



## Child Neglect in the West Nile Region of Uganda: A Pastoral Concern

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### **Abstract**

In the past, having a baby in the West Nile Region of Uganda was a blessing for the entire society. Nowadays, the situation has changed. Child neglect by parents and other adults is rampant and has several negative consequences on the society. This situation strongly calls for a pastoral concern and for care. Child neglect is taking place in the family which is the nucleus of society, hence, the key focal point of pastoral ministry. This article aims to investigate how the Ugandan society can, through the instrumentality of the church, fight against the different factors causing child neglect in the West Nile Region of Uganda. The method used covers social analysis, literature narratives and personal reflection.

**Keywords:** child, neglect, pastoral, concern

1.

### **Introduction**

This paper is an article on the pastoral concern raised against families and parents who neglect their children throughout the West Nile Region of Uganda. The paper highlights the role expected to be played by the church in promoting this contemporary concern throughout the West Nile Region of Uganda (Diocese of Mthatha 2008/2009:1–16). The justification for such a concern lies in the fact that whenever children are raised in a responsible way, it fosters the well-being, not only of the church but that of the society as a whole. The essay describes the menace of 'child neglect' as a failure in the family function, depicting also how this failure has in turn affected neglected children as victims and the society which carries this burden and how this has continued to open doors for them to get involved in illegal/criminal activities,

religious conflicts – living contrary to the teachings of the church (Paul VI, 1965, Nostrate Aetate) – and in immoral behavior. The negative effects of child neglect on institutions like schools, the police force, and the wider society, are also noted in the current paper.

The key question guiding this review article is how can the pastoral ministry of the church be of assistance in engaging the problem of child neglect? Complementary questions include: what are the key causes of child neglect? How can these key causes of child neglect be tackled pastorally by the church? Church ministers emphasize the “love of God and love of neighbor” (Benedict XVI 2005:21), care, solidarity, good relationship, acceptance, dialogue and trust (AMECEA Pastoral Department, 1994: 21). To address these questions, the study resorts to using various methods which include a critical survey of social analysis, literature review and personal reflection and discussion.

The article is limited to child neglect by biological parents. It means that the study is focused on family pastoral care – the Church’s task in nation-building in the Region. This means that the research does not cover other regions where the context is different. Therefore, others may not benefit from the findings of this study. As the author used English in writing this review article, those who do not know English may feel excluded. The researcher’s background and experience as a baptized Christian has also influenced this study. Nevertheless, there is great hope that the fruit of this research would benefit not just Christians from the Region, or English speaking family members but also Christians and those from other religions from other parts of the continent such as French-speaking citizens.

**2. Theoretical framework**

Several theories shape this review article but the major one is the theory of child/children neglect. Connected with it is pastoral concern or care. The theory of child neglect focuses more on children than on their parents. Children, in this case, are regarded as those family members who are dependent on their parents, relatives, and guardians for basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, education, etc. In the theological doctoral dissertation entitled “Family Pastoral Care as the Church’s Task in the Nation Building in the West Nile Region” the theory also takes seriously other young people. Included are:

... teenagers (young people) who are under 18 years old or young people living with the family who have not yet reached the age of adulthood, and are too immature to live on their own, they are living with their family (Arima 2007/2008: xxii).

It reveals issues that cause failure to offer proper care or attention to children. Part of this is the failure to do something for their well-being, neglecting them or their state of being neglected (Soanes, 2008:600). The reader should understand that this review refers to the child neglect by biological parents.

Connected to the theory is the concept of “pastoral care”. It consists of two terms, “pastor” and “care”. The term “concern” or “care” is being “troubled about” or “to heed”. Child neglect as pastoral concern is a matter of care or being troubled about children who suffer because they have been neglected by their parents. As a theory, it aims to change the situation of children who suffer, to a better/humane living. Theoretically, it fights for the liberation of all family members. The term “pastor” is Latin-derived and refers to a shepherd who looks after his/her flock of sheep. S/he does not want them to be lost or harmed. That is where for the researcher, it fits comfortably into the context of the mentioned theory. Its theoretical framework aims at bringing about change in the context of young family members in the West Nile Region (Arima 2017:15). Thus, child neglect refers to a lack of parental care in providing children with basic needs like food, shelter, security, health, and education. Providing for these needs is fundamentally important for both parents.

