



Backdrop of Faith amid the Scourge of Covid- 19 Pandemic in Christian worship: Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In the early Months of the year 2020, the wave of Covid-19 pandemic was strange to Nigerians. Covid-19 is a virus that originated from India in 2019. It was rapidly spreading globally. The most affected areas were: China, Europe, Israel, and United State of America, India and the Arab States. The outlook of its surge was lesser in some African countries especially Nigeria. The Federal Government of Nigeria quickly arrested the spread of the pandemic virus through practical measures such as: avoidance of public gathering, social distance keeping, wearing of Nose Mask, and washing of hands and use of hand sanitizer. Public worship in Churches was prohibited. Invariably Christians tend to be worshipping God at their homes due to fear of contacting the virus. This paper intends to investigate the backdrop of Christian faith amid the scourge of Covid-19 in Christian Worship in Nigeria. It would evaluate the extent the Christians demonstrated their faith amidst the stillness of the world due to pandemic of Covid-19 spread of virus. To delve into this qualitative descriptive research, I will utilize the methods of observation and structured interview with related Christian worshippers in Nigeria. The paper proffers validation of demonstrated Christian faith. It encourages Christians who are weak in their faith not to be discouraged but be firm in professing their faith in Christ. Covid-19 is to be accepted in faith. It has surfaced like any other virus like HIV AIDS and cancer which Christians must accept in faith.

Keywords: *Christians, Faith, Worship, Covid-19, Nigeria.*

Citation: Opara Eucharía (2021). Backdrop of Faith amid the Scourge of Covid- 19 Pandemic in Christian worship: Nigeria. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 3(6), 162-168.

INTRODUCTION

The Twenty first century of 2019 is a global remarkable year. The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has indelible mark in the global record. More importantly, the Wuhan city in Hubai province of China that first experienced the outbreak of this pandemic virus in December 2019[1]. It speedily spread to European countries, United States of America, India, Arab world, Australia, Israel and African countries. The virus was highly contagious, it was mostly contracted from person to person at close contact. The corona virus pandemic affected the United States of America mostly.[2]. The surges of Corona virus relatively affected the African Countries but on a lesser effect. In Nigeria, the major metropolitan cites of Lagos and Abuja are the most affected areas that, the pandemic Covid-19 touched greatly as estimated in May 23rd 2021, to be 156,128: Lagos 58,842 FCT Abuja 19,853 [3]. The Corona virus seemly reported to be predominant in the two major cities in Nigeria via: Lagos and Abuja which stands; the former and later Capital of Nigeria. These two cities are centers that attract global immigration. Consequently, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic smeared over these major cities in the country. Copious people flux into the country for various dimensions of business transactions. Corona virus arrived into Nigeria through mostly the elites, business tycoon, politicians, and migrants from Europe, United States of America and Asian countries where the Covid-19 were attacking and killing people, on a more serious note. Nigerian society tends to be safer to dwell as the COVID -19 pandemic had not spread compare to other global nations COVID - 19 pandemic is severely spreading fast. The populace of Nigeria is highly religious. Religiously, COVID-19 pandemic affected the mode of freedom worship. The sudden news of the Corona virus in Nigeria at the early month, March 2020 was a devastation. Many people were confused and perplexed. Fear griped into the marrow of the citizens as they contemplated the phenomenon dimension of the strange illness. The Corona Virus emerged into the society in mysterious ways. People of different categories coined different names to the pandemic virus such: 'Corona Drive us', Corona see us' 'Arrangy'. As Africans, the minds set of the populace towards the response to the new scary illness was to proffer immediate solution to stop the spread of the virus. Natural herbs and

¹ Aaron, Kandola. 2020. Corona Virus Origin and how it spread. Reviewed by Meredith Goodwin, December 2019 in Wuhan city, China. Spread globally like wild fire. On this day May, 4th 2021 extracted from Medical news today. News Letter <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/coronavirus-causes>

² Covid-19 Pandemic, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic#2020 More than 32.4 million confirmed cases have been reported in the United States since January 2020, resulting in more than 577,000 deaths, the most of any country, and [the seventeenth-highest](#) per capita worldwide

³ Covid-19 Nigeria. Assessed May 23rd 2021.

