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Mitigation strategies to the challenges of women singlehood in Kerith Churches of Kenya

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges single women face in their singlehood status and the church mitigation strategies in addressing them. Singlehood has many challenges that the church has yet to address adequately. The scholarly work focuses on understanding singlehood from a sociological perspective, but comparatively less attention is paid to the mitigation strategies employed by the church. Although the church acknowledges the role played by single women, less attention is given to them compared to other social groups. This necessitated doing this study to discover the challenges of singlehood, examine the mitigation strategies, explore the programs' effectiveness, and investigate theological justification for the Kerith Church's involvement in addressing singlehood challenges in Kenya. The study used a descriptive research survey to collect and analyze qualitative data. The target population was 20000 members in 210 Kerith Churches nationwide. A sample of 250 members filled out the questionnaires while ten clergy, 20 single women and ten lay leaders were interviewed. The study established that women go through many challenges in their singlehood status despite being in church, yet the church is endowed with a godly mandate to address them. It was further established that various programs to mitigate the challenges of singlehood in Kerith Churches were ineffective. Thus, the church must rethink its mitigation strategies to alleviate women's challenges with singlehood. The study was significant in religion and society by espousing the church's role in addressing the challenges of women's singlehood in Kenya.

Key words: Challenges, church, Kerith Churches, singlehood, women.



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INTRODUCTION

Singlehood is a status in our society that no one can overlook. After my few encounters with single women in society, I was deeply motivated to conduct this research study. I encountered my neighbor who fought the wife for supporting their ageing daughters who had no signs of getting married. I also agonized over my sisters and aunts, who were overage and unmarried. One night, I spent a sleepless night counselling my cousin, who was suicidal and had attained over 50 years of age, was unmarried, and had no child. She could not see sense in a loving God in her state. My greatest empathy went to my sister, who married under 18 years old, lost her husband after one year and was left to raise a few months old son alone. A quick observation in my local church: I see many single women, including my matrimonial mother, who was widowed and was left with four young children to bring up. The list is long. I was motivated to investigate the challenges and how the church mitigation strategies helped the singles in church being the children of God like any other member in the church.

God is the creator of all human beings. In His design, He created both males and females. In Genesis 2:18, God found that it was not suitable for man to be alone. He provided him with a female companion for companionship and instructed them to procreate and populate the earth. In this case, God instituted marriage for a divine purpose.

On the contrary, we find members in our society today who live single lives. Various factors have contributed to this state, some of them including widowhood, divorce, and separation. Likewise, those who never married but have children and others who never married and have no children. For those who are single because they have never married, some are out of volition, while others are willing to get married but have missed a suitable mate (Baloyi, 2008). Nevertheless, before exploring singlehood, it is imperative to find the meaning of marriage that will help shed light on the challenges under study.

Meaning of Marriage

Marriage is defined as a permanent union where a man and woman intentionally live together for procreation, the rearing of children, and mutual

companionship and assistance (Hastings, 1973). Other scholars have also engaged in defining this word. Harris (2003) posits that marriage is a cultural phenomenon in almost all cultures. This, therefore, makes its definition difficult. According to a 1995 report by the Council on Families in America, a [desired concept] is a relationship that receives social endorsement and encouragement from the community for sexual intimacy and childbearing. According to this report, marriage in the West is a natural, economic, social and legal institution (Popenoe et al., 1996). As a natural institution, it is described as a meeting and guiding the primary human inclinations toward sexual expression, reproduction and emotional intimacy. It is meant for procreation and mutual companionship (Gichaga et al., 2009; Estrada, 2009). As an economic institution, it is understood to be a unit of consumption, exchange and production. It is within marriage institutions that basic needs are met. As a legal institution, marriage is protected and regulated by the body of law. In addition, as a social institution, it is a place for nurturing and socializing children and regulating the behavior of both the husband and wife (Popenoe et al., 1996).

Waite and Gallagher (2000) encapsulate this perspective with their assertion that marriage is not just a private commitment but also a public declaration and legally binding contract that carries weight in both the courts of law and public opinion. Entering marriage signifies a public declaration of commitment, which can influence your self-perception and how you view your partner. It can also reshape your future plans and decision-making, and it may alter how you are perceived and treated by others and various institutions. In a nutshell, this understanding of marriage represents a modern-day opinion about marriage. However, as denoted by Harris (2003), many women chose not to marry at all. They engage in careers and find satisfaction in their independence. This disvalues the significance of a marriage institution, bringing about the new trend of singlehood and its challenges. The choice of singlehood in a country like Kenya, where marriage is a validating metric for complete life, poses a challenge not only to the individual but also to the church and society (Waithera, 2022).

