
STRESS AMONG 21st CENTURY NIGERIAN CHURCH LEADERS: CAUSES AND MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

The 21st century church has not only witnessed the emergence of great church leaders who are actively involved in the proclamation of the word of God for the salvation of humanity but also the sudden demise of most of such church leaders to eternity as a result of sickness and other natural occurrences. The abrupt death of most church leaders has aroused doubts among many critics on the sovereignty of God on his servants which has also necessitated question such as why should people involved in carrying out divine mandate die suddenly? Against this backdrop, this paper centres on stress among 21st century church leaders: causes and management. The paper employs a phenomenological method and reveals the factors that impacted church leaders stress status to include long working hours, lack of finance, inadequate rest, relaxation and exercise, lack of control of work schedule and poor eating habits resulting in frustration, anxiety and burnout. The paper maintains that while stress among church leaders is inevitable due to their indispensable role in the family, church and society, the adverse result can be evaded if efficient coping mechanisms such as healthy support system, good attitude, healthy eating, rest and relaxation is initiated and maintained. The paper recommends that church leaders should be encouraged to have annual vacations with their family with mandatory change of environment in order to invigorate and rejuvenate. Annual retreats when organized should not be packed just with spiritual content only but be made to minister to the total man. Churches should prioritize clergy mental health by providing adequate support in order to prevent a burnout and mass resignation.

Key Words: Anxiety and Burnout, Coping Mechanism, Church leaders, Mental Health, Stress,

Introduction

In recent times, the Nigerian socio-religious spheres have been agog by the rate of death recorded especially among Church leaders of high repute. For instance, Archbishop Caleb Maduoma of the Anglican Diocese of Ideato died in May, 2021 few months after his retirement from active service in the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion while pastor Dave



Adeboye, son of Pastor E.A Adeboye General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God died in May, 2021. Similarly, Rev. Stephen O. Akinola the General superintendent of Redemption Ministries Worldwide based in Port Harcourt and Prophet Temitope Balogun Joshua the pioneer leader and founder of The Synagogue Church of All Nations located in Lagos all died in June, 2021 respectively. While the causes of their deaths at a young age in their lifespan is yet to be confirmed, some authorities claim that it is as a result of stress. Consequently, stress has been identified as one of the problems of life. Sometimes the source or sources of the stress is identifiable at other times they are not; sometimes the claim is rational at other times it is not. Currentworkssubmits that stress is a common phenomenon that every individual faces in their daily activities however when it becomes overwhelming the effect could be disastrous. Ineffective coping mechanisms harm the individual such that symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, depression, anxiety, and irritability manifest. Other identified symptoms include somatic complains such as weight loss, lack of appetite, gastro-intestinal disturbances, chronic tiredness which is not repaired by sleep but is temporarily alleviated by medications, depression and nagging boredom often result leading to ineffectiveness, disillusion and frustration (J.A. Stanford 6). While most Nigerian church leaders are not immune to these problems it is expected that they would have an effective coping mechanism which they could use and also teach their congregations who see them as their leaders and spiritual fathers. In view of the disastrous effect of a church leader breaking down while undertaking ministerial assignments, this paper seeks to investigate the causes of stress among Nigerian church leaders in the 21st century which has led to many deaths and also proffering ways that stress could be managed, this is with the intention to bringing to the front burner the need for Nigerian church leaders' psychological health to be taken seriously and to prevent excessive break down as observed in socio-religious space even in the social media.

What is Stress

The word stress is a word derived from the Latin *Stringere* meaning 'to draw tight' (Cooper and Eaker 9). This definition is helpful in understanding the effect of stress on an individual. Most often stressed /distressed people appear 'uptight', wound up and too overstretched to function effectively. Merriam Webster Dictionary describes stress as “a physical, chemical or emotional factor that causes mental or physical tension and may often be a factor in disease causation” (1235). Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman states that stress results from an imbalance between demands and resources(1). Regardless of the different definitions of stress, there is a need for early diagnosis in order to institute an effective coping mechanism so as to mitigate its effect in order to enjoy optimum health. The quality of life of an individual can be correlated to his life expectancy so it is important that any perceived threat to its efficiency should be detected early. Hans Selwyn defined stress as the 'wear and tear of the body' or 'the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made on it. In his framework to explain the physiological response to stress, he viewed stress as any positive or negative occurrences or emotions requiring a response. He remarks that the interactions with the environment and others also inevitably produces stress, however the type of response elicited depends on the individual's perception of the stressor (39).

