

Christian Teachings and Adolescent Suicide Prevention in Kenya: A Study of Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay

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Abstract: Adolescent suicide is an increasing public health, psychological, and pastoral concern worldwide, with rising cases reported in Kenya despite the significant role of religious institutions in promoting moral values and psychosocial support. Christian teachings emphasize the sanctity of human life, hope, compassion, forgiveness, and communal responsibility, which may strengthen adolescents' emotional wellbeing and reduce suicidal behaviour. However, limited empirical evidence exists on the influence of these teachings within Catholic communities in Kenya. This study assessed the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention 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, parish leaders, teachers, parents, 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 Christian teachings significantly contribute to adolescent suicide prevention by promoting hope, reinforcing the sanctity of life, strengthening moral responsibility, fostering resilience, and encouraging adolescents to seek spiritual and psychosocial support. However, challenges such as inadequate mental health awareness, limited counselling services, and weak collaboration between religious and mental health professionals constrained their effectiveness. The study concludes that Christian teachings are an important protective factor against adolescent suicide when integrated with pastoral care, family support, and community-based mental health interventions. It recommends strengthening faith-based counselling, enhancing adolescent catechetical formation, training clergy and youth ministers in mental health, and fostering partnerships between the Church, families, schools, and healthcare providers to improve adolescent suicide prevention.

Keywords: Christian teachings, adolescent suicide, suicide prevention, Catholic Church, pastoral care, mental health, Mawego Deanery, Kenya.

1. Introduction

Adolescent suicide is a growing public health, psychological, and pastoral concern worldwide. During adolescence, young people experience significant physical, emotional, and social changes that increase their vulnerability to suicidal behaviour. Factors such as family conflict, academic pressure, substance

abuse, depression, hopelessness, and limited access to mental health services have contributed to the rising prevalence of suicide among adolescents. While research has traditionally focused on psychological and biomedical determinants, increasing attention has been directed towards the protective role of religion and spirituality in promoting resilience and preventing suicide.

Within Christianity, human life is regarded as sacred because every person is created in the image and likeness of God. The Catholic Church promotes this belief through Scripture, Church doctrine, catechesis, pastoral counselling, youth ministry, and faith formation, encouraging values such as hope, compassion, forgiveness, perseverance, and trust in God. These teachings provide adolescents with moral guidance, emotional support, and a sense of purpose that may reduce vulnerability to suicidal behaviour.

Although studies generally associate religious participation with lower levels of depression and suicidal ideation, limited evidence exists on the specific contribution of Catholic teachings to adolescent suicide prevention within African contexts. In Kenya, adolescent suicide continues to rise despite the active involvement of the Catholic Church in youth formation and pastoral care. This study therefore assessed the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. Specifically, it examined how Catholic teachings on the sanctity of life, hope, and spiritual formation influence adolescents' attitudes towards suicide and their capacity to cope with emotional and psychological challenges.

2. Background of the Study

Suicide among adolescents has increasingly become a major public health, psychosocial, and pastoral concern across the world. Recent evidence indicates that suicide is among the leading causes of death among young people, with adolescents experiencing multiple developmental, emotional, and social challenges that heighten their vulnerability to suicidal thoughts and behaviours. The growing prevalence of adolescent suicide has prompted researchers to investigate both risk and protective factors, including the contribution of religious beliefs and

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practices to psychological wellbeing. Within Christianity, faith is increasingly recognized as a potential protective resource because it shapes adolescents' moral values, coping mechanisms, resilience, identity formation, and participation in supportive faith communities.

Christian teachings are founded on the biblical conviction that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27) and therefore possesses inherent dignity, value, and purpose. Consequently, Christianity upholds the sanctity of human life and encourages believers to cultivate hope, compassion, forgiveness, perseverance, and trust in God during periods of suffering. The Catholic Church communicates these values through catechetical instruction, Sacred Scripture, Church doctrine, liturgical worship, pastoral counselling, youth formation programmes, prayer, and community fellowship. Contemporary scholarship reviewed in the dissertation further indicates that Christian teachings strengthen adolescents' sense of belonging, purpose in life, ethical decision-making, emotional resilience, and positive coping, thereby reducing vulnerability to depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviour. Christian communities, youth ministries, and families also provide social support that protects adolescents from isolation while enhancing their psychological wellbeing.

