Going beyond spiritual synoptic into child protection: the contribution of church in caring of orphans and vulnerable children in rural Zimbabwe.

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Abstract
The aim of the study was to get an analysis of the role of church activities in looking after Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (OVCs) in rural areas of Zimbabwe. The study was conducted in Matsai Community in Bikita District, Masvingo Province. The target population for this study consisted of OVCs and their caregivers who were under the jurisdiction of the Church of Christ. Qualitative research design was used and it employed in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and observation methods to gather data. Availability and purposive sampling was used to select 20 OVCs, 10 caregivers, and 4 key informants who participated in the study. Data was gathered, presented and analyzed using thematic frames. The ethics of care theory was used to inform this study. The study found out that the church played a significant role in looking after OVCs in rural areas. It was found out that the church paid for OVCs’ education, provided food and clothes; recruited volunteers to help OVC households; taught OVCs on issues relating to health, career guidance, and abuse. It was found out that OVCs in the rural areas faced challenges that were poverty induced hence the church was found to be providing worthwhile services through its activities in looking after OVCs. Government and the civil society organizations were therefore encouraged to come into rural areas to join resources with the church so as to fully look after OVCs in rural areas.

Key Words: church; child protection; Matsai community; Zimbabwe

Introduction
The church is known to be an abiding institution with a long history of compassion. It poses a cherished resource that has nourished communities across generations (Chitando, 2007). Considering the constrained government support to OVCs in the rural areas, the church has since then assumed the duty of looking after these children in rural areas. It is against this background that this study sought to get an analysis of the effectiveness of the Church.
of Christ in looking after OVCs in Matsai Community, a rural community in Mavungo Province in Zimbabwe. Matsai community is in Bikita district which falls under natural region five. The area is characterised by very limited rainfall and to a larger extent, lacks any meaningful economic activities. Generally households are poor and people survive on gardening. Given this situation, the state of OVC can be envisioned.

To the church, looking after orphans and other vulnerable children is an obligation that lies at the essence of the Christian religion. Drawing from their Christian Bible which is to them, their manual and God speaking mouthpiece, there are a number of verses and chapters that give reference to the care of the orphans and widows. According to Carr (2013), in the Christian community, true religion is that of looking after orphans and widows. The central verse from the bible pointing to the church’s responsibility towards orphans is James 1: 27 which says, “Pure and genuine religion in sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in times of their distress and refusing to be corrupted by the world” (NLT).

In Isaiah 1:7 Christians are commanded to ‘defend the cause of the fatherless’. Looking after orphans by the Christian community is therefore a way of worshiping and a sign of obedience to God’s command. A church practicing genuine, authentic and true religion is therefore measured by its contribution to looking after orphans and other vulnerable children. The church, therefore cannot relegate child welfare and protection to the secular world and governments alone but should be on the frontline to offer support to children in need (Carr, 2013). According to Bergeron (2012), the global orphan crisis is too serious to ignore and the biblical call is too plain to miss. As the church therefore awakens to the outcry of orphans and other vulnerable children at its doorstep, in the very communities they are established, it should dispatch the vast resources entrusted to it.

According to Knight (2012), caring for orphans and children of the poor was the practice of early Christians. McKenna (1911) and Knight (2012) concurs that widows and deaconesses of the early church took orphans into their homes. Due to this custom, the terms widows and orphans are so often found joined together in ancient Christian literature. According to UHLHORN (1885:185), Christian Charity in Ancient church, “it would also often happen that individual members of the church would receive orphans and children of the poor especially those whose parents had perished of persecutions and brethren who had no children would also take orphans as their children”. The taking of orphans to rear and giving them a place in a new family circle has always been an honoured custom amongst good people in all times. In simple communities as rural areas, it is the sole solution to the plight of orphans and other vulnerable children. Equally undeniable in the literature, however, are discussions of “proper” use of theology; examples of this include scripture’s emphasis on children as holy and Jesus’ command to protect the innocence of childhood (DeVries, 2001; Linder, 2006).
O’Neill et al (2010) notes that child advocates rely upon scripture that speaks of the holiness of children and the value of childhood:

- “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belong the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:14-15, New International Version).

