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Charismatics and People with Special Needs: A review of Some Hospitable Gestures in Kenya's Ecclesiology

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Abstract

This research article highlights the suitability of charismatic churches to individuals with special needs by focusing on their inclusivity and accessibility within Kakamega, in Western Kenya. Utilizing a descriptive survey research design, which suited the qualitative nature of the initial study that culminated into this research article, it was conducted across 12 sub-counties in Kakamega County. A sample of 78 respondents was selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The findings revealed that charismatic churches in Kakamega County serve as crucial community hubs, with physical accessibility playing a key role in enhancing inclusivity and enabling individuals of all abilities to participate fully in church activities. It concludes that fostering a culture of acceptance and support is vital for empowering individuals with disabilities, and in ensuring they feel valued and integrated into all aspects of church life. In this treatise, we view the definition of "special needs" as encircling the emotional, intellectual, sensory impairments, and physical challenges.

Key words: Accessibility, Charismatic Churches, Inclusivity and Special Needs

Introduction

The suitability of charismatic churches in Kakamega County towards people living with disabilities is a critical dimension in assessing the inclusivity and accessibility of religious communities in the region. Kakamega County, a vibrant and culturally rich area of Kenya, offers a unique landscape for examining how churches accommodate individuals with disabilities (Mwembi, 2021). The research article explores the extent to which charismatic churches in the county provide an empowering and supportive environment for people living with disabilities, highlighting the importance of inclusivity in religious settings (Omwaka, 2020). Given the prominence of dynamic worship, spiritual growth, and community engagement within charismatic churches, it is essential to assess how well these institutions implement their principles of love, acceptance, and fellowship toward individuals with disabilities (Juma, 2019). Evaluating their suitability involves examining their commitment to dismantling both physical and

attitudinal barriers that often prevent full participation by individuals with disabilities (Shikoli, 2022). Furthermore, the study investigates whether these churches promote a culture of belonging, participation, and empowerment, essential for fostering an inclusive environment (Ingyesi, 2021). Understanding how well charismatic churches in Kakamega County accommodate individuals with disabilities is vital for promoting a more inclusive and accessible faith community.

Methodology

The research article employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive survey design to explore the inclusivity of charismatic churches in Kakamega County. This research was carried out across the 12 sub-counties of Kakamega, including Butere, Mumias, Matungu, Likuyani, Mumias East, Khwisero, Shinyalu, Lurambi, Ikolomani, Lugari, Malava, and Navakholo (Ochieng, 2021). Kakamega County, known for its diverse array of churches, hosts a significant number of charismatic congregations (Odhiambo, 2019). The sample consisted of 78 participants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure saturation. Among these, 20 respondents had special needs, and 50 did not (Naboth, 2022). The sample included 12 key informants: 3 individuals with disabilities and 9 without (Wambua, 2020). The content analysis method was used to interpret the qualitative data collected from interviews. Content analysis, a research tool used to examine the presence of specific words, themes, or concepts within qualitative data such as text, was selected for this study (Kothari, 2004). This method allowed for a detailed examination of the inclusivity practices within the charismatic churches and provided insights into the experiences and perceptions of the respondents.

Discussion of Findings

This research article underscores the suitability of charismatic churches for individuals with special needs by examining key subthemes: physical accessibility, attitudinal inclusivity, supportive leadership, education and awareness, empowerment and involvement, and collaboration with disability organizations. Each aspect contributes significantly to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment in Kakamega County. The findings are discussed as follows:

Physical Accessibility

The physical environment of charismatic churches in Kakamega County plays a crucial role in accommodating individuals with disabilities. Key aspects such as wheelchair ramps, accessible restrooms, and seating arrangements designed for mobility aids are essential for ensuring inclusivity (Wilson Olale, O.I, 2023). This level of accessibility not only reflects the church's commitment to inclusivity and equal participation but also creates a welcoming environment for all individuals, regardless of their abilities (Smith, 2018). Research shows that physical accessibility is a key factor in fostering the full participation of individuals with disabilities in various communal activities, including church services (Brown & Johnson, 2017).

