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Christian Mentorship for Embracement of the Sacrament of Marriage in Ogembo Town Catholic Church, Kenya

Daniel Bikundo Miruka

Student, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kisii University, Kenya

Dr. Anthony Ichuloi

Lecturers, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kisii University, Kenya

Dr. Daniel Kandagor

Lecturers, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kisii University, Kenya

Abstract:

This study focuses on the role of Christian mentorship in embracing the sacrament of matrimony in Ogembo Town Catholic Church. The study argues that today, in the church membership, there is a serious inconsideration of the institution of marriage as a sacrament to a height that some even opt to substitute it with temporary arrangements (cohabiting) for living together without officially being married in church. Such temporary arrangements can be dissolved whenever either party desires. Many Christians seem to have lost commitment to conducting church marriages. A triangle theory of love and social capital theory was used to enucleate the arguments of the paper. The target population of the study was 400 participants. However, the actual sample size of 120 participants (comprising 2 priests, 4 catechists, 6 married Christian couples, 6 Christian counselors, 93 cohabiting Christians, and 15 local church leaders from all the 15 local churches that compose Ogembo Town Catholic Church) was used to collect data using a questionnaire, interview schedules, and Focused Group Discussions. The study found that:

- *The response of young Catholic Christian couples to mentorship marriage programs was not appealing to many of them,*
- *Christian role models are wanted in the church such that the young couples have no admirable lived experience of role models that encourage them to regularize their marriage in church*

The study recommended that the Catholic Church should emphasize a lived marriage faith that is not only for those married but also for future church marriages; those leading marriage programs to be people of real marriage sacramental life.

Keywords: *Christian mentorship, cohabitation, sacrament of matrimony, modeling*

1. Introduction

Today, in the church membership, there is a serious inconsideration of the institution of marriage as a sacrament to a height that some even opt to substitute it with temporary arrangements (cohabiting) for living together without officially being married in church. Such temporary arrangements can be dissolved whenever either party desires. Many Christians seem to have lost commitment to conducting church marriages. This puts into question the role of Christian mentorship in embracing the sacrament of matrimony. According to Biblical exaltation in Genesis 1& 2, marriage is a permanent institution that forms the core of human meaning in the areas of human needs, such as companionship, procreation, mutual love, encouragement, practical help, and sexual satisfaction among others. Despite these teachings on the sacrament of marriage, marriage in the Catholic Church is struggling against a more insidious attack (cohabitation) that threatens its continued existence and celebration from within the body of the church membership. There is no doubt that cohabitation as a practice shares many of the trappings of marriage outlined in the bible and other tasks. Those who enter it may not necessarily have malicious intentions, and some do not even suspect it is wrong (Bonagura, 2009). However, the acceptance of cohabitation practice should not be misconstrued to replace Christian sacramental marriage.

The fundamental Christian values of marriage to individuals, family, and society stipulated in the biblical teachings should not only be carefully watched, safeguarded, and strengthened but also contextualized and made palatable to those who embrace the sacrament of matrimony (Abanyan et al., 2014). The manner of making it palatable and relevant is to change the shift from the mentorship of those who are already married in church to those who are living in cohabiting union relationships. As argued by Tumuti, Ireri, and Tumuti (2012) in their study "Relationship Guidance Sources, Fears, and Reasons for Marriage among Young Urban Christians", the serious mistake that is often made is to leave mentorship to acquainted friends for guidance, which in most cases is intended for those Christian officially married couples who are experiencing marriage problems. This in itself begs the question: How about those outside the sacrament of marriage but living in cohabiting marriage relationships? The intimate relationship choices of many young adults in the church today depict a culture that increasingly fails to appreciate moral discipline, the inherent value, and the beauty around the sacrament of marriage. Moreover, leaving the mentorship role to cohabitants themselves alone or concentrating the

mentorship role on only those who are already married in the church will be losing a serious mark regarding the place of matrimony as a Christian marriage sacrament.

