

P. Musoni

Dr. P. Musoni, Department
African Religion, Culture and
Philosophy, University of
KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.
E-mail: musonip@ukzn.ac.za
ORCID: [https://orcid.org/
0000-0002-4597-8526](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4597-8526)

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Dynamics of health and wellness at an African Pentecostal Church-related institution in Zimbabwe: Implications for theological beliefs and values

ABSTRACT

The article explores the challenges faced by God's Grace University in Zimbabwe (a pseudonym), an African Pentecostal Church-affiliated institution, due to an increase in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among its students. As one of the pioneering African Pentecostal church-affiliated universities in Zimbabwe, it has experienced a significant surge in student enrolment, which coincides with an increase in STI incidents. The information gathered during the research highlights the frequent visits by students to the university clinic for STI treatments, an indication that the university's exclusive dependence on premarital abstinence as a preventive measure is inadequate. To curb the escalating infection rates, the article recommends the implementation of additional STI prevention strategies. Data for the article was gathered through interviews with university administrators and students, employing a descriptive phenomenological approach and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Due to ethical considerations, the names of participants and the organisation have been omitted.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the rising incidence of STDs among adolescents and young adults, particularly among university students in Zimbabwe. Research shows that, in Zimbabwe, with 38% of its population aged between 10 and 24 years, the average age for the first sexual encounter is 15 (Kim *et al.* 2001:4). However, many engage in unprotected sex (Martin *et al.* 2024). Unprotected sex exposes youth to risks such as unintended pregnancies, which can lead to school dropout, early marriage, baby abandonment, and abortions (Kim *et al.* 2001:10). Consequently, sexually active young individuals face the risk of contracting HIV and other STDs (Martin-Smith *et al.* 2018). The article notes that God's Grace University is caught between two conflicting belief systems. On the one hand, the Pentecostal view holds sex as a sacred act reserved only for marriage. Scholars studying Pentecostalism have noted that these churches are fixated on doctrinal dualisms that separate body and spirit, promoting a puritan sexual ethic (Nadar & Jodamus 2019). According to Nadar and Jodamus, rather than promoting safer sexual practices, these churches are known to advocate for abstinence outside of marriage and impose sexual restrictions within it, labelling sex as generally "indecent" (Nadar & Jodamus 2019:1). Burchardt (2011) observes that the push for premarital abstinence, marital fidelity, and a "virtuous" lifestyle is especially strong in Pentecostal Christianity, which is rapidly expanding in urban townships.

On the other hand, the university, as a learning environment, is bustling with young adults and teenagers from diverse religious backgrounds who are reaching sexual maturity. Given this context, the topic of cross-cultural geography gains significance in discussing how a Pentecostal university could convey its theological views on sex and sexuality to students of various faiths. The article is structured into four sections to accomplish its objectives: the first section delves into the broad Pentecostal theology of sexuality; the second section discusses God's Grace University's views on sex and sexuality; the third section analyses the reactions of God's Grace University students to these subjects, and the fourth section offers a conclusion based on the findings of the research.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of STIs among adolescents and youth has turned into one of the most global pandemics in many societies (Martin *et al.* 2024). Recent scholars have argued that the incidence of curable STIs remains high (Martin *et al.* 2024). Although HIV has seen a global decline in incidence over the past two decades, due to technological advances, curable STIs have received significantly less support, and their programming continues to be heavily

compartmentalised (Martin *et al.* 2024). These new STIs are predominantly attributed to unprotected sexual activity. The article examines the reasons behind the shortage of condoms at the God's Grace University clinic under the period reviewed. For Rigillo (2009:17), condom distribution is often banned in church-affiliated institutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

The article adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically employing a phenomenological design to delve into the studied phenomenon. The participant pool included first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students, with 10 selected from each year. Initially, representatives from each year were chosen to recruit further participants through snowball sampling, a method apt for sensitive subjects involving personal matters such as sex and sexuality (Monette *et al.* 2014). The interviews were conducted, using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions, which provided the necessary flexibility for in-depth probing of the participants' responses (Dube *et al.* 2017). To prevent harm, the article adhered to ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were pre-informed about the study's potential impact to enable them to make an informed choice about their participation (Dube *et al.* 2017). They were provided with details regarding the study's purpose, what was required of them, and the duration of their involvement. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no adverse effects for those choosing not to participate. All participant information was kept strictly confidential, irrespective of their social status, health condition, or church membership. The confidentiality agreement encompassed all participants, ensuring that even the actual name of the institution remained undisclosed.

4. AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES' THEOLOGY ON SEX AND SEXUALITY

Zimbabwe is home to numerous church-affiliated academic institutions, including those established by mainstream churches and African Indigenous churches. The article explores the influence of African Pentecostal churches' theology and values concerning sex and sexuality, with God's Grace University serving as a case study for an academic institution affiliated with an African Pentecostal church in Zimbabwe. Kgatle (2019:4) observes that a major issue among various religious communities, especially African Pentecostal churches, is their particular approach to sex and sexuality. Married individuals are counselled to be monogamous, whereas those who are

divorced or widowed are encouraged to practise celibacy. Young people are advised to abstain from sex until marriage. Discussions on sexually STIs and their prevention are often eschewed by African Pentecostal churches, a silence Kgatle (2019:4) ascribes to the Pentecostal tenet of absolute sexual purity. Many African Pentecostal churches seem to hold the view that sex education, especially promoting condom use among the unmarried, leads to increased promiscuity among the youth (Dube 2012:142). By contrast, various governments and NGOs support the “ABC model” (Abstain, Be Faithful, Use Condoms). However, Pentecostals and other faith-based groups oppose the use of condoms, promoting solely abstinence and faithfulness (Mpofu *et al.* 2014:9). Mpofu *et al.* (2014:10) observe that, in Botswana, many African Pentecostal churches emphasise abstinence before marriage (A) and fidelity within marriage (B) as strategies to prevent HIV, consequently dismissing condom use (C). This position frequently results in discord between health institutions and faith-based organisations regarding suitable methods for STI prevention. While faith-based groups focus on abstinence and fidelity, health institutions advocate for proper and consistent condom use, causing ideological clashes over the most effective STI-prevention strategies (Rigillo 2009).

Until recently, African Pentecostalism was recognised for its strict promotion of conformist standards and corrective measures regarding the sexual behaviour and orientation of its members (Kaunda 2016:1). However, the persistent threat of HIV, which has claimed more lives in heterosexual communities in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world, has compelled some newer Pentecostal/prophetic churches to adopt a more open and often explicit stance on matters of sex and sexuality (Kaunda 2016:2). Paul Sanyangore, a Zimbabwean prophet and leader of a Pentecostal church, faced significant backlash from his congregation and peers for advocating condom use, challenging the prevalent belief among born-again Christians that condoms are unsuitable (Kaunda 2016:13).

In 2015, Imo MacDonald, a contributing editor for *Christian Today*, covered the same controversial event, where Pastor Sanyangore distributed the so-called anointed/miracle condoms to his church members (MacDonald 2015). For MacDonald, both married and single women scrambled for “blessed condoms” distributed by Prophet/Pastor Sanyangore in church. During this incident, Pastor Sanyangore was quoted as saying:

God heals and protects, but people should always be vigilant. A woman may come to church, but her husband does not, and some of these men engage in extramarital affairs, making the wife at home the victim. HIV is a reality we must all recognize. We preach, yet some remain unrepentant (Macdonald 2015: n.p.)

Pastor Sanyangore's actions have attracted significant criticism, as such behaviour is not typically expected from a pastor, who is assumed to maintain the sanctity of sex. However, the article indicates that the high demand for so-called anointed condoms, especially among both married and unmarried women, suggests that women are victims, necessitating a shift from a theology that frowns upon condom users, labelling them as promiscuous. Furthermore, Pentecostal preachers should acknowledge that transformation is not instantaneous, and that it is thus necessary to accommodate those deemed weaker by refraining from condemning the use of condoms. The outstanding question remains whether God's Grace University permits the distribution of condoms at its clinic.

