
A Study of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and Its Implications for the Care of Widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and its implication for the care of widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri using feminist and exegetical methodologies. It explores the extent of contempt and disregard for widows in Igbo land, as well as the efforts of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri to address and alleviate widows' suffering. The study reveals that widows in the study area have experienced severe economic and social hardships as a result of obnoxious age-long widowhood practice prevalent in Igbo land. The study concluded that, while churches in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri have made significant headway in improving the lives of widows, there is still much work to be done in accordance with the instructions of Paul in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 to provide proper care for these women.

Introduction

The care of widows has a long history in the Christian community, with roots dating back to the early church. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul instructs Christians to care for widows, particularly those who are older and have no other means of support. This is seen in passages such as 1 Timothy 5:3-16, where Paul writes:

"Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is

dead even while she lives. Give these instructions to the people so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, they have denied the faith and are worse than an unbeliever."

Throughout the history of the church, widows have often been among the most vulnerable members of the community, and as such, they have been a focus of care and support. In the early centuries of Christianity, the church established widows' homes and provided financial assistance and other forms of support to widows in need.

Despite this long history of caring for widows, there is a need for contemporary churches to continue to follow this example and provide support and assistance to widows in their own communities. In many cases, widows still face significant challenges and may need help with practical matters such as housing, financial assistance, and emotional support.

This work investigates the status of widows in the Igbo society, the care for widows in the early church especially in the historical context of 1 Tim 5:3-16 and the activities of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri through the Dorcas Ministry and Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development.

Plight of Widows in the Igbo Society

Widowhood practice in Imo State offers a useful insight into the status of widows in of Igbo society, because Imo State is part of the Igbo society. In Owerri Imo State, a woman is declared a widow as soon as the husband dies. According to Wariboko & Mbonu (2021) among the Igbo, at the demise of a husband, the wife apparently loses 'dignity'. In most cases, she loses all the property of her husband; hence, she is dethroned, defaced and disinherited – following the adage "*ugwu nwanyi bu di*" meaning the pride of a woman is the husband. Onuogu (2007) observes that the treatment of widows varies from community to community according to their custom. However, in Igbo society, every widow is expected to observe the ritual cleansing and a period of mourning.

A Study of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and Its Implications for the Care of Widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri

There are factors that determine the level of treatment against widows in Igbo society. Amalu (2013) notes that the following considerations are put in place before any treatment is given to a widow in Igbo society: such as her relationship with her in-laws, socio-economic status of the widow, the economic status, educational attainment, and the widow's relationship with her late husband. Nwaoga, Uroko, Anuli & Okwusa (2021) describe widowhood as an awful period for any woman who loses her husband to death. Such woman undergoes a lot of stress and punishment. In Igbo society, it is difficult to believe that a man could die a natural death. The general assumption is that the wife was responsible for his death. Hence, the widow is treated worse than a murderer.

The widow passes some ceremonies in order to pacify the ancestors and the spirit of dead husband. According to Nwaoga, Uroko, Anuli, and Okwusa (2021), some of the rites widows go through include being forced to drink the water used to bathe the partner's corpse. In certain tribes, the widow is required to drink that dirty, contaminated water just exonerate herself from blame for the death of her husband. The widow is also required sit on a bare floor and to cry repeatedly during mourning period as a sign grief. Furthermore, the widow is not expected to go to market shave their pubic hair throughout the mourning period. They are kept in an unhygienic environment. The widow is not expected to look neat to avoid being attracted to men. According to Amalu (2013), the effects of widowhood traditions in Igbo society include the psychological trauma, depression, loneliness.

Moreover, according to Nwaoga, Uroko, Anuli & Okwusa (2021) widows are deprived of everything at the demise of their husband. They are left with nothing to continue life after the burial of their husband. In some areas, Women may not be allowed to participate in some occupations or activities that could help them advance their economic status. For instance, preventing an active widow from engaging in certain economic activities will restrict her ability to generate revenue and render her permanently reliant on others for existence. Unabuiké (2009) states that certain widow's turn to begging, prostitution, and other antisocial behaviours as a way to get out of the predicament and provide for their families.

The widow is frequently dispossessed of her husband's estate by the husband's family members. These activities cause a lot of trauma to the widows involved. These practices against widows result in stress, depression economic hardship, pain, sickness, fear and even death.

