

Review Article

Pastoral Silence and LGBTQ+ Engagement in Coastal West African Christianity: A Theological Framework for Family Ministry

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Abstract: The main purpose of this article is to investigate the prevalent silence among Christian parents in Coastal West Africa regarding LGBTQ+ issues and propose a pastoral framework for church leadership. It makes use of a conceptual methodology, and data from the 2025 OneHope Faith Foundations Research, which covered 737 participants across Benin, Cameroon, Liberia, and Nigeria. The research highlights a widespread lack of interest in LGBTQ+ training among both parents and clergy. While digital exposure has created a slight increase of awareness in Anglophone regions (20%) compared to Francophone areas (11%), institutional barriers persist. In response, this article proposes the Theological Silence Continuum as a diagnostic tool to guide tailored pastoral interventions. This diagnostic tool categorises silence into four forms: Enforced, Structural, Protective, and Engaged. Ultimately, this article argues that proactive and context-specific church resources are essential to prevent youth from seeking guidance from unreliable external sources.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Coastal West Africa, Theological Framework, Parent-Child Communication, Culture of Silence, Sub-Saharan Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

In the month of May 2025, OneHope published the Faith Foundations Research Report for Central Africa. This empirical study surveyed 566 parents and 171 church leaders across four coastal West Africa nations: Benin, Cameroon, Liberia and Nigeria. The main objective of the survey was to offer empirical evidence to the churches, enabling them to better support parents in their role as primary spiritual formators and mentors. The findings revealed a notable disparity in parental priorities. On one hand, parents are deeply committed to the religious formation of their children by showing interest in Christian faith, effective discipline, emotional and mental health, sex and love, paired with social media and technology. On the other hand, they are notably disinterested in addressing gender equality and LGBTQ+ topics.

As an emerging concern, LGBTQ+ is currently one of the preeminent controversial issues in Africa. The OneHope report reflects this reality by revealing a significant gap in parental interests as what can be termed as 'traditional topics' over more controversial ones. The consequence of not addressing this reality may

not be immediate, but rather a future challenge. However, if not well addressed, families and churches may struggle to respond when their children unavoidably face emerging issues, including LGBTQ+ discussions, in their daily lives through social media, peers, neighbours and strangers without their parents' guidance. This may leave children to seek answers from elsewhere, most likely from untrustworthy sources.

In line with this, the article begins by establishing the problem statement, followed by a literature review that situates the OneHope findings within the broader context of Sub-Saharan African research. It then presents key data from the OneHope report before proposing the Theological Silence Continuum as a diagnostic and pastoral framework for church leaders and family ministry practitioners.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a conceptual research methodology, utilising secondary data analysis and a thematic literature review to develop an original pastoral framework. The empirical basis of the study is drawn from the OneHope Faith Foundations Research Report

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(2025), a published study that surveyed 566 parents and 171 church leaders across four Coastal West African nations: Benin, Cameroon, Liberia, and Nigeria. Rather than re-analysing raw data, this article extracts and interprets specific quantitative findings from the report to identify a significant pastoral gap, namely the near-universal disinterest among Christian parents regarding engagement with LGBTQ+ topics.

These findings are examined against a thematic review of peer-reviewed literature on parent-adolescent communication about sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa. This review unveils a persistent “culture of silence” that contextualises the OneHope data. From this synthesis, the article constructs the Theological Silence Continuum. This original diagnostic framework was designed to equip church leaders and family ministry practitioners with tools to identify and respond to various forms of communicative silence within their specific congregational contexts. The approach aligns with conceptual research methodologies that utilise existing empirical evidence as a foundation for developing theoretical and practical frameworks.

Statement of the Problem

Parents are supposed to be the primary educators of their children, and the influence of their teaching often leaves a long-lasting impact. Apart from being their children's first teachers, Christian parents must also be ready to address emerging controversial issues in society, such as sexuality and gender identity. Meanwhile, it is important that the church and parents collaborate in forming children's worldview through a religious lens. On the other hand, Christian parents are assumed to be best positioned as the first and most trusted sources of guidance on sensitive matters in their children's lives. However, this happens not to be the case with parents in Coastal West Africa. Data from the recent OneHope Foundation report (2025) reveals that topics like gender identity and LGBTQ+ are least prioritised by Christian parents in the region, with only 13% indicating they are interested in receiving training on them. This disinterest is reflected across all demographics, revealing a widespread silence on the two issues. Ironically, parental hesitation does not mean that their children are shielded; instead, they encounter these topics and related conversations through social media. This gap therefore empowers social media and external forces to influence and shape children's worldview.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature that was identified and reviewed indicated a current existing silence that can be termed a 'culture of silence' between parents and children on topics related to sexuality, especially LGBTQ+, in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Parental Silence