Parent here refers to the biological father and mother and embodies the responsibility of these parents towards their children. Psychological research indicates that the mother is the “role model” for the “optimum development” and the formation of the personality of their children (Rowland 2007:11). Both parents are the first teachers/educators of their children (Onwughalu 2011:1–7); they are their role models (Maria 2016:1–8). This article considers the human, moral and spiritual formation of the youth as the primary duty of both parents – not grandparents, teachers or church

leaders. It perceives children as images of God and therefore investigates the challenges of the church towards child neglect.

When someone in past times would ask children what kind of person they would like to be someday, young girls would respond, “I want to be a mother like so and so”; the boys would answer, “I want to a father” (i.e. a biological father). During harvest time, young girls would tie ground nuts or maize cobs to their backs as a symbol of carrying a baby. Some would even try to breast-feed their dolls made from clay or mud. These symbols had a lot of meaning in the life of these girls, preparing themselves to become mothers in the future. The boys looked up to their fathers who acted as examples in providing security for the younger children and women in the house. Children would compete to hold a new-born baby in their arms. Everybody wanted the baby to be called by the name they were giving to him/her. This indicates the value that society attributed to children and other young people in the Region in the past. However, today the situation is radically different because of various reasons.

Utter dependency, reverential fear, submission in the children, have prevented responsible child nurturing among parents. No chieftain of the clan would dare to interfere in the administration of any man’s household. A father has the power of life and death over his children. Children cling to their mothers for all their serious trifles and troubles. The tyrannical patriarch knows or pretends to know nothing, or is not interested to know what is going on with his children. When the mother cannot take care of children she gives up and another adult(s) must provide for their children or children must take care of themselves.

The majority of parents are not serious about their irreplaceable responsibility for rearing their children for nation-building in the Region, even though this is not the sole purpose of raising children. Children are also raised for security reasons, to take care of the clan and of the elderly in the community. It is unfortunate that these children are often not nurtured by their own parents, but by their grandparents, the school, the church, or even by housekeepers, aunts, and uncles. It also reveals the ignorance of the parents. Angucia (2012) who is the spokesperson of the North Western Regional Police, argues:

In most cases, parents who are brought in for neglected children (in the West Nile Region), become violent to show that they really don't see it as a law for neglected children.

Here she is trying to expose that when parents are arrested by the police because of neglecting their obligation to rear their children, they generally become violent. Okot and Jennings (2016) highlight the fact that the number of children neglected by their parents in the Region is increasing. They also refer to police statistics indicating that district officials, police and community leaders are failing to cope with this challenge. The consequences of this child neglect are many and varied, affecting the lives of everybody in the Region – children, youth, adults, as well as the society as a whole. In addition, Angucia, elaborates on the neglect of children, referring to “parents denying children access to basic needs like food, clothing, medication, school fees and other scholastic materials” (Angucia 2012). This opens the door for youth to act in a manner that is inhumane, criminal, and immoral in order to survive. Being neglected by their parents or other adults, children get involved in criminal activities like theft, robbery, violence, and even rape. One such example is reported in the New Vision Newspaper: In 2016 this Newspaper reported the theft and robbery of cars (Journalists 2016:6). According to an eyewitness, many young people were involved, and in the end, two were killed. The police report about this case indicated that 50 stolen cars originating from across the country (between August 2015 and January 2016) were found. These cars were channeled to DR Congo through Arua. The report accentuated that young people were involved in this illegal activity. These neglected youth were held responsible for that crime. This incident blacklisted Arua town as a hub for stolen vehicles and signified this town as a crime hotspot for vulnerable and neglected youth.