- “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin” (Luke 17:1-2).

- “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” (Proverbs 31:8).

The church is one of the few well organised institutions in rural areas and better placed to respond to the call of orphans and other vulnerable children. According to Bergeron (2012) the church is entrusted with resources that come to it collectively from its members. Davelaar et al (2011) notes that the donor community is also likely to target the church in society, due to the trust drawn from its Christian values of care, honest and compassion towards the needy and the vulnerable. This is supported by Birdsall (2005) who notes that many international donors prioritise rural areas and this signifies the upsurge of indigenous responses to the plight of orphans and other vulnerable children. The church therefore has no choice to ignore its call to humanitarian duty and moral responsibility. OVCs exist in the very communities the churches are established in and are congregates of the same. Should they go hungry and naked amongst such religious and moral Christian congregation? Should they stay out of school and be denied health care? More persistently, should they live without a family in a Christian community? What really is the church doing to support OVCs and with what effects? Thus the Good Shepherd has long served as a Christian symbol for the protective, nurturing, healing caregiver. It brings up images of a leader who provides for the vulnerable, one who guides gently and protects his flock with the ferocity of a lion.

Ideally the government should look after OVCs because it has the obligation under the law to do so, a duty it is failing to fulfill. The present situation is therefore that, churches in pursuant of their Christian social and religious responsibilities towards OVCs are looking after these children in rural areas where government efforts seldomly reach. Less attention has been paid to documenting and analysing the activities of Christian churches in rural areas of Zimbabwe. As a result much remains to be understood about the nature, scope and scale of Christian churches’ activities towards OVCs in rural areas. The effectiveness by which churches are carrying out their work of looking after OVCs is not fairly known. Therefore, the
plight of children who need support would continue unabated despite all effort by churches to improve children’s well-being, might there be challenges with regard to church activities in looking after OVCs.

**Research Materials and Methodology**

The study was conducted in Matsai, a rural community in Bikita district in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe, particularly covering parts of ward one, two and three. It is also where Church of Christ is based and more strongly reputable. The researchers were therefore, interested in analysing the effectiveness of Church of Christ’s activities in looking after orphans and other vulnerable children in Matsai community. The study adopted a qualitative research design. The study thus adopted the values of interpretivist school of thought where methodology utilizes open-ended, in-depth; semi-structured or close structured interviews, observations and group discussions to explore and understand the attitudes, opinions, feelings and behaviour of individuals or group of individuals.

The sample for this study included 20 OVCs (10 boys and 10 girls) who participated in in-depth interviews and in focus group discussions, 10 caregivers who participated in a focus group discussion and 4 key informants who participated in in-depth interviews. Availability sampling was used to identify the children and caregiver while purposive sampling was used to select the key informants. A small sample was chosen because interpretivist approach used in this study was time consuming hence a small number was easy to manage given the time. Small sample sizes were also used in focus groups to maximize on probing and soliciting for clarification and elaboration within the context of face validity during the discussions.

The researchers informed all participants of the objectives of the investigation. It was made it clear from the onset that participants were at liberty to withdraw their participation anytime they felt to want to do so, without any fear of contradiction. The participants were reminded of this right every time prior to any focus group discussion and or in-depth interview. The researchers made it known to the participants that information they provided was confidential and would be used only for the purposes of the research. Everything was documented and presented in a way that was not identifiable as referring to any person in general or particular terms. Anonymity was assured through the use of pseudo names throughout the study.
Research Results

Diagram 1: Services offered to OVCs by the church

Source: OVCs and Caregivers Focus Group Discussions.

Diagram 2 shows the services that are provided by the Church of Christ in Matsai. The church’s activities in looking after OVCs target the individual child, the family, and the community as demonstrated by diagram above. The data was collected during focus group discussions and further probing was done during in-depth interviews and supported by key informants.

