

The Roles of Women in the Spiritual Development and Formation of Children in the Anglican Church in Kenya

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Abstract

This article examines the instrumental roles being played by women in the Anglican Church in Kenya, diocese of Thika in the spiritual development and formation of their children. James Fowler's theory of faith development was applied to help analyse the central roles women play in shaping, moulding and nurturing children spiritually. Methodologically, this study used the data from questionnaires and interviews that were conducted with clergy and Christians from twenty one parishes in the diocese of Thika. The study findings indicate that while spiritual development and formation of children is a corporate responsibility in the Christian faith, it has been highly influenced by social and cultural constructions that perceive this as a 'women only' responsibility. To this end, women have taken leading roles in the spiritual development and formation of children in the Anglican Church in Kenya, in the Diocese of Thika. Such roles include the teaching ministry of children in the Church, good role modelling to children in terms of faith and their ministry of being ever – present in the life of children.

Introduction

Most African societies highly value and treasure children as the source of new life because children bring joy, hope and life in the society and make it sustainable. John Mbiti does not hesitate to state that "children are the buds of society, and every birth is the arrival of 'spring' when life shoots out and the community thrives."² This means that children are blessings rather than a liability in most African societies. As such, one can sire as many children as possible, as they are looked upon as source of wealth in future when they grow up, which is of course not the reason for having children in the first place.

Children are cherished in the family and their birth is a great source of celebration. For example, among the Kikuyu women in Kenya, their joy is expressed in ululations. If it is a boy child born, women do shout five ululations while for the girl child it is four. These ululations play a fundamental role as they serve as signal to the child's father, the sex or the gender of the child born because it is a taboo for Kikuyu men to draw closer to their women during delivery time. However, this phenomenon is rapidly changing today due to the many interactions with other cultures and particularly the western culture. At this time gifts exchange hands and there is frequent movement of women in the society to usher in the new 'guest' in the community. Therefore children are an integral and important part of an African community for they ensure continuity of life and community.

With this extraordinary jubilation in the society, comes the enormous responsibility of bringing up the new 'guest' in the community. This entails bringing up this child spiritually,

² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1969), 110.

morally, socially and physically. While all these aspects of the human growth are equally essential, this article gives more attention to the spiritual growth and development of children. As it is not merely an anecdote but "...is an established scientific fact"³ children are born spiritual beings. As spiritual beings then, children in our Churches call out for spiritual development and formation because they desire to remain today and tomorrow in the Church.

Whereas in some communities children are generally shunned, we find Jesus had a special place for children during his earthly ministry. Catherine Stonehouse observed this and argues "Jesus takes seriously the child's faith and the protection of it ... for in his teachings, Jesus saw a high view of children and their spirituality. Therefore children's faith is real, not just a weak forerunner of adult spirituality but an example for adults."⁴ While Christ saw the unique place of children in his kingdom, the question today remains, who then is responsible for children spiritual development and formation? It is in light of this quagmire that this article anticipates to examine the extent to which women in the Anglican Church in Kenya, diocese of Thika have been instrumental in the spiritual development and formation of children.

Faith Development Theory

The Faith Development Theory is derived from James Fowler who conducted a critical study of children's "earliest constructions of God."⁵ He argued that every human being is born with a spiritual inclination towards a Supreme Being/God. In this theory, he envisioned that human beings grow spiritually in a progressive manner and that spiritual formation at earliest stage is simplistic and improves gradually as children continue to grow. Interestingly, he observed that faith development takes a certain form "in order to illuminate a path persons follow from the origins and awakenings of faith through the interactive process of forming and reforming frames of meaning, in and between communities of shared traditions and practices."⁶ It is in light of this understanding that this article uses Fowler's theory to show how the life of women is fundamental in spiritual development and formation of children. Through this theory, not only the influence of women in children's spiritual development and formation is evident, but also the central role of shaping and moulding children spiritually.

Methodology

Methodologically, this article used a mixed – method approach where the researcher sent twenty one self-completing questionnaires to twenty one parishes in two archdeacons, namely the Cathedral and Thika Memorial in the diocese. The purpose of using the questionnaires was to establish who is ultimately responsible in the diocese for the spiritual development and formation of children in Sunday school. Upon receiving the statistic of the teachers involved in the children ministry in these two archdeacons women emerged the majority and this prompted me to conduct a semi – structured interviews with five participants to know why women are the dominant factor in the children ministry in the diocese. These participants were clergy, the Diocesan Mother's Union co-ordinator and three lay people.

³Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The Science on Parenting for Health and Life Long Thriving*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 2.

⁴Catherine Stonehouse, "After a Child's First Dance with God: Accompanying Children on a Protest Spiritual Journey," in Karen – Marie Yust et al, ed., *Nurturing Child and Adolescence Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2006), 97.

⁵James W. Fowler, "Faith Development Theory and Postmodern Challenges," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 3, (2001), 162.

⁶Fowler, Faith Development Theory and Postmodern Challenges, 167.

On data analysis, which involved “the process of making sense and meaning out of the data, through consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read,”⁷ the researcher used discourse analysis. Where discourse analysis is defined as a detailed exploration of political, personal, media or academic ‘talk’ and ‘writing’ about a subject, designed to reveal how knowledge is organized, carried and reproduced in particular ways and through particular institutional practices.⁸ Various discourses emerged and are discussed here below. These discourses stipulate the central roles that women are playing in the spiritual development and formation of children.

The Roles of Women in the ACK Diocese of Thika in Spiritual Development and Formation of Children

Christ identified the central place of children in his earthly ministry. However, this vanished with his death because in spite of children being so close to God’s heart as Tina Houser argues “children are so highly regarded that God refers to adults who possess childlike qualities as children,”⁹ they were neglected later by the Church. It was until later in the Church history that children spiritual development and formation took the center stage as Stonehouse discloses this stalemate that it is until “the sixteenth century, when the spiritual nurture of children got the attention and energies of Protestant Christians.”¹⁰

In the Anglican tradition, women in the umbrella of Mother’s Union play a significant role in this noble task of spiritual development and formation of children. Their remarkable role in the life of children got the attention of Lambeth conference 1998 that expressed their gratitude to mother’s Union for their self - sacrificing task.¹¹

It is on this note that this section will analyse the essential roles that women in the ACK diocese of Thika are playing in the spiritual development and formation of their children.

Teaching ministry

Teaching is one of the focal roles that women are playing in the diocese of Thika in spiritual development and formation of their children. This is evident in statistics that were collected from the archdeaconries,¹² which show that more than eighty percent of Sunday school teachers are women.¹³ As faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17), it suggests that the children in the diocese are learning the word of God through the teaching ministry of the women. Through this self – sacrificing ministry to children, women are able

⁷Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, (San Francisco: Jossey – Bass, 2009), 175 - 176.

⁸James Harding, *Qualitative Data Analysis from Start to Finish*, (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 139.

⁹Tina Houser, “Building Children Ministry: A Practical Guide, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2008), 4.

¹⁰Stonehouse, *After a Child’s First Dance with God*, 95.

¹¹See Lambeth Conference 1998 Resolution 111.8 in

Justus.anglican.org/resources/lambeth1998/lc98res/sec3.html#3.18 Accessed on 29/05/2015.

¹²Cathedral had 105 Sunday school teachers while Memorial had 45.

¹³ See ACK Diocese of Thika. Preparatory Report for the Sixth Ordinary Session of the Diocesan Synod, (17th – 18th April 2009), 52.

not only to care for children physically but through their ministry “touch hearts and minds of children so that they will desire to live godly lives.”¹⁴ In this regard, Sunday school plays a fundamental role in the spiritual development and formation of children and what I have observed in the last ten years of my ordained ministry is that women have been the ones touching and inspiring the hearts and minds of children in the diocese.

While the teaching ministry in the Church is a calling, it is evident the ministry to children is dominated by women as men involvement in the diocese is minimal. When I inquired from the diocesan Christians why women are the majority in the teaching ministry of children various responses were given such as

Because they are the one who knows what it means to give birth, so they have that in their heart.¹⁵

Most men think that caring for children is not their job. They find it involving, and they would like to have more say in the Church so they leave children to mothers.¹⁶

African tradition has always portrayed children as women business and since men have been granted higher more noble position in the Church they cannot bother with minor responsibilities like looking after children.¹⁷

From these responses, various gender issues emerged for discussion as far as women are the dominant figure in the teaching ministry of children. One of the reasons is their attachment to children as mothers that have much deeper relationship. Respondent 01# attributes this attachment to the pang of birth when she says ‘*they are the one who knows what it means to give birth*’. This suggests that due to the pang of birth that is only understood by women, gives them special burden and passion of caring about the wellbeing of their children. This unique attachment between children and women (their mothers) develop a symbiotic relationship that Madeleine Grumet traces from:

The pressure of labour and the wrenching expulsion of the infant physically recapitulate the terrors of coming apart, of losing a part of one-self. The symbiosis continues past parturition, as the sucking infants drains her mother’s swollen breasts of milk, reasserting the dominance of the child’s time over the mother’s as lactation and sleep as well as respond to the duration and strength of the child’s hunger and vigour.¹⁸

So according to Grumet the symbiotic relationship between children and women (their mothers) is a long one that begins at birth and is cemented during weaning period. This develops a strong attachment and deeper relationship between children and women (their mothers) who take care of them by providing security and nourishment. What is conspicuous is that this symbiotic relationship extends in Church where women passion for their children

¹⁴Houser, Building Children Ministry, 3.