The Care for Widows in the Early Church

Widows are considered the most vulnerable because of some social and economic challenges they pass through. Stedman (2021) observed when wife lost her husband, there was hardly anything she could do to support her. According to Guzik (2018), in the early church, there was no social assistance system from the government. He describes those who are really widows in the early church days as the elderly widows, who were usually without support from husbands' relations or grown children, and there was little or nothing support themselves. Such people belonged to the vulnerable class. Brown (2014) notes that the early church had a ministry of supporting widows but as the church grew, there was complaint from Grecian Jewish widows that they were overlooked while the Hebraic Jewish widows were favoured. The Apostles appointed seven deacons to handle the ministry to the needy and the problem was resolved (Acts. 6:1-7).

In Acts 6:1, the church's funds and members' freewill donations were used to care for widows. Such a charitable act toward the poor undoubtedly increased the number of widows from non-Hebrew sociocultural groups who converted to Christianity. As a result, the Church realized how crucial it was to take care of these widows. According to Bacchiocchi (2000), the grumbling of the Hellenists about the alleged neglect of their widows attracted the apostles' attention (Acts 6:1-3). Seven men of excellent standing and the fullness of the Spirit were appointed as a result of the issue to work in the church's welfare ministry.

A woman by the names of Tabitha or Dorcas who made a good impact on the wellbeing of the destitute widows is also mentioned in the book of Acts (Acts 9:36-39). For her charitable and kind deeds, Dorcas was well known. When she died, Peter was called upon by the widows, who presented him with clothing that Dorcas had made for them. According to Bacchiocchi (2000), the substantial percentage of widows who accompanied her funeral shows that she was likely one of the local church's widows herself.

A Study of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and Its Implications for the Care of Widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri

True religion is described in James 1:27 as "... visiting the orphaned and widows in their distress, and keeping oneself unspotted from the world." Such a focus on practical religion and practical virtue gave the early Christian Church strength and enormous impact.

The Apostolic Church set an example for how to respond to different calls to ministry in a comprehensive way and manage church growth using time-tested techniques.

Nwaomah (2019) observed that the Church did not only focus on spiritual matters but realized the closeness of physical, social and spiritual needs of its members. This kind of teaching is the core of the Gospel Commission. The first letter of Paul to Timothy explains that unbelievers are those who refuse to care for their own widows, not even those living with them in their own households (1 Timothy 5:8).

Exegesis of 1 Tim 5:3-5

Text of 1 Timothy 5:3-5

³Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.

⁴But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. ⁵The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.

Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding how believers should conduct themselves in public and the characteristics required of Christian leaders provide the framework for 1 Timothy 5:3–16.

According to Brown (2014), There are four types of widows mentioned in the text:

(i) The "widows indeed" (5:3-5, 9-10), who are "genuinely in need," (ii) Widows with children and grandparents (5:4, 16), (iii) Youthful widows, who really should remarry (5:11–15), and (iv) Widows who live for themselves rather than for the Lord (5:6). Paul continued by defining the "genuine widow" *ontoscherai* who belonged on the church's roster of charitable recipients (1Tim 5:3, 5, 9, 16).

In light of the financial difficulties the church was experiencing, Towner (2006) noted that the word *ontos*, denotes true, actual, or genuine, caused Paul to modify the definition of *cherosin*. The church's finances were so thin that it was impossible to provide for those who genuinely needed and merited financial assistance. Paul explicitly exhorts them to take care of a widow who has children or grandchildren. The parents' contributions to the welfare of their children and grandchildren are immeasurable. Paul praised the fact that such a conduct is "acceptable" or "pleasant" in God's eyes (1Tim 5: 4).

According to 1 Timothy 5:4, widowed mothers or grandmothers should be cared for by their children and grandchildren.. Paul commended that such a practice is “acceptable” or pleasing in the sight of God (1Tim 5: 4). Young widows needed to remarry and care for their family, thus they had to be taken off the list because they cannot really control themselves (1Tim 5:11-15). According to Adeyemo (2011), elder widows made a promise to the Lord and the church that they would remain single in order to devote the remainder of their life to serving the Lord. A younger widow who made such a commitment but later decided she wanted to get married again would break her word and receive the wrath of the church. Nwaomah (2019) asserts that Paul does not disparage a younger widow's natural wish to remarry.