Symptoms of Stress

Lowdermilk Deitra, Perry Shannom et al in their work *Maternity Nursing* grouped symptoms of stress into two namely: physical and psychological symptoms. The physical symptoms of stress include: headache, dizziness, muscle tension, backache, skin rashes, sweaty palms, indigestion, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, loss of appetite, pounding heart, non-radiating chest pain, frequent colds and psychological symptoms includes: anxiety, irritability eating disorder, insomnia and substance abuse (51).

Types of Stress

There are two major types of stress namely eustress and distress. Eustress is the positive form of stress. The stressor or root cause of eustress is pleasant but paradoxically it may also elicit some pain. Selwyn used the term eustress to describe beneficial stress and coined the word from a *Greek* prefix eu- meaning 'good' and stress. Examples of eustress could be physical (exercise) and psychological (getting married) or starting a new venture. In spite of the anxiety and pain the benefit pushes the individual to still want to go on with it. Benefits of Eustress include the drive or motivation to improve self or achieve unimaginable goals. It is said to be the key to resilience which helps to build emotional health. Eustress often indicates a challenge and can be differentiated from distress which is unpleasant. On the other hand, distress is the long term and persistent pressure an individual under goes. It is defined by its ability to demobilize a person, it seeks for immediate relief without which illness and maladaptive behaviour occurs. Proper evaluation and effective coping mechanism must be instituted to avoid exhaustion and burn out. Examples of stressful conditions include, toxic work environment, relational difficulties with superiors, major changes in work hours or conditions, major changes in church activities, major changes in eating hours, death of a spouse, among others.

Classification of Stress

Stress could be classified into physical and visible stresses which is associated with lack of sleep, severe pains, physical injury, aging problems and invisible internal stresses. This classification is based on the cause of the stress, example of physical stress includes acute stress, environmental stress, post-traumatic stress and chronic stress. Acute stress is said to be short term. It can either be positive or negative. It is found in every day activity and calls for immediate and effective intervention. For example, the presence of a snake in a house requires immediate solution. As a result, the 'fight or flight' instinct is activated and the danger is removed. Environmental stress could be physical, from noisy environment or relational between people. Most often some environment constitutes a form of stress. This can be physical environment such as a noisy industrial environment or a toxic relational situation in which a subordinate does not seem to know how to confront his superior over an issue. The person endures the condition until the source of stress is terminated. Unfortunately, the incident must have caused some damages which a future event can easily trigger. Post-traumatic stress is based on an event or incident that leaves the individual feeling depleted and unable to cope with present happenings. These incidences include sexual abuse, rape, accidents, kidnapping, fire, flood or other natural disasters. Victims often need patient and genuine show of affection and support in order to return to positive self-care. Chemical stress results from elements which when ingested cause imbalance in the body system. Such chemicals include alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, food additives etc. The human body has a

threshold which when exceeded creates an imbalance with sometimes visible signs such as rashes, nausea and vomiting. Intervention comes from proper evaluation and identification of the stressor.

Invisible Internal Stressor

This is the second type of stress and it is often internal and invisible. For instance, childhood abuses often leave unseen marks especially if undetected. Victims are often left fearful and angry hence the dictum abused children often become abusive adults. The invisible nature of the hurt creates a foot hold and affects the individual's perception of other life experience. Joshua Komolafe lists some experiences that are capable of building up invisible internal stressors. These include, parental separation and family break up, persistent parental neglect or absence, incessant abuse or bullying from guardians as a result of parental poverty, early parenthood, problems at school or place of work, isolation or loneliness as a child or teenager taking care of younger sibling as while yet underage, bereavement of especially both parents at an early age (12).