By removing architectural barriers such as steps, narrow doorways, and uneven surfaces, charismatic churches demonstrate their dedication to creating spaces where individuals with mobility impairments can move freely and comfortably (Olivia Kanaga, O.I, 2023). The provision of wheelchair ramps, accessible parking, and elevators empowers individuals with disabilities to navigate the church independently, thereby ensuring their dignity and autonomy (Ngugi, 2016). Furthermore, accessible restrooms, equipped with proper grab bars and ample space, ensure comfort for all congregants (Josephat Sunguti, O.I, 2023). These considerations benefit not only individuals with disabilities but also their families and caregivers, allowing for greater participation in church activities (Olson, 2019).

Physical accessibility also extends to creating sensory-friendly environments for individuals with sensory processing challenges. Adjustments such as dimmed lighting and quiet spaces can significantly enhance the worship experience for these individuals (Hellen Otieno, O.I, 2023). By creating such spaces, churches signal their commitment to addressing the varied needs of their congregation and promoting diversity (Peters, 2015).

Moreover, churches that prioritize physical accessibility fulfill their legal and moral obligations under equality and non-discrimination laws. The legal requirements for accessibility not only align with ethical principles but also encourage greater inclusivity within faith communities (Jones & Smith, 2020). As churches in Kakamega

County continue to serve as community hubs, physical accessibility strengthens their role by promoting inclusivity and allowing individuals of all abilities to engage fully in the faith community (Sunguti, O.I, 2023).

Attitudinal Inclusivity

The attitudes of congregants and church leadership significantly influence the experiences of individuals with disabilities in charismatic churches. Attitudinal inclusivity, which extends beyond physical accessibility, is a critical factor in fostering an environment where people with disabilities are recognized as valued and contributing members of the community (Fridah Akaliche, O.I, 2023). Research supports the notion that congregational attitudes shape the overall experience for individuals with disabilities, affecting their sense of belonging and empowerment (Brooks, 2016). This inclusivity involves not only acceptance but also active support and respect for the inherent worth and contributions of individuals with disabilities (Griffin & Bowers, 2017).

A welcoming attitude from both congregants and leaders promotes a culture where people with disabilities are encouraged to participate fully in all aspects of church life, from worship to social activities (Jackline Auma, O.I, 2023). This inclusivity is linked to the broader concept of social empowerment, as positive attitudes foster leadership opportunities and facilitate meaningful participation in church events (Davis & Stevenson, 2018). Attitudinal inclusivity helps dismantle stereotypes and promotes a more accurate understanding of disabilities, encouraging a shift in congregational perspectives (Emmanuel Inguyesi, O.I, 2023).

Churches that embody attitudinal inclusivity also cultivate supportive networks within the congregation. These networks provide a safe space where individuals with disabilities feel comfortable seeking assistance and forming meaningful relationships (Consepter Rhoda, O.I, 2023). Inclusive attitudes create a ripple effect, as leadership that embraces inclusivity can inspire the entire congregation to follow suit, promoting a culture of acceptance and understanding (Barasa & Ouma, 2023). In turn, this inclusive culture leads to spiritual growth for all members, fostering unity, shared values, and deeper communal bonds (Ominde Ouma, O.I, 2023).

Moreover, churches that prioritize attitudinal inclusivity often drive efforts to educate congregants about disabilities, promoting greater empathy and sensitivity (Brooks & Smith, 2015). This educational component not only benefits the church but also extends to the wider community, encouraging advocacy for more inclusive practices beyond the religious setting (Griffin, 2018). Charismatic churches in Kakamega County, by emphasizing attitudinal inclusivity, serve as positive examples for other religious institutions and community organizations, demonstrating the power of a supportive and accepting environment (Barasa Alfred, O.I, 2023).

