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## **Improving church-parent-partnership in ministry to preschoolers in the Nigerian context**

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### **Abstract**

Many people see the spiritual nurturing of children and preschoolers as the responsibility of the church, but God gave the assignment to parents. The church is to serve as a help to parents in achieving their God-given responsibility. Both in homes and churches in Nigeria, there is inadvertent neglect of preschoolers in terms of the use of substandard means of care and other areas. Families and churches need to improve in hygiene, provision of space, water, snacks, teacher-child ratio, parent-teacher meetings and guidelines for the care of preschoolers. In this paper, the authors focus on this important but less emphasised assignment of the synergy of parents and the church regarding the spiritual development of preschoolers as they weave together findings from library research and both physical and virtual focus groups to achieve this feat.

### **Introduction**

For many years in Christendom, especially in Nigeria, the church has taken over the responsibility of spiritual nurture and the upbringing of children from their families. This is an aberration because God's commands to teach and nurture children are given to parents. Both in the Old and New Testaments, the command is given to parents and the immediate family to teach, nurture, impact, impress God's love and his ways on children (Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:4-9; Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4). God's commands state, "Teach them to your children and their children after them" (Deuteronomy 4: 9c) and in Deuteronomy 6:4-7:

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them in your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Parents have a mandate to first know, love, revere and obey God and then to pass this on to their children – to be taught and caught through the way they live and relate with God every day, all the time. The *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and other passages on spiritual and all-around nurturing of children are domiciled in the home. Logically and socially speaking also, the home is the first place of socialisation, growth, spiritual experience and all life experiences. It is thus out of order for the church to try to take on the spiritual assignment of nurturing preschoolers and to ‘do her own thing’ while parents and the family ‘do their own thing’. Since the responsibility for spiritual nurture is given *first* to the biological family as led by the parents, the family of faith should play her role of equipping parents for their divine assignment instead of taking the responsibility off parents.

For effective ministry to preschoolers, there ought to be a partnership between the parents (home) and the church. While many churches have picked up tremendously in recent years in the care of children and teenagers, preschoolers have not received sufficient attention. Preschoolers are created in God’s image, they are God’s heritage and also part of the world Jesus came to save. It is expedient that they are trained in the Way of the Lord. This paper addresses the neglect of preschoolers by parents and the Church, and the roles parents and the Church have to play, each with their own responsibility in improving the ministry to preschoolers.

## **Methodology and respondents**

This research combined library research, observation and the use of both face to face and online focus groups. Churches represented in focus groups are 22 in all. They represent churches that are well established with many years of existence to show for it, churches that have been recently organised, churches that have an established long-standing ministry to children and churches that

are up and coming, established from the year 2000 on. One church is in Ekiti State, one in the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), two in Lagos State, two in Osun State and thirteen in Oyo State. The larger number in Oyo State (13 churches) are in Ogbomoso where the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary – the oldest degree-granting institution in West Africa – is domiciled. Ogbomoso has more Baptist churches than many other towns and is often referred to as the ‘Jerusalem of the Baptists’ in Nigeria. It has a good blend of churches that are closer to traditional society, those that are town-like churches and a few mega-churches as found in some larger cities. Like Ado-Ekiti, which is the capital of Ekiti State, Ibadan is the capital of Oyo State and three churches among the represented churches in the focus groups are located in Ibadan. While the numbers may seem small, it is clear to the writers, one of whom has served as Director of Christian Education of the Nigerian Baptist Convention and thus, travelled to most states in Nigeria, observed and interacted with their children’s ministries, that the feedback is quite representative of ministry to preschoolers in the Nigerian Baptist Convention as at 2020.

The churches that respondents in focus groups reported on are: First Baptist Church, Ado Ekiti in Ekiti State, Faith Baptist Church, First Baptist Church, Adegbayi, Polytechnic Baptist Church, Apete all in Ibadan, Peace Baptist Church, Oluponna/Iwo, Bowen University Chapel, Iwo, both in Osun State, Christ Baptist Church, Gbagada, and the Agape Community Baptist Church, Surulere, both in Lagos, First Baptist Church, Garki-Abuja, Antioch Baptist Church, Ayegun Baptist Church, AyoOluwa Baptist Church, High School Area, Grace Baptist Church, Ibukun-Oluwa Baptist Church, Ife Pipe Baptist Church, Olodanbon Baptist Church, Owode Baptist Church, Peniel Baptist Church, Baby Area, Smith International Baptist Academy Chapel, Riverside Baptist Church, Igbo Agbonyin, Taraa Baptist Church, and Victory Baptist Church, Isale General - all in Ogbomoso. The respondents consisted of students in the Faculty of Education, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso at Bachelors, Master of Divinity and Post Graduate levels, graduates from the same Faculty serving in various areas of the educational ministry of the church and church members involved in Children’s ministry in their respective churches. All respondents had undergone some level of training which exposed them to ideals and principles in children’s ministry and therefore they were able to

objectively report on ministry to preschoolers in the church bodies they represented.

## **Positioning**

### ***The neglect***

The neglect of preschoolers is not new. In New Testament days, parents brought their (little) children to Jesus to pray for them and lay his hands on them to bless them. His well-meaning disciples felt their Master needed rest and did not need the noise and dirt of these small creatures. Jesus however showed they were as important as the adults who were around Him. Jesus said, “Let little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” Mathew 19:14. This was Jesus’s response to those who were debarring children and their parents from getting to Him. “With those words, and his subsequent actions, Jesus Christ elevated early childhood to a position of respect and importance” (Wilson 1991:222). Jesus placed a high value on children and meeting their needs as we see in His reaction when asked to help a child, ways He interacted with children, and things He said about them. For instance, Hall states that He ‘interrupted ministry’ to attend to Jairus’s daughter (1980:23), although the ministry to Jairus’s daughter should not be seen as an interruption but rather part of Jesus’s ministry itself.

