

THE ROLE OF MOUNT ZION MISSION INCORPORATED IN RECLAIMING DRUG USERS AND REDUCING STIGMA IN ORO NATION, AKWA IBOM STATE

By

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ABSTRACT

Stigmatization is commonly attributed to people who use drugs by other members of society who are supposed to provide reliable information to drug users about the dangers of drug use to the body. Stigmatizations of drug users in various ways serve as a hindrance to effective treatment and reintegration of drug users into the society. As this notion of stigmatization of drug users continues to drive in our society, people of various religious backgrounds and scholars of different fields have begun to ask on the role of the church in reclaiming drug users and reducing stigmatization of drug users. Consequently, the study examined the role of Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation, Akwa Ibom State, in reclaiming drug users, identified strategies for reducing stigma, and investigated the impact of the church's interventions. The study adopted descriptive survey method that is interviews of 10 church leaders and administration of questionnaires to church members and selected community stakeholders in selected areas of Oro Nation. The study revealed that Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation preaches against drug abuse and provides counseling services to people in the host communities struggling with addiction. The study further shows that the church carries out community outreach programmes in various communities in Oro Nation in order to create awareness of the dangers of drug use. The study also revealed that, in order for the church to address stigma that it has embraced drug addicts and supports individuals struggling with addiction. The study recommends that the Government of Akwa Ibom State as well as Traditional Institutions of Oro Nation should partner with the Church- Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, in order to enable the church live up to her social responsibility and create more impact by establishing rehabilitation centres for drug treatment to be carried out. The study concludes that the church efforts in preaching, counseling and educating drug users on the dangers of drug abuse have served as instrument of promoting rehabilitation and reintegration. The findings of this research underscore the relevance of faith-based organizations in addressing stigma and drug abuse.

Keyword: Church, Reclaiming, Drug users, Stigma, Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation, Akwa Ibom State

Introduction

Drug abuse is indeed one of the pervasive social issues challenging the world of today. The occurrences in drug abuse among young and old members of our society have drawn public attentions on the role played by the church in curbing this menace. In recent years, drug abuse has become a perennial problem in our society that short and long term effects have been experienced by the individuals taking it, families of the persons taking it as well as the societies (Ekenene, *et al* 2024:68). In Nigeria as a whole, the prevalence of drug use is alarming; with an estimated 14.3 million people using drugs (Oweibia, *et al* 2025:3).

Regrettably, drug use is associated with stigma as drug users and their family members face stigmatization from members of the society. Stigma in the order hand is often been identified as primary barriers to effective drug misuse prevention, as well as the provision of treatment, care and support. Such viewpoints tend to employ stigma as a catch-all for the multiplicity of negative beliefs, attitudes and actions related to the abuse of any substance. There is, however, a need to be cautious. As Bond (2002:17) reveals that ‘it is easy to fall into a trap of labeling attitudes or acts as an example of stigma without examining other possible motives’, there is a need to ‘look at the wider context... Stigma is not the whole picture, but one important part of the wider picture’. The weighting given to stigma as primary and ultimate barriers impeding drug misuse response is problematic as such weighting often implies that stigma is pervasive throughout society. This has the effect of stigmatizing many communities as being uncaring and inhumane – a process that can perpetuate existing marginalization. Stigma therefore needs to be carefully defined, cautiously analyzed and critically reviewed if we are to understand impacts and develop appropriate responses.

Reviewing drug use as social problem perplexing our society and drug users being stigmatized, the church as an important social institution has a crucial role to play in addressing this long lasting problem. The study hinges on examining the role of Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation, Akwa Ibom State, in reclaiming drug users and reducing stigma.

Conceptual Clarification

Church

The word ‘Church’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ekklesia’ meaning ‘called out’. It is used almost a hundred times by Septuagint in the Old Testament according to Minear, (cited in Ikot 2024:14).