In a broad sense, marriage can be categorized into three categories: Christian, African and secular. In traditional African communities, marriage is considered normal, natural and fully respected. As Mugambi (2002) described, marriage is a sacred duty for raising children and perpetuating the family's name. All community members are brought together through marriage, including the born and the yet-to-be-born (Mugambi, 2002; Gichaga et al. 2009). This marriage is mainly characterized by the practice of polygamy, where a man is allowed to marry as many wives as he can be able to support. As earlier mentioned, this ensured marriage for all women, curbing the problem of singlehood, among other advantages of polygamy (Mbiti, 1969).

Within Christianity, marriage is seen as a Godly ordained institution with two primary purposes: procreation and offering companionship to spouses (Gichaga et al., 2009). This view is derived from the Bible (Genesis 2:24; Mathew 19:12b; 1 Corinthians 6:15-17, 40 and Ephesians 5:21-33). These scriptures reveal that marriage is part of the created order where man and woman are made to bear and raise children as well as complement each other. Both man and woman become one flesh after marriage. According to Kunhiyop (2008), God planned marriage for a divine purpose. It was meant to meet human needs for companionship, love, mutual encouragement, practical help and sexual satisfaction. I, therefore, agree with Aguboshim (2022), who posits that God had a plan that children be raised in the security and love created by one man and one woman in marriage commitment to each other for a lifetime in a monogamous state.

In a Christian marriage, a man is supposed to leave his parents and be joined by his wife, and both live together as husband and wife. This does not mean that the two neglect their parents; instead, it establishes a new family's unique rights and freedom. The husband becomes the head of the family and loves his wife as his own body (Ephesians 5: 23). The marriage is expected to last forever, only to end when a partner dies. This is unlike in the African marriage that continues even after the death of a partner. Africans practiced wife inheritance that ensured the continuity of a marriage

after the husband died (Gichaga et al., 2009). The man was allowed to remarry, or if he had many wives, he could continue with others. This indicates that in African society, the problem of singlehood was reasonably addressed, and the community lived in harmony and peace. This is why this study was necessary today to find out how Kerith Churches can amicably respond to problems of singlehood. If solutions exist in African society, then it means all is preserved as far as singlehood problems of today are concerned. This study raised suggestions to show how Kerith Churches address these issues.

In the secular world, African and Christian views are no longer taken into consideration. Many changes have taken place. Owuondo and Muiru (2015) expound on these changing trends. They elucidate how marriage is no longer viewed through a religious lens. People may decide to marry or remain single. They may decide to cohabit, live together or be separated at will. Chastity is no longer a priority. The traditional notion of valuing virginity has become outdated. Nowadays, many young people boast about the number of sexual encounters or relationships they have had rather than emphasizing the importance of maintaining their virginity. Surprisingly, even with the scourge of HIV/ AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the carefree attitude of young people is still noteworthy (Mathai, 2014). Children are no longer valued in this category; if they have to get them, they limit the number (Gichaga et al., 2009).

It is very likely to get a couple with one child, and they are contented. The values searched for in a marriage partner have changed from looking for a person of integrity, hardness, generosity, and humility to looking for external beauty, financial status, education level, fame, and power. That is why there is a high increase in the present situation of 'sponsors' and 'sponsor less'. The 'sponsors' and the 'sponsor less' are financially stable men and women who offer money and other materials to lovers in exchange for sexual satisfaction. The relationship here is sustained by material gain and self-body satisfaction. It is a short-lived relationship, which eventually ends up breaking and adding to the statistics of singles in society. This poses a challenge

to the Christian church today. When all this happens, the marriage institution is affected. Consequently, it has a ripple effect that escalates to the family, the church, and society. As the conscience of society, the church needs to be concerned about such happenings and provide amicable explanations and answers for a better society (Nthamburi, 1982).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The word single generally means to be ‘only one or not married or not involved in a romantic relationship with anyone’ (Biber, 2004). On the other hand, singlehood is the state of a man or woman having attained adulthood age yet being single (unmarried). According to Baloyi (2008), several factors lead to singlehood; a man or woman of age may have missed a marriage partner or declined to engage in a marriage relationship. A second scenario is when a man or woman has separated or has been divorced by her spouse. Thirdly, a spouse can pass on, leaving the widow or widower to live all alone. A fourth and the most prevalent in our society today is the state of mothers living single after they bore children out of wedlock and did not manage to be married by the father of the child or anyone else.