In terms of education and early child care, several writers have expressed concern about the state of neglect where preschoolers are concerned. Gwang-Jo Kim and Mami Umayahara (2010) researched early child care services in Asia–Pacific. Their purpose in research was to assess the extent of achieving the Asia-Pacific region’s first goal of Education for All, “expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education (ECCE), especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” and marginalised groups as well as the under-threes. They discovered that particularly, South Asia, has the world’s highest proportion of children aged five and under, suffering from stunting. The challenge still exists in 2020. The church needs to rise to this need to help parents in their God-given assignment of rearing preschoolers as “the first two years of life (and we say beyond that) dare not be neglected or slighted in the church program” (Wilson 1986:84).

Sometimes the neglect of preschoolers is not outright abandonment, but the use of substandard, hurriedly thrown together shoddy and poorly prepared materials, methods and facilities to reach them. Joellen Lewsader and James Elicker researched various unlicensed child care facilities in the State of Indiana, United States of America and realised the number of such facilities is growing and have a greater tendency to not treat preschoolers well (2015:67):

There are no unified child care quality standards across the 50 states, nor even within a single state. Currently, all of the states license most child care centers, yet there are still multiple types of licensing exemptions for programs, ranging from church-sponsored centers, to half-day preschool programs, to government-run centers, to those operated by a university or college.

Lewsader and Elicker are not alone in this concern and not only the USA has this problem. Even where there are rules and regulations in Nigeria such as the Oyo State Ministry of Education's benchmark (2010), the availability of such and its upholding is questionable. Where the church is concerned, these writers are not aware of any regulatory bodies checking what is provided in terms of child care in the Nigerian church, let alone concerning the care of preschoolers. While the average pastor may fast and pray, study the Bible and commentaries to prepare for preaching to adults, many a preschool worker in church (and at home) just makes sure there are snacks and sometimes toys for the preschoolers and they feel that everything is fine. This observation was confirmed in the focus groups held both face to face and virtually. Almost all churches had some form of physical provisions for their children, but not all knew how to handle the care of children professionally.

Neglect of preschoolers extends outside the four walls of the church. Writing on the high cost of neglect, Blackwell (1983:113) states,

Many times as workers with children we tend to concentrate on the children already in our Bible teaching setting and become complacent about our responsibilities for those outside this setting. We glibly say that we are reaching most of our

possibilities when actually the number of children (preschoolers) to be reached grows every year.

Christians have a responsibility to reach both preschoolers who are brought to church and those who are not in church because their parents have not yet found faith in Christ. By reaching parents and teaching them to raise their preschoolers to a life of faith by providing a Christ-centred, Godly environment, the church will do a better job of fulfilling the Great Commission.

### ***The Nigerian Context***

Nigeria is a multicultural nation with over 520 living dialects<sup>1</sup>. As the nation is blessed in terms of natural resources, likewise she is endowed with multicultural experiences and creative people. The Nigerian context is a blend of the traditional, the colonial, post-colonial and current. Sometimes it seems the lines of demarcation are fine but at other times, it is quite difficult to draw the demarcation between the past and present in terms of the Nigerian context. Certainly, the past impinges on the present and the future. However, with the world becoming a global village, with the influences of other cultures and traditions, at some points, it is a bit difficult to categorise some practices as being truly exclusively 'Nigerian'.

Every Nigerian culture has an avalanche of good things to draw from as well as things to get rid of from the Christian perspective. In all Nigerian cultures, though in varying shades depending on whether they are single or multiple births,<sup>2</sup> male or female, children are considered a blessing. The place of preschoolers in the Nigerian context is very similar to Hall's description of preschoolers in the Jewish context (1980:22-23):

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<sup>1</sup> Seven dialects in Nigeria are reportedly extinct out of 527

<sup>2</sup> For instance, while in Yoruba land, multiple births - beginning with twins and on to triplets, quadruplets and so on were seen as a major blessing, for the people of Calabar, until Mary Slessor stopped the killing of twins, the belief was different. In some Nigerian societies while females could inherit, serve as regents and take on other leadership positions, in others, they were totally relegated to the background. Likewise, the social class a baby was born into determined whether the parents would celebrate with pomp and pageantry or hide the 'blessing' of the baby lest it spelt doom for them.

Children were important in Jewish societies – owing from the name they were given which were meaningful and showed joy of parents, circumstances of birth or prayer for the quality of life the child was to live; they were protected, had better quality of life than some other societies at the time but the society was not child-centred... The Bible speaks frequently of the obligation of parents to love and provide for children, but nothing about the “rights” of children to expect or demand things.

In many Nigerian cultures, babies are also given names to show their importance, circumstances surrounding their birth, prayers and prophecies parents and family have in mind for the infant. In Nigerian traditional society also, it was more of privileges than ‘rights’ where children are concerned. Preschoolers were more seen than heard, yet they were to be properly cared for as dependent members of society. There are many proverbs about the role of the elderly in caring for the very young such as ‘*Agba kii wa loja kori omo tuntun wo*’ literally meaning that, with the presence of elders in the market when a baby is mounted on the back, the baby’s head will not be allowed to become unstable at the back of the one carrying the baby. The elderly in society would always ensure infants were properly cared for by mothers and other caregivers.