It is used of,

- i. Israel called out from each tribe (Gen. 12:3, RSV)
- ii. A council called out to worship (Gen. 49:6, RSV)
- iii. Israel called out to worship (Deut. 18:16, RSV)
- iv. Any congregation of worshippers (Psalm 22:22-25, RSV)

The Church is also viewed in three broad perspectives namely;

- i. A local Church (Rev. 2:13, Rom. 1:8, Acts 8:4-8, RSV)
- ii. A denomination (Acts 6:1-6; I Cor. 5:7, RSV)
- iii. Church Universal (Heb. 12:33, Rev. 19:6-7, RSV) (Ikot, 2004:14)

From the foregoing ‘Church’ is the people of God, the body of Christ, a band of pilgrims, a leavened yeast, salt of the earth, light on a hill, a crowd of people of all races, colours, tribes and tongues, gathered at the throne, joining in singing a new song to the lamb who was slain and brought the crowd as a gift to God. Obot (cited in Ikot 2024:14) reveals that:

The church is never a place, but always a people, never a fold, but a flock never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray not where you pray in order words the church is people, and how people flow, relate, serve, share, worship and love as the issues that matter most.

Obot is right in his assertion, for Greek derivative cannot imply calling out a place or a building. Church therefore is derived from the Greek ekklesia meaning “called out” or assembly of the people and cannot mean a building. However, the understanding of the word church ought to be all embracing; it should cut across creed, ethnicity, colour and cultural learning. It is therefore the richest view which defines the church a community of the people of God, comprising all the people from all parts of the world and united to a common bond of love through the covenant blood of Jesus Christ. The church can best be understood when seen as a new community of God which in the New Testament gradually separated from Judaism of the Old Testament. The church

in this way is seen as a unifying factor and contributor of peace and also as a bridge that closes the gap between people and their leaders (Oko, 2018:31). In the process it acquired its own structure, which was sequel to the ratification of the New and ultimate covenant with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Ikot, 2024:7). Church in this study means a denomination which is Mount Zion Mission Incorporated which was founded in Oron of Akwa Ibom State in 1946.

Drug use, Causes and Effects

Drug use is taking of both licit and illicit drug by human persons for health and other benefits while drug misuse or abuse is improper way of taking both licit and illicit drugs which is harmful to the body. This study is more concern with drug misuse that can also be referred to substance abuse which to this study is primarily illicit drugs namely; cannabis, tramadol, cocaine, heroin, and benzodiazepines. It can be said that the causes of drug abuse vary from social, interpersonal, cultural, environmental, and family factors. People abuse drugs due to pleasure derived from it. Drug abuse can be socially learned through drug use by peer group members, exposure to offers to use, and easy access to drugs. Pressure from friends that abuse drugs including their frequent escalation of drug experience may appeal others to start the use of drugs and other reasons (John, Otene and Antenyi, 2023:263).

Research has showed that harmful effects of drug abuse could be physical, emotional, family dynamics, school behaviours, and social problems. They include cardiovascular disease; abnormalities in brain structure and function; respiratory problems; weakened immune system; insomnia; reduction in libido or sexual dysfunction; anxiety and irritability; loss or increase in appetite; and poor judgment. Different crimes such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and rape have been identified with young people under the influence of drugs. Family dynamics will reflect in the form of secretiveness, withdrawing from family, starting arguments, and breaking rules. For the school behaviours, the teenager will begin to play truancy, display discipline problems, decline in grades, decreased interest, many absences, and subsequently withdrawal from school and many other effects including social problems (John, Otene and Antenyi, 2023:264).

This study addresses issues of drug users and stigma associated with drug users. The study referred to drug users as people who take illicit drugs which is considered harmful to their

bodies and equally led them to go against standing laws of the society. Their involvement in drug use has caused them wrong labeling which is referred to in this study as stigma.

Stigma

Individual identity is the product of how we think of ourselves and of others. This includes our attitudes, beliefs and values about our commonalities and differences in relation to others. Woodward (cited in Makhubele, Ntiabati and Parker 2016:153) maintains:

Identity gives us a location in the world and presents the link between us and the society in which we live... [it] gives us an idea of who we are and how we relate to others and to the world in which we live... [it] is most clearly defined by difference, that is, by what it is not.