Sometimes, it may look like being single is enjoyable, but Amanda (2016) tells us it is not all right. She writes out of her heart about her experience as a single woman who is willing to be married but has not yet, and, in her situation, finds it essential to encourage herself and her readers. She says; In just a few short months, I will reach the ripe old age of 30. That sounds young to some of you, but that mile marker is daunting to a single woman who figured she would be married with kids by now. While reflecting on the past few years: a heartbreak or two, the obvious absence of little ones running around the house, and the overwhelming desire for companionship with the right man, I am faced with a question: Is God’s love enough? After recently stepping out in obedience and saying goodbye to a man I cared for sincerely, I have to ask myself, is God’s love really enough? Because neither a lifelong marriage nor kids are promised to me in this life, I have to ask, is God’s love really enough?

Amanda’s (2016) vision and desire is to be a married person. She goes ahead to even question God because of her status. Despite being very hopeful about achieving her dreams, it is reasonable for any researcher to develop a desire to investigate the phenomenon further. The statistics of single women beyond marriageable age in Kenya continue to rise. The World Bank report 2021 indicates that ‘single women head 36.4 percent of households in Kenya, an increase from 32 percent in 2014 (Waithera, 2022). She denotes that divorce cases in Kenya had risen from 10.5 percent in 2015 to 17.1 percent in 2019, which is an additional statistic for single women. Now that the situation exists and is worrying, it has an impact not only on the single but also on society; what is the church’s role in addressing the situation? Has the church done enough concerning this state? What else can the church do to better our societal institutions? It is within these premises that the study was carried out.

Singlehood has existed for a long time in human history, although not much has been done to alleviate its challenges. Globally, scholars have delved into analyzing data that reveal its prevalence, but fewer details on mitigation strategies require further research. According to Hajnal (1971) and Engelen and Kok (2003), the issue of singlehood prevalent in the West is unique compared to the less developed countries. For example, in countries such as the Netherlands, children of the upper class and certain religious groups opt for singlehood (Engelen & Kok, 2003). Relatively, singlehood status is significantly assumed, and the challenges are ignored because of the percentages of people engaged in marriage. However, although a higher percentage of people still enter into heterosexual formal marriage, recent statistics reveal that there is a significant decline in marriage rates both in developed and developing countries, including those countries that are known for conservative marriage cultures like Africa (Wilmoth et al., 2023). In Malaysia, among Malay Muslims, the total percentage of single women over the age of 35 increased from 3.1 percent in 1960 to 23.3 percent in 2000 and to 37.8 percent in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). In the United States of America, the percentage of single women aged 35 years and above

rose from 7 percent in 1970 to 8 percent in 2000 and 10 percent in 2008 (Bremner et al., 2010). In England and Wales, the percentage increase of single women aged between 35 and 44 who have never married is even higher. According to a report by the United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (ONS) published in Spring 2009, the percentage of single people in the UK rose significantly in 2007. The data showed an increase to twenty-five percent in 2007, from fifteen percent in 1999 and eight percent in 1991. This confirms that singlehood is a status that requires keen study to explore the challenges and possible mitigation strategies.

In African society, where marriage ought to be compulsory, the situation is drastically changing. In the past, marriage was of great value in the African community. Regardless of their circumstances, all males and females were supposed to get married. According to Gichaga et al. (2009), singlehood was rare, and the African world setup was arranged so that even those members who had special needs and could not get a partner on their own were helped. The parents, friends or relatives intervened and acquired a partner for them. They posit that many African communities solved the problem of gender imbalance in situations where females were more than males by practicing polygamy. There was no limit to the number of females a man could marry, meaning finding a single woman in an African community was rare.

Nevertheless, this is different in Africa today. Singlehood states have taken root in Africa and are steadily increasing, and their challenges cannot be ignored. The demographic and health surveys conducted in various West and Sub-Saharan African countries provide an excellent example of the statistics on single women. In Ghana, there was a consistent increase in the number of single women aged 35 years and above from 1.3 percent in 1993 to 2.3 percent in 1998, 5.1 in 2003 and 5.7 in 2008. In the Ivory Coast, the number of single women aged 35 years and above increased from 6.1 percent in 1994 to 7.7 percent in 1999.

This situation is also imminent in the church. Commenting on charismatic churches in Kenya,

Shorter and Njiru (2001), Saliba (2003), Nkonge and Maina (2014), and Wilson (2004) opine that these churches have a high number of women as compared to men and a number of these women are singles. The situation is not different in Kerith Churches of Kenya, a typology of the charismatic church. Their population has increased to approximately 20000 members, of which there are approximately 1300 single women (Thuranira, 2019). This contributes to 6.6 percent of single women in these churches, which is a significant number. The situation today is a reality that needs to be addressed. Aune (2002) justifies the need for church engagement in issues of single women. He posits that the proportion of single women in society is rising steadily, and singleness is an urgent need for discussion and understanding by the church. For the society towards which the Church has a mission is acutely touched by the issue of singleness.