spices recipe were utilized to curb the Covid-19 pandemic. The Federal Government hastily intervened through the global precaution to handle the spread of Corona virus. The Nigeria Center for Disease Control, NCDC. The drastic measures to comply with the global instruction on ways to curtail the spread of the pandemic virus was followed. The people were instructed to maintain long distance, wear nose mask, face shield, and wash hands frequently with running water and use of sanitizer and face shield. There was lockdown, People were instructed to remain indoor due to fact that the Corona virus or the Covid-19 pandemic. Everyone tends to be afraid of the surges of the corona virus. Covid-19 came and crumpled normal activities such as: Economic, social, political, biological cultural and religious activities of the citizens. The main focus of this paper is to examine the backdrop of Faith amid the scourge of Covid-19 pandemic in Christian worship in Nigeria. Faith is a supernatural gift from God that enables us to believe without doubting whatever God has revealed [4]. Faith could be fragile and weak if it is not fan into flame to be actively sustainable [5]. Faith in God is in congruence with good sound conscience. Obviously, the faith of the Christian adherents were challenged with the scourges of covid-19 pandemic. This challenge was as result of the, measures the global world health organization and the government of Nigeria gave in order to stop the rapid spread of the virus. Such measures include: Social distancing, Nose Mask, washing of hands and hand sanitizing.

The Catholic Church in Nigeria remains resilient in their feat of believing and expressing their fidelity in God and in their worships. Notwithstanding lots of alteration took place patterning on the Liturgy styles of worshipping in other to keep on enkindling the fire of faith implanted on the Christians through Catechism, teaching, preaching and counselling. The Catholic Archdioceses of Lagos and Abuja adhered to the Covid-19 regulations of lockdown [6] of public places like Churches, Mosque, Malls, and Institutions of learning, Banks, Offices and Markets. To be candid, it was hell experiences. The lockdown lasted for seven months. The populace lose patience to demonstrated hunger strike of economic meltdown. The Christian Churches in other parts of the Country in Nigeria were not adhering to the strict regulations of Civid-19 pandemic due to low, scanty experiences of the spread of the coronavirus. It is imperative for the Christian Churches in Lagos and Abuja to adhere strictly to the regulations and observation of the Covid-19 pandemic due to high reports of those suffering from the ailment. To avoid contraction, those affected were isolated in Isolation centers for adequate treatment. The Churches were lockdown for the whole periods of lent and Easter. Only the priests and few other would celebrate the Mass and Services, then the Media would televise it to people to watch from their homes. The scourge of Covi-19 has reduced and even fading away as a result of the vaccine. Christians are making themselves available to be vaccinated.

Collection of Data

Covid-19 scourge is new to this contemporary era. The truism is that, it plunges people into self-awareness, hygiene, and self-control. Currently there is no much existing textbooks on covid-19 except in the internets, pamphlets, magazines and newspapers due to its newness in the society. Scholars are critically still studying all facets of it. This research is exclusively focus on the Christians and the practice of their faith amidst the scourged of Corona virus pandemic in the society. It is based on self-observation. A typical interview was conducted from the few adherents of Christianity on the effects of the Covid-19 and its influence on the practice Christian faith in the society. During this period the Christian faith was facing challenging of steadfastness. . The paper proffers validation of demonstrated Christian faith. It encourages Christians who are weak in their faith not to be discouraged but be firm in professing their faith in Christ. Covid-19 is to be accepted in faith. It has surfaced like any other virus like HIV AIDS and cancer which Christians must accept in faith. Other effects of its challenging on Christians unveil itself in economics, social, political, cultural and religious life.

The Effects of Covid-19 on Christians in Nigeria

Every life experience affects people positively or negatively. The advent of Covid-19 in the month of March 2020. The influx of Coronavirus remains Shocking to the citizens of Nigeria.

The Economic life of the Christians in Nigeria

The Nigerian workforce was in trouble during the Covid -19 pandemic. There was economic meltdown in all sources of income in the families, and organizations. The lockdown really locked the sources of income to the populace. Cursory view at the farmers reveals that most of the farmers ceased the opportunity to delve assiduously into the farm work but got poor harvest. It is still a mystery because one expects plentiful yields of food crops, but reverse was the case.