2. Statement of the Problem

Today, in the church membership, there is a serious inconsideration of the institution of marriage as a sacrament to a height that some even opt to substitute it with temporary arrangements (cohabiting) for living together without officially being married in church. Such temporary arrangements can be dissolved whenever either party desires. Many Christians seem to have lost commitment to conducting church marriages and attending church marriage seminars and programs aimed at mentoring them around the sacrament of matrimony. Despite this, the Catholic Church has been on the frontline in affirming that there is no substitute for the sacrament of matrimony that will bind lifelong marital commitment. The church has not kept quiet in the attempts to curb cohabitation practice that remains to be a threat to a Christian marriage commitment. It does this through various modalities like education through religious instructions on marriage, mentorship, etc. However, there have been no direct attempts to involve the cohabiting church members themselves in the form of mentorship in fighting against the practice that tends to dilute the meaning of matrimony as a sacrament. The efforts made are about mentorship of those who are already wedded in church and are living in their right families. On the other side, the available literature does not suggest practical church remedy measures for the predominant cohabitation practice among Christians in Ogembo Town Catholic Church. These gaps informed this study on Christian marriage mentorship in Ogembo Town Catholic Church, Kenya.

3. Literature Review

The rising trends of cohabitation and premarital sex relationships among Christians are more socially acceptable practices all over the world (Mashau, 2011), including in Christian church institutions. However, mentorship preparation plays a fundamental role in the enterprise of relationships. This is fundamental because the sacrament of matrimony as celebrated by the church is on the verge of falling apart. It is gradually shifting from being the locus of love and mutual nurturing to a hotbed of individual greed. There is no doubt that many factors are contributing to this scenario: materialism, individualism, unemployment, advancement in technology, convenience marriages, inadequate premarital preparation, and abandonment of African family values among many others (Mobegi, et al., 2016). All this is attributed to the rapid modernization of industrialized societies, which has brought changing notions of marriage as was conceived in traditional and conventional societies. Manning & Smock (2009:68) argue that changes in behavior associated with the sexual revolution diminish the connection between sex, marriage, and parenthood. This has made legal marriage less necessary. According to Cohan (2013:10), a higher proportion of those in cohabiting marriage unions opt for this practice because it is more convenient than protracted courtships; it is easier for them to be with each other sexually than when they are living separately. This implies that sexual intimacy is a fundamental drive to cohabitation. Here the literature only looks at the aspect of companionship and lust, leaving out other fundamental goals of marriage like love, procreation, and so on, as preached in the Christian church. Despite the lust-based reason for cohabitation, the literature does not provide sound solutions to the problem of cohabitation. It tends to treat cohabitation as a socially acceptable practice, which in essence, conflicts with the socio-Christian notion of marriage.

Mokame (2013) investigated cohabitation as an alternative or a prelude to marriage in Botswana. The overall results of the study revealed that cohabitation differs from marriage in terms of socio-legal status and the reproductive behavior of women in cohabiting unions. The study also found that cohabitation in Botswana is regarded as a temporary phase before marriage, testing, and confirmation period. Mokame (2013) concluded that while the increasing prevalence of cohabitation does not threaten the institution of marriage in Botswana, it results in delays in the church solemnization and public recognition of the same. The position of Mokame was earlier maintained by Hatari (2009), who contained that many young people cohabit to test their relationships in that by staying together, they are well-positioned to discover whether they are compatible with each other to allow them to marry formally. It is done with the pretension of avoiding the mistake of marrying someone with whom they are fundamentally mismatched. When they find that they are incompatible, and when things become difficult in their union, it is easy to end the relationship by parting ways without the trauma of the divorce in court or legal socio-ecclesial arrangement. However, then Hatari (2009) went further and maintained that even though cohabitation is regarded as a testing moment for a genuine marriage relationship, it forgets to cater to the preservation of societal values and the religious essence of a true marriage relationship. In fact, it violates the church's teaching that involvement in intimate sexual relationships before marriage is fornication and, therefore, a sin (Hatari, 2009). Fundamentally, taking cohabitation practice as a prelude to marriage is a fear of a serious marriage commitment in that partners opt to live together because they fear a permanent commitment (Kansas Bishops, 2014). These authors seem not to acknowledge that cohabitation threatens the institution of marriage, while this study affirms the threatening negative effects of cohabitation on the institution of marriage.