Education for OVCs

The Church of Christ in Matsai targets 100 OVCs in the community. The church has 10 congregations and each congregation has an average number of 10 OVCs. The central administration of the church is at Matsai Christian Life Centre where the overall coordination of the OVC Ministry is administered. The congregations made sure that all the OVCs in their communities are attending school. The church paid the school fees and provided stationery needed by these children. Five pastors lead and supervised the programs. The congregations pull its resources together and the programme is administered at one place. Twelve of the OVCs selected for this study are being sent to school by the Church of Christ. All of them appreciated the role of the church given the challenges they would otherwise face in the absence of a church. One of the participants noted:

“The church has really been helpful to us as orphans because we could not pay school fees on our own. At one time some of us had quit going to school but the church came
to our rescue. We really see the hand of God through our church.”

Caregivers were equally relieved by the church’s support of OVCs’ education. All of them in the focus group discussions unanimously agreed to the vital role the church plays in Matsai.

**Recruitment of volunteers**

The Church of Christ in Matsai has recruited volunteers to visit OVC homes. The church realized that some OVCs need support with a range of activities given that a lot of them stay with their grandmothers who are advanced in age to take proper care of them. Volunteers from the church who are men and women often helped OVC homes with buckets of water and firewood. Each OVC household has a volunteer to whom they can go to, should they need anything. Pastors also frequent OVC homes to consistently monitor their welfare and talk to them about their needs. The volunteers were responsible for helping the OVCs with homework if they are in primary schools and would make sure that all the OVCs are attending school. During in-depth interviews, one of the OVC participants stated:

“People from the church have always been assisting us with water and firewood which makes domestic work easier after school. Even when one has homework, one knows who to approach. The pastors visit us often to inquire if there is anything we need and this encourages us a lot to know that people love us.”

The approach of visiting children and assigning adults to help OVCs boosted the OVCs’ confidence, sense of self worth, and dignity. The findings from OVCs echoes the same sentiments with the ethics of care theory which states that when the vulnerable realises that someone is concerned about them, their confidence and self worth are reinforced. During the process of care, rapport and trust are developed which creates a positive nurturing relationship.

**Provision of food and clothing**

Although the supply of food and clothing to OVCs is not unfailing, the Church of Christ seeks to feed and clothes the OVCs in Matsai. From its own resources and those it receives from well wishers and donors, the church always targets the OVCs. The Church of Christ in Matsai has got strong ties with American Churches of Christ such as Westerville and Pinedale Christian Churches which sometimes donate food and clothes. The Church runs the ‘Maheu Programme’ for community children where they come to their respective congregations three days a week for Maheu nutritious drink so as to contribute to their diet which usually in the case of OVCs lacks variety. During the OVCs focus group discussions all the children attested to the importance of the Maheu Programme which they look forward to every week. The study also found out that there are some OVCs whose welfare is fully taken care of by the church. One of the children who stay at Matsai Christian Life Centre noted that:

“Our welfare here is taken care of by the church since my parents died and I had no one to care for me. The church has accepted me and gave me shelter, food, clothes and education. Right now I am a student nurse at a local hospital and I will always be
indebted and beholden to the church’s love and generosity”.

Moral education and HIV/ AIDS and abuse awareness

The Church of Christ in Matsai has also targeted OVCs for its youth programmes. The church taught children on moral lessons of love, respect and care of others referencing to its demonstration of the same. In these programmes, pertinent issues such as HIV and AIDS as well as drug abuse are discussed. Issues to do with abstaining from sexual activities are emphasised in the church teachings. The pastor said, “It is also our primary responsibility as the church to look after children’s spiritual, social and educational lives. To this effect we devote out time to counsel them, individually and collectively, in the biblical ways of love, respect and compassion towards others. We are also the custodians of morality and we emphasize on purity of character especially in the face of HIV and AIDS as well as the use of drugs, for all these, our God detest”.

The church also instils awareness in children especially OVCs about abuse. Orphaned children are more vulnerable when it comes to abuse; therefore the church sought to empower them with knowledge so they also take a proactive approach to protect themselves. OVCs participants showed awareness concerning HIV and AIDS as well as forms of abuse that they should be aware of. More so, adolescence and teenager OVCs expressed knowledge about their sexual health which they got from the church and their schools.