⁴ Catechism of Christian Doctrine, Approved by the Archbishops nd Bishops of England and Wales to be used in all their dioceses. The Catholic Church in Nigeria found it useful to be used in teaching Catechism in their dioceses.

⁵ First Letter of St. Paul to Timothy 1:18 and 19, The African Bible, Edited by Victor Eznkurature sss et al, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2000), 2006.

⁶ John Capbell. *Lagos and Abuja on Lockdown to stop Coronavirus in Nigeria*. April 1st 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/lagos-and-abuja-lockdown-stop-coronavirus-nigeria><https://www.cfr.org/blog/lagos-and-abuja-lockdown-stop-coronavirus-nigeria>. Assessed 27th May 2021.

The lockdown prevented abled men and women in workforce to go to work. Offices were closed. No work, no interaction, and no integrations to avoid face to face contact and business discussions. The government endeavored to pay monthly salaries. While those on private sectors and institutions could not afford the full payment of their worker's monthly salaries, some decided to pay half month. Some works resigned from the meager salaries. There was adjustment of the stomach. People eat every day but on very little portion of food. Business tends to collapse. Production of goods and services reduced. Markets and malls were closed down. There was little or no exchange of goods and services. Some business remain stagnant while unsustainable ones collapsed.

The church ministers experienced set back on peoples' offering and Tithes. The lockdown restricted the church members to attend the Holy Masses and services and Eucharistic celebrations. Some Pastors could not survive the ugly situation, they posted their Bank accounts to their members to post their tithes, offerings and donations.

Charity and care for the less privileged: Inversely the Catholic Church queued in the provision and promotion of palliative to less privileges. In the cities of Lagos and Abuja Archdioceses, most of the parishioners gathered food stuff, detergents, beverages packaged them and shared to the needy, and less privilege. Various organizations volunteered to render assistance to provide palliative to their fellow parishioners in need of material help, The Women Religious of the archdiocese contributed to the provision of various copious food stuff, to share to the poor and the needy in the community. More importantly, the Church raised fund and supply air purifying respirators, face shields, Nose masks, gloves, coronavirus nucleic acid detection reagent, ventilators, patient monitors, syringe, pumps, infusion pumps to affected areas.

Social Life of the Christian

The social distance practice is so obvious and isolating. Friends could not hug each other. People began to live suspicious life amidst each other. Restriction band was lifted and the Church was allowed to accommodate only fifty individuals with Face masks and six meters distant gap. There must be running water from sink or bucket with disinfectant hand wash and Hand sanitizer and thermometer to Check each one's temperature before one is allowed to enter into the church. People were happy for the lifting up of the band of lockdown. The celebration of Masses resumed in full force. Several times for Masses were fixed, and in comply with the Covid-19 rules and regulations. People could attend each of the Masses based on mapped out distant rules. The sign of peace greeting was suspended to avoid contacting the coronavirus and spreading it further.

Pious organization was conducted on precaution. Some Choir practices were on Zoom platform. Church meetings were conducted using Google meet, Zoom and Telegram. Even when the restriction was erased, some Church members were scared of coming to the Church to worship with others. Rather, they preferred watching the celebration of Mass on Television or turning to radio to listen sermon, spiritual song and preaching. This one year of Covid-19 experience in the social life of the Christians is like a dark year in an oblivion. Interaction was limited, integration was avoided. Communication in the church was cautioned.

When the wave of Covid-19 lessened, the Christians came to realize the love of God and his compassion to mankind. People began to troop into the Church to resume fully church activities in spite the scourge of Covid-19 that was still ravaging the European, Asian countries and United States of America. Enthusiastically, the parishioners who hungered and thirsty for God, converged without restriction to church practices with great zeal to worship God. Many did not experience the ailment of coronavirus, some heard of it but of distance. Some took it as fallacy or 'arrangy' deception as they coined it, from the Government, while some looked at it as Divine mercy and test of Faith.

