

ECCLESIOLOGICAL PRAXIS IN POST COVID-19 CONTEX

SELOME KUPONU (PhD)
Department of Religious and Peace Studies
Lagos State University, Ojo
Lagos State
selome1965@gmail.com

&

ADEKUNLE TAYO
Department of Religious and Peace Studies
Lagos State University, Ojo
Lagos State
dekunletayo@gmail.com; kunle.tayo@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 as described by an author is “The Great Reset”. This work is a position presented as a suggested guide for the church to understand the reality of how COVID-19 has disrupted our social and church life. This author also looks at what changes would be needed in the Post COVID-19 era. This is necessary for the church administratively in order to create a more inclusive ministry to reach the world and to position the church to be buoyant and have a workable spiritual program for the vision and mission of the church locally and internationally going forward. The question that would be running in the minds of church members and ministers of the gospel is “where do we go from here?” To state that there exists a concern for the future of the church, yet Biblically we see that the solution has been provided for us. The disruptive of the patter of activities of the church requires a reset. It is required of the church to turn to God and renew the power of foresightedness and divine ingenuity, so as to take the church, with the help of God, to a better future.

Key words: Praxis, COVID-19, Ecclesiology, Cell Church

INTRODUCTION

In the year 2020 there arose a worldwide crisis which was caused by the coronavirus pandemic. This has no parallel in modern history. It is not exaggeration if one says that the COVID -19 pandemic has plunged our world in its entirety into chaos. It has affected every facet of human existence. This writer will not be considered to be hasty by saying that the world will never be the same again. Reasons being that, for years to come, we will be dealing with the effect of the pandemic and everything we considered to be normal will no more be normal and this includes the church. As we deal with the effect of the pandemic, everything in life will have to be redefined, and many things that has changed will remain changed forever. The COVID-19 pandemic

...brought with it economic disruption, creating a dangerous and volatile period on multiple fronts – politically, socially, geopolitically – raising deep concerns about the environment and also extending the reach (pernicious or otherwise) of technology into our lives. No industry or business will be spared from the impact of these changes. Millions of companies risk disappearing and many industries face an uncertain future; a few will thrive. On an individual basis, for many, life as they’ve always known it is unravelling at alarming speed. ¹

It is an understatement to say things will not return to normal but rather “Normal” has been redefined. The event has been described by some to be

a deep crisis of “biblical” proportions, but the essence remains the same: the world as we knew it in the early months of 2020 is no more, dissolved in the context of the pandemic. Radical changes of such consequence are coming that some pundits have referred to a “before coronavirus” (BC) and “after coronavirus” (AC) era.²

A new normal, as suggested by an author, is here and it is not leaving soon. It has actually come to stay. Every serious human organisation must strategically map out a tactful approach to the days ahead.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

ECCLESIOLOGY: The word “Ecclesiology” from which the term “Ecclesiological” is derived from two roots word in the Greek language ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia* (Latin: *ecclesia*) meaning "congregation, church and -λογία, *-logia*, meaning "words", "knowledge", or "logic", a combining term used in the names of sciences or bodies of knowledge.³

It is the science which may treat of the proper construction and operations of the Church, or Communion, or Society of Christians; and which may regard men as they are members of that society, whether members of the Christian Church in the widest acceptance of the term, or members of some branch or communion of that Church, located in some separate kingdom, and governed according to its internal forms of constitution and discipline.⁴

PRAXIS: This is gotten from Ancient Greek: *πρᾶξις*, and Romanise. Praxis is the process by which a theory or lesson or skill is endorsed, personified and understood. It also refers to the act of engaging, applying, exercising, realizing, or practicing and ideas.⁵ Praxis as an accepted practice or custom, or an idea translated into action, or something in reality rather than something in theory.⁶

However, for a better understanding of this submission it should be noted here that there is a difference between “Practice” and “Praxis” As nouns the difference between praxis and practice is that praxis is the practical application of any branch of learning while practice is repetition of an activity to improve skill.⁷

Some important issues in Ecclesiology are the praxis of the church. According to Scripture, the praxis of the church includes the followings:

- **Worship:** The principal purpose the Church exist is to worship God. It is only in worshipping God that we will be a change agent to the world that He has called us into. It is our very nature to worship and this is God-given (1Chr. 16:29; Ps. 95:6; Jn. 4:24; Rom.12: 1)
- **Instruction:** the church will equip the believer to understand the Bible and become a teacher of the word of God. This is done through Bible Studies and Spiritual enrichment programs. This is tailored towards encouraging a personal devotional life. (Ps.32: 8; Rom.15: 14; Eph.6: 4; 1Tim.6: 3 2Tim4: 2; Matt.28: 19; Prov.9: 9)
- **Service:** the church will do all things under the leadership of the Holy Spirit to equip the total man for the ministry that God has called him to. The church is instituted to provide an encouraging atmosphere for the individual to express himself and be fulfilled in ministry. (1Cor.12: 5; Eph.4: 12)
- **Evangelism:** It is the calling of all saints to reach out to the lost souls in the world. It is the responsibility of the church to train and encourage members to do same as a life-style. The church is open to all forms of evangelism. (Prov.11: 30; Mk.16: 15; Matt.28: 16-20)
- **Fellowship:** As a community, the church provides fellowship for edification and nurturing of the saints. (1 Jn.1: 7; Rom.1: 12)⁸

Therefore, the Ecclesiological Praxis is the act of engaging, applying, exercising, realizing, or practicing worship, instruction, service, evangelism and fellowshiping in the church. This write up however, submits that those praxis as accepted practice or custom in the church requires a new form of *modus operandi*.

There are two major areas that should be a prior consideration for the Church to explore as she resets for the abnormal normal of the effect of the COVID-19 experience. These are:

1. NEED FOR TECHNOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS
2. NEED FOR THE HOUSE CHURCH

1. NEED FOR TECHNOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

There are things that many churches considered to be sacrilegious which are not. The electronics and the media are one of the things that some churches considered to be un holy and whoever uses then is not considered to be a Christian. A good example of such churches is the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, Lagos, Nigeria. In the early days of the Deeper Christian life Church in Nigeria, Television and anything that relates to it was seen as a taboo. The gadget was tagged to be “The Devil’s Box” and members of the church were strictly warned against the TV, video cameras in weeding and many more. It was as intense as even the repairing of tv was also considered as an abomination. ⁹This drastically affected the ministry in the early stage where the ministry had young dynamic youth leave the church. Such was the now pastor of Latter Rain Assembly, Pastor Tunde Bakare. His testimony was not a good one about the church and her position. He had this to say:

I was in Deeper Life for five years, between 1978 and December 1983. Brother Kumuyi was and is still a great teacher of the Word. The person that put the fear of God in me was Brother Kumuyi. He laid the foundation for systematic teaching that many people see me do today.

One day, while I was ministering and a brother was interpreting, I was giving example of the “faith cometh by hearing and hearing the word of God” and I said, ‘Supposing you go to a supermarket to buy soap, you might not know what soap to buy but because you watched the advertisement of Joy soap on television, then you would look for Joy soap because you have been hearing about it.’ And my interpreter said: “If you have been watching the devil’s box...”

I told him I didn't say devil’s box but television, and he repeated saying the devil’s box and Brother Kumuyi was behind us. I said I didn't say devil’s box and that the normal interpretation is amuohun mu aworan, (the box that captures both the voice and the visuals). Anyway, he still said what he said.

