

The Effects of Retirement on AIC Missionaries in North Rift Regional Church Council

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How to cite this article: Siwa, S. B., Mutua, H., Waweru, S., & Ngaruiya, D. (2024). The Effects of Retirement on AIC Missionaries in North Rift Regional Church Council. *Journal of Sociology, Psychology & Religious Studies*, 4(5), 1-5.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of retirement on missionaries within the North Rift church area council. The voices of retired missionaries are utilized to increase awareness of the needs of missionary retirees, enable the church to reevaluate its role with regard to retired missionaries, and to help with the support of missionary retirees. Qualitative research was essential to the study as it enabled an in-depth understanding of the experiences of missionary retirees including their expectations, views about the ministry after missionary work, and areas where they felt improvements could be made. It was determined that retired missionaries in the North Rift region still held the conventional view of dependency without prior planning for retirement and these affected their psychological, physical, and spiritual needs after they had retired. It was recommended that the church and mission agencies should be equipped to provide for missionary retirees in their different areas of need, raise awareness about the needs of this population, and analyze the potential of integrated retirement activities with the home church.

Keywords: *Retired missionary, Mission agency, Church*

1. Introduction

Retirement can have significant effects on missionaries and their families. Many retired missionaries feel that the church and mission agencies are not fully aware of the challenges they go through after leaving active service (Clark, 2018; Gallagher, 2024; Langat, 2014). The missionary calling often involves a vow of poverty, with the understanding that the supporting church and mission organization will provide for the missionary's needs (Sunquist, 2013). However, this support does not always continue into retirement. Retired missionaries can find themselves disconnected from their former church and ministry relationships, with little ongoing support or involvement. The African Inland Church Missions Department (AICMD) has seen a high rate of missionary retirements in recent years, with around 50 missionaries retiring between 2014 and 2016 (Sawatzy, 2016). The AICMD has tried to address this by hosting send-off parties to reintroduce retiring missionaries to their home churches (Sawatzy, 2016). However, this reorientation has had limited long-term impact, as the missionaries are often left to fend for themselves after the ceremony.

This disconnect between the churches and mission agencies and the needs of retired missionaries suggests a lack of awareness and preparation. Retired missionaries can feel neglected, undervalued, and uncertain about their place and purpose after a lifetime of devoted service. Their transition into retirement can be challenging, as they lose the structure, activity, and sense of meaning that their missionary work provides. There seems to be a need for the AICK (African Inland Church of Kenya) and AICMD to better recognize and address the effects of retirement on their missionaries. The churches should play a more active role in caring for their retired missionaries, ensuring they remain connected, involved, and supported during this transitional phase of life. This research aimed to investigate the specific effects of retirement on AICMD missionaries in the North Rift region, to develop recommendations for how the church can better support these devoted servants of God in their later years. Caring for retired missionaries is not only an act of compassion but also an important way for the church to honor their lifetime of sacrifice and service to the kingdom.

2. Literature Review

Missionary Retirement

The transition to retirement is a major dilemma for missionaries returning from years of service in the field. As mission culture and society change, finding suitable roles for "older" pre- and post-retirement missionaries has become increasingly difficult. Many missionaries assumed they would receive continued support from churches and move into support positions upon returning home, but this assumption is challenged by current missionary retirement developments (Bonk, 2006). Retirement is a challenge facing each missionary, as the burden of effectively preparing for the transition from active service to retirement often falls on the individual missionary. Without proper preparation, facing retirement can be overwhelming, especially regarding the maintenance of the Christian Faith and recommending it to younger Christians (Jordan, 1992). Some missionaries continue serving without retirement plans, while churches strive to be responsible stewards of resources. Some churches have policies to only support retired missionaries in special circumstances, while others provide lifelong support (Baker & Priest, 2014).

In the current age, the dependent missionary model must change. According to Shenk (2015), this model bears reference from Philippians with the argument that God is the ultimate provider.¹ While God promises to supply all needs, using this as a reason to avoid planning is unwise. The situation of the retired missionaries in Kenya is slightly different from that of the Western missionaries because the Kenyan mission boards and individual missionaries have emphasized the importance of depending on God to supply all their needs during the years of active service and so the same attitude and practice is expected to continue to retirement. Retired missionaries face difficulties reintegrating into their home culture. They may feel like strangers because the passage of time signifies changes for them as well as the people they have known, including family. As noted by Jordan (1992), the process of coming home can be more difficult than adjusting to the mission field. Retired missionaries consequently need the church to provide companionship, moral, physical, and spiritual support, as well as love, acceptance, and a listening ear for their experiences (Gallagher, 2024).

¹ "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4:6)

While the historical research on missionary retirement is limited, a survey of evangelical missions found that retirement programs and planning are necessary to provide for financial needs, explore reduced assignments, and maximize the contributions of retirees (Nunns, 2012). There is a need for information and reeducation about the financial needs of retiring missionaries. The situation of retired Kenyan missionaries differs somewhat, as they have emphasized dependence on God to meet their needs. Scientific data shows that retirement can have adverse effects on health, with studies showing an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, especially in the first year (Kim et al., 2013). Retirement involves environmental changes that reshape health behaviors, social interactions, and psychosocial stresses. Retired missionaries may need provisions such as medical coverage and counseling to prepare for this transition. Retirement can also negatively impact self-esteem, as retirees may feel worthless, bored, and lacking purpose (Kim et al., 2013). This could be due to the struggle to reorient to home cultures, feeling like outsiders, and having difficulty reintegrating.

