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Surrendering all to Christ: Overspiritualization of Workplace Health and Safety in Selected Churches in Lagos, Nigeria

Oluranti Samuel, DPhil.

ABSTRACT

Every worship centre is a work environment for members who are designated as voluntary workers and those who are paid employees. Worship centres are also places, where believers attend to interact with the Supreme Being with the expectations of having their needs met. The safety of the Lord is never in doubt. However, the clergy and individual worshippers need to adhere to some fundamental safety precautions so as to benefit from the overall safety of the Lord. Clergies and worshippers, in most cases, throw caution into the winds and leave what they need to do for their safety and health undone, surrendering them to God to do for them. Using qualitative methods (FGD, IDI, KII and observation), this study assesses safety issues in selected churches in Lagos, Nigeria. The levels of precautionary measures put in place in the worship centres to avert hazards to both individuals and the church as a whole, the personal safety and health measures by the clergy and members as well as the environmental precautionary measures serve as the main focus of the study. The study found out that personal precautionary measures, worship centres and environmental safety measures are not taken with the seriousness they deserve. Spirituality and the belief that "safety is of the Lord" take precedent over needed precautionary measures among many Christians and in worship centres. The study suggests that individual worshippers and the clergy should play their expected roles to avert dangers that could put the name of the Lord into disrepute.

Keywords: clergies, churches, Christians, overspiritualization, workplace health, safety

INTRODUCTION

Occupational safety and health (OSH) can be defined as freedom from danger or risk of injury and illness (Dionela, 2018). It also involves protection and preservation of a worker's well-being, property or business, and the work environment (Samuel, 2018). Occupational Safety and Health deals with the protection and welfare of human beings who are the God's most important creation.

Churches are places of worship where Christians or believers interact with the Supreme Being with the expectation of having their needs met. The worship centres are of various types of buildings and structures, depending on the environment, economic status, and tastes of the leaders and the worshippers. There are various denominations and different doctrinal teachings and modes of worship in the Nigerian society and in every society. The activities include singing, drumming, praying and other different way of supplications.

Leviticus 19:16 shows that protection and preservation of human life emanated from the identity and character of God, which is to what is right and just. The ethics or moral issue of Occupational Safety and Health started with God (Micah 6:8). The Garden of Eden is the first workplace or environment for humankind (Genesis 2:8) and God prepared the workplace before He placed man the worker there (Genesis 2:15). The Hebrew word for work is 'service to God and worship'- an indication that the Garden of Eden was both a place of work and worship. Work is also worship, and a place of work is also a place of worship and vice versa (Dionela, 2018). Though the Garden of Eden had all the resources needed by humans to accomplish their work and be productive, there were also the inherent hazards that included the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9), with a risk of death (Genesis 2:17).

Churches also serve as a work environment for pastors or the various religious leaders and members designated as voluntary workers and those who are paid employees. Many are employed formally by the church administrators and management to carry out their various roles within the church envi-

ronment and their activities. The voluntary workers are those assigned to carry out some roles and responsibilities that within or outside the church environment for the church, but they are not paid wages and salaries. The assigned jobs and responsibilities could be spiritual or physical, aimed at enhancing the doctrinal beliefs of the denomination. Health and safety is an important part of daily life at work, home, churches and other places of worship. It is wrong to believe that accidents will never occur in churches or that health and safety are applicable only to larger or higher risk workplaces (Environmental Health Department,).

In the processes of work within and outside the church, the workers are involved in several work-related diseases. Though the safety of the Lord (Proverb 21:23) is never in doubt, work-related diseases and health problems pose serious threats to workers' health and their general well-being, even in the church. The church, as a workplace, has an obligation to discharge the same duty of care to volunteers or other persons at the workplace as applied to paid employees. The enormous outcome of occupational injuries and illnesses on employed people affect personal and family suffering is enough for the involvement of the clergy who should consider it a part of their pastoral responsibilities to address the problem (Finn, 1981).

