Sustaining The Future Of Christian Faith Through Pastoral Care Of Waiting Sisters In Sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria Perspective

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ABSTRACT
Marriage is highly celebrated in Africa because it provides an avenue to meet the need to love and to be loved, which is an intense desire of every African even from birth till death. To love others and to be loved is ultimately enjoyed and experienced in marriage, especially from immediate family members. Marriage is likely to be the wish of everybody who strongly desires to nurture infants, care and train them up to adulthood. Therefore, Africans see marriage as an institution where privilege, advantage and freedom to be loved and to show love and care to people within their family and beyond are granted. God's instituted marriage to provide companionship and sustain the human race, through procreation, and sexual gratification to avoid all sexual unfaithfulness. The above blessings: companionship, procreation and sexual satisfaction are summed up as the purpose for establishing a marriage. However, as good as marriage is, some people involuntarily seem missing out of blessings attached to marriage because of their single status, and these people are described in this paper as the waiting sisters. The agony of singleness among female adults in Christian churches within Nigeria and the community has been evident for a long time. Although the causes of singleness differ, the worrying factor is that the church has addressed not many of the challenges these people face. The waiting sisters sometimes feel neglected or even like outcasts. It is a pity that the church, which also finds itself within the community, is composed of people who continue to have the kind of attitude that excludes singles, even inside church circles. While churches run programmes that have a strong emphasis on marriage and family life, nothing is being done to address singleness and its related problems. As a result, the waiting sisters often regard themselves as unimportant and worthless, and many out of frustration and struggle for meaning and meaninglessness got married to men of other religious faith. Later many of these Christian sisters are compelled, lured or forced to drop their religion and embrace the religion of their husbands. This paper, therefore, considered functional and beneficial pastoral care and counselling manner and procedure to checkmate the challenges of the waiting sisters as a way to sustain Christian faith in Nigeria.

Keywords: Waiting-sisters, Singleness, Pastoral, Counselling

INTRODUCTION
Marriage is a blessing to humanity from the creator who observed that loneliness (an effect of being alone) could affect the future of the human race. To find a lasting solution to the problem, He (God) provided a helpmeet for Adam. Apart from companionship, God intends that the human race should be sustained through procreation, as well as sexual gratification to avoid all sexual unfaithfulness. The above blessings: companionship, reproduction, (procreation) and sexual pleasure and satisfaction are summed up as the purpose of establishing a marriage. As good as marriage is, it is surprising that, some people are involuntarily missing out of the attached blessings to it. Because of their single status, and these people are described in this paper as the waiting sisters.
Waiting sisters, in this context, are female adults of marriageable age but who are not yet married, those who have a delay in having marriage partner. They are people who, by all forms of human assessment, have ripped, matured, qualified, and due for marriage, yet still singles. So they wait for their miracle, opportunities, and time of favour when their marital desires will come into reality. It is disheartening that during their waiting period, many got cheated, and were taken advantage of in so many dimensions by men who knew their problems, these make their experiences traumatic and more complicated.

Some waiting sisters had put godly standard aside and clung to the available indecent options vis: cheaply making themselves available to any man to sleep with, spending on men, and taking up unnecessary additional responsibilities. All this done just to satisfy or entice those men to keep the relationship. Some are giving their bodies, caring and doing some energetic, stressful and time-demanding activities. The primary issue of love between the man and the woman becomes irrelevant and insignificant. What matters to them is to get married to a man to get disconnected from the shame and stigma attached to their unmarried status. When the desirable is not available, the available becomes desirable, what a confusing situation!

Marriage in Nigeria is highly celebrated. It comes with a ceremony of different stages or phases, with elaborate winning and dinning, singing and dancing, with varying styles of fashion of Aso Ebi. In Nigeria, particularly in the Southwest part of Nigeria, much expectation is placed on marriage, and any lady who is grown up enough to get married is encouraged and advised to do so on time. Adeniran’s assertion is adapted to strengthen the above claim that marriage is the point where all the members of a given community meet; the departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet there, and the whole drama of history is rehearsed, reinvigorated and give birth to new life or strength. This religio-cultural facet of marriage makes it more sacred to an African (Adeniran 2004, 30).