Supportive Leadership

The role of leadership in charismatic churches is central to shaping their suitability for individuals with disabilities. Supportive leadership demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and directly influences the church's overall culture of acceptance and respect. Research has shown that church leadership, through their attitudes, actions, and policies, sets the tone for congregational behavior, thereby fostering an inclusive atmosphere (Wilson Amwoma, O.I, 2023). When leadership actively engages with individuals with disabilities and works to meet their needs, they contribute to creating a welcoming environment where everyone can fully participate (Tobias, 2016). Supportive leaders prioritize accessibility improvements, ensuring that physical barriers such as steps and narrow doorways are addressed. This is crucial in enabling individuals with disabilities to access church services and events, reflecting the church's commitment to inclusivity (Kellen Musisi, O.I, 2023). Leaders who engage in open dialogue with individuals with disabilities not only gain insights into their challenges but also cultivate a culture of empathy within the church. According to McNair (2018), leadership that listens and responds to the concerns of individuals with disabilities fosters stronger relationships and a deeper sense of community.

Providing disability awareness training for church staff and leadership further equips them to create a welcoming atmosphere. Supportive leaders actively encourage individuals with disabilities to participate in various church activities, from worship services to leadership roles (Wilson Amwoma, O.I, 2023). By allocating resources for programs and services tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities, leadership shows a tangible commitment to their inclusion (Smith & Rivera, 2017).

Moreover, supportive leaders collaborate with disability advocacy organizations, enhancing their knowledge of best practices for inclusion and ensuring that their church's approach is well-informed and effective (Isaac Nominde, O.I, 2023). This kind of collaboration is particularly important in fostering long-term changes that

promote accessibility and inclusivity in religious settings (Jones, 2020). In Kakamega County, charismatic churches play a pivotal role in community life, and leadership that champions inclusivity helps ensure that individuals with disabilities can fully engage in their faith (Ibrahim Nanda, O.I, 2023).

Furthermore, leaders who offer pastoral care that is sensitive to the unique spiritual and emotional needs of individuals with disabilities create an environment that nurtures their spiritual growth (Rabecca Omwaka, O.I, 2023). Such leaders reinforce a culture of respect and appreciation for diversity within the congregation, encouraging all members to value the contributions of individuals with disabilities (Petersen & Harris, 2019). Supportive leadership in charismatic churches, therefore, extends beyond the church walls, positively impacting the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families in significant ways.

Education and Awareness

Churches that prioritize education and awareness about disabilities demonstrate a commitment to understanding, inclusion, and reducing stigma. Education and awareness are crucial in fostering an environment that is welcoming to individuals with disabilities, as they help to dispel common myths and misconceptions. In Kakamega County, charismatic churches that engage in these initiatives enhance their suitability by promoting inclusivity, empathy, and acceptance (Rabecca Omwaka, O.I, 2023). According to Hauerwas (2018), educating congregants on the realities of living with disabilities enables them to interact more respectfully with individuals with disabilities, thereby creating a more inclusive church atmosphere.

Education initiatives also shift the focus from limitations to abilities, highlighting the unique contributions that individuals with disabilities bring to their community (Ibrahim Nanda, O.I, 2023). This perspective change can break down negative stereotypes and foster a church culture that values diversity. Research shows that when congregants are educated about disability rights, they become advocates for accessibility and inclusion, actively supporting initiatives that promote these values (Taylor, 2020). As such, churches that offer sensitivity training to their leaders and volunteers equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively engage and support individuals with disabilities (Simon Mahero, O.I, 2023).

Inclusive language is another vital component of education and awareness campaigns. Educating congregants to avoid derogatory or disrespectful language when discussing disabilities fosters a more respectful and welcoming church environment (Patrick Juma, O.I, 2023). These efforts align with inclusive practices that extend to all aspects of church life, from worship services to social programs. According to McClure (2019), providing accessible information and resources about disabilities allows the entire congregation to engage in meaningful discussions about inclusion, further enhancing the church's suitability for individuals with disabilities. Guest speakers and workshops on disability-related topics are effective tools for raising awareness. Hearing directly from individuals with disabilities and their families through testimonies fosters a deeper understanding and connection within the congregation (Simon Mahero, O.I, 2023). These educational events can also prompt congregants to participate in disability-related community initiatives, demonstrating the church's broader commitment to social justice and inclusion (Johnson, 2021).