The study by Miller and Sassler (2011:60) indicate that cohabiting is directly linked to financial costs such that those affected by low financial factor opt to live together because they cannot afford the cost of financing themselves in general, including marriage itself. Since they face financial uncertainty, they optimally delay or avoid marriage, which may lead them to further financial hardship. Miller and Sassler (2011:60) further indicate that most young people decide to go against the teaching of the church about marriage as a sacrament due to cultural determinants like dowry demands. This sentiment is echoed by Phiri (2011:92), who states, "With poverty still adversely impacting many African societies, the obligation of bridewealth payment puts on the man and his family an unbearable burden that cannot be settled at once, but in installments". The evidence of these studies is that couples from poorer economic settings are more likely to decide to

cohabit than to marry officially. In the context of this study, this literature indeed brings out economic reasons for not committing oneself to a permanent marriage sacramental union. However, the literature does not offer a community-based engaging solution to resolve the problem of the financial situation of those in cohabitation practice and to allow them to embrace church marriage.

Wood et al. (2012) and Lindquist et al. (2014) bring in another important aspect of premarital education. They argue that high rates of economic disadvantage play a salient role in diminishing the effectiveness of premarital education and all other related factors that enrich marriage.

According to them, low-income couples cannot meet the demands of marriage formation programs that contribute to the quality of marriage. Due to their low-income levels, couples are more likely not to participate fully in premarital programs and therefore lack the skills and knowledge necessary for marriage (Wood et al., 2012). However, the literature does not tell what happens to the union of couples lacking an economic base in relation to cohabitation. It can be insinuated that such a category of couples ends up engaging themselves in cohabitation practice, deeming it unnecessary to have any mentorship skills attained from seminars and workshop arrangements.

The fundamental gap in the above literature is that it undermines a fundamental place of mentorship of those engaged in cohabitation practice. The literature is more on why people engage in cohabitation without giving any attention to what should be done to those in practice itself. The literature does not consider the mentorship aspect of those in cohabiting marriage unions. Further, the literature does not point or shed light on the place of church role models in mentoring those in cohabiting unions. This is the gap this study intended to fill.

4. Methodology

The study investigated the Christian mentorship and embracement of the sacrament of marriage in Ogembo Town Catholic Church, Kenya. This was done by examining various viewpoints of participants on various aspects of marriage mentorship in the church. Different clusters of respondents were involved in the study. The target population of the study was 400 Christians from the Ogembo Town Catholic Church. To determine the sample size for the study, Mugenda & Mugenda (2003) formula of 30% for a target population of less than 1,000 was used, as shown in table 1 below.

Target group	Target Population	Sampling procedure	Sample size	Percentage
Cohabiting Christian Couples	365	Simple random	93	77.5%
Priests	4	Purposive	2	1.7%
Catechists	8	Purposive	4	3.3%
Christian Counsellors	8	Purposive	6	5.0%
Local Church leaders	15	Censors	15	12.5%
Total	400		120	100%

Table 1: Study Groups, Sampling Techniques, and Sample Size
Source: Researcher (2022)

A sample size of 120 respondents (comprising 2 priests, 4 catechists, 6 church married couples, 6 counselors, 93 cohabiting Christians, and 15 local church leaders from all the 15 local churches) was used to collect data using a questionnaire, interview schedules, and interviews. The main purpose of involving different groups of participants was to have a significant representation of the respondents to generalize the study findings on Christian mentorship and the sacrament of matrimony in Ogembo Town Catholic Church, Kenya, to reduce the rising cases of cohabitation among Christians. Quantitative data was collected using the questionnaire for 93 informants, while qualitative data was collected from key informants and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and is presented in verbatim.

5. Results

The presentation of field results on Christian mentorship and the sacrament of matrimony involved data from Christian couples, priests, catechists, Christian counselors, and local church leaders in Ogembo Town Catholic Church. The findings from the questionnaire were thematically presented, as illustrated in table 2 below.

Thematic Item	Agreement	Disagreement
Accompaniment of cohabiting Christian couples by church members	65(69.9%)	28(30.1%)
Religious Counselling to cohabiting couples	60(64.5%)	33(35.5%)
Marriage mentorship seminars for those cohabiting couples	40(43.0%)	53(57.0%)
Economic support to those not able to meet cost of church wedding	14(15.0%)	79(84.9%)
Marriage lived examples to motivate those cohabiting to wed	15(16.1%)	78(83.9%)
Training of marriage mentors	18(19.4)	75(80.6%)

Table 2 Specific Church Marriage Mentorship Roles for Cohabiting Couples
Source: Researcher's Construct, 2022

In table 2, thematically, the study established the following:

On the accompaniment of cohabiting Christian couples by church members, the findings indicated that 65(69.9%) of those who answered the questionnaire agreed with the importance of accompanying cohabiting Christians, while 28(30.1%) were of the contrary opinion.

