



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

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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 as 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

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Agreed (A)	106	54.3
Strongly Agreed (SA)	27	13.8
Disagreed (D)	44	22.5
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	18	9.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>

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

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Agreed (A)	98	50.3



Strongly Agreed (SA)	60	30.7
Disagreed (D)	12	6.2
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	25	12.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>

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.

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

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

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Agreed (A)	50	25.6
Strongly Agreed (SA)	40	20.6
Disagreed (D)	100	51.3
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	5	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>

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

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Agreed (A)	41	21.03
Strongly Agreed (SA)	120	61.54
Disagreed (D)	14	7.18
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	20	10.26
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>

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

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

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.

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Agreed (A)	116	59.49
Strongly Agreed (SA)	14	7.1
Disagreed (D)	62	31.7
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	3	1.5



<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>
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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

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Agreed (A)	69	35.3
Strongly Agreed (SA)	103	52.8
Disagreed (D)	8	4.1
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	16	8.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>

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.

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

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, 13<sup>th</sup> 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, 13<sup>th</sup> 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, 13<sup>th</sup> 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, 13<sup>th</sup> 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, 13<sup>th</sup> 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 Basse (Personal Communication, 14<sup>th</sup> 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, 14<sup>th</sup> 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, 7<sup>th</sup> 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, 7<sup>th</sup> 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, 10<sup>th</sup> 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, 10<sup>th</sup> 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, 14<sup>th</sup> 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, 1<sup>st</sup> 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, 1<sup>st</sup> 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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## **Moral Gatekeepers or Silent Witnesses? Evaluating the Attitude of Mainline Churches in Curbing Sexualisation in Uyo LGA, Akwa Ibom State**

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### **Abstract**

This work assesses the attitude of the selected mainline churches in curbing sexualisation in Uyo LGA area, Akwa Ibom State. Sexualized representations of men and women are ubiquitous across cultures via several channels especially the media. The valuation and validation of persons constructed on beauty-based or sexually-based features leads to objectification and commodification of persons, making sexualisation a grave psychosocial problem. This work validates Durkheim's Functionalism Theory which provides a framework for religion's roles in society. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation across mainline churches in Uyo LGA, findings show that the church though logically placed as moral gatekeeper, the



current attitude toward curbing emerging sexual expressions presents the church as lethargic and silent witnesses, enfeebled by modern media influences and shifting moral standard. While moral teachings persist in doctrinal brochures, sermons and catechisms, it does not translate to positive and committed action; the passive and lukewarm impression is insufficient to regulate cultural shifts, social conformity fuelled by unbridled digital exposure to unhealthy content and behaviours. The study concludes that the church's functional role in moral gatekeeping is shallow and there is a significant decline in social stimulus. The study recommends intentional rejuvenation of moral influence to balance holy intentions with action. Considering the magnitude of invasion, religious organizations, academic and other social institutions should join forces and adopt proactive engagement with emerging sexualised culture to restore religion's integrative and regulatory function within the social system.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Sexualisation, church, Media, Uyo LGA,

**Introduction** The contemporary social setting is increasingly marked by an unprecedented wave of sociocultural transformation, where values, identities and self-expressions are shaped by the digital media, global entertainment and quest for fulfilment. One of the most profound outcomes of this definitive shift is the ongoing sexualisation of society. The prevalence and normalization of hypersexual images, sexualized behaviours and attitudes in everyday life from music to fashion to online platforms and advertisements, is fuelled by globalization, mass media and digital platforms. Globalization has attracted wide commentaries from the four cardinal points of the earth commentaries in both positive and negative dimension (Oko, 2015, p.358). In Nigeria, home movies, music videos, social media platforms are constantly bombarded with loads of sexual contents by celebrities and amateurs, thus creating a pornified culture where sex and sexiness defines the worth of an individual. The trend raises profound questions about morality, dignity and the role of social institutions especially the Church in safeguarding communal values.

Religion stands as both a moral compass and a custodian of spiritual guidance. Religion has created a lot of impact in the national development in many countries through education (Sibani and Oko, 2014, p.83). The Church for instance has functioned as a moral gatekeeper, shaping societal norms and resisting cultural practices deemed destructive to human wellbeing. Yet in the face of the trending phenomenon, the Church's response appears indifferent. In some contexts, it speaks boldly against moral decline, while in others it appears as a silent witness, retreating into a theological obscurity without tangible social engagement. The tension calls for critical reflection to ascertain the church's



role as a moral gatekeeper or a silent observer. The article therefore interrogates the attitude of mainline churches (Methodist, Lutheran, Qua Iboe and Presbyterian) in curbing sexualization in Uyo LGA. It seeks to explore whether the church is actively shaping moral discourse or passively yielding to the pressures of the rapidly evolving society. The study thereby contributes to ongoing discussion about the relevance of religious institutions in shaping public morality in a rapidly pornified society.