It is quite unfortunate that almost every Church in Nigeria, with a particular focus on Southwestern part, has female adults who have difficulties in having marriage partners. Regrettably, many churches lack proactive steps and practical approach to address the situation to positively change the story of this group of people in their congregations. This has contributed a lot of psychological trauma for the affected Christian sisters. The significant intensity of the shock, injury and trauma have caused some of the sisters giving their hands in marriage to just “anybody in trousers” without minding their religious affiliation, economic status, and future ambition, cultural background, philosophy of life, and spiritual maturity and sensitivity.

This paper, therefore, aims to provide useful and practical pastoral care approach; to help churches come up with better strategies in addressing the challenges of the waiting sisters. To also help and guide the waiting sisters in various congregations to live a meaningful life as they wait unto the Lord. This will help them to achieve their marital ambitions within the community of faith (church) to sustain the future of Christian faith, to the glory of God, in Nigeria.

High Desire for Change in Marital Status among Unmarried Female Adults In Southwest Nigeria

High desire for change in marital status among waiting sisters is fueled, powered and caused to burn more intensely because of some African perspectives of unmarried status. Marriage in Africa, especially among the Yorubas, is a union between the extended families of the groom and the bride. It is not a union between the groom and the bride alone, but an alliance between the two extended families at large.

In the opinion of Aylward, marriage in Africa is communitarian. It is an alliance between groups and which involves the interrelationship of the entire extended family and the community at large. Africans placed much expectation on marriage. The stages in marriage include knowing members of both families, followed by the introduction, then payment of bride price and traditional wedding (Aylward 1973, 166). The extended family members and the society are always on the lookout for when they will receive a bride price and other attendant gifts that will be admired during the ceremony. Therefore, being unmarried is seen as a curse and abomination that must be dealt with in a forceful, passionate, or intense manner (166). This creates and aggravates psychosomatic experience, an internal conflict, struggle, and stress for people in this condition.

Also, Otile and Oginwo corroborate the above assertions that new rights, new roles and modern social relationships are formed through marriage. To them, the new responsibilities are not only between the spouses but also between the kin of the spouses (Otile and Oginwo 1985). The practice suggests that Africans uphold marriage in high esteem because of the new responsibilities and some unique benefits the union brings to the entire extended family members. It is with pride that family members trace themselves to the family trees of
their in-laws. Consequently, any abnormalities connecting with delay in marriage of who is adjudged as marriageable is deliberately ignored, disregarded and not condoned because it is considered morally wrong or offensive (Otile and Oginwo 1985). Such a lady is prone to many questions and constant prodding. This makes the pressure to be more intense by family members and neighbours.

In most cases in some southwest part of Nigeria, marriage proposals (introduction) often pass through various stages or phases. Each of these stages is observed and celebrated with eating and drinking, drumming, singing and dancing. These, therefore, account for the strong desire and eagerness with which marriages of the extended family children are awaited. Any suspicious of reluctance, foot-dragging or deliberate delay in the marriage processes may present the person and the family as irresponsible or stingy (Otile and Oginwo 1985).

Factors Responsible For Unmarried Status of Waiting Sisters

Unmarried status among female adults could be traced to several factors which could be natural, circumstantial, spiritual, self-inflict, among others. Madoghwe, Akanmu, Ayankeye, Adeniran, McDowell and Hostetler, Bolade, and Oyinlola among others state, and emphasize some contributory factors for the unmarried status among female adults, especially in Africa. In the view of Madoghwe, the wrong assumption about marriage affects some ladies to have a delay in marriage mate selection. The author states that some Christian ladies feel that marital issues should not be discussed when they are not ready for marriage. Such ladies turn down marriage proposals from men because they think the time is not ripe for them to marry (Madoghwe 2003, 25). Many ladies, however, regret their actions when no one approaches them for marriage when they are ready to get married.