This subjective sense of identity incorporates positive and negative, rational and irrational thoughts and emotions that define how we see ourselves in relation to others. Our sense of identity is intertwined with social and cultural ideas that allow us to understand ourselves in relation to others, including social differences linked to gender, age, class, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation and physical attributes. Stigma is that part of identity that has to do with prejudice – the setting apart from individuals or groups through the attachment of heightened negative perceptions and values.

Stigma is a process that may occur at the individual level, but it is also influenced by social processes related to assumptions, stereotypes, and generalizations and labeling of people as falling into a particular category on the basis of association. Stigma involves the social expression of negative attitudes and beliefs that contribute to processes of rejection, isolation, marginalization and harm of others (Phelan, 2001). It is useful to distinguish between stigma and discrimination. Stigma is largely related to ideas about others, whilst discrimination involves some form of direct enactment of stigma which may be verbal or physical, and which is likely to be hurtful and/or harmful to the person to whom it is addressed. Many authors, however, refer to stigma as encompassing both ideas and actions. Most countries and societies have recognized that forms of stigma and discrimination are antagonistic to concepts of human rights and equality.

Whilst discrimination involves overt practices (some of which may be considered illegal), stigma is more subtle and less readily defined. Processes of enshrining non-stigmatising and non-discriminatory practices are therefore complex and gradual. Many inequalities are perpetuated in social practices that are well established and embedded such as in the use of language. In the case of Drug users for example, the naming of people as ‘victims’ and ‘sufferers’ contributes to their stigmatization, and extended discourse processes are necessary to address these constructions.

A Brief History of the Mount Zion Mission Incorporated in Oro Nation, Akwa Ibom State

The birth of the Mount Zion Mission Incorporated in Oro Nation is not farfetched. Ekenene and Okere (2024:72) traced the Origin of Mount Zion Mission Incorporated in Oro Nation to the Apostolic Church Nigeria. Ekenene and Okere (2024) maintain that it is believed that Late Bishop Joshua Uloh Edumoh who lived from 1905 to 1991 was a pastor with The Apostolic Church Nigeria and in 1945, he was affected in a downsizing exercise carried out in the church to reduce number of ministers so that one minister can take care of many assemblies to boost their remunerations.

Ekenene and Okere (2024) further maintain that The Apostolic Church at this time neglected the operations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and went secular than a spiritual church. This articulation coincides with the assertion of Ayegboyin (cited in Ekenene and Okere, 2024:73) who maintains that “some African prophetic leaders seceded from the mainline churches because of what they perceived to be the failures of ministers in the established churches to live up to the call of the Bible and the alienation of the church hierarchy from the spiritual needs of the common people.” But unfortunately, the same cold spiritually witnessed by African prophetic leaders in Mainline churches found its way into some African indigenous churches many years later and the Apostolic Church, Nigeria was a victim.

Furthermore, Bishop E. H. Ukpabio who is the only living pioneer member of the church in an interview with Zion Mirror (2018:13), reveals that “the Apostolic Church had no schools to educate the members children, so those children had to undergo difficulties and suffer shame in their attempt to be admitted into schools belonging to other denominations. Therefore, the Nigerian front leaders appealed to Pastor Philip (the Field Superintendent in the British colonial

days) for permission to establish schools in the name of The Apostolic Mission; he was seriously annoyed saying “there is no money”, and turned his back against those ministers. He purposefully refused to re-employ the redundant ministers as decided in the High Council Meeting of 1946. The articulated factors culminated into a split. Bishop Ukpabio in Zion Mirror (2018: 13) explains the scenario as follows:

...so we split from the Apostolic Church with some Efik speaking people under the leadership of Apostle J. U. Edumoh, with some Yoruba's too, under the leadership of Pastor Odubanjo. We started with the name “African Apostolic” so it's to embrace universal interest. The name was well accepted, but through the prompting of the Holy Spirit was changed later to the Mount Zion Mission Incorporated

Amana cited in Ekenene (2021:10) giving a crystal clear explanation of what transpired after the split states thus:

A few of us in Oron Town resolved to avoid the confusion and we therefore gathered ourselves together in the veranda of a watchman by name John Akwaha, and there we started our morning and evening prayer meeting and Full Gospel Teaching. True Faith was fully practiced and creative ability came within the new creation. As in the days of apostles when God directed representatives who took the place of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and were given authority over evils (sic) spirit, so it was with the new creation.

