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PASTORAL CARE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CHILDREN IN MAINLINE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN HARARE-ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to establish the quality of pastoral care offered to ECD children in the mainline Christian churches. The qualitative research design based on questionnaires, interviews and observations was used. Participants in the study were parents, Early Childhood Development (ECD) children, priests, and religious instructors. Data was thematically analyzed. Findings revealed that some ECD children got Sunday school classes while others did not. Results highlighted that the Christian churches lacked expertise in dealing with ECD children. Advocacy by knowledgeable ECD stakeholders was recommended. The study also recommended a training curriculum for trainee priests emphasizing the pastoral care of ECD children.

General Terms: Early Childhood Development

Keywords: Early Childhood development, Pastoral care, Bible, sermon, drama, songs, stories, affective, Sunday School, Preaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

It takes creative Early Childhood Development (ECD) Bible lessons and Christian instructions to keep the children interested. It is never too early to begin planting God's word into the hearts of ECD children. ECD children can learn powerful biblical truths that will shape their lives. When the audience is a group of ECD children, the preacher needs creative ideas and children's sermons to capture their attention so as to absorb the truth of God's word, and to hold on to it for as long as they can. The study looks at the background to the study, the statement of the problem, methodology, data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

ECD is defined as the period from pregnancy and birth to the age of eight years (Christie, 2008; Thomas & Thomas, 2009). Pastoral care is the process of offering a friendship that is intentionally seeking to walk with ECD children along their holistic path of development (White, 2002). Its focus is on emotional support and spiritual care. Spiritual development involves the integration of one's beliefs, value, meaning and self-worth and these are intangible elements, such as beliefs about self and others. Religious beliefs may eventually be part of what a child believes about himself and others, but it is only one of the many factors that make up spirituality (Gillan, 2007). Understanding the value of religious instruction and spiritual development of a young child will go a long way in helping to understand how to foster the child's spiritual development. It will also help to inform and guide the process of religious instruction (Stewart and Berryman, 1989). The study sought to establish the mainline Christian churches' understanding of ECD children's spiritual development processes.

ECD children learn God's love and care through their relationships and the affective dimension (White, 2002). The smiles, gentle touches, soothing words and songs, and affection given all demonstrate the love and acceptance of a gracious God (Dunn, 1986; Lee, 1988; Vader, 2007). The foundation for religious instruction focuses on a God who is; loving, accepting, caring, concerned, and trustworthy and in whom we can find contentment. Stories from the Bible which demonstrate these characteristics include the story of creation and a myriad of other stories that demonstrate God's care and concern for those who trust in Him: Moses in the bulrushes; water from a rock; ravens feeding Elijah; Jesus making breakfast for His disciples; Jesus' miracles, and so on. The goal is to teach the ECD child that God loves and cares for those who trust in Him. The current study sought to establish whether a loving God is being preached in the mainline Christian churches to ECD children.

As the young child's cognitive abilities develop, the religious instruction can be enhanced by the affective dimension; a dimension which can be influenced, developed, and taught through specific pedagogical skills (Lee, 1988). Research indicates that the development of the young child's affective dimension must be purposely taught (Lee, 1988). Parents/priests/religious instructors intentionally attend to the child's affective behaviours, communicate and respond empathically, name and describe feelings and use nonverbal behaviours and signs. For instance, the story of Naaman may include the kindness of the little maid, Mrs Naaman's worry, and unhappiness and Naaman's anger when told to wash in the dirty river Jordan. Everyone is happy when Naaman is obedient and God heals him. The freedom to make decisions, both good and bad, is discussed. Obedience is emphasized and yet, disobedience must come into the conversation from time to time. Lessons must be learned and consequences experienced. The study sought to establish the extent of affective teaching of Bible stories to ECD children in the mainline Christian churches.