¹⁵Interview with respondent 01#, Field Notes, (Mutugu, 20th May 2015).

¹⁶Interview with respondent 02#, Field Notes, (Kamenu, 21st March 2015).

¹⁷Interview with respondent 03#, Field Notes, (Juja, 31st May 2015).

¹⁸Madeleine R. Grumet, Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching, (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 10.

is evident and that is why they perceive this noble calling as their responsibility for spiritual nourishment of their children.

Another reason that emerges is gender roles how they have been socially constructed in the society in which we live. Through the gender roles in the society there has risen division of labour that depict children rearing as the responsibility of women and particularly in Africa. This was evident in the diocesan Christians' discourses that children rearing are women's role. Respondent 02# put this assumption clearly that '*Most men think this is not their job caring for children. They find it involving.*' As such, this respondent implies that men attribute this role to women and the striking thing is, men find it 'involving'.

As women role, men take refuge in the African tradition and claim that it is '*women business*' as respondent 03# observed. However, when going back to the African tradition, one notes that men have been doing two things. One is that they have been conspicuously hiding from their responsibilities in the name of the African tradition. And secondly, they have been neglecting this unique role of bringing up their children together with their wives and instead absconding their role in the name of 'African tradition'. But, Jomo Kenyatta¹⁹ and John Mbiti²⁰ disclose that children upbringing that involves teaching and passing down core values is a corporate responsibility in the society that include the living and the departed. This means that the responsibility of teaching and bringing up children in the African society is not a one person show but a community responsibility where men and women live together.

Consequently, through the gender roles in the society, some roles have been perceived as inferior while others superior. According to the diocesan Christians, teaching children has been perceived as one of the inferior roles in the Church, in spite of children being at the center of God's heart. As inferior role, most men neglect this noble calling of shaping their children spirituality and leave it only to women as they perceive it as inferior role and '*minor responsibility*'²¹ in the Church because '*they would like to have more say in the Church so they leave children to mothers.*'²²

From the respondent 02#, it is right to observe that men like the roles in the Church that would give them 'say'. This word 'say' is more symbolic in that it depicts men lust for power and control in the Church. And the only 'safe space' for power and control, to exercise their masculinity is in the other ministries in the Church and not in the children department that is looked upon as secondary in many Churches. A good example of the centre of power and control in most Churches lies at Synods, General Assemblies levels et al. Incidentally, these levels are predominately within the masculine domain and it is where key decisions are been made. Such decisions that affect women directly have been the contentious issue of ordination. What is evident is most women have been denied ordination in spite of their outstanding calling to the ministry and academic performance as such.

So, the children ministry like the place of the women in the Church have been not exceptional either. Stanley Grenz and Denise Kjesbo witnessed this in their Church and they describe their encounter:

¹⁹Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of Gikuyu*, (London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1979), 241.

²⁰John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy second edition*, (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989), 107.

²¹Interview with respondent 03#, Field Notes, (Juja, 31st May 2015).

²²Interview with respondent 02#, Field Notes, (Kamenu, 21st March 2015).

...despite the initial opposition [at inception of Sunday school movement], the Sunday school grew largely through the untiring efforts of women. Not wanting to be 'outdone' by the women, men leadership co – opted the movement forming the American Sunday school union. The men set policy and governed the organization, while women, who composed the majority of its teachers, did the grassroots work.²³

In light of the above, it is evident that teaching is one of the significant roles women are playing in the Church for spiritual development and formation of their children. However, it is challenging as it is looked upon as a minor responsibility for women while in the Church of Christ it is supposed to be a corporate responsibility for all in the whole household of God. It is an unfortunate phenomenon because in the diocesan appointments of children ministers in four parishes with such Church personnel all of them are women. Ironically, even when perceived as women task, it is disturbing as women are in the periphery in terms of decision making, that most often than not exercised by men who perceives it as less noble.