Children have become objects of exploitation by older youth and adults, some being sexually forced into prostitution to make money. Young children are caught up in the obscene trafficking of organs. Others are profoundly hurt by the violence of adults. This causes the youth to become violent themselves as they rebel against their neglect and suffering. Their violence leads to more violence and in severe cases forces people to leave this country for a foreign country. Out of frustration many children have become drug addicts, or have enlisted in the army. These children have permanent scars

because they are being neglected. Humanity cannot close its eyes for this appalling tragedy (Arua Diocese Bulletin 2009:6).

Teachers (2016:19) further reports an increasing number of school drop-outs in the Region. Moreover, public school education is free and provides universal education (FUE) in Uganda. Teachers feel challenged when young people drop out of school. This can be devastating, not only for the child but also for their parents (Gall, Gall & Borg 2007:1–3). Uneducated young people cannot get employment and therefore lack basic needs.

All lead to teenage pregnancies, and young people having sexually transmitted diseases. Many young mothers and fathers are unable to take care of their children, leaving this task for someone else. Some of these young parents do not even appreciate or thank the people for what they do for them or follow up to find out about the welfare of their children. Sex is a gift from God for responsible procreation, and an expression of love between two spouses, but it has become a commodity for pleasure.

### 3. Reflection

Reflecting on previous presentations, the key root causes of child neglect can be summarized as social (lack of parental care, and media influence), moral (presented as the stigma of shame), legal (over-expectation of government service), and theological (lack of pastoral care).

Parents have the key responsibility to nurture their children. They are: 1) teachers of these children on the level of i) human and cultural values; ii) morals; and iii) faith; 2) representatives of the aspirations of other adults in society; 3) promoters of discipline in the family. Christian parents should be witnesses of the Christian faith, while non-Christians parents must be witnesses of good human values.

According to Paul VI (1965), parents should be the first to communicate the Christian faith to their children and to educate them; by word and the example they are to mold them to embrace the Christian life. Parents must advise and guide their children in making life-changing choices. The problem detected by this research is that some of these parents underwent a lack of parental care as children themselves, and now the cycle tends to repeat itself. By their failure, parents have contributed greatly to criminal activities among their children.

The stigma of shame is in agreement with 2017 research conducted in the same region of West Nile Region. It highlighted the (criminal) actions of the youth as scaring their parents because many youth in the Region are greatly involved in drug and substance abuse, including (the chewing of) marungi, (the smoking of) opium, and abuse of alcohol. This is a reason why parents want their children to leave home because if they are in the family setting, they will bring shame to their parents. Teachers (2016:38) highlight the abuse of “illegal substances/drugs”, referring to them as “sachet waragi, beer, kuberm cigarettes, shisha, marijuana, khatmiraa, cocaine, and glue”. Included is the negative influence of the media.

Parents are experiencing the media – which should be a tool for responsible child nurture – largely as a channel of frustration in the Region. The media is driven by various interests, least of all child rearing, which cause parents to neglect their children. According to Arima (2007/2008:6–62), the media mislead young people in the Region to undertake criminal/immoral behavior instead of promoting responsible parent-child nurture. As radio, TV, and internet have become powerful means of communication in the modern world – both for good and for bad (Radio Pacis 2004:7) – Arima points to the media’s potential to challenge or support basic Christian beliefs and customs. In the Region, the media is used in subtle ways by powerful groups. They are capable of twisting the truth, making people unsure of their human and Christian values, and manipulating them to change their moral and religious beliefs. The media, whether local or foreign, is capable of imposing a distorted vision of life, and of human beings. Instead of promoting the development of youth, some media are introducing them to violence and sexual irresponsibility by means of programs promoting violence, and pornography. These programs usually portray a very negative image of the family.

During a casual conversation with different groups of people in the West Nile Region of Uganda a person cannot fail to realize that parents do not really care about the number of children they have – perhaps this is the weakness with the African culture of the people. Parents give birth to as many children as they can, but when they fail to take care of them, they do not only look at other adults but also government for assistance. According to Aluma (2016), many of these parents expect the government to take care of their children,

providing a contribution to their welfare. For sure, government alone cannot stop drug abuse, bring down youth involvement in criminal activities, and take control of overnight discos, media violence, and pornography. The church is called upon to act in this crisis situation, to take the lead in helping the parents in their grave circumstances, and not to turn a blind eye to it.