Christian families and churches provide a unique medium for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with ECD children. In order to accomplish this, the social and emotional climate of the entire home/church must reflect the character of Christ: Love, care, unconditional acceptance, warmth, giving, forgiveness, empathy, altruism, carefulness and thoroughness (Lee, 1988). An environment of this type, along with the instructional behaviours exhibited, are vital in helping young children learn to love an unseen God (Lee, 1988; White, 2002), without which, children may learn to be apathetic, lacking feelings and emotions, concern and interest (Lee, 1988). Probably the most important lessons to learn at this stage have to do with the picture of God that is being formed in the child's mind. A demanding, arbitrary parent/priest/religious instructor will be reflected in Bible stories and represent a demanding, arbitrary God. An unpredictable, undependable parent/priest/religious instructor will also mirror an unpredictable and undependable God (Vader, 2006). It is important then, for the significant adults in the child's lives to be examples of the loving, caring, and forgiving God so well depicted within the stories of Scripture. The study sought to establish the picture of God displayed by the significant others in the ECD children's lives and its impact on their spiritual development.

One's self-concept is predicated upon the personal value instilled into the young child from infancy and the significant adult will emphasise both self-esteem and self-worth (White, 2002). The stories of self-sacrifice, submission and selflessness become meaningful as the young child participates in various acts of kindness and thoughtfulness towards others. As the young child participates in projects that help to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sick and confined (Kanter, 2007) they learn life lessons that strengthen their ability to empathize with the plight of others. They learn to appreciate the gift of all life because of the gift of eternal life provided to them by a gracious, ever-present God. Such lessons should span the entirety of daily life from the caring of plants and animals to the care of other children, adults and the elderly. The ultimate example of selflessness, that of God giving His only begotten Son, is held in deep reverence and appreciation. So too, are the reasons for God's gift: to demonstrate God's character; to provide us an example of how we should be; to establish our faith in God's promises; and to give us hope. The study sought to ascertain whether ECD children are encouraged to participate in the various acts of kindness within the mainline Christian churches.

Policymakers and program administrators often emphasize the importance of providing high-quality pastoral services for ECD children. Although "quality" can refer to a number of factors, research indicates that the most important factor in determining quality of pastoral care programs may be what preachers do, and how they do it, when interacting with children (Vader, 2006). Professional development of pastoral workers may result in improved interactions with ECD children, which may lead to considerable skill gains in children (Vader, 2006). However, professional development can take many forms, and public funds devoted to pastoral leaders' development must be used in ways that are beneficial to ECD children, not in ways that are merely convenient to professional-development providers (Kanter, 2007). Therefore, the study sought to establish the quality of professionalism of the pastoral carers and its impact on addressing ECD children's pastoral needs.

The preacher and ECD children gather symbolically and the preacher is neither the expert in scriptural interpretation nor the answer person in matters of faith (Kanter, 2007). Here the preacher is simply the one charged with the responsibility of focusing homiletical conversation for the particular service. Although one person *may* do all the speaking during the time set aside for the sermon, it is the priesthood of believers, the entire community of faith, that is responsible for exploring the word and deciding its meanings, its claims, and its direction pointing (Vader, 2006). The idea of expository preaching is that the preacher becomes the mouthpiece of his/her text, opening it up and applying it as the word of God to his/her hearers, speaking in order that the text may be heard, and making each point from his/her text in such a manner that his/her hearers may discern the voice of God." The purpose of preaching is not that we

ourselves might be heard, but that the text of the Word of God might be heard. The study sought to establish whether ECD children were valued as active participants in their spiritual development.

It would appear that ECD children lack effective religious instruction in the churches and schools. The fault of children not being instructed effectively lies in the churches' pulpits lacking power of all embracing homiletics (Vader, 2006). At the heart of this lack of power is an impotent pulpit. Seduced by the sirens of modernity preachers have jettisoned a word-based ministry that is expository in nature but not reaching down to the real lives of ECD children. The church has in its attempt to be popular and relevant, become foolish and irrelevant. Therefore the purpose of this study was to establish the extent of pastoral care and its impact on the holistic development of ECD children in the mainline Christian churches.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Research indicates that the most important factor in determining quality of pastoral care programs may be what preachers do, and how they do it, when interacting with children (Vader, 2006). However, it would appear that ECD children lack effective religious instruction and active participation in the construction of their faith in the main line Christian churches. The fault of children not being instructed effectively lies in the churches' pulpits lacking power of all embracing homiletics (Kanter, 2007). At the heart of this lack of power is an impotent pulpit where homiletics concentrates on youths and adults while paying little or no attention to ECD children. The purpose of the study was to establish the quality of pastoral care offered to ECD children in the mainline Christian churches.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design

