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## Single Parenting and Worship Participation in Local Churches: An Empirical Assessment

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### Abstract:

*In today's society, roles have changed for many parents. They are working long hours and having to balance family at the same time. Consequently, single parents tend to have more role strain in raising children alone than those who are not single, and single parenting demands often turn into stress and conflict between family and survival. After a divorce or separation, single parents' perceptions of raising children alone and survival often go unnoticed. This study therefore empirically assessed the issue of single parenting and worship participation in Monrovia Central Seventh Day Adventist Church, Liberia.*

*This study used a survey design. One hundred and fifteen (115) respondents participated in the study. Data were collected structured interview. Four research questions were raised to guide this study, while Analysis of data was done using descriptive statistics.*

*A total of 115 participants were included in the study, 66 (57.4%) females and 49 (42.6%) males participated in the study, the age range from 21 to 71years with majority (75; 65.2%) aged 21-35years, 49.6% were married, 21 (18.3%) were single and 37 were single parents. Also, majority (45.2%) were first degree holder, and 44 (38.3%) have spent between 6 and 10 years in the current church. Eighty-three (72.2%) participants among the one hundred and fifteen affirmed the existence of single parenthood or family, 59 (51.3%) of the participants of this study agreed that single parents are saddled with responsibilities in the church. All the respondents interviewed agreed that they do encourage their wards and children to participate in all activities required of them; and that social support for single parents from other church members is a must.*

*The study concluded that the problems and challenges faced by single parents were personal while others were coming from the community due to lack of support from society. Based on the outcome of this study, it was recommended that pastors need to consider the relational communication pattern, couples' mutual vulnerability, and emotional atonement in order to improve the couples' marital quality, satisfaction and interaction towards each other.*

**Keywords:** Single parenting, worship participation, local churches, central Monrovia

### 1. Introduction

The world today has seen an increase in the number of single parents taking care of their children alone as a result of changes in family patterns. The family, which is a basic unit of socialization, is also one of the most important institutions for raising children. It is through the family that children first develop their cognitive abilities, emotions and morals. The family is also a source through which children meet their daily needs of life. However there has been some breakdown in the family structure in the developed and of lately in developing countries posing some challenges on single parents to take care of their children.

A single parent family is a nuclear family where one or more children are nurtured by either a father or a mother (Ezeigbo, 2001). Such a family is often referred to as father or mother headed family. There are several factors that are responsible for the increase in single parenting in our society, such as among others (Ward, 2012). It comes with a big financial burden that often drives the individuals into street hawking, armed robbery and their children in turn engage in prostitution just for survival and this poses a big challenge to the contemporary society. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of theologians, feminists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers among other scholars. Whereas God's instructions about parenting apply equally to the single and to the married (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21).

The demographics of single parenting globally show a general increase in the number of single mothers (Senior, 2014). However, study by Clark and Hamplova (2013) demonstrated that about 50% of women in sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to become a single mother as a result of marriage dissolution through divorce or death of a spouse. Studies have also shown that single parenthood is common (Jordal, Wijewardena & Olsson, 2013).

Changes have occurred in the family structure of many nations over the years, with the traditional two-parent family structure becoming much less prominent. However, single parenting family life can be stressful and with various

pressures on families. Ultimately, parents want what is best for their children and a strong parent-child relationship can help lead to better outcomes for children (Trillingsgaard, Baucom, & Heyman, 2014).

However, the church just like every other formal organization, appreciates the relationship that exist between the couples in their churches. This relationship matters in the sense that the members form a dynamic family that affects the work and mission of the church. Regrettably today, the way in which the family is structured within the church and of a local congregation often times is characterized by mistrust, anxiety, and hurtful behaviour.

Like any other human organization, the Churches are entangled with problems and perplexities some of which are doctrinal, interpretation of values and etiquette, spiritual leadership and administrative problem, continued exodus of members, illiteracy, disenchanted youth, financial and economic problems, among others, the aftermath of which hitherto negatively affected evangelism and growth of the church.

In order to empirically assess the issue of single parenting and worship participation in local churches, the following questions were raised and looked into.

- Does single parenting or family exists among Christians?
- Are single parents saddled with responsibilities in the church?
- Do single parents encourage their children or wards to participate in church worship?
- Do single parents have social support from other church members?

