

Sexual Misconduct Suspension: The Impact of Guilt on Members of the Church of Pentecost, Ghana

Philip Osei-Korsah

Abstract

The research involved 13 respondents and examined the impact of guilt resulting from suspensions related to sexual misconduct among church members, specifically focusing on The Church of Pentecost (CoP) in Axim. The church practices disciplining members by suspending those found guilty of sexual misconduct, including premarital and extramarital relationships. The study explored the conditions affecting members who had been suspended for such behaviour. Subjective evidence was gathered through in-depth interviews with respondents who were members of The Church of Pentecost in Axim and had experienced suspension for sexual misconduct. A hermeneutical phenomenological approach was adopted for this qualitative study. Existing studies on sexual misconduct and church discipline reveal varying prevalence rates within the church. Notably, The Church of Pentecost in Axim has a suspension prevalence rate of 4% attributed to sexual misconduct. A significant emotional experience reported by those who have been suspended is guilt, a conclusion further supported by scriptural evidence. However, research specifically addressing guilt among suspended church members remains limited. The findings indicate that suspending individuals for sexual misconduct serves as a disciplinary measure employed by the church to confront sexual sin. This study will contribute to the existing literature on the effects of guilt among suspended members and offer recommendations for appropriate pastoral care.

Keywords: Sexual misconduct, suspension, discipline, guilt, healing.

How to cite this article: Osei-Korsah, Philip. "Sexual Misconduct Suspension: The Impact of Guilt on Members of the Church of Pentecost, Ghana." *Pentecost Journal of Theology and Mission* 5, no. 2 (2025): 47-54.

Introduction

Church discipline for sexual misconduct has been extensively studied over the past few decades, revealing significant variances in prevalence rates across different congregations. However, most studies have inadequately addressed the psychological impact of guilt on individuals subjected to disciplinary actions. An unpublished report from the office of The Church of Pentecost in Axim indicates that 4% of its members are currently under suspension due to sexual misconduct. Within the context of The Church of Pentecost, suspension entails the temporary cessation of an individual's involvement in leadership functions and church-related activities as a consequence of violations of

church doctrines, including sexual immorality. This form of public disciplinary action aims to foster an environment of repentance and introspection, distinguishing the Church of Pentecost's approach from other denominations that may opt for more private resolutions to similar issues.

The church community is tasked with addressing the issue of sin through various disciplinary measures, including suspension, which is subsequently accompanied by pastoral care aimed at reformation and healing. Observations from ecclesiastical practices in Ghana suggest that disciplinary actions may result in individuals feeling profoundly forsaken in their Christian faith. Suspended congregants have reported feelings of neglect; however, church leadership contends that the primary objective of suspension is to effect correction, thereby safeguarding the moral integrity of the entire congregation. Thus, discipline should not be seen as punitive retribution for offences but rather as a means to promote personal accountability, encourage healing, and ultimately restore individuals to a state of fellowship and renewed commitment within the Christian faith.

Furthermore, the leadership of The Church of Pentecost contends that suspension is consistent with biblical standards of discipline and restoration, as outlined in Gal. 6:1. However, critics argue that the lack of adequate social support increases emotional distress and fosters feelings of isolation among suspended members. Importantly, there is a notable absence of empirical research examining the psychological consequences of guilt on individuals facing suspension due to sexual misconduct, despite such disciplinary actions being a core component of church practice. This study advocates for the development of a pastoral care counselling framework aimed at facilitating emotional healing for those affected and promoting their successful reintegration into the church community.

In this study, the researcher sought to engage closely with participants who are members of The Church of Pentecost in Axim, gathering subjective evidence through interviews. The study specifically (1) examined the impact of guilt arising from the sexual misconduct suspension on the suspended member of The Church of Pentecost in Axim, (2) explored the activities within the church community that facilitate healing for the suspended member, and (3) investigated the roles and actions of pastors in providing supportive or crisis care to the suspended member within The Church of Pentecost, Ghana.

Methodology

The study employs an interpretive qualitative framework, utilising primary data gathered from semi-structured in-depth interviews. These interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted with 13 suspended members of the CoP. This qualitative methodology is supported by scholars advocating for an inductive approach that prioritises personal significance and underscores the necessity of faithfully capturing the complexities inherent in the phenomenon under investigation.¹ A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives based on their leadership roles and experiences with suspension.

The research focused on non-numerical data gathered from members of The Church of Pentecost in Axim, specifically examining the impact of guilt felt by individuals following their suspension for sexual misconduct. Interview responses were systematically transcribed and analysed through thematic content analysis, revealing consistent emotional, social, and spiritual patterns among the suspended members.

To enhance the validity of participant narratives, we cross-referenced their accounts with pastoral records and church circulars, ensuring alignment with the documented disciplinary procedures. This methodological triangulation allowed for a comprehensive examination of the primary themes and concerns articulated by the suspended individuals, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their experiences.