The research design, which was mainly qualitative, was used for this study. The qualitative design was preferred because it is the most appropriate design where perceptions of participants are sought *in situ* (Creswell, 2009). Patton (2002) states that in qualitative research, direct quotations and excerpts from open-ended interviews can be cited as they present the participants' perceptions. In the present study, verbal quotes of pastoral carers and ECD parents were relevant as they captured the participants' perceptions of the pastoral care of ECD children. As qualitative research is the interpretive study of a specified phenomenon or problem, the researcher becomes central to the analysis of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). When qualitative methods of collecting data are used, the data collected can be inaccurate because respondents are often untruthful or biased (Creswell, 2009). The researcher tried to create a warm environment during observations so as to build trust with respondents.

4.2 Sample

A sample is a representative selected for a study whose characteristics exemplify the larger group from which it was selected (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A purposive sample was done of Harare urban Christian churches. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) define purposive sampling as an approach whereby participants are selected because of the rich information they hold that is required to answer the research questions. The sample was drawn from Harare urban because that is where the researcher resides. Only two churches from each of the mainline Christian churches were sampled, one from the centre of town and the second one from the high density suburb. Only 5 main line Christian churches were sampled for the study. 30 ECD parents, 10 Priests in Charge, and 30 religious instructors were purposively sampled.

4.3 Instruments

Detailed observations were used for the study. These were used at each of the ten mainline Christian churches to observe the quality of pastoral care of ECD children. Observations were successfully used to describe what was happening in context and why (Silverman, 2006). The observations that took place led to the follow-up in-depth interviews for triangulation purposes. Patton (2002) suggests that questionnaires are the least expensive means of gathering data and are easy to construct and to administer. This therefore means that responses can be found from more people. Creswell (2009) also states that questionnaires give respondents a greater feeling of anonymity and thus encourage open responses to sensitive issues. Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) point out the questionnaires give the researcher an opportunity to establish rapport and explain items that are not clear.

In administering questionnaires there are however, a number of precautions that the researcher had to take into account. Silverman (2006) notes that filling out lengthy questionnaires takes time and effort and thus the researcher had to guard against that by making them short and precise. In other words the researcher had to ensure that the participants read the items quickly, understood its intent and give a response without difficulty. Moreover, the researcher was able to help respondents like Early Childhood Development pastoral carers read the item quickly, understood its intent and give a response without difficulty. In support, McMillan and Schumacher (2010) posit that the researcher should make language very clear. To ensure clarity, the researcher gave clear instructions on how to respond to the items in the questionnaire.

Open ended items were used in collecting data from the participants. In this regard, Silverman (2006) is of the opinion that open ended items reduce ambiguity as respondents can give their chosen responses than being guided to choose from a fixed set of responses. There may be less frustration experienced by participants when responding to open ended items and the approach is realistic in that people rarely say 'yes' or 'no' to a statement, without giving a comment. In comparison bio-data collected from close ended items had the advantage that large amounts of data were collected conveniently and quickly (Patton, 2002). Through close ended items, it is possible to collect large amounts of data from the respondents, in this study of the pastoral care of ECD children.

5. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Responsible authorities of the five different mainline Christian churches in Harare. The researcher observed the different mainline Christian churches during services, handed out questionnaires, and conducted in-depth interviews after discussing the ethical issues. The researcher visited the purposively sampled Harare mainline churches and interviewed the participants at their convenient times. The Priests and religious instructors were interviewed after their church services upon making prior appointments, while the ECD parents were given questionnaires after the church services. Permission to carry out the observations and interviews was sought from the Priests in Charge or Administrators and or Bishops of the respective churches.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

Data was content analysed as per each emerging theme from the findings. The analysis included reporting verbatim the participants' responses.