Provision of health and sanitation services

Considering the fact that most OVCs face financial challenges, the Church of Christ has always been on alert to respond to their health needs. The study area is a malaria prone area hence children are the most risk and the church members are always on watch and call should any child fall sick. The church was eager to avoid past mistakes when some OVCs died because of delaying to take that child to the hospital. The pastor noted that: “We are always on watch as a church to always respond to the health needs of OVCs because in most cases there is no money or an adult person close by to assist. So through our visits as pastors and the regular check-ups by our volunteers, OVCs under our jurisdiction as the Church of Christ in Matsai are under watch”.

OVC teenage girls are also provided with sanitary wear by the church through Pastors’ wives. The church was aware of the difficulties OVC girls encounter in accessing sanitary wear and so they made them available. The study therefore found out that lack of sanitary wear would otherwise cause a lot of anxiety among the OVC girls which would lead to depression and loss of self esteem. The provision of sanitary wear by the church is something that girls are proud of. It is an expression of total care of the human person. This is the consummation of care as described by the ethics of care theory as the natural and universal human attribute (Foster et al, 1996). T is also noted that when the vulnerable realises that someone is concerned about them, their confidence and self worth are reinforced.
Strengthening of the extended family system and the community caring network

The study also realised the impact of the Church of Christ in Matsai pertaining to its role in strengthening the extended family systems. With the adversities of economic circumstances in Zimbabwe, the extended family is struggling to secure basic needs for OVCs which include school fees, food and medical care. Caregivers agreed to the fact that they were encouraged to accept OVCs into their families, relying upon the assistance that would come from the church as they look after them. The traditional incumbents of Matsai community who was included in the study as one of the key informants gave their analysis of the effectiveness of the Church of Christ in looking after OVCs as follows:

“The church is helping keeping extended families and kinship groups together. I am honoured as the chief that children are growing up amongst their own people and families cared by their relatives as was the situation in the past. God and the ancestors will bless us and the spirit of the dead will rest in peace. Also, caring for our children in our communities is investing our future in them because they are going to look after us and the church as well. In support of the good work started by the church, every year I make sure that Zunde fields are farmed so that OVCs will get food”.

In agreement to the subject raised by the traditional leaders, the Pastor also attested to the support the church is receiving from the people who are former beneficiaries of the church’s support.

“We are very grateful and encouraged to look after OVCs because at the end of the day we are capacitating the community to look after itself. Education is an investment and if I must say the truth, the significant part of our resources channelled to these children comes from former beneficiaries of the same programme who have made it in life. We have over the past been blessed with teachers, nurses, police, heads of schools, social workers among others and these have organised themselves to support the work that we are doing for God here in Matsai”.

Challenges faced by the church of Christ in looking after OVCs in Matsai community.

Lack of adequate resources

In its endeavour to look after OVCs, the Church of Christ in Matsai faces some challenges. The study found out that the most daunting challenge relates to lack of adequate resources. The funding for OVCs programme is heavily dependent on donors, congregants’ offerings, and former beneficiaries’ contributions. It was learnt from the study that there are times when the church would be having debts to schools because they would have failed to gather enough resources in time. It should also be noted that there are other groups of people in the community who are poor and destitute some of whom the church again is obliged to also assist. The pastor summarised the above situation by saying:

“The church faces a number of challenges in its endeavour to look after OVCs in Matsai community. Our sources of resources are limited and not consistence. It takes time to get all the money we need for school fees
and most times we make arrangements with schools to pay in instalments or later after the dates. Whilst our budget is so tight, we are called unto serving more need groups of people in this community as the poor, the sick and the old”.

**Lack of professional personnel**

Another challenge that the church faces as was observed by the researchers is lack of professional persons. The study found out that the church has employed only 5 pastors to work with ten congregations and the whole community of Matsai. While they can go a long way, there is also a need for different professionals as to bring diversity and creativeness in the programmes. Social workers are such persons well trained and specialised in child welfare and practice such that their inclusion would add value to programmes designed for children as well as in community development. The Church of Christ in Matsai however, lacks the benefits of such professionals hence the programmes sometimes lack research and information for which to base its activities on.

