

Challenges of the Contemporary Church Traditions to Single Mothers: A Case of ACK Subukia Archdeaconry in Nakuru in Kenya**Elizabeth W. Murathi***

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Abstract: This paper is based on the observation that there is tension between single mothers and the Anglican Church of Kenya (A.C.K), Nakuru Diocese, Subukia Archdeaconry. In the Subukia A.C.K Archdeaconry, there is a tendency to regard single mothers (who are perceived as having broken the church norms) as sinners. This perception has existed for a long period. As a result single mothers have been excluded from the full life of the church. They are barred from partaking Eucharist and denied infant baptism (sacraments). They are also not allowed to take any leadership position and excluded from the church ministry hence they feel alienated from God. By contrast, there are other A.C.K Churches where single mothers are accepted, partake Eucharist and their infants are baptized. They are permitted to take any leadership position and are included in the full life of the church. This has prompted the question of whether the A.C.K has changed its administration since it is known to have uniformity in discharging its mandate. This contribution was based on theological and constitutional survey geared towards accommodating single mothers and curbing their increase in the church. At the same time, the church advocates marriage to be the ideal and Biblical way where children should be born. The paper offers a balance in which single mothers and the church coexist without compromising the dignity and discipline of the church.

Keywords: Anglican Church of Kenya (A.C.K), Archdeaconry, Single mothers.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, there has been confusion when it comes to single mothers and the doctrines observed by A.C.K. In some Anglican churches, single mothers are allowed to participate in some of the ministries of the church while in others, they are not allowed at all. This paper aimed at investigating how this conflict can be handled without threatening the unity of the church. Subukia Archdeaconry comprises of nine parishes namely: Mbogoini, Subukia, Sidai, Kabazi, Berea, Bahati, Karunga, Arahuka and Solai. Single Mothers in this Archdeaconry are over three hundred [1]. They are perceived as sinners who have fallen short of the expected standard of the church whereby, the church is seen as a bride of Christ [2]. This implies that Christ loved the church so much that he died for it to make believers clean and holy, hence expected to measure to the standard of the church. Single mothers are isolated in most of the activities of the church hence subjected to loneliness. Some of the ministries they are excluded from include preaching, conducting services, partaking of sacraments of infant baptism and Eucharist, leadership positions, ushering, enrolment into the Mothers Union (MU), (until they attain the age of fifty years), instructing children and hosting visitors in the church. The irony of the matter is that when the church

has financial need especially in development, it does not mind involving single mothers.

The church in Kenya is notably not responding adequately to the needs of the single mothers in respective households because, like any other human being, they have needs, which they are denied by the church. Socially, everybody likes to be associated with other people, institutions, social clubs, age, grade, or family. The sense of belonging makes people to seek fellowship with others in places such as the church. Single Mothers need to be associated with their families, to be associated with other women, especially married women in the church who have a lot to offer, particularly in family values. Even though they may not be married in the future, they have children who may one day marry. It is in these social gatherings that a single mother learns about family values which she would, in turn, pass on to her children. In this view the church has not lived up to the required theological standards in responding to the rise and restoration of single mothers. It is the view of this study that the phenomena of single mothers can be incorporated in the church without compromising its unity. This paper explores challenges facing single mothers in the A.C.K church and provides possible solutions.

Single Mothers and the Church

Single mothers' families have been rendered vulnerable and it has been difficult for the family church to accept them as families because they tend to identify them with sin and sinful behavior [3]. Spann [4] agree that the church has serious problems dealing with single mothers. A stigma exists, which gives a single mother the feeling of being cursed. Because of this anger frustration, guilt, repression, and anxiety have often accompanied this feeling. Single mothers are likely to think God is far from them because churches appear uninterested in them [4]. It goes without saying that the church is really faced with the challenge of teaching the leadership to consider some strategies that may cater for inclusion of single mothers in the entire church program. Single mothers need fellowship, nurturing, caring, and spiritual guidance and counseling. They need a place where they can have a sense of belong and support from other people with whom they can share similar problems and concerns [3].

In a two parent family-oriented church, a single mother is considered a living reminder of the fragility of family life. A strong possibility existed that mother-only families made local churches feel uncomfortable. Local churches have designed programs with two parent families as their model. But Laurie and Stewart [5] see it differently. He says: "It is Biblical to love persons wherever they happen to be rather than if they move to the spot we have designed for them" [3].

According to Maston [6] the Biblical family is to promote the kingdom of God on earth and to provide understanding, love, and the companionship for its members. The church is to be a place of support and safety for all its members. Single mothers need this kind of support because they are overwhelmed by parental duties. Maston [6] further indicates that single mothers have been wounded by death, divorce, desertion, and all the other causes of their parental status. He adds that single mothers' families have been rendered vulnerable in the process of becoming one parent homes. Like the other researchers cited above, Maston [6] asserts that it has been very difficult for the family oriented church to accommodate and acknowledge the single mothers as genuine members of the church, with the right to fully participate in the entire church program. Inability to separate sin from the sinner causes rejection of single mothers by the local church. Many single parent homes were created by divorce. This makes the situation to become worse because divorce is unacceptable to the church. Some researchers argue that the church should learn to separate a sinner from sin; the church should promote Biblical forgiveness.