Another such proverb is that one person gives birth to the child but the whole village raises the child. Child care in Nigerian traditional society was communal and not individualistic. All adults are responsible to teach the young child the values of society and correct the child when they err. “In many Nigerian ethnic groups, the education of children is a community responsibility. For example, in the Igbo culture, the training of children is the work of both men and women, within the family and outside it... It is not strange to see a man disciplining a child who is not his own” (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Federal Republic of Nigeria 2015).

In the traditional Nigerian society, the way to ensure compliance to social, spiritual and other norms was to instil fear. This has continued to date where some adults feel it is acceptable to tell lies to a preschooler to ensure compliance – lies that are rooted in fear such as a masquerade coming to pick

the child, police around the corner to catch them and at times even medical personnel and ministers of the gospel are among the ‘terrorists’ used to instil fear of punishment in the unruly preschooler or to catch the disobedient. Obedience is therefore often based more on fear than on love.

Preschoolers were not expected in traditional society to work for pay but once they could understand simple commands, they were given household chores and they were expected to join parents and family on the family farm or in the family business. Infants were subtly derided in songs (lullabies) used to pacify them for just eating and having round tummies but not working.

*Abemu mi, ko ro’ko,  
Abemu mi, ko r’odo.  
Bo ba ji, a gb’obe kanna;  
a jeba tan a s’ekun rogodo;  
Omo oloro to n je’yin awo...*

(Meaning: My dear Abemu (the baby) neither goes to the farm or the river to assist others. She only sleeps, warms stew/soup, eats and has a round tummy. She enjoys the riches of the land/parents, eating the egg of guinea fowls’). Both in the traditional society and currently, Nigerian children are taught to do chores and to work (Embassy of The People’s Republic of China in The Federal Republic of Nigeria 2015):

As children, many Nigerians learn that laziness is not acceptable; everyone is expected to contribute. When children reach the age of about four or five, they often are expected to start performing a share of the household duties... These tasks help the children learn how to become productive members of their family and community.

In current Nigerian society also, preschoolers are taught generally to assist with sales where parents are traders, to do household chores like fetching water, sweeping, picking refuse/litter and so on. The assumption in the Nigerian context is that the preschooler does not know anything and has to be taught all that society expects of them. They are seen as a blank slate who needs to have the right values written on them to become the civil person



society expects them to become. The Nigerian traditional milieu puts the responsibility on the shoulder of the immediate family assisted by the whole village or society. The ill-mannered child is a disgrace to the whole village but first and foremost an indication of lack of home training from the compound to which the child belongs.

### ***The Need***

As a result of ignorance, many parents, families and churches are not properly playing their roles in the care of preschoolers. They assume all that preschoolers need are the lower needs in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs – food, clothing, shelter and safety. They forget that these are just basic needs and demotivators, not the motivators the average human being needs to produce maximally – as Maslow advocates. Every human being needs these basic things and more. Meanwhile, even these basic needs which seem to be met leave much to be desired. Only two of the twenty-two churches have provision for separate mats or mattresses for children to sleep on and beddings are not changed immediately after a child uses them before using them for another child. Potable water as provided for preschoolers in some instances are from questionable sources if put under the microscope of academic and World Health Organisation standards. Toys are hardly disinfected but used week after week. Shared space is more common than space set apart for preschoolers, the ratio of caregivers to preschoolers leaves much to be desired. These basic things are not yet in shape and so, it is difficult to emphasise the lacuna where higher needs are concerned. There is the need to begin from lower needs and improve on the ministry to preschoolers.

While Maslow's hierarchy provides a great springboard, it is not sufficient as it does not address the whole *imago Dei* – the image of God in man. The search for God and His will and love is innate and needs to be provided for. Many parents, families and the church fail in providing this for preschoolers because they do not understand the needs and the peculiarities of these children. Meanwhile, everyone involved in Christian ministry from the home front to the church needs a constant reminder that 'the ministry is to people' (Wilson 1991:219). It is the task of Christian educators to orientate parents and the church to rise to their duties as touching the preschoolers in their care.

## Preschoolers

Preschool years are the early years in the life of a child from birth to age five or six. During this period, internationally, children are expected *not* to have begun primary (elementary) school and as such, belong to preschool age. The preschool years are the early years of life and thus, also referred to as early childhood. Children within this age range are referred to as preschoolers.

Preschoolers are further divided into infants, toddlers and beginners. The term 'infant' is used to refer to a child during the first twelve months of their lives (Wilson 1986:84) while 'toddler' describes the child who is thirteen to twenty-four months of age (89). The name comes from the child's attempt to walk, which is not yet steady as the child toddles. Three-year-olds are often referred to along with two-year-olds as twos and threes while older preschoolers (beginners) are children between four and six years of age. Each of the categories has its peculiarities and these must be understood by parents and caregivers if their needs would be properly met.

While there are general characteristics for each group of preschoolers, parents and the church must remember that each child has their unique characteristics as well. There is something different and unique about each child as God has taken time to knit each of them as individuals in their mother's womb. No two human beings are exactly alike. As David rightly observed and sang in Psalm 139:14-15, humans are not mass-produced but each is intricately woven by the tender hands of the loving heavenly Father. However, characteristics that cut across the various stages of life and growth process of preschoolers and theories of psychologists help understand preschoolers better.