Few months later, more than a hundred souls were converted; beginners were now praying to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The construction of the church building starts immediately. A large number of converts were won through open air campaign (Ekenene, 2021:10). Ekenene (2021) further adds that:

The new born church came to be named Mount Zion Mission through the vision given to one of the founders who was led by the Holy Spirit to the top of the mountain where the present Mount Zion Road is. It was there that he (the prophet) pronounced the name of the church as the Mount Zion Mission (*Obot Zion*). This name theologically symbolizes the city that God dwells and it is also known as the city of refuge... the hill that was known by men and women of earliest days is now the present No, 17 Mount Zion Road where the cathedral is situated.

The birth of the Mount Zion Mission Incorporated in Oro Nation consolidates Christianity in Oro Nation, and it empirical that the church known and addressed as the Mount Zion Mission

Incorporated today was officially established in 1946 at Oron, Uyo Province, and Eastern Nigeria. The church has spread to almost every part of Oro Nation and across the shore of Nigeria, The church maintains Episcopal Administrative structure and its impact is felt in politics, culture, religious, social, education and in economic streams. The church since it was founded is known for a strong doctrine of teachings and affirming the sovereignty of God, Jesus Christ, the son, Holy Spirit, man as creation of God, the fall of man, Redemption, Judgment, church, heaven, hell, divine healing, baptism, the lord's supper, tithing and offering (Ekenene and Okere, 2024:73).

Oro Nation

Ekenene (2021:8) states that Oro people comprising of the Idua, Okobo, Efiat-Mbo, Ebughu, Enwangand Oron Ukpabang groups, inhabit the western bank of the estuary of the Cross River now Akwa Ibom State. It is said to share boundaries with the Etebi and Ubium in the Eket region and the Uruan groups of Ibibio in the Uyo region. Politically, Oro became a division in August 1970s and in 1976, was made a local government area. However, following the local government creation in 1989, Oron was split into 3 local government areas Mbo, Oron and Okobo. Again in September 1991, Urue-Offong/Oruko Local Government Area was carved out of Oron Local Government Area. Finally in December 1996, Udung Uko Local Government Area was further carved out of Oron. Oro Nation therefore can be said to be the indigenes of the five Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State, namely: Okobo, Mbo, Udung –Uko, Urue/Offong –Oruko and Oron with the total land mass of 400 square miles or 1040 square kilometers and said to speak the following dialects: Oro, Okobo, Ewang etc. Oro is linguistically viewed as a language spoken in the area. However, in the work, Oro is used when referring to the five Local Government Areas in Oron. It is not to be confused with Oron which is one of the Local Government Areas in Oro Nation.

Methodology

The Research adopted descriptive survey method, the use of primary and secondary sources of information to examine the role of Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation, Akwa Ibom State, in reclaiming drug users and reducing stigma. The secondary method attracted information

from published books, journals, manuals, etc while the primary source which is quantitative made use of interview and questionnaire. 10 leaders of the church were interviewed while 200 questionnaires were administered to members and host communities in Oro Nation. 40 questionnaires each were distributed in selected areas across the 5 local government areas in Oro Nation. The study focused on the riverine areas like Ibaka, Oron beach, East-West Road, Okobo beach and other places in Oro Nation that are known for drug abuse and the church has been engaging the people of these areas as regard the dangers of drug abuse and reasons why drug users should not be stigmatized. The study made use of purposive sampling technique to select church leaders, community stakeholders, drug users, and former drug users consisting of male and female in the selected areas of Oro Nation to provide information for the study. Purposive sampling technique in the study is in line with the rule according to Robinson (cited in Ekenene *et al* 2024:69) who maintains that purposive sampling is intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept or phenomenon. This gave room for the researcher to select key formants in the selected areas across 5 local government areas in Oro Nation in order to provide information for the study and information gotten from these people in the areas represent the 5 local government areas of Oro Nation.