In Kakamega County, charismatic churches are integral to the social fabric, and education and awareness initiatives can transform the community's attitudes toward disability. By promoting a culture of empathy and advocacy, these churches not only empower individuals with disabilities but also foster self-advocacy within the faith community (Gentry Shikoli, O.I, 2023). As noted by Shaw (2017), education empowers individuals with disabilities to advocate for their own needs and rights, contributing to a more inclusive and empowered congregation.

Empowerment and Involvement

Empowerment and involvement of individuals with disabilities are key factors that influence the suitability of charismatic churches in Kakamega County. According to Mahero (2023), when individuals with disabilities are empowered and actively participate in church activities, it not only enriches their experiences but also enhances the overall inclusivity of the faith community. The inclusion of individuals with disabilities in leadership and community roles creates a culture where every member is valued, contributing to the diversity and vibrancy of the church.

Empowerment fosters a sense of belonging, allowing individuals with disabilities to feel appreciated within the church. As noted by Msambai (2023), charismatic churches that provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities to take on leadership roles demonstrate a strong commitment to equal participation and diverse representation. This empowerment also allows them to contribute their unique talents, enriching the faith community as a whole (Hamill & Carter, 2019). According to Okoti (2023), involvement in church activities builds confidence, strengthens self-esteem, and provides avenues for forming supportive relationships within the congregation.

Empowered individuals with disabilities often become advocates for inclusion and accessibility within the church, promoting awareness and encouraging others to follow their lead (Brown, 2017). As advocates, they challenge societal stereotypes and inspire others to recognize the potential of individuals with disabilities. By actively engaging in church life, these individuals break down both attitudinal and physical barriers, fostering a culture of acceptance and mutual respect (Hamfrey Okoti, O.I, 2023).

Including individuals with disabilities in decision-making processes ensures that their needs and perspectives are considered, resulting in more inclusive policies and practices (Mahero, 2023). According to Schippers (2018), empowerment and involvement not only benefit individuals with disabilities but also inspire the broader congregation to see them as full participants in the church's mission. This holistic approach transforms the faith community into a place of shared growth, acceptance, and mutual support.

In Kakamega County, charismatic churches play a central role in community life. Empowering and involving individuals with disabilities in church activities not only benefits them but strengthens the overall church community (Bishop Shinali, O.I, 2023). Through this inclusion, charismatic churches demonstrate a commitment to promoting social justice, equality, and collective growth (Msambai, 2023). By promoting opportunities for leadership and active participation, these churches harness the collective strengths of their congregation, enhancing their mission and impact on the community.

Collaboration with Disability Organizations

Charismatic churches in Kakamega County demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and accessibility through collaboration with local disability organizations. Such partnerships are essential in ensuring that the churches provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for individuals with disabilities. According to Inguyesi (2023), these collaborations significantly influence the suitability of charismatic churches by bringing in expertise, resources, and a broader perspective on promoting inclusivity and accessibility.

Disability organizations provide specialized knowledge in accessibility and accommodations, which helps churches navigate the challenges associated with inclusivity. Mwembi (2023) emphasizes that partnering with these organizations gives churches access to valuable resources such as training materials, guidelines on accessibility, and information about disability rights. These resources are critical in helping churches create more inclusive environments, as they allow for the proper accommodation of individuals with disabilities (Smith, 2018). The connection between churches and disability organizations also fosters a network of support. According to Okoli (2020), collaborative efforts allow churches to receive valuable feedback and insights from individuals, families, and advocates. Joint awareness campaigns can be organized to promote empathy and understanding toward people with disabilities (Inguyesi, 2023). Such campaigns not only shift attitudes within the congregation but also foster a more inclusive and supportive community.

