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Original Research Article

The Future of Lay Women Roles in St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish in Vihiga County, Kenya

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the question of the future possibilities of lay women for full participation in the life of the Catholic Church. This is based on St Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 14:34 that "*women should remain silent in the church. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says*". This paper therefore, specifically examined the future of lay women roles in the Catholic Church in St Charles Lwanga Parish in Vihiga County. The study was based on both primary and secondary data. The study was conducted in the five sub parishes within St Charles Lwanga Hambale parish in Vihiga County. Through questionnaires, focus group discussions, observations and in depth interviews, the paper shows that lay women have a major role in future in the church based on their age, effects of their roles on Small Christian Communities, support received from the church towards their roles and on the future plans in various lay women organizations.

Keywords: Catholic Church, lay women, roles, Small Christian Communities, Socio-spiritual

INTRODUCTION

In order to change the church, Muller (2004) noted that Catholic lay people must get out of their traditions and take action. With increased lay participation it will be possible to enhance the role of women in the church. Women should be permitted for example to serve as deacons. With the increasingly acute shortage of priests, deacons are playing an ever greater role in the church. Unlike priests, deacons may not absolve sins or consecrate the Eucharist, but they are empowered to baptize and preach as well as preside at marriages and funerals. Deacons perform works of charity with the poor, the sick and they are often involved in religious education and preparation for the sacraments.

Schenk(2006) added that there are many roles for Catholic women in the church. A married woman can serve in any capacity that any lay person married or single, male or female may serve including such ministries as, extraordinary ministers of Eucharist, lectors, hospitality ministers, catechists, parish council members, directors of religious education, bible study leaders, marriage preparation or any number of administrative positions in the parish office, including accountants, business manager or office manager. Women can have any role in the Catholic Church that is open to laity.

Reflecting back on the years since Vatican II, (Fagin (1984) pointed out that one figure emerges with special clarity out of many persons, women and men, lay or otherwise, who had been moving the church forward in this after the council. That figure is Theresa Kane, the President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. During the council, as she greeted Pope John Paul II at the shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC in October 1979, she requested that the pope be mindful of the intense suffering and pain which is part of life of so many women in United States. Women had been led by contemplation of the church's own teaching to seek a place in all the ministries of that church. In her speech, she called upon the pope to be open to and respond to the voices coming from women of United States who were desirous of serving in and through the church as fully participating members. She respectfully addressed the Pope as one baptized Christian speaking in humility and charity to another baptized Christian about the pastoral needs of the People of God. This was not only a welcome relief from unrestrained adulation of Papal visit, but also a welcome glimpse of the future towards which Vatican II have set the church. Therefore a need to acknowledge the future of lay women roles in the Catholic Church.

The study was pegged on Feminist theology which is a critical theology of liberation. Rowland (1999) a feminist theologian notes that religion has

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operated with gender blindness and that the Christian churches have failed to promote the full humanity of women in their structures of theology. There have been subordination and victimization of women by recourse to scripture like in Paul's letter to Timothy (1 Timothy: 2:12) and church (Catholic) tradition to show that this was a part of God's plan for creation. Also feminist recognizes the exploitation and oppression of women in the structures of patriarchies. Feminist theology task is therefore to uncover the theologies and institutional practices which perpetuate the injustice inflicted on women and deny their full human subjectively and constructively to create a liberated and liberating theology. In the application of this theology women are expected to take up various roles in the church aimed at the growth and expansion of the church since they have the potential.

OBJECTIVE

The study aimed at examining the future of lay women roles in St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish in Vihiga County, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to examine and give a descriptive scrutiny of the future of lay women roles in the Catholic Church with special reference to St Charles Lwanga Hambale Parish in Vihiga County. The study was carried in the five sub-parishes that constitute St Charles Lwanga Parish in Vihiga County namely: Hambale rural, Hambale town, Welgina, Vihiga and Hatemesi. Qualitative methods of data collection, which included in-depth oral interviews and questionnaires, were employed. Open-ended questionnaires were prepared and administered. For selected sub-parish, four officials were purposely sampled for the study and issued with an open ended

questionnaire. In-depth oral interviews were done with two respondents randomly picked in lay women organizations within the parish, using non-structured interview guides. Inductive coding was used because the questions used were open-ended. Data was classified and coded into meaningful themes. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing data where major concepts or themes were identified and discussed. This shed light on the participants' responses to questions regarding the future of lay women roles in then St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish.