According to Baloyi (2008), addressing the challenges of single members in the church is important and meaningful because it focuses on the absolute need for pastoral care for the people. This means that the challenges of single women are part and parcel of the church's responsibility (Kathanya, 2021). All members are important and deserve equal treatment, as espoused by Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Despite this understanding, this has only sometimes been the case. Single women have often been discriminated against. Some churches decline to give leadership positions and other responsibilities to single women. In addition, there are other challenges to women's singlehood, which are not limited to loneliness, denial of their rights, damage to their esteem, financial constraints, and children's deviance (Baloyi, 2008), to mention a few. Sometimes single women are often disqualified from ministerial responsibilities. Other times, they are not even considered for ministry positions because of their status (Thebarge, 2015). These observations are an indicator that single women experience a myriad of challenges.

Many scholars have researched why there is an increase in singlehood in our society and the challenges experienced by singles. According to Isiugo-Abanihe (2000), the challenges that the

singles go through outweigh the positive consequences of this kind of state. In their research on single women, Lemanna and Riedmann (2003) found that involuntary singles experience many challenges that make them live unhappy and desperate lives. However, it is crucial to evaluate the strategies employed by the church to alleviate singlehood challenges. The case of Kerith Churches of Kenya was considered for study.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Challenges of Singlehood

The study interrogated the kind of challenges that single women in church experience. Women in the church would be presumed to be living comfortable and satisfied lives. This is in the guise of the role the

church is embodied to offer. Also, in social media, most frequently, single women posit an attitude of freedom, able to run their lives without interference from men. However, this is only sometimes the case. The challenges experienced are more than the enjoyment gotten from singleness freedom, and the purported role of the church to emancipate single women is inadequate. The findings from this research done in Kerith Church of Kenya confirmed that single women go through challenges that the church may not always be keen on. Several statements were formulated, and the respondents were to indicate their level of agreement with the statement. Table 1 shows the responses.

Table 1: A Table Showing a List of Challenges of Women Singlehood

Statement	Rate	Opinion					Total
		SA	A	UD	D	SD	
Single women experience loneliness.	Frequency	120	80	15	15	20	250
	Percentage	48.0	32.0	6.0	6.0	8.0	100
Single women are discriminated against in society and by their in-laws	Frequency	91	101	13	21	24	250
	Percentage	36.4	40.4	5.2	8.4	9.6	100
Single women are disturbed by men who want sexual relationships with them	Frequency	81	118	26	17	8	250
	Percentage	32.4	47.2	10.4	6.8	3.2	100
Single women experience financial problems	Frequency	70	85	10	33	52	250
	Percentage	28.0	34.0	4.0	13.2	20.8	100
Children of single mothers are undisciplined	Frequency	51	90	5	73	31	250
	Percentage	20.4	36.0	2.0	29.2	12.4	100
Single women experience a desire for sexual intimacy	Frequency	131	112	2	3	2	250
	Percentage	52.4	44.8	0.8	1.2	0.8	100
Single women are held with suspicion	Frequency	62	98	21	40	29	250
	Percentage	24.8	39.2	8.4	16.0	11.6	100
Many single women mismanage their social and economic lives	Frequency	21	44	8	110	67	250
	Percentage	8.4	17.6	3.2	44.0	26.8	100

Key: SA–Strongly Agree A–Agree UD–Undecided D–Disagree SD–Strongly Disagree

Loneliness

The majority, 120(48%) of the respondents, confirmed that single women experience loneliness. An anonymous social media blogger in 2017 commented, “Singlehood is a bleak and lonely existence devoid of love or human contact, a torment to be endured until the sweet release of death finally sets you free”. Waithera (2022), in a personal testimony, confesses having faced so much loneliness in her life and, as a single mother, was bothered by having no one to help make crucial decisions. This confirms other researchers’ findings that singlehood contributes to solitude and loneliness (Baloyi, 2008; Thebarga, 2015). The study also confirms Kathenya’s (2021) research that found loneliness challenging for single women. He argues that single women are like any other human being who need somebody to talk to, share joys and sorrows, and feel part of and associate with. He remarked that most of his single respondents claimed they were lonely most of the time. According to most of the single women interviewed, loneliness leads them to clubbing even when they know it is against the values of the church. Some of them confessed to having had to take alcohol and other drinks to forget their loneliness.