Professionals in the area of drug addiction, religion and social works within and outside the area of research have validated the research items. 200 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents by the researchers and 195 retrieved. The total of 195 received from the field was analyzed using 4 point Likert Scales. The responses to the questionnaires were first weighed and coded based on a four point scale thus: Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA) Disagree (D) Strongly Disagree (SD). The study made use of simple percentage method to analyze the questionnaires administered.

Data Presentation

Question 1: There is a significant prevalence of drug addiction among diverse demographics in Oro Nation

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	106	54.3

Strongly Agreed (SA)	27	13.8
Disagreed (D)	44	22.5
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	18	9.4
Total	195	100

The table above shows that 106 of respondents representing 54.3% agreed, 27 respondents representing 13.8% strongly agreed, 44 respondents representing 22.5% disagreed, and 18 respondents strongly disagreed. Based on the fact that 54.3% of the respondents are of the majority, it therefore means that individuals of various age groups, men and women from Oro Nation in Akwa Ibom State are also addicted to drug abuse.

Question 2: A range of substances, including cannabis, tramadol, cocaine, alcohol, heroin, and benzodiazepines, are commonly abused by individuals across diverse demographics in Oro Nation

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	98	50.3
Strongly Agreed (SA)	60	30.7
Disagreed (D)	12	6.2
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	25	12.8
Total	195	100

From the above table, it quite clear that 50.3% of the respondents agreed on the above question, 30.7% strongly agreed to it, 6.2% of respondents disagreed, and strongly disagreed are 12.8%. It means that the respondents who agreed to the question are the majority. It therefore means that

various substances, including cannabis, tramadol, cocaine, alcohol, heroin, and benzodiazepines, are abused by individuals of different age groups and gender in Oro Nation.

Question 3: Drug abuse is associated with diverse physical and mental health outcomes, financial difficulties, strained familial relationships, emotional trauma, and increased community crime rates.

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	40	20.5
Strongly Agreed (SA)	110	56.4
Disagreed (D)	25	12.8
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	20	10.3
Total	95	100

The table above indicates that 20.5% of the respondents agreed on question above, 56.4% strongly agreed, 12.8% of the respondent disagreed and 10.3% of the respondents strongly disagreed. This means that the respondents who strongly agreed to the question are the majority. It further entails that drug abuse has diverse effects on drug users ranging from physical health problems like organ damage, infections, mental health issues –depression, addiction as well as cognitive impairment and loss of productivity. The diverse effects of drug abuse are also faced by families and community of the drug users as it strained relationships and breakdown family bonds. Increased risk of domestic violence, caused emotional distress and trauma for family members as well as increased crime rates in the community.

Question 4: The NDLEA, Drug-Free Club, NAFDAC, and Akwa Ibom State Primary Healthcare Development Agency (AKSPHCDA) have actively engaged in awareness initiatives on drug abuse prevention and reducing stigmatization in Oro Nation

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %

Agreed (A)	50	25.6
Strongly Agreed (SA)	40	20.6
Disagreed (D)	100	51.3
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	5	2.5
Total	195	100

From the above table, it quite clear that 25.6% of respondents agreed on the above question, 20.6% strongly agreed to it, 51.3% of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed are 2.5%. It means that the respondents who disagreed to the question are the majority. Its therefore means that NDLEA, Drug-Free Club founded by Oron Zone Corp Members, NAFDAC, and Akwa Ibom State Primary Healthcare Development Agency (AKSPHCDA) have not been actively engaged in awareness initiatives on drug abuse prevention and reducing stigmatization in Oro Nation, despite the fact that these agencies are found within Oro Nation. The inactiveness of these agencies to carry out awareness creations on the danger of drug abuse and stigmatization of drug users made it imperative for Mount Zion Incorporation, Oro Nation to initiate different programmes in order to curb drug abuse and reduce stigmatization of drug users in Oro Nation.

