

## WELL-BEING OF THE AGED IN UNITED EVANGELICAL CHURCH: EXAMINATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT AS INDICATORS OF BLESSING OR BURDEN.

### Authors & Affiliations

#### AKWU PETER EMMANUEL

Department of Religious and  
Cultural Studies

University of Calabar, Calabar

Email: [eakwu@yahoo.com](mailto:eakwu@yahoo.com)

Phone: 080375149849, 08077880004

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the determinants of perceived quality of life among the elderly congregations of the United Evangelical Church in Calabar, Nigeria. Framed within the societal dichotomy of old age as either a blessing or a burden, the research employs qualitative methods, including oral interviews and textual analysis, to examine how socio-cultural participation, religious engagement, subjective well-being, and health status intersect. Findings reveal a critical dissonance between the church's doctrinal tenets of care and the lived experiences of its aged members, who frequently face social exclusion and a diminished sense of relevance. The analysis demonstrates that sustained religious involvement and robust social ties are positively correlated with higher self-rated well-being and life satisfaction. In contrast, health deterioration and social isolation reinforce perceptions of burden and dependency. The study concludes that the blessing narrative is contingent upon active socio-spiritual integration. It underscores the imperative for faith communities to translate theological values into structured practices that actively foster dignity, purpose, and community participation among the elderly, thereby challenging the conditions that frame ageing as a burden.

**Keywords:** Church, ageing, burden, doctrine, health, care

### Introduction

Old age is a natural yet complex phase of life, often marked by transitions in health, social roles, and psychological states. In Nigeria, the elderly are traditionally revered as custodians of wisdom, but contemporary socioeconomic pressures have altered this perception. The concept of aging as a “blessing” or a “burden” is shaped by cultural, religious, and economic realities. This study explores the trajectories of quality of life among the aged, focusing on socio-cultural participation, religious engagement, subjective well-being, and health as key determinants.

According to the World Health Organization, quality of life refers to individuals' perceptions of their position in life within cultural and value systems (WHO 5). In Nigeria, where communal living and religion are deeply ingrained, these domains play pivotal roles in aging experiences. However, modernization, urbanization, and weakening family systems have eroded traditional care structures, leaving many elderlies in precarious conditions (Ogunbameru 34). Understanding how these factors interact to determine whether aging is seen as a “blessing” or “burden” remains a critical area of inquiry.

In African societies, old age is traditionally regarded as a period of honour, wisdom, and reverence.

The elderly are seen as custodians of moral values, transmitters of culture, and spiritual intercessors for younger generations. However, with the advent of modernization, globalization, and the gradual erosion of extended family systems, the perception and treatment of the aged have undergone significant change. In the United Evangelical Church (UEC) founded as Qua Iboe Church, these shifts invite theological reflection and pastoral action concerning the well-being of older adults.

This paper investigates whether the aged in United Evangelical Church (UEC) communities are perceived and treated as blessings channels of divine grace and living testimonies of faith or as burdens individuals marginalized by declining health, economic dependence, and social neglect. The study employs socio-cultural and religious lenses to explore how engagement in religious and socio-cultural communal activities affects their psychological, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Aging is the most difficult phases of life, a transactional period marked by deteriorating health and loss of energy. It is a period of life with great challenges including seeing the end of a long working life, seeing friends and relatives fall sick and pass away and starting to more closely to see the end of one's life. Social, psychological and health problems are the special concerns of wellbeing of the aged in older population of United Evangelical church who live alone or reside in old home facilities. Many of the aged goes through a lot of psychological and social problems. Many of the aged face multiple challenges of changing family dynamics, mostly children leaving the household and many a times the older population leaving the household of their children. Most frequently, one of the commonest problems that aged face is the issue of psychosocial maladjustment.

### **Method and Theoretical Framework**

This research employs qualitative methods and rely on Oral interviews, theological, sociological and cultural frameworks to highlight how the United Evangelical Church can enhance the dignity, participation, and spiritual vitality of its aging population, its uses secondary textual research materials, including textbooks and journals. Approaching the research from an academic standpoint, and employed descriptive analysis.

This study adopts the Activity Theory and the Religious Coping Model. Activity Theory (Havighurst 309) posits that active engagement in social and cultural activities contributes to life satisfaction in old age. Similarly, the Religious Coping Model emphasizes that spiritual practices and faith offer psychological comfort, resilience, and meaning amid aging challenges (Pargament 104). Both theories jointly explain how the interplay of participation and faith sustains subjective well-being among Nigeria's elderly population.