EMPERICAL FINDINGS

THE FUTURE ROLES OF LAY WOMEN IN ST CHARLES LWANGA HAMBALÉ CATHOLIC PARISH.

In this study the future of lay women roles was measured with five main indicators namely: the age of those involved, the effect on the church and individuals, areas of improvement, the support they receive from the church and the future plans of lay women roles.

1. Age of respondents

From the findings, the age of respondent is important in determining the future of the socio-spiritual roles because the younger the respondents the more they will witness tremendous success in the church. Youth as the future generation are more energetic to play major roles towards the growth of the parish compared with the old. As observed and revealed in this study youths in the parish can be used to determine the future of the parish and the Catholic Church in general. They were the majority in the study population.

The figure below shows the age of respondents as captured during the study.

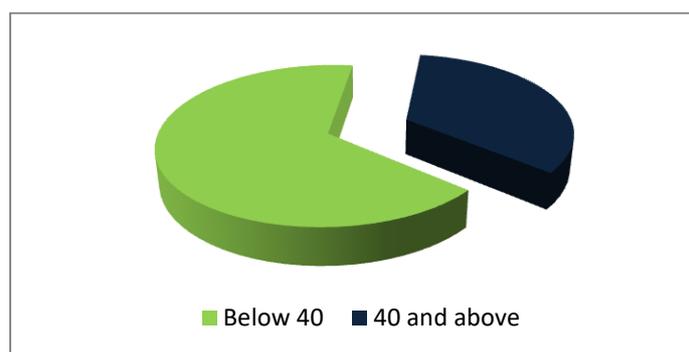


Figure 1 Age of respondents
Source: field data

Majority of the respondents are below 40 years of age as is seen in figure above. Since majority of the lay women in the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and in the lay women organization fall under this category, it gives a good indicator of the growth of the parish in future. The parish can depend on them for its

socio-spiritual growth more than any other age group. If the parish empower the group and give them all the support, there will be a lot of success to be proud of in future.

2. Effects of women roles on the church and individuals

The effects of lay women roles on the church and individual also determine the future of the socio-spiritual roles of lay women. It is based on the benefits acquired, the success and the outcome of lay women roles in the church. The following was revealed from the study:

The research further checked on the effects of SCCs to church growth. The indicators show that there is a strong bond between members of the SCC. This was attributed to the fact that members came from the same locality and they knew each other socially.

Table 1. Effects of lay women roles on SCCs to church growth

Age	Total %	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years	40-44 years	45-49 years	50+ years
Uniting people of God	31%	10%	31%	67%	60%	18%	0%	0%
Spreading gospel	21%	10%	8%	22%	0%	55%	29%	100%
Teachings on spiritual living	21%	20%	46%	0%	20%	9%	29%	0%
Discussing scripture	8%	30%	8%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%
Matrimonial sacrament to couples	5%	10%	7%	11%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Children brought to church	5%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	14%	0%
Praying/ reciting rosary	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%	14%	0%
Singing	3%	0%	0%	0%	10%	9%	0%	0%
Guidance and counseling services	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	14%	0%

Source: field data

As indicated in table 1 the respondents felt that through the weekly meetings members of the community are united in sharing the word of God as well as teachings on spiritual living. Through the efforts of lay women in the SCCs, they have been able to spread the gospel to the majority as well as teachings on spiritual living. They discuss the scripture together hence nourishing each other spiritually. From their sharing within the SCCs, some faithful have received the sacrament of holy matrimony and young children have been baptized. They pray and recite rosary

together and this have made many to know how to recite rosary and pray on their own and it has boosted the spiritual growth of the parish. They offer guidance and counseling services to faithfuls which have reduced conflicts between deferent groups of individuals in the church and in the SCCs.