Role Models

Fowler's theory argues that children spiritual development and formation is highly influenced and shaped by those close to children. At this stage of their growth, children learn more from women such that they emulate what they do and say. Notably women in the diocese are a good role models for their children to emulate and this is rightly captured from a diocesan member respondent who observed that:

It is evident that women have taken a leading role not only as Sunday school teachers but role model for our children. This is not only in the diocese but all over the country.²⁴

Engaging this respondent, one deduces that women in the Kenyan society are an outstanding group contributing immensely in shaping the life of children. Indeed, they have become good role model in the Church and in the country according to respondent 04#. This means that children who at their growth process use symbols and images to construct their life realities. These realities are highly shaped and influenced by women who are good role models to them. A good example is when these children go to Church and their Sunday school teacher describes who God is. The first impression and image that appears to them is of women who are their bread winner, caring, loving, merciful et al. All these impressions of God to the children go to women and not men. As most men today have neglected and abandoned their role as the head of the family. To children privileged to have their fathers, the image and symbol of God as the father to them translate to a father who is a rapist to his daughter, alcoholic and thus not able to provide basic needs for his family and so a violent father and husband.

Fortunately, women have excelled as role model to their children in training up their children the importance of Church in their life. This is evident in our Churches where we find women and children are the majority in the pew. And since children grow spiritually through interaction with others, their presence in the Church in the company of women have become a strong foundation of their faith development and formation. The Bible has a wide spectrum of outstanding women that engaged in faith development and formation. However, this article singles out Timothy's mother Eunice and his grandmother Louise (1Timothy 1:5). These women are depicted as role model to Timothy during his growth. Slaughter could not

²³Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Woman in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 45.

²⁴Interview with respondent 04#, Field Notes, (Kamenu, 23rd May 2015).

hesitate then to suggest that Timothy “probably was won through the teaching ministry of his grandmother and mother, who besides sharing their own faith with him, exposed him to the sound doctrine of God’s word.”²⁵ Another is Hannah and her son Samuel (1 Samuel 1:21 – 28) who accompanied his mother to the temple after weaning. Although, Samuel was taken to Eli it suggests that his mother Hannah played a significant role in his spiritual development and formation.

Concerning the married women in the Church, what I have experienced as an ordained minister for the last ten years is that most of their husbands rarely come to Church. This phenomenon portrays to children a very negative image of the Church as a place for women only. To this end, men seldom come to Church and if it happens they come under duress when their children are being dedicated or baptized or for funerals. Elizabeth Caldwell shares the same thought with me and she argues “these parents left the Church after their confirmation as teenagers, and in many cases their return to Church is predicated by their wanting their child to be baptized.”²⁶ Indeed, this is similar encounter in the diocese where most men are left behind while women come with their children in the Church. As good role models, women have therefore been faithfully teaching their children the importance of going Church where they are shaped and grow spiritually. As Proverbs assert “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” (22:6), this the very thing women are doing in the diocese by accompanying their children to Church and in return become good role models to them in their spiritual development and formation.

Ministry of Presence

The presence of the family in the life of children growth is so essential that it not only communicates love to children but also the notions of care and concern for their plight. Women in the diocese have been exceptionally present with their children in all circumstances such that if their children are going to school or Church women escort them or accompany them without hesitation. In Kenya, this is a worrying trend as most men are invisible in the life of their children not only in the Church but also in school and social life spheres. One of diocesan Christians I interviewed shared this concern and said:

A man opts to hang out with friends in a drinking pub than spend time with the family in an outing.²⁷

This implies that men are at home with their friends in the social recreational institutions but have no time or place for their children physical, social and spiritual growth. The implication of their absence today is they become ‘visiting fathers’ and as such strangers to their children because they do not have time for their children. This weakens the family bond between them and their children, because unlike women, who enjoy a symbiotic relationship with their children, more often than not men’s relationship with their children is abstract and transitive in nature. It is also supported and reinforced by women’s intimacy and empathy of the conjugal relationship and so men’s experience of paternity is transitive, whereas maternity is far more involved and direct.²⁸

²⁵Slaughter, Teaching in the Family, 291.

²⁶Elizabeth F. Cadwell, “At Home with Faith and Family: A Protestant Christian Perspective,” in Karen – Marie Yust et al, ed., *Nurturing Child and Adolescence Spirituality: Perspectives from the World’s Religious Traditions*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2006), 330.

²⁷Interview with respondent 04#, Field Notes, (Kamenu, 23rd May 2015).

²⁸Grumet, Bitter Milk, 10.