The act of violating a promise is wrong. Paul made it clear that it was improper for younger widows to be on the enrollment list while leading a sedentary lifestyle (1Tim 5:13). According to Mounce (2000) cited in Nwaomah (2019), Paul's main goal in this text was to aid Timothy in making the distinction between widows the church should support and those they should not support. The evidence in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 shows both the issues and the actions taken to care for widows. Paul is concerned that the Ephesian church would care for the widows who are in actual need.

Overview of Care of Widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri

The Anglican Diocese of Owerri has shown concern in the plight of the widows in the Diocese, through the Bishop's foundation for mission and development, Dorcas ministry, Parishes and individuals. Apart from the provision of materials needs for their livelihood, the Diocese has a system of taking care of their physiological challenges. Nwankiti (interview: 15/05/22) in an interview reported that at the instance of any death of a husband, the members of the various women ministries of the Church led by the enrolling member of the parish are encouraged to visit the bereaved member throughout the delicate period of the mourning. The women also

A Study of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and Its Implications for the Care of Widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri

organize to keep her company in the night and give her words of encouragement. Usually two women are assigned per night; the delegates conduct night and morning devotion for the family of the bereaved member. The devotion features hymn singing, bible discussion and prayer session. With this development, they provide support to the widow also defense against the perpetrators of the wicked acts.

On the day of burial, a barricade is provided where the widow stays during the burial to restrict movement and avoid over crowdedness around the widow. The women's ministries of the parish appointed two or more widows especially the older widows to stay with the bereaved widow inside the barricade to give her the courage. This is because the widows have had such experience in the time past and are in the better position to encourage the bereaved widow and also help refute any ungodly demand from the tradition. However, seeing that those around her are widows who have passed through the same experience will give her encouragement.

Nneka Uzowuru (interview: 12/09/22), states that after the burial ceremony, the selected women from the parish will accompany the widow to the ba theoom. While she would be inside taking her bath they will be outside singing different hymns and songs of encouragement, they may shave her if she so desires and another set of women will be appointed to keep her company in the night for about three days before she is allowed to begin to stay on her own.

Recently, the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri led the Bishop; Rt Rev.Chukwuma Oparah introduced condolence offering to assist the bereaved family offsetting the bill of some funeral expenses. Every parish and different ministries have in the Anglican Diocese have welfare package presented to the bereaved members.

In the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri, it was resolved that a widow is permitted by the Church to mourn her late husband for not more than six months. With this the widow will no longer be restricted by culture from pursuing economic activity outside their homes just because they are mourning. The Diocese promised to stand to defend any widow that may be persecuted on account of that. It was also announced that wearing of mourning cloth and shaving of hairs are no longer compulsory but by choice.

Dorcas Ministry in Anglican Diocese of Owerri

Dorcas Ministry is a ministry established by the Rt. Rev. Cyril Okorochoa, the then Anglican Bishop of Owerri on 28th August, 2002 under the aegis of the Diocesan Women's Ministries dedicated

to promote the welfare of widows and children. The following were the terms of reference for the ministry, to

- i. provide help to the widows and orphans financially, materially and morally.
 - ii. give widows a sense of belonging Visit and reassure them that their past services to the Lord and humanity is highly appreciated and has not been forgotten.
 - iii. encourage them to continue serving the Lord and humanity as long as they live.
 - iv. intervene when the widows are theeatened or maltreated by the community.
- Okorochoa (2017)

The team had seven (7) women as members at the time of inauguration and funding for this ministry is raised through individuals, organizations, parishes, stations, Archdeaconries and more. Onyekwebibe & Mbagwu (2019) report that they normally take some money from the women's office to augment the money realized at the visited church. This was shared to the widows, especially the most indigent widows.

Activities of Dorcas Ministry in the Diocese

The main activity of the Dorcas Ministry as noted by Oparah (2018) is that it takes care of the indigent and widows in the Diocese. The Dorcas ministry sees to the welfare of widows and orphans within the Diocese. Members of the team visit two churches every month to interact with the widows in the churches visited. Anyanwu & Ayozie (2019) reported each church visited, the Dorcas Ministry distributes bags of rice, salt and fairly used materials and reasonable amounts

of money especially most indigent ones. The visitation provides forum to counsel and pray for the widows. Amaechi & Onyekwelibe, (2009) note that, the Dorcas Ministry organizes annual conferences for all the widows in the Diocese. The conference features gospel message and prayers by guest preachers, free Medicare with laboratory services sponsored by the Women's Ministries of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri, distribution of interest free loan, welfare packages such as food items, clothes, footwear, bags and toiletries and money to the widows.