Evil covenants cannot be overlooked as one of the causes of delay in marriage among the waiting sisters. Madoghwe stresses further that some female children had been dedicated and initiated into a cult and family or community divinities when they were young. And such people are marked down by demons never to get human spouse as long as the covenant between those ladies and the demons are intact (Madoghwe 54). People in such situations will not be noticed, admired or approached for marital relationship by men no matter how beautiful, brilliant, or successful they are. Evil covenants and causes are real and should not be left unnoticed as a reason why some single sisters are yet to get married.

Sickness and physical deformity is another cause of delay in marriage among female adults. Madoghwe opines that illness and physical deformity are causes of marital delay among some women, due to the premium the society placed on physical beauty (27). It is, however, worthy of note that despite indirect cultural conclusion about physical deformity as a cause of marital delay, there are numerous achievements and success records in the marriage of women with physical challenges.

Akanmu also discusses some causative factors for delay in marriage among female adults. One of the factors is the role of the Women Liberation Movement. He submits that this movement struggle with men's dominance on womenfolk; it sees marriage as one of the means men used to subject women to their perpetual control. The movement is discouraging women from being caged or knot by marriage to deliver women from the dominance of men. Again, delay in marriage among waiting sisters is caused by being tied down for a long time caring for aged parents. Akanmu observes that such ladies are hindered from proper dating experience and social interaction with young men who may propose to them until it is too late (Akanmu 2003, 33-36)

Spentzer and Riley are of the opinion that there is a high possibility for female scientist, engineer, to have a delay in marriage than their male counterparts. This also applies to females in other highly recognized professions like doctors, nurses, bankers and even pastors. The complexity, fame and respect associated with female higher educational achievement appears to put such ladies on ego-trip and thereby scare men away from them (Spentzer and Riley 1974, 88). In the view of Okolo, the United Nations declaration of 1975 that was in favour of women has reduced the level of sympathy men have for women feminity. The resolution of that year as the international year for women has changed women status in modern society. To the author, the influences of international conferences and organizations which brings up the call for gender equality raises the shoulders of some women which in turn became instrumental in increasing in women singlehood (Okolo 1985, 366).

Ayankeye submits that African cultural practices, in some measure, contribute to delay in marriage among Christian youth. He explains that ladies are forbidden to approach their male counterparts for a wedding. In Africa, a lady or her family does not initiate marriage proposal towards any man; ladies instead need to show
their love and interest in an action to the men of their interest and wait until the man makes the right move. This causes some ladies to wait for a more extended period, and some keep waiting when they could have approached some men they have interest in (Ayankeye 2013, 112).

Among other factors responsible for delay in marriage are setting a very high standard for men, over-estimation of self, pride and arrogance. Some ladies responded in a rudely and unacceptable manner when men approached them because they see themselves to be people of high class, therefore they under-value the men who ask their hands in marriage. Also several disappointments, pride, carrier pursuit, spiritual infliction, exposure of the ugly past, high parental demands and family upbringing, religious beliefs and practices are some of the fundamental causes of delay in marriage among the waiting sisters as discovered by some scholars.

Effects of Involuntary Single Status on Waiting Sisters

Delayed marriage among female adults comes with numerous effects that could be psychological and emotional, physical, spiritual, and sometimes social. Delay marriage prevents some female adults from getting ideal partners. It forces many into unplanned family life and even prevents both couples from having proper time to understand their partners and simply start living a robotic life, with not much experience in it. A female adult who crossed the mid-age without getting married gets difficulty in finding a nice, understanding and like-minded partner. They look for males little older in age and find it difficult to suit their requirements and preferences. It, therefore, is seen as a complete dead-end (Binson 2014, www.womenpla.net).