In the diocese, the presence of women in their children's life is quite conspicuous during children's Christians rites such as churching, baptism and confirmation. As a minister, administering the sacrament of baptism, I do encounter many married women bringing their children alone for baptism as their husbands could not accompany them. This means that women are more concerned of their children spiritual development and formation than men. And like Mary the mother of Jesus whose presence in the life of Jesus was outstanding, this the very role diocesan women are playing today. In the diocese, there are weekly prayer groups known as cell groups prayers. In spite of these prayer groups being for both men and women, women are in the majority most of the time. What is highly visible is that women tend to come with their children to these cell group prayers where the word of God is shared. The presence of children with women makes them faithful members in these fellowships where children are equally nurtured spiritually through the songs and Christian stories that are sang and shared in that fellowship. This means the presence of women everywhere with their children is an excellent opportunity for spiritual development and formation of their children. This ministry of presence as premises for spiritual development and formation of children is also visible in women groups such as Table banking known as 'merry go round' in Kenya where women in company of their children commence their business with the word of prayer and conclude with the word of prayer.

Challenges Women Facing in their Roles of Spiritual Formation and Development of Children.

Training

Christianity is a teaching faith and this is emulated from Jesus Christ who was a teacher par excellence. This phenomenon was passed down in the ACK by Church Mission Society (CMS) missionaries who introduced this faith in Kenya.²⁹ However, it is sad to note that in spite of women been at the fore front in teaching children in the diocese, they are ill trained to effectively equip them. This challenge features always in the diocesan synod documents and it is a perennial problem in children ministry. This finds support in the diocesan document that cites "lack of enough, committed, consistent and trained teachers to teach Sunday school in the local Churches."³⁰ This study bears witness to this worrying phenomenon as most of the teachers whom I engaged in this study had only informal training despite the daunting task they have in shaping and nurturing children spiritually. To make the matter worse, some and particularly from rural Churches are illiterate meaning they have no formal education, yet are entrusted with this noble task. This really jeopardises the quality of teaching in the Churches and more so the degree of spiritual formation children are receiving. Though these women use indigenous teaching methods and models of spiritual formation such as narration of stories, riddles, proverbs et al and have proven quite useful to children, they are limited to other modern teaching methods and models that could be more effective.

Therefore, training women would be more valuable and effective in their teaching ministry. As with training, dynamic teaching methods and models such as role play in Christian drama, use of visuals, theme walk with Christian perspective and modelling would be in place if women were adequately trained to carry out their important functions.

²⁹ Julius Gathogo, "Historical Developments of Christian Education in East Africa: The Example of Johannes Krapf" in *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, editors Isapel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Dorpspruit: Cluster Publications, 2013), 28 – 46.

³⁰ ACK Diocese of Thika. *The Sixth Ordinary Session of the Diocesan Synod*, 52.

Limited resources to execute their roles well

Another challenge facing women in their ministry to children is the fact that there are limited resources allocated to them for expediting their role efficiently and effectively. This ranges from the Sunday school literature at their disposal, the space these children are given in their respective Churches and the funds to cater for their annual activities at parish, deanery, archdeaconry, diocese, regional and at provincial levels.³¹ With all these limitations, a woman's endeavour to shape and nurture children spiritually has been adversely affected and it only needs the intervention of the Church to alleviate this pressing problem.

Conclusion

As I conclude this article, I have argued that women's role in children spiritual development and formation is invaluable to nurturing caring human beings and a sustainable society. This is in spite of children spiritual development and formation being a corporate responsibility of the whole household of God. As women have remained distinct in the teaching ministry of children where they are touching and shaping the hearts and minds of children positively. Also, they have been good role models in training their children the significance of the Church for spiritual nurture, development and formation in children ministry. Their role of being present in all aspects of their children life has also contributed a healthy spiritual development and formation of children's faith. However, despite the daunting task of laying a solid Christian foundation to children, children ministry is facing immense challenges.

Unless these challenges are urgently addressed, the future of the Christian faith in the diocese of Thika is at stake as it might end up extinct. Furthermore, since spiritual development and formation help children to have an optimal relationship with God, themselves and others as it produces a Christ – like character in their life, it is essential to carefully plan it. This may sadly end up like building castles in the air, if the children ministry is not taken seriously in our Churches and the necessary resources are not allocated to this ministry as a matter of extreme urgency.

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Interviewee	Location	Interviewer	Date
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02#	Kamenu	George Kiarie	21/05/2015
03#	Juja	George Kiarie	31/05/2015
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