## Psychology on preschoolers

In his research on children's cognitive development, Jean Piaget identified four sequential stages through which every individual progresses in cognitive development and the first two stages address preschoolers. Piaget's sensorimotor stage begins at birth and lasts till the child is about two years old, thus spanning infancy and toddlerhood. Children's thinking at this stage involves seeing, hearing, moving, touching, tasting and so on. The stage marks a transitional stage from a biological to a psychological being.

Writing on Erikson's stages of Psychosocial development, McLeod (2018) states,

If the care the infant receives is consistent, predictable and reliable, they will develop a sense of trust which will carry with them to other relationships, and they will be able to feel secure even when threatened... If the care has been inconsistent, unpredictable and unreliable, then the infant may develop a sense of mistrust, suspicion, and anxiety. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of hope... Failing to acquire the virtue of hope will lead to the development of fear.

Gene Getz & Wallace Getz (1986), citing Christian psychologist James R. Dolby, also state that during the first year, the child learns whether the world is cruel or comfortable, they learn that they are a separate entity apart from the world of stimuli outside them. This year is the foundation on which all personality rests. They quickly explain that in coming to Christ, Christ changes people and things, but the impact of the first year of life is still strong in the individual. The early years of life are crucial because those are the years when children learn to decide whether the world is wicked or kind. As Psychologist Erik Erikson (McLeod 2018) noted in the first and second of his eight stages of psychosocial development; preschoolers learn through their experiences with adults whether to trust or mistrust and how to be autonomous or live in shame and doubt:

Autonomy versus shame and doubt is the second stage of Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. This stage occurs between the ages of 18 months to approximately 3 years. According to Erikson, children at this stage are focused on developing a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence...

If children in this stage are encouraged and supported in their increased independence, they become more confident and secure in their own ability to survive in the world. If children are criticized, overly controlled, or not given the opportunity to assert themselves, they begin to feel inadequate in their ability

to survive, and may then become overly dependent upon others, lack self-esteem, and feel a sense of shame or doubt in their abilities.

Parents and church workers need to be guided to help preschoolers develop autonomy instead of shame and doubt.

## **Parents and the church: current ministry and improving in ministry to preschoolers**

The improvement of the ministry to preschoolers is first and foremost the responsibility of parents, but the church is not to fold her arms either. “Christian education is a two-way street. The home needs the church, but also it is true that the church needs the home” (Getz and Getz 1986:589-590). Both need to work together more than ever before to ensure that ministry to preschoolers improves and thrives by making the home the starting point, providing the needs of preschoolers regularly and promptly, being inclusive of preschoolers in church plans, programmes and provisions and many other things as explained below.

### ***Start from the Home***

Preschoolers can learn about God’s love and this must start from home. Charity still begins at home. All adults and especially parents need to realize that preschoolers are not too young to have spiritual experiences. “Parents have a significant, irreplaceable role in nurturing their children in the things of God” (Getz and Getz 1986:588). This irreplaceable role as foundation layers and trailblazers must be consciously fulfilled. Parents should monitor all aspects of their children’s development. As parents make provision for preschoolers’ physical wellbeing, they should also pay attention to their spiritual development (Choun and Lawson 1993). “God’s Word must be in the head and heart of the preschooler for it to be useful in their hand” (Ayo-Obiremi 2016:119).

### ***Parents set the Pace***

In Deuteronomy 6:5-6, Moses instructed parents to love God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their strength and impress God’s

commandment upon their children, talking about them at home, along the road, when they lie down and when they get up. As such, parents need more than head knowledge about the Bible. Effective teaching in the home must involve more than a period of instruction and the Word of God must permeate the total atmosphere of the home (Getz and Getz 1986). Beyond knowing and quoting scripture, parents must be good examples of Christian truth and virtue and make use of every opportunity to teach their children in the way of the Lord.

### ***Regular Care***

The spiritual development of preschoolers begins with good physical care by parents and caregivers in church. Since preschoolers learn best through their senses and the care they receive, it behoves parents and the church to give them the best care possible. It is through lovingly meeting the physical needs of infants that parents and the church minister to them (Wilson 1986:89). Nigerian parents and caregivers must not see their care of preschoolers as mere routine. They should see it as a service to God. They should hum, “speak in simple short sentences”, sing “simple songs and rhymes, soothing tunes” There is no need for ‘baby talk’ or for songs that subtly or outrightly rebuke the infant for not working. Rather, they should sing songs of reassurance of God’s love and the love they have for the infant. Care for preschoolers must be regular and predictable, as observed in line with Erikson’s discovery. Caregivers must not withhold food, drink or care from preschoolers on any grounds lest they teach them to mistrust. The old wives’ myths that paying attention to a crying infant or carrying them when they cry will make them possessive, greedy and clingy must not be adhered to.

With regards to Erikson’s second stage of autonomy versus shame and guilt, many parents and churches in Nigeria have a lot to learn to be better caregivers to preschoolers. Often, parents and caregivers are in a hurry, deny preschoolers their freedom, punish them and do not allow preschoolers to exercise their autonomy when they refuse to ‘cooperate’ with adults as expected (McLeod 2018):

For example, rather than put on a child's clothes, a supportive parent should have the patience to allow the child to try until they succeed or ask for assistance. So, ... parents need to

encourage the child to become more independent while at the same time protecting the child so that constant failure is avoided.

Erikson states it is critical that parents allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment which is tolerant of failure. A delicate balance is required from the parent. They must try not to do everything for the child, but if the child fails at a particular task they must not criticize the child for failures and accidents... The aim has to be “self-control without a loss of self-esteem”

Parents and caregivers need to remember the foregoing, particularly when preparing for church, social functions, during toilet training and other developmental tasks of the preschooler.