Ultimately, the loss of financial support and income can be a major challenge for retiring missionaries (Baker & Priest, 2014, Bonk, 2006). When missionaries retire, they often lose the regular financial support and income they had been receiving while they were actively serving on the mission field. This can be a big problem because they suddenly do not have the money they need to cover their living expenses and other costs. Missionaries may have dedicated many years of their lives to serving God and others in another country or community. But when they retire, the organizations or churches that were providing their salary and benefits may not be able to continue providing, hence making the transition to retirement difficult.

3. Methodology

The researcher used primary data to gain a good understanding of the effects of retirement on missionaries. Since there was limited recent African material on this topic, the researcher chose to conduct interviews as the primary data collection method, supplemented by secondary material from Western missionaries who had written extensively on missionary retirement. The study used a qualitative research methodology, which involves the systematic investigation of a situation or problem to generate new knowledge or validate existing knowledge (Hennink et al., 2020). This qualitative approach was chosen to collect data on the effects of retirement on missionaries in the North Rift Area Church Council. The target population for the study included area mission directors, the national mission director, serving missionaries, and retired missionaries from the sampled churches in the North Rift Area Church Council. A total of 30 individuals were interviewed. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the participants. The area mission directors and national mission directors were chosen because they are the key leaders responsible for missionary activities. Five serving missionaries were selected to represent active missionaries who would soon retire. Twenty retired missionaries, including 10 men and 10 women, were also selected. The researcher, who has been part of the Africa Inland Church for over 30 years, serves in various capacities and was able to gain access to the participants through the area Assistant Bishop. The participants were contacted, and their consent was obtained before the data collection process began.

The researcher conducted in-person interviews with the respondents at mutually convenient locations. Most of the interviews happened in the church and the researcher was able to clarify questions because of the face-to-face approach. The qualitative data was analyzed through transcription, grouping of similar ideas, and identifying emerging themes from the shared experiences of the individuals affected by retirement. The study ensured validity and reliability through criteria-based selection of participants and triangulation of data sources. Ethical

considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, were also strictly followed.

4. Results and Discussion

Objective 1: To identify the needs of retired missionaries in the North Rift Area Church Council.

The main needs of retired missionaries identified in the study were psychological and emotional including love and acceptance from the church community, friendship and understanding, feeling valued, and having a sense of purpose and responsibility. Financial and material needs included money for basic needs like food, shelter, medical care, and provision of food, clothing, and housing. Spiritual needs comprised ongoing spiritual support through prayer, Bible study, and counseling. The needs were consistent across the three groups interviewed which were church leaders, serving missionaries, and retired missionaries. There were no major differences between the needs of active and retired missionaries.

Objective 2: To evaluate how the mission agency and the local church are meeting the needs of retired missionaries

The findings indicated that the local church and mission agency were doing very little to actively meet the needs of retired missionaries. Over 60% of respondents across the three groups reported that the church was doing nothing to support retired missionaries. Some churches and individual members provided ad hoc financial and material support, but there was no consistent, structured support program. The mission agency primarily focuses on active missionaries, with little to no planning or provisions made for missionaries in retirement. Spiritual support through prayer and visitation was one of the few ways the church tried to care for retired missionaries.

5. Conclusion

The research study explored the needs of retired missionaries in the North Rift Area Church Council and how the local church and mission agency were meeting those needs. The findings revealed several key insights. First, the retired missionaries had a range of needs that were consistently identified across the different groups interviewed - church leaders, serving missionaries, and the retired missionaries themselves. These needs fall into three main categories: psychological/emotional, spiritual, and financial/material. On the psychological and emotional front, the retired missionaries deeply desired love, acceptance, and a sense of belonging from the church community. They wanted friendship, understanding, and to feel valued for their years of faithful service. Spiritually, they needed ongoing support through prayer, Bible study, and counseling to help them navigate this new phase of life. Financially and materially, the retired missionaries struggled to meet their basic needs like food, shelter, and medical care. Many were living in poverty and relying on occasional help from individual church members rather than any structured support program. In conclusion, this study lays bare a concerning gap between the real needs of retired missionaries and the limited support being offered by the institutions that once sent them out. It suggests a pressing need for the church and mission agency to develop more intentional plans to care for these faithful servants in their retirement years, ensuring that their emotional, spiritual, and material needs are fully met.

6. Recommendations

The mission agency and church should provide more preparation and support for missionaries as they approach retirement. This could be achieved by offering retirement counseling and seminars to help missionaries transition emotionally and psychologically. The agency could also reassure retiring missionaries that their worth and identity are not tied to their jobs

The church needs to take a more active role in caring for retired missionaries by offering financial assistance to meet basic needs like food, housing, and healthcare and creating social activities and small groups to help retired missionaries feel connected and valued. Retired missionaries may also be invited to participate in church ministries and services

The experiences and knowledge of retired missionaries can be used to continue mission work at home. The church could work to build strong relationships with retired missionaries

Missionaries should start planning for retirement early in their careers by saving money to build financial resources for the future and maintaining relationships with their home churches throughout their missionary service

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