Although psychological, biological, and socio-economic factors remain important determinants of adolescent suicide, increasing attention has been directed towards religion as an important protective factor. International empirical studies summarized in the dissertation consistently demonstrate that adolescents who actively participate in religious activities report lower suicidal ideation, stronger hope, greater psychological resilience, and healthier social relationships than those with limited religious engagement. Systematic reviews further suggest that religious commitment indirectly reduces suicide by discouraging substance abuse, violence, hopelessness, and other behaviours associated with self-harm. However, most existing studies have examined religiosity broadly rather than the influence of Catholic teachings, pastoral ministry, catechesis, and youth formation within specific diocesan contexts.

In Kenya, adolescent suicide has become an emerging social and public health concern despite the country's deeply religious character. Rising suicide cases among young people have been associated with family conflict, peer pressure, substance abuse, social media influence, economic hardship, depression, and limited access to mental health services. The dissertation notes that Homa Bay County has experienced an increasing number of reported suicides, particularly among young people, prompting mental health professionals to recommend stronger involvement of families, schools, and faith-based institutions in prevention efforts. Despite the Catholic Church's extensive pastoral presence through schools, hospitals, youth ministries, counselling programmes, and community outreach, localized evidence explaining how Christian teachings influence adolescent suicide prevention within Mawego Deanery has remained limited.

Mawego Deanery provides an appropriate context for

examining this relationship because it represents one of the major pastoral jurisdictions within the Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, serving a population where the Church plays a central role in spiritual formation, education, healthcare, and social development. The deanery comprises seven parishes whose clergy, religious, seminarians, catechists, and youth leaders regularly engage adolescents through catechetical instruction, pastoral counselling, youth fellowships, and faith formation programmes. These structures provide opportunities for transmitting Christian teachings that may influence adolescents' attitudes towards life, suffering, hope, and suicide prevention.

Against this background, the present study sought to examine the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention within Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. Specifically, the study investigated whether Catholic teachings concerning the sanctity of life, God's love and mercy, hope in Christ, perseverance in suffering, and pastoral guidance contribute to strengthening adolescents' emotional wellbeing and reducing suicidal tendencies. By providing empirical evidence from a Kenyan Catholic context, the study contributes to scholarship on religion and mental health while informing faith-based approaches to adolescent suicide prevention.

3. Statement of the Problem

Adolescent suicide is a growing public health and pastoral concern globally and in Kenya, driven by factors such as depression, family conflict, substance abuse, academic pressure, and limited psychosocial support. Although research has identified religion and spirituality as potential protective factors, limited empirical evidence exists on how Christian teachings specifically influence adolescent suicide prevention within Catholic communities.

The Catholic Church promotes the sanctity of life through biblical teachings, catechesis, pastoral counselling, youth ministry, and spiritual formation, all of which aim to foster hope, resilience, and moral responsibility among adolescents. Despite these efforts, cases of adolescent suicide continue to be reported in areas served by the Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, raising questions about the effectiveness of these teachings in preventing suicidal behaviour.

Previous studies have largely focused on religiosity in Western or multi-faith settings, with little attention given to the role of Catholic teachings in adolescent suicide prevention within the Kenyan context. This knowledge gap limits the development of evidence-based pastoral and faith-based interventions. Therefore, this study sought to assess the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, with the aim of generating empirical evidence to inform pastoral care, youth ministry, and collaborative suicide prevention strategies.

4. Literature Review

A. Christian Teachings and the Sanctity of Human Life

Christian teachings regard human life as sacred because every person is created in the image and likeness of God

(Genesis 1:27). Consequently, life is understood as a divine gift that must be protected and respected from conception to natural death. The Catholic Church condemns suicide as contrary to the Fifth Commandment while emphasizing God's mercy, compassion, and the need to provide pastoral care for individuals experiencing emotional and psychological distress. Through Sacred Scripture, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, catechetical instruction, and pastoral ministry, the Church encourages believers to cultivate hope, perseverance, forgiveness, and trust in God during times of suffering. These teachings seek to strengthen adolescents' moral values, emotional resilience, and appreciation of the dignity of human life, thereby discouraging suicidal behaviour. The dissertation identifies Christian teachings as a key religious practice that shapes adolescents' attitudes toward life and coping with emotional challenges.