Purposive convenience sampling, a non-random sampling technique that involves the deliberate choice of participants due to the qualities they possess, was utilized in selecting the participants. The key criteria in the choice of participants with this sampling technique are the participants' knowledge, experience, willingness and availability. Participant observation provides additional tool in the study. It is expected that the select mainline churches in Uyo LGA with their large followership and influence through their preaching and teaching, social work, outreaches and church discipline can contribute to the ongoing discourse in sexualisation of Uyo LGA.

## **Conceptual Definitions**

### **Church**

The idea of the church as a gathering of specific people comes from the Greek word *eklessia*. *Eklessia*, from classical Greek was commonly used to indicate a called out assembly of citizens of a Greek city states usually summoned to deliberate on civic affairs. For, Christians, the word *ekklesia* came to mean a divinely called community of believers –called by God through Christ into a new fellowship. Bragg (nd) explains that *ekklesia* is 'The most common word translated "church" in the New Testament, from Greek, *ek*--out, and *kaleo*, to call, hence a company or assembly of called out ones. It is a company of the *kleetoi*, the called out ones. Bonhoeffer (1939, p.121) describes the *ekklesia* as 'Christ existing as community'. By this he meant that church is the visible embodiment of Christ's presence in the world. Akanbi & Beyers (2017, p.3), believe that when the early Christians understood themselves as constituting a church, no doubt exists that they perceived themselves as called out by God in Jesus Christ for a special purpose and that their status was a privileged one in Jesus Christ'. Terms like 'Body of Christ', 'People of God' and 'Bride of Christ', truly capture the church's relationship with the



Godhead, with Christ as the Head (Ephesians 1:10; 4:15). Thus, different usages of the term *ekklesia* rightly positions the church as ‘universal body composed of all true believers in Christ, united in Him by the Spirit, and, though there are many local “churches,” there is really only *one* church’ (Herrick, 2004).

Focus on the role of the church as an agent of social transformation and change is not misplaced. Olusakin (2020, p.4) believes that the Church exists to shape people’s attitudes, provide services..., Others are that she has the capacity to influence the powerful and has prophetic ministries. Throughout the ages, the church has been involved in the life of humankind, making of nationhood, building of culture, structuring society with its functions and institutions and shaping the form and quality of political systems (Pillay (2017, np). Velarde (2024) is right to observe that ecclesiology is not some ivory-tower, academic discipline removed from the reality of daily life. Instead, learning more about the church helps us make a real difference in the present world and for all eternity.

### **Mainline Churches**

In this study, the term ‘Church’ refers to the collective body of believers and their institutional structures and dogma that provide spiritual, moral, and social guidance. In the context of this work, these believers are represented in mainline denominations in Uyo LGA, Akwa Ibom state. Mainline Christian denominations are the several

long-established church traditions that share core doctrinal beliefs while often differing in specific practices, governance, and historical origins. Many of these groups arise from the major movements of the Reformation era or have roots tracing back through centuries of history. They traditionally emphasize communal worship, doctrinal creeds, and a commitment to outreach within broader society (Bible Hub, 2024).

Interestingly, while local church structures and practices can differ, the mainline denominations largely affirm the foundational teachings of Scripture like the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, His resurrection, salvation by grace alone, and Christian worship/fellowship. In Uyo LGA, these denominations apart from their similar origins share a common identity which can be quickly identified from *non-mainline* denominations. ‘This shared identity often surfaces in ecumenical dialogues and cooperation for



evangelism, social issues, and interdenominational ministries, and across the denominational lines, the central mission remains pointing to Christ, proclaiming His Gospel, and growing in the knowledge of His Word' (Bible Hub, 2024).

The observation in Health Sciences that mainline churches are 'characterized by less frequent youth gatherings and a subdued religious atmosphere...avoid explicit discussions on sex-related topics by fostering a more reserved approach to religious experiences' (Wisdom Library, 2024), serves as a basis of contrasts which this work seeks to examine. Known for historical breadth and theological richness of the Church's witness to the world, it is believed their affirmation of the scripture as the only rule for faith and practice reflect a shared heritage of Christian belief and motivation to approach social issues with the right attitude and theological base. Mainline denominations considered in this work are Methodist, Lutheran, Qua Iboe and Presbyterian congregations within Uyo LGA. These churches in addition to their long established presence also boast of large followership and influence in all social institutions in the state.