With great conviction, the researcher believes that a solution to child neglect in the Region, is possible, provided the church takes the lead in collaborating with institutions concerned with responsible child nurture.

The most important institutions include family, school, church, and media. The church should work for co-operation (unity) between her members – to act like a family (John Paul II 2000) where there is unity among parents, and between parents and children. This unity helps in lessening the problem of child neglect and abuse and to uphold children’s rights. Traditional cultural values and practices should be dearly cherished which can also be a challenge. The assumption can be made that traditional cultural values are no longer practiced by the people. Times have changed and how will the youth submit to these cultures? The youth should learn to respect, listen to elders and behave morally. They can use media to promote information that builds the nation, learn to be job creators than job seekers to solve the problem of unemployment and poverty. Traditionally, the whole community used to take responsibility for all the children, becoming a role model for them and for the young parents. Children should always be reminded that they are the means of the parents’ security, wealth, and prestige, and are the future promoters of the Christian faith, community, and the human race in the Region.

#### **4. Discussion**

There is a need for pastoral guidelines. The church alone without any support cannot manage to solve the problem of child neglect by biological parents. Collaboration between church, family, school, and government is needed.

##### *4.1. Church, family, and school*

It’s, therefore, important the church focuses on family and school, government and its institutions to care for the children (Snippet 2013:11). This can be possible when each institution is urged to take care of the children in their own way. Some will need to provide children with basic needs directly or indirectly provide children with basic needs through parents, school administrators, and the church. It, therefore, involves

focusing on the family as the “domestic church” (Paul VI 1964) because it is a place where parents are expected to enrich their children spiritually. The family is as well the key focal point in the church as it is evident in the New Testament (Holy Family of Nazareth where Jesus, Mary, and Joseph serve as role models for all human families). Therefore, the role of the church is to remind family members of their pastoral mandate. This begins in the home because it is at home that harmonious relationship between parents, and between parents and their children, are expected. (The researcher does not take into account unconventional homes, e.g. those with gay partners who have adopted children because in Uganda gay families are seen as alien to the African way of life.)

Faith in God begins at home in the family and it begins when “parents pass on the faith to their children” (Pope Francis, 2013:41). The teaching does not stop at home but it extends to the church, e.g. with Holy Communion – the table of the Lord. It enables the children to recognize God’s presence in the daily actions of their parents, as well as in family prayers. The prayer then helps children and other family members to remember God’s presence in the ordinary actions of family living. That is to mark and ritualize His/Her presence on days of celebration. It means family prayers should not only be a shopping list delivered to God, but also constitute a conversation with and to God (Diocese of Tzaneen 2011:41). Through prayers family members are able to respect each another.

It has become important to focus on the family in child nurture because the family is a “school for human enrichment” (Paul VI’s *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965:52). It is a place where an intersection between church, school, and government begins. Included is being “the primary vital cell of society”, and the “domestic sanctuary of the church” (Paul VI’s *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 1965:11). All these are to portray the family as a place where different generations come together, helping one another to grow wisely, and harmonizing the rights of individuals with other demands of social life. These are means of communication to indicate all institutions exist because of the family. This includes health centers like hospitals and clinics. They all form part of the bigger extended family. It should not be forgotten that in *Gaudium et Spes*, Paul VI (1965:52) levels, all family members as responsible for the transmission of the gospel message. He proclaimed profound human values, contrary to child neglect. Included is enabling people to perceive the

family as an “invitation to a community of life and love” and as “the domestic church”.

The challenge is to catechize the children – first by their parents, but also by ordained ministers and laity – through witness and prayer (Brennan 2007:1–14). General Directory for Catechesis (Family Formation S.A., 2017) underscores the church and family as places “in which the Gospel is transmitted and from which it extends”. Through the parents’ way of living and example, they influence their children to make responsible Christian choices. When the children become adults, the Christian family helps them to deepen their Christian faith. Family role-play is not only important for the rearing of the children, but it is also important for the parents’ religious education.