### ***Appropriate Lessons***

Current day Nigeria seems to have an invisible force pushing parents and establishments to rush the lives of the children. Babies are rushed off to school, toddlers rushed to run and not just walk and especially schools rush the educational steps so they can boast of the youngest, most brilliant products. As soon as children can speak, they are taught ABC and 123. When muscle skills are not yet developed, they are rushed to hold tiny pencils and write. Parents tend to see it as a pride that their 3-year-old is writing. There are lots of dangers in rushing children through early childhood.

Unfortunately, the rush carries over into spiritual matters also. Rather than introducing them to spiritual exercises beyond their age, preschoolers should be provided with a rich, warm, loving and captivating environment that is supportive of their learning priorities and pacing. In addition to Piaget’s submission on cognitive development, Rudolf Steiner in his Waldorf method for early childhood advocates that a child should not be taught intellectually until the intellect has matured at the onset of puberty (Ogletree 1997:48). These writers are not against teaching spiritual values and concepts, but rather advocate that such should be done at the age level of the target learners. Preschoolers should be shown love and taught concrete things that relate to faith in the simplest language they can understand.

### ***Church Provisions for Preschoolers***

The church is not only an opportunity for adults to experience the love of God but also an opportunity for children to grow in the love of Christ. The church needs to provide properly for preschoolers in terms of environment/space, equipment, potable water, healthy snacks, programmes/opportunities, trained workers, parent-worker/teacher meetings, and so on. A church that wants to take after the “New Testament church in every regard must care about and provide for even the youngest individual who comes through its door” (Wilson 1991:221).

### ***Provision of Proper Environment and Space***

In terms of meeting the physical needs of the preschoolers, it was discovered, during this research, that all of the churches studied have some sort of provision on the ground. While two churches have up to two separate rooms for preschoolers, eight have physical space for preschoolers alone. Most of the others have a space they share with other children and two others have plans for the future. Both parents at home and caregivers in churches should provide free space for preschoolers as research has shown that preschoolers need space and that they learn a lot through their environment. The Ministry of Education of Oyo State, Nigeria must have also realised the need for adequate space as they have a benchmark of a minimum of 7m x 4m x 3m as classroom size and 9m x 15m space for a playground, recreational facilities and future expansion for the establishment of nursery schools (Oyo State Government Ministry of Education 2010:7-8). Since young children require more space in which to grow and learn than adults, their needs must become a priority for the church (Choun and Lawson 1993:300).

Wilson (1986:89) rightly observes,

The church wanting to minister to parents as well as infants must do its utmost to provide clean, responsible, efficient, friendly, and loving service to infants and their parents. Such a church is making an investment in lives. No other investment has such rewarding or eternal dividends!

Not only infants but all preschoolers are ministered to when the environment is clean and friendly and they are treated with love and acceptance as they should be. Beginning with the surroundings, a preschooler can tell if they are welcome. Rudolf Steiner, a renowned early childhood philosopher propounded the Waldorf method and in it, he educated readers that infants and young children are entirely given over to their physical surroundings. They absorb the world primarily through their senses and respond in the most active mode of knowing i.e., imitation (Barnes 1991:52). The top priority in a preschool programme and the church setting should be to provide a healthy, loving family environment. This will reinforce the young child's sense of trust and independence, recognise the child's needs for self-awareness, confidence, self-expression and self-appreciation (Flanagan 1991:127).

Writing on Early Childhood Centres making the most of indoor space for children's wellbeing and physical activity, Ole Johan Sando (2019) corroborates the need for clean space: "Physical environments supportive of physical active play are beneficial and ... dominating the indoor space with tables should be avoided" (506). Where preschoolers have free space to play, they tend to feel freer, safer and tend to be more at home. Preschoolers are better ministered to when given space for free play and creative interaction.

When the environment is right, preschoolers will feel free to learn using their senses and exploring, for children have the innate creative ability to learn, and given the right environment they will learn. Adults at home and church need to provide the right emotional and physical environment and learn how to handle the preschooler with care. Maria Montessori "Italian physician, educator, philosopher, humanitarian & devout Catholic ... best known for her philosophy and the Montessori method of education of children from birth to adolescence" (Chacko 2009:78), states that "Yet the child, like all other human beings, has a personality of his own. He carries within him the beauty and dignity of the creative spirit... so that his soul which is pure and very sensitive requires our most delicate care. Man does not live by bread alone even in his infancy" (79).

Blackwell contributed to this discussion many years before Chacko. She lends her voice to the role of the adult concerning a well-prepared environment. "A preschooler who is allowed and encouraged to use his senses, muscles and



imagination to explore the world around him has a basis for sound teaching experiences. . . . He responds when he is encouraged to explore, to do, and be gently led into areas that are unknown to him so that his learning may expand. Adults who touch his life should always be in the role of an encourager rather than one who stifles” (1983:75). In addition to the lack of space provision in some cases, in many more cases, many a Nigerian parent and church caregiver do not allow preschoolers to explore because they see it as too much stress for them. They want ‘peace and quiet’ and so, use electronic media and various types of screens to keep preschoolers occupied. There is a danger of raising children addicted to the screen. Using the screen as a babysitter (nanny) and caregiver must stop.