Pastors, employees, volunteers and congregations members are involved in church work, and the governing body of every church has obligation to comply with work, safety and health laws (Sentrient (2020). Workplace health and safety deals with eliminating and reducing the risk of work-related injuries (Samuel, 2018). Everyone is responsible for working towards a church environment devoid of risk to the health or safety of others (Sentrient (2020). Poor workplace health and safety can affect a church through injury, loss of productivity that can result in lower engagement, loss of skills, experience and knowledge, fines and reputation damage to the church and the people.

The obligations of the church include a safe physical environment that includes structures, furniture and fittings, equipment; an environment devoid of abuse and harassment as well as the safe use of equipment, material in the church and structure. Some hazards and risks common in the church include: manual handling, plant and equipment, working at heights, physical and environmental hazards (i.e. poor lighting, trip hazards etc.), chemical hazards, electrical hazards, and psychological hazards (Sentrient (2020).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Churches in Nigeria, like every other place, have witnessed buildings collapsing, electrocutions in the church, armed robbery attacks during vigils and services, kidnapping of children, killings in the church by hired assassinations, accidents within and outside the church, some worship in dilapidated and makeshift places or buildings, pastors collapsing (dying during church programmes) and several other safety and health challenges. Is it that God has abandoned His role of safety to His people or the clergy and worshippers, in most cases, leave what they need to do for their safety and health undone, surrendering them to God to do for them? This attitude have caused avoidable hazards and accidents and in most cases, death. The clergy and worshippers need to adhere to fundamental safety precautions so as to benefit from the overall safety of the Lord. This study is meant to assess safety issues in selected churches in Lagos, Nigeria.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:

1. Identify possible hazards and OHS issues prevalent in the selected churches.
2. Identify the personal safety and health issues by clergies and members
3. Assess the levels of precautionary measures put in place in the worship centres to avert hazards to both individuals and the church as a whole,
4. Suggest ways of improving the OSH and wellbeing of the clergy and church members.

METHODOLOGY

The study location is Lagos State, southwestern part of Nigeria. The boundary area of Lagos State is defined by a 180 km long Atlantic coastline in the south, the Republic of Benin in the west, while the north and east boundaries are shared with Ogun state. It is on a land area of 358,861 hectares or 3,577sq km representing 0.4% of Nigeria's total land mass (*Demographia*, 2013), and arguably, the most economically important state in Nigeria (Campbell, 2012). Lagos State with 20 Local Government areas and 37 Local Council Development Areas, has an estimated population of 21 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014), and it is home to over 6.4 percent of the national population of over 200 million (Trading Economics, 2019). The choice of Lagos State was premised on its high rate population growth, the socio-cultural diversity of its inhabitants, its status as the major

commercial nerve-centre of the Nigeria and its former capital with striving informal economy. In addition, Lagos State has so many churches of various denominations.

Qualitative data collection techniques were used for the study. The qualitative techniques include in-depth interviews (IDI), focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs) and participant observations in some of the selected churches. Qualitative data collection was adopted because of the peculiarity of the study and the sensitivities attached to religion in this part of the world, the nature of the various church activities and programmes and to get in-depth information from the respondents. Three LGAs were purposively selected, with six churches of various denominations purposively selected from each of the local governments. Three different FGDs were conducted from each of the Local Governments involving the representations of all the churches selected in the LGAs. In-depth interviews were also conducted with purposefully selected pastors/clergy and senior congregational members from each of the LGAs. The interviewees were selected, based on status and leadership roles in the selected churches. Two key informants were also interviewed virtually; one official from the Local Government and the Lagos State Safety Commission. The choices of the key informants was premised based on their status and roles on occupational safety issues during the pandemic. Observations of activities and the surroundings of the some churches were also taken note of. The data collected were content-analysed, transcribed and discussed under different headings depicting the objectives.