In general, the church cannot ignore its role of transforming adults thoroughly to understand and practice their parental role in the faith development of their children. It is, therefore, the church duty to help the parents to comprehend that the family is the focal point of love and (Christian) life. The parents must be taught to pursue holiness in the way in which they fulfill their daily duties in responsibly rearing of their children in the Christian faith. This will prepare the children for an encounter with God through the mediation of the family. The family must be regarded as the center to which the church brings the gospel, and from which the same gospel is proclaimed to the children (Rowland 2012:6).

Involved is the church responsibility in the parents’ lives because they need counseling about the risks of child neglect. Otherwise, they will not be able to take care of their children in a responsible way (cf. Society for intercultural pastoral care and Counselling, 2008). This involves embarking on community sensitization against child neglect. This can be done through pastoral agents who minister in local areas, sensitizing people on the rights of their children. The parents are informed and taught that they have the first responsibility to protect their children, while the immediate relatives take the second responsibility and the community the third.

School education is a basic human right. It engages educators in “the process of teaching or learning”. This includes “the theory and practice of teaching” and “training in a particular subject” (The South African Pocket Oxford

Dictionary, 2008:280). It leads learners from childhood into adult life. By doing so, the undeveloped potential in that person is discovered, drawn upon, and developed. In order to achieve this, the church members who happen to be educators can help the children to mature, to be able to judge, to become creative and critical, and not imitators of the *status quo*. Good education instills knowledge that enables children to be critical of behavior patterns in society (Paul VI's *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965). Bad education harms society because it does not train children to become critical and think in a creative way.

The role of the church is to intervene in support of the school and to provide family pastoral care. Informal education at home precedes education at school. It enables the children to listen, and ask intelligent questions (Lk 2:41–52). This included the opening of the door for children to remember words spoken, and take them seriously. Children who are “holding on to faith and a good conscience” are well educated (1 Tim 1:18–20). In other words, education enables children to know how they ought to behave in God’s family.

*4.2. Spotlight of Government and media*

The church should look at itself as the spotlight of government and media in the West Nile Region because of preaching the gospel to all nations. The church preaches that all people are made in the image of God. It helps children and all people to serve one another like Jesus. He was/is the perfect family pastoral caregiver. This must be practiced and preached by those who have the greatest influence in presenting the church, in the government, and in the schools. It is a positive way of empowering the children to be active in the socio-political arena. Even if these people are not (active) members of the church, they should cultivate a sense of ownership of the church, instead of taking their church as a business transaction. The church can challenge them until they are able to commit themselves to serving the church, each other, and the children in their community. Neglected children and their parents will then observe the example of leaders in service of the community. The church as family is the responsible community, a team that serves in the way that Jesus intended them to do: “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all” (Mk 9:35). They must be prepared to counter child-neglect with all their being (Cf. Mk 10:13–16), and help citizens to develop a sense of unity amongst themselves.

The school and government should not exploit each other or family members for their own (selfish) ambitions; for example, the government can make family members feel important, just to get their votes, but without supporting them in child rearing. Nolan (2009:145) calls this kind of attitude “egocentricity”, also referred to as a “selfish self” or a “self-centred” attitude. It is this “false self” attitude, which can be described as a false image of God. Egoistic or selfish attitude is morally wrong, and it should not be tolerated but condemned. It fails family child nurture, as well as the school and government, whose task is to promote the common good of all family members. This is where the school and government can unite, and be more practical in regard to the education of their children. Each institution can be open to criticism, ready for positive change, to learn from each other, and to work for the betterment of the children in the Region.

The church can also make sure that family members are prepared and guided by different institutions for the proper exercise of their civic rights and duties towards responsible child-rearing, especially in the area of the moral and human formation. As the government is there for the common good of all its people, the church can advance the government’s safeguard in the right of the children in receiving all their basic needs like a good education. This involves making parents vigilant about the quality of the teachers, and the standard of their teaching in relation to responsible child nurture, and being watchful over the health of the learners.

