

Church-Based Strategies for Adolescent Suicide Prevention in Kenya: Evidence from Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay

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Abstract: Adolescent suicide has become a growing public health and pastoral concern in Kenya, necessitating coordinated interventions from families, schools, healthcare providers, and religious institutions. The Catholic Church plays a significant role in promoting adolescents' spiritual, emotional, and social well-being through pastoral programmes and community outreach. However, limited empirical evidence exists on the effectiveness of church-based strategies in addressing adolescent suicide within local Catholic communities. This study identified the strategies employed by the Catholic Church in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design guided by a mixed-methods approach was adopted. Data were collected from adolescents, clergy, catechists, teachers, parents, parish leaders, and local administrators using questionnaires, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that the Church employs several strategies, including pastoral counselling, youth ministry programmes, catechetical instruction, prayer and spiritual guidance, family outreach, mentorship, and community sensitization, to promote adolescents' resilience and prevent suicidal behaviour. Despite these efforts, challenges such as inadequate mental health awareness, limited professional counselling services, stigma surrounding suicide, and resource constraints hinder programme effectiveness. The study concludes that church-based strategies contribute significantly to adolescent suicide prevention when integrated with professional mental health services and community support systems. It recommends strengthening pastoral counselling, enhancing collaboration between the Church and mental health professionals, expanding youth mentorship programmes, and equipping clergy and catechists with skills in adolescent mental health and suicide prevention.

Keywords: adolescent suicide, church-based strategies, pastoral counselling, youth ministry, Catholic Church, suicide prevention, Mawego Deanery, Kenya.

1. Introduction

Adolescent suicide is a growing public health, social, and pastoral concern worldwide, with serious consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Adolescents face numerous challenges, including family conflict, academic pressure, substance abuse, poverty, peer influence, and limited

access to mental health services, all of which increase the risk of suicidal behaviour. While conventional suicide prevention efforts have largely focused on psychological and medical interventions, faith-based institutions are increasingly recognized as important partners in promoting mental health and resilience among young people.

The Catholic Church contributes to adolescent wellbeing through pastoral counselling, youth ministry, catechetical formation, prayer, mentorship, family life programmes, and community outreach. These interventions provide spiritual guidance, emotional support, and positive social relationships that foster hope, resilience, and healthy coping mechanisms. Consequently, church-based programmes have the potential to complement formal mental health services in preventing adolescent suicide.

In Kenya, the Catholic Church plays a significant role in youth development through parish-based pastoral initiatives. However, limited empirical evidence exists on the specific strategies employed by the Church to address and mitigate adolescent suicide, particularly within the Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. Most previous studies have focused on the psychological determinants of suicide or general religiosity rather than practical church-based interventions.

This study therefore sought to identify the church-based strategies employed in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. The findings contribute to the growing discourse on faith-based mental health promotion and provide evidence to strengthen collaboration between religious institutions, families, schools, healthcare providers, and policymakers in adolescent suicide prevention.

2. Background of the Study

Adolescent suicide has become an increasing public health, social, and pastoral concern worldwide, with devastating effects on families, schools, and communities. The complex nature of suicide requires multidimensional interventions that address not only psychological and social factors but also spiritual and moral dimensions of adolescent wellbeing. Consequently, faith-based institutions have increasingly been recognized as

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important partners in promoting mental health, fostering resilience, and supporting suicide prevention through community-based interventions.

The Catholic Church has a long tradition of pastoral care that extends beyond spiritual formation to include emotional, psychological, and social support for vulnerable populations. Guided by the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching, the Church seeks to uphold the dignity and sanctity of human life while responding compassionately to individuals experiencing suffering and emotional distress. Within its pastoral mission, the Church implements various interventions, including pastoral counselling, catechetical instruction, youth ministry, family life programmes, mentorship, retreats, and prayer groups, all of which contribute to the holistic development of young people. These interventions aim to strengthen adolescents' faith, promote positive values, enhance coping skills, and provide supportive relationships that discourage suicidal behaviour.

