



Church of Nigerian Anglican Communion: The Clergy and Laity on Premarital Sex, Contraception, Abortion and Unmarried Pregnancy

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Background: The Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion

- The seed of Anglicanism was sown in Nigeria in 1842 by Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society.
- The Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion was inaugurated as an autonomous Province on 24th February 1979. It is arguably the fastest growing province worldwide.
- It is Presently one of the major church denominations in Nigeria, alongside Catholic and Pentecostal churches.
- A key part of its vision states that “it shall be bible-based, spiritually dynamic, united, disciplined; self-supporting, committed to pragmatic evangelism, social welfare and a church that epitomizes the genuine love of Christ”

Background: Christianity, Churches and Sex In Nigeria

- The society uses agents of socialisation such as the family and the church as a tool for initiating discourses of control on young people's sexuality (Foucault 1976; Gordon 1980).
- The society constructs a stigmatisation discourse set aside for the punishment of young women who they believe have gone against the demands of the sexuality discourse (Foucault 1976; Gordon 1980).
- Adults and young people in several societies perceive the church as one of the major sources of identity (Ngcobo 2009).
- In Nigeria, many churches forbid premarital sex as well as the use of contraceptives particularly for young unmarried women (Ojo 2005).
- Religious injunctions and dogmas make it difficult for parents and church members to teach young people how to navigate through issues of a sexual nature (Okonofua et al. 2009).

The Study

- **Study**: Part of a wider study on Unmarried Young Mothers in South-Eastern Nigeria: Attitudes and Experiences
- **Setting**: Conducted in Owerri Imo State, South-Eastern Nigeria from March to June 2015
- **Group**: Church and community members.
- **Interviews**: 18 one-to-one interviews
- **Focus Groups**: 4 focus group discussions
- **Target**: Church and Community members from 3 church denominations:
Catholic, Anglican and Pentecostal churches

Key Issues:

Findings:

- Attitude of Anglican Church clergy and laity towards premarital sex, contraception, abortion and unmarried pregnancy
- Data gathered from a one-to-one interview with Anglican Church clergy
- Data gathered from one-to-one and focus group interviews with Anglican Church laity
- Similarities and differences between the attitude of the Anglican Church and the two other church denominations (Catholic and Pentecostal).

How the church handles the issue of sex education

Clergy:

- Parents are encouraged to educate their children sexually as early as possible, and not to see it as a taboo, because if they don't teach them, some of their peers and TV will teach them, so to break that, the church encourages the parents to begin to teach the positive and negative side of these things so that children will have a balanced view of sex and approach it the way they should approach it avoiding the risks that are involved (Peter, Anglican Vicar).

Laity:

- Our parents here, they are just too shy and formal with us, their children, they don't give sex education (Uzo, Anglican Church Member)
- I wasn't taught, nobody taught me, I just found out. (Wena, Anglican Church Sisters Coordinator)

The church on contraceptives

Clergy:

- Contraceptives is the last option, we emphasise abstinence, contraceptive is a sin; in fact it's not an option, it's not an option really from strong biblical convictions and perspectives (Peter, Anglican Vicar).

Laity:

- In as much as we preach total abstinence, we understand that (...) we are driven by hunger and thirst, the drive is just there (..), some people might go out of control, when its out of control that's when contraceptives come into play, but I advocate abstinence, total abstinence (Eze, Church Brothers' Coordinator).

The church on contraceptives

Laity:

- When it comes to contraceptives I would say (...) it's necessary, (...) It is necessary because in the case of incest, (...) you could introduce contraceptives (Uzor, Church Youth Secretary).
- When you talk about the use of contraceptives , I think from the religious view the best option is just abstinence , that's just the best option but from the health view as well as the psychological view, it's necessary (Wena, Church Sisters' Coordinator).

The church on contraceptives

Laity:

- You have to be so strong for you to [abstain from sex] and once staying back is not there you have to introduce contraceptives; it's like taking an extra measure and in a way, yes, God is against premarital sex but I don't think He is against contraceptives because when contraceptives are not used and then finally the woman gets pregnant you see that it leads to abortion and abortion (..) is worse (Ikenna, Anglican Church Member).

Who stigmatises unmarried young mothers?

Clergy:

- There is some sort of stigmatisation, (...) if a girl gets pregnant without a husband, in the community, it's not acceptable, her praise is not sung, nobody praises her for doing that. So the community will expect that she will begin to hide (..) even after she has given birth, there is also some measure of stigmatisation that she has given birth before. For instance, if you want to go and marry this girl, somebody who knows her in the village might say 'okay I know her but do you know that she has given birth before?' you know, which is a kind of stigmatisation on her (Peter, Anglican Church Vicar).

Who stigmatises unmarried young mothers?

Laity:

- I won't say the church stigmatises actually, because at some point it's even the church that will also comfort you when you meet the right people (..) In the Anglican Church for example, if you meet the right people you'll find those that will comfort you. Though we are one body, there are also some people who are not just there for their fellow members so that's when we talk about meeting the right people (Ikenna, Church Youth Leader).

The church on issues of unmarried pregnancy and unmarried young mothers

Clergy:

- There will be counselling to reassure her that all is not lost and that the future can still be recovered, and (..) when we have such, the church gives a help to make sure that the person is looked after, the person has some care and the women of the church, when such is done their attention is drawn to that (...) the women work with the person to see that she's looked after (Peter, Anglican Church Vicar).

The church on issues of unmarried pregnancy and unmarried young mothers

Laity:

- Seriously you cannot come to church with [pregnancy] if they've not published the Banns of marriage between you and one other guy, (..) what are you coming to flaunt? they will just ask you 'ah! Sister what's up? Are you married?' and because of that kind of question you just wouldn't want to show your face in church (..) Because of you, they might make up one sermon, they can say 'all these women that go about opening their legs for men when they've not paid their bride price (...)' and you will feel so depressed (Uzor, Anglican Church Youth Secretary).

The church on issues of unmarried pregnancy and unmarried young mothers

Laity:

- When we talk about the church's view about unwanted pregnancy (...) as a child of God, a Christian (..) you've grown in the church, you've heard those morals right from when you were born, be a good child, avoid fornication, adultery and all that and you find yourself that you are now pregnant and you are a church member; naturally because you know you've been warned against all these things right from when you were young and you've fallen into that trap, you won't just want to come around. (..) (Wena, Anglican Church Sisters Coordinator).

Concluding Thoughts

- The Anglican clergy and laity hold variant views on premarital sex, contraception, abortion and unmarried motherhood.
- Anglican clergy similar to (Catholic and Pentecostal) focus on the “the community” as the source of stigmatisation and not their church members
- The laity believe stigmatisation is from the church and it is also facilitated by the “sermon” of the clergy.
- When compared to other church denominations, the clergy and laity from the Anglican Church hold more flexible views on use of contraceptives by young unmarried women
- General teachings of churches such as Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion are still not explanatory enough to influence a teenager’s decision not to have sex or to use contraceptives.

*Thank
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