



CHURCH RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE INFLUENCE OF CIVILIZATION ON CHRISTIAN SENIOR CITIZENS

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Cite this article:

Odeleye A.O., Oyedele J.A. (2023), Church Responsibility Towards the Influence of Civilization on Christian Senior Citizens. African Journal of Culture, History, Religion and Traditions 6(2), 35-45. DOI: 10.52589/AJCHRT-FFRSOG7L

Manuscript History

Received: 15 July 2023

Accepted: 9 Sept 2023

Published: 28 Sept 2023

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ABSTRACT: *The invaluable place of senior citizens cannot be overemphasized in the African community. In fact, any community devoid of them can be considered incomplete by every human standard. Senior citizens are male and female individuals who are above sixty years of age. There is a paradigm shift against senior citizens in contemporary Nigeria due to the influence of civilization. The paper identifies specific factors responsible for weakening the strong foundation of the place and welfare of senior citizens in Nigerian societies and they are inadequate appropriation of civilization in the African context, change of value for communal family life, the ideology of liberation and individualism, eradication of kinship care and co-residence practice, economic instability, unemployment, insecurity, oppression and injustice. Caring for senior citizens is rooted in the Bible and the responsibilities of the church toward senior citizens in the face of civilization include advocating and promoting policy for the care of senior citizens, celebration programmes for senior citizens, ministering to the spiritual needs of senior citizenry, and reconciliation, among others. The paper submits that the church should faithfully discharge their roles towards the welfare of senior citizens and this will help them to live a fulfilled life and prepare them for eternity with Jesus Christ. The paper concludes that the challenges of civilization that are confronting senior citizens can be mitigated through church responsibilities toward senior citizens.*

KEYWORDS: Christian Senior citizens, Church, Civilization, Influence, Responsibility.



INTRODUCTION

The invaluable place of senior citizens cannot be overemphasized in the African community. In fact, any community devoid of them can be considered incomplete by every human standard. This is why Yoruba people do pray, *Agba ko ni tan lori ile*, meaning “never should the family or community be devoid of elders’ presence.” The community can easily be greeted with disorderliness and desolation due to their absence in society, for they are usually the custodians of cultural values, stability and orderliness in the family, neighbourhood and community. This gives credence to why traditional communities treasure their presence anytime.

Africa has a well-structured pattern for the social welfare of its senior citizens, but this is being affected in contemporary times for certain reasons. According to Onokerhorage (1984:154), “the splendid Nigeria tradition of taking care of the aged has existed for generations; there is evidence to show that this tradition is breaking down under change and economic pressures. These increasing pressures cause a lessening of interest and regard for the aged.” Most traditional family support mechanisms are being affected in contemporary Africa. It is, however, regrettable to notice a paradigm shift against the senior citizens in contemporary Africa due to the influence of Western civilization, hence referred to as civilization. This civilization has influenced the nature of jobs, the structure of the house, community life, close affinity to nature and care of senior citizens. The same influence is no doubt affecting the church’s attitude towards these valuable members. Sulaiman (2016:28) defines civilization as an advanced state of human society in which a high level of culture, science, industry, and government has been reached.” The senior citizens in this paper are male and female individuals who are above sixty years of age in the church. The paper delves into the overview of senior citizens, challenges of civilization confronting senior citizens in contemporary times and church responsibilities toward senior citizens.

Overview of Senior Citizens

Age grade is a case of chronology. Delineating chronological age grades for senior citizens is crucial in identification and in church social responsibility to the senior citizens. For senior citizens, age grades facilitate linkage for meaningful presentation of age information and social and related economic purposes. It does not only represent socialization and its opportunities, it also represents people who share a common birth history and provides a guide for the church to develop need-based care rather than a general approach to the social welfare of the senior citizens (Alafe, 2017:775).

According to Miller, as reported by Adeosun and John (2002:26-27), the age grouping for adults is as follows: Young Adults (26-35 years), Median Adults (36-59 years), and Senior Adults (60 and above). However, since senior citizens fall among the senior adults, as Miller puts it, there is a need to draw a separate but more categorical age group for them. At the age of 60, after completing thirty-five years in the service, one is similarly qualified to retire from the service. Statutory retirement is part of the qualifications for senior citizens; one can, therefore, place the beginning point of being a senior citizen at sixty years of age. Therefore, the paper proposes the method of age grouping below for different categories of senior citizens. This proposal is premised on the civil service retirement age in Nigeria, as reported by Okechukwu and Ugwu (2011:2),



which some scholars have also proposed as the entering point of life's later years: Early Senior Citizens (60-69 years), Middle Senior Citizens (70-79 years), Older Senior Citizens (80 years and above).