Globally, faith-based organizations have increasingly become important stakeholders in mental health promotion because of their accessibility, moral influence, and established community structures. Religious leaders often serve as trusted confidants for adolescents experiencing emotional crises, particularly in communities where access to professional mental health services remains limited. Church-based programmes also promote social connectedness, hope, compassion, and a sense of belonging, which have been identified as protective factors against suicide. Consequently, collaboration between religious institutions and mental health professionals is increasingly viewed as an effective approach to adolescent suicide prevention.

In Kenya, rising cases of adolescent suicide have prompted greater involvement of religious institutions in addressing mental health challenges among young people. The Catholic Church has responded by strengthening youth ministry, pastoral counselling, family apostolate programmes, educational initiatives, and community outreach aimed at promoting adolescents' spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Within Mawego Deanery, these interventions are implemented through parish structures involving clergy, catechists, youth leaders, teachers, and lay faithful, who collectively support adolescents facing personal, family, and social challenges.

Despite the Church's active pastoral engagement, limited empirical research has examined the specific strategies employed to prevent adolescent suicide within Catholic communities in Kenya. Existing studies have largely focused on the causes and prevalence of suicide, with little attention given to the practical pastoral interventions implemented by the Church. This study therefore sought to identify the church-based strategies employed in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, thereby contributing evidence that can strengthen faith-based mental health programmes and pastoral care for adolescents.

3. Statement of the Problem

Although adolescent suicide has become an increasing public

health concern in Kenya, many interventions continue to focus primarily on psychological and medical approaches, with limited attention to the contribution of faith-based institutions. The Catholic Church has established various pastoral programmes, including youth ministry, pastoral counselling, catechetical instruction, family outreach, and mentorship, which are intended to support adolescents experiencing emotional and psychological challenges. However, cases of adolescent suicide continue to be reported within communities served by the Church, raising questions about the effectiveness of these interventions.

While previous studies have examined the prevalence and determinants of adolescent suicide, few have investigated the specific strategies employed by the Catholic Church to address and mitigate suicidal behaviour among adolescents, particularly within the Kenyan context. This lack of empirical evidence limits the development of effective faith-based interventions and collaboration between religious institutions and mental health professionals. Therefore, this study sought to identify the church-based strategies employed in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, with the aim of generating evidence to strengthen pastoral care and faith-based suicide prevention initiatives.

4. Literature Review

A. Church-Based Approaches to Adolescent Suicide Prevention

The Catholic Church regards the protection of human life as an essential aspect of its pastoral mission. Grounded in biblical teachings and Catholic Social Teaching, the Church promotes the dignity and sanctity of human life while providing pastoral care to individuals experiencing emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress. Beyond doctrinal instruction, the Church implements practical interventions aimed at promoting adolescents' holistic wellbeing. These include pastoral counselling, youth ministry, catechetical programmes, retreats, prayer groups, mentorship, and family life programmes. Such interventions seek to strengthen adolescents' faith, foster resilience, promote hope, and provide supportive relationships that reduce vulnerability to suicidal behaviour. The dissertation identifies these Church-based initiatives as important strategies employed within Mawego Deanery to address adolescent suicide.

B. Pastoral Counselling and Youth Ministry

Pastoral counselling is an important strategy through which the Catholic Church supports adolescents experiencing emotional, social, and spiritual challenges. Through confidential guidance, prayer, and counselling, clergy and trained pastoral agents assist young people in coping with grief, family conflict, peer pressure, anxiety, and hopelessness. Youth ministry further complements pastoral counselling by creating opportunities for adolescents to participate in youth fellowships, retreats, leadership programmes, Bible study, and community service. These programmes strengthen adolescents' sense of belonging, promote positive peer relationships, and encourage healthy coping mechanisms. The dissertation

indicates that respondents viewed pastoral counselling and youth ministry as central strategies for enhancing adolescents' resilience and reducing suicidal behaviour.