Discrimination

The majority, 101(40.4%) of the respondents, agreed that single women experience discrimination in society and from their in-laws. Waithera (2022), Baloyi (2008) and Thebarga (2015) confirmed that discrimination is a common factor in the church as well. They argued that singles are denied leadership roles, and the widows are demoted after passing on of the husband. Waithera (2022) also worries about the clergy’s concentration on marriage issues while singles are ignored. Kathenya (2021) corrects the clergy’s mistakes of assuming singles are just like other women in the church and conducts women’s seminars combining married and unmarried meetings. However, the topics covered address married people. The church also fails when programs for addressing such groups are not implemented. The majority of the clergy interviewed affirmed their laxness in organizing such meetings, probably as a way of not favourably publicizing singlehood and secondly to avoid pricking their ego.

Gender discrimination is extended to widows. Whereas widowers are encouraged to marry, remarriage for widows is frowned upon in the church (Ogweno, 2010). Many widows who informed this study expressed their desire to remarry, but they have rare opportunities to associate to get a suitable partner. They distance themselves from men for fear of being taken advantage of and for being mistaken for promiscuity. They indeed confirmed that remarriage for widows is not as easy as for widowers. Property inheritance for widows whose husbands had not written wills is not a walk in the park. Many widows have found themselves in the courts to fight for their husbands’ property. Despite the church being an influential organ in society, this study confirmed her deficiency in addressing the issue. A clergy interview informed us that the clergy dissociate from property disputes. Such matters are handled mainly by local administration or the courts at the family level.

Societal discrimination also is manifest in single women. According to Waithera (2022), Joy Kimani, at 46 years old, underwent discrimination when there were couples, and when she visited her home in the village, she was asked why she was not married yet. She was a good woman. In social media, there is much scorn for singles who have passed marriageable age. An anonymous clip circulating read, “You felt sweet when you were younger, now all the good men are gone. Kula ujeuri wako (eat your pride)”. This is quite painful, though.

Disturbance by Men in Need of Sexual Relationships

The singles are a vulnerable group when it comes to men-woman relationships. The majority, 118(47.2%) of the respondents, agreed with the statement that singles are disturbed by men in need of sexual relationships. Waithera (2022) says they are defenseless and insecure. As I grew up, my mother used to tell me, “a man, even a small boy, is a source of security”, not only for the muscle he can use for defense but for a psychological scare to men with ill intentions. This is probably why married-life advocates argue that married women would be less disturbed than singles (Shahrak et al., 2021).

The clergy who informed this study associated the men who go around disturbing singles for sexual relationships as immoral, undisciplined and agents of the devil. Ogwen (2010) lamented that HIV/AIDS spread among married people has failed to cease due to men who visit singles and other women for sexual relationships. These kind of men claim to be family men, yet promiscuity is prevalent among them. How a single woman can overcome the temptations of such predators in the name of men requires life skills that the church can inculcate.

Financial Problems

The majority, 85(34.0%) respondents, agreed that singles face financial problems. At the same time, some singles are pretty rich and self-sustaining; Kathenya (2021) found out in his research that most singles face financial problems, confirming the findings in this study. He contributed to the financial strain of the unemployed single mothers who, in addition, did not have a reliable source of income. The divorced and the widowed are also constrained to raising children single-handedly (Gichaga et al., 2009). Waithera (2022) claimed that two hands are better than one because a single woman's resources would not be compared to those of a married couple in a family with bills to be settled. In the new University funding model, the government of Kenya affirmed the financial need of singles in the society. The government categorized the children of single mothers as vulnerable and extremely needy compared to the needy and less needy students' category in awarding university scholarships for those joining the University in the year 2023/2024. The clergy also confirmed that the singles were strained financially. They affirmed their effort to raise financial support for singles in their congregations to mitigate their financial problems.

Children Discipline Issues

The study sought to investigate the challenge of singles while raising their children. Majority 90(30%) agreed that Children of single mothers are undisciplined. According to an anonymous blogger, the biggest challenge she had to deal with was keeping her children disciplined. She lamented how she lost her daughter to drugs and later to suicide. As a counsellor for ten years in a boy's secondary

school, I found out that out of ten deviant cases handled in the guidance and counselling office, seven were for children brought up by single mothers. Many 15(75%) of the single mothers interviewed for this study confirmed that bringing up their children was difficult. Many times, their children blamed them for not having a father, a painful experience for a single mother. Some children are driven by psychological trauma that sets in hopelessness, especially in the case of the death of the father. Such children indulge in drugs and substance abuse, as found by Mathai (2018). The clergy lamented over the discipline of the single mothers' children, whom they could not help unless they came to church. The programs in the church were voluntary, and the clergy and church leaders were tied to those willing to attend.