These findings were corroborated with those from the interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), where a key participant informed:

Church accompaniment of cohabiting couples is a kind of guidance that should not be used to turn those cohabiting into Christians with no judgment of their own. On the contrary, it is meant to develop church families with their own Christian standards. This requires maturity, firm convictions, sufficient church doctrinal knowledge, a refined spirit, and an educated will on the importance of church marriage (Interviewee KINF2, 2022).

Another participant in the interview confirmed:

In the church, there is a family marriage ministry or apostolate meant to help and accompany all those engaged in the marriage vocation. This is organized under the marriage encounter groups, and leadership is charged with the responsibility to organize seminars and workshops to educate all those interested in marriage matters (Interviewee KINF15, 2022).

While a participant in the FGDs was of a different opinion:

There is no organized church structure to accompany those engaged in cohabiting forms of marriage unions. It is left to their volition and sometimes even forced to wed in church. Church members tend to be aloof when it comes to walking together with those who have not wedded in church. Instead, those who cohabit are stigmatized and even excluded by the church membership (Participant in FGDs 3, 2022).

The findings were in agreement with the fact that accompaniment is an essential aspect of mentoring those in cohabiting marriage unions. However, then this is not fully implemented in Ogembo Town Catholic Church. Those who did not wed in the church are sometimes stigmatized and even criticized by the church leaders and other churchgoers, especially those with orthodox Christian faith. These findings are in tandem with Hatari (2009), who asserted that today, many couples find no problem with cohabiting since some regard their cohabiting relationships as trial marriages, which serve as an experiential decision-making time for a long time commitment.

The study noted that at this time, it is essential to consider journeying together with those in a cohabiting relationship as an unstructured moment where they can be assisted spiritually and religiously. This is in line with the Second Vatican Council, which affirms that the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate ... to the height that the member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to himself (Second Vatican Council Decree Apostolicamactuositatem, no. 2).

On the theme of marriage counseling as an essential element in mentorship for cohabiting Christians for the sacrament of matrimony, the findings in table 2 above indicated that 60 (64.5%) of those who answered the questionnaire were in agreement, while a majority of 33(35.5%) were of the contrary opinion. However, the study went further to establish whether counseling is widely used by the church in Ogembo Town Parish. The findings from the interviews and FGDs showed very little use of this tool to help cohabiting Christians. A participant in the interview schedules argued:

Even though pastoral marriage counseling is important in encouraging those who opt for cohabitation, the church has not seriously taken the role played by marriage counseling in enhancing church marriage. There are no marriage counselors in all the local churches of Ogembo Town Parish. In the cases where marriage counseling is done, this is often meant for those who are married in church and are seen to be experiencing problems in their marriage. However, there is no effort replicated for those who are cohabiting and not experiencing problems in their union. It would be good if such is extended to cohabiting Christians (Interviewee KINF10, 2022).

This sentiment was further echoed by a participant in the FGDs who reported:

Whenever counseling is given to couples, it is always done on the grounds that it is for those experiencing problems in their marriage, and counseling is there to resolve their conflicts. However, then, this is a

negative regard for counseling. Moreover, it is often administered formally, undermining the informal ways that are unstructured within everyday life directives. Church marriage counselors have not done much in offering proper guidance and counseling to cohabiting marriage unions, which are termed "illicit" marriage unions (Participant in FGDs 13, 2022).