Political Life of the Christians

The Christians complied with the guidelines given by the Federal Government for total lockdown of the Churches in Lagos, Ogun States and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja. And partial lockdown to other Churches in other States of the Country where coronavirus was not much. After seven months, the government declared free from the embargo placed on Churches and Mosque. Thus, they were given strict guidelines on the methods of operation. In each gathering; the number of persons should not exceed fifty, six meters of social distancing, wearing of nose mask, washing of hands on running water with alcohol base 99% liquid soap, use of hand sanitizer and thermometer to check people's temperature before allowing one to enter into the Church. This is done to checkmate the possible further spread of the Covid-19 in the country. Some Christians had the privilege to benefit from palliative the government released to alleviate the hunger scourge of covid-19 in the country. The Christian leaders have the right to rouse the minds of the people to engage in hard work of cultivating cultural food to reduce hunger lockdown had caused on the people[7].

⁷ Ehusani George, Christianity and the Challenge of Corruption in Nigeria.(Abuja: Lux Terra Leadership Foundation, 2018),22.

Cultural Life of the Christian

Culture depicts way of life. Encarta Microsoft dictionary elucidates it as: arts, music, literature, and intellectual activities considered [8]. Cultural life of a Christian entails copious indelible exhibitions Christians utilize often to season their worship of God in their various Churches. Covid-19 destabilized the normal church activities. Invariably, the method of worship changed. The behaviour of the worshippers in response to the beliefs and practices eroded. The complete lockdown of the churches in Lagos and Abuja drastically affected the stated Christian culture. Music is the food for the soul especially the weary soul. Christians in Nigeria find solace in music. The Churches in Nigeria intertwined with the African music in the worship of God at Masses and services. Nigerian Christians enjoy native music and incorporated it in worship. The Covid-19 prevented the Christians the joy they derive from African music used in worshipping God. The extrinsic experience portrays absolute silence in all the Churches in Lagos and Abuja cities due to lockdown. The African Independent churches could not demonstrate their spirit filled wiled dances. There was no choir practices, no playing of music instruments both local and foreign. Africans are culturally very vibrant in all ramifications. They transferred the same mode of vibrant spirit to the system of worshipping God in different churches. Covid-19 pandemic stopped some of the church activities like: parade, Youth organization meeting, Pius organizations and other associations. Nobody went to sweep the Church neither weed or clean the church compound for fear of contacting the coronavirus.

Some Christian farmers ceased the great opportunity to engage seriously in farm work since they do not need crowd for social distancing. They produced food stuff but relatively little. This could not sustain the populace who were experiencing hunger and jobless. People needed to be engaged since covid-19 scourges locked people completely down. Farming along out sketch of Abuja was a bit released so as to have food stuff supply to serve others domiciled in the city.

Religious Life of the Christian

Human beings are deeply religious, living in religious universe [9]. Christians worship God daily but more importantly of Sundays. At the time of Covid-19, the activities of the Christian were paralyzed. Things became stagnant, unprogressive and dominant. It was an awful experience that affected all facets of Christian activities especially Sunday worships.

During the total lockdown, there was no Sunday worship. Every church compound was silence. It was a dramatic result, people quickly shift from one to one contact in churches to online worship. They resolutely consented to worship God anyhow and anywhere. The cancellation of worshipping services of various Christian denominations and the closure of Sunday schools, and cancellation of holy pilgrimages, church ceremonies and festivals to seven months. Many Churches used various communication techniques to reach out to their audience. Those allowed to enter into the church were: one alter servant to represent the entire 1500 members that make up the Parish. The rest of the, such as: Radio, Television, Telegram, Skype, Zoom, and other online media. Prior to the advent of Covid-19, viewing worshipping God online is termed wrong. It is not a genuine way to worship God in sincerity of heart. During the period of lockdown, The Catholic Church in Lagos and Abuja instructed their members to dress properly on Sundays and turn on African Independent Television AIT at 8:00 am or 10: 00 am for The Sunday Masses. The Holy Mass was celebrated by the Archbishop or priest with two to four choristers and parishioners, while others sit at home, to watch the whole celebration on media. During Holy Communion, they equally receive the holy Eucharist in spirit. They could demonstrate sticking out tongues or stretching out hands. In the Lenten Holy week; Good Friday and Easter Sunday 2020, few devout Christians forced themselves to watch the priest through the church windows or the dwarf wall fence of the church to get the glimpse of the great feast of the church [10]. This is indeed, the test of faith. Some Christians living in semi-urban areas in Abuja would group themselves, climb the mountain to pray there, while others might gather under the tree standing to fellowship together. Some pastors were reported and arrested for violating COVID-19 regulation. The leadership of the church ought to be exemplary in discipline and honesty [11], the society so as to have sound followers.