Usonwu *et al.*, (2021), in a study entitled “Parent–adolescent communication on sexual and

reproductive health in sub-Saharan Africa: a qualitative thematic synthesis,” indicated that parents were uncomfortable engaging in sexual conversations with their children because of cultural taboos, parental embarrassment, poor knowledge and the misconception that conversations about sex will encourage children to have it. This study by Usonwu *et al.*, (2021), involving thematic synthesis on parent-adolescent communication in Sub-Saharan Africa, indicates that cultural taboos, parental embarrassment, poor knowledge and the misconception of conversations about sex are consistent patterns found in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In line with Usonwu *et al.*, (2021), Aliyu and Aransiola (2023) indicate that the Nigerian culture makes it very difficult for parent-child conversation on sexual topics. This difficulty is rooted in the hierarchical authority of parents and their strict enforcement of morality, which makes it challenging to have open conversations. Aliyu and Aransiola (2023) further note that the absence of suitable vocabulary in indigenous languages hinders conversations about sex. This thus leads to parents remaining silent, so as to evade sexual conversations at home.

Furthermore, a similar study in Ghana by Klu *et al.*, (2022) revealed that Ghanaian parents, particularly in Adaku District, viewed silence as a strategy for preserving their children's purity. According to Klu *et al.*, (2022), parents' reluctance to engage in sexual health dialogue is informed by the cultural belief that addressing sexual topics is a reflection of poor moral character. The study by Klu *et al.*, (2022) was conducted with the aim of examining sexual health dialogue; it, however, provides strong support for existing silence on sexual conversations that the current generation of children are exposed to, with or without the knowledge of their parents.

In addition, similar studies in Malawi by Ngwira (2025) and in Uganda by Ndugga *et al.*, (2023) provide strong empirical support for the 'culture of silence'. In Malawi, Ngwira (2022) noted the existence of a culture of silence that is maintained by a strategy he terms 'protective buffering', where parents knowingly and willingly withhold information about sexuality to protect their children's innocence. This creates an unfortunate and unplanned discipline-oriented communication after a problem has happened. The nature of these conversations makes children feel alienated, causing them to turn to their peers or other sources of information. Conversely, Ndugga *et al.*, (2023) highlight the cultural expectations that task mothers alone with the responsibility of providing moral guidance to children, effectively marginalising the father's role. This imbalance places families in vulnerable positions, as the absence of the paternal voice in these important conversations creates significant gaps in their children's domestic support system. Furthermore, Ndugga *et al.*, (2023) reveal that a lack of suitable

vocabulary and communication skills serve as major stumbling blocks, preventing mothers from engaging effectively in sexual dialogue with their children even when they recognise the need to do so.

In summary, the reviewed literature confirms that the lack of engagement in sexual conversations identified by the OneHope (2025) report is not only limited to Coastal West Africa, but perhaps reflects the same trend in Sub-Saharan Africa. While parents are supposed to be the primary educators of their children, their current silence on LGBTQ+ presents a significant discipleship gap. Therefore, the influence of social media apparently threatens the parents' role as primary educators and authorities on the talk that is already inadvertently happening in society. In line with this, there is a need for a pastoral strategy that equips parents with the necessary knowledge and confidence to spearhead the dialogue about LGBTQ+.

The Institutional and Legal Contexts

Although the foundational responsibility of a child's holistic formation lies with their parents, the church is an important partner in the same conversations. The nexus between parents and the Church lies in the fact that both roles, namely parent and pastor, are often embodied by the same person. The parent who is supposed to have these conversations at home with his children is at the same time a pastor at the church, a leader or even an elder. Having these twin roles may place a parent in a dilemma about what to do. This may lead to a failure to engage in LGBTQ+ talks from the pulpit, which may mirror the unwillingness that is also found at home, leaving children in a vulnerable condition as well as exposing them to both religious and moral dilemmas when confronted with the LGBTQ+ agenda.