### **The Church as a Moral Gatekeeper**

The idea of the church as a moral gatekeeper describes its socio-religious role in the transmission, regulation and intentional preservation of moral values in society. Emile Durkheim's Functionalism theory captures the social role of religion not only in social cohesion and solidarity but also in regulating behaviours through collective values and norms. Omoruyi (2025, p.2) affirms that 'A church generally accepts the norms and values of society and frequently regards itself as the guardian of the established social order'. It gives society rules of conduct to live by equally serves as a model for how life should exist based their life on Jesus example. According to Oko (2022), the church is a tool for development, and is spiritual in approach which appeals for people sense of what is right or wrong. Thus, as a moral gatekeeper in her long history, the church has positioned itself not just as a custodian of moral traditions but also as a formative moral community and moral regulator. This empowers the church through its prophetic capacity to evaluate cultural norms and societal trends based on its ethical lenses, define moral boundaries and mount a moral guard for a society by filtering what passes through the gate.



## **Sexualisation**

Human beings are sexual beings. They exist as products and agents of sexuality. This makes sexuality ‘a core part of an individual identity and affects both sexual behaviour and totality of human functioning and is influenced by social attitudes’ (Ventriglio & Bhugra 2019, p.29). Whereas *nature* decides individual sex, sexual expressions are culturally decided through a script. Thus, sexuality is the cultural way of living out our bodily pleasures, a manner we decide to or are conditioned to enjoy or deny our sexual desires (Weeks, 2003, p.8). Sexology as a discipline shows that sexuality is multidimensional. It includes sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations. Interestingly, it touches a wide range of other issues including pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence (Tamale, 2011, p.45). Sexualisation is a negative expression of sexuality which has been discussed as a social problem. According to APA (2007, p.I), sexualisation occurs when a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;

- I. a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- II. a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making;
- III. and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person

The first standard espoused by the APA report restricts human value to mere sexual appeal and desirability; the second measures physical appearance according to a cultural standard – like sexy hour-glass body; the third focuses on sexual satisfaction derivable from a sex object while the fourth standard examines unsuitable imposition of sexual particulars on a person. Any one of the listed criteria is sufficient in itself to constitute sexualisation. This sexual valuation can come from the culture, from person to person and from the individual. In the last case, the individual decides to present/evaluate him/herself based on physical attractiveness or sex appeal. When a society becomes hypersexual and pornified,



sexual attractiveness becomes an important part of people's identities perhaps due to the rewards and positive outcomes associated with being sexually attractive and objectified.

In the end, society is constantly bombarded with sexual imageries and sexual discourse in sights, sounds, thoughts and feelings. The media has been identified as the prime player in the sexualisation of persons/societies, featuring platforms that showcase sexual expressions in movies, fashion, advertising, printed works, music videos, and social media platforms. The more people are exposed to media with highly sexualized portrayals, the more they objectify their own bodies, enjoy emphasizing their sexiness, and base their worth on sexual appeal (Choi and DeLong (2019, p.1354). The most popular conception is that girls and women are the most sexualised and objectified members of society. Ward (2016, p.562) argues that sexualisation is a 'form of sexism which narrowly frames women's worth and value in ways which they are seen only as sexual body parts for others' sexual pleasure'. Again, 'There is no mutuality in sexualisation because one person is "using" the other for his or her own gratification, without regard for the other's needs, interests, or desires'. Studies reflecting examining western societies describe these societies as pornified with ubiquitous sexual imageries especially in media and fashion industry. Referring to cultural acceptability, Mace (2012, p.49) observes that:

As the public's attitude towards sexuality becomes more passive and tolerant, fashion imagery has simultaneously evolved into a more provocative and eroticized aesthetic, opening the door to the mainstreaming of soft-core pornography and evoking imagery that capitalizes on notions of hyper-sexualisation to further the commodification of sex.

Mace's position recognises the connexion between the moral state of society and the sexual behaviour of her members. The more society loosens restraint on sexual expressions or becomes indifferent; individuals decide to flow with the popular culture. Scholars have identified various negative consequences of sexualization of society such as mental health problems like eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction, body anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, self-harm, suicidal ideation, sexual violence, and acceptance rape myth.