The life of the Christians at the post lockdown is characterized unbalanced. After seven months of Government strict regulation of lockdown, the church and other public places and institutions were permitted to reopen. Strict guidelines were given to checkmate further spread of the coronavirus in the public. The Churches were reopened and re-energized. People's zeal was rekindled, while some people were still lukewarm in spirit, they were skeptical about their faith in Christianity. They were downcast. The Federal Government gave strict regulations: social distance, wearing of nose

⁸Microsoft Encarta Dictionaries Cooperation, 2009.

⁹ John Mbiti S. African Religions and Philosophy. (London: Heinemann, 1975), 15.

¹⁰ Anthony O. Azuwiki. A priest's Diary on the Corona Virus Pandemic of 2020 (COVID-19) (Okponu Awka Anambara, Published by Fab Anieh House, 2020), 54.

¹¹Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah, Managing Ethnic Identities in the Church an Afrian Perspective, in One Faith: Many Tongues Managing Diversity in the Church in Nigeria Edited by Fortunatus Nwachukwu (Abuja: Pauline Publications Africa, 2017), 19.

mask, washing hand frequently with tap running water, and use of hand sanitizer. The Church was given instruction to comply with the number of fifty worshippers, six meters social distancing. In the Catholic Church, the celebration of the Holy Mass was scheduled from Three times to six or Eight times in the main Church and church halls respectively. It is pertinent to portray Changes that occur as COVID-19 steps into the life of Christian and the significant alteration in methods of worshipping in Archdiocese of Abuja. (a) Complete compliance of the COVI-19 regulations of: social distancing, wearing of Nose mask of face shield, washing of hands with tap running water and use of hand sanitizer and checking of Temperature before allowing one to enter into the Church. (b) Time for Offertory was changed to after post Communion prayer. This alteration was made to prevent the worshipper from touching money presuming lots of people might have touched it. To avoid contaminations of hand prior to the reception of the Holy Communion. (c) The reception of the Holy Communion was changed from receiving it by mouth to receiving it by hands while standing, maintaining the social distance. The truism is that, the dignity of the Holy Eucharist must be uphold and respected. It is a spiritual food that nourishes the soul and unites it with the love of Christ, who sacrificed [12] himself as a holocaust on the cross. (d) The sign of peace was suspended. This is likened to the time Ebola ravaged the country in 2014. The fraternal greetings of the sign of peace was suspended till all traces of Ebola was over. This is applicable to the current Covid-19 pandemic. The spread of the coronavirus is facing extinction. With time things will come to its normalcy. In some churches, the members have relaxed in adhering to COVID-19 regulations. They believe it has effaced from their environment and, they trusted in God.

Findings

The experience of COVID-19 is a Test of Faith. Eight out of ten Christians interviewed concurrently admitted that God sent the pestilence in form of coronavirus to test the faithfulness of those who claimed to believe in him. People become closer to God as the last resort. At the initial stage of the emergency of the virus, the scientist frighten people that, Coronavirus has not gotten cure. Lots of people become more frighten and fear of death gripped everyone. The truism of the fact lies that, people became more convinced on the profession of the faith they uphold. Faithfulness became a more valuable virtue one ought to cultivate of seek for it. Faith is a supernatural gift from God, which enables us to believe without doubting whatever god has revealed to mankind. It is a realization of what we hope for and an evidence of unseen things. Hebrew 11: 1-2. Those who remained steadfast in their faith, quickly responded to resume their worship with enthusiasm and vibrant faith and trust in God. While, the lukewarm Christian neither resume nor follow those to church. Rather, they continue to enjoy the watching of services or Holy Mass on Television or online media. Some are afraid of contacting the COVID-19.

Invention of New Method of Worshipping God. Prior to the Spread of COVID-19 pandemic, most of the Christians disbelieved the authentic worship of God could be derived through Television or online Media, without going into the Church fellowshiping together. The advent of Coronavirus shift the mindsets of Nigerian Christians to view another dimension of propagating the Christian faith. A new evangelization could widely spread through mass media. This is an eye opener that, God is still omnipresence, unchangeable God.