**Lack of communication and consultation**

There is also lack of communication and consultation amongst the church, the OVCs and the caregivers which results in some conflict. There are times when the church and caregivers would want to children at the same time. One participant stated that:

“Most times we are summoned at church without the knowledge of our guardians. This does not go well with them and they would sometimes tell us to stay at church forever.”

This scenario can therefore be said to be at variance with the ethics of care theory which calls for reciprocal relationships of respect and trust between the carers and the cared for (Foster *et al*, 1996). The theory however, goes on to explain that while it is ideal that there has to be consideration of the cared for’s point of view, it does not mean the one caring does what the cared for desires in all situations.

**Government bureaucracy**

The Church of Christ in Matsai also faced bureaucratic challenges when it comes to its activities. It was found out that the church should always inform the government authorities before they implement any program or project. The rigorous nature of the procedures and regulations to be followed were found to be expensive and time consuming, and many times act as deterrent factor to the care of OVCs. The headmaster, one of the key informants narrated a scenario as follows:

“Government regulations can be very discouraging to organisations and individuals willing to help children. They take a lot of time to approve things. For about 5 months now, we have been working with the Church and pastors to get permission to provide nutritious rice to children but the government is delaying. Even when the church wants to donate little items as balls and stationery to our schools they have to pass through a lot of offices before they get approval. We have asked our Member of Parliament to look into the matter”

The findings were found to be diametrically opposed to the churches in Uganda. Churches in Uganda submit their general program in form of project formats and
drafted plan of operation for a period of five years. The plans are aligned with the national development plan. This level of organisation avoids inconveniences because churches will implement programs already provided in the national action plan anytime when resources permit them.

**Discussions**

Today, children are involved in a web of community systems such as schools, sports and music activities, civic groups, social service agencies, and church-based youth groups; thus, it has become increasingly difficult for one shepherd to oversee the flock (O’Neill et al, 2010). Churches today are taking care of orphans and other vulnerable children in both urban and rural areas. There are many Christian Homes and programmes established for the welfare of orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe. The modern church today has both material and human resources to enable it to look after orphans and other vulnerable children. According to Chitando (2007), the church has an astounding competence to recruit volunteers towards the care of orphans. With many churches having social workers, teachers, doctors, police officers, politicians and many other professional persons, it is quite easy for the church to develop and run an orphan care programme that is comprehensive and effective. Christian social workers in churches play a very significant role in working directly with orphans to help them resolve common feelings such as confusion, behavioural issues and assisting with placement and as mentors to children of school going age and adoptees (Davelaar et al, 2011).

The Church of Christ is one of its own kind. It has taken the gospel of Christ to practical levels and as schools was humbled by their support of OVCs. Over the years community have witnessed a lot of children’s lives changing for the better because the church has chosen not to be ignorant of their plight. The church always encouraged children to work hard and be able to remember this church with resources when they become successful so that the good work can continue to repeat itself in this community. The information provided above showed the Church of Christ in Matsai’s dedication to educate OVCs. In addition to paying school fees, the church also made sure to assist children with school stationery. This commitment to help is in tandem with the ethics of care theory which has it that in helping, there is willingness to act and intervening on behalf of those that are in need or hurting (Ai et al, 2009). The church understands that lack of education to children is likely to result in lasting effects as they mature into adulthood (Hallencreutz, 1998). Educating children is a prime move towards human capital development that arguably is a linchpin towards political, economic and social transformation of the communities. Ultimately, there was a general unanimity among church leaders that education is precursor to fundamental change to curb problems facing OVC and community at large.

Volunteers also take care of the OVC households’ garden during the week when they are in schools. Almost all the Church of
Christ members are called upon by the Pastors to water and care for OVCs and the aged people’s gardens. The church in Matsai is therefore unswerving to directly or indirectly serve the OVCs and make sure they are not disadvantaged. The church is committed to look after them whilst they are in their families under the care of their relatives. The church would expect the relatives to assimilate the OVCs in their family set ups and at the same time the church would do her best to look after them while they are in family environment. This is line with Zimbabwe’s national orphan care policy, which considers family as a cog and fundamental component for better development of a child. In supporting caregivers, the church understands that caring for OVCs is an overwhelming duty hence there is need for assistance as according to the ethics of care theory (Davidson, 2010). It is on this background that the church has recruited volunteers so as to make the caregivers duties easier in caring for OVCs. The idea of church volunteers helping children with their school work is also synonymous with the findings of Miller et al (2006) in Botswana where faith based organisations utilize community church halls to help OVCs with academic work and offer extra lessons. The challenge however that was observed in the rural areas is lack of academically knowledgeable volunteers especially to assist secondary school children.