C. Family and Community-Based Pastoral Interventions

The Catholic Church recognizes the family as the primary environment for nurturing adolescents' moral, spiritual, and emotional development. Consequently, Church programmes encourage parental involvement, family dialogue, mentorship, and community support in addressing challenges affecting young people. Through parish activities, family apostolate programmes, home visits, and collaboration with schools and local leaders, the Church strengthens supportive social networks that promote adolescents' wellbeing. These community-based interventions create opportunities for early identification of emotional distress and facilitate timely pastoral support for vulnerable adolescents. Such collaborative approaches reinforce the Church's holistic response to adolescent suicide prevention.

D. Empirical Review

Studies reviewed in the dissertation indicate that faith-based institutions make significant contributions to suicide prevention by providing counselling, emotional support, mentorship, and community engagement. Research conducted in different contexts demonstrates that adolescents who participate actively in church programmes often report stronger resilience, lower suicidal ideation, and better psychological wellbeing than those with limited religious involvement. However, many previous studies have concentrated on the relationship between religiosity and suicide rather than examining the practical interventions implemented by churches. Furthermore, most studies have employed quantitative approaches and have not adequately explored the experiences of clergy, parents, youth leaders, and adolescents regarding church-based suicide prevention strategies.

E. Knowledge Gap

Although existing literature acknowledges the contribution of religious institutions to adolescent mental health, limited empirical research has examined the specific strategies employed by the Catholic Church to prevent adolescent suicide within the Kenyan context. Previous studies have largely focused on the prevalence, determinants, and psychological aspects of suicide, with little attention given to pastoral counselling, youth ministry, mentorship, family outreach, and community engagement as practical Church interventions. Moreover, few studies have adopted mixed-methods approaches to examine both the effectiveness and lived experiences of these strategies. This study addressed these gaps by identifying and evaluating the Church-based strategies employed in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay.

5. Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design using a mixed-methods approach to identify the

strategies employed by the Catholic Church in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. The mixed-methods design enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of Church-based interventions.

The study was conducted in Mawego Deanery, one of the deaneries of the Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, Kenya. The target population comprised adolescents, clergy, catechists, parish leaders, teachers, parents, and local administrators involved in adolescent faith formation and pastoral care. Purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling techniques were used to obtain representative respondents from the various stakeholder groups.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring views regarding Church-based strategies for suicide prevention. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were observed throughout the study.

6. Findings and Discussion

The study sought to identify the church-based strategies employed in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. The findings indicate that the Catholic Church plays a significant role in promoting adolescents' emotional, spiritual, and psychosocial wellbeing through a range of pastoral interventions. Respondents generally agreed that these strategies contribute to strengthening resilience, promoting hope, and reducing vulnerability to suicidal behaviour among adolescents.

One of the most prominent strategies identified was pastoral counselling. Respondents reported that priests, religious, catechists, and trained pastoral agents provide guidance and counselling to adolescents experiencing emotional distress, family conflict, grief, academic pressure, and other life challenges. Participants observed that pastoral counselling creates a confidential and supportive environment where adolescents are encouraged to discuss their concerns, receive spiritual encouragement, and seek appropriate help. Qualitative responses further indicated that counselling enables adolescents to develop positive coping mechanisms while reinforcing the Christian understanding of the dignity and value of human life.

The findings also identified youth ministry programmes as an important strategy in suicide prevention. Through youth fellowships, retreats, seminars, leadership formation, Bible study groups, and recreational activities, adolescents are provided with opportunities for spiritual growth, peer support, mentorship, and community participation. Respondents emphasized that these programmes reduce social isolation, strengthen adolescents' sense of belonging, and promote positive relationships that enhance emotional wellbeing.

Another key strategy involved catechetical instruction and faith formation. Regular catechism classes, parish teachings,

and homilies equip adolescents with Christian values that promote hope, perseverance, forgiveness, compassion, and responsible decision-making. Participants noted that these teachings encourage adolescents to appreciate the sanctity of life while providing spiritual resources for coping with personal challenges.