Nature of Senior Citizens

Senior citizens can be defined as people in their age of retirement. They are people who have, after a meritorious service to humanity in their primary activities in business, industry, or active service as full-time employees, retired from the usual service, though they may still be involved in some other service to humanity. They are consistently characterized by a reduction in work hours and low income as much of them depend on their retirement benefits (gratuity and pension), while others become dependent on children, family and others for their sustenance. They are the adults who have been graced with the longevity of life, based on human understanding of life expectancy, full of experiences and above all, at the last phase of their social life. In other words, they are a group of citizens who are in the period which precedes death.

A clear picture of the ancient world is the centrality of family. The family, according to Ferguson (1987:65), "was the basic unit of society in all of the cultures that provide the background for early Christianity." Both casual and careful reading will afford the reader a clear picture of how the family was being run in early Africa and Ancient Near East to the early Church. "Family is, therefore in many respects, a vital unit in social organization and social control and an important institution in sociological studies" (Charles, 2005:35). It is a unit that Africans saw as having cultural, social, and economic values before the advent of Western civilization. Just as family is central in the ancient world, so it is among the Jews. Family as a social unit of parents, children and extended family members was closely knit in the ancient world; there was no individualistic family lifestyle.

Family structure in Africa and Ancient Near East has the father as the head of his family. Talking from an African perspective, Dasyuva (2017:709) submits that: "The father lives together in a compound under one roof with his nuclear and extended family." This indicates that every nuclear family is an integral part and subsidiary of the extended family. Chapman (2010:630) states that "people remained in substantial contract with their parents and siblings, at times living in the same house or compound." Thus, the extended family is also an integral part of the community. The father, who is the head of the family, is directly responsible for family decisions. He acts as the sole administrator of the family. All family members look up to him as a superior person for directive, instruction or otherwise. He also serves as both the provider and protector of the family.

Both African and biblical records attest to the inestimable value of senior citizens in every human society. In an ideal situation, they are loaded with wisdom to handle virtually all cases in the family, church and community. Using Yoruba as a case study in Africa, Bamikole affirms that, "*Agba*" (elders) play both earthly and spiritual roles in Yoruba traditional society. Elders are respected because of the experience they have garnered over the years. They are also custodians of wisdom and they are believed to be morally upright persons in whom the people repose a lot of confidence" (Bamikole, 2007:35). Those who are considered senior citizens in the scriptures usually constitute the city council. They are the ones who determine cases in the community and



their judgments are considered valid and devoid of bias (cf. Ruth 4:1-12; Prov. 31:23). Training young ones on how to behave in the family and society was part of the statutory responsibility of senior citizens (Titus 2:4-5).

It was not unusual to see many ancient African parents giving birth to many children. To them, children were regarded as important for the security of their parents in old age (Ferguson, 1987:69). It also has economic reasons in addition to the continuity of the progenitors. Ijatuyi-Morphe (2011:84), submits that social welfare and security are reasons for many offspring in ancient Africa: "Securing enough hands to carry out the necessary (household) tasks and, in view of a high infant mortality rate in such communities, a large enough offspring to take care of parents in their old age." The parents provide adequate training for them according to the education provision of their time. A major reason people had many children in ancient Africa, trained and empowered them is for the children to become assets to their parents and have the financial strength to care for them when they were old (Arinpe, 2017:869). Thus, the view still exists among some African people today.

The eldest son receives special training to become the family head and later to become a community elder (Dockery, 1992:357). The family's business and wealth are always under the control of the first male child when the parents are too old to work. In ancient Africa, the eldest son and his family assume the responsibility of caring for his parents in their old age. He takes charge of all his parents' businesses. While other siblings may also dwell in the same house or compound with their parents, the eldest son, at the old age of his parents, is considered as the younger father. His responsibility also includes taking care of his siblings and ensuring harmony in the family.

Challenges of Civilization Confronting Senior Citizens in the Contemporary Time

This paper identifies specific factors responsible for weakening the strong foundation of the place and welfare of senior citizens in African societies and they are expatiated below.

Inadequate Appropriation of Civilization in African Context: The advent of Western civilization has brought rapid change in African human relationship with attached consequences. Western civilization here refers to an advanced stage of African social and cultural development through influence from the Western world. Civilization brought tremendous positive changes to Africa; it is also seen as a significant precursor of most of the other factors responsible for ineffective integration and care of the senior citizens in contemporary Africa. Again, the negative effect of inadequate appropriation of civilization in the African context has been a foundational contributor to the diminishing quality and quantity of their welfare in contemporary Africa's dynamic landscape.