Through the effort of lay women in the SCCs individuals have also benefited from the roles of lay women as shown below.

Table 2 Effects of lay women roles in SCCs on individuals

Age	Total%	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years	40-44 years	45-49 years	50+ years
Spiritual growth	38%	11%	62%	56%	22%	25%	57%	0%
Strengthening Christian faith	20%	33%	0%	11%	33%	25%	14%	100%
Spreading gospel	17%	22%	15%	11%	11%	25%	14%	0%
Improved socializing skills	15%	11%	15%	22%	33%	8%	1%	0%
Improved family life	7%	22%	0%	0%	1%	17%	0%	0%
Acquired life skills	3%	1%	8%	0%	0%	0%	14%	0%

Source: Field data

As shown in the table 2 above, individuals have benefited from the efforts of lay women within the SCC in terms of spiritual growth they have been uplifted spiritually Others confessed that their faith have been strengthened by the roles of lay women

within the SCCs. They are enlightened on spiritual matters and now they are spreading the gospel together with lay women. Their frequent meetings in the SCCs have made them to improve their socialization skills. They now see each other as brethren contrary to how

they used to view each other. Family life has been improved as all their problems were solved at the SCCs level and they got feedback immediately. From the numerous roles of lay women in the parish, some respondents confessed to have acquired life skills which will assist them in future to face life and live a comfortable life.

It was observed that lay women were the majority in the St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic Parish. They comprise sixty (60%) of the church population. This is a strong indicator that they are the backbone of the church and from their various socio-spiritual roles the future of the Parish is in their hands.

In support of the above the following were gathered during interview:

Respondent 3: Women were among the Christian martyrs. Those who gave their lives for Christ as martyrs in the early church are still commemorated by Catholics today and their names are listed at mass. Such include Agnes, Cecelia, Perpetua, Felistas, and Agatha among many. Therefore, women have had challenges in their faith but their strong devotion to the church have left a mark that is worth to be emulated. It is clear therefore, that women are responsible before God knowing that they must take decisions affecting their salvation and that of others to the Catholic faith. Within St Charles Lwanga Hambale Catholic parish lay women roles in the church have contributed relatively to the growth of the parish.

Respondent 5: The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable. Lay women are called to share in the common priesthood of Christ by making themselves gifts to God and others.

Respondent 11: The Catholic Church desires that women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission. Lay women roles are capital important both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the face of the Catholic Church.

Respondent 23: All are called to Holiness. The church as an institution of sanctity invites all women. With the reception of the sacrament of baptism and confirmation all are united to share out Christ's mission. That is; prophetic, kingly and priestly. Women can teach Christ's message, communicating either through vocations that is religious life or secular.

3 Areas of improvement

For the church to enjoy the benefits of lay women roles it has to put some improvements in certain areas and shown below.

Respondents suggested the following areas in the SCCs need to be improved for a successful future in lay women's roles.

Table 3. Specific areas of improvement.

Improvement area	%
Women should not shy off when spreading gospel	27%
Move to rural areas	24%
Men to accompany wives to SCC meetings so as to learn more about God	19%
Organize more seminars	11%
Youth ladies should be members of the group too	8%
Encourage members to support women	5%

Source: Field data

According to the table 3, it appears the greatest area of improvement for the SCCs is that women should gain more courage when spreading the word of God. Lay women should try to emulate women in the Bible such as Esther and spread the gospel to all without fear. Most of the respondents also want the groups to move to interior areas and spread the word of God as well as allow participation from the locals. Consequently, there will be a lot of achievement in term of church growth as far as roles of lay women are concerned from the grass

root which are the SCCs to the parish level and beyond. If all men would give women support by accompanying them to the SCCs weekly meetings, women would feel more honored in the society and never feel inferior to men. More seminars are necessary to empower lay women on how to play their socio-spiritual roles right from the SCCs. The seminars should cater for social, economic, political and spiritual affairs of lay women to enable them face challenges in their line of duty. Female youths need to be informed of their need to be

active member of SCC as they will be able to give lay women support in their roles than any other group of youths.