### **Well-Being and Aging in United Evangelical Church (founded as Qua Iboe)**

Marvin Koller, defined gerontology as the scientific study of aging, an inquiry that differs remarkably from geriatrics which involves the application of gerontological knowledge. In aging as a process, the author opined that most laymen

“...frequently define aging according to chronological categories. Age bracketing in terms of number of years of life appears to be part and parcel of folk culture (4).

The United Evangelical Church (UEC) holds sound biblical doctrine as a core value and believes social action to demonstrate the gospel, which includes caring for the elderly. These doctrinal tenets are based on biblical commands to honor and provide for older adults, treating them with the respect due to parents (1

Timothy 5:1-2, Leviticus 19:32). Scripture also forbids casting the elderly aside in their old age (Psalm 71:9) and commands family members to provide care as a fundamental act of faith (1 Timothy 5:8).

However, as noted in this study earlier, the experience of elderly members often involves social exclusion and a feeling of lost relevance, creating a critical dissonance with these teachings. This gap may stem from modernization pressures on traditional family structures in Nigeria, where a culture of informal care is under strain despite deep-seated values of respect for elders.

For Koller, aging is synonymous with life as humans begin to age right from the womb and the aging process continues throughout life till death. He noted the arguments of Aristotle on which period of life was considered as “prime” and settled upon thirty (30) – thirty five (35) for the body and about forty-nine (49) for the mind and Plato's examination of who should be guardians of the Republic which favoured the elders over youth as well as Cicerol's argument that the status old age was the most advantaged position to achieve (6). He noted also that in numerous preliterate societies, old age brought special privileges and honours and the older persons in such societies were venerated. Even the supreme deity is visualized anthropomorphically as a venerable old man.

Koller pointed out however that the changing technology has eroded the relatively secure and honoured position of the elderly, who were regarded functionality of the social systems. Thus, the advent of mechanization, new and more powerful sources of energy, industrialization, urbanization and specialization has displaced the elderly whose knowledge and sources have become obsolete.

Abiodun Johnson Ogunbodel sees aging as a social category in African cultural entity. He stressed that in every human society; people are socially classified according to age or sex which is the basic for the differentiation of social roles in the society. He noted that the concept of “social age” is a relative concept which varies in different cultural contexts and the conditions affecting adulthood, old age and aging in general varies among cultures (6).

On the issue of African culture and the aged, the Harison Victoria stated that the perception of the aged in traditional society is different from that of the Western society. In her view, the aged in African society are respected, recognized and occupy big status or titles and roles in the society such as the head of the family and having the final say in almost all affairs of the family. Caring for the aged according to her poses little or no problem in African societies as the extended family system assigns this as a responsibility to the younger generation. Also, special privileges are generally graded according to age in African traditional societies. Thus, the religious tradition of the people has a positive influence in the care of their aged which is the focus of this study (125).

Wnuk & Marcinkowski proposed that well-being is multidimensional (33-35). They found that the meaning of life and hope were directly related to psychological well-being in terms of cognitive and emotional measures, however, only in positive directions. They hypothesized that religiosity, including finding the meaning of life and improving hope, might show a positive influence on psychological well-being (35).

Wnuk & Marcinkowski said that psychological well-being and its relationship with meaning of life, an aspect of religiosity, played a major role in their participants' quality of life. As previously discussed, spirituality, health-related behaviours, and psychological well-being all intersect. Božek, et al. (36) found that these three particular aspects of life were significantly related in the realm of acquired education. Acquired education in this instance means the subconscious process of retaining knowledge.

Wnuk & Marcinkowski found that spirituality and health-related behaviours were linked to psychological well-being and spirituality associations with psychological well-being were stronger in the students who were studying aspects of the human mind and spirit. High levels of psychological well-being are associated with a “lower risk of depression, a lower possibility of displaying risk behaviour, a decreased immune cell expression of a conserved transcriptional response to adversity” (33-38).

Wellbeing and happiness mean different things to different people. Happiness, joy, and subjective well-being are related but distinct concepts. Myers and Diener explored happiness and showed that it is related to three correlated but distinct factors: the relative presence of positive affect, absence of negative affect, and satisfaction with life. They referred to these together as subjective well-being. Myers and Diener concluded that, among other things, happy people have a meaningful religious faith.

Through the Triangle of Well-being and Resilience model, Dan Siegel demonstrates how human mind, brain, and relationships are part of a flowing system, and are consistently and continuously responding to new experiences. Humans function holistically, so anything that affects them, affects the whole self. Psychological well-being is linked to all other facets of human life, including physical health, social endeavours, and spirituality.