Question 5: Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation uses counseling and spiritual guidance, community outreach, support groups, awareness creation and mentorship as strategies to reclaim drug users and reduce stigmatization of drug users in Oro Nation

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	41	21.03
Strongly Agreed (SA)	120	61.54
Disagreed (D)	14	7.18
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	20	10.26

Total	195	100
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From the above table, it is quite clear that 21% of the respondents agreed on the above question 61.54% strongly agreed to it, 7.18% of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed are 10.26%. It means that the respondents who strongly agreed to the question above are the majority; it therefore means Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation uses counseling, spiritual guidance, community outreach, support groups awareness creation and mentorship as strategies to reclaim drug users and reduce stigmatization of drug users in Oro Nation.

Question 6: Mount Zion Mission Incorporated's approach to rehabilitation and reintegration had a great impact on the lives of reclaimed drug users in Oro Nation through spiritual transformation, sense of community, emotional healing, restored relationship, and new identity

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	79	40.51
Strongly Agreed (SA)	98	50.26
Disagreed (D)	10	5
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	8	4.10
Total	195	100

The table above shows that 79 respondents representing 40.51 % agreed, 98 respondents representing 50.26% strongly agreed, 10 respondents representing 5% disagreed, and 8 respondents representing 4.10% strongly disagreed. With the highest percentage being strongly agreed with 50.26%, the question is answered. It therefore means Mount Zion Mission Incorporated's approach to rehabilitation and reintegration has had great impact on the lives of reclaimed drug users in Oro Nation through spiritual transformation, sense of community, emotional healing, restored relationship, and new identity.

Question 7: Oro Nation plays a significant role in promoting awareness and education, providing support and encouragement, participating in outreach programmes providing resources and services, and partnering with the church in order to support the church's efforts to reduce stigma and reclaim drug users.

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	116	59.49
Strongly Agreed (SA)	14	7.1
Disagreed (D)	62	31.7
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	3	1.5
Total	195	100

The table above shows that 116 respondents representing 59.49% agreed, 14 respondents representing 7.1% strongly agreed, 62 respondents representing 31.7% disagreed and 3 respondents representing 1.5% strongly disagreed. Based on the fact that 59.4% of the respondents are of the majority, it therefore connotes that Oro Nation plays significant role in promoting awareness and education, providing support and encouragement, participating in outreach programmes providing resources and services, partnering with the church in order to support the church's efforts to reduce stigma and reclaim drug users.

Question 8: Mount Zion Mission Incorporated's counseling programmes are effective in addressing the psychological and spiritual needs of drug users

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	69	35.3
Strongly Agreed (SA)	103	52.8
Disagreed (D)	8	4.1

Strongly Disagreed (SD)	16	8.2
Total	195	100

The above table shows that 69 respondents representing 35.3% agreed, 103 respondents representing 52.8% strongly agreed, 8 respondents representing 4.1% disagreed, 16 respondents representing 8.2% strongly disagreed. With the highest percentage being strongly agreed with 52.8%, the research hypothesis is affirmed. It therefore means that counseling programs initiated by Mount Zion Mission Incorporated are effective in addressing the psychological and spiritual needs of drug users.

Question 9: Fear of rejection, lack of trust, past experiences, and lack of awareness of the church's counseling services are perceived barriers to seeking help from the church among drug users.

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
Agreed (A)	41	21
Strongly Agreed (SA)	120	61.5
Disagreed (D)	14	7.1
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	20	10.2
Total	195	100

From the above table, it is quite clear that 21% of the respondents agreed on the above question 61.5% strongly agreed to it, 7.1% of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed are 10.2%. It means that, fear of rejection, lack of trust, past experiences of drug users, lack of awareness on the church's counseling services are perceived barriers to seeking help from the church among drug users.