The following Sunday, Brother Kumuyi came up with what he called “Sunday Exaltation”; he said that even if you repair television, you are a child of the devil. Then I took my Bible and left. I went home and said I would serve my God, but was not interested anymore in church. So I returned to Surulere Baptist Church.¹⁰

Later on Kumuyi he himself eventually went on television. This shows that he had a changed his mind, because that time he was very hard on such things. However, there is a lot of evil on television these days, but it is not the electronic that is the devil’s box, it is the programmes that people put on it that is the devil’s. But today, the story has changed. The situation in the Deeper Christian Life Ministry is totally different, the ministry now has thousands of televisions in various branches of the ministry for live transmissions. Hence the use of the video cameras, which was a taboo, has become a necessity in the ministry. ¹¹

In all of the events of the covid-19 pandemic, God was in it working in favour of the church universal and his children as individuals

It's now possible to use Internet tools to organize a rally, energize a political campaign, arrange a date, join a support group, or sell a product, as naturally as we use a phone...Through a series of pertinent case studies and interviews with leading thinkers and doers in this rapidly evolving field, Christian lot of churches should start to use the Internet to reconnect themselves to their parishioners, neighbourhood, their community, and the world. The development of the social networks on the Web touches countless aspects of our everyday lives which is where the church should be, ¹²

This readily illustrates how we can use technologies - web services, blogs, mobile phone, SMS, and more- to accomplish widespread goals as an organisation. This also suggests how the church could take advantage of these technologies to connect with people for ministry purposes

2. NEED FOR THE HOUSE CHURCH

References from the Bible teach us how the church should be organised. One that kept the church during the time of persecution and difficulties was the house church. If the church is to survive in this nearest future, it will do well to take a leave from the apostolic church as recorded in the Bible. It is worthy of note that the house church is called different names in the contemporary church. It is called, House Fellowship, House Church, Care Centre, Cell Groups, Shepherd's Group, etc

The House fellowship system provides the biblical pattern of church administration with the resultant effect of growth and discipleship. This will not be the enthronement of human ideas and unbiblical practices.¹³

The churches have constantly been involved in the addition of program in every facet of the church life. Furthermore, the result of such addition do not yield the desired results. The situation becomes worse where the church has only twenty-percent of the membership who do eighty-percent of the work in the traditional church system. The church often suggests that everyone is to find time from their already busy schedules to become more involved in church programmes.¹⁴ As a result the membership experience burn-out and the job of the clergy in the local church does not get easier either because it provides that twenty percent of the church's population are doing the job of the ministry for the rest church members. And in this present misnomer due to the COVID-19 effect, the job of the clergy will become tougher. The resultant effect is that eighty percent of the parishioners do nothing for God in the church. The professionalized leadership is seen to be the only one qualified to do the work of ministry in the local church. To these few leaders and the clergy, ministry becomes hard work and sometimes too difficult to bear.¹⁵ Therefore, it is a good thing that the situation in the future will require the house church system as provided by the Bible.

Theological teaching of Paul in the New Testament on the house church will be considered in this essay in order to unearth a theological understanding which will immensely help the contemporary church to discover and return to the biblical church pattern. Thereby help the church during the post COVID-19 era. The house church or home fellowship is the biblical church. "All of the churches in the New Testament era were small assemblies that met in homes."¹⁶

This writer will use the term "Cell Church". The term "Cell," as defined is given to the house church system by Dr. Yonggi Cho. This term is employed from the field of biology because the cell is the basic structural and functional unit of all organisms.¹⁷ The Cell system or the house church enhances the Christian to have his divine purpose achieved as he or she identifies identifying his or her spiritual gift that God has custom designed for the individual and to seek to manifest to it in the fellowship of the people of God.¹⁸ The cell groups or the local churches are the basic Christian communities organized by the church where people can grow in their Christian experience both to God and to their fellow believers.¹⁹

The character of a shepherd as stated above suggests that the pastor is not a person to drive or judge members of the flock. This means, in management terms, the leadership and the leadership structure of the pastor is people oriented. Biblically balanced church does not pyramid as it is obtainable in a secular organization or company trying to make a profit. This is because the purpose and the practice of the church were from a different principle than any other organization in a given society.

It has been...said that success in the church is determined by the "3B's" bodies, building, and budgets. If enough people join and the building is beautiful and money pours in, the world regards a church as successful. That is the problem. It is the world's standards rather than God's.²⁰

Also, the pastor is involved in preaching as a fulltime vocation. It should be noted that the church also requires the involvement of every member. This makes the parishioner to be less a spectator but more of a participator.²¹ Hence the fact that the cell groups or the house church is the basic Christian communities where people can grow in their relationship with God and with one another cannot be over emphasised

A. The New Testament Church

Both scriptures and social psychology address issues that have to do with individual relationship and with groups. The New Testament supports three concepts which are very significant to the above statement: the first is the word 'ekklesia'; this emphasizes the idea of a called-out people joined together.

