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Pastoral care and counselling in Africa

The case of Ghana

topics

- *changing society in Ghana/Africa*
- *youth and marriage in Africa*
- *urbanisation and migration*
- *family planning*
- *counselling programmes of the churches in Ghana*

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Introduction

Ghana is situated on the West Coast of Africa with a population of 17.5 million. Formerly known as the Gold Coast, the Country obtained its independence from the British in 1957 as the first black Sub-Sahara African Country to attain an independence status. Ghana's population comprises many groups with a variety of cultural values which affect various aspects of life of the people.

The country has a mixed economy, and there is a dominant traditional agricultural sector, characterized by small-scale peasant farming, which absorbs about 60% of the total adult labour force. The problem of poverty is exacerbated by the high population growth rate, which is around 3% per annum, and places a burden on the majority of families, as well as on the national economy.

The 1993 National Church survey shows the following Religious groupings in Ghana:

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| Christians | 61% |
| Muslims | 18% |
| Indigenous Religions | 21% |

With the foregoing as a background, the paper attempts to examine how the Ghanaian has handled life stresses; look at some of the current stress areas in Ghana; observe what the Church, specifically the Christian Council of Ghana has done about some of the stressful issues and conclude with some future dreams of pastoral care and counselling.

Traditional approach of pastoral care and counselling

Families in Ghana, as all families in the world, face daily pressures and stresses. The degree of stress often differs from place to place or from one generation to another. Regarding unpredictable and accidental happenings like lightning striking somebody, a car accident, sudden death, sudden sickness, etc., many Ghanaians and Africans believe that nothing happens to people by chance. Hence, there is a cause to every misfortune. Thus, some mishaps that occur to people are supernaturally caused and they need supernatural (diviners and fetish) diagnosis to bring assurance and healing.

For example, when a 70 year old man died, the family thought the death was unnatural. They consulted an oracle and the diagnosis was that 3 people in the family with the power of witchcraft killed the man. And that the dead person was saying the 3 people would follow him soon. Within the space of 2 weeks, 2 members of the family died. The elders had to consult the oracle again to 'protect' the supposed remaining 'victim'.

Moral lapses such as drunkenness, cruelty, etc. have caused great strain in many families leading to separation and divorce. In all cases elders and parents have attempted to bring spouses together. It was common for the family head of the aggrieved partner in an arbitration to "place his foot" on the case and urge the niece or daughter to go back to continue the marriage. There has been traditional respect for the elderly and often people are forced to suppress their feelings and pain to obey their elders.

Concerning general incompatibility the traditional Ghanaian culture handled it better than what we experience now. People mostly lived and married from the same ethnic groups in the same area. Parents and family elders from either partner in the marriage had known each other and their respective children well. Therefore, selection was done adequately and to the satisfaction of the couple concerned because dad or uncle knew best.

Let us now turn to Ghana presently and examine some of the pressures and challenges families are facing.

Challenges in the changing society

The average Ghanaian is directed by three voices: Voice from the past/tradition, modern voice from the Western World with its changes, and religious voice (either Christianity or otherwise). Often there is no problem or stress or crises when one faces an issue and all the three voices are in agreement. However, when there is dissonance in the voices problems erupt.

The issue of polygamy can be used to illustrate this point traditionally, and religiously. Traditional marriage allows the man to take another wife or wives. While the Christian teaching is against polygamous relationships.

Again, sometimes cultural practices and beliefs from one tribal or ethnic group in Ghana differ from one another as night is from day. An example is the descent systems in Ghana: which have two systems of inheritance - patrilineal and matrilineal descents. The patrilineal allows children in a marriage to inherit their father's property and wealth. The father therefore makes sure he provides for his children even while he lives. The matrilineal descent enables children to inherit

their maternal uncles - mother's brothers or family. Children from such descents are therefore sponsored in school or apprenticeship by their uncles, with fathers doing very little for them.

Below are some of the specific challenges facing the young couple.

The youth and mate-selection

Traditionally, choice of a spouse was the work of parents or elders of the extended family. Marriage traditionally was considered to be a communal event - the union of families. Thus such decision about marriage was too important to leave in the hands of children alone. Now, urbanisation and especially education cause many young people to be beyond the influence of their parents and elders of the extended families. The choice of a marriage partner is now largely within the hands of the youth. However, for marriages to be completed, the choice by the youth must receive the consent and approval of parents and relatives. It is here that the youth face conflict and stress. First, his or her choice may not come from his or her tribe, and second, the social, educational and professional position of the person chosen may be far below the expectation of parents. Consequently, there is undue pressure to abandon the spouse or deliberately calculated attempts to disrupt the marriage resulting in stress. The extended family system in Ghana is going through some changes presently.