Ensworth [7], states that "we are required by the Bible to come alongside of people who hurt, and offer them the redemptive healing grace of God". He

[7] posits that the church is required to find ways of understanding the needs and concerns confronting single adult women and lead them into reconciliation rather than alienation. "As a vicar you cannot help thinking: What can I do about all this? Is it in my powers to change the thinking of these people?" Laurie and Stewart [5] believe that it is important for the church to start fresh ministries for single adults. This according to Laurie and Stewart [5] will help single mothers to understand that they are regarded as important in the church and that they too have a peep group of their own. Laurie and Stewart [5] therefore push for careful selection of leaders for single mothers in the local church.

RESULTS

This research utilizes interviews and focus group discussion as primary data collection methods. Respondents included members of the church, both women and men, single others as well as couples. The clergy also formed part of the respondents.

Stereotypes about single mothers by the church

85% of the believers agree that there is stigmatization of the mothers in the church. 70% of the population affirms that the church has precisely turned a blind eye on the issue and declined to address it over the years. In addition, many of them do not have the confidence to raise stigmatization issue to the church authorities. This is attributed to the fact that all the leadership positions in the church are headed by married couples who more often do not are not ready to listen and secondly, the habitual segregation on the single mothers has taken place in the church for so long, and the single mothers do not see and hope that their voices could be heard and addresses. In addition the attitude of the church towards the single mothers is very disturbing. The church notion on the single mothers is that they are uninformed, prejudiced and ignorant.

Stereotyping is a very detrimental act by the church towards its development. Not only are the members affected spiritually but their social circles and psychology are severely affected. When a church is affected numerically, spiritually and morally, it will lose the communities respect. The ACK Subukia church is a center that many worshipers respect and desire to worship every single Sunday. But with the increment in the number of single mothers in the congregation, the community is not happy with the directions that the church has given. Most leaders that were interviewed seconded the stereotyping nature of the single mothers in the church because they explained that the church take marriage as a sacred entity and it still promotes the traditional beliefs that marriage is the primary goal of life.

Furthermore, there is concern on what happens to the church's next generation of children whose mothers have been segregated by the church? How are

the kids expected to grow spiritually if they are not allowed to be baptized? Are the mothers to blame if some of the children were conceived from rape? What happens to the children whose parents had to run from abusive marriages and opted to stay single? These are some of the questions the single mothers seek to ask the A.C.K Subukia church leadership, but they have not been accorded to the right forum to do so.

Depression and pain

Approximately 95% of single mothers especially at Kabazi parish experience pain and suffer depression as a result of stigmatization by the community. Much of the pain experienced by the single mothers of the region is brought by the shame of living a single parent life whose cause is divorce, abuse in marriage, death, and rape. Furthermore, 80% of the single mothers who divorced their spouse are unwilling to revive their marriages. The primary reason for the single mother's failure to forgive their former spouse is that every time they saw their former husbands with new lovers, they felt angry. The pain is further increased if the partners share the same church with the divorcee. However, a church is not responsible for sharing every individual problem but a place to offer harmony everyone cannot be satisfied with the church operations. But as noted it is the primary responsibility of the church leadership to ensure every member of the church can call the church their home.

A single mother by the name Wanjiku (not her real name) expressed her anger when she recalled as a man who she lost her virginity to while she had just completed high school and he abandoned her with an illegitimate child. As she expressed herself in tears, it was hard for her to understand why in place of the church covering her shame and accepting her in the church they chose to crucify her with her child. According to her, she could have decided to abort the child but instead decided to keep the child, and her only hope was to run for the church where he expected to be embraced by the Christian but instead since her arrival he has had to deal with rejection and misery. According to the respondents interviewed, the children they are left with leave them with a sense of guilt and all they can do is condemn themselves every time. The scripture notes that when one comes to Christ all is made new. However, according to the participants in place of the church giving them comfort and acceptance the church notably magnifies the problem more than ten times by rejecting them translating to guilt and anger, frustration, bitterness, jealousy and development of an unforgiving spirit.

Financial burden

Based on the discussions held with the single mothers, it is evident there is a dramatic change in their lifestyle upon either loss of their husbands or divorce. Approximately 80% of the respondents noted that they had to change their lifestyle because they were now the

ones responsible for taking care of their families. Many of the single mothers who had been widowed or divorced noted that they had to change their dressing styles and they opted to put on dull colors, 70% of the ladies noted they had to reduce on their social functions such as going upcountry often. 50% of the respondents indicated they had to change their eating habits. The single others noted the change of lifestyle was not easy for them. They were all over sudden the breadwinners and had to stay strong for their children. Moreover, in addition to the primary wage earner imposed to the women, they were also forced to shield more responsibilities that their husbands functioned major.