## 2. Methodology

- Research Design: This study adopted a survey research design. This survey design was preferred since the researcher cannot control the conditions experienced by the churches understudied.
- Study Population: The target population covers the confirmed members of the Monrovia Central Seventh Day Adventist Church through baptism, confirmation, or any other means. This study specifically covers all members of the church - pastors, elders, and ordinary members.
- Sample and Sampling Techniques: One hundred and fifteen members were selected through stratified random sampling techniques.
- Research Instrument: Relevant information for this research were obtained majorly through structured interview. This is a conscious effort being made by the researcher to collect relevant information from the church members on the subject matter. The four questions that guided the direction and formation of this paper were addressed through the design of a twelve question open-ended interview. This researcher constructed and pre-tested ten questions that allowed the participants to tell their story in a somewhat unrestricted fashion while ensuring that the relevant, needed data was also extractable.
- Method of Data Analysis: The data collected in this study were quantitatively done and analyzed.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Variables		Frequency	Percentages
Gender	Male	49	42.6
	Female	66	57.4
Age	21-25	25	21.7
	26 -30	26	22.6
	31 - 35	24	20.9
	36-40	20	17.4
	41-45	16	13.9
	45years above	4	3.5
Marital Status	Married	57	49.6
	Single	21	18.3
	Single mom/dad	37	32.2
Educational Status	Diploma/NCE	20	17.4
	First degree	52	45.2
	Master degree	35	30.4
	PhD	8	7.0
Years of worshipping in the current church	< 5 years	19	16.5
	6-10years	44	38.3
	11-15years	28	24.3
	16years above	24	20.9
Position in the church	Pastors	2	1.7
	Elders	13	11.3
	Deacon(ness)	28	24.4
	Members	72	62.6

Table 1: Respondents' Socio-Demographic Characteristics  
N = 115

The participants' socio-demographic report shows that 66 (57.4%) females and 49 (42.6%) males participated in the study. It was further revealed that the age range of the respondents range from 22 to 71years with majority (75; 65.2%) aged 21-35years. The majority (49.6%) were married while 21 (18.3%) were single and 37 were single parents. The educational status showed that majority (45.2%) were first degree holder, 44 (38.3%) have spent between 6 and 10 years in the current church. The positions in the church shows that 72 (62.6%) were church members, 28 (24.4%) were deacon(ness), 13 (11.3%) were elders, and the remaining 2 (1.7%) were pastors.

#### 4. Interview Presentation

The outcome of the first question that stated 'Does single parenting or family exists among Christians' was not shocking but revealing. Eighty-three (72.2%) participants among the one hundred and fifteen affirmed the existence of single parenthood or family in Christianity with support, and that there is nothing wrong with it as long the individual has his or her eternal peace. It was revealed further that 20 (17.4%) said it is not Biblical to be single parents and the remaining 12 (10.4%) were indifference.

One of the respondents affirmed the existence of single parenthood or family within the church even among pastors, explaining that:

'More often than not, no one want to be a single mother or father in this life but situation permits it. It have long been in existence. It is not a new phenomenon among couples, which might due separation, divorce or death of partner.' (Interview, 05.07. 2021).

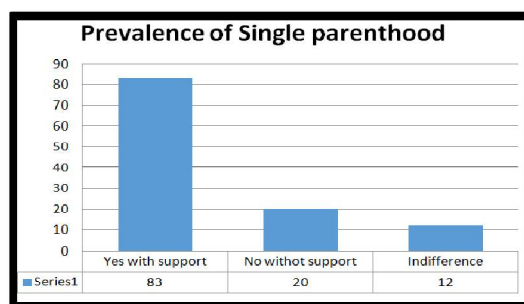


Figure 1: A Bar Chart Showing the Existence and Prevalence of Single Parenthood in the Church

The questions on whether single parents are saddled with responsibilities in the church showed a mixed report. Some respondents believed that there is nothing wrong in saddling single parents with responsibilities in the church, that they are in the church to serve God and not human. This is the thought of 59 (51.3%) of the participants of this study.

Single mothers or fathers are human too and the church is for everyone. We must have equal right and privileges to serve our maker. Remove them from the church, will others become the saints? No! While Jesus Christ was on earth like us, He worked and fellowship more with the 'sinners' - Excerpt from one the respondents (a deacon). (Interview, 01.07. 2021)

'Working with the single parents in the church does not mean we are encouraging single parenting either through divorce or separation rather we work with them to make them better person and also use that to bring the two parents back as one in many cases. This according to some respondents will help the marriage institution because it is part of creative plan of God for the world and the family becomes one of the foundations of humans' - Excerpt from another respondent. (Interview, 05.07. 2021).

On the contrary, some respondents were of the opinion that saddling them with responsibilities in the church is a means of encouraging the vices. They went further saying that the majority of single parents are women and mothers who are mostly the primary caregivers in a single parenthood family as a result of divorce or unplanned pregnancy or separation.