Desire for Sexual Intimacy

Single women are sometimes presumed to be lesser human beings who do not have or have controlled body emotions and feelings because they do not have a man in their lives. This is a misconception. As Kathenya (2021) explained, single women are human beings with natural bodies with feelings and emotions. The majority, 131(52.4%) respondents, strongly agreed that single women experience a desire for sexual intimacy. However, the church requirements restrict them from such engagement unless they get a man and get married. The majority of the single women interviewed claimed they spend more time and energy suppressing their body feelings. The desire for sexual intimacy is more of a challenge to the women in the church than those who are not tied to it. The non-church going women will have no guilt about having sexual relationships with any man. Parsitau (2014) claimed that the church transforms women to uphold faithfulness in marriage, integrity, and dignity for single women. However, the singles incur emotional and psychological costs when balancing their faith and actions.

Suspicion

The study established that a majority of 98(39.2%) agree that singles are suspicious of the statement. Waithera (2022), who opened up to national media, testified that married women suspect they can steal

from their husbands. She complained that it is difficult to keep friendships with married women. Ogweno (2010) claimed that the widowed are suspected of their husbands having died of diseases like HIV/AIDS, which is stigmatizing. The interviewed single women also claimed it was not easy to establish a relationship because there were those men who felt 'singles' were pests to their pockets. However, the clergy had no reservations for the singles. They appreciated them the way they were with no suspicion withheld.

Mismanage Social and Economic Life

The question of whether single women mismanage their social and economic lives was decried. The majority, 110(44%) respondents, disagreed with the statement. The single women interviewed said they are very cautious with their social and economic lives. They know they have no one to depend on, and any mistake would add more trouble to their lives. Unlike many studies that showed women's state of joblessness, financially crippled, and economically discriminated globally, those women who get an opportunity become extremely careful. One of the interviewees argued she could not make a mistake twice, be a single mother and waste the little resources she gets. Socially, widows are known to better their lives after the death of their husbands, unlike in the case of widowers. That is why society approves immediate remarriage of widowers to get care, comfort and partnership (Ogweno, 2010).

Programs for Mitigating Challenges of Singlehood

The study explored the various programs employed by the church to mitigate women's singlehood challenges. To achieve this objective, respondents were asked to explain various categories of programs organized to cater to the challenges faced by single women. The majority, 210(84.0%), enlisted in seminars. When asked how often the seminars are held, they claimed it could be once a year. Others said it takes more than a year to hear a seminar for singles, unlike the women's fellowship seminars that can be held every quarter of the year to address marital issues.

Thuranira (2019), a recognized bishop in Kerith Churches, was honest in his responses. He informed me that his eyes were opened after interacting with the researcher to view the issues of single women differently and handle them independently. He informed us that Kerith Churches have elaborate programs for women, men, children, the youths, the leaders, and the pastors, but they rarely give singles much attention. They hold fellowships, workshops, trainings, conferences, general meetings, rallies and talent shows for the groups mentioned above but none for single women. He explained that single women generally fit into the women's groups, and the assumption is that their issues are taken care of, which is not the case. He also attributed the failure to amicably tackle single issues to their sensitivity and fear of exposure. He blamed singles for being secretive and reserved and people who formed their world and lived it alone. The clergy honestly revealed that they offered space to the singles and avoided unnecessary intrusion into their private lives that would hurt their feelings.

In his research, Kathenya (2021) found the yearning of singles for programs dealing with their issues. As a church clergyman, he made efforts to conduct seminars and workshops for singles in the Methodist Church. He raised their esteem, brought their recognition and acceptance into the church, and made them appreciate their singlehood status. Kathenya's contribution marks a turnaround message to the Churches in Kenya to recognize the singles as children of God and address their issues through elaborate programs.

Strategies for Mitigating the Challenges of Singlehood

Like any other institution, the church must develop strategies to mitigate its members' challenges, including those of vulnerable groups like single women. The clergy played a great role in informing the public about their strategies. Most of them agreed that the challenges of single women are never exposed, which is a challenge on its own to the church. They claimed that singlehood is, to some extent, held as a private affair and with a probability of causing trauma, hence becoming quite sensitive when handling it. However, sometimes, single

women are overwhelmed by their challenges and seek assistance from the church. At this point, the church can handle the case. The clergy identified various key strategies: Prayers, guidance, counselling, and financial support.

Prayers

As Kiragu (2009) puts it, the church is a praying institution. In his book *Building Capacity to Pray*, he identifies 'needs' as prayer's engine and driving force. He elucidates the significance of an individual's unfulfilled desire to engage in intensive prayer. Singlehood challenges encompass many unmet desires and needs that require a strategy that helps give strength and hope to the individual. The church uses prayer to encourage and seek divine intervention for the challenges of single women, among other needs. Many scriptures in the Bible inform us of the importance of prayer when in need. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and in what the church categorizes as the 'Lord's prayer', He taught them to ask for daily provision, deliverance from temptations and protection from evil (Luke 11:2-4, Matthew 6:9-13). These are among the challenges that single women go through, and they need prayers. They need divine provision; they need protection from God and help them overcome all the temptations they go through in life.