One of the effects of delayed marriage is unmarried sex and parenting. Mcdonnell avows that young adults desire stable friendship and family life, and when this seems not realistic, they engage in unmarried sex and parenting (Mcdonnell 2013 www.thepublicdiscuss.com). Waiting sisters should be encouraged and helped to achieve their marital goals to prevent single parenting and sex. Similar to unmarried sex and parenting is cohabitation. Cohabitation is another effect of delayed marriage among waiting sisters. Just as some young ladies go into cohabitation to test their marriage before they go into it properly, those who have delayed in marriage also cohabit with men. Carroll avers that many people are attracted to cohabitation (Carroll, 2017, www.churchofjesuschrist.org). Carroll's assertion is true of some waiting sisters who cohabit because they think it can lead to the actualization of their marriage expectations.

As opines by Dourron, late marriage also leads to late pregnancy and its wide range of side-effects. Female of 40 years above experienced hardships and trials in pregnancy, many experienced multiple IVF, failed cycles, and some had to use donor eggs of very young women. The experiments are difficult than younger women. Only 1 percent of women over 44 have a chance of achieving a viable pregnancy using their eggs, according to the US Centers for Disease Control. Plus, there a

Women over 35 who decide to get pregnant will have more emotional, psychological, physiological and social difficulties than younger women. Only 1 percent of women over 44 have a chance of achieving a viable pregnancy using their eggs, according to the US Centers for Disease Control. Plus, there are additional risks to both the mother and the baby's health when the mother is of advanced maternal age. Age is a crucial and fundamental criterion for women, especially for conception. Delayed age dramatically affects the fertility of a woman, reducing the possibility of conception, life will not have delay in conception”, and “in the next nine month, we shall joyfully help you carry your child.” When people’s expectations are not working out as anticipated, the couple begins to worry, and the family begins to ask questions. Other effects of delay in marriage among waiting sisters are isolation, withdrawal from social functions, hatred, and loneliness, and so on.

Church Response to the Challenge of The Waiting Sisters

Effectual church response to the challenge of the waiting sisters will come from the understanding of marriage as the display of the covenant which is keeping love between Christ and his church (Eph. 5:21-27,32). The church is for all and is of all, and for the church to be the church, waiting sisters should be seen as part of
God’s covenant, part of the bride of Christ, and as the recipients and benefactors of Christ faithful covenant. Therefore the church should care for them, as the church cares for others, the care for one another speaks volume to the watching world and brings glory to God. The church approaches to care of waiting sisters include:

Sharing of responsibilities among believers
Activities in the church should not be limited to married people. Waiting sisters should be encouraged to embrace the endless opportunities in the house of God. They should be made to know that every believer does have many of the same boundaries and opportunities in working faithfully as unto the Lord, in building up the body of Christ, in caring for the family members, and their families and friends they have. These should not be opportunities for married people alone; single adults should be inclusive (McCulley, www.desiringGod/how-to-serve-the-single). The church needs to be guided and educated by pastors that leadership positions and opportunities can be giving to the unmarried female adults as well. They should not be disqualified because of their single status.

Spiritual Formation and Discipleship
Too often, pastoral responses to unmarried female adults tends towards worldly and ungodly approach and somehow affect the church and individual waiting sisters. Many of the advice given appear to focus more on physical improvement and equipment of individual waiting sisters to attract good men for better relationships, than reminding them that they are stewards of whatever relationships they have been given or they will be giving. Emphasis should be on inner reformation and transformation than outward refashioning or repackaging.
Also, an excellent response to the challenge of waiting sisters should go beyond unmarried female adult getting a man to marry, to whether the lady can sincerely say (if Christ is physically present) thank you, Jesus, for the opportunity you give me with this man. In other words, all church members are encouraged to pray with and for the waiting sisters. By the grace of God, the church can build up waiting sisters to be a blessing and valuable gift of God in their relationship with men; this is because even in a marriage that is what they should be to their spouses (Carroll, www.churchofchrist.org).