Moreover, the single mothers notably have a tendency to push their children to focus more on education. This is because they have the notion their children have to get the best education for them to succeed in life. A bigger proportion of the group interviewed further noted that with the already escalating financial responsibilities imposed on them, many of them did not find extra money to give to church projects. A section of the respondents went ahead and highlighted many of the church projects that required contributions; the married women often gave the largest contributions. More so, this is because they could be able to gather the required money from their husbands, however, for the single mothers they had no one to depend on for financial help.

Single mothers do not feel that they belong to the church

The typical family that is presented in the media is that consists of Dad, mom, and children. The church is not different as it is made up of related families. Approximately 70% of single mothers feel that the church has not provided a room for them; they often struggle to fit a place where they can meet and serve in the church. The Anglican Church in Subukia is severely lacking in its single mother's community programs. The single mothers further explained they feel that unplanned pregnancy, separation, divorce cases are often categorized by the church to be some of the most significant sins in comparison to cheating, lying, stealing or other sins that God hates. Thus, this has led to the church believing that having any single mothers program may be in a way be the promotion of "a loose sexual lifestyle." Research has proved that single parents have the capability to arrive at their journey in a variety of ways, just as different the single parents in the communities there are also some amazing single mothers who are thriving in their local churches. Also, it is not fair to paint every church with the same brush as there are amazing churches in Kenya that are doing amazing things for the single mothers. Thus, it is unto the church leadership under study to take action regarding the single mothers.

Moreover, many single mothers further explained they fear being judged by the church member. They have the notion the congregation may not wholly accept them and this results in some single mothers carrying some shame that may have led in their current situation. May despite the struggles they are going through, feel they have failed their children and cannot fit to be a role model for their children as they have not demonstrated the church foundation of families. Therefore, with the shame and the lack of children fitting in the society, a significant portion approximately 20% of the single mothers interviewed could not forgive themselves for the failures they had caused. However, we thank God that the church is around Kenya has started recognizing that there is need to reach the single mothers in the communities. Many of the religions have understood the church ought to be "inclusive" rather than being "exclusive." The Bible further explains that Jesus did not only come to see the finely dresses that are perceived to be sin free but rather came so that even the desperate and miserable cold life and live abundantly according to the riches of heaven.

Focus Group discussion analysis

Immorality

Approximately 60% at Sidai and Subukia revealed that they had a problem with single mothers' morality. Most of the clergy indicated that they were suspicious of their immorality. They confessed to have had cases of the same in the church. One clergy singled out a case of a single mother who had fallen in love with a married man who had left his family. The clergy explained the pain where both had to be in the same church. During the focus group discussion that involved a majority of them being pastors' wives, they noted they were the ones who were left with the trouble of amending the church. Traditional set up of the church, the clergy wives are tasked with many women organization function, and in scenarios where there are conflicts, the clergy wives are anticipated to try and solve the problems before they escalate to the pastors. However, cases of infidelity in the church are not take slightly especially the single mothers are accused of causing the trouble. With the high rising number of single mothers in churches today, the clergy wives are specially tasked to ensure there are continual harmony and unity in the church activities.

Single mothers admitted it was not easy to manage the problem alone. They also said generalization has prompted to this. They said if Love, support, and acceptance were offered to them they would do it. However, the clergy wives had a different opinion on the single mother appeal of them being offered love support and acceptance. Their feel was, if the single mothers desired to get love, acceptance, and support from the church, then why did many of them an adventure to break more marriages in the church. Moreover, many clergywomen noted, the single mothers have needs that they need to be addressed but

why do many of them focus on already married man why not settle for the unmarried men in the church. Apparently, the tension between the single mothers and the clergy wives may not come to an end anytime soon. Approximately 95% of clergy wives attested to the fact that they could not trust single mothers.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

Contemporary church traditions pose an unnecessary challenge to single mothers when they come to seek ministry from the Church. In addition, there is a growing distance between the Church and single mothers and by extension the congregation because of the long practiced traditions. There are also more than adequate biblical grounds that the Church can use to restore single mothers to the body of Christ and extend ministry to them. The justification of the paper was done based on the findings done concerning the issue of single mothers in the church, in particular, the Anglican church Subukia on the social front; single mothers are regarded as misfits just because they are not married. Their children go through unique challenges because of being viewed as illegitimate which creates mental torture for them. Through this study, the church is prompted to find ways to change society's mind by being the agent of change.

The church is required to know that there are two identified aspects concerning single mothers in the church today, they are expected to curb the rise of the single mothers in the church and restoring those who are single mothers into the body of Christ. The single mothers are not allowed to commune in the Eucharist, their children are denied of their baptism, the single mothers are not authorized to join the Mothers Union despite there not being any justification of their not joining. They are not authorized to participate in the leadership of the church elections and are not permitted to take part in the ministry of the word. Therefore, despite the skills that the single mothers may possess they are not allowed to take part in the church based on the church doctrinal laws and cultures.

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