4 Support received from the church

The study revealed that lay women received support from the church in the SCCs and in lay women organizations. Respondents agreed that although there is no institution to train lay persons on leadership courses, the Catholic Church offers seminars, workshops, retreats and some training such as on civic education to its leader and members. It is evident that the church prepares the lay women for their roles

mainly through organization of seminars. By such support from the church it is clear that the church has realized that it cannot meet its spiritual duties without the assistance of lay women. Their presence and their roles are part and parcel of the church ministry. The church has to depend on lay women from the SCC and in the same way laywomen have to depend on the church for their social and spiritual needs.

As was brought out by many lay women, the Catholic Church encourages women to take an active role in the organization in different ways. The key ways are outlined in the table below:

Table 4. How the Catholic Church empower laywomen in their organizations.

Church empowerment	frequency	Percent
Fundraisers and financial support	24	40%
Prayers and G&C	20	33.3%
Free participation	10	16.7%
Encouragement	6	10%

Source: field data

According to table 4 the Catholic Church supports women mainly in terms of fund raising and financial support (40%). This still leaves a gap in terms of inadequate finances because the implications are that the lay women somehow have to raise the remaining 60% on their own. They also help them in prayer, guidance and counseling whereby they encourage and support them .They allow free participation of lay women in various church activities depending on their interest and capability. The church also encourages them in their roles as a way of motivating them and supports them in their teaching. The support given to lay women shows that the church has put in place future plans for the women as stakeholder of the parish.

empowerment. Women in growing numbers are re-reading religious traditions from their collective experiences and perspectives. In doing so, they are reclaiming the foundations of their faiths and setting themselves free of dogma that has served to hide the truth of their historical and contemporary capacities for action. In doing so, the church is supporting women through all means to enable them to be effective in church activities. The church is offering training to lay women in the following manner.

Although there is no institution that offers formalized training to lay women, lay women organization offers some informal training to both leaders and church members. This is a way of equipping them with knowledge and spiritual knowledge to enable them plays their various roles effectively. The figure below shows the type of training lay women receives.

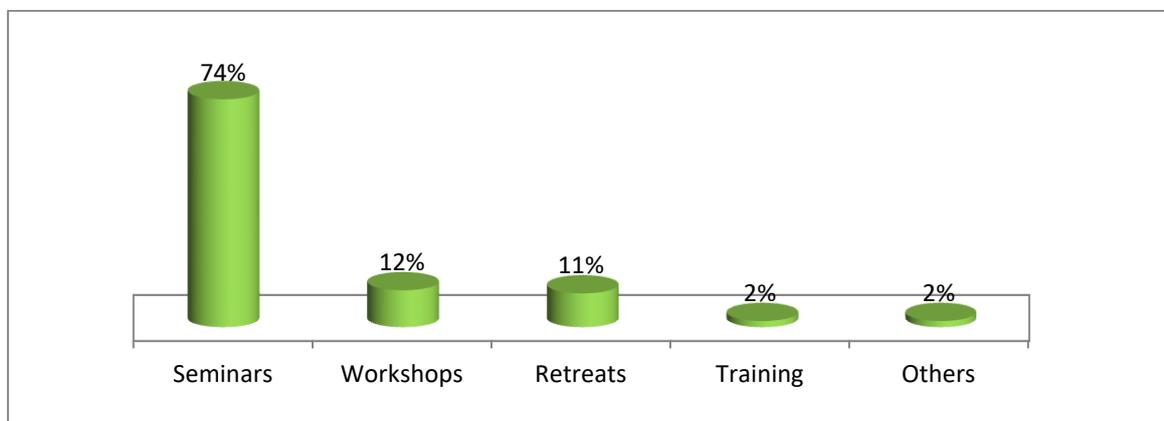


Figure 2 Training of Lay women
Source: Field data

Given that the church supporting lay women through seminars, workshops, retreats and other training as a way of preparing them for their various roles it is clear that the church has realized that lay women have the potential of being leader of the church in the same way as men .The Catholic Church empowers women by enlightening them to come up strongly in faith. It’ also inform them of their importance in the church as a way of awakening them so as they can came up strongly to support the growth of the church in all aspects.