Research Findings

The findings of the research are summarised as follows:

a) The Impact of Guilt from the Sexual Misconduct Suspension on the Individual Suspended Member

The study revealed that suspensions for sexual misconduct serve as a disciplinary measure implemented by the church to mitigate instances of sexual immorality. In an effort to uphold the moral standards of its congregation, the church has established programmes designed to address and reduce inappropriate behaviours, including sexual misconduct. It was observed that individuals occupying leadership positions – such as worship leaders or those responsible for Scripture readings during services – are prohibited from performing these roles during the suspension period. This approach

¹ John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008).

highlights the church's commitment to maintaining ethical leadership and accountability among its members.

b) Impact of Sexual Misconduct Suspension

The study highlighted the effects of sexual misconduct suspension on the victims. Specifically, it was clear that the suspension elicited emotional responses, including feelings of sadness and shock at the time of the pronouncement. These feelings of shock may stem from the manner in which the suspension announcements are communicated. The findings indicated that those who were suspended experienced a variety of emotional reactions. Victims reported feelings of shame, guilt, sadness, and anger upon hearing the announcements.

The findings indicate that suspensions resulting from sexual misconduct significantly impact an individual's spiritual well-being and relationship with God. Following such suspensions, a notable trend emerges among congregation members to distance themselves from the individuals involved, often labelling them as sinners. Participants reported that after the suspension announcement, many church members began to withdraw social support, leading to outright neglect, even among former close associates. This social ostracism has precipitated profound feelings of isolation in the victims, creating a sense of disownment from the church community.

The research underscores the crucial role of social support in facilitating the reintegration of individuals suspended for sexual misconduct back into the church community. While participants generally reported a lack of substantial support, it was indicated that a handful of church leaders and, in some instances, pastors, provided the necessary assistance. This support network has been identified as a vital component in the reconciliation process, enabling affected individuals to reconnect with the broader societal context. According to the findings, pastoral care facilitates the reintegration of victims into the church both during and after their suspension. This care is driven by compassion, kindness, and mercy towards ill and suffering churchgoers, as well as the broader community. Pastoral care is essential because those who have experienced sexual misconduct are believed to have endured moral harm.

Conclusion

In the historical context of missionary endeavours in Ghana, several churches implemented sexual misconduct suspension as a disciplinary mechanism. This form of suspension functioned as a critical instrument for the early Pentecostal churches in

safeguarding the integrity and sanctity of their congregational communities. Its deterrent effect was substantial, promoting an environment conducive to repentance and restoration, while also ensuring the preservation of church unity and social cohesion. Although criticisms have arisen regarding the severity of this approach, it can be argued that such measures were indispensable. Given the myriad challenges the nascent churches encountered in establishing themselves as foundational bastions of strength and faith within their communities, sexual misconduct suspension was seen as a necessary corrective to uphold moral standards and community integrity. The early Christian communities confronted numerous challenges in their efforts to uphold the sanctity and stability of their congregations. One of the disciplinary measures employed to safeguard these communities against disruptive and detrimental behaviours was the suspension for sexual misconduct. This form of discipline entailed a temporary or permanent revocation of a leadership position or the ability to participate in church worship activities. Suspension was chiefly applied to transgressions such as adultery, theft, and slander, which were perceived to jeopardise the moral and spiritual integrity of the church body.

The early Pentecostal churches in Ghana were fundamentally structured around a collective adherence to faith and the teachings of Jesus Christ. To maintain communal integrity, leaders would expel members whose behaviour disrupted the harmony or contradicted doctrinal principles. The practice of suspending individuals for sexual misconduct served to uphold the unity and moral standards of the congregation, ensuring that all members were accountable to the same ethical guidelines. Additionally, these churches prioritised the preservation of their religious traditions and the sanctity of the church community. Implementing suspensions for moral infractions was considered necessary to safeguard the church's integrity and protect it from the potential corruption posed by unrepentant or immoral individuals. The implementation of suspension due to sexual misconduct served as a significant deterrent for other members who might have contemplated similar misconduct. By publicly addressing the transgressions of offenders, the church aimed to instil a sense of accountability and fear regarding the repercussions of immoral actions. While enforcing accountability was critical, early Pentecostal church doctrine also emphasised the principles of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. The suspension was perceived as a juncture for offenders to engage in introspection regarding their behaviour and seek divine forgiveness. In certain instances, individuals demonstrating authentic remorse and a commitment to restitution were subsequently reintegrated into the community through restorative practices.

The Church of Pentecost, one of the largest churches in Ghana, is known for its strict adherence to moral standards and beliefs without compromise. One of the church's more

controversial practices is the suspension of members for sexual misconduct; this approach has faced criticism as being outdated. However, supporters argue that it serves as a deterrent for believers and helps to maintain moral integrity. As a religious organisation, The Church of Pentecost upholds its values for several reasons, which can be traced back to the core principles of Christianity, as well as the church's mission and vision.