Discussion of Findings

Findings have shown that there is a significant prevalence of drug addiction among diverse demographics in Oro Nation, table 1 affirmed this. According to Akadu John (Personal Communication, 13th October, 2025) the prevalence of addiction especially in riverine areas like Ibaka, Oron beach, East West Road, Esuk-inwang and other places in Oro Nation is high and this is linked to various factors like socio-economic challenges, peer pressure etc. James and Ekenene (2021:45) maintained that school children within the age bracket of 15-20, 25-30, and 35 and above are mostly associated with drug abuse and their reasons vary. But many take it to fit in, to feel good, to feel better, to do better and also to experiment with it. Chief Edet Willie (Personal Communication, 13th October, 2025) maintained that outside of students who abuse drugs of various types, truck drivers who use the East- West Road, boat drivers in Oron Rivers, and their associates abuse all kinds of illicit drugs. Chief Edet Willie (Personal Communication, 13th October, 2025) further maintained that not all parts of Oro Nation experience drug abuse, and the church has been involved in curbing drug abuse and reducing the stigmatization of drug users. However, areas like Ibaka, Oron Beach, East-West Road, Okobo beach, and other selected places in Oro Nation have a high prevalence of drug abuse. The study discovered that alcohol, marijuana and tramadol are most abused substance in these areas, with some people stating that it gives them the energy to work.

The finding also revealed that, people of these areas in Oro Nation abuse a range of substances, including cannabis, tramadol, cocaine, alcohol, heroin, and benzodiazepine and there are adverse effects of these substances on their health, family and even the society they belong to. The study discovered that effects of drug abuse range from mental health issues, physical health problems, financial loss, breakdown in family relationships and bonds as well as increased in crimes. Result on table 4 proved that though, there are agencies like NDLEA, Drug Free Club, NAFDAC, and Akwa State Primary Healthcare Development Agency in Oro Nation, they have not shown any impacts as regard creating awareness on the danger of drug abuse as well as making efforts in reducing stigma among drug users. This made it imperative for the church to step in to address this problem, which is more or less a social and societal issue that had almost crippled Oron society for years.

The result on table 5 entails Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation carries out counseling and spiritual services, community outreaches, create support groups among members

of the church, and create awareness on the danger of drug misuse and also employ mentorship as strategies to reclaim drug users and reduce stigmatization of drug users in Oro Nation. According to Akadu John (Personal Communication, 13th October, 2025) the church provides counseling sessions for drug users every Thursday of the week. The church organizes seminars as form of counseling and invites experts in drug treatment to talk to invited members of the society and the church members who abuse one drug or the other and they have been stigmatized by members of the society who do not use drug. Chief Edet Willie (Personal Communication, 13th October, 2025), disclosed that the church print flyers and walk from street to street of Oron Town and share flyers, indicating the public on the dangers of drug misuse. In addition, Chief Okon Bassey (Personal Communication, 14th October, 2025) further maintained that he was aware of small support groups created among members of the church which the community has imitated to provide counseling support and therapy of all forms for drug users. Speaking further, he stated that the church employs also mentorship method where drug users are assigned for station pastors and members of the church and society who do not use drug for mentorship. Ekenene *et al* (2024:69) reveal that even during Covid-19, Religious Leaders counseled and provided prayers services to drug users through phone calls and social media platforms. With the study data on table where 61.54% strongly agreed to the research question, the research therefore by findings shows that Mount Zion Mission Incorporated employs these strategies for reclaiming drug users and reduce stigma among them and their family members.

On table 6 with 50.26% who strongly agreed to the research question it therefore entails that impact felt by the drug users through spiritual transformation, sense of community, emotional healing, restored relationship, and new identity are enormous. According to Elder Ita Udi (Personal Communication, 14th October, 2025), 60% of drug users who never believed they could change are now Sunday teachers, interpreters in the church. Furthermore, Mary Luke (Personal Communication, 7th November, 2025) maintained that the drug users feel sense of belonging to the community and contribute their quota to the growth and development of the society. He further said that the role of the church impacts more on the drug users by giving new identity and value. Stigma and labeling, leading to shame and life of mockery have been dealt with by the efforts of the church. Emotional healing becomes paramount in the lives of reclaimed drug users thereby rebuilding self-esteem and confidence. Ekenene (2020) said there is a growing effect of drug abuse and it is becoming global concern, as this raised question on the

role of the church. Based on the findings, it could be said that the church provides atmosphere of healings and go further to restore relationship in broken homes.