Some scholars, including Bongmba (2016), paired with Gyasi-Gyamerah and Akotia (2016), argue that the church plays a decisive role in supporting the 'culture of silence'. Bongmba (2016) opines that the post-colonial African ecclesia positioned itself as the primary architect of social norms regarding family life, suggesting that the church's influence over family values remains profound. Complementing this view, Gyasi-Gyamerah and Akotia (2016) identify a direct correlation between religious commitment and the systematic rejection of same-sex unions, alongside a rejection to engage in discussions on the topic. Furthermore, Van Klinken and Chitando (2016) argue that African churches have positioned themselves as defenders of 'civilisation values', framing their rejection of Western liberal norms as forms of cultural preservation. As a result, the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ is not to be seen as a private individual choice, but a socially enforced mandate strongly rooted in religious authority. Perhaps what also makes these conversations difficult is the existence of laws that prohibit same-sex relationships. In Nigeria, the 2014 Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act imposes harsh prison sentences for same-sex

relationships, including for its advocates (Adamu, 2019). Similar same-sex prohibition laws exist under Cameroon's Penal Code (Article 347-1), which prohibits same-sex relationships with serious penalties (Nordberg, 2012), and under the laws of Liberia. The existence of legal frameworks that prohibit such relationships could definitely inform the existence of silence on LGBTQ+ conversations. Thus, the combination of family silence and rejection, religious disapproval, and legal threats appear to be major obstacles to LGBTQ+ conversations. This perhaps implies that young people in Coastal West Africa experience a dilemma when it comes to LGBTQ+. Although Western studies (Mills-Koonce *et al.*, 2018) argue that supportive parenting can protect children regardless of their parents' theology, these study findings do not easily translate to the African context. Given Africa's own cultural context, especially the Coastal West African cultural context of family silence, religious disapproval, and legal threats, there is a need for a pastoral strategy that is sensitive to local realities rather than imported from the West.

Key Findings from the OneHope Report

In this section, attention now turns to the major quantitative results that have been extracted from the OneHope Faith Foundations Research Report (2025), which are relevant to the pastoral problem being addressed in this article. These findings have not been re-analysed in any way; rather, they are based on published reports as the empirical basis of the theoretical framework that is developed in the discussion section.

Generational Parental Interests in LGBTQ+ Training

Among the topics on which Christian parents were surveyed, gender identity and LGBTQ+ issues were ranked lowest across all four nations, representing the areas where they least desired to receive training. With only 13% of parents indicating interest in receiving guidance in these areas, this was a sharp distinction compared to topics such as Christian formation, effective discipline, and emotional and mental health, all of which received significant parental attention. This imbalance in terms of interest, in a sample of 566 parents, indicates systematic and widespread disinterest rather than individual preference.

Coherence between Demographics

One of the significant findings from the OneHope data is that the lack of interest in the LGBTQ+ topic is not confined to one particular group, but is a demographic constant. This reality is reflected consistently across all categories of parents, regardless of age, educational background, denomination, or whether they reside in urban or rural environments. This kind of homogeneity suggests that the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ is not determined by a lack of urban exposure or modern awareness; rather, it reflects a culturally and religiously entrenched pattern that transcends individual differences. This revelation is essential for the development of a pastoral strategy, as it eliminates the

possibility of demographic-based 'quick fixes' and indicates that a more comprehensive, structural, and theological transformation is required.

Anglophone–Francophone Differential

While interest in LGBTQ+ training remains consistently low across all four Coastal West African nations, the OneHope data reveals a notable statistical divergence between Anglophone and Francophone territories. In Anglophone countries, for instance Nigeria and Liberia, parental interest in such training was reportedly 20%, almost double the 11% reported in Francophone countries such as Cameroon and Benin. Although both figures represent a pastoral concern, the 9% gap is analytically significant. It suggests that parents in Anglophone regions may have greater exposure to English-language digital media, where LGBTQ+ discourses are more prevalent. This increased visibility appears to be fostering a nascent awareness among Anglophone parents that these issues are an unavoidable reality, necessitating a domestic or ecclesiastical response, even if they currently lack the linguistic tools or institutional permission to engage effectively.

Church Leader Data

Notably, of the 171 church leaders surveyed, LGBTQ+ issues were consistently ranked as the lowest priority for both congregational training and the development of ministry resources. This shared disinterest between parents and ecclesiastical leaders is a critical finding, as it demonstrates that the 'culture of silence' is not merely a domestic phenomenon. Rather, the lack of pastoral engagement effectively creates and sustains an environment in which familial silence can flourish. By failing to provide teaching or resources on these subjects, church leaders signal an institutional taboo to parents, reinforcing the perception that such topics are prohibited within the sacred space of the church.