This comprised of individual personalities with a common bond. The second is 'koinonia', which emphasizes the idea of fellowship or shearing, and the third word is 'agape' which speaks of a deep and unconditional love for other persons as they are. It is within this context of the church as a body of believers who relates together, that Paul found himself. The scriptures in Ephesians 4:11-16 discourse personal growth."²²

...nowhere in the New Testament do we find ground for a church meeting that is dominated or directed by human beings neither do we find any biblical merit for a gathering that is centred on a pulpit and focused upon one man."²³

The New Testament established and portrays the church by using images to paint the picture. For example, the New Testament uses a body (Col. 1:18), a bride (Rev. 21:2), a family (Eph. 3:15), and Colossians 1:17-18 says "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent." The point here is that each image teaches that the church is a human institutional organization which is organic in nature.

Therefore, if the church is a living organism, then the church is a living entity, which has the basic unit of life which is the cell. The cell church movement derived their concept from this understanding."²⁴

The New Testament church was an organic (living) church, it was a cell church. The members were volunteer-led and meet in house-sized groups for participatory and interactive meetings involving prayers and worship, Bible study and discussion, meeting and outreach, as well as food and fun."²⁵ This is clearly stated in Acts 2:46 which says "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts,"²⁶

They did not just meet on a special day like Sunday. They met any day of the week. That is what the Bible word church means. The church is not a religious word in the New Testament but it simply means people who have assembled together. The early church met together in large setting – "And day by day, attending the temple together" and they also met together in small setting – "breaking bread in their homes"

The activities of Paul before his conversion experience are recorded in Acts 8:3 which says "But Saul was ravaging the church (*ekklesia*), and entering house after house (*oikos*), he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." The scripture above is an account of Paul's zealous persecution of the church. He was entering into every house (*kata tous oikous*) where he supposed disciples could be found worshipping."²⁷

But Luke terms it "the church" (*tênekklesian*). Plainly not just an "assembly," but an organized body that was still "the church" when scattered in their own homes, "an unassembled assembly" according to the etymology...In the contemporary scene he was visiting the churches. The day and time to meet the Christians in worship was of less importance because the early disciples meet in the house church almost every day. It was their life style."²⁸

Another account that is of relevance to this essay is Acts 16:40 "And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed." The text above reveals that it was not only Lydia's family and the jailer's, but probably others now gained to the Gospel who were regular worshipers in the house."²⁹ The church hence planted grew and was afterwards honoured with an apostolic letter."³⁰

The phrase "into the house of Lydia" which is rendered in Greek as "pros tēn Ludian" had no word in the Greek for "house," that is *Oiko*, but it means the house of Lydia. All "the brethren" in the text, is not merely Luke and Timothy, but other brethren now converted besides those in the house of the jailor. The four missionaries were guests of Lydia (Acts 16:15) and probably the church now met in her home."³¹

B. Paul's Teachings and Experiences in the House Church

In the first place, many doctrinal statements in Christianity originated from the inspired teachings of Apostle Paul. For example, Paul's understanding of justification by faith, the church as the body of Christ, to mention a few.³² This essay shall be limited to the teachings of Paul in the house church coupled with his experience in his early missionary work and as a house-church planter especially conversion and discipleship in the house church.

C. Conversion in the House Church

"Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with all his household (*oikos*); and many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized." Acts 18:8. Crispus, though a Jew and ruler of the synagogue followed Paul to the house of Titus Justus. The act was devastating for the synagogue because his entire house (*sun holôitôioikôiautou*) moved from the synagogue into the house church because of their new-found faith in Christ. It was a household conversion, but the text also reflects the fact that it was not Crispus household alone.