OVC caregivers have also resorted to the church for support when in need. Due to drought in Matsai caused by very little rainfall, there are times when families struggle to get food to eat and turn to the church for support either with money or with grain. It was noted that the church is really adjacent government because they accept our request for assistance in the face of this drought. Churches are obliged to respond to the needs of OVCs because it is within its mission to do so. The church therefore dispatched resources it has towards welfare of OVCs. Bergeron (2012) noted that by so doing the church acts as the proxy of Christ’s righteousness and mercy on earth. The widely held belief among church leaders that prayer has the potential to strengthen healthy families, heal victims, and reform abusers. This is indeed a point of disputation between the religious community and some social service professionals. Similar studies unearthed that prayer has been linked to improved quality of life among cancer patients and post-operative cardiac patients (Ai et al, 2009). Although the above argument may be statistically insurmountable to approve, it the common belief among Matsai, like elsewhere among Christian community that prayers are indispensable tools in dealing with earthly problems.

Health is one of basic fundamental human right. Hence the church is conscious of such requisite right to children. All the girls (participants) expressed knowledge of their sexual and reproductive health issues most of which they are taught as girls at church by pastors’ wives and/or female church members with some knowledge of such issues during arranged lessons. They also expressed knowledge of sexual abuse by naming areas of their bodies that should not
be touched by men. Similarly, it is argued that good principles of community mental health have been demonstrated religious sections. Health and church has essence and genesis in God. The principle is that there is a balm in Gilead and that the Creator, the Great physician, cares for the health and well-being of all people. The study therefore comprehended the conceivable influence of the church in looking after the health children in Matsai especially those that are more susceptible. Knowledge is power and social workers must tap the church as a resource, is one step further towards the protection of children in communities. Muturi (2008)’s findings in Jamaica noted that churches hold credibility with the people because of their presence at the grass root level and their awareness of the realities of OVCs. Utilizing forgoing arguments can be arguably a stepping step towards the development spiritually sensitive social work- a missing link in developing countries.

The church was therefore found to be an institution well fitted into the cultural context of the people of Matsai and has the support of the traditional leadership. Monasch and Boerma (2004) noted that 90% of OVCs in Africa and mostly in rural areas are under the care and support of the extended family. Williamson and Greenberg (2010), however argue that the extended family system is failing to cope without the external support for instance from the church. According to Davelaar et al (2011), the church is the last remaining community resource in most secluded communities. The Church of Christ in Matsai in tandem with the ethics of reciprocity theory that believes that care for OVCs should be provided within the context of a given culture of the recipients. Gardner (2003) believes that one feels comfortable if assisted by someone who understands him or her and this understanding can only be possible within a common culture between the career and the cared for. Parry (2009) also noted that cultural sensitivity provide a foundation for recognising problems of vulnerable persons. In this case, churches in rural areas must be integrated with entirety in the national child protection frameworks or forms rather leaving them as separate entities in Zimbabwe.

Although the government has the primary mandate to care for OVCs in Zimbabwe, it is also understood that caring for OVCs is considered to be the politics of everyone. Besides censuring the government, the church should also play a role to improve the value and uphold the dignity of everyone. The church therefore has the overall responsibility to provide for the need, the poor and the vulnerable. In the rural areas, the church is said to hold the conscience of the nation and community by sharing into the mission of Christ by caring for OVCs. Miller et al (2006) opines that whenever people’s lives are destroyed and people are living under dehumanising conditions, it becomes a theological issue. The church in Zimbabwe is therefore called to look after OVCs. However, together, service providers and churches have the potential to throw a blanket of security over families and children, replacing the all too permeable cover that exists in today’s social
service or security systems. The potential of churches to impact their communities is great. Churches are irrefutably helping the government in safeguarding the welfare of the children in Zimbabwe like elsewhere in less developed countries.