Factors that Contributes to Church Leaders Stress Status

There are several factors which contributes to most Nigerian church leaders stress status. This includes but not limited to their lifestyle, occupation and irregular eating habits. Most church leaders in Nigeria work almost round the clock to see that their visions and goals in the propagation of the gospel, investments pursuit and gigantic building projects are realized within their stipulated time frame thus leaving them with little or no time for rest, exercises, proper dieting or annual leave. It is important to note that the key mantras for a healthy stress free life is, eat well, exercise well, sleep well and work hard. These mantras ensure that the physical self is properly cared for however, when they are neglected stress is inevitable. Lifestyle make a huge difference in stress management. A person's attitude to life, work etc has the propensity to predict his output and progress in life. It therefore follows that one of the predictors of stress is the church leader's attitude to life and work. Some of the components of negative attitude include anxiety, depression, and feeling of isolation among others. Similarly, financial worries among the church leaders particularly to meet up with the present demands and realities of events constitute another source of stress to them. Due to the unhealthy competitions among 21st century church leader in the acquisition of jets, flight of cars and building of large cathedrals, some church leaders inadvertently obtain loans in the bank with huge interest rate, thus creating a problematic situation for themselves and congregation in relation to the repayment of the loans.

Ways to Mitigate Stress among Church Leaders

In view of the fact that 21st century church leaders are often faced with a continuous service, such as holy day celebrations, sick people to visit in the hospitals and their individual homes, sermons to write and other pastoral and sacramental duties which inevitably leads to stress which Gary Collins has identified as religious stress, thus, causing breakdown of the church leaders, how can the church leaders manage stress in a stressful environment is the focus of this section.

Delegation of Duty

Alan G. Palmer opines that church leaders in the ordained ministry or those considering the call to ordination should consider prudently the nature of their calling. This according to him

helps the church leader to determine what exactly is his calling so that he can conveniently and willingly delegate to others within the church some duties he is not particularly gifted in. Moreover, church leaders need to understand themselves more fully this means the personality type, their gifts strengths and weakness (170). Stanford on the other hand attributed church leaders stress to the clergy continuous onslaught of services, holy day celebrations, sick people visitations and sermons to write which expectedly, handling all this week after week can be monotonous and overwhelming, especially when the church leader has to deal with the same difficult people year after year. Delegation is not a divestment of power nor authority so the church leaders and others should not be afraid of using it. Even church members whose areas of gifting have been identified can have work delegated to them under supervision as a means of enhancing productivity since every man shall work according to his ability.

Dialogue

Communication has been adjudged as one of the most important skills and gifts of the human species, especially the ability to verbalize thoughts and actions and receive feedback is so important that it distinguishes one organized society from another. A lack of communication can therefore without doubt lead to a much stressed environment. Dialogue between two or more people on a vexing issue has been used to relieve tension, deescalate volatile confrontation and consequently relieve stress. Importantly, the inability of a church leader not acknowledging the fundamental principle of dialogue in ministry, that is relying and dialoguing with one another can lead to depression and frustration.

Exercise/relaxation

Endorphins and serotonin are hormones released by the brain during exercises, they make the body relax. Even negative effect of stress can be reversed as physical or creative exercises though stressful produce pleasant emotional states, the body perceives this as an enjoyable experience however exercises must be tailored to meet each person's unique physiological and emotional make up. Having been accepted as an age long true that exercises and relaxation play a role in mitigating stress and its attendant disorders, Peter D' Adamo and Whitney Catherine patented a revolutionary work which shows that different blood types need different forms of physical activities and exercises to cope with stress. The goal of exercise for all blood types is to build up the immune system and thus effectively manage any type of stress.