### *Provision of water*

The provision of water was discovered to be as varied as the churches studied. Seventy per cent of the churches were discovered to provide water fetched from a generally agreed-upon local source – a borehole, a tap or general source of ‘potable’ water. While this is commendable and in line with the Oyo State government benchmark of tap, borehole or deep well (2010:9) as sources of potable water, there is a need to go a step further both in homes and in the church to treat water for preschoolers by filtering it through local means like using new clean handkerchiefs as one of the churches was reported to do, boiling the water, using a factory-made filter or buying water that is certified potable like about five of the other churches were said to do. In some churches, the water is truly potable but all children share cups. For such cases, even if in the homes, utensils are shared as part of Nigerian communal life; the fact that the preschoolers are from different families must be taken into consideration. More so, some diseases are spread through sharing cups, cutlery and other items for food and drink. Post-COVID-19, internationally, care must be taken not to share utensils that can lead to the spreading of germs.

Two of the churches studied have taken care of this challenge by having dispensers and disposable cups. This may be a bit expensive for lower-income earning areas though. Another way out is to have plastic or any other type of unbreakable, (possibly stackable) cups for the children and to provide potable water in a keg or a bucket that has a tap so preschoolers can operate it on their

own. An open bucket or drum for everyone to dip their cups in is not hygienic either. Where cups are provided generally, the preschool/children workers should label the cups with masking tape and help preschoolers learn to read their respective names or the first key letters of their names so they can pick their cup from a tray or container without mistaking it for another preschooler's cup. Three churches were found to have each child bring their own water bottles from home. These were mainly churches in academic campuses and big cities. Where this option is adopted, the church will need to have some extra water provision for visitors and preschoolers whose caregivers forget theirs at home. These are just some ways of dealing with the health hazards involved where drinking water is concerned. Parents and churches should creatively deal with the problem.

### *Provision of Snacks*

The provision of snacks by churches studied is commendable. Every church had some form of provision of snacks. While about sixty per cent of the churches provide the snacks from the church purse, others have a roster. In one church on the university campus, the children's workers contribute money to buy snacks, while for others, in addition, parents who have just had a baby, are celebrating a birth date in the family or some other occasion supply biscuits and drinks for preschoolers. Other churches depend solely on celebrants, donors or lovers of children while in four churches, children were reported to bring their own snacks. Sales of snacks to preschoolers served the dual role of a financial business for the Woman's Missionary Union and provision of snacks for the children in two churches while in another church, it was an individual who brought snacks for sale.

Our recommendations are: The provision of snacks should continue but rather than wait for someone to have a celebration, there should be a clear plan for snacks for preschoolers as some of the churches already have, but with the added dimension of deliberately planning for healthy snacks – not the cheapest, most available but a sacrificially well-planned affordable healthy snack time for children both during church programmes and in cases where there is a church school. While it is good that the preschoolers are remembered, giving a child biscuits and carbonated drinks merely to keep them quiet and pacified as some do is the beginning of teaching wrong

priorities in life and may become a foundation for impulse eating when upset – and even for obesity. Preschoolers require healthy balanced meals that help their growth.

Caution should be taken where snacks are sold lest the financial benefits override the care for the preschoolers. Churches should be careful lest the business opportunity beclouds their vision from proper care of their preschoolers. Rather than encourage a feeling of social stratification of those who can afford snacks and those who cannot, our attitude should be, in the words of Lim (2017:31):

Those of us who are wealthier should be challenged to give more in terms of higher percentage to the poor, compared to those who are poorer, so that everyone in the family has a fair share of resources. In this family, all barriers that serve to divide us—the social-economic, geographical and ethnic boundaries—are removed through Paul’s economic principles.

This is the true picture of the expectation from a New Testament church.

### *Budgetary Provisions*

It is observed that many churches do not have a special budget for preschoolers. This needs to change. Whether as a separate budgetary item or as a sub-item under the provision for children, preschoolers’ particular needs have to be budgeted for. Preschoolers’ care must go beyond the provision of snacks and carbonated drinks. The church must remember that preschoolers’ learning should happen in a variety of ways – visual, verbal, active involvement, media techniques, and so on – not just listening to a teacher. They must be well equipped to enhance their learning. Church members can also be involved in raising funds to equip preschoolers’ places of worship. Preschoolers’ physical needs, materials for teaching them, training of their caregivers and workers among them, parent-caregiver meetings, parents training and other things need to be properly provided for.

### *Provision of materials*

All of the churches studied had some kind of provision of materials for preschoolers. While some had pictures that stayed on the walls perpetually, others had them well stowed away where teachers could get needed ones for use. Two of the churches did not have any provision for toys. One church has the children bring their toys from home and take them back while the remaining nineteen churches have toys for preschoolers. This shows the provision of toys and teaching materials is not unacceptable. However, the toys are sufficient in some places but inadequate in others. For improvement in this area, parents and workers should provide toys for preschoolers in keeping with their age, developmental growth, spiritual relevance and the locality. Play is the number one business of the child and directed play should be a priority. Parents and churches should ensure toys are sanitised regularly and are in good shape so as not to injure preschoolers. Teaching aids should also be varied and not the same ones used all the time. They should match the lesson on each occasion. Preschoolers should not be taught by rote.

While only three churches have separate toilet provisions for preschoolers, another three have toilets only children use but others do not. One church had their preschoolers urinate right outside the room and when the wind blew later, it blew the stench of urine inside. Churches need to provide more hygienic toileting facilities for preschoolers. While the benchmark of separate toilets for male and female children at a ratio of one toilet to ten preschoolers and one toilet to five teachers (Oyo State Government Ministry of Education 2010) may seem a tall order, churches should attempt to improve by providing more hygienic toilet facilities.