Summary of Findings

Collectively, the OneHope data presents a cohesive and logical narrative in which LGBTQ+ issues are systematically absent from both domestic and ecclesial discourse across Coastal West Africa. The findings indicate that this silence is demographically universal and institutionally sanctioned, though it is beginning to face increasing pressure in Anglophone contexts due to the rising visibility of digital media. These empirical results form the foundation for the Theological Silence Continuum discussed in the following section. This diagnostic model is designed to identify the various forms this silence takes and to determine the specific pastoral interventions required for each.

Discussion: The Theological Silence Continuum

The data in the previous section reveals a very consistent and uniform pattern of non-engagement with LGBTQ+ topics across Christian contexts in Coastal

West Africa. However, simply identifying this silence is merely the first step in developing a pastoral response, because effective ministry requires a deep understanding of the specific drivers behind that communicative gap. This section moves beyond quantitative findings toward an interpretive analysis, proposing a diagnostic framework to categorise the various motivations and pressures that sustain this silence.

The Need for a Diagnostic Framework

While the earlier section establishes the scope of LGBTQ+ silence in Coastal West African parenting, it does not innately explain its nature. Quantitative data can prove that silence is universal across demographics, but it cannot discern whether that silence results from active institutional prohibition, structural inattention, deliberate parental strategy, or suppressed engagement. These distinctions are vital for church ministry because each form of silence requires a unique response; a pastoral approach suited for one may be entirely ineffective for another. The Theological Silence Continuum is therefore proposed as an analytical tool to help church leaders and practitioners make these necessary distinctions.

Four Positions on the Theological Silence Continuum

The first position, Enforced Silence, describes a context where discussing LGBTQ+ topics is actively forbidden by religious or legal authority. Parents in this position are constrained by the explicit disapproval of their church communities, social networks, or criminal law. In this state, addressing the gap cannot begin with training or resources; instead, it requires church leadership to acknowledge the pastoral deficit and create the institutional safety required for dialogue. This is most characteristic of Nigeria and Cameroon, where legal criminalisation and ecclesiastical prohibition intersect to foreclose engagement.

The second position, Structural Silence, occurs when LGBTQ+ topics are not explicitly banned but are simply absent from the frameworks and resources available to families and churches. Silence here is the default result of institutional inattention. Many churches in Coastal West Africa occupy this position; they have not prohibited the conversation, but they have failed to develop the training or pastoral tools that would make such dialogue possible. This represents the most practical starting point for ministry improvement through the development of new resources.

The third position, Protective Silence, describes a situation where parents are aware of LGBTQ+ realities but consciously choose to avoid the subject. They believe that silence shields the child from harmful influences or protects the family from social stigma. This reflects an active, deliberate parenting strategy. The Anglophone–Francophone differential is most consistent with this position, as parents feel the pressure of awareness and manage it through intentional avoidance. Addressing this

requires a theological shift regarding the pastoral consequences of silence for a child's wellbeing.

The fourth position, Engaged Silence, occurs when parents acknowledge LGBTQ+ realities and feel internal tension about their silence, yet lack the theological vocabulary or communal permission to speak openly. These parents are not indifferent; rather, they find no safe space for engagement in their social environment. From a pastoral perspective, this is the most accessible position, because the motivation to speak already exists. These parents primarily require permission, language, and a secure pastoral environment.

Applying the Theological Silence Continuum to the Coastal West African Context

The OneHope data indicates that the Enforced, Structural, and Protective positions operate concurrently across various national and denominational settings in Coastal West Africa. In nations such as Nigeria and Cameroon, where legal criminalisation and explicit ecclesiastical prohibitions are present, Enforced Silence defines the institutional framework. Nevertheless, individual families within these regions may also occupy Structural or Protective positions, depending on their personal awareness and the specific pastoral style of their local congregation. Conversely, in Liberia and Benin, where the legal environment is less punitive and church authority is less vocal on these matters, Structural Silence appears to be the more prevalent form.

The statistical differential between Anglophone and Francophone contexts, with interest levels at approximately 20% and 11% respectively, suggests a shift from Structural toward Protective Silence in Anglophone areas. Awareness of LGBTQ+ realities is rising due to digital media exposure, leaving parents increasingly conscious that their children are encountering content for which they have no processing framework. Because structural and legal constraints remain static and the Church has yet to grant pastoral permission for engagement, parents often feel more constrained despite their increased awareness. This trajectory is especially significant for churches in Anglophone settings, where the pressure for a response is most immediate.