COVID-19 became an instrument aiding to foster the spirit of Charity and alms giving. The Church authorities appealed to those who have to donate generosity to the poor, hungry, destitute and less privilege in their midst. People tend to team up in groups to gather fund, and material things together to distribute to those in need. Such items include: Rice, Beans, and Beverages, detergents, Indome, Spaghetti, Bread, Sugar, Milk, Fishes, Meat and others. Many Christians learnt and acquired and appreciated the value of giving than receiving.

COVID-19 united people of different faith together. It enhanced promotion of Religious Dialogue of Engagement and social development. People seemed to ignore their religions tenets and advanced to engage in discourse that would help in the development of the immediate environment. When Government and non-governmental organization brought palliative to the community, the entire people shared it to everyone irrespective of the ones beliefs and practices. It promoted good relationship.

The pandemic of coronavirus did not augur well with Christian ministers. Reduction of source of income was prevalence. The lockdown was not palatable to the priests and pastors who depend on the offering collection from their members. Hence no one goes out to Church services or celebration of the holy Eucharist, the ministers of God lacked money to maintain themselves, families and the church compound. Some priests engaged in farm work to cultivate food stuff to maintain themselves. Some Pentecostal pastors gave their Bank account number to their members to deposit their monthly tithes, vowed money and seed sowing fund. These assisted to keep them alive till the ban of COVID-19 was lifted up by the Federal Government of Nigeria. COVID-19 pandemic has made the Christians to sit up and inwardly examine their lives and faith in God.

¹² Fev. Fr. Dr. Anthony Amadi c.s. Sp. At Home with the Most Holy Eucharist Gift and Blessing to Humanity (Kaduna: Cywhite Ventures, 2018), 44.

The period of COVID-19 foster the marital unity between husband and wife. Sincere everyone was at home because of lockdown, married men and women began to learn and understand themselves better as husband and wife. They could watch their children closely and understand their characters better.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research would enable the lukewarm Christians to take a solid concrete decision on matters patterning to their faith and not to remain at the fence.

This is to encourage Christians who are weak in their faith not to be discouraged but be firm in professing their faith in Christ. Covid-19 is to be accepted in faith. It has surfaced like any other virus like HIV AIDS and cancer which Christians must accept in faith and patience.

The Christians should embrace new techniques of disseminating the message of Jesus Christ to the members and of the whole world through various online mass median.

The Christians need to be encourage to take the vaccine of Covid-19. Some people were giving wrong information on the side effect of coronavirus vaccines. The populace should receive more proper information on the need to get themselves adequately vaccinated.

CONCLUSION

The global advent of COVID-19 is highly remarkable. It has inscribed indelible mark that would not be forgotten. An experiment that erupted from Wuhan city of Hubai in China speedily spread all over Europe, Asian Countries and United State of America. Although the coronavirus was more severe in the Western world, yet it was adequately taken care of in terms availability of adequate appropriate facilities that could be enforced to manage the situation. The African experience of COVID-19 is not as high rate as compared to the Western world. Churches were closed to avert the spread of COVID-19 pandemic through human contact. The advent of Covid-19 to Nigeria was minimal compared to its effects in the Western world. In Nigeria, the coronavirus was reported in March 2020. People could not comprehend the magnitude of its danger in the society. It started spreading in two major cities of Lagos and Abuja. The Federal Government of Nigeria put embargo on movement. People were restricted from going to public gathering like Church, Mosque, market, Banks, Shopping Mall, School, and Restaurant, and Offices. These affected the faith of the Christians. People generally complained of hunger because of the lockdown. The Government lifted the embargo of lockdown after seven months of sit at home.

The Christians are to follow the strict regulations stipulated for the movement such as: maintaining social distance, wearing of Nose Mask, Face shield, washing hand with hand wash and running water and hand sanitizer and checking of body temperature. With Social regulations, Christians could operate its activities fully. COVID -19 made some changes in the social, economic, political, cultural and religious lives of the Christians. COVID -19 helped the Christians to evaluate the dept. of their faith, encourage them to remain steadfast in times of tribulation and pestilence like coronavirus.

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