7. DATA PRESENTATION

Findings of the study are presented thematically as follows:

7.1 Sunday school

Findings revealed that Sunday school in the centre of Harare town was more prominent than in the High density suburbs. In this view the following excerpt is given from a church administrator's response to questionnaires, *"You will notice that the church in town is more rigorous in offering Sunday school than our rural and high density suburbs' churches"*. In some churches the high density suburbs offered Christian instructions on Saturday mornings but toddlers were not included. The once a week in the evening church services for children excluded ECD children as well. This maybe because the children were meant to walk long distances hence toddlers could not go alone. The fact that there was less Sunday school rigour in high density suburbs may be because there were no policies to that effect as highlighted by one priest who noted that, *"Sunday school is my initiative which I have inherited from a late religious sister"*. It was also noted that Sunday school catered for the children's needs and interests as illustrated, *"Sunday school takes care of the children's individual needs as they are grouped according to their age groups"*. It was also highlighted in the study that while Sunday school was good, it was crucial for parents to know the religious curriculum imparted to their children for continuity purposes. To quote a parent's view, *"The instructors are doing very well but I think it will be good for us to get to know the syllabus used"*.

Observations made revealed that during Sunday school children were exposed to Bible stories, praise and worship, games, and role playing. In some instances Sunday school imparted church doctrine. In some instances the parents felt that Sunday school was in English making it difficult for some children to understand it. The following illustration highlights this view; *"The religious instructions are in English and I suggest that they be done in the mother tongue as some of our children miss out on important messages"*. It was revealed in the study that the Sunday school environment was child friendly and the lessons learnt could be observed from the life the ECD children lived. To illustrate this view one parent responded as follows to the open ended questionnaire guide, *"Sunday school is child friendly and my child retells church teachings. I can tell that the behaviour is guided by Bible stories learnt from Sunday school"*. Findings also highlighted that, some Christian churches held Sunday services for children especially during the school term but did nothing during the holidays as their religious instructors were on holiday. It left a gap in Christian instructions during the holidays as there were no child centred sermons. Observations revealed that during children's special church services some priests/pastors used child centred methods while some lectured using heavy theological language instead of interacting with the children in simple language. It was observed that sometimes ECD children were asked to read scripture during the church services while at other times only the priest/pastor read the Gospel depriving children interaction with the scripture at a tender age. It was further observed that ECD children rarely participated or read or shared the word in church except for a few dancers. Rigorous participation in church would create in ECD children respect and ownership of Christian values. It was observed that the adage *"catch them young"* in the mainline Christian churches was weak as the ECD children were seen not heard. Observations made revealed that some volunteering religious instructors teaching ECD children were not trained for this special calling. Some instructors echoed this observation in the open ended questionnaires, *"I am a volunteer and am not trained to teach ECD children. Engaging ECD teachers would yield better results"*. However, some instructors interviewed were due for training to teach Sunday school which would make them more confident in dealing with ECD children.