Ryff Carol was a pioneer in psychological well-being, focusing on well-being beyond medical or biological descriptions. Ryff developed the Six-factor Model of Psychological Well-Being. The Six-factors of Ryff's model include self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy. Ryff's model was relevant cross-culturally, and data supports the use of a six-factor model (34).

The six relevant factors of psychological well-being described by Ryff (33) give context to parts of a person's life that could also impact or overlap other areas of well-being, such as spirituality. Ryff's multidimensional construct of well-being builds on such concepts such as “basic life tendencies of Buhler, psychosocial stages of Erikson, personality changes in Neugarten, positive criteria of mental health of Jahoda, account of individuation of Jung, formulation of maturity of Allport, depiction of the fully-functioning person of Rogers, and notion of self-actualization of Maslow” (34, para. 5). As explained below, spirituality and religiosity are often primary sources of a person's well-being, and the factors of spirituality tie into all other aspects of wellbeing, including biopsychosocial well-being and what that means from a religious or spiritual perspective.

Well-being encompasses physical health, emotional stability, social integration, and spiritual fulfilment. According to Ryff's model of psychological well-being, six key dimensions autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance collectively determine one's quality of life. For the aged, these dimensions are often mediated by social inclusion and religious faith.

The United Evangelical Church traces its origin under God, to the pioneer-missionary vision and endeavour of the late Samuel Alexander Bill who came from Belfast in Northern Ireland. The people of Ibeno at the mouth of the Qua Iboe River had in the course of trading contacts heard something of the Gospel Message. They made known to the Scottish Missionaries at Calabar their desire to have a messenger of the Gospel come to live in their midst. Their request was forwarded to Harley College, London, where in the Providence of God, Bill had almost completed his training for missionary work (Manual & Doctrine, 1).

Bill made an immediate personal response and soon proceeded to Ibeno. When four years later he took his first furlough a little company of believers had made their profession of faith, a mud and wattle 'House of God' had been erected and what is now known as United Evangelical Church had begun its work and witness (Manual & Doctrine, 1).

During Bill's furlough interested friends rallied round him and founded in Ulster the Qua Iboe Mission which took its name from the river where Mr. Bill had been working. At that time the Qua Iboe River was the one and only highway into the hinterland and so the work spread in its basin from Ibeno to centres like Okat, Eket, Ikot Ubo, Etinan, Mbioto, Uyo, Ikot Edong, Ikot Akpan Anwa, Ibesit, Aba, and Oloko. There was opposition, difficulty and hardship but the Gospel message met with an encouraging response and many churches were formed. By the nineteen-thirties the whole of the Qua Iboe Country had been entered and many thousands had been received into church membership. It was at this period the Qua Iboe Mission accepted the Missionary Challenge and accompanied its parent Mission to a new field of Gospel endeavour among the Igala and Bassa tribes in Northern Nigeria (Manual & Doctrine, 1-2).

### **Socio-Cultural Context of Aging in United Evangelical Church**

After careful drafting and redrafting, the Qua Iboe Church adopted in July 1944 a formal Constitution. In May 1959 its Trustees (6) were registered and the Church then acquired the full legal powers of an incorporated body. The Constitution of the Church is printed as a separate booklet. Udeme Esemé in an oral interview noted that the church does not have a ministry nor department for the aged (Oral Interview). Peter John added that the aims and objectives of the Church have been and shall be:

To proclaim the gospel of the grace of God;

To instruct the members in the word of God that they may be built up in the most holy faith;

To train her members and workers to enhance their performance and be useful citizens;

To imbue in her members a sense of responsibility towards those as yet unreached by the gospel; (John, Peter, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2026).

#### ***To propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ through: (a)***

Indoor and outdoor preaching

Print and electronic media- Radio and television messages for purposes of evangelism

Production, publication, and distribution of Christian literature;

#### ***To establish schools, hospitals, and other institutions such as may be in the interest of the Church;***

To promote unity in faith, doctrine and practice, and to defend same against false teachings;

To encourage members to uphold Christian ethics and the doctrine of the Church; to foster love, unity, promote justice and righteousness in all dealings of the Church;

To engage in approved ventures/undertakings towards the generation of income to sustain and advance the goals of the Church;

To do such things that shall be in keeping with the aims and objectives of the Church as shall be approved by the Church Conference from time to time (Oral Interview).

John Ubong added that the United Evangelical Church, with its roots in early 20th-century evangelical movements in the Que River area Nigeria, emphasizes holiness, service, and community life. Traditionally,

elderly members occupy respected positions as elders, deacons, or advisers. Their accumulated wisdom is seen as a divine endowment to guide the younger generation. Though, there's no special group or department for the aged (Oral Interview).