Furthermore, collaboration enables charismatic churches to participate in community events and initiatives that promote disability awareness and advocacy. Disability organizations can conduct accessibility audits of church facilities, ensuring that areas needing improvement are addressed (Juma, 2023). Churches that implement these changes based on expert feedback are more likely to create an environment where individuals with disabilities feel welcomed and valued.

Training sessions and workshops, conducted in partnership with disability organizations, are effective tools for educating church leaders, volunteers, and congregants about disability inclusion. These sessions can teach respectful communication and foster understanding of how to support individuals with disabilities (Mwembi, 2023). Smith (2018) argues that such training is essential for changing perceptions and encouraging inclusive behaviour in faith communities.

Collaborative efforts can also lead to the development of inclusive policies and programs within the church, ensuring that individuals with diverse abilities are considered in the church's activities and leadership roles. Disability organizations provide vital feedback that helps churches tailor their programs to be inclusive, thus fostering broader societal change (Okoli, 2020).

In Kakamega County, charismatic churches are central to community life, making their collaboration with disability organizations particularly impactful. As Mwembi (2023) notes, these partnerships lead to mutual learning, where both churches and disability organizations benefit from sharing perspectives and addressing challenges together. This collaborative model has the potential to promote societal acceptance and inclusivity far beyond the church walls (Juma, 2023).

Conclusion and key highlights

In conclusion, the suitability of charismatic churches in Kakamega County for individuals with disabilities hinges on a multifaceted approach that collectively nurtures an inclusive and welcoming environment. Physical accessibility is crucial, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can navigate and participate in church activities with ease. Features like wheelchair ramps, accessible restrooms, and sensory-friendly spaces not only meet legal standards but also reflect the churches' dedication to inclusivity (Wilson Olale, O.I, 2023; Smith, 2018). By removing architectural barriers, churches create a space where all congregants feel comfortable and respected (Gathogo 2008).

Attitudinal inclusivity extends beyond physical access, highlighting the importance of positive attitudes from congregants and leadership (Fridah Akaliche, O.I, 2023). A culture of acceptance and support empowers individuals with disabilities, helping them feel valued and involved in all aspects of church life (Griffin & Bowers, 2017; Jackline Auma, O.I, 2023). Supportive leadership is key in shaping this culture. Leaders who prioritize accessibility, engage with disability advocacy organizations, and provide awareness training contribute significantly to creating a welcoming atmosphere (Wilson Amwoma, O.I, 2023; Rebecca Omwaka, O.I, 2023).

Education and awareness initiatives are essential for fostering understanding and reducing stigma, promoting a more respectful and inclusive church environment (Hauerwas, 2018; Patrick Juma, O.I, 2023). These efforts encourage advocacy and self-advocacy within the faith community (Gentry Shikoli, O.I, 2023). Empowerment and involvement of individuals with disabilities enhance their participation and enrich the church community. Opportunities for leadership and active involvement not only benefit individuals but also strengthen the overall church environment (Mahero, 2023; Okoti, 2023). Empowered individuals become advocates for inclusion, challenging stereotypes and fostering acceptance (Humphrey Okoti, O.I, 2023).

The research article has established that collaboration with disability organizations provides expertise, resources, and a broader perspective, facilitating accessibility improvements and promoting community-wide inclusivity. By working together, churches and disability organizations can address challenges and drive positive societal change. Overall, charismatic churches in Kakamega County that embrace these aspects of inclusivity demonstrate a profound commitment to creating environments where individuals with disabilities can fully engage and thrive, thus playing a pivotal role in fostering a more inclusive and accepting community.

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Ethical Pledge:

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Competing Interests:

There were no financial, personal relationships or undue interests that influenced the researchers in conducting the research that culminated into this research article.

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The researchers are the sole authors of this article.

Disclaimer:

The views expressed in this research article are those of the author and not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors or the Journal itself.

Ethical Considerations Statement:

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