The church can foster co-operation between school and government to make sure that it’s task is not limited to school management. The church can ensure that schools and government work together in training leaders who are really committed to child nurture at all levels in society. The government can make it mandatory to re-enforce the work of schools by making sure that human education and human politics begin at home. The children can be exposed to politics as they grow up, being aided by their parents and other adults. This exposure can also be found in the church, in the unity between school and church, as an important relationship in the history of the Region. This will remind the inhabitants of family pastoral care during the era of Christian missionaries in the Region. During these times, both Catholic and Protestant existed side by side with schools and health centers. Later on,

most of these schools became government-owned, with only a few church-owned schools remaining, making their impact weak.

Vatican II Ad Gentes Divinitus (1965:1) portrays the church as a moral organ and “universal sacrament of salvation” of all people. Thus, the church can encourage both government and school to excel in practicing morality and co-operate as role models. This is possible through living witness and preaching gospel values to government officials and school administrators.

The church cannot be identified with any political grouping in society. Both are autonomous and independent of each other. Church emphasizes spiritual, moral and human values. Politicians stress the common good. But both are devoted to the personal vocation of mankind under different titles (Paul VI Gaudium et Spes (1965:74). The Church can still negotiate with the school, such as universities to have a chair for religious education. If possible establish a theological faculty to provide a learning environment which focuses on the morality of young people (Paul VI Gravissimum Educationis 1965: 10-11). The church can also encourage the media industry to promote training for media personnel and receivers in the Region. It is to develop skills for a positive change. For some people, this may still be a challenge: What mandate does the church have to influence the media?

The church tries to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ: “while he was on earth Christ revealed himself as the perfect communicator” (Vatican II Communio et Progressio 1971: 11); and to influence the media, believers in Christianity recall his command: “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). In agreement with Eilers F-J (2002: 222), such people can be reminded – “actually almost all history of the church can be considered as a history of a communicating church”.

This training will enable children and parents to determine their own destiny, to identify human social situations, to develop leadership skills, and implement self-discovery method. The training should embrace pastoral communication, create communion between God and his children. This should cover all aspects of pastoral work in building a better Christian community, in which men, women, and children all take part (Radio Pacis 2004:5).

Training includes proper use of appropriate media for the cultural, moral, and spiritual development of children. This training is required by universal religious institutions. Morally the media cannot fulfill a training role alone – they can work together with other institutions. For many media centers, this may be a great challenge because it is like controlling what the media want to communicate. But control should not be the case. Rather, it should be seen as another way of helping the media work for moral and humane communication. John Paul II (1995:6, 89–92) states that “educating children to be discriminating in their use of the media is a responsibility of parents, church, and school”. The media requires special qualities of mind and heart, together with a constant readiness to accept new ideas. That is to take into account the parents’ primary and inalienable duty to raise their children. Finally, it can be suggested that parents and children should work for moral and human education and training to reduce child neglect in the Region(Ariaka 2015). Education and training enlighten and make people responsible. The responsibility for the rearing of children should not be left to one person or institution.

**5. Conclusion**

It is clear that collaboration is required between different spheres of life (family, school, church, and other government functionaries, like the police force) in the Region, directly or indirectly. This collaboration requires the following:

- ☐ The church needs to turn her attention and loving gaze to the family and its problems – especially child neglect.
- ☐ The church should always bless the family and human love, following the example of its divine Founder.
- ☐ Today, more than ever, the church should point out that the physical and moral health of humanity depends on the healthy and full spiritual life of the family.
- ☐ The real extension of the kingdom of God should find its roots in the family.
- ☐ The church must always be ready to counteract dangers and difficulties which threaten to undermine the stability of the family in responsible child nurture, and its moral soundness.

The article emphasizes responsible parenthood which necessitates the authority of parents over their children. This authority pertains to their physical, economic, psychological, and social needs. Responsible parenthood implies a profound relationship to the objectives of morality.

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**Acknowledgements**

There is no sponsor behind this article who should have influenced me, the writer. Nevertheless, I would like to acknowledge the different authors and people who have allowed me to enrich this article with their scholarly works. Please remain blessed,  
Cyril Arima