Modern conditions such as industry, modern urbanization, private property, wage earning, and easier mobility are contributing to the decrease of pressure or stress from the extended family. In urban centres the nuclear family in which a man, his wife and children alone live together, is on the increase. There is however, conflict and stress in this new arrangement too: the extended family expects couples to take on traditional responsibilities such as provision of the needs of nephews, nieces, younger siblings or ageing parents.

Mother-in-law and sister-in-law also insist on their rights as members of the family. One experiences a lot of joy and happiness until the extended family visits; then there is a lot of stress.

Migration

Rapid and unplanned movements of people is also a source of stress for many people. In a developing country like Ghana, both internal and international forms of migration are common.

In Ghana, harsh economic conditions have compelled people to move from the rural areas to the urban centres or from the country to another country for "greener pastures". Migration has social and emotional effect on the migrant, the remaining spouse, the children left behind and society as a whole.

The migrant and the remaining spouse both deprive themselves of physical, emotional, financial and sexual benefits. These can lead to marital infidelities, marital breakdown or infection of STDs or AIDS.

Children also need the two parents to have a balanced growth. The pressure on the child in our contemporary world is too much for one parent to handle. Ghana's internal migration to regional capitals puts severe pressures on the already inade-

quate services and facilities in these areas. The scramble for the inadequate facilities causes stress for many.

Female and male marital roles

In Ghana and in most tribal societies in Africa there are traditionally assigned sex-typed division of labour. For example, women are supposed to bear and nurse children, cook food, fetch water and keep the house clean. Men must hunt, fish, build houses and do the hard work on the farm, such as felling trees in preparation for a new farm.

Conflict and crises come when both the husband and wife are professional persons and are engaged in wage-earning ventures. Who cares for the child, maintains the home or cook food? There is the case of this medical doctor (wife) with an engineer as a husband. In Ghana there are 582 medical officers in the public service. If that equal number are in the private sector, then we have one medical officer caring for about 17,000 people.

With this sort of demand on the life of a medical officer, there does not seem to be any time for household chores. But naturally, this husband would insist that the wife cooks his meals even though they may have a house help. Thus, this busy and highly sought after wife, mother and specialist doctor finds herself constantly under stress in an attempt to play all her roles adequately.

Urban life with husband and wife both careerist has created the situation where couples depend on house helps to take care of their small children and also do all household chores. There have been cases where the female adolescent house helps have become the “mistress” of the husband because they had taken over the running of the house for too busy mistresses.

Fertility and family planning

Ghanaians traditionally want many children. Currently, the total fertility rate is almost 6. Reasons for this high level of fertility are various socio-cultural practices and beliefs, low level of contraceptive usage and low level of education of females.

The economic situation of the country cannot tolerate a high fertility rate. On the other hand, there have been some separations or divorces when a marriage produced no offspring. The divorcees feel cheated and unloved and the ensuing pressure under which they find themselves causes them to engage in unlawful acts such as stealing babies.

Normal developmental crises

Early this month a lady spent over Cedis 30,000 (about 1/3 of her monthly salary) on medical tests later to be told that there was nothing wrong with her, that the results on the blood and urine samples showed her to be very healthy.

The lady is 46 and it seems she is beginning to experience menopause. There are many women like this one, who have little or no information on what changes occur during mid-life or old age.

There are people who are moving from one prayer camp to another, from one fetish to another just to find answers to personal and family crisis. The inability of the priests and spiritualist to find permanent solutions to their problems is another source of stress for many.

Other issues

The average Ghanaian faces serious economic problems/challenges. In the urban centres there are youth without employment, engaged in prostitution, teenage sexual affairs, involved in drug use and other social vices.

Sometimes, instead of facing these issues rationally people tend to blame others and attribute their problems to supernatural causes. There is a recent case of a grandson who clubbed the grandmother to death because he was told by an oracle that she had be-witched him. Many people who find themselves at the receiving end are bound to experience some degree of stress.

Christian Council of Ghana's Pastoral Care and Counselling Ministry

The Christian Council of Ghana is an ecumenical body made up of 14 member Churches and two affiliated organisations. Some of the member churches are: Presbyterian, Methodist, Salvation Army, Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran and Mennonite Churches. The affiliated organisations are YMCA and YWCA. The Council responds to societal needs through its four specialized Departments, namely: Church and Society, Development and Environment, Church Relations, Theology and Research, and Finance and Administration.