Uyo LGA is not just an economic hub of Akwa Ibom state. It is also a religious, social and political centre with features of a metropolitan society like population, urban spread, transportation network, cultural diversity and administrative importance. The prevalence of sexualisation can be observed in



youth fashion style, patronage of social clubs that publicly flaunt and promote sexiness and sexualised behaviours, sex in advertising, trending local and Nigerian music videos, home movies and rise in hook-up culture.

The mobile phone and the internet provide an opportunity for sexting, unhindered access to dating sites and limitless pornographic materials of celebrities. Local content creators use Facebook and TikTok platform to produce amateur contents with sexual explicit innuendoes either for fun or funds. With the monetisation of the Facebook for instance, one is constantly bombarded with loads of self-sexualised materials sometimes accompanied with an erotic music or sexually suggestive poses and dress. It shows to what extent non-western cultures are exposed to the sexualised culture of the West and how much they have internalized the popular culture of sexualisation. These observable features in Uyo LGA justify its description as sexualised society and it calls to question Christian presence organized in religious denominations littering the streets of Uyo Local Government Area.

### **Durkheim's Structural Functionalism – The Church in Society**

The Church wields a widespread, growing and influential presence in the Nigerian society at large. To justify the religion-society relationship, Emile Durkheim's Structural Functionalism posits that society is a complex system of interconnected institutions, norms and values. Each component performs a specific function, maintaining order and stability through consensus, cohesion and social control. Durkheim's theory stresses the importance of social solidarity and collective conscience. Its emphasis on functions of social institutions such as socialization, social control and integration provides insights into the mechanisms that maintain social order and stability as well as potential for change. The function of this theory is its ability to socialize the individual. As religion is a reflection of society, this moral power actually serves to socialize people into certain accepted behaviours, and to avoid certain forbidden/deviant actions.

According to Durkheim, there is no religion in which prohibitions do not exist and play an important part. With its strong integrative force religion instils of common values and identity. This helps strengthen the integrity of a society (Durkheim 1997, pp.130–131). In this way, religion creates the framework for what is considered moral principles and behaviour within society, which in turn



regulates social relationships, as the individual cannot exist without society. It also serves as a counter to individualism, which is inclined to weaken social cohesion. Sexuality has never been left to the whims and caprices of individuals. Though personal, but society determines what is acceptable and unacceptable, taking cognizance of social and future implications. This is where the church comes in as a moral gatekeeper.

### **Church Role in Curbing Sexualisation of Society**

- **Doctrinal Affirmation of Mankind as Image of God**

In spite of doctrinal differences in Christian denominations in Uyo LGA, there is a unanimous acceptance of the place of mankind in the divine plan and priority. Man is the bearer of the image of God and partakes of the divine nature. Therefore, all forms of activities that abuse the dignity and sanctity of persons should be discouraged. Within the framework of man in the image of God and equality in Christ, women's bodies are temple of God and emphasis on physical appearance downplays the concern of Jesus on the soul, rather than the corruptible bodies. The theology of the human body has a long history and tradition within the Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II opines that the human body reveals the mystery of God. On that foundation, the Catholic Churches world over, in its social teachings, papal encyclicals and ecclesiastical documents and priestly exhortations emphasize the wholesome dignity of the human body. Since the body is always the centre of sexualization and objectification, it is believed that the acknowledgement of the image of God in man should discourage the various expressions of sexualisation in Uyo Local Government Area.

This doctrinal avowal is an antithesis to the undue obsession with physical appearance and quest for a certain kind of body size and shape. Humans are not Temples of the Living God based on some physical characteristics and there is no Christian teaching that the prettier the holier. Smolak & Murnen (as cited in Ward et al.,2023) states that 'because standards for female beauty within Western cultures require a thin and sexy body, adolescent girls and young women frequently experience cultural pressure to self-sexualize'. The pressure to conform to certain body standard and look sexy is prevalent especially amongst women and girls. This body mindfulness comes with anxiety as girls come to depend on external gaze and compliments. Adequate emphasis on humanity in the Image of God discourages on



one hand all forms of abuses (like objectification and commodification of the body), and on the other hand, all uses that is materialistic and undermines the development of spiritual faculties.