Hearing believed and were baptized (*akouontesepesteuon kai ebaptizonto*)...for the "many" others who kept coming to the Lord in Corinth. It was a continual revival after Silas and Timothy came and a great church was gathered here during the nearly two years that Paul laboured in Corinth (possibly...³³

It is clear in the writings of Paul that the early meetings of the brethren in the church were primarily believers' meetings. The content of I Corinthian chapter 11 to 14 gives a context that explained that these church meetings were the regular gatherings of the church. They were the equivalent of our Sunday-morning church service. Yet they were radically different. Unlike today's practice, it was not a meeting where a professional clergy man preached a sermon and everyone else would listen passively. "The notion of a sermon focused, pulpit-to-pew, audience-styled 'church service' was alien to the early Christian".³⁴ These house gatherings of the early church are specifically designed for every believer to express Christ through his or her spiritual gift as stated in 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Hebrews 10:24-25. But unfortunately, the institutional church of this contemporary age does not provide enough room for all of the parishioners to express Christ through his or her spiritual gift.

In this regard, participation in the early church meeting meant giving more than receiving. Contrary to today's popular practice, the New Testament Christians did not attend "services" to receive from a group of religious specialist called the "clergy". They simply met to serve their sisters and brothers by ministering something of the Lord's life to them and by this; they were building up the church of God. (Rom. 12: 1-8; 1 Cor. 14:26; Heb 10:24-25). The context of the Galatians' church, in Asia Minor was one that belonged to several house churches that was funded by Apostle Paul.³⁵

Another account of conversion in the house church can be found in Acts 18; Paul was recorded to have visited Corinth after leaving Athens. He has spent eighteen months in the city. He was initially preaching at the synagogues and then he turned to the house of Titus-Justus, this buttress the fact that the Corinthian Christians also worshipped in house churches. (Rom. 16: 23; 1 Cor. 16:19) The venues that was used were probably the "larger houses of wealthier church members (e.g. Gaius, Aquila)³⁶

Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer. (1 Cor. 16:15-16)³⁷

A number of the other converts of Paul in Corinth are named elsewhere in Scripture making Corinth the church which has probably more of its converts named in the Bible than any other house church mentioned in the Bible planted by Paul. We can add to the name Crispus, the names of Titus Justus, Gaius (1Cor. 1:14), Epaphroditus (Rom. 16:5), Stephanas (1Cor. 1:16), Fortunatus (1Cor. 16:17), Achaicus, Chloe (1Cor. 1:11), Sosthenes (1Cor. 1:1), Erastus (Rom. 16:23), Quartus

In studying the Corinthian letters, it will be erroneous to think of Paul as writing to one congregation. Paul most likely, was writing to several house churches which were already established in Corinth then. These house churches are made up of people of different background in a cosmopolitan community. Taking this into account, it reflects on the issues addressed in the Corinthian correspondent writer by Paul. The

development of the Corinthian church polity can best be understood mostly if the house church context is understood.

In the early church communities one or more household, (families) formed a single house church, according to practicalities such as size of the household(s) and the home where they gathered. Congregations meet in the homes of more affluent members because they owned larger homes. Everything in such a situation favoured the emergence of the host as the most prominent and influential member of the group. Eventually the strong leader of one house church might assume leadership throughout a city or section³⁸

Some of the early New Testament Christian households were headed by women. It can be mentioned, at list, one household was headed by a couple, the artisan Priscilla and Aquila. These couple established good-sized households in three cities, which were Rome, Corinth, and Ephesians. (Acts 18: 1-11; 1Cor. 16:19-20; Rom. 16:3-5)

D. Paul's Discipleship Ministry in the House Church

Shortly after Paul arrived at Ephesus the second time, he found "certain disciples" (Acts 19:1), "about twelve" in number (Acts 19:7), who had deficiencies in their knowledge and understanding of the Holy Spirit. This experience of Paul with the twelve disciples is not recorded to have happened in the synagogue or in a school setting; it probably happened in house churches, on the streets. A person's conversion involves the Holy Spirit. These Christians needed discipleship in the knowledge and understanding of the Holy Spirit. Hence, Paul inquired, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" (Acts 19:2)³⁹