Brown (2021) narrates the importance of prayer for singles. She testifies of having spent time in prayer when she encountered overwhelming circumstances in her life. She says, "as a single woman, I have poured out my heart to God over circumstances that seemed overwhelming, impossible and heartbreaking. I have struggled with feelings that threaten to sink my emotional ship in a sea that rose to Tsunami proportions... through these experiences I have learnt the importance of prayers for singles".

The clergy, aware of how challenging singlehood is, encourage single women to pray. They identified diverse areas of prayer for singles. Whereas there are those seeking God to get a life partner, to others, it was to be sustained in their singlehood state while others were to address their life problems. The clergy have to jostle with the uniqueness of the individual case. How often were prayers for singles made and

sought? It was surprising to realize that though it was vital to offer prayers, most of the clergy got time to pray for the singles who availed themselves and confided with them. Such forums were also rare compared to the increasing number of singles in the church and many other activities the church had to undertake. The effectiveness of prayer as a strategy to address the issue of singlehood was hampered by inadequate time that the church would easily acquire if well-organized programs were put in place. The singles interviewed were asked about their satisfaction with prayers offered on their behalf by the church. Some did not blame the church for not offering special prayers for them because they rarely opened up to the clergy for help. Others took a neutral position. They resulted in personal prayers as exalted in churches just like any other person with general needs. They failed to seek special prayer attention from the clergy. A few single women were dissatisfied with the way the clergy handled them. They had reservations about some clergy who ignored them in need, while others were too busy to afford time to pray with them. Concisely, the clergy and the church generally played minimal roles in offering single individualized prayers.

Guidance and Counseling

The Bible is a significant book that offers guidance to Christians. The word of wisdom contains wise counsel. The clergy have a role to guide the singles and to give them wise counsel. The effectiveness of guidance and counselling to help singles in the church was evaluated. The members interviewed lamented that the church lacked an organized guidance and counselling structure. There were limited schedules to address individualized issues like that of singles. Also, booking an appointment for guidance and counselling sessions was difficult because of the time factor. The singles informed us that they diversified physical meetings with phone calls and messages to get advice from their clergy members who had busy schedules. However, the counselling technique requires a physical presence to achieve effectiveness. A counsellor may need help understanding the client adequately when done through phone calls and messages. The clergy notified the researcher of their challenges as well. The clergy were sincere in informing that they had

no formal training in guidance and counselling and, hence, lacked the skills to help the singles in the church adequately.

Financial Support

The Kerith Churches of Kenya lacks a well-laid-down structure for mitigating the financial needs of single women. Like many New Christian Movements, the church focuses on structural development but lacks social development (Parsitau, 2014). The informing clergy claimed that the financial support system was yet to be streamlined. The challenge to the church was the increasing number of cases and, secondly, dealing with insincere members. However, the churches, like many other institutions, were struggling to address financial cases. When members were asked how the financial needs of single women were addressed, they informed us that financial matters brought to the church would be addressed through a funds drive and generous support to help the needy single women. However, this applied to the cases considered very needy. The single women indicated that they live to struggle with financial needs alone. The church lacked an organized support system for needy members like single women.

Theological Justification for Church Involvement in Mitigation Strategies to the Challenges of Women Singlehood

In this section, secondary data sources are considered to answer two critical questions that address the theological justification for church involvement in mitigation strategies to the challenges of women's singlehood. First, why the church? Secondly, how should the church approach singlehood challenges based on biblical scriptures? According to Bosch (1991), in the New Testament, the word church comes from the Greek word "ekklesia", which means an "assembly" or "called out ones." The root meaning of church is not a building but people. Taking reference from Ephesians 1:22, "God placed all things under Jesus feet and appointed Him to be Head over everything for the church." Here Jesus is not being appointed to the head over the building but the people (Bosch, 1991).

The church in the twenty-first century has a critical role because it fills a void that only the church can fill. Why do the troubled, depressed singles go to church? They expect their life problems will be addressed. They expect the church to address their spiritual, emotional and physical needs. The church has more responsibility than only preaching. This is well explained by Numberger (2007), who criticizes them and says, "Most Christian congregation have spiritualized perceptions of what it means to be the church. They never moved beyond preaching worship and prayer." This can be a big oversight if the churches fail to realize they have a more significant mandate. The individualized attention is needed for various groups within a church congregation. As proposed by Monrose (2012), the small groups in the church congregation should be given enough attention so that the needs of the entire church membership will be met. Regardless of the size of the congregation, the strategy of small group ministries is effective in touching the lives of people. Regarding the singles as unique persons in the church, excellent care and attention are required to understand them and know what they are going through. In addition, they come up with ways of addressing their problems.