### *Sleep Provisions*

Many churches in the study that had provision for sleep for children had a general provision. While the big general mat or mattress is the Nigerian style, parents and church caregivers need to learn and get used to 'separate sleeping and resting, even for siblings, (because it) reduces the spread of disease from one child to another' (American Academy of Pediatrics 2012):

Although children freely interact and can contaminate each other while awake, reducing the transmission of infectious disease agents on large airborne droplets during sleep periods will reduce the dose of such agents to which the child is exposed overall...

Because respiratory infections are transmitted by large droplets of respiratory secretions, a minimum distance of three feet should be maintained between cots, cribs, sleeping bags, beds, mats, or pads used for resting or sleeping... If the room used for sleeping cannot accommodate three feet of spacing between children, it is recommended for caregivers/teachers to space children as far as possible from one another and/or alternate children head to feet...

From time to time, children drool, spit up, or spread other body fluids on their sleeping surfaces. Using cleanable, waterproof, nonabsorbent rest equipment enables the staff to wash and sanitize the sleeping surfaces.

None of the respondents was aware of the detailed safety precautions described above. Parents and church caregivers need to be educated on the need to separate sleeping preschoolers – even twins! The recent global experience with COVID 19 makes this all the more important. Where individual cots, mats, mattresses and beddings cannot be afforded, parents can be saddled with the responsibility of providing mats/mattresses (and beddings) for their children to use in church, to be taken home regularly for washing/cleaning according to specification and the church can provide for visitors and new children. This will raise the standard of hygiene in Nigerian churches.

### *Provision of Trained Workers*

The training of workers who work with preschoolers is very important. Matters raised in the foregoing and other matters need to be properly taught and imbibed by workers with preschoolers. They need to understand preschoolers, how they learn, standards of how to care for them, the ideal look and atmosphere of physical and emotional environments, what curriculum to use

and how to apply it; methods and materials for ministry to preschoolers, among other things. The Baptist denomination has multiple opportunities for training children's workers at Church, Association, Conference, Regional and Convention levels. The dimension that needs to be added is a greater emphasis on details on how to minister to preschoolers and the synergy expected between the home and the church.

Besides the need for appropriately trained workers, the ratio of workers to preschoolers is a very crucial area to examine. From the research done in the churches, while one church has no standard children's ministry, only seven church informants could provide the ratios as follow: one teacher to four preschoolers (3 churches), one teacher to five preschoolers (2 churches), one to six preschoolers and one teacher to 15 preschoolers respectively. On a different note; due to the many teachers in the chapel where students in the higher institution take care of the preschoolers, they have more teachers than others, and so serve on a roster basis. None of the other respondents knew the exact number of preschoolers among the children in the churches they represented but gave ratios of one to five, one to six, one to seven, one to fifteen, one to twenty and so on as the ratio of children's workers to the total number of children. The fact that there are teachers and other helpers is commendable. Those who have a ratio of one to four or one to five are also commendable.

However, there is the tendency to reduce adequate care when the ratio of preschoolers to teachers and caregivers is too high. Though writing on preschool centres, the submission by Schachner et al. (2016) is still apt:

Appropriate teacher-child ratios are one of the main aspects of a high-quality early childhood program. Studies show that lower class sizes and smaller teacher-child ratios may improve child outcomes, help reduce behavior problems, lower rates of special education placements, reduce teacher stress, and improve the teacher's experience.

Just as in preschool centres, so it is for the church setting. The problem of an inadequate number of teachers/workers per preschooler is not limited to Nigeria or the church setting. One of the main findings in the 2019 North

American Child Care Benchmark Report is that 57% of respondents have less staff employed than they need (Himama 2019). Lewsader and Elicker (2015) also discovered inadequate staffing in unlicensed early childhood facilities. The widespread and international nature of the problem does not however absolve the church of the need to improve on what she has.

Schachner et al. (2016) explain that the teacher-child ratio depends on class size. Thus, the first step is to determine the class size. Churches need to know how many children they have on role in the preschool section. Not all churches have an attendance register. It is important to have records that include names, ages, parents' names, phone numbers, physical address, allergies, feeding patterns, and other necessary details that will help in the care of preschoolers. There should be adequate knowledge of the number of preschoolers in each group. There should be a regular check of who is present to follow up on their growth, relate with families and follow up on absentees. The number on the role also helps determine the teacher-preschooler ratio that is ideal.

The ratio given by Oyo State Government for nursery schools is one caregiver to ten pupils and ideally not more than thirty pupils in a class (2010:9). Furthermore, the ratio for preschool centres and home care centres as given by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) can serve as a reliable guide. For those beginning at preschool centres, i.e., children from birth to three years, the suggested ratio is one teacher to four children. For three-year-olds, the recommended class size is not to exceed 17 and the suggested number of teachers is no less than two while for ages four and five, the suggested ratio is a maximum of 20 children in a class with no less than four adult caregivers – two teachers and two helpers. That gives a ratio of one to five.

For family childcare, the recommendation of NAEYC as cited by Schachner et al. (2016) is one child care provider to 4 toddlers and infants with no more than 2 of them under the age of 18 months and one child care provider to a maximum group size of 6 children with no more than 2 children under the age of two. These numbers are inclusive of the children of the caregiver within the age range if they are also around. Here, many child care services and church provisions for preschoolers leave much to be desired. Parents, caregivers and

church workers need to be educated on these ratios and deliberate attempts need to be employed to see to it that they are adhered to.