Showing concern to one another
Pastors and the church should understand that prolonged singleness is a crisis and a form of suffering, and there is an appropriate time for mourning with those who mourn. Involuntary singleness is an immense and traumatic challenge for the waiting sisters, particularly for those who see the door of fertility closing on them without the hope of bearing children. The church should not make a statement or give counsel that will present minimum cumulative years of hope to them even when situations and people outside the church remind them of their predicaments (McCulley, www.desiringGod/how-to-serve-the-single). A statement like “You know you are not getting younger,” “You are 38 this year,” “Your time is going,” and violent words that can trigger emotions should be avoided. Counselling should be given toward overcoming hopelessness and bitterness that could block their prayers to God, hinders their relationship with others and reduce or affect their services to the church on the negative.

Recommended Pastoral Care Approaches to the Challenge of Waiting Sisters
One of the ways to retain the unmarried adult sisters in churches across sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria, is through effective use of pastoral care functions. These functions are the writer’s recommended approaches to counter-measure the struggle, pains, and challenges of the waiting sisters to sustain their Christian faith.

Educating Function: It is imperative to inform the unmarried female adults to take marriage with all seriousness. Christian ladies need to understand that all were created as male and female to demonstrate the glory of God and that people were given the gift of marriage as the singular context for which God designed the sexual gift and benefit and granted humanity the privilege and command of having and raising children. For all these reasons and more, Christian ladies must understand that, unless one is given the calling of celibacy, they should honour marriage and seek to marry and to move into parenting and the full responsibilities of adulthood earlier rather than later in life. Delay could be dangerous.
Also, due to occupational and socio-economic reasons, there is selectivity in the marriage market. Because of fear of possible difficulties in the control system, men tend to ignore women with strong will and independent
personalities. Therefore, single female adults need constant teaching to be courteous and humble with their academic attainments and life achievements. Studies have shown that women who have reached a higher socio-economic level have difficulties in the choice of marriage mate because it becomes difficult for many of them to marry any man below their level. This can lead to an extension of their period of singlehood.

**Sustaining Function:** Waiting sisters can be supported through prayer, counselling, and engaging them with some responsibilities in the church. They should be encouraged to hold some leadership positions and guided to avoid being tempted and tempting others. The pastor should make the church to note and appreciate active once for their Christ-like lives that are worthy of emulation. The services and motivation from the church will keep them within the household of faith. Many waiting sisters serve in the music ministry of the church, work among the children and teenagers, and some are teachers in the educational administration of the church. Some work in the education and other establishments of the church with excellent preparation and bearing testimonies of gospel truths and touch other lives. Therefore, waiting sisters in the Church need love and appreciation of the congregation, especially those who serve the Lord with all their heart faithfully to sustain them spiritually and emotionally.

**Healing Function:** Delay in marriage could lead to many problems if the situation is not well handled. It could be psychological, spiritual, social, emotional, and could be physical or financial. Each area needs to be handled appropriately for healing to take place. Theological issues sometimes come up during counselling session with the waiting sisters. Many are angry at God and also not ready to unforgive men who hurt and disappointed them maritally. Some get angry because they see their services in the vineyard of God and their marital challenges not to be commensurated. The church should not close her eyes to the commitment and higher capacity of the waiting sisters to missions. Some of the singles are serving as volunteer workers reaching out to the less active, to the troubled, reaching out to the widow, the shut-in aged, with the gospel truth and organizing Sunday School and worship services in some homes.

Benson encouraged single sisters in one of the general conferences; he states that:

Dear sisters, never lose sight of this sacred goal. Prayerfully prepare for it and live for it. Be married the Lord's way. Temple marriage is a gospel ordinance of exaltation. Our Father in Heaven wants each of His daughters to have this eternal blessing. Therefore, don't trifle away your happiness by involvement with someone who cannot take you worthily to the temple. Make a decision now that this is the place where you will marry. To leave that decision until a romantic involvement develops is to take a risk, the importance of which you cannot now fully calculate. And remember, you are not required to lower your standards to get a mate. Keep yourselves attractive, maintain your self-respect. Do not engage in intimacies that bring heartache and sorrow. Place yourselves in a position to meet worthy men and be involved in constructive activities (Benson 1988).