To them:

'Single parenting is not Biblical except in the case of death of one and the other refused to re-marry. Sanity must come to our marriages and homes. Though, some church doctrine is not against single parenthood'

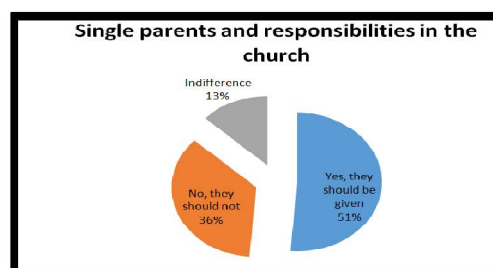


Figure 2: A Pie Chart Showing If Single Parents Should Be Saddled with Responsibilities in the Church or Not

The third research question which stated that 'Does single parents encourage their children or wards to participate in church worship?' did not generate any argument at all by the respondents. All the respondents interviewed agreed that they do encourage their wards and children to participate in all activities required of them.

The last questions on the aspect that looked at the issue of social support for single parents from other church members was revealing and surprising because every individual interviewed agreed that it is necessary to give them all necessary social support. A lot of reasons were adduced for this social support given. Since, the single-parent family consists of a single parent and her/his dependent children.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The implication of this result is that single parent family life can be stressful with various pressures on families. Ultimately, parents want what is best for themselves and their child(ren). This is in line with previous study of Kolawole, (2018) that marriage disruption is a stressful life event initially resulting in acute stress that may cause daily stressors such as economic difficulty, overload of twofold parenting roles, and childcare issues. Thus, the positive support from the church to get the single parents involved so many church activities is not just important for the individual but for the society at large.

One plausible reason for this finding may be adduced to the fact that the demands being placed on single parenthood might have been too high and they tend not to have resources to meet them, which in turn may create a gap in communication and make them depressed or unwanted. Getting them involved could buffer their mental health. This is in tandem with the findings of Holly, Fenley, Kritikos, Merson, Abidin and Langer (2019) that stress either marital or usual life often negatively influence life quality. Satisfying relationships particularly marital quality are correlated with life satisfaction (Naess, Blekesaune, & Jakobsson, 2015), happiness (Riva Crugnola, Ierardi, Ferro, Gallucci, Parodi, & Astengo, 2016), and well-being (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2013) that could make an individual to participate more in church activities and be religiously functional.

Social support is very important in every individual's life. The positive effects of good social support cannot be over emphasized in that such support has a direct impact on humans' health and wellbeing because it provides humans with feelings of predictability, belonging, purpose and security. Similarly, social support acts as a buffer against various forms of stress and thus promotes quality of life and coping mechanisms. Moreover, social support enhances quality of life and provides a buffer against adverse life events (Heaney & Israel, 2018).

The importance of social support is that it enhances strong social support network which helps one through the stress of tough times. On the other hand, lack of social support can lead to isolation and loneliness. Humans are social beings who are dependent on having social contact and support with their immediate family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and the people they meet through various interests and leisure activities. Social contact is also having great impacts on both humans' physical and mental health. Furthermore, research findings have it that social contact and support may help reduce stress, depression, anxiety and isolation, as well as promote self-esteem, normality, well-being and quality of life (Adejoh, Kuteyi, Ogunsola, & Adeoye, 2019).

## 6. Conclusion

This study has been able to empirically assessed the issue of single parenting and worship participation in Monrovia Central Seventh Day Adventist Church, Liberia. Also it has been able to look into the importance of social support of the church on the church participation and wellness of the single parents. Deducing from various reviews, old and current literature and findings of this work, there is no doubt that social support would be the determinant of single parenthood in worship participation. On a concluding note, the problems and challenges they faced were personal while others were coming from the community due to lack of support from society, and the church must not add to this. Proverbs 19:17: says 'Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.' The most important thing for any parent to remember is that God created our children and has a plan for their lives. They were entrusted to us, regardless of our family situation, and their Creator expects us to take the responsibility to raise them in a godly manner. Single parents may find this more difficult than those with partners, but when they engage the help of their brothers and sisters in Christ, their children can thrive. Jesus had a special tenderness for children (Matthew 19:14), and single parents can rest assured that He cares for their children as much as He does for those raised in two-parent homes.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

The findings would be of great benefit to pastors and marriage counsellors, Ministry of Women Affairs, Social Welfares, and Community Development, who are frequently confronted with marital issues such as divorce, separation, unresolved conflicts among couples. It is believed that identification of the index of poor marital health and satisfaction or otherwise of the target population may increase readiness of married couples making themselves available for marital counselling, thereby making counselling enterprise uncomplicated and establish the success of counsellor at work and in religious organizations.

The findings from this study demand urgent attention by all concerned, including counselling psychologists, marriage counsellors, religious leaders, married couples and the entire public. This is because the study has revealed and confirmed the contribution of social support on single parenthood. Prevention they say is better than cure. Therefore, the results from this study should be of paramount interest and concern to all.

Pastors need to consider the relational communication pattern, couples' mutual vulnerability, and emotional atonement in order to improve the couples' marital quality, satisfaction and interaction towards each other. It is also helpful for counsellors to increase the couples' insight regarding each other relational skills, vulnerability, and emotional atonement.

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