FINDINGS

Hazards and OHS issues prevalent in the selected churches

The study found out the following nature of hazards and occupational safety issues prevalent in the selected churches:

Physical facilities: As good as many of the structures were, many of them lacked some physical challenges. Some of the church buildings that were tiled had slippery floors and could easily trip the worshippers. There were no warning symbols or signs for members and workers to be careful on the slippery ground. Some of the buildings of the churches under study were structurally defective, had poor ventilations, and were odoriferous, ramshackle and incomplete. It was observed that some older buildings had peeled walls and the sand from them was injurious to the eyes. The chairs in some of the churches visited were fragile, not good enough and of poor quality, and could be hazardous and injurious for the worshippers,

A respondents had this to say:

You cannot complete the church building overnight and we have to worship our God. The fact is that when people worship under the incomplete building, they will be conscious of the fact that there is the need to contribute to the completion of the building. There is no problem about safety as the Lord always protects His people. We are covered by His blood. (IDI/Clergy/M/52/Lagos/January 2022).

Poor environment: Some of the church premises were not neat and could attract reptiles, snakes and rodents. The flooded situation of some church premises because of lack of adequate drainage was also seen as detrimental to the health of the members and workers in the church. The stagnant water and the untidy environment were breeding spots for mosquitoes and other dangerous insects. This situation was not seen by many to be hazard-prone, as a respondent tried hard to defend it:

I do not see any danger in this environment. We have not been bitten by any snake here. Mosquitoes can also bite anywhere not because of the environment, though we clear the bushes often and create pathways for the flood. So I don't see any danger in this. (

Noise pollution: Every church service is agog with melodious songs and dancing of members to the various musical gadgets as used by the churches under review. The musical bands were seen as crowd pullers and their usage and mastery as pull factors for many congregational members. However, the arrangements of the musical instruments in many of the churches visited never took the health of members into consideration. The speakers were strategically located but closer to many of the congregational members, and they oozed sounds directly into their ears. The higher decibel of such sounds are injurious to the health of the worshippers. The drummers, singers and instrumentalists, who were busy exhibiting their skills without adequate protections of their ears, were also seen to be the consumers of such high decibels of the sounds from the instruments. In addition, where the musical instruments are

not of good quality, the users may be forced to exert energy, especially in the use of microphones. A respondent exhibited her ignorance through her response:

The sounds really motivate us into dancing. There is no way you can praise God without making a joyful noise unto Him. If the musical instruments are not loud enough, many people will not hear and will not be happy about the service. I see nothing wrong in the volume of the sound as nobody has ever complained about ear problems because the sound themselves and the dancing are healing therapies. (FGD/D3/Grp2A/Female/44/Church worker/Lagos/ January 2022).

Another respondent from another denomination opined that:

The issue of noise pollution is nothing to be worried about. The scriptures ask us to make a joyful noise to the Lord. God will not allow those praising Him to be affected with any sickness or hearing problems. I sit closer to one of the speakers so as to hear the sound very well, and I am encouraged to dance. I don't think there is any health implication. (IDI/Church worker/Male/46/Lagos/January, 2022).

Dress code for workers, ministers, pastors/clergy: Workers and clergy in many of the churches under study have dress codes. In some denominations, the entire members wear the same clothes, especially the white garment churches; the Cherubim and Seraphim and the Celestial Church of Christ. Despite the commonality of their uniforms, the latter do not wear any footwear under the uniform. Not wearing footwear in most cases could be healthy, especially when walking in the sun for some time. The health implication however is that individual could be injured on the leg or hit his feet/legs against sharp objects that could cause health problems. In addition, the longer robes could also endanger the owner if it hooks on any object while walking or kneeling to pray. These, to many, are not issues to be concerned with.

In addition, in other denominations, the uniforms are limited to some departments like the choristers, ushers, security and sanitation. The purpose of these were to identify membership and to enhance cohesion. The clergy, on their own have special robes or formal ways of dressing. It was observed that in most churches, where formal dressings are recommended for the clergy, little or no attention is paid to safety and health. A situation where three different robes are worn by some members of the clergy and others who must suit up always in an environment not well ventilated, the hidden health hazard can be imagined, especially where there is not enough ventilation and adequate illumination.