- **Systematic Teaching on Marriage, Sexuality and Christian Sexual Ethics.**

A significant number of Christian denominations within Uyo LGA organize regular biblical teaching on sexuality, dignity, modesty and holiness. This is done through daily devotionals distributed to members and non-members. These devotionals feature topics that challenge cultural norms that treat marriage, sexuality and sex with levity. A thematic analysis of a daily devotional manual (Heaven's Dew) produced by Qua Iboe Church and Methodist church's Daily Reflections reveal the church is aware of the pervasiveness of sexualisation of local cultures and biblical lessons lasting for over two months were produced to discourage immodest dressing, partaking and exposure to corrupting media trends and illicit relationships. For the church, there is strict adherence to modest dressing for all her members, from the clergy to the laity alike. Beyond religious materials which can be accessed by literate church members. Rev. Okworo and Rev. Raymond (personal communication on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2025 and 26<sup>th</sup> July, 2026 respectively) confirm that youth fellowships in most mainline churches in Uyo LGA regularly conduct seminars and Sunday school classes for different age grades to examine matters of marriage, sexual standards, sexual identities and orientation, unhealthy relationship, dressing, pornography and hook-up culture

- **Discipleship, Advocacy and Social Engagement.**

Christian denominations also engage in intentional process of mentoring their young members through discipleship and mentoring. According to Vincent Okon (Personal Communication on 24<sup>th</sup> May, 20205), 'this is a step beyond pulpit speech-making and wow lectures. We have members who are good at delivering great lectures and wonderful sermons but wanting in integrity. What we do is to assign some young people to a mature member to *culture* them over time'. Churches who employ this initiative intend to monitor the progress of their young members, help them in their struggle against negative peer influence and discover new areas the church can look into. Okworo Martins (Personal Communication on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2025) believes that 'This initiative helps both our young ones and their



absentee or indifferent parents. Even those who are called to mentor and disciple our teens must be watchful of themselves as well’.

Another church-based approach to curbing self-sexualisation is in advocacy and social engagement programmes. The church prides itself as the light of the world and salt of the earth. As a bride to nation-builder, the church must invest in intra in massive human right educational programmes needed to raise the level of general consciousness in any given area so as to arouse activity the people’s initiative and participation in nation building (Atanang, Ekanem and Oko, 2022, p.209) This bequeaths upon her the right to pursue social good. Victory Chapel of the University of Uyo, organizes monthly youth outreach in Uniyo community to discuss the prevalence and dangers of self-sexualisation using proficient resource persons. ‘Through public performances, spoken words, campus concerts, partnership with non-governmental organizations, the Chapel targets students’ population with the aim of raising Christ-like models’. We encourage our youths to live a representative lifestyle amongst their mates in their departments and society at large, such that their behaviour will not discredit their message’ Elder Pius Udoh (Personal Communication on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2025). An important aspect of social engagement is the church-society dialogue to sanitise Ibibio culture of chauvinist mentality and obnoxious practices that debase women and exalts unhealthy socialization between genders.

- **Use of Social Media:**

The media is taking the world by storm and it has become the greatest factor in the spread of sexual materials. Apart from traditional practices and patriarchal beliefs which sexually objectify women, the greatest factor driving sexualisation of persons globally is the media. Santoniccolo *et al.* (2023,p.I) confirm that ‘...the ubiquity of media, the chronicity of individuals’ exposure to it and its role in shaping beliefs, attitudes and expectations have made it the subject of scientific attention’. Continuous exposure to sexualizing media definitely encourages the internalization of the sexualisation culture. For instance, Ward (2016, p.560) affirms that the mainstream media have been noted to contain a high level of sexual content that features a particular characterization of women and of female sexuality, with extreme focus on sexual appearance, physical beauty, and sexual appeal to others.

Much attention has focused on the role of the media and the emphasis is justified in view of the abundance of sexualized images of women across media. To say the least, the media is where everything is happening now. With a mobile phone, internet connection and ease of access to any site



of interest, nothing is hidden. Instead of suppressing the truth, religious denominations have taken up media campaigns using outdoor billboards, video skits and religious contents to educate the public of the implications of pornography, sexting, indecent dressing and unhealthy online relationships. Obsession with the social media especially amongst young people today provides an evangelistic opportunity for the church to leverage on the fascination and share informative content, personal stories and healthy resources. The church seems to confirm that sexualisation is unhealthy, indecent self-exposure on the social media space is immoral and discredits the integrity of the church in society.

- **Intentional Parenting:**

Teachings on building godly homes hold a significant place amongst Christians. The family is the core of the church and society. If families are mini-factories that produce personalities, parents are primary producers and are entrusted with the sole responsibility of cultivating discipline and enforcing religious teachings on their children. Elder Ette (Personal Communication on 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2025) admits that, ‘sexual elements in all media platforms are posted and downloaded by people family affiliations. Yet, fear and shame that once kept our children in control have disappeared. Yes, there is liberalisation and democratisation of moral values in modern culture, but parents can still discipline their children rather than wait for the church or school to perform some magic’. The abdication of parental role is a major challenge in the contemporary age, where parents often assigned duties to other agencies while they pursue other endeavours.