5. FINDINGS: GOD'S GRACE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO PREMARITAL SEX AND BEING SEXUALLY ACTIVE

The vast majority of the students interviewed about their perceptions of premarital sex raised several issues. This article found out that most of what they raised about premarital sex reflected certain Christian doctrines about the meaning and value of sex. Female Participant 1 shared the following perception of premarital sex:

As Christians, we are not supposed to engage in sex before marriage. The Bible clearly states that we should flee from sexual immorality. 'Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body' (1 Cor. 6:18) (NIV) (interview: 3 March 2024).

The above interview reveals that premarital sex is viewed as sinful and those who disobey this teaching of the Christian religion, may receive eternal punishment from God. Accordingly, one would, therefore, expect that young people who are affiliated with the Christian faith will be more likely to delay sexual intercourse until marriage. However, this article has found that not all those affiliated with the Christian faith adhere to all the moral codes as prescribed by the Bible.

We noted that participants also understand that the Christian concept of "becoming one flesh", as outlined in Mark 10:9, occurs through sexual intercourse. Accordingly, one participant argued that through sexual relations, one becomes spiritually bound to one's sexual partner and this should only occur within the confines of marriage. Female Participant 2 shared the following in an interview:

I don't believe in sex before marriage because when people have sex, they become one flesh and I want that to happen with the person I will be married to, the person I would share my life with for the rest of my life until death separates us (interview: 3 March 2024).

From the above responses, we also found that the motive behind delayed sexual intercourse is to wait for the right partner. However, previous studies have shown that the factors that promote premarital sex include pressure from peers and partners. This is because both church-related and non-church-related universities have open student recruitment policies that do not discriminate against students based on their religious affiliations.

In addition, female Participant 3 indicated during the interviews that the main reason for abstaining from premarital sex was her willingness to obey God's instructions on sexual chastity:

The main thing is just wanting to please God. Thus, my willingness to please God is the motivational factor and my primary reason for abstinence (interview: 3 March 2024).

Closely related to this, female Participant 4 indicated that abstaining from premarital sex would make marriage more blissful because both partners would love and trust each other more than they would if one of them had had premarital sex.

It's really based on my future relationship with whoever ... So, I think it will enrich the future relationship. I believe marriage will be a lot better if I abstain until that moment (interview: 5 March 2024).

Female Participant 5 argued that abstinence provides one with the moral grounds to serve as a role model:

I wanted to be an example to my younger sisters that a person can save herself from sexual activities until one is married. To show them that it is possible ... as they will see that I have not engaged in premarital sex and I don't have a child and I'm continuing very well with my life (interview: 5 March 2024).

Apart from being a role model, female Participant 6 raised the issue of being hurt emotionally if she initiated sex with someone who might leave her. For her, agreeing to have premarital sex would amount to giving one's body away freely to men.

It's also fear of emotional hurt. When you get into a relationship, someone will use you, but after sex will leave you because most relationships are more about sex and men wanting to satisfy their needs (interview: 5 March 2024).

Therefore, the fear of emotional hurt, of guilt and shame, and of pregnancy was the main reason for abstinence, according to the above interview responses. In addition, female Participant 7 had this to say:

Having seen friends and others around me experience abandonment, I wish to avoid the pain that comes with being left behind. (interview: 10 March 2024).

In the same interview, female Participant 8 also emphasised the emotional aspects of premarital sex:

Having sex means showing your body to someone ... If the relationship breaks, the ex-boyfriend will go about telling his friends that I know this girl. Again, showing someone your body is something that is very sacred. Remember sex is not just a physical act, it's spiritual as well (interview: 10 March 2024).

In summary, for most of the female participants, the desire to abstain was driven by a wish to avoid being emotionally hurt and to prevent sexual abuse.

However, the article also found that, for most of the male participants, in contrast with the views of the female participants, the main reason why they would advocate abstinence over being sexually active was the great fear of being punished by the church (*kuiswa pasi pe shamhu*). According to male Participant 9, the local church often metes out punishment to disobedient individuals. This serves to deter other members from premarital sexual activity:

In most other churches, there is no punishment for premarital sex. But in my church if they find that you have had sex before marriage, you have to go through punishment. So that keeps me away from having sex (interview: 10 March 2024).