### *Open Church Doors*

Any time the church doors are open, preschoolers must not be left out. Part of laying a good spiritual foundation for children is to allow them to have opportunities to worship with the adults (Chromey 1991:174). Children (including preschoolers) should be involved in both being ministered to and using their talents and gifts to bless the body of Christ. Some churches destroy the beauty of *koinonia* or fellowship by not allowing children to speak, touch musical instruments or participate in any part of church life (Ayo-Obiremi 2016:120). This is wrong, for, as young as they are, the voice of the preschoolers should also be heard in the church. There should be regular opportunities for intergenerational worship with the adults where they see adults model worship and they are also involved. Programmes like Sunday School, Bible Study, Holiday Bible School, discipleship lifestyle, missions emphasis, social events, picnics, retreats, revivals, night vigils and so on must be planned in such a way that there is either a preschooler's section or the preschooler is adequately provided for in the programme planned for adult and youth members of the church.

### *Special Church Provision for Preschoolers*

Other ministry opportunities purposefully for preschoolers include prenatal ministry, cradle roll ministry, after school care ministry and mother's day out. Prenatal ministry is a ministry to unborn babies through their parents. A prenatal ministry can develop a bond between young parents and the church (Ashcraft 1991:111). As the expectant mother is being ministered to, the unborn child is indirectly being ministered to as well.

Cradle roll ministry is ministry to families with infants and toddlers. The cradle roll ministry goes into homes and also makes provision at the church for the care of infants and toddlers (Wilson 1991:231). The after-school care ministry aims to provide quality care for children after school, especially for children of parents who work outside the home and may not come back from work by the time the school closes. Parents in the workforce often require care for their



preschool-aged children and before and after school care for their school-age youngsters (Choun and Lawson 1993:251). Mothers' day out is a day set aside to give mothers with preschoolers free time and rest time while preschoolers are being lovingly cared for by the church for free or at an affordable token fee.

The alert local church can do much to support and aid parents in their role of child training by providing training for parents on how to rear their children, providing the home with a programme of Christian education that supplements and supports parents in their task of nurture and by providing a programme of Christian education that incorporates biblical principles of child nurture. Furthermore, churches can provide husband and wife teams who can function like parents to the preschoolers as children should have experiences that are like a close-knit family and not be lost in the crowd (Getz and Getz 1986:588).

Where the church has provisions as stated above, parents should cooperate with teachers and children's workers in all areas, including discipline. Parents should encourage their children to be part of a Christian education programme by taking them to church for programmes on time, talking about the importance of church programmes, encouraging children to prepare for church meetings and lessons, encouraging Bible reading and scripture memorization. They should also encourage the workers who minister to children, among other things.

### *Parent-Church Caregiver Meetings*

In working together to care for and minister to pre-schoolers, parents and church workers need to have times when they meet. From the research done in the focus group discussions, only one church had formal parent-teacher meetings and it was held only twice in a particular year and annually thereafter for a short time. It was not sustained after the children's pastor left for another church. Others have informal discussions with parents – one on one – but mostly when there is a challenge or something that needs to be corrected in the preschooler's life rather than a regular communication of the content of learning, how to understand and care for the preschooler and such matters.

Though her book was published in 1958 and focused on the kindergarten as a church-school plan Dillard (1958:132-141) has useful information on the church and parents working together. The ‘teachers’ in the church need to prayerfully plan and think through the kinds of meetings that can help parents understand their preschoolers better and the methods to employ for each meeting. Options include lectures, discussion, films, observation, and individual conferences, among others. Such meetings need to be publicized ahead of time, parents carried along, and they need to be made worth the time parents and church workers invest in it. There should be specific discussions to help parents improve on the care of their preschoolers and some of the things discussed above may be included.

## **Conclusion**

There is no better time to take the teaching of God to children (and especially preschoolers) more seriously than at this time of the life and existence of the world, nation, church and family. Ministry to preschoolers is a divine assignment given to parents and the home which has to be done in partnership with the church. Parents and the church should work together to lovingly provide for preschoolers physically, emotionally and spiritually by providing for their cognitive, physical, spiritual and all-round development. Parents should constantly remember that the care of their preschoolers is their divine assignment and the church should remember she is Christ’s body who should equip, strengthen and support parents in this assignment.

Beyond physical provisions of food, shelter and safety, preschoolers should be given an enabling emotional environment both at home and in the church where they are safe to express their feelings with adults to guide them. They need to be trained by parents and church workers to be the social beings that God made them – sharing toys and utensils in love, yet recognising individual differences and the need for healthcare. While some Nigerian cultural values and practices are okay for the care of preschoolers, others need to be re-examined in the light of scripture, educational exposure and health principles.

There is a need to improve on care for and ministry to preschoolers in terms of the understanding that the command is to parents originally, in terms of the provision of adequate healthy food and water, an appropriate ratio of

caregivers to preschoolers, toilet facilities, sleeping provisions that are healthy, age-appropriate teaching and in many other areas. Each home and each church need to evaluate their current situation and improve on ministry to their preschoolers – beginning with the parents and being supported by the church. Christian educators should help parents and the church understand their respective roles, train them, have meetings with them and provide the needed curriculum, materials and methods that will help them. Churches, through their Education Ministry, need to agree on a benchmark for preschool ministry so all preschoolers will benefit from quality care. When all work together, the goal of Christian education in respect to ministering to preschoolers will improve and the family and church could be said to have obeyed Christ’s instruction to let the little children come.

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