According to Captain Joshua (Personal Communication on 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2025) reveals that ‘Parental negligence and ignorance is a key factor in the proliferation of sexual attitude and behaviour of young people. While some parents condone some unhealthy behaviours, some do not even know what their kids are into, both online and offline. But the worst situation is where either of the parents objectifies/commodifies the ward for some pecuniary reasons. That is an outright case using a person as an object, a means to achieve some ends. In her attempt to curb further pornification of society, the church charges parents to pursue healthy socialization of their children through exemplary living, equal respect for both sexes, informed discipline and a family culture built on strong moral framework to serve as a compass and shield against negative peer influences.



## **Pastoral Counselling and Youth Empowerment Programmes**

Most congregations of Qua Iboe Church and Lutheran Church have counselling units to attend to the congregants' needs. The aim is to offer pastoral assistance to both erring members, depressed and abused individuals. Rev. Bob of Qua Iboe Church (Personal Communication on 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025) explains that, 'In my congregation, the unit is for members who have experienced abuses in their relationships, struggle with body acceptance or physical appearance, or people struggling with sexuality-related matters. The unit is composed of a medical personnel, a psychologist, selected elders and a barrister. The interaction shows that the most sensitive case handled in the unit was a case of leaked nude video/pics involving a member.

Whereas young people engage in posing sexy-selfies for fun, some actually sell their private videos to raise *urgent 2k*. 2k literally refers to Two thousand naira- and generally came to be used for any urgent cash to meet immediate needs). The church understands the helplessness of some students and the temptation to join sexualising trends like hook-up culture. The church believes in the holistic development of all human faculties, and encourages members attend skills acquisition workshops in entrepreneurship and other decent ways of earnings. This approach is based on a number of teachings that extol decent work and discourages slothfulness. Proper counselling is needed to liberate the people involves from alcoholic quagmire of drunkenness (Sibani and Oko, 2022, p.114).

The foregoing discourse shows that mainline churches are involved in curbing sexualisation in Uyo LGA. The role as a moral gatekeeper is not a new found role or merely a reactive effort to a moral disaster. Interestingly, at some point in the history of the church and sexuality, the church once assumed full control of sexual expressions, delineating what is acceptable and unacceptable by the church. The Catholic Church as a prominent influence in Western Europe during the Medieval Ages seemed to have exalted chaste men and women above others, because they were devoted to God and sex was a shameful and sordid business (Worthen, 2016, p.171). Marriage was for the function of procreation. Brundage cited in Worthen, (2016, p.171) mentions specific religious restrictions viz.:

Sex was forbidden during Lent, Vigils, major feast days and Sundays throughout the year. Believers must abstain from sex as during menstrual periods, pregnancy and after child bearing years. Newly



married couples were to avoid sex on their wedding night and were forbidden to enter the church for thirty days following their wedding. Marital sex for enjoyment was considered sinful. Sexual pleasure was sinful and couples were advised to make the sign of the cross and pray that they would not experience pleasure during sex. The approved sexual position was the missionary and only for procreation. Forbidden sexual practices comprised oral and anal sex acts, same sex behaviour, adultery, incest, masturbation, prostitution, sexual imagery and spontaneous sexual emissions.

This era was a period of excessive sexual austerity and repression. But as Worthen clarifies, despite the stronghold of the Christian Church and its extensive restrictions, in practice, sexual pleasure still made its way into the medieval society. For early historians, however, this was also an age of hypocrisy. Social conventions made discussion of sex, sexuality and bodily functions taboo, but at the same time pornography and prostitution flourished. Religious repression of sex succeeded in driving sex underground, then came the Renaissance, which awakened sexuality in all its forms.

The invention of printing machine made publications available to all and material on sex, sexual positions other than the sanctified 'missionary' style, contraception and pregnancy flourished. But this awakening was cut short during the Victorian era. For Worthen (2016, p.172), "if the Renaissance represented a rebirth and awakening of sexual pleasure following the Dark Ages, the Victorian Era symbolized a retreat back into sexual repression'. Sex was utilitarian (reproduction)...women should show no sexual passion or appetite...should be modest, sexually passive, pious, chaste and even asexual...they were given a specific dress and hair style, and forbidden from food that have direct influence on the abnormal exercise of the sexual system' (Worthen 2016, pp.172, 173).