There was also the fear of regret or feelings of guilt for defaulting on one's decision to obey God: "I don't want to wake up in the morning and think 'Oh eish, what have I done?'" (interview: 10 March 2024).

For some of the male participants, one of the costs of engaging in premarital sex was being judged by non-Christians. Male Participant 10 indicated that those who proclaim to be Christians are not only watched by their churches or other Christians, but also by collegemates who expect them to maintain high moral standards, including sexual abstinence:

Because of my faith, I was obliged to separate myself from sexual activities, because I thought that people were going to judge me because I said that I am a Christian and now I am doing something else (falling in love). So, I decided to stay away from being sexual[ly] active (interview: 10 March 2024).

Despite all these reasons why one should abstain from premarital sex, the researcher found that most of the participants experienced several challenges with regard to keeping the commandment of abstinence, particularly at university level. One challenge is the fact that God's Grace University, as a church-related academic institution, recruits students not only from the Christian faith background, but also from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, being at university is often the time for discovery and experimentation. Seeing some students in love with someone creates a desire to also have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Thus, in the interviews, I learnt that both male and female participants reported experiencing pressure from their peers to have a boyfriend or girlfriend and to have sex. Among the boys, peer pressure came from sexually experienced friends discussing the pleasures of having sex. Accordingly, male Participant 11 narrated how difficult it was to stay abstinent in the midst of sexually active friends and university mates who constantly discuss sex.

It is not easy because of the environment we live in ... guys talk about sex ... saying 'I had sex with so and so', so peer pressure resulted in me wanting to experience sex. And when they talk about sex, it clicks on my mind that eish! Why am I not trying it? My body even feels sexual[ly] animated. It comes to mind, and therefore I feel like having sex (interview: 13 March 2024).

The above quotation indicates that the main source of indulging into premarital sex is peer pressure. Accordingly, the absence of parents and being at a university are also identified as facilitating thoughts about sex, thereby making it difficult for many students, particularly from Christian backgrounds, to refrain from engaging in sex.

Adding to what was highlighted by male Participant 11, male Participant 12 argues that, in most instances, sexual pressures come from seeing attractive girls in tightfitting dresses.

Seeing girls; sometimes it happens that you are attracted to one of them. And say ooh! My God! why can't I try once and feel what people always talk so much about. That is another challenge. In most cases, when you see a beautiful girl, your eyes are stuck, and your mind just runs there (interview: 3 March 2024).

Male Participant 13 also indicated that he was pressured to have girlfriends to prove that he could entice girls (interview: 13 March 2024). In addition, male Participant 14 concurred with male Participant 13 that he was also pressured by his friends to have a girl to justify their own actions (interview: 13 March 2024). This scenario invariably puts pressure on both boys and girls to have sex. Thus, this article found that the main sources of sexual pressure are

pressure from peers and partners as well as the subtle coercion of partners. Apart from peer pressure, the research found that most of the participants who grew up under church restrictions to sexual activity felt that they need no longer comply with such restrictions at university, because they were no longer watched over by the church leaders (interview: 12 March 2024). For them, although the university emphasised total abstinence, no university law states that courtship has to occur at a church leader's house with the threat of chastisement hanging over their heads for being sexually active at university (interview: 12 March 2024).

However, what remains crucial and unexplored is the fact that, from all the responses given by the participants, none of them raised the fact that abstinence is the "in thing" to prevent oneself from contracting STIs or HIV. None of the participants indicated that they knew or had seen anyone close to them infected with HIV. This may be because of the availability of antiretrovirals (ARVs), many who are affected by the HI virus do not show any signs of being infected. Those who grew up in the early 1990s when the infected were easily identified would avoid premarital sex to avoid contracting the virus, due to acknowledging that it caused an incurable disease and led to many deaths in their respective communities. Against this background, the following section discusses new infections at God's Grace University and a probable hypothesis for the cause of these new infections.