Change of Value for Communal Family Life: The value of communal family life, once cherished and held in high esteem, has changed. Awolalu (1979:186) affirms that as a result of Western civilization, there is a new dimension to Africa's social construct. "As a result of contact with the external world, a new way of thinking and a new appraisal of social and ethical consciousness have occurred" (Idowu, 1986:78). Western civilization's influence begins with the introduction of Western culture at the expense of age-long cherished African culture. Africans turn to Western



individualistic culture as the most acceptable culture, rather than engaging African socio-cultural setting to transform it. This is an attempt to throw away the baby with the bath water.

The Ideology of Liberation and Individualism: Civilization promotes the ideology of liberation and individualism. It is noted that before the advent of Western civilization, formal and informal children education had been restricted to the community of the children. Today, however, children, even at tender ages, tend towards schooling in boarding schools to access quality education, thus promoting individualism and limiting the instinctual development of the African child towards the community. The advent of civilization has encouraged a society where one is free to step out of family business to seek for choice of work. It has also brought freedom of opportunity to find work that suits an individual's talents and freedom to marry for love (Ola-Aluko, 2002:68).

The nature of the job of several parents has also promoted the culture of boarding school for children, even at the elementary school level. This has indirectly affected the building of the bond that should exist between parents and children. While this cord of affection is gradually broken, parents continue to invest so much in their children's schooling, only for the children to come back after schooling with individualistic ideas and lifestyles. Therefore, civilization tends to promote socialization of children leaving the senior citizens to themselves. The slang now is "me and my family" as modern Africans appear to pay less attention to the sayings that forbid living separately from family.

Eradication of Kinship Care and Co-residence Practice: Once cherished, kinship and co-residence practice are no longer desirable. While, as recent as a few decades ago, grandchildren lived with grandparents to assist them, and grandparents are brought in to help raise grandchildren, a rapid decline in kinship care and co-residence with the senior citizens has been noted. Children and relatives are no longer willing to release grandchildren, nieces, and nephews to live with aging grandparents, while not many children are willing to have aged parents reside with them.

Economic Instability: Economic instability has contributed to the ineffective care of the senior citizens in most parts of contemporary Africa. Taiwo (2004:249) submits that for Nigeria, as a case study in Africa, "one of the implications of the unstable economy in both private and public sectors is the high level of unemployment among the young. This is quite serious because it leads to increased dependency rate of many youths on parents and relatives." One possible negative consequence of the increase in economic consequence is a decrease in the family's commitment to the welfare of senior citizens and the shifting of responsibility to others.

Unemployment: There are several jobless graduates who happen to be children of those senior citizens, and thus need a means of caring for their aged parents. In the case of the senior citizens in rural areas, their unemployed children are not willing to return to their parents in the rural areas. They struggle to survive in the urban centres while their aged parents struggle to survive in the rural areas. Today, a high level of unemployment among the youth has increased the anxiety of their parents who invested so much in their children, with the hope that they will, in turn, care for them in their old age. This, coupled with the other more natural crisis associated with being a senior citizen, has become a major cause for worry for the senior citizens as the youth who are supposed to take care of their social welfare turn out to be dependent on others. Furthermore,



personal care for the aged often threatens the security of well-paying jobs outside the home. Many of such children find it difficult to provide personal care for their senior citizens, resulting in hiring nurses or housemaids. Unfortunately, the hireling does not adequately do the job because of a lack of requisite training and necessary intrinsic affection to provide such service.

Oppression and Injustice: Oppression and injustice are part of the features of civilization that affect senior citizens. Oppression and injustice are evident in the society, which affects the society. It is unfortunate to note that government, whose duty is to protect and champion the care of these senior citizens itself exposes and denies them their rights and privileges. For instance, it was reported by Ajayi and Ojomoyela (2017) that Ekiti State owed eight (8) months of unpaid pension since 2012 while Oyo State owed especially primary school teachers over fifty-six (56) months in addition to gratuities since 2008.

It is becoming a norm, particularly in Nigeria, where senior citizens serve only to retire and have their pensions and gratuity denied them or for the retirees to suffer neglect at the hand of the government after meritorious service years. Consequently, there are retirees who have a health challenge and the worsening or complicated health of some of them is due to the failure of the government to pay their entitlements. Some of them have sold their properties to either clear or cater for their ever-increasing medical bills. Their situation may not have become this pathetic if the government had taken their welfare seriously. Their protracted unpaid arrears have made living standards difficult for them.