History shows that the church was at the forefront of moral regulation. Far from being a silent witness, society got direction from the church and the church exerted some control over nearly all aspects of life. It appears the church has been overwhelmed by the current hypersexual culture. The present sexualised and sexualising society makes it that:

We do not have to go looking for ways to stain our hearts; they come looking for us! The pathways to dark and destructive places abound: Internet, cable TV, hotel room adult video offerings, movies, and mobile dating apps are part of a culture that beckons us to give in to our feelings and desires, to escape lives of loneliness, routine and stress. Even if you are not



personally struggling with sexual integrity, there are dozens of people sitting in the same church service as you who are struggling (Freeman, 2016, np).

Freeman's position is quite expressive of the current socio-religious landscape of Uyo Local Government Area. The pervasiveness of sexually objectifying environments is a glowing evidence of how far society's silence is perceived as acceptance. In all fairness, the church has been largely silent or less vocal today. Rev. Fabian (Personal Communication 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2025) believes that the modern church seems to have lost some interest in social issues. With the rise in independent congregations, more energy is channelled to empire expansion, economic odyssey and some illicit co-operation with political leaders. An instance of the association is the creation of the Fathers of/in Faith forum in Akwa Ibom State. Unfortunately, the religio-political fraternity is not harnessed towards the promotion of morality or social good, but self-aggrandizement. Rev. Fabian believes that it is difficult for church leaders to speak up and confront social illnesses when the church is complicit in some ways.

Adeola (2010, p.158) observes that, it seems people dress up to expose their bodies...clothes that expose the breast, short skirts, tight blouses that show the belly button...are worn even to the church. Mainline churches studied do not permit revealing dressing – mini-skirt, open back blouse, short gown, any wear that exposes the armpit, trousers, uncovered hair, male use of earring, and other tight-fitted wears. All the mainline congregations for instance, have strict directives for female dress code during worship services. But while the Church exercises control over what their congregants wear on Sundays, less is actually done to sustain this direction after service on Sunday, for the saintly dressed chorister on Sunday morning can also dress like a porn-star at a social club after church.

But to Freeman (2016, np), the church is silent because; it is in our nature to pretend—to pretend that all is well. We really do not believe that the gospel can transform deep sexual struggles and we feel that the Bible outdated for today's culture. Personal struggles with unresolved sexual baggage in our own history continue to plague us and there is fear that to do so will open up Pandora's Box. Pastors and leaders are so busy with other agenda items and neglect the need for leadership to intentionally offer help to others and our people are increasingly unaware of the depths to which the Bible speaks



about sexuality and the way God designed it. In the same vein, 'Adeola posits 'The church has being (sic) silent about sex and sex related issues, it was and still a taboo in some churches to mention the topic of sex in a church environment'. Yet the daily barrage of sexual innuendoes in society today makes it easier for curious kids to ignore the silence of the church and learn sexuality from the enchanting popular culture.

In evaluating the attitude of these churches, there is a positive attitude towards morality and use of social media in the official statements and doctrinal positions such as pastoral letters, communiques, policy statements and synod/conference resolutions. However, these documents are just general moral statements that do not address sexualisation directly and a number of congregants are not aware of the documented social policies of the church. Sermons and teachings often capture the moral stand of these churches. But while the tone often shows deep concern and urgency, at least for the occasion, there is lack of follow up and feedback. For Deaconess Unwana (personal communication on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2025) 'most church pastors tread this path with caution or risk offending the youth population who appears to be the most active participant in the trend or appearing judgmental and 'old fashioned.

For those who even mention it, the somewhat active attitude is occasional and there no direct interventions outside the church, no media presence, awareness campaigns, public condemnation or consistent engagement with trending sexualised issues. The attitude is more reactive than proactive and there is evidence of shallow knowledge about cultural trends the implications of sexualisation in society. However, like Deacon Nkantion (Personal Communication on 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2025) observed, 'silence does not mean we approve it, it is just evidence of the end time. While we cannot change the society, we can just monitor what our children are exposed to'. Yet, as defeatist as the response sounds, parental role cannot be ignored. Silence is also an attitude and it shows a non-confrontational and permissive attitude. The prophetic voice need not be silent and 'prophetic proclamation is twofold: warning regarding impending danger, and promise of restoration and renewal, for the repentant' (Olusakin, 2020, p.4).