6. DISCUSSION: FACTORS THAT GAVE RISE TO (STIS) AT GOD'S GRACE UNIVERSITY

From the interviews carried out at God's Grace University, I observed that students at the institution comprise a heterogeneous group of people from Christian and non-Christian backgrounds. Accordingly, it can be argued that perhaps the large number of students who visited the God's Grace University clinic for STI-related treatment, were from non-Christian backgrounds. However, this hypothesis can be dismissed on the basis that the Christian youth are youth first, before they are Christians. I argue that this is the challenge facing church-related academic institutions that policymakers tend to overlook. This article argues that the assumption that all university students will be sexually inactive until marriage is false.

From the foregoing, the university clinic advocates an appropriation of Apostle Paul's theology of the weak. Borrowing Paul's theology, "We, who are strong, have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Rom. 15:1) (ESV). Thus, according to the information provided by God's Grace University's clinic staff, between August 2022 and September 2023, there was an increase in the rate of students who visited

the clinic for STI-related treatment. For them, the reason for this increase was perhaps that many of these young university adults were engaging in unprotected sex because the clinic was not allowed to distribute condoms, since the institution was a Christian-related institution.

In an interview, an anonymous health worker from God's Grace University clinic revealed to the researcher that they had requested permission from the university management to operate as a standard health facility, which would include providing condoms to students in need (interview dated 20 March 2024). Despite this, the health worker and his colleagues reported facing resistance. Consequently, they considered enlisting a private voluntary organisation specialising in sexual reproductive health rights for tertiary students to advocate for STI prevention methods for students and staff. Yet, as of now, the distribution of condoms remains prohibited at the university clinic.

The researcher noted that the opposition to condom use at God's Grace University could have contributed to the increase in new STIs at the institution. This opposition to condom use at this university was based on the general Christian doctrine that views the use of condoms as the promotion of promiscuity. In addition, the negation of condom use is based on most of the Pentecostal teachings that emphasise that "he who is born again cannot sin" as the Church literally quotes (1 John 3:9), "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remained in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (King James Version). Thus, based on this Christian teaching, the distribution of condoms was not possible at the university. Therefore, this article argues that, with the increase in new STIs at God's Grace University, there is a need for the reconstruction of a theology at this university to save lives. Mudau (2012:13) notes that there is a serious need to adopt a new theology that addresses sexual issues within Pentecostal Christianity in light of an ever-increasing STI rate, particularly within Pentecostal-related academic institutions. For Mudau (2012), the church has been engaged in the theology of the spirit for too long, ignoring the realities of pandemics such as HIV/AIDS. Thus, to address the problem of new STI-related illnesses, the university should adopt the full approach of the ABC model as part of its obligation to society. Kgatle (2019) supports this and opines that, in light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, faith-based organisations need to interpret the Bible in a new way.

This article contends that there is a need to reconstruct a theology of tolerance because, for Masenya (2003:35), "a theology which fails to address the most urgent questions asked by ordinary people is not theology at all". Thus, in order to reconstruct an impressive theology,

the method of reading the Bible with and from the community can be used to generate and discover a contextually relevant theology of our time. Reading the Bible in the context of the community to highlight gender and other social injustices would serve us well in our search for a healing theology in the time of HIV and AIDS(Masenya 2003:36)

Thus, based on the evidence of the number of students who have visited the university clinic for STIs, this may be an indication that the gospel of total abstinence alone is not producing the desired results at this university. There is a need for the university to admit that most of its students are sexually active, hence, the use of condoms must be considered an added strategy for saving lives, while abstinence can remain as the university's main thrust. This is so because focusing on abstinence only has proved to have its own shortcoming, hence being criticised by the Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council (ZNFPC), who argue that it is unrealistic to expect all university students to comply with such standards of purity (Kim *et al.* 2001).