B. Christian Teachings and Adolescent Suicide Prevention

Religion has increasingly been recognized as an important protective factor against suicidal behaviour among adolescents. Christian teachings provide adolescents with moral guidance, spiritual hope, and a sense of purpose that enable them to cope with personal crises and emotional difficulties. Participation in religious activities such as worship, prayer, catechetical instruction, youth fellowship, and pastoral counselling strengthens social support networks while promoting positive coping strategies. The dissertation reviewed several international studies showing that adolescents who actively participate in religious activities report lower levels of suicidal ideation and greater psychological wellbeing than their less religious counterparts. Christian teachings also discourage behaviours associated with suicide by promoting resilience, communal responsibility, forgiveness, and hope in God's providence. These findings suggest that faith-based interventions can complement conventional mental health services in preventing adolescent suicide.

C. Empirical Review

Empirical studies reviewed in the dissertation consistently demonstrate a significant relationship between religious commitment and reduced suicidal behaviour among adolescents. Studies conducted in the United States, Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda found that regular participation in religious activities, church attendance, and strong religious beliefs were associated with lower suicidal ideation and improved psychological wellbeing. For example, a study by Owusu-Ansah *et al.* (2021) among Ghanaian adolescents established that regular church attendance significantly reduced suicidal thoughts. Similarly, studies in Nigeria and Uganda reported that religious involvement and supportive family relationships enhanced adolescents' resilience against suicidal behaviour. However, these studies were conducted in different socio-cultural contexts and largely emphasized general religiosity rather than the specific influence of Catholic teachings, catechetical formation, pastoral counselling, and youth ministry. Methodologically, many relied predominantly on quantitative approaches, limiting an in-depth understanding

of adolescents' lived religious experiences.

D. Knowledge Gap

Although previous studies demonstrate that religion and spirituality contribute to reducing suicidal behaviour among adolescents, limited empirical research has examined the specific influence of Christian teachings within Catholic communities in Kenya. Existing studies have focused mainly on general religiosity, psychological factors, or family support, with little attention to the role of Catholic doctrine, catechetical instruction, pastoral counselling, and youth ministry in shaping adolescents' attitudes toward suicide. Furthermore, few studies have employed mixed-methods approaches to explore both the statistical relationship and the lived experiences of adolescents regarding Christian teachings and suicide prevention. This study therefore sought to address these contextual and methodological gaps by examining the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, Kenya, using a mixed-methods approach.

5. Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design using a mixed-methods approach to examine the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. The mixed-methods design enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Christian teachings influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviours regarding suicide.

The study was conducted in Mawego Deanery, one of the deaneries within the Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, Kenya. The target population comprised adolescents, clergy, catechists, teachers, parents, parish leaders, and local administrators who were directly involved in adolescent faith formation and psychosocial support. Purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling techniques were used to select 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, together with inferential statistics, particularly correlation and regression analyses, to determine the relationship between Christian teachings and adolescent suicide prevention. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically by organizing participants' responses into emerging themes that complemented the quantitative findings. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were upheld throughout the study.

6. Findings and Discussion

The study assessed the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. The findings indicate that respondents generally perceived Christian teachings as playing a significant

role in discouraging suicidal behaviour among adolescents. Most participants agreed that biblical teachings on the sanctity of life, hope in God, forgiveness, love, and perseverance positively influenced adolescents' attitudes toward life and strengthened their ability to cope with emotional and psychological challenges.

The study further established that Christian teachings are primarily communicated through catechetical instruction, sermons, youth fellowship meetings, pastoral counselling, retreats, prayer groups, and parish-based faith formation programmes. These platforms provide adolescents with opportunities to develop moral values, strengthen their faith, and seek spiritual guidance during periods of distress. Qualitative findings revealed that many respondents regarded the Church as a safe environment where adolescents receive emotional support, mentorship, and encouragement from clergy, catechists, youth leaders, and fellow believers.