It is recorded in Act 20:20 that in Ephesus, Paul taught in the homes "taught (*didasko*) you publically, (*demosios*) and (*kai*) from (*kata*) house to house, (*oikos*)". This text suggests that Paul taught in different houses (*oikos*), thereby referring to Paul's teaching and activities in house church gathering.⁴⁰

Romans 16:3-5

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ.⁴¹

"The Church that is in their house" In these primitive times no such places existed as those which we now term churches; the word always signifying the congregation or assembly of believers, and not the place they assembled in.⁴²

Likewise, the church that is in their house--The Christian assembly that steadily met there for worship. From his occupation as tent-maker, he had probably better accommodations for the meetings of the church than most other Christians. Probably this devoted couple had written to the apostle such an account of the stated meetings at their house, as made him feel at home with them, and include them in this salutation, which doubtless would be read at their meetings with peculiar interest.⁴³

Where any Christian had a large house, the early Christians assembled together. The Christians at Rome had no bishops...So far were they from any shadow of clergy power. If there were Paul would have saluted them also in his epistles.⁴⁴

In Paul language, it is the ideal that all Christian are functioning members of Christ body.⁴⁵Romans 12: 5-8 records:

so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (RSV)⁴⁶

Also in the New Testament days it is the usual practice to meet in homes.

The private house was a centre of intellectual activity and the customary place for many types of speakers and teachers to do their work... the private homes provides a teacher or speaker with much more than just a place to speak and hospitality... Thus are invitation to teach in someone's house would provide Paul with sponsor, and in doing the same Paul was following recognized practice.⁴⁷

An event that happened in China, Asia, illustrates the above statement and gives a vivid picture of what can happen when a church frees herself from cathedrals and elaborate church buildings, which have become walls that shot people out from the church.

Rather than relying upon the western ways of doing things they began to see that many aspects of Chinese cultures were in harmony with the scriptures, such as the strength and structures of the Chinese family and the importance placed upon the home as a place of worship. So even from this time, many movements began whereby Chinese believers met in their homes to worship and pray to the living God as families.⁴⁸

In 1950, when all the western missionaries were forced to leave China, their campus (Programme – Based – Design) kind of fellowship had to leave with them. Prior to this time, the church in China had not experienced the tremendous growth that is now a testimony in Church Growth. The question is: what was the secret of the growth of churches in China? The answer to this question is not farfetched which is

After the changes in 1950, the Chinese Christians began sharing their faith with their relatives and friends through relational evangelism (that is evangelism that spread from one relative to relative) an amazing miracle of growth began to take place in the church in China⁴⁹

It was recorded that after 120 years of western missionary activities, they were about two million (2, 000,000) Christian believers in China in 1952. Statistics records that in 1972 (twenty years later) when China opened up again to the west it was discovered that there were over twenty million (20, 000,000) Christians in China. As at 1990, information given about China placed the Christian community in China at 50 to 60, 000,000 believers. What is of great interest is that the phenomenon has occurred without outside assistance except prayers for China by missionary organizations.⁵⁰

Several years ago, elderly pastor Wang Mingdao explained: we have nothing- no pastors, no churches, no Bibles- nothing! We only have God⁵¹

However, the church in China shot out the cathedrals and reverted back to New Testament practice of meeting in homes. This made the church in China to begin to function as a community of family. They were freed from western missionary ways of church organizations. "the Chinese church adapted quickly to methods much more compactable with its culture"⁵³

CONCLUSION

The after effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new normal. This new normal would requires that the church focus on these three things:

First, the church must be more people-based project. This means projects that directly address the target audience. The project of the church must be people oriented and less of the physical structure.

Secondly, the programs of the church must always be Impact driven program. These times would call for more impact-oriented, not window dressing for program sake.

Thirdly, Teamwork is more important now than ever. Churches in this era where several ministers of the gospel expend energy, time and resources doing almost the same things, executing similar programs, reaching out to the same population.

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