Ekanem Iboro added that the recent socio-economic transformations urban migration, unemployment, and nuclear family living have reduced the community's ability to provide adequate support. Younger members often relocate for education or employment, leaving aged parents of the United Evangelical church elders socially isolated. Consequently, the communal support structures that once upheld the dignity of the aged are gradually weakening, leading to feelings of loneliness and marginalization (Oral Interview). Elijah Amos added that the United Evangelical church does not have the facilities and policies to care for the aged in the present circumstances.

The socio-cultural context of the United Evangelical Church provides a unique framework that shapes the experience of aging, offering both meaning and practical challenges.

**Impact on Aging members,**

The church's evangelical eschatology offers a cosmological narrative that provides semiotic coherence and solace in the face of aging's physical challenges, helping congregants frame elderhood as a meaningful part of God's plan. Scripture is actively used to reframe aging, for instance, the prophecy that Peter would "grow old" (John 21:18) was originally seen as a promise of a long life, challenging modern negative stereotypes. The biblical assurance "Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he; and even to hoar hairs I will carry you." (Isaiah 46:4) offers profound personal comfort.

### **Impact on Church and Society**

This context influences broader church life. An aging congregation affects practical aspects like transportation needs, physical accessibility, and financial support. There is also a growing call within evangelical circles to combat ageism and better utilize the wisdom and continued capacity for ministry of older adults, seeing them as part of the solution for the society.

### **Socio-Cultural and Religious/ Spiritual Engagement as a Determinant of Well-Being**

Ben Anthony notes that Culture through its traditional practices are often times responsible for roles assigned to members of the society. On this very fact, he quotes Okolo who noted that Culture of the people in traditional societies were yardstick and root cause of human roles and participations in the society. Culture is the established pattern of behavior among a people that encompasses every aspect of a man's life and experiences, way of life or the totality of all human efforts and achievements in the struggle for survival in the society. Culture is a complex whole of man's created actions or creation in his society (344).

Culture is the intellectual development among the people of a social group or may simply mean civilization, as seen in terms of Egyptian, Greek and Roman Culture". Also, culture is what gives order and meaning to the linguistic, social, political, economic, aesthetic; religious and philosophical modes and organization of a people, nation or ethnic group" (344-345). Culture is the hallmark of the distinction as well as connection between one people and another.

Ekpenyong Akpanika emphasized that, "Christianity endorses policies that promotes longevity. Christians are trained to imbibe positive and healthy lifestyles to enhance good health and wellbeing. Old age

is treasured in Christianity ...” (66). Cultural participation remains a strong determinant of well-being among the aged. Mark Esemé noted that there is need for the UEC's to encourage the aged to participate in cultural, social, institutional, community fellowship, visitation, and collective worship as it mirrors traditional African communalism, which values interpersonal relationships and interdependence (Oral Interview). Bassey Akpabio added that when the elderly are actively involved in traditional marriages where they are assigned roles during such occasions, weddings, naming ceremonies, or church anniversaries, they experience a sense of belonging and relevance (Oral Interview).

Cletus Ironbar explain that the decline of traditional family-based caregiving has also made many elderly congregants economically vulnerable (Oral Interview). Lack of persistent income or family support makes the aged to withdraw from socio-cultural and religious participation because of the shame they experience and they end up withdrawing social withdrawal (Oral Interview).

Mary Okon noted that in the United Evangelical Church, spiritual vitality is central to identity and belonging. For many older congregants, regular participation in worship services, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and mission activities sustains psychological health and fosters a sense of purpose. Faith communities provide not only spiritual nourishment but also emotional support networks that mitigate anxiety, depression, and fear of mortality (Oral Interview).

Pastoral care programs that intentionally include the aged as prayer intercessors, mentors, or worship leaders help reinforce their sense of usefulness and divine calling. Conversely, exclusion from church activities due to physical weakness or lack of mobility can lead to spiritual desolation. Accessibility measures, such as home-based fellowship visits and transport assistance, are therefore critical to maintaining inclusion.

Socio-cultural engagement refers to participation in community activities, family networks, and traditional associations that affirm the aged as integral members of society. Religious engagement, in contrast, emphasizes the individual's connection to faith practices—worship, prayer, service, and fellowship which provide meaning, belonging, and hope. Within UEC, the two forms of engagement often intersect, producing both spiritual and psychosocial benefits.

### **Blessing or Burden: The Theological Interpretation**

In many African Christian contexts, old age is ambivalently understood. On the one hand, Scripture extols the aged as blessed. Etim Bassey irrespective of the fact that aging is often accompanied by frailty and dependency, making some people to perceive the elderly as economic or social burdens (Oral Interview). The dependency of the aged on the younger generation is what has created the dichotomy between “blessing” and “burden” reflects broader societal attitudes toward productivity, autonomy, and moral worth in later life. Inability for the aged to cater for themselves is seen as a burden to the younger generation (Oral Interview).