The findings are consistent with Ndlovu and Hove (2015), who posit that informal counseling has been overshadowed by the formalized, strategized, and skills-based forms of counseling models. Informal church premarital counseling calls on parents, close relatives, and the larger community to journey with those who are yet to officialize their marriage unions in church (Rotich & Starcher, 2016). It is an incentive for them to see the value of a faith-based approach to marriage where other values like conflict resolution skills, childbearing and upbringing, work, service to others, and roles and responsibilities to their immediate families and the community at large are being communicated. This is an aspect that the study underlined for the Catholic Church in Ogembo Town. It is also in line with Collins (2007:34), who opined that today counseling has broadened its acceptance in the Christian community, moving the ministry of counseling to the domain of informal life settings that are grounded on the reality of those receiving this ministry. The study underlined that the Ogembo Town Catholic Church should move marriage counseling to the informal arrangements of the church in a way that involves all Christian couples in the responsibility of being church envoys for marriage. This is fundamental because informal premarital informal education provides experiential knowledge and skills-based training to couples with the aim of building a healthy and sustainable relationship once they are officially married in church (Markman& Rhoades, 2012). Mentorship programs for cohabiting couples were another aspect of the study. The findings showed that 40(43.0%) were in support, while 53(57.0%) were of a contradictory opinion. The study noted that apart from premarital programs for those intending to solemnize their marriage unions in church, there is practically no program dedicated to cohabiting marriage unions. This was voiced by a participant in the FGDs who noted:

Marriage programs are noted to be beneficial to Christians since they give a religious and faith-based meaning to their unions. Unfortunately, in our church, there is practically no program dedicated to cohabiting Christians; no content of any kind, whether formal or informal, is developed to take charge of the reality of Christians having cohabiting unions. When there are no platforms, those in cohabiting unions feel left out by the church and, therefore, not needed by the church (Participant in FGDs 20, 2022).

This sentiment was echoed by another participant in the FGDs who postulated:

Even if there were programs for cohabiting couples, there is a likelihood for those programs to be premised on some misconceptions since many of those Christians cohabiting are already stereotyped and regarded as living in a state of sin. However, they are members of the church who need to be heard and given a chance to voice themselves (Participant in FGDs 11, 2022).

These findings are critical to the pastoral ministry of Ogembo Town Catholic Church, which the church should relook at and find mechanisms to have inclusive ways of realizing the sacrament of matrimony. Furthermore, the findings are supported by Poley (2011), who, in his study on premarital preparation in the Catholic Church, found that most of the marriage preparation programs carried out are insufficient. The same reality was echoed by Coleman (2012) in his assessment of marital preparation in the Catholic Church. He established that the programs used did not have standardized content; some of the programs are taught in one day, and two percent of the providers or presenters did not have any training at all in premarital counseling. Another study by Wilmoth and Smyser (2010) indicated the scarcity of information regarding the use of assessment tools by clergy to ascertain the needs of married couples that require enhancement of their marriages. The findings of the study, as supported by these other studies, pointed to the fact that the Catholic Church in Ogembo Town Parish should widen its scope in making the sacrament of matrimony desirable in the way of giving Christians the necessary knowledge on marriage.

On the item of economic support to those unable to meet the cost of church-wedding, the study findings showed that 14(15.0%) agreed with the postulate that those unable to wed in a church should be helped economically to do so. While an overwhelming majority of 79 (84.9%) participants were of a different opinion. These findings validated those from the interviews and FGDs. A participant in the FGDs asserted:

Since the Christian community cannot help the economically poor cohabiting Christians, they opt to remain in a cohabiting marriage union until they can finance the wedding by themselves. Moreover, even if the Christian community may be willing to finance their marriages, it is shameful to them because they should be able to meet some of the marriage expenses (Participant in FGDs 16, 2022).

On the same, a key participant in the interview schedules was of a different opinion:

The church has emphasized that the most important thing is not the celebration of the church wedding in terms of a feast. The important thing is to receive the blessings and commit oneself to a testimonial church marriage solemnized in the mutual exchange of marriage commitment/promises among the couple. Unfortunately, Christianity has refused to adhere to this church advice (Interviewee KINF19, 2022).

Another key informant from the interview schedules informed:

It is upon the church to vehemently fight against the conventional consumerist form of church marriage that has adversely affected the sacrament of matrimony and come up with contextualized people-based ways that encourage church marriages. If this is not corrected, it will reach a time when the church has to forget the sacrament of matrimony since there will be no members to receive it in Church (Interviewee KINF13, 2022).

The point brought up by these findings is that cohabiting Christians from lower income backgrounds, facing financial uncertainty, opt to delay or avoid church marriage because of the difficulty of financing their wedding. This

makes them go against the teaching of the church about marriage as a sacrament and instead postpone their marriage. The findings are in tandem with Maag and Acs (2015) and Calves (2016), who posited that cohabitation is on the rise among Christians from low-income settings, which has led to a decline in marriages since couples opt to live together in a cohabiting relationships as a preferable way of enjoying mutual companionship and conjugal rights without any of the economic constraints.

