 cases are still around us and inviting someone to come becomes tricky especially if they may get sick, the church has to start explaining all their protocols and when there is a small violation then the church is in trouble with health authorities so the church is comfortable with those who come to church on their own decisions. The government left this area with a lot of grey unexplained areas so organisations like churches are taking a cautious route. Encouragements to attend are done on various social media platforms. Following people in their homes is not yet done. Also we are not aware if these members will allow us in their homes they are still self-isolating.

**Researcher:** Very interesting, what do you think the church can do to assist affected members?

**Andrew:** I think we can encourage members who are very close to the affected members to visit them on individual basis not as a church.

**Researcher:** Thank you. Good day.

### **Central themes emerging from the church board members' responses.**

Like the church elders, the church board members felt that the issues of COVID-19 and attending church services is a complex one that should be dealt with great care. Acknowledging that COVID-19 is still a health threat, church board members indicated that church is not yet at liberty to be actively involved in persuading its members to return to church. Individual members should make their own decisions to return to church. The church can only encourage and pray for the affected members. Visitations to the homes of the affected members are to be done by their close friends as an individual initiative not sanctioned by the church. The issue of dependence on both the conference and government came out as the church has to be in full compliance with the set policies and directives. Table 4.4 summarises the themes emanating from the interviews with the church board members.

Table 6. Themes as proposed by church board members

Themes	Evidence from the interview extracts
Passive efforts, praying and encouraging	Unfortunately we have not applied ourselves to this, as church we have done little
Covid -19 threat is still around	COVID-19 cases are still around, members are self-isolating
Visitation by close members	Encourage members who are close to the affected group to visit them on individual basis

## DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

In this study the documents that were analysed included church manual, church policies, church yearly programmes, church communication with its higher organizational structures and minutes from the church board. The researcher went through all the church documents scrutinizing the church’s position and actions towards the members who have not yet returned to church.

### Themes emanating from the document analysis.

The following came from this exercise, the church is aware that they are a number of members that have not yet returned to church after COVID-19. The church while very concerned about these members has taken very minimal initiatives, this is largely due to the communication from the conference the administrative organ of the church that stressed the need of vigilant adherence to COVID- 19 protocols. With such communication it is understood why the church has minimal activities with the members who have not returned to church. The church has on various communication modes called upon its members to come back for physical worship. To this end several online programmes have been stopped as a way of encouraging all members to attend physical worship services. Services like prayer sessions for all those who are not yet back are evident from the church board minutes and the yearly church programmes all this shows that the church has great concerns about its members who are not yet back at church, yet this concern cannot be demonstrated in elaborate means.

### Analysis of the findings

The study has found out Bulawayo Seventh-day Adventist church does several passive strategies to lure back its members to church. The church is not yet at liberty in going out full force calling back its members as this might be in violation of the COVID-19 health protocols. This action is in line with what Earls, (2022) says when outlining the precautions the churches should adopt when dealing with post COVID-19 worship services. Rainer (2022), weighs in stating that by taking passive actions, the church demonstrate that it is responsive and cares for its members and their health welfare. The study also noted that the local church initiatives are to be aligned to the plans of the conference which is the administrative organ of the church. Although no dramatic changes have happened to the members who have not been attending the passive methods are having some noticeable returns or the church.

### Prayer sessions for the members

Prayer sessions is one of the passive methods that Bulawayo East church engages in. The study found out that this encouraged as the church believes that prayer can change all things as seen in Romans 8 v28-30. Pillay, (2022) argues that churches should engage in much prayer if they want their members to return to church, he stresses that all other initiatives to win back the members should be informed by prayer. In support of this, Earls (2022) emphasises that not attending church is a spiritual problem and the best tool to deal with spiritual issues is prayer.

### **Online encouragements**

The study found out that the church is active in posting encouragements for its members to attend the church worship services on social media platforms. Some of the encouragements are posted on church groups while others are posted to the specific individuals who are not attending. Such encouragements make the concerned members feel loved and cared for and as a result decide to come back to church. Rainer (2022) posits that these encouragements make the members feel connected to the church body and may in the long run desire to have physical connection and fellowship with the body of believers.

### **Visitations of concerned members**

The study found out that the church has maintained the links with its non-attending members through visiting them although on a small scale. The visitation initiative is done through the use of members that are close to the concerned families. Using members close to the concerned families is to safe guard the reputation of the church as the visitations are based on individualised efforts. Sharp (2022) emphasises the role of such small group visitations as these give the concerned families an opportunity to be in close fellowship with other church members thereby creating this desire to have such unions on weekly basis.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The main purpose of carrying out this study was to examine the responsiveness of Bulawayo East church to its members who have failed to join physical worship services after COVID-19. The study was to come up with the church's strategies that can be used to attract their members back to church. After a deep interactive study through focus group discussions, interviews and document analysis the study found out that the church has a very positive attitude with its members who are not yet back at church. The church has several passive programmes that are motivated by love and care for those members. The post COVID-19 era is still seen as a threat as there are still new cases being recorded on daily basis. Within such a post COVID-19 context it is not easy for the church to be all out inviting its members to church. At this time church attendance is still based on individual choices to take the risks and attend services. Those that have opted not to attend church should be understood from that angle. They are still members in good and regular standing and should be treated as such.

The government proclamations were seen to be a tumbling block on the initiatives the churches could do to bring back their members to church, the government still insists that in such gatherings stringent measures should be taken to curb or minimize the contacting and spread of the virus. Such proclamations have tended to instil fear on organisations to fully urge their members to attend. Closely related that it's the recognition that the local church is aligned to the conference its administrative body. The local church has to get directives for all their initiatives from the conference especially on such grey areas as the post Covid -19 situation.

The study observed that small and passive initiatives posting of the church programmes on social media platforms, having prayer sessions for and with the affected members and asking those very close to the affected members to make private and individualized visits to the homes of the concerned members have great impacts in keeping the members in good faith and winning some members back to church.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study have shown that Bulawayo East Church is responsive to its member that have not returned to church. While the post COVID-19 environment has not been friendly to the church. Through its

passive programmes and initiatives the Church maintained a link with all its members including those who have not yet returned for physical worship services. The self-isolating behaviour of the affected members should be seen in the light of the health threat that these people are considering instead of seeing this as being against attending church.

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