Table 7 reveals that Oro Nation plays significant role in promoting awareness and education, providing support and encouragement, participating in outreach programs, providing resources and services, partnering with the church in order to support the church's efforts to reduce stigma and reclaim drug users. With 59.49% agreeing to the hypothesis posed forward in the research question 7 it also means that, the church has received community support in the fight against stigmatization for years. According to Chief Edet Emetuei (Personal Communication, 7th November, 2025) revealed that Eweme Community in Oron had many times made available village hall available for the church to use for seminars and sensitization. In support, the researcher argues that it is the peace giving by any host community that can make the church to succeed in its programmes and he believed that the community has given the church conducive environment for awareness and education, outreach programmes and partnership of any kind to be possible. In addition, Mr. Edem Uyeh (Personal Communication, 10th November, 2025) said that villages in Oro Nation that are most affected with this issue which is the riverine side often partner with the church by providing the church with personnel, refreshment, publicity and venue for educational outreach on the dangers of drug abuse to be done.

The study further revealed counseling programmes initiated by the church to have been effective in addressing the psychological and spiritual needs of drug users. According to Elder Asuquo Sampson (Personal Communication, 10th November, 2025) there is psychological, emotional, social as well as spiritual stability in the lives of reclaimed drug users by the church. Also Deacon Ita Okpoyo (Personal Communication, 14th November, 2025) said that members of the community who were into drug and misbehave in public places do not misbehave like that again. Mrs Ekanem Uyah (Personal Communication, 1st December, 2025) has it to say that drug users who had suffered stigmatization now go to church and consider their spiritual needs important as they now partake in church rituals, like communion, baptism, morning prayers and crusade of the church as well as participate in community duties. They now have psychological readiness for change and contribute greatly for the betterment of the society.

Moreover, with 61.5% strongly agreeing to question on table 9, it therefore entails that fear of rejection, lack of trust, past experiences of drug users, lack of awareness in the church's counseling services have been perceived as barriers to seeking help among drug users. According to Mr. Ating Edward (Personal Communication, 1st December, 2025) despite the fact that the church has tried to reclaim drug users there is still fear of rejection, being judgmental by drug users. However, he maintained that many drug users have begun to build trust with key members of the church and also depend on the services of the church for wellness. There is a shift in reasoning that is of benefit for the drug users, family, church and society at large.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Stigma is complex concepts that are often over-simplified, over-generalised and incorrectly utilized as a catch-all for understanding negative responses to people who use drug. Qualitative explorations help to contextualize stigma and inform the design of research that can identify the form of the problem in a given setting. In the study, it is discovered that drug users are being loved, given priority to by the Mount Zion Mission Incorporated. The study also spelled out the role of the church in reducing stigma and reclaiming drug users. Findings equally revealed that, Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, Oro Nation preaches against drug abuse and provides counseling services to people of the host communities struggling with addiction, as well as partnering with the community to provide help for drug users and their family. The study further shows the level in which the church carries out community outreaches in various communities in Oro Nation in order to create awareness on the dangers of drug use. The study recommends that the government of Akwa Ibom State as well as Traditional Institutions of Oro Nation should partner with the Church- Mount Zion Mission Incorporated, in order to enable the church live up to her social responsibility and create more impact by establishing rehabilitation centres for drug treatment to be carried out. The study also recommends for Educational Board, Oron Zone to partner with the church for more awareness to be created on the dangers of drug abuse. The study therefore concludes that the church efforts in preaching, counseling and educating drug users on the dangers of drug abuse have served as instrument of promoting rehabilitation and reintegration.

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