

I CAN HEAR YOU NOW

COVID AND US

BY

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*JIDE, mid-50s, male nurse in the main local hospital, married to FOLA. Jide has lived in the UK for 25 years. They live in a diverse lower middleclass area. He visits Nigeria regularly and is an active member of his church.*

*JIDE's hospital ward. JIDE is about to end his night shift.*

**JIDE:** The last time I saw Pa Olu was the night he was moved out of ICU to my hospital ward - Pa Olu, you look better. I've known him since I came to the UK 25 years ago. He's like a father to me.

By God's grace, he says, wheezing through his oxygen mask. I will be alive to tell the pastor to hear you.

Sure, Pa. Goodnight. (*Fondly.*) Pa Olu. He's one of the wisest people I know.

Imagine my shock two months earlier, when he came to my outdoor get-together and agreed with my wife Fola and our two other guests that the effects of Covid-19 are exaggerated. They believed these WhatsApp messages that were being shared across their networks. I warned Fola, don't share them.

Fola says - But they're true. We Africans are immune to Covid.

Fola I could understand: she was living in Northern Nigeria when the meningitis trial scandal broke, but Pa Olu?

So I say - Many of my patients are our people.

Oh, so we Africans are the ones spreading the virus, Pa replied sarcastically.

No one is saying that, Pa. Many of us do jobs that expose us to the virus; we live in deprived areas. Pre-existing conditions like your diabetes, they all make us susceptible to it.

Fola says - you're a nurse, you haven't contracted it.

Fola, you know the PPE I wear protects me, I hiss.

Pa says - God who is seeing me through my diabetes will see us through Covid-19.

Amen, yelled everyone, putting an end to the debate.

You don't understand, I press on.

Yes, we are stupid, you are the expert, Sammy huffed. He was one of our junior pastors.

I didn't say that Pastor Sammy, I reply.

Pastor Ada, our other guest, also a junior pastor, chimed in - You sound like that doctor that came to the community centre to talk about the trials. He dismissed my concerns as if I were a child.

Fola squeezes my hand, her way of saying stop arguing.

After our guests leave, Fola says - I told you not to bring this up.

I tell her - since the trials began, not one black person has volunteered. Maybe if I join, that will convince our people.

No, she says emphatically.

The trials are conducted under the strictest conditions, I assure her.

And the side effects? She asks.

I won't know until I take the vaccine.

So, it's like they are giving you food without telling you the ingredients they used, she says.

If we don't take part, the vaccine will be tested only on white people. It will be tailored only to them.

Ehn, that's OK, she says, we are immune to Covid.

*JIDE sighs in frustration.*

The following night at the hospital Pa Olu tells me he will record a message for the congregation on his phone. He wants them to see how badly Covid is

affecting him. He is too tired now. He'll do it in the morning.

The next night I return to find that Pa had passed away. (*Sobs.*) I call our senior pastor Michael. He says the church will help arrange the funeral. He will contact Pa Olu's brother in London.

I was not on duty when the brother came and took Pa's belongings, including the phone. To be honest the phone was the last thing on my mind.

At a Zoom meeting before Sunday service, I ask if I could address the congregation about the trials.

Pastor Sammy says, we've been through this.

Pastor Ada says - Pa's death has made me rethink my concerns. We should let brother Jide talk.

The congregation believes God is in control, Sammy replies.

When you are hungry you do not open your mouth and say, 'God, feed me.' You find your way to the kitchen.

Pastor Michael says - first, the authorities said it will be years before a vaccine is found. Now they say they have **two** vaccines ready to inject us with.

I feel like I'm losing them, then I remember what Fola said to me after Pa's death - Pastor Ada was right: you should know how to talk to your own people about the virus. They are afraid. I'm afraid.

So, I say - forgive me if I've sounded like I dismissed your concerns about the vaccine. But we can't be left behind on this one. Science has advanced. The time for testing and approving new vaccines have been cut greatly. Pa Olu wanted you to know that Covid-19 is real. How I wish he were here to tell you himself.

There is a pause. Then Pastor Michael says, I think we should let brother Jide talk to the congregation.

Pastor Ada nods.

Pastor Sammy says, I remain sceptical, but the congregation should hear brother Jide speak.

Before I'm called upon to speak, my phone rings. Pa Olu's brother has emailed me Pa's video recording. As I listen to Pa Olu struggling for breath with each word, Fola wipes the tears from my face.

Pastor Michael calls on me. Instead of speaking I raise my phone to my laptop's webcam.

- Brothers and Sisters, I'm living proof that Covid-19 is real. Please assist brother Jide to help our community to fight this problem. God bless you all.

The End.