Insecurity: Crime and violence are part of the threats to the existence of civilization (Patterson, 1997:10); currently manifesting in insecurity is another contributing factor to senior citizens' precarious situation, particularly in Nigeria. It is clear that the state security apparatus is overwhelmed by the spate of insecurity in the country (Onifade; Imhonopi & Urim, 2013:53). Among the most vulnerable in times of insecurity are the senior citizens. They have no strength to defend themselves. In most times, civilization, as stated earlier, has caused the unavailability of children and relatives who are in a position to provide security for them due to the pursuit of a livelihood. People have been killed, maimed, raped, and all such vices by the terrorists of various groups. It is becoming increasingly difficult for people in the rural area to embark on farming because of fear of being kidnapped, maimed, or killed. Even those who summon the courage to farm have their farm produce carted away by these evil people. The report of herdsmen invading and devouring farmlands with their cattle is no longer news. In a situation where people can no longer go to farm, senior citizens suffer more.

Responsibilities of the Church toward Senior Citizens

One clear biblical basis for social welfare of senior citizens is the fifth command, "Honour your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). Being the only command with a promise makes the welfare of the aged a serious matter in the mind of God. Honouring one's parents includes taking proper care of them at their old age. Evidence of children honouring their parents could be seen in Abraham (Gen. 11:31-12:1) and Isaac (Gen. 24:67). It may account for Esau to have remained substantially with his parents



when his brother Jacob was allowed to live in a distant country (Gen. 25:34, 36:1-4, 27:41). Jacob's children also lived with him to take care of him (Gen. 42:1-3, 44:18-34).

Caring for senior citizens in the New Testament was certainly a practice, although very little is known about it (Keener, 1993:200). This was why Simon's mother-in-law could stay under his roof, where Jesus eventually healed her of her high fever. Her living with Peter and his wife reveals responsibility toward one's aged parents, which was a practice. Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Matthew 15:3-6 indicates that caring for one's aged parents was more common in the New Testament period. Children, according to Jesus' statement, are required to care for their parents; they are expected to honour their parents with their substance as a way of fulfilling the fifth commandment. What is meant for the welfare of one's parents should not be devoted to the temple, contrary to what the Pharisees and teachers of the law had been teaching. Again, his release of his mother, Mary, to the care of John, his beloved disciple, in John 19:26-27, is a pointer that shows consistency with the fact that he himself must have attended to the welfare of his aging mother that he would expect John to continue.

In the era of civilization, the search for effective treatment and care of senior citizens must become a major concern for the church. It is a big task to handle the welfare of senior citizens in contemporary society where the church has multifaceted challenges to contend with; it is equally important to note that it is part of the mission of the church to take the welfare of senior citizens seriously. Like other Christians, senior citizens need encouragement and assurance in their situation due to old age. Like any other person, senior citizens need hope to cope with later years; that they will not lose focus on heaven no matter the challenges they may be passing through. The specific responsibilities of the church toward senior citizens are explained below.

Mobilization of Local Security Network: Church as Rallying-point: Meeting the social needs of the senior citizens is a collective responsibility of every segment of society, including the church. Church can stand as a rallying point to which all members return before sailing forth again into the ever-increasing demand of the world in the era of civilization. In a situation where the state security apparatus is overwhelmed by the spate of insecurity as it is in the country, church in collaboration with the host community, should, in addition to continuous prayer, look for a way out. Therefore, it is high time people began the formation of local security networks and/or strengthening existing ones. The current situation of insecurity and terrorism seems to have no end in view. In view of this, the church in rural areas and urban centres needs to mobilize the community to provide a community security network. The Bible is not against community security networks (Neh 4:7-9, 12-13, Matt 26:41).

Advocating and Promoting Policy for Care of Senior Citizens: The church must rise to defend the cause of senior citizens in contemporary society. The lack of functional policy development for the care and welfare of senior citizens has been a major challenge in Africa (Tanyi, Pelsler, & Mbah, 2018:3). The church should therefore advocate and promote policies that will ensure the protection of senior citizens against violence and abuse. The church, with her foresight, should sensitize the government to care for the welfare and health of both literate and illiterate senior citizens living in the rural area and urban centres. Thus, their well-being and protection against violence and abuse should be given priority. They are part of the citizenry and their right of care



should be protected. When there is adequate protection for senior citizens, tapping from their wealth of experience and wisdom becomes easy.

Celebration Programme: This programme involves organizing a special service to celebrate the senior citizens. This could be setting a day apart as Senior Citizens' Day or Senior Citizens' Sunday. A retired or elderly minister may be invited to preach on such a day or Sunday. The church can make senior citizens happy and relevant by celebrating them.