A member of the clergy said:

Though the electricity issue is a challenge, and we don't often have light, except when we use generator, we however need to adjust to the situation, especially if you are on the altar. You can't remove your tie or dress or your robes, even if you are feeling the heat. I don't think there is any health challenge in that situation because the service do not take too long to be concluded. (IDI/Clergy/Male/54/Lagos/January, 2022)

Poor or and inadequate conveniences: The toilet facilities in some churches under review were poor and inadequate. Some toilet facilities were incomplete, some did not have running water, some had leaking roofs, some had bad doors, while there was no provision in some churches under construction. The health implications and the possible spread of diseases these problems could bring can better be imagined. It was observed that some members urinate in nearby bushes as the facilities were no-go-areas.

A respondent stated that:

I don't use the toilet here for at all. I always make sure I go to conveniences before leaving home. This is because the odour in the toilet because of lack of water makes it unattractive. I have also seen many members going to the nearby bushes to urinate. I just believe that situation will improve very soon, as the work is in progress on it. (FGD/D5/Grp3B/Male/45/Lagos/January, 2022)

Another respondent stated that:

Though the toilets in our church are good and neat, they are inadequate. I agree with you that people can contract toilet diseases if the facilities are very dirty and not properly kept. The fact however remains that the Lord will always protect His own. (FGD/D3/Grp2/Female/42/Lagos/ January, 2022).

Poor and inadequate safety kits: The necessary safety kits that could be used to prevent hazards and accidents were not available. Cleaners did not have face masks and hand gloves, even sanitizers that were prevalent during the COVID-19 era were no more in place. There were no fire extinguishers in the church auditoriums. Apart from three churches among those observed, the rest had no CCTV cameras that could be used for surveillance. There were no First Aid boxes in case of minor injuries. The relevance of some of these necessary safety kits was underplayed by a respondent:

What do we need first aid box for? Can first aid box be more powerful than God's aid? How long are we staying in the church that will warrant injury that one will need first aid box for? It is only people with little faith that will take such steps. Even during COVID-19, we only obeyed the government instructions, not because we were afraid of the pandemic. (FGD/D5/Grp3/Male/55/Church worker/Lagos/ January 2022).

Another enthused:

How long are we going to work that we need some of these gadgets you mentioned? We don't do this cleaning every day, but only on Saturdays and Sundays. (FGD/D4/Grp1/Female/47/Church worker/Lagos/ January 2022).

Poor and hazard prone children churches: In most of the churches used for this study, children churches were not given adequate attention in comparison with the adult churches. Some spaces given for children churches were inadequate and too small for them. Facilities were not enough and many of the children were uncontrollable. The ventilation in some of the children classes and auditoriums was very poor. In some of the churches, the noise pollution from the musical instruments were heard louder in the children church, which could affect their hearing ability, as many of them were shouting at the top of their voices. In some churches, some children were running around and that could lead to falls or slips which, of course, is hazardous.

PERSONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH ISSUES BY THE CLERGIES AND MEMBERS

The personal safety of the clergy and members were examined in the study. It was discovered that several safety and health issues that were not taken cognizant of were taking place in the various worship centres and they were indirectly affecting the clergy and their members.

The churches under study have programmes and activities throughout the week. Some of the churches have theirs three times in a week. The activities and the programmes of the churches involved singing, dancing, prayers that involved invitations of non-members of the church. It involved the movement of people from one place to another. It is noteworthy to explain that in some of the programmes witnessed, members were seated outside the church premises and vehicles were parked on part of the road, blocking other road users. Some of these activities were carried out without precautionary measures.

It is also important to note that many of the programmes are laced with fasting of various categories: short, long, dry, white and so on. Fasting, though is healthy for the body, should not be abused. The danger is some cases has to do with what is used to break the fast and when it is done. Many worshippers do not have adequate training on fasting and what to do to prevent its adverse effects. Many people, in the bid of acquiring power from God, engaged in dry fasting for many days, denying themselves of food, drinks and even water. The health implications of some of the activities never attracted attention from the worshippers. Crowd management in some of the churches with large crowds was also a point to note. The physical nature of individuals could not be ascertained.