In rural areas of Zimbabwe, the church holds a very critical position since its inauguration. Whilst the colonial government concentrated efforts in urban areas, the churches through missionary work were the sole providers of social services in rural areas. In the case of Zimbabwe, the government after independence in 1980 inherited the same system of leaving the welfare of the people in the rural areas to the mercy of the Christian churches. As caring and compassion institutions, churches through missionaries, established hospitals and schools as well as other social welfare services to respond to the needs of need people in the rural areas. With the coming of HIV and AIDS epidemic coupled with economic hardships following the introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs), many people passed on and a lot got poor (Madziwa, 199). The situation created a lot of OVCs and at the same time debilitated the customary care system as the extended family and community support. OVC crisis started and the church naturally came into the centre stage of care. Many church responses initially were however, more concentrated on establishing institutions instead of strengthening the capacities of the extended families and communities so OVCs can grow and develop in their communities in family environments (Foster, 2004). Williams and Greenberg (2010) argue that what OVCs want are families and not orphanages/institutions.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The study has found out that churches can be very priceless in looking after OVCs in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. If one considers the church’s role in the area of child care and protection, one can agree that it is a vital institution to society. The Church of Christ in Matsai was found to be far ahead of any government or non-governmental organisations efforts in looking after OVCs in Matsai area. Although it cannot be declared that church activities were the best in looking after OVCs in rural areas, its contributions are imperative. Considering the economic adversity in the country and low levels of incomes in rural areas, it was observed to be a daunting task for the church to raise enough resources to look after OVCs adequately hence other players were encouraged come into the arena of child care and protection.

It is therefore recommended that Church of Christ should initiate projects at church level so as to boost its sources of income and resources. Since their main challenge was lack of ample resources it could be progressive towards sustainability and effectiveness of its activities in looking after OVCs in rural areas. Taking advantage of its capacity to raise projects capital and its ability to recruit volunteers, projects like vegetable production, poultry keeping, piggery production along others may go a long way to bringing resources for the OVC
ministry. Such markets as community people themselves, the local schools, hospitals and the business township can be targeted. The Church of Christ should also engage other churches in Matsai Community for example and allow them to come on board so as to draw resources from a wider perspective. Given the existence of such other churches in rural areas as Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), Roman Catholic, Zion Christian Church, Johane Marange, Postori yekwaMwazha weAfrica, Jehovah Witness Church (Zvapupu ZvaJehovha), and Mugodhi apostolic church, there is a possibility of an ecumenical merging and an establishment of a united organisation to look after OVCs in rural areas. Collective efforts are likely to bring better results compared to solo undertakings. If these churches come together they may draw a lot of strengths from their diversity, different skills and resources.

Since the Church of Christ was found to be a vital institution in child care in rural areas of Zimbabwe, the government through the Department of Child Welfare and Probation Services and Schools of Social Work should target churches for rudimentary training (child care workers) in child welfare issues as children’s rights, child abuse, their health and development so that in the process of looking after them, they will provide proper care. Although the discussion on strategies for forming collaborative relationships was beyond the scope of this investigation, but might include the development of educational groups and committees, dual consultative relationships, and the sharing of resources in order to build trust between churches and service providers.

With reference to bureaucracy, the government is recommended to relax its regulations so as to encourage churches and organisations to look after OVCs in rural areas. Child abuse and neglect is a pervasive problem that cannot be solved by churches, government, or social service agencies in seclusion. If churches are to uphold their duty to nurture and protect children, then they must initiate efforts in the context of their larger community. Collaboration is the only way to ensure that children receive the swift response they deserve in times of crisis and parents receive the systematic support they need to raise healthy families. Although the Christian church has faced significant challenges, findings reveal that church teaching, tradition, and infrastructure offer struggling families promise and hope for the future, along with material resources and social capital. Phenomenal insight must be provided, particularly for service providers who wish to strengthen relationships with local congregations and church leaders who are committed to child protection.

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