The study also found that on marriage-lived examples that motivate those cohabiting to formalize their marriage union in the church, 15(16.1%) agreed with the claim, while 78(83.9%) were of the contrary opinion. This finding from the questionnaire was alarming in that although married couples today play an important role in marriage preparation, in Ogembo Town Catholic church, this seems not to be the reality.

A participant in the interviews informed:

A positive Christian lived experiences of the sacrament of marriage serve as models, witnesses, mentors, and guides for engaged couples. In their specific capacities, they offer practical examples of marital issues and share their day-to-day experiences of the reality of marriage as a sacrament; they present themselves as living examples to engaged couples (Interviewee KINF1, 2022).

While another participant from the FGDs opined:

Today we talk of marriage lived experience, but we experience negative examples from active married church members every day. In my neighborhood, those married in the church are the ones fighting all the time. Some of these people are even leaders in the local churches. There are no positive examples to emulate from those who are married in church. This discourages those who may want to formalize their marriage union in the church (Interviewee KINF17, 2022).

The findings pointed to the challenge of a positive lived experience of marriage that should act as a catalyst for others living in cohabitating marriage unions. For a marriage to have far-reaching positive effects on the lives of others, it must be built upon the foundation of faith. Christian witness to marriage is not a matter of lip service but rather a real-life witness. Married Christians, in virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, connote to others and share in the mystery of love unity with the rest of the Christian family; they help each other to attain holiness in their married life.

Finally, the study sought to examine the contribution of training mentors to enable them to mentor cohabiting couples. The findings from the questionnaire indicated that 18 (19.4%) agreed with the claim, while 75 (80.6%) were of the contrary opinion. The findings were corroborated with those from the interview schedules and FGDs. A participant from the interview schedules noted:

Mentor training ensures a contextualized mentorship of cohabiting couples and enables identifying the needs and critical issues of the mentee couples, thereby ensuring that mentors play their roles effectively. However, there are no such training arrangements in Ogembo Town Catholic Church (Participant in FGDs 16, 2022).

The findings acknowledged that mentors work with mentees on various issues: marriage goals and expectations, communication, conflict resolution, financial planning, household roles, faith issues, and spiritual practices. Because of the role they play, their training is paramount, but, unfortunately, this is not the case in Ogembo Town Catholic Church. The church, if it has to effectively help marriage apostolate, should prioritize the training of mentors.

These field findings are consistent with Bindhi (2003), who posits that effective mentoring can be enhanced through mentor training. However, the incentive should be given to the trainers who invest their valuable time in this valuable apostolate in the church. Similarly, Hobson et al. (2009) highlighted that the key to maximizing the potential benefits and costs of mentoring lies in the realization of a number of conditions for successful mentoring, such as ... preparation of mentors. The key point in the findings is that mentor training is vital to increase mentor capacity, which in turn can increase the effectiveness of mentoring outcome attainment. This is something that the Ogembo Town Catholic church should take seriously by investing in mentorship and improving its quality in the attempts to make the sacrament of matrimony palatable to church members. In so doing it equally encourages veteran trainers to undertake the task of mentoring their cohabiting colleagues (Gagen& Bowie, 2005)

6. Conclusion

The study was about Christian mentorship to embrace the sacrament of matrimony in Ogembo Town Catholic church. It argued that despite the Catholic Church's teachings on the sacrament of marriage, still many Christians are not ready and do not have prospects to solemnize their marriage in church. Instead, they have taken cohabitation practice as their best alternative to marriage. To resolve this problem, the study established that marriage mentoring is an essential and indispensable strategy that can help those engaged in cohabitation to enable them to see the beauty of church marriage. As a journey, mentorship further extends to marriage life after officializing their marriages in church. However, to attain this, Ogembo Town Catholic parish needs solid and committed Christians recognized in their respective communities as role models. The study also established that Ogembo Town Catholic church should restructure its marriage apostolate to attend not only to those who are within the active church life but also develop programs for those who are in cohabiting marriage unions. Traditional marriage apostolate approach dedicated only to those in church does not work. The church must see outside the box and meet those outside her everyday operational circles.

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