Creating Awareness on the Peculiarity of Senior Citizenry: There is no doubt that senior citizens may be sometimes difficult to satisfy due to generational gaps, different experiences, exposure, taste, ideology, and worldview. This is why the temptation is always there to consider them difficult, and sometimes stubborn, avoidable burdens or become abandoned. The church needs to create awareness on the peculiarity of senior citizens so that people will not name them witches and possessed of evil spirits. Understanding this fact will equip children, family members and neighbours to relate well with the senior citizens. However, the paper states that there are cases of senior citizens who are possessed of evil spirits and alleged of different evils against their children and neighbours. The senior citizens in this category need salvation in Jesus Christ and this is possible through effective church ministry.

Ministering to the Spiritual Needs of Senior Citizenry: The senior citizens are not immune against the challenges of life. Every stage of life has its own challenges and the church is obliged to minister to the citizens. The spiritual needs of these individuals in terms of certainty of salvation and spiritual growth must be met. The church should have an intentional senior citizenry ministry to meet the needs of these individuals. This could be achieved through organizing a series of programmes based on their context to meet their needs. The church should organize means of reaching the senior citizens who cannot come to church in their respective places. Through this means, the church is identified with these people and also makes them experience God's love in their old age.

Reconciliation: Reconciling means helping alienated persons to establish or renew proper and fruitful relationships with God and neighbours. Reconciliation is an act that involves bringing two people or a group of persons back to become mutual friends again after an argument or disagreement (Ogundipe, 2014:129). Effective reconciliation is capable of promoting the restoration of a broken relationship to a better relationship. There are senior citizens who failed to care for their children when they had the strength to do so. Some senior citizens misused their time when they were young; some followed other men or women and some abandoned or divorced their spouses. Hence, the reality of old age came upon them and they became objects of pity in society. This poses a challenge to the church of God for reconciliation. The church can play a reconciliatory role by counseling and encouraging the children to forgive and reconcile the family into normal relationship. The church has the role of intermediary in family crises to ensure smooth relationships. This will lead the children to give rapt attention to the welfare of their parents. Therefore, the children should not abandon their parents irrespective of the situation. When people live alone, life becomes boring, negative thoughts find footing easily and health can easily become weak. However, being around other people, especially of their age, resuscitates life and brightens



hope, making life worth living again. Where getting people of their age becomes impossible, there is a need for extra activity to keep them busy such as keeping a pet in their house.

Engaging Petty Business: The church can encourage early senior citizens to embark on small-scale businesses that will not affect their health. The context of every citizen will dictate the kind of business that individuals will undertake. Embarking on some of these businesses is capable of improving their health; it gives a better sense of happiness and helps in connecting with people.

Co-residence Arrangement: It is essential to state here that nothing can replace the place of one's children at old age. Where possible, the church should help in an arrangement for co-residence with the citizens. If the children live far away, the church should help to find and supervise a trustworthy friend or relative near their parent's home who will care for them. If there is none, the engagement of a nurse or housemaid becomes an option, though there may be a lack of intrinsic affection toward them and vice versa, but it is better than being alone.

Relocation of Senior Citizens: The church should guide the children in relocating their parents. If there will be a need to relocate a senior citizen to another environment, care and caution is needed. Most of the senior citizens are averse to change. It is not easy to evacuate a senior citizen from the place where he/she is used to. This is why they complain about almost everything as they adhere to traditional ways of life (Omoresemi, 2006:41). It may become suicidal to remove somebody who had stayed in a place for five, six, or seven decades to a new place. The longer one stays in a place, the stronger the attachment. In the same way, due to the longevity of their staying in that particular location, most of them are concerned about their world (people, animals and things) and their house, which the children may consider old or dilapidated. However, if the children plan to move their aged parents from their usual place, it is better to make it gradual rather than sudden. This should begin with a frequent invitation to visit the intended new place and a deliberate effort to encourage their parents to find new friends or things of attraction.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the influence of civilization on senior citizens in the church. Africa had a well-structured pattern for the social welfare of its senior citizens, but this is being affected in contemporary times by civilization. This civilization has influenced the nature of jobs, the structure of the house, community life, close affinity to nature and care of senior citizens. The same influence is no doubt affecting the church's attitude towards these valuable members. This paper argues that traditional methods of caring for the senior citizens have come under serious threat in this era of civilization, leading to neglect by the family, even the church's responsibility towards senior citizens have not been effectively carried out. The government, whose responsibility is to protect the rights and defend the course of senior citizens, is not performing as expected, leading to various precarious situations. The paper presented the responsibilities of the church toward these invaluable senior citizens and members of the church in the contemporary church. Overcoming the negative influence of civilization for the effective administration of their welfare will pave the way for the church to maximize the invaluable blessings that old age affords.



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