5 Future plans of lay women roles

From the response given by the Catholic Women Association in the questionnaires and in the interview, the organization plans to help women spiritually and economically through its many roles. It was reported that the church supports women by providing them with prayer books they need in their organization as a way of empowering them spiritually. Lay women organizations plan the following.

Table 5 Future plans of lay women organization

Plan	Frequency	Percent
Evangelize to all	28	46.7%
Maintain faith	20	33.3%
Demonstrate women leadership capacity	9	15%
Help women financially	3	5%

Source: Field data

Table 5 displays all the future plans of the Lay Women Organization (LWO).Lay women aspire to evangelize to all Christian within their lay organizations and in the parish. Comparing with the conceptual frame work, it is clear also that lay women have realized their potential in church matters. They have realized they have a bright future in the Catholic Church. One of their major objectives is to evangelize to all. Twenty eight out of sixty respondents who attempted the question of the future plans of lay women in the organization concurred with this assumption. Lay women would wish to maintain their faith and the faith of all Christian faithful within the parish. In addition they would wish to demonstrate women leadership capacity in the church as they believe they have the potential just like men. In spite of this, women have a plan of helping women financially through merry-go round and various projects as discussed earlier.

The future of lay women roles in St Charles Lwanga Catholic Parish can also be traced from the Small Christian Communities. This is attributed to the fact that SCCs church member live together as a family. Members of SCCs are mostly draw from family members or people from the same clan given that they come all from the same locality. Therefore SCC is a small unit of the church or a home.

From the 65 questionnaires administered to SCCs, at least 40 respondents who attempted the question of giving out their opinion whether lay women in the SCCs played a vital role towards the growth of the church supported the opinion. This was clear as most of the leaders in SCCs came from lay women .In addition the spiritual needs of the community has been catered for through the work of lay women in the SCCs.

In support of the above findings, Isiguzo (2008) noted that the differences between male and female exist because God made us differently to accomplish His plans and purpose. The creation story tells us that God made a helpmate for man. The word *mate* is Hebrew word for *neged* and means part opposite, counterpart, suitable or in front of. Though opposite to man, woman was designed to fit man perfectly like the missing part of a jigsaw puzzle. Therefore lay women are an integral part of the church and the church cannot function or meet its spiritual needs of its member without them.

There is future of socio-spiritual roles of lay women by saying that Catholic Church teachings holds that the differences between men and women are constructive .They contribute to what we do and who we are. In essence, we will do many of the same things. The fact that a person is either a man or woman should contribute something positive to whatever he or she does. We should see a person affirmatively as a man or a woman not a genderless automation in everything that a person does (Solemni, 2005). Therefore the Catholic Church needs to support lay women in all their church activities as the backbone of the church.

CONCLUSION

From the indicators above, it is clear that there is future for lay women roles in the Catholic Church. This was evident by the age of the respondents as majority of them are at their youthful stage and on effects of lay women roles on individuals and the church based on the success of their roles. In addition, improvement in some areas of weakness like encouraging members to support women would have an impact on the future roles of lay women as it would mobilize them to be actively involved in church

activities. Finally through the support that the church gives to lay women through seminars, workshops and retreats, there is future in the roles of lay women roles in the Catholic Church .

RECOMMEDATION

The study recommends that lay women be fully involved in various activities within the church because the church has a lot to benefit from them based on various future indicators discussed above. The future of the Catholic Church depends on lay women hence their presence and participation in various church activities is very paramount.

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