The study further established that prayer, retreats, and spiritual accompaniment form an integral component of the Church's response to adolescent suicide. Through personal and communal prayer, spiritual direction, recollections, and sacramental life, adolescents receive encouragement to develop deeper trust in God during periods of emotional distress. These practices foster hope, inner peace, and resilience, which respondents perceived as important protective factors against suicidal behaviour.

Family engagement also emerged as an important Church strategy. Respondents observed that the Church encourages parents to participate actively in the spiritual and emotional formation of their children through family life programmes, marriage enrichment initiatives, and parent-youth dialogue sessions. Such programmes strengthen family relationships and create supportive home environments that enable early identification and management of emotional challenges among adolescents.

Despite these positive interventions, respondents identified several challenges limiting the effectiveness of church-based suicide prevention programmes. These include inadequate mental health awareness among some pastoral workers, shortage of professionally trained counsellors, stigma associated with suicide and mental illness, financial constraints, and weak collaboration between the Church and mental health professionals. Participants emphasized that while spiritual support remains essential, complex mental health conditions require timely referral to qualified healthcare providers.

The quantitative findings demonstrated that church-based interventions positively influenced adolescent suicide prevention, while qualitative findings reinforced the importance of integrating pastoral care with professional psychological support. The findings support previous studies that identify religious institutions as important community partners in promoting adolescent mental health, strengthening resilience, and fostering supportive social networks. However, this study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating how specific Catholic pastoral strategies contribute to adolescent suicide prevention within a Kenyan diocesan context.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations.

The Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay should strengthen pastoral counselling programmes by providing continuous training for clergy, catechists, religious, and youth leaders in adolescent mental health, suicide risk assessment, and referral procedures.

Youth ministry programmes should be expanded to include structured mental health education, peer support initiatives, mentorship programmes, and life-skills training that enhance

adolescents' resilience and emotional wellbeing.

The Church should strengthen collaboration with mental health professionals, schools, families, healthcare institutions, and government agencies to establish integrated referral systems for adolescents experiencing emotional and psychological distress.

Parishes should intensify community sensitization programmes aimed at reducing stigma associated with suicide and mental illness while promoting early help-seeking behaviour among adolescents and their families.

Future research should investigate the effectiveness of church-based suicide prevention strategies across different Christian denominations and geographical contexts to strengthen evidence-based faith interventions.

8. Summary

This study examined the church-based strategies employed in addressing and mitigating adolescent suicide in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. The findings revealed that pastoral counselling, youth ministry, catechetical formation, prayer, retreats, family engagement, mentorship, and community sensitization constitute the principal interventions used by the Church to support adolescents facing emotional and psychological challenges.

These strategies contribute to strengthening adolescents' resilience, fostering hope, promoting positive values, and encouraging supportive relationships that reduce vulnerability to suicidal behaviour. However, their effectiveness is constrained by limited mental health awareness, inadequate counselling capacity, resource limitations, and insufficient collaboration with professional mental health services.

9. Conclusion

The study concludes that the Catholic Church plays an important role in adolescent suicide prevention through holistic pastoral interventions that address the spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions of adolescents' wellbeing. Pastoral counselling, youth ministry, catechetical formation, prayer, mentorship, and family support provide valuable protective mechanisms that strengthen resilience and promote healthy coping strategies.

Nevertheless, the increasing complexity of adolescent mental health challenges requires greater collaboration between the Church, families, schools, healthcare professionals, and government agencies. Integrating faith-based pastoral care with professional psychological services will enhance the effectiveness of church-based suicide prevention programmes while ensuring comprehensive support for adolescents experiencing emotional distress. The findings contribute to the growing scholarship on religion and mental health by demonstrating the practical role of Catholic pastoral ministry in adolescent suicide prevention within the Kenyan context.

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