7.2 Preaching

Observations made by the researcher revealed that priests/pastors' sermons concentrated on adults and youths as examples were adult oriented than child centred. Some priests noted that they were not competent to preach to ECD children as highlighted in the following excerpt, *"I do not know what to include in the sermon since I was not trained for pastoral care of ECD children"*. Observations in some church services revealed ECD children sitting right at the back in the custody of their religious instructors where it was difficult to see hear or understand the preacher. Furthermore, observations also noted very long and abstract sermons detached from the children with no practical examples touching ECD children's lives. It was also observed that sermons were not very sensitive to the concentration span of ECD children. As a result children became restless and walked in and out of church to the toilet, played with each other and so on. In support of the finding from the observations, open ended questionnaire responses from the parents highlighted that, *"these priests' sermons are not sensitive to little children and we end up sitting outside because our children become restless"*. Findings revealed that some priests/pastors felt confident to preach to ECD children while others felt incompetent to preach to children due to lack of training. To illustrate this view, one priest's response is presented as follows, *"I feel very confident and when exposed to ECD children I do very well as I learnt it from one instructor in the seminary who was so good. However, my colleagues do not feel confident as we were not trained specially in ECD children homiletics."* However, the confident priests/pastors when observed preaching to all age groups including ECD children lacked sensitivity as they concentrated on adults and youths. To explain this anomaly, the priests/pastors highlighted that, *"it is difficult to address all the age groups in homiletics in the short space of time given to preach at any given time"*. The priests who suggested that they were confident when observed during children's services were very effective in demonstrating the Bible passages. It could thus be explained that, integration of all age groups is quite challenging in the given short period if one had to deliver a touching message for all age groups.

7.3 Parental Involvement in the pastoral care of ECD children

Parents felt that they were the first teachers hence they should instruct their ECD children at home through their life styles and Bible reading to ensure that Christian ethics are upheld at a tender age. In this regard, the following response was presented from open ended questionnaires, *"Christian instructions should start early in the home since parents are the first teachers spending most of the time with ECD children"*. It was observed that some priests/pastors and some congregants were not supportive to parents when ECD children became restless and started talking and crying during church services. In support of this view parents felt that *"some priests and congregants would look at the parent with such a talking eye that the parents would end up walking out of church"*. Some respondents even labelled some priests/pastors *"anti-children priest/pastor"* because if during the sermon a child cried, the priests would stop mid-sentence and asked the parent to go outside or look at the parent sternly until s/he walked out. Worse still, parents responding to open ended questionnaires noted that they stopped going to church for fear the priests would not tolerate their ECD children's tricks as they have had nasty experiences. Contrary to the view above, some priests highlighted that when ECD children cried during church services, they were not bothered. The following excerpt highlights this view; *"I understand that children get restless, hence their naughtiness does not disturb me"*.

8. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

8.1 Sunday school

Findings revealed that Sunday school in the centre of town mainline churches was more prominent than those in the high density suburbs. The fact that there was less Sunday school intensity in high density suburbs may be because the toddlers could not go alone to church until they were much older to move around in the absence of adults. The fact that there was less Sunday school rigour in high density suburbs may be because there were no policies to that effect. It was also highlighted in the study that Sunday school catered for ECD children's needs and interests. In this view, Lee (1988) and White (2002) note that an environment of this type, along with the instructional behaviors exhibited, are vital in helping young children learn to love an unseen God without which, children may learn to be apathetic, lacking feelings and emotions, concern and interest. It was also noted in the study that while Sunday school was good, it was crucial for parents to know the religious curriculum imparted to their children for continuity purposes. Observations made revealed that, during Sunday school children were exposed to Bible stories, praise and worship, games, and role playing. This method of teaching brought excitement and kept the children focused. In some instances Sunday school imparted church doctrine. Some parents felt that Sunday school instructions were in English making it difficult for some ECD children to understand it. It was revealed in the study that the Sunday school environment was child friendly and the lessons learnt could be observed from the exemplary lives the ECD children lived. This finding concurs with Gillan (2007) who reveals that religious beliefs gathered from Christian instructions may eventually be part of what a child believes about himself and others and will thus guide his/her behaviors'. Findings also highlighted that, some Christian churches held Sunday services for children every Sunday especially during the school term but did nothing during the holidays. A gap was created in Christian instruction as in church the sermons remained focused on the adults and there were no holiday services for the children. Findings revealed that, some priests/pastors used child centred methods while some lectured instead of interacting with ECD children. Maybe the differences to the approaches used could be attributed to a training curriculum that lacked ECD emphasis and standardisation. It was sadly observed that the ECD children rarely read the scripture even during children's services depriving them interaction with Bible reading at a tender age. It was also revealed in the study that some of the instructors were not trained to deal with ECD children and as a result they were sometimes rude to ECD children. The fact that ECD children were not active participants in their pastoral development maybe because the church administrators thought they were

not knowledgeable of Scripture. However, active participation in pastoral care may speed up the ECD children's understanding of scripture and Christian values. This finding is contrary to Vader (2006) who notes that although one person *may* do all the speaking during the time set aside for the sermon, it is the priesthood of believers, the entire community of faith that is responsible for exploring the Word and deciding its meanings, its claims, and its direction pointing including ECD children.