On the question of whether or not members and the clergy go for regular check-ups, majority of the respondents stated that they seldom go for medical check-up as they enjoyed divine healings in most of the programmes. Some mentioned that even when they fall sick, they prefer coming to church for prayers and have faith that they would be healed of such diseases or sicknesses. Others mentioned that they do checkups when they have health challenges and are taken to the hospital. Issues of checking of the blood pressure was seen to be working against one's faith.

A respondent has this to say:

I come for my check-up anytime I come for services, especially prayer programmes. I believe in the power of healings that are in such prayers. The scripture had assured us of divine health and healings. (FGD/D1/Grp1/Male/51/Church member/Lagos/ January 2022).

Another said:

What use is the check-ups when I am not sick? I even hate to take some of the drugs and injections that are prescribed in the hospitals. I believe that by His stripes, I am healed. (FGD/D6/Grp3/Female/52/Church worker/Lagos/ January 2022).

The lack of enthusiasm towards medical check-ups is not limited to members. Some pastors and other members of the clergy also do not believe in it. A pastor has this to say:

It is lack of faith that makes many to go into regular medical checkups. I believe in many of the prayer and deliverance programmes, one will automatically be healed. If I start having medical checkups every day, I will discourage many of my members who have been coming for prayers. (IDI/Male/48/Pastor/Lagos/ January, 2022).

The situation of sicknesses, illnesses and healings are seen by members from different perceptions. Many of the respondents, majority of which were averagely educated, exhibited overdependence on anointing oil and mantles, which they bring for programmes and go with them after the prayers. Many of the respondents confessed that they bring the sick to the church for healing therapy through prayers and fasting. The level of dependency on the anointing oil was seen in the manner by which a respondent stated that:

There is a strong healing power in the anointing oil. I once rubbed my sick son with the oil and the sickness that we have been spending money on disappeared. I don't joke with it. (FGD/D4/Grp2/Female/45/Church worker/Lagos/ January 2022).

Another said that:

The mantle that was prayed on was what I took to touch the head of my sick father and within few hours, he was healed of the sicknesses that we have been spending money on. (FGD/D6/Grp1/Male/50/church member/Lagos/ January 2022).

THE LEVELS OF PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES PUT IN PLACE IN SOME WORSHIP CENTRES

Some of the churches under study put in place some precautionary measure to prevent some health and safety challenges. Some of the bigger churches have individuals working in the sanitation department. This department is saddled with the cleaning of the premises and the toilets. However, it was discovered that many of them do not have all necessary sanitary materials and equipment to achieve excellent results as required in this respect. Others never have any specific department for the purpose of sanitation, though they have people who do the cleaning of necessary places. This idea is commendable, but the need to get the necessary materials for those doing the cleaning will assist greatly.

To control orderliness within the church premises, there are ushers who directs members or guests to places they should be seated. They also mount the entrance to control the goings and coming of members. The ushers are called different names, depending on the denominations.

Many of churches under observation do not have warning signs or health and safety educational posters. The posters that adorn the walls included scriptural posters, especially the one meant to build faith and those encouraging members for attendance in Sunday school to pay their tithes and offering.

It is noteworthy that some of the churches have medical teams. The major role of these medical teams is to organize medical checkups for the members as part of the church's Social Responsibility (CSR). They are also involved in medical counselling, while some of them work voluntarily for few churches that have clinics and maternity centres. However, it is expected that churches have Safety Committees with safety professionals handling such committees. None of the churches under investigation had safety committees. It was found out that many of the respondents subsumed medical teams for the safety committees. They could not differentiate the roles of the two. A respondent said:

What is the need for Safety Committee when we already have a medical team? Safety of the individual belongs only to God. The medical team takes care of all medical issues and I think it will be a duplicating efforts to have any committee in the name of Safety Committee (IDI/Clergy/Male/58/Lagos/ January, 2022).