The Church appears relaxed, distracted and overwhelmed as a moral gatekeeper. It seems forces of globalization, the internet, ICTs and the addictive capacity of social media have usurped the coaching



role of the Church, disarmed and muzzled the prophetic voice, such that the more she sees, the less she talks. Yet the church has inbuilt advantages over other social institutions to direct moral attitude and behaviour. Olusakin et. al. (2025, p.231) confirm that the church reaches a large number of people both at the rural and urban area, provides a long-lasting sustainable service to the people and has the potential to influence the powerful. Due to respect people give to their churches and church leaders, church has the capacity to shape people's attitude and behaviour. These comparative advantages make this moral; gatekeeping responsibility important.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that the present Uyo society is engrossed with inappropriate expression of sexuality from fashion to pageantry, advertisements, strip clubs, home videos and musical videos. Tiktok and Facebook posts are inundated with nude pictures and amateur sexualised videos by local content creators and porn companies. The Church is not unscathed in this immoral and mal-social incursion and reluctance to confront this state of affairs would create grave socio-religious implications for the Church and society. Christianity is the dominant religion in Uyo Local Government Area, with varieties of Christian congregations littering every street. Mainline churches (Lutheran, Qua Iboe, Methodist, Presbyterian), all hold on to strict moral conduct espoused in their daily devotional materials, manuals of doctrines and practice. Yet it does not translate to a positive reaction and pro-action to curb an emerging sexualised culture taking society by storm. The Church and her leaders have not done enough to curb the prevalence of sexualisation in Uyo LGA. Personal interactions with church leaders in Uyo LGA clearly confirm that 90% of Christian congregations do not see sexualisation as a social phenomenon requiring a 'state-of-emergency' response. The level of concern is weak and indifferent, commitment is lukewarm. A good percentage of church leaders are ignorant of sexuality issues in society and the extent to which such issues have impacted attitudes and behaviour in the church.

Each time the church fails to be proactive in nurturing values, detecting alien hostile forces and warning congregants of the dangers 'out there', congregants fill the vacuum from the popular culture. Sexualisation is actually carried out by individuals who belong to one Christian denomination or the other, with various levels of commitment. The escalating complicities of *church people* in the ongoing



sexualization seem to challenge the integrity and capacity of the Church as an indispensable social institution. The Church is sleeping on duty; the enemy (foreign and local) came and sowed tares among the wheats; but should the church delay action till the end of time? A passive and occasional response to the ongoing sexualisation of society cannot curb the degree of sexualisation observable in Uyo LGA.

In most western countries, sexualisation is the concern of the government, policy makers, advocacy groups, academic communities and other stakeholders. But like Hewson said (though about a different matter), 'If the church were to get behind this, imagine what we could do'. There is no righter circumstance to say this than in Akwa Ibom state with millions of worshippers, wealthy congregations and influential leaders who equally wield some sort of influence in government. Imagine that Christian congregations in Uyo LGA can join forces, share ideas, harness their vast resources to resist further escalation of this socio-cultural and ideological crisis, just like it happened during the pandemic, somehow, public morality will be restored and the land and its inhabitants will be redeemed from their unhealthy ideological servitudes.

### **Recommendations**

Based on findings above the study recommended as follows:

- I. Mainline congregations in Uyo LGA should be intentional in their approach and commitment to reshaping cultural imagination and social ideologies that promote sexualisation and objectification of persons through appropriate programmes. As part of God's design, sexuality should not be seen as a criterion for valuation, validation or profit.
- II. The degree of sexualizing elements in Uyo LGA requires collective efforts. This calls for deliberate denominational partnership/forum with the mandate of identifying and confronting all manifestations of sexualisation in society.
- III. Outside ecumenical collaborations, there is need for partnership with parents, schools, agencies of Government (like Ethical and Attitudinal Reorientation Commission EARCOM), and NGOs that protect children from early exposure to illicit contents, promote human dignity, decent job opportunities, sexuality education, ethical advertising and media regulation.



- IV. Times have changed, Mainline congregations in Uyo LGA should develop a balanced theology for current sexuality and social media, create alternative media contents like films, songs, digital content that promote modesty and virtue as an attempt to infiltrate media platforms so saturated with obscene, vulgar and sexualised sights and sounds.
- V. Christian designers, musicians and artists, content creators in Uyo LGA should be encouraged use their creativity to honour God not sexual appeal. Godly role models should be celebrated instead of celebrities known for sensualities.
- VI. All congregations need to look inwards to identify elements within that may weaken their resolve and moral capacity to curb this malaise. At the same time, members who promote or participate in sexualised contents should be warned or disciplined.

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