The Activities of Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development to Widows in the Diocese

According to Okorochoa (2000) the Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development is a vision that includes everyone in the process of mission. The fund is used at the discretion of the Bishop under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with genuine sense of accountability to God and the people to meet the demands of the vision that God put before the Diocese in relation to mission and development. This mission of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri includes solidarity with members who are passing through different levels of suffering and the communities that host the churches.

The foundation was first inaugurated on Sunday 29th October 2000. The aim of foundation is help in the alleviation of the problem of the people in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri especially widows, orphans and the less privileged. The areas of operation of this foundation include Medicare, provision of water supply to the communities of the churches in the Diocese, housing scheme, scholarship and empowerment. Okorochoa (2000)

It is also worthy of mention that the Diocese built houses for some widows to enable them have a home of their own especially in case their late husbands did not build any house while alive. Ngoka (2009) reported that the Bishop through the Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development (BFMD), the Diocese built houses for widows at the following places:

- i) Umuahii Mbieri Parish in Mbaitoli Local Government Area.
- ii) Orogwe in Owerri West Local Government Area.
- iii) Umuhu Atta Ikeduru Local Government Area.
- iv) Ugurike, Ikeduru Local Government Area.
- v) Ogwa in Mbaitoli Local Government Area.

through the Bishop's foundation for mission and development, the Diocese completed house for the widows at the following places

- i) Alaenyi Ogwa in Mbaitoli Local Government Area
- ii) Owerri Municipal Council.

Care of Widows in Churches

The widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri received care and welfare packages from different individuals from different churches in the Diocese. It has become statutory in my churches that during Christmas season, Easter period, Home and Abroad meeting and Mothering Sunday gifts, harvest thanksgiving season, welfare packages organized for the widows at various levels (Diocese, Archdeaconry, Parish and Station). The packages distributed to the widows include money, bags of rice, wrappers, cartons of tomatoes, some tubers of yam, clothes.

Anyanwu (2020) reported that apart from the contribution of various churches, well-to-do members and groups in the church contribute to the welfare packages to the widows. An instance, she gave is Sir Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu and Knights Saint Christopher that make annual donation of five hundred thousand naira (500,000) and forty thousand naira (40,000) respectively to the widows through the Dorcas ministry. The church and individual give scholarship to children of widow in different congregations.

Evaluation of care for widows in Anglican Diocese of Owerri

In the analyzes of data collected, the findings show that the Anglican Diocese of Owerri through the Dorcas Ministry and Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development has catered for the needy widows in the Diocese. The Diocese builds houses for with modern facilities for some indigent widows and aids some widows with the house rent. More so, the Dorcas Ministry disburses reasonable amount of money as upkeep with bags of rice, beans, salt, fairly used clothes, new wrappers, packets of noodles, to the needy widows in the Diocese. Annually, the Women's Ministries through Dorcas Ministry disburses interest free loan to widows to enable them start or beef up their businesses. In the every parish, there are provisions by the parish to cater for the widows periodically. Many of the widows' children are on scholarship by the church and well-to-do parishioners. In order to encourage widows, the Diocese organizes annual retreat widows featuring bible discussion, empowerment programmes, free medical treatment with laboratory services and prayer sessions.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that the counsel of Paul to Timothy in 1 Tim 5:3-16 has great relevance for the church in Imo State. The church has a responsibility to the needy especially the widows. The paper also acknowledged the role of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri through the Dorcas ministry and the Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development in the provision of care to the widows and the orphans within the jurisdiction of the Diocese. The paper argues that the church, specifically the Anglican Diocese of Owerri in Imo State, Nigeria, has a responsibility to care for and support widows and orphans within its jurisdiction. The ministry to widows and orphans should be a priority for every church in Nigeria.

Recommendations

In view of the findings above, the following recommendations were made

- The church should identify and assist widows who are in dire need, without children to support them, and who are poor and unable to help themselves
- The church should work to provide employment and start-up business opportunities for marginalized and mistreated widows
- The church should address the social and psychological effects of widowhood practices and fight for their eradication
- The church should also educate the relatives of the widows on the importance of supporting their kin
- The church should educate members on the importance of caring for widows and de-emphasize customs and traditions that dehumanize them
- The church should encourage couples to make provisions for their families by creating a "Living will" to provide for surviving spouses and children at the end of life.

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A Study of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and Its Implications for the Care of Widows in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri

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