Being a single woman in the church is not a sin as it was in traditional African society (Mbiti, 1969). According to the traditional African religion, all men and women should be married for social and religious purposes. However, in the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments record the existence of single women, particularly widows. Unlike in the Old Testament, where widows have remarried Ruth (Ruth 3:11), Bathsheba Uriah's wife (2 Samuel 11), to mention a few, in the New Testament, Paul exalts singles to remain single to be able to serve God (1 Corinthians 7:7). However, this was conditioned to those who had special grace to be single otherwise, they should marry to avoid sinning (1 Corinthians 7:9, 36). Jesus expressed compassion to single women. For example, He raised the only son of the widow in Nain in Luke 7:11. However, on the issue of remarriage, Jesus was silent and focused on the heavenly kingdom, where he espoused that there is no marriage because there is no woman nor man (Mathew 22:30). Both Paul and Jesus agreed that

once married, no one should divorce until death (Mathew 5:31-32; 19:8-9 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11). If this were followed as a matter of policy in the church, the number of singles would reduce, and the church would fulfil its divine mandate of mitigation of the challenges of singlehood. Nevertheless, there are enough divorce cases in church as there are out of the church.

Singlehood has been described as an epidemic in society (Hardin, 2019). The church, aware of this, has established 'singles ministries' for those seeking marriage. He argues that the clergy takes time during their sermons to 'elevate marriage and God's goodness displayed through marriage'. Rarely does the church support Jesus and Paul's attitude toward singlehood as a better way of serving the kingdom of God. Therefore, he proposes three ways the church can deal with singlehood challenges. First, the church needs to teach about singlehood and its challenges in the church. This will solve the problem of stigma, fear and discrimination of single women. This will empower single women to 'steward their singlehood' and manage their lives. According to Hodges (2020), singlehood is a gift from God, and the church ought to endeavor to encourage those who are singles to be productive in the church's work. He says, "the gift of singleness is not a spiritual gift or a unique ability to bear the weight of the single life. It is a blessing God gives for his glory and the Joy of the one to whom it is given".

Secondly, the church must rethink its strategies for dealing with single women. Hardin (2019) laments over the wrong impression that being single is a disease that needs to be cured. He proposes to the church to define her mission activities to deal with singles in the church. He claims that the attitude that singlehood can be used as a state to serve God better ought to be adopted. The church ought to make an effort to empower those who are single. He argues that the church can come up with the roles that single women can amicably play in the church for the glory of God. According to Hodges (2020), marriage should not be a prerequisite for participation in church activities. The single women should be viewed as the loved Children of God whom he needs in the kingdom. He demonstrates that both the

singles and the married complement each other and show the love of God for all. Hence, all of them matter before God.

Thirdly, they propose training single women on self-awareness. The singles 'ought to seek the will of God in their state. They seek God to understand how they can serve God with undivided focus. The church should demonstrate the steadfast love of God available to all people and that human status means nothing before God. God is pleased by what an individual does in the kingdom and not who he or she is. One can be a president, a rich person, a very beautiful person, and so on, but contribute nothing worthy of being commended in the kingdom of God. That is why Hodges encourages a positive self-attitude for single women in the church. The clergy in charge are responsible for teaching, training, and mentoring single women in their congregation so they can hold themselves in high esteem and confidence.

Therefore, the church, being a body instituted by God, is justified to be involved in mitigation strategies for singlehood challenges. Like any other member, single women are essential to the church congregation. Their service in the kingdom of God is acceptable, just like for the married and any other person in the church. The church's role is to formulate strategies, develop effective programs to address challenges that singles go through and provide space for active participation by all members, including single women.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study investigated mitigation strategies to the challenges of women's singlehood in Kerith churches in Kenya. Singlehood has been on the rise, a unique phenomenon in an African setup where, a few centuries ago, it was unheard of. There are various challenges that single women go through, yet the church has not succeeded in addressing them. The programs and the strategies employed by the church to deal with these challenges have not been effective. There has been an assumption that single women's challenges are similar to the general challenges women face, which is not always true. The scriptures in the Bible have addressed the issue

of singlehood, and the church is obligated to manifest God's love to single women and plan on mitigating their challenges.

Recommendations: The challenges of single women require well-structured and organized practical measures. Therefore, the church needs to rethink its strategies for dealing with them. Church programs

need to be customized to handle single women's challenges without amalgamating them with other church groups. Secondly, singlehood challenges are sensitive issues requiring vast knowledge and skills. The clergy handling single women in church need to undertake minimum training on guidance and counselling-related course(s).

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