The issue of safety and health in church premises is fatalistically considered. It is either members and worshipers attach causes of any hazard, injury or accident in the church as the work of the devil or evil spirits that do not want people to be blessed. The study is not discountenancing the existence of the devil and its work of evil; however, there are many things that are caused by the carelessness of members or the church authority that are injurious to the safety and health of members. The efficacy of prayers in averting evil and dangers are also not in doubt; however, the precautionary roles of individuals to prevent such cannot be overemphasized. Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that safety issues can be solved totally by prayers. This over-reliance on prayers had created a major gap in what people should do to avert accidents and dangers. In addition, in most of the churches, the statement of the pastors or the clergies are seen as law and seen to be sacrosanct. The overdependence on the pronouncement of the pastors through prophecy, decrees and prayers on issues of safety and health are seen in most cases to be protective enough. A respondent has this to say:

One need to emphasise the fact that the issue of safety and health is underplayed in most of our worship centres. Rather than taking precautionary measures, most church leaders take occupational safety and health issues with levity, until they start experiencing the various health and safety challenges that have been and is being recorded. Prayer is key in all things, but we need not leave what we need to do undone and don't expect the negative effects. (KII/Male/52/Safety Expert/Lagos/January 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper assesses the level of involvement of Christians in some selected churches on safety and health issues. The apathy and insignificant attention given to safety and health issues in most worship centres are based on the general belief that God will protect all and will avert dangers, accidents or hazards from happening to the worshippers. It is significant to state that the power of God to protect and prevent accidents, dangers, and hazards from happening to worshippers is never in doubt, neither is the miracles of God. It is important, however, that worshippers also play their major roles to avert such safety and health challenges. Humans have their roles to play and these must not be jettisoned.

To enhance effectiveness of safety and health in churches in Lagos in particular and in Nigeria in general, notwithstanding all scriptural beliefs, prayers and quotations, the study recommends the following:

- i. Health and safety of all persons within the church premises should be taken as priority. Established health and safety practices should be enforced in the culture of the church.
- ii. Safety Committees should be constituted and professionals appointed as members. The committee should be involved in training members and the clergy on safety needs, with regular safety auditing of the entire church environment.
- iii. Equipment used in building or for any part of the physical materials should meet the required standards for plant, structures and substances.
- iv. Defective items donated or loaned should be excluded from being used, notwithstanding their presumed costs.
- v. Contractors handling church buildings and facilities should be licensed, qualified and hold adequate public liability insurance by producing evidence of compliance. There should be consultations with various contractors on information relevant to carrying out the work safely. In addition, there should be due diligence by involving volunteers and paid church workers, to maintain a record which confirms that the appropriate consultation, induction, training, instruction, supervision and other necessary processes took place. Hazardous tasks are clearly identified and a job safety analysis (JSA) is conducted.
- vi. Emergency management procedures should be established. This will take care of issues of fire or building collapse and in some cases, such as fire and building evacuation are established.
- vii. Correct personal protective equipment (PPE) should be used and worn by church workers, especially those in security, sanitation, engineers and the musicians.
- viii. Churches should comply with relevant work, health and safety (WHS) legislation and providing adequate resources to achieve compliance. They should establish and maintain a WHS management system that integrates all church activities. In addition, Churches should promote WHS awareness at all levels across the church to achieve the commitment and adherence of workers, worshippers, visitors and other persons to the Church's WHS policy and procedures. They should maintain, monitor and improve WHS performance across the Church.
- ix. Safety signs should be put or pasted in strategic places within the church premises. Church authorities should establish measurable targets aimed at preventing injury or illness from church activities.
- x. Where congregations utilise hired premises for Church activities, risk assessment should be undertaken to ensure participants in the activity are not exposed to avoidable risks.

- xi. Church authorities should provide a safe and healthy environment in which to work, visit and worship.
- xii. Churches should provide adequate conveniences for members.

It is important to state that when church authorities and members carry out due diligence on the safety and health situation of their members and the church and do what they are expected to do, Christ will definitely do His own.

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