While the position of Engaged Silence was not a prominent feature of the OneHope quantitative data, it is likely present among the minority of parents (approximately 13% to 20%) who expressed an interest in LGBTQ+ training. These parents have acknowledged the issue and sought guidance but have not yet found a pastoral context in which to act. They represent the most immediate opportunity for a ministry response, and identifying and supporting them provides a concrete, feasible starting point for churches aiming to break the cycle of silence.

Ultimately, the Theological Silence Continuum provides church leaders with a vital diagnostic question to ask before developing a pastoral response: what specific kind of silence is operating in this context? The answer to this question determines which form of pastoral development is both appropriate and achievable. For instance, a church identifying Structural Silence can begin with resource development and discreet training. In contrast, a church where silence is Enforced must engage institutional leadership before any other intervention is possible. This framework prevents the error of applying a single, undifferentiated approach to a phenomenon that manifests in multiple, distinct forms.

Implications for Church Leaders and Family Ministry Practitioners

The findings of this research carry several concrete implications for churches in Coastal West Africa and the organisations that support them. First, leaders must honestly evaluate what these results mean for their specific congregational settings. A church truly invested in the spiritual formation of children cannot view the total absence of pastoral provision for LGBTQ+ family situations as a neutral or sustainable state of affairs. This does not necessitate a change in theological position; however, it does require churches to investigate what care is currently available to families navigating these realities and to choose a pastoral presence over a pastoral absence or silence.

Secondly, the diagnostic use of the proposed framework is essential. Leaders should assess which specific form of silence is operational in their own context. A church where the topic has simply never been addressed has a significantly different starting point than one where the topic is explicitly prohibited. In the former case, the development of resources can begin without the need for institutional confrontation. In the latter, engagement at the leadership level is a mandatory prerequisite before any meaningful change can occur at the family level.

Thirdly, there is a clear implication for faith-based organisations, including OneHope, to recognise that contextually appropriate resources are currently non-existent. Such materials can be developed within existing theological frameworks to provide parents with practical guidance on offering the relational warmth and pastoral presence that research identifies as protective for children. The current deficit of such resources is, in itself, a form of Structural Silence at the organisational level.

Finally, the Anglophone-Francophone differential suggests that churches in Nigeria and Liberia face the most immediate pressure. As digital media exposure increases, this challenge will likely intensify in Anglophone contexts and will inevitably reach Francophone areas in the medium term. Proactive ministry development remains a far more effective and

less costly approach than a reactive response to a future crisis.

CONCLUSION

The silence of Christian parents in Coastal West Africa on LGBTQ+ conversations calls for immediate attention. Urgent interventions should aim to break the silence. The Theological Silence Continuum developed to address this challenge provides a practical diagnostic tool that can help identify why the silence exists and distinguish between silence that is enforced, structural, protective, or engaged. This distinction is very important, since each type calls for a differentiated response. In addition, the need to engage in conversations about LGBTQ+ is a necessity that cannot be ignored. Since children are increasingly being exposed to these topics, especially through social media and peers among others, parents and the church must have the courage to be involved rather than remain silent.

This study establishes that silence on LGBTQ+ issues within Coastal West African Christian families and churches is neither neutral nor sustainable; rather, it constitutes a critical pastoral deficit with long-term implications for youth formation. In an era of unavoidable digital exposure, the absence of guided theological engagement does not shield children but instead redirects them toward alternative narratives that operate outside ecclesial influence.

The Theological Silence Continuum offers a significant contribution by reframing silence as a diagnosable and addressable pastoral condition, indicating that different forms of silence require differentiated interventions. This challenges churches to move beyond passive non-engagement toward intentional, contextually grounded ministry responses. Importantly, this does not necessitate a shift in doctrinal position but calls for the development of pastoral presence, linguistic tools, and safe spaces for dialogue.

Ultimately, the article argues that the future of Christian family ministry in the region depends on the church's willingness to transition from silence to guided engagement. Proactive investment in contextually relevant resources, especially in increasingly exposed Anglophone settings, is not merely strategic but urgent. Failure to act risks ceding the formative space of the next generation, while thoughtful engagement presents an opportunity to reaffirm the Church's role as both a theological authority and a pastoral companion in navigating complex contemporary realities.

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