Foremost, The Church of Pentecost acknowledges the critical role that moral frameworks and belief systems play in the spiritual maturation and development of its congregants. As a Christian institution, it prioritises biblical teachings and the principles of righteousness and holiness, which are essential for the ongoing sanctification of believers, aligning them more closely with Christ's likeness. Furthermore, The Church of Pentecost endorses its moral and ethical standards as a guiding compass for its members. It asserts that adherence to the Word of God is a fundamental obligation for Christians and that through the exhibition of virtuous conduct, believers effectively testify to their faith and engage in meaningful evangelistic efforts. Additionally, the preservation of its moral and doctrinal stances is crucial for maintaining the church's spiritual heritage and identity. As a distinct Pentecostal denomination, it possesses unique cultural practices, beliefs, and theological tenets that set it apart from other Christian entities. Therefore, adherence to its institutional values is imperative for sustaining its unique identity and perpetuating the legacy established by its founders. Moreover, the Church of Pentecost aims to provide a robust and stable foundation for its members. By steadfastly upholding its principles, the church seeks to equip individuals with a solid basis from which to navigate life's challenges while fostering a deeper relationship with God.

Finally, The Church of Pentecost upholds a set of moral and ethical standards aimed at safeguarding the well-being of its congregation. Recognising that deviations from these values can lead to moral degradation, spiritual stagnation, and disconnection from the divine, the church prioritises strict adherence to its principles to foster holistic member development and growth. This study has indicated that suspension as a disciplinary measure for sexual misconduct, while intended to uphold church standards, can adversely impact victims. Such suspensions are associated with negative emotional outcomes, including grief, anger, and regret. Moreover, victims may experience unforeseen repercussions that can deteriorate their relationship with God, potentially leading them to distance themselves from God.

To mitigate these unintended consequences for both the individuals affected and the church community, it is imperative for The Church of Pentecost, along with other Christian denominations that enforce suspensions for sexual misconduct, to reevaluate

this disciplinary approach. Enhancements to this process could include the establishment of a robust support system, codified within the church's standing orders or by-laws. Furthermore, it is essential that pastoral staff receive comprehensive training in pastoral care, ensuring that these principles are effectively integrated into their ministry practices.

Recommendations

In light of the concluding findings, several recommendations are proposed for both The Church of Pentecost and future research avenues. First, it is imperative that church authorities develop and implement explicit guidelines governing the suspension process. This should include a well-structured discipleship framework that addresses the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of congregants during the suspension period. Such a framework is vital for facilitating effective restoration while providing comprehensive pastoral care. Additionally, a clear delineation of roles for key stakeholders – namely, the Pastor, church leaders, and the broader congregation – is essential. Second, the integrity of the suspension process must be prioritized to ensure fairness and justice. This necessitates providing a platform for the affected church member to voice their perspective and engage with the allegations made against them. Hearings should be overseen by an impartial adjudicative body, with decisions based on transparent and objective criteria. Third, the rights and beliefs of the suspended church member must be duly respected throughout the process. Fourth, transparency and accountability are crucial in the execution of the suspension process. This can be achieved by publicly disclosing the procedures and making them accessible to all stakeholders. Regular updates on the progress and outcomes of the suspension process should be communicated to the congregation to foster trust and clarity. Fifth, the process must be evaluated for its effectiveness in achieving the intended outcomes, including ensuring adherence to established restoration and reconciliation protocols throughout the suspension.

Finally, future research on the suspension of sexual misconduct in the church should focus on several key areas: identifying and addressing inappropriate behaviour, implementing preventative measures to reduce the occurrence of such misconduct, and providing support for both victims and perpetrators. By taking these steps, religious organisations can foster church communities that are safe and inclusive for all members.

Bibliography

- Barclay, K. "Marriage, Sex, and the Church of Scotland: Exploring Non-conformity amongst the Lower Orders." *The Journal of Religious History* 43, no. 2 (2019): 163-179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12580>.
- Creswell, J. W. *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc, 2008.
- Durso, P. R. "A Word from Pamela R. Durso: Baptists and Clergy Sexual Misconduct." *Review & Expositor* 114, no. 2 (2017): 141-145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637317701098>.
- Garnett, R. W. "Religious Freedom and the Churches: Contemporary Challenges in the United States Today." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (2020): 194-204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946819896077>.
- Gross-Schaefer, A., L. Feldman, and N. Perkwitz. "A Time to Learn: A Comparison of Policies Dealing with Clergy Sexual Misconduct." *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 2 (2011): 223-231. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-010-0310-y>.
- Hammett, J. S., and B. L. Merkle. *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*. B & H Publishing Group, 2012.
- Kleiven, T. "Sexual Misconduct in the Church: What Is It About?" *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 3 (2018): 277-289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0807-3>.
- McInteer, J. "Discipline in the Church." Harding University. Accessed May 18, 2023. <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/mcinteer-sermons-topic/32>.
- Moyo, H. "Pastoral Care in the Healing of Moral Injury: A Case of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i2.2919>.
- Norman, I. D., M. Aikins, and F. N. Binka. "Faith-Based Organizations: Sexual Harassment and Health in Accra-Tema Metropolis." *Sexuality & Culture* 17 (2013): 100-112. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-012-9141-6>.
- Oxford, L. K. *What Healthy Churches Do to Protect Vulnerable Others and Prevent Clergy Sexual Misconduct: Family and Community Ministries*, Volume 25. Baylor University, 2012.
- Stephens, D. W. "'Sex and the Church': Sexuality, Misconduct, and Education in Methodism." *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 6, no. 1 (2011): 32-43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2011.547359>.