The above statement can be used as therapy for spiritual and psychological healing of the waiting sisters in the congregation. A pastoral caregiver should make use of logo-therapy for healing to take place. Declaring positive statement to upon oneself raises one’s faith and can prevent waiting sisters not to engage in intimacies that bring heartache and sorrow, especially with non-believers.

Church should work as a body to address the challenges of the waiting sisters to heal them spiritually and psychologically. The emphasis the church naturally place on families should cover challenges of the singleness to avoid the thought of less needed or less valuable to the Lord or His Church. The sacred bonds of Church membership go far beyond marital status, age, or present circumstance. Their worth as a daughter of God transcends all situations. The pastor should let concerned sisters know that the church is aware of their challenges and individual needs and the church as one body is praying and working towards actualization of their marital desires. There should be a real expression of hope from the church, particularly from the pastors to show that waiting sisters who remain under the grace and commandment of God will be exalted in the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom. And that they will enter into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage with Christ, which is the ultimate goal of all true believers. These will raise their hope and encourage them to remain in the faith.

**Reconciling Function:** Misunderstanding, conflict and disappointment are inevitable in a relationship. This is because people are of different backgrounds, exposure, attitude, character, and philosophy of life and coming together of two different people require self-understanding, and right perception about others. Adjustment is needed from the two parties if there will be a successful relationship. Reconciling function is geared towards
peaceful and cordial relationship (Ayankeye, 2012, 9). Pastors should make use of reconciling function between the two parties where there is the possibility to reunite a broken relationship, particularly between Christians. When there is a fractured relationship between a Christian brother and a Christian sister reconciliation should be introduced to avoid Christian single sisters accepting a marriage proposal from men outside their religious affiliation.

**Guiding Function:** Guiding is to give the necessary direction to people. It is all showing someone how to do or achieve something difficult. This should be done basically through counselling. Church pastors should also caution single sisters in their congregation not to become so independent and self-reliant that they decide marriage does not worth it, and they can do just as well on their own. Some of the single sisters indicate that they do not want to consider marriage until after they have completed their degrees or pursued a career. This sounds good, but it could be dangerous when there are no adequate plans. Indeed, it is good that single sisters maximize their potential, to be well educated, and to do well at their present employment. They also have much to contribute to society, their community, neighbourhood, churches and their families. Pastors should give pastoral guidance that will motivate single sisters to desire honourable marriage in the temple to a Christian man and rear a righteous family, even though this may mean the sacrificing of degrees and careers. Christian sisters’ priorities will be right when they realize there is no higher calling than to be an honourable wife and mother. This will help the waiting sisters to remain in the faith.

**CONCLUSION**

Marriage is a blessing of God to humanity; therefore, right perspective should be developed by all to enjoy it. Having considered various reasons for and effects of delay in marriage among single sisters, pastoral care functions of educating, guiding, sustaining, healing and reconciling become imperative. The effective use of these functions not only addresses the challenges of the waiting sisters alone but equally equips the church on appropriate ways to react to the situation as a body of Christ. The paper similarly challenges the church to encourage young Christians toward the goal of marriage. It must be clear about the necessity of holiness and obedience to Christ at every stage and in every season of life. When the world around us is scratching its head, asking what has happened to marriage; Christians must display the glory of God in marriage and all that God gives to us in the marital covenant.

Overall, this paper provides a practical pastoral care approach to help the church come up with better means of addressing the challenges of the waiting sisters. And to also help and guide the waiting sisters in the congregations to live a meaningful life as they wait unto the Lord, to achieve their marital ambitions within the community of faith (church) to sustain the future of Christian faith, to the glory of God, in Nigeria.

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