Sleep

This is one of the cheapest and most effective methods of coping with stress. Sleep is one of God's greatest gifts to man which is freely available to all living things equally. This serves as a time to rest and rejuvenate. Human Growth hormone is released when the body is at sleep this ensures that new body cells are created to replace old the old dying or dead ones. Through the body's rest and sleep, weak cells have the opportunity to receive nourishment uncompetitively, they become strengthened and enjoy adequate and natural healing. The body's natural circadian regulates its activities. All human beings should work with the natural body circadian and just sleep at night. Sleeping during the day does not compensate for the loss of sleep at night. As one gets busier it becomes necessary to plan sleeping. Various literatures

show that physiological processes slow down around 10pm which is the recommended time to go to bed and wake up about 5am. The waking hours tend to be longer later in senior years so it is necessary to build a routine in earlier years in order to have a healthy sleep/ wake pattern in later years. Sleep deprivation results in stress with such manifestations as irritability, fretting, outburst of anger and lowered immune system. Cortisone hormone is released to enable the body cope with the stress however persistence and overwhelming stress will result in excess production of the hormone which is dangerous and counterproductive leading to diabetes, heart attack, exhaustion and ultimately death. The use of medication for sleep is not advisable except for temporary medical reasons and under a doctor's supervision. Working hard during the day naturally helps the body to crave for rest and sleep at the end. Starting the day with physical exercises such as brisk walking keeps the body fit, also ending it with eating a light supper, reading relaxing books, listening to music helps to prepare one for sleep. A well ventilated and dark room with comfortable beds in a noiseless environment ensures a restful therapeutic sleep which is guaranteed to help cope with stress.

Biblical response to stress

Stress as has been mentioned is a common phenomenon that every individual faces in their daily activities. It can therefore be understood that most biblical characters would have had their fair share of stress. It can also be expected that the bible as the Judeo-Christian life manual would have views and teachings on prevention and management of stress. Evidence of prophets under stress include Elijah who was said to have gone a day's journey after his encounter with Jezebel, sat down under a broom tree then prayed that he would die saying "... It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4b NRSV). While it is undebatable that Moses (Exodus 17), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26), David (1 Samuel 24), and the early Christians (Acts 4:19ff) all went through stress and anxiety, it is worthy of note that contemporary Christians are not immune to stress. Stress can resonate from anywhere and at any time. This implies that work place, family, school and even relationships can all be sources of anxiety and stress. While people turn to medications and therapy to help ease their fears and stresses, Christians in addition to the aforementioned are expected to pray to God and read the bible in addition to obtaining professional help to ease their anxieties. It is a fact that behind every stressful manifestation is anxiety and fear. The 21st century church leaders therefore need God's assurances to sustain them in those low moments in order not to slip into depression. The promises of God contained in the bible should form the bedrock of their stability to mitigate stress.

Recommendations

Church leaders should be encouraged to take annual vacations and be assisted to leave their stations and have a change of environment for proper relaxation and rejuvenation.

Annual retreats for church leaders when organized should not be packed with spiritual contents only but be made to minister to the total man. Sporting events such as swimming, table tennis, football and other recreational activities should be part of the programme of events.

Church leaders should be encouraged to actually identify their specific areas of callings and specialize on them and also be ready to seek help or delegate to others what they cannot do

without being made to feel ashamed or inadequate. It is important to note that working in an area of little competence without training is an invitation to failure which leads to stress. Churches should make policies that will affect the health care of the church leaders and also provide effective and efficient health care delivery to them. On the other hand, church leaders should seek and utilize available health facilities as soon as they perceive the need, in order to avoid undue stress, burn out and thereby perpetually remain in optimum health.

Conclusion

This paper examined the concept of stress among 21st century Nigerian church leaders their causes and management. The choice of this title is as a result of the increasing rate of death recorded among Nigerian church leaders in recent times. The paper remarks that stress is an unusual alarm system that informs the body of an external or internal threat to its normal homeostasis. It is therefore not pathologically destructive except when it is not differentiated and properly managed. Moreover, the paper reveals that the destructive effect of stress depends on the Nigerian church leader's attitude to life among others. Stress could be managed and life enjoyed amidst stressful environments.

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