From a theological perspective, aging is not a burden but a vocation a divine invitation to deeper faith and service. The Apostle Paul writes, “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). This renewal underscores the spiritual productivity of the elderly. Nevertheless, the “burden” perception arises when church and society fail to integrate the aged meaningfully into collective life. A community that measures worth solely by economic output inadvertently marginalizes its elders. In contrast, when the church frames old age as a season of wisdom, mentorship, and testimony, the aged become indispensable vessels of grace truly a blessing to the body of Christ.

Theologically, value for aging well-being is beyond the well-known promise of being sustained "even to your old age" (Isaiah 46:4), the command to honor elders (Exodus 20:12) affirms their inherent worth. The Psalms declare that "The righteous... will still bear fruit in old age" (Psalm 92:14), challenging narratives of uselessness and assuring purpose, dignity, and ongoing contribution within the Christian communities.

### **Proposed Policies for Enhancing the Well-Being of the Aged in UEC**

**Aged Pastoral Inclusion in UEC:** Design church programs that intentionally include the elderly in worship leadership, teaching, and intercessory roles. **Social Support Systems:** The UEC should establish aged department, Ministry and welfare committees to provide spiritual, financial, medical, and emotional assistance to aging members. If possible they can also create home for the aged.

**Intergenerational Dialogue:** Create mentoring programs linking youth and elders for cultural and spiritual transmission. **Health and Recreation Initiatives:** Encourage physical activity, health screenings, and social outings that foster vitality and reduce isolation. Church-based social welfare initiatives such as elderly care funds, health insurance assistance, and volunteer visitation programs are thus essential for restoring dignity and addressing the "burden" perception. **Theological Education on Aging:** Teach the congregation to view aging through a biblical lens of honor, not decline, thereby reshaping cultural attitudes.

This study integrated Activity Theory to show how sustained social and church roles maintained elderly well-being. Concurrently, it used the Religious Coping Model to analyze how faith practices helped manage health and social losses. The synthesis demonstrated that both active participation and spiritual coping are essential for positive aging.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The well-being of the aged in the United Evangelical Church stands at the intersection of theology, culture, and social care. Socio-cultural and religious engagement strongly influence whether the aged are perceived as blessings or burdens. When participation, respect, and pastoral attention are prioritized, older adults emerge as Blessings, spiritual pillars embodiments of God's blessings and faithfulness across generations.

Conversely, neglect or exclusion transforms them into symbols of burden and dependency. Thus, the task of the church is twofold: to affirm the aged as bearers of divine wisdom and to implement structural mechanisms that sustain their dignity. In doing so, the United Evangelical Church will embody the biblical injunction, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long" (Exodus 20:12), transforming the experience of aging from one of fragility to one of flourishing.

Results indicate that socio-cultural participation and religious engagement significantly enhance life satisfaction among the aged. Elderly individuals actively involved in community life and religious activities reported higher subjective well-being and stronger social support networks (Eboiyehi 77). Conversely, participants with limited social or spiritual engagement expressed feelings of loneliness, dependency, and emotional distress.

Health emerged as both a predictor and consequence of well-being. Poor health conditions such as chronic diseases and mobility limitations—exacerbated perceptions of aging as a "burden" (Aboderin and Beard 1480). Nonetheless, respondents who perceived their aging as part of divine will or moral fulfilment

demonstrated greater resilience, even under adverse health conditions. The study also found gender and regional variations: elderly women, particularly in rural communities, reported higher religious participation but lower access to healthcare. This study affirms that quality of life among the aged in Nigeria is multidimensional, influenced not only by material conditions but also by cultural and spiritual resources. Religious faith and communal belonging serve as buffers against psychological decline, reinforcing the traditional notion of aging as a stage of honour and wisdom rather than decline.

The study concludes that the quality-of-life trajectories among Nigeria's aged population are deeply embedded in socio-cultural and religious frameworks. Active participation in community life and religious activities fosters positive aging, resilience, and meaning. However, diminishing traditional support systems and inadequate healthcare infrastructure threaten the elderly's dignity and well-being.

The Nigerian government should integrate community-based and faith-based programs into aging policies. Health interventions should focus on preventive care and social inclusion. Religious institutions should establish structured elderly care ministries to sustain spiritual and emotional well-being. Awareness campaigns should reframe societal attitudes toward the elderly, celebrating aging as a “blessing” rather than a “burden.”

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