In such situations, more comprehensive STI-prevention methods should be introduced to address the socio-religious context that makes people vulnerable to new infections within Pentecostal institutions among other church-related institutions. An example of a comprehensive framework is the model known as "SAVE" which stands for safer practices; available medications; voluntary counselling and testing, as well as empowerment (Eriksson *et al.* 2011). The SAVE approach was originally formulated by the African Network for Religious Leaders living with and personally affected by HIV/AIDS (Eriksson *et al.* 2011) as a reaction to the shortcomings of the existing method known as total abstinence for the unmarried and being faithful for the married couples. The SAVE model provides a more holistic approach to preventing STIs, by incorporating the principles of abstinence for youths and being faithful for married couples, as well as providing additional prevention methods such as the use of condoms and an open discussion on sexuality, HIV tests and counselling. Thus, a holistic approach to STIs is the ideal against the backdrop of university students visiting the university clinic for STI treatments during the period reviewed.

This article observes that, while total abstinence for the unmarried protects youths from the risks associated with sex, the practice of total abstinence, in particular, is not without limitations (Mbotho *et al.* 2013). Mbotho *et al.* (2013) consider that individuals may not be able to sustain the practice of abstinence until marriage. Thus, Christian youths who engage in sex may experience feelings of guilt and shame. According to Sadgrove (2007), those who engage in sex before marriage will feel guilty but will also be afraid of being ostracised by the church. Accordingly, this will remove the Pentecostal youth from an environment that may confer protection against the risk of infection, thereby

increasing sexual vulnerabilities (Sadgrove 2007). Thus, emphasising holiness and upright living and what the Church will do to those who have failed to adhere to the prescribed norms, is two-sided. The fact that churches sanction those who break their rules by having sex and that society holds Christians accountable for having premarital sex, could motivate abstinence in the youth. On the other hand, the shame and guilt that come with having sex could serve to push those who are unable to sustain abstinence and, accordingly, have sex in secret, to practise unsafe sex. For instance, studies have shown that Christian youths who engage in sexual relationships, because they are unable to sustain abstinence, are less likely to use condoms (Sadgrove 2007:210). Thus, this article postulates that, at face value, this doctrine of purity sounds noble, but it does not address the practical issues faced by most of the youths in church-related institutions. For instance, the university is composed of youths who abstain and those who cannot abstain. Besides, it is common knowledge that adolescents want to experiment. Therefore, this would suggest that most of the youths are vulnerable to STIs, particularly those who fail to comply with the required standards of sexual purity.

7. CONCLUSION

The main argument advanced in this article is that God's Grace University students who visited the university clinic for STI treatment during the period reviewed, was an indication that the university, despite it being church-related, were not immune to STIs, a global pandemic in universities. This article noted that total abstinence for the unmarried, as the sole method to prevent STIs, had its own challenges, particularly in a university setting. Of importance is the finding that sustaining sexual abstinence is extremely challenging for the Christian youth, mainly due to the university setting which does not only recruit students from Christian backgrounds. Despite the fact that God's Grace University inculcates Christian values, this article has noted that all universities have, by their very nature, a culture that promotes sexual freedom. Most of the students from Christian backgrounds found that the university setting promotes sexual permissiveness since there is no parental policing of their sexual behaviour. This article cited subtle forms of coercion and physical intimacy as threats to sustaining sexual abstinence.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Against this background, this article recommends that the adoption of Paul's theology of the weak be implemented at this university among other church-related universities in Zimbabwe. The reason for this submission is that academic universities' student recruitment policies do not discriminate against students in terms of religious affiliations. Hence, universities always comprise a religious-heterogeneous group of people. Besides, it can be accepted that the vast majority of university students are youths and at most sexually active. Thus, the naïve, unbalanced view of sexual matters that emphasises total abstinence for the unmarried, is a fertile ground for the occurrence of more STIs at most of the church-related universities in the country. Against this background, this article recommends that the God's Grace University clinic must be given full autonomy to operate as a full health centre, by being given permission to distribute condoms to the needy, and must be able to provide HIV and AIDS counselling and testing and all other health support the clinic can offer to the university without religious or theological impediments. This article also recommends that all church-related institutions of higher learning should find a way of talking openly about sex, encourage safer sex, and cultivate a tolerant approach and a holistic view and reconstruction of the theology on sex and sexuality.

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