8.2 Preaching

Findings revealed that priests/pastors' concentrated their sermons on adults and youths and examples given were adult centred only. This finding is contrary to Vader (2006) who highlights that the most important factor in determining quality of ECD pastoral care programs may be what preachers do, and how they do it, when interacting with children. Some priests/pastors noted that they were not competent to preach to ECD children. The lack of competence maybe alluded to lack of adequate training in ECD issues. Contrary to the finding, Vader (2006) notes that quality training of pastoral workers results in improved interactions with ECD children, which may lead to considerable skill gains in children. In some Christian church services the children sat right at the back with their instructors listening to a long sermon detached from children's lives. It was also observed that sermons were not sensitive to ECD children's concentration span due to priests' lack of professional understanding of ECD children. Capacity building of priests in ECD teaching methodology would improve their effectiveness in imparting pastoral care to ECD children. In this regard, Kanter (2007) highlights that professional development should take many forms, beneficial to ECD children, not in ways that are merely convenient to professional development providers. Findings revealed that priests used varied teaching methodologies to ECD children some of which were not helpful. Variation of teaching methodologies may be due to a weak training curriculum. Concentration on youths and adults during sermons may be because priests had poor time management skills since church services should embrace all the participants. The priests' failure to address ECD children's pastoral needs may also be because they did not see the importance of evangelising to ECD children.

8.3 Parental Involvement in the Pastoral Care of ECD Children

Parents felt that they were the first teachers hence they should instruct their children at home through their life styles and bible reading to ensure that Christian ethics are upheld at a tender age. This finding concurs with White (2002) who notes that ECD children, learn God's love and care through their relationships, in the affective dimension. In addition, Vader (2006) also notes that, the smiles, gentle touches, soothing words and songs, and affection given demonstrate the love and acceptance of a gracious God. The parents further highlighted that the children could be involved in projects like caring for the sick, preaching in church and so on. This finding concurs with Kanter (2007) who notes that as the young child participates in projects that help to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the sick and confined they will learn life lessons that will strengthen their ability to empathize with the plight of others. Findings revealed that some priests/pastors and some congregants were not supportive to parents when ECD children became restless during church services. Contrary to the view above, some priests/pastors highlighted that when ECD children cried during church services, they were not disturbed.

9. CONCLUSIONS

From the findings of this study the following conclusions are made; Sunday school is prominent in low density suburbs than in the high density suburbs, parents see the fruits of Sunday school in their children's lives, the Sunday school syllabus may be exposed to parents for continuity purposes at home, parents are the first teachers of Christian values and they should be serious about it, that priests rather concentrated on adults when preaching to a composite group of congregants, that some priests/pastors were not sensitive to ECD children's concentration span and that parents were not fully supported by priests/pastors and congregants when children became restless.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations may be made;

- That the seminary curriculum may infuse and emphasise training of ECD centred teaching methods so that the priests/pastors maybe able to address the ECD children's pastoral needs effectively.
- That intense training maybe given to ECD religious instructors so that they may be effective in their teaching.
- That reading material appropriate for ECD children may be developed so that they also feel involved in church services.
- Advocacy by knowledgeable ECD stakeholders may improve the church's view of pastoral care of ECD children.
- That sermon may be all encompassing and sometimes interactive to accommodate ECD children.
- That ECD children may frequently participate read and share the word during church services to inculcate gospel values at an early age.
- That the church may keep abreast with current trends and come up with policies that address those needs.

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