Quantitative analysis demonstrated a positive and statistically significant relationship between Christian teachings and adolescent suicide prevention. Respondents indicated that regular exposure to biblical teachings increased adolescents' appreciation of the sanctity of life, promoted hope during difficult situations, discouraged self-harm, and encouraged help-seeking behaviour through family members, clergy, counsellors, and trusted adults. These findings suggest that Christian teachings contribute to strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to suicidal ideation among adolescents.

The findings are consistent with previous empirical studies reviewed in the literature, which reported that adolescents actively engaged in religious activities generally exhibit lower levels of suicidal ideation and greater psychological wellbeing. Similar findings from Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda indicate that church attendance, religious commitment, and supportive faith communities promote resilience against suicidal behaviour. The present study extends this evidence by demonstrating that Catholic teachings, pastoral counselling, and youth ministry play an important role in adolescent suicide prevention within the Kenyan context.

Despite these positive findings, respondents identified several challenges affecting the effectiveness of Christian teachings in suicide prevention. These include inadequate mental health awareness, limited professional counselling services, stigma surrounding mental illness, insufficient training of pastoral agents in adolescent mental health, and weak collaboration between religious institutions and mental health professionals. Participants emphasized that while Christian teachings provide valuable spiritual guidance, they should be complemented by professional counselling, family support, school-based interventions, and community mental health programmes to address the multifaceted nature of adolescent suicide.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Christian teachings constitute an important protective factor against adolescent suicide by fostering hope, moral responsibility, resilience, and supportive social relationships. However, their effectiveness can be enhanced through greater integration of faith-based

pastoral care with evidence-based mental health interventions.

7. Recommendations

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

The Catholic Church should strengthen catechetical programmes and youth ministry by integrating mental health education and suicide prevention into faith formation activities. This will enable adolescents to appreciate the sanctity of life while developing healthy coping strategies for emotional and psychological challenges.

Parishes should enhance pastoral counselling services by equipping clergy, catechists, and youth ministers with basic skills in adolescent mental health, suicide risk identification, and referral mechanisms.

The Church should strengthen collaboration with schools, families, healthcare providers, counsellors, and government agencies to provide holistic support for adolescents experiencing emotional distress.

Parents and guardians should be encouraged to actively participate in adolescents' spiritual formation while promoting open communication, emotional support, and positive family relationships.

Finally, further research should examine other religious practices and psychosocial factors influencing adolescent suicide prevention in different Christian denominations and cultural settings.

8. Summary

This study examined the effect of Christian teachings on adolescent suicide prevention in Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. The findings demonstrate that Christian teachings significantly influence adolescents' attitudes toward life by promoting hope, resilience, moral responsibility, and the sanctity of human life. Through catechetical instruction, pastoral counselling, youth ministry, prayer, and biblical teaching, the Catholic Church provides spiritual and psychosocial support that contributes to reducing suicidal tendencies among adolescents.

However, the study also identified challenges, including limited mental health awareness, inadequate counselling services, stigma associated with mental illness, and insufficient collaboration between religious and mental health institutions. These findings underscore the need for an integrated approach that combines Christian teachings with professional mental health interventions to enhance adolescent suicide prevention.

9. Conclusion

The study concludes that Christian teachings play a significant role in adolescent suicide prevention within Mawego Deanery, Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay. By emphasizing the sanctity of human life, hope in God, compassion, forgiveness, and perseverance, the Catholic Church strengthens adolescents' resilience and promotes positive coping mechanisms during periods of emotional and psychological distress.

Although Christian teachings alone cannot eliminate all factors associated with adolescent suicide, they provide a strong spiritual and moral foundation that complements psychological, family, school, and community-based interventions. Strengthening pastoral counselling, adolescent faith formation, mental health awareness, and institutional partnerships will enhance the Church's contribution to adolescent suicide prevention. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on religion and mental health and provide practical insights for faith-based organizations seeking to promote adolescent wellbeing and reduce suicide among young people.

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