The Department of Church and Society has four main units, namely:

- Women and Children's Programme
- Youth Programme
- Relief and Rehabilitation Programme
- Family Life and Welfare Programme.

The general purpose of the Department, in addition to spiritual upliftment of the Churches through its activities, is to create awareness in individuals, equip them with requisite skills for empowerment, development and transformation. One of the prime foci is to reduce stress and poverty and enhance the quality of life of people.

The Family Life and Welfare Programme (FLWP) handles Population and Pastoral Care and Counselling issues of the Council. The Programme was set up in 1961 as an ecumenical response to the need to in strengthen the integrity of the Christian family and to address certain common problems regarding Christian living. The three foci of the FLWP since 1961 have been: Family Planning, Family Life Education and Family Counselling.

Let us take a closer look at the area of 'Family Counselling' for example:

Family counselling

Coping with the problems associated with the rapid rate of change in the world has not been easy for many individuals and families in Ghana. Some of these changes, which are contrary to some of our traditional norms, have sometimes created stressful situations for many people. Thus, the need for counselling.

Our churches and communities need counsellors who can help people to understand and cope with their varied needs. The counselling training programme offered by the Christian Council is meant to help along this line.

The Counselling Programme has been evolving through the years since 1967. It started with the training of Family Advisors then to a 3-Part Structured Training Programme of Family Counsellors. The programme was structured not only to train people in basic counselling skills but also to equip them to lead in seminars, workshops, talks and rallies in the churches' programmes on family living. The 3 Phase Programme took 3 years to complete. Phase I was a two-week course, mostly, on family life education with some introductory counselling topics. Phase II followed a year later. This lasted for one week. Finally, the phase III took place in a year's time after the Phase II and it was also one week. In the intervening intervals, trainee counsellors were encouraged to meet monthly with other counsellors and through talks, discussions and role plays, deepen their knowledge on Family Life Education and Family Counselling.

Since its inception, over 800 family counsellors have been trained. The Christian Council is currently the only organisation which offers formal structured training in family counselling to both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

It is being proposed to separate the Family Counselling Course as it exists now into two: purely Family Life Education and purely Family Counselling. Phase I will be Family Life Education (FLE) to interested church leaders, individuals and representatives of organisations for 3 weeks. Phase II would be more selective, admitting only those who have the requisite qualification to undertake family counselling. A new training programme is being prepared.

Over the years, the course has affected the lives of many positively. Here are a few examples. Men who felt they had learnt a lot sponsored their wives the following year. Some wives also encouraged husbands to attend. Some Moslems were converted after listening to morning and evening devotions. A man learnt of ovulation, went to teach his wife whom he had been married to for nine years without a child and she got pregnant. They have a child now. Many marriages at the verge of collapse have been turned round. Many participants with personality problems have also overcome such difficulties through the individual counselling provided to all participants during the course. If these significant changes have occurred in the lives of participants, then one can imagine a greater impact the course has on the many people who receive counselling from the 800 trained counsellors.

A look ahead

The future of this programme looks very bright, once the following have been put in place:

The Christian Council, with assistance from donors envisages training of selected past students or beneficiaries of this programme to become facilitators or tutors, locally or abroad.

With the separation of Family Life Education from Family Counselling, the varied background of the participants will be narrowed to make instruction easier.

The Christian Council has contracted experts in various fields to write papers which will be put together as a source book for use by both tutors and participants as reading materials. A course outline has already been designed.

Emphasis is being placed on biblical implications of topics treated since the programme is mostly church based.

Individual churches who can afford, have requested for and been provided with local training programme based on the same contents of the training syllabus. The number of these requests is on the increase and the committee has put resources in place to accommodate such requests.

Plans are also afoot to provide two training sessions a year for both programmes. This will double the number of counsellors trained every year. There is the need for funding.

The local associations are being encouraged to meet regularly. Current topics in counselling and family issues can be discussed or presented at such meetings. The executive of the Marriage Counsellors' Association are working around the clock to inaugurate the association early next year 1996.

Tutors who have lectured over the years are being encouraged to put their ideas together in the form of booklets for participants' use.

A programme involving 3-5 families coming together as a support system in the local churches can be a substitute to the traditional extended family. Family Counsellors and educators are to be equipped to facilitate the setting up and running of such family growth groups in the church.

Conclusion

Africa and other developing countries have some advantages as we look towards the 21st Century. We can learn from our traditional past and also from the industrialized world. We have the chance to choose what can help us best in coping with this constantly changing world with its stressors.

The resources are around us. It is our responsibility to ask-seek and knock till we see people's lives enhanced.

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