*Review Paper*

# Libraries fostering solidarity and values through workplace spirituality and devotion: the UNIUYO library experience

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## Abstract

*It is not unusual for secular organisations to have worship gatherings in Nigerian society. These occur often with the underlying benefits ranging from economic, social, psychological, moral and political amidst other derivations. This paper consequently is a documentation of the devotional gatherings held at the library, University of Uyo (UNIUYO) Nigeria, based on participatory account of the lead author who coordinated same. This 'congregation' spearheaded by the library management from nearly ten years ago, comprised predominantly library staff and other members of UNIUYO community occasionally invited. In recent years, this gathering gradually advanced to become an enabling platform to deliberate and implore for peace, solidarity and values towards progress generally, not only for the library workplace but the university community at large. This paper therefore takes a germane look at the encounters surrounding these solemn meetings from with plausible consequences. It also brings to the fore how such meeting points incidentally raised both moral and civil standards in the work force.*

**Keywords:** Congregation, reflections, counselling, piety, University library.

## Introduction

The rich religious background and conducts in Nigeria particularly in the Southern region being predominantly Christians, dates back to the colonial era following the incoming of foreign missionaries in the 19th century[1]. As of 1953, it was documented that Christians in Southern Nigeria comprised 21.4% while statistics in 2010 show a rise of 49.3% (approx. 50%) of Nigeria's population[2]. Akwa Ibom State in particular has a large population of over 90% Christians; the people notably are very religious and love to have reflections on God in relatively every facet of life. It is therefore not uncommon to find that even corporate group meetings usually commence with an opening prayer and closing at end. Such has become a regular practice for most sectors in Nigeria, whether governmental or non-governmental. In public places like banks as a case in point, early morning devotions (prayer) is recognisably part of their first routine activity before opening hours for customers at 8am, while awaiting customers are getting used to this daily routine. Some writer maintain that the workplace is a natural, logical, biblical place where faith gets shared and people come to know God[3].

Library personnel at University of Uyo (UNIUYO) in similar ways gather briefly in the morning once a week for Christian devotion, prayer and sober reflection before opening hour. Interestingly, this practice is not entirely new at University of Uyo as a whole since various congregations and meetings embrace in spiritual observance periodically. This paper is of the view that these forms of devotions build individual lives in various ways, some of which are attested to personally by beneficiaries. Faith and good works are essentially concomitants to the worship of God and can result in the healing of a nation[4]. They submit that sincere devotions and ethical orientation can actually help to heal and salvage a nation from moral decay and corruption. Be that as it may, outcomes of these pious endeavours at official or informal meetings, are perhaps yet to be documented and published. This constituted a factor to this article on UNIUYO library Christian devotional activities as the thrust of discussion with premise from the institution as a whole. Workplace spirituality and devotion as used in this paper denotes Christian worship acts and dialogue with admonitions to strengthen for solidarity, peace and other forms of virtue by members of UNIUYO community and the library in particular. The latter was spearheaded in 2006 by the former University Librarian of UNIUYO. This paper is significant given that the fact that most literature reviewed only discusses religious inclinations by library users, more so in the Western world. Little or no works treats library spaces in relation to spiritual inclinations among library users in Nigeria. Either ways, there are no studies also on library staff in relation to issues of spirituality and prayer in relation to their work and wellbeing relatively.

## Antecedents

Devotional acts in some ways, offer a common ground for participants to express what they believe in transcendental ways,

which sometimes are beyond human comprehension. Biblical history portrays official solemn meetings held in temples and places set aside for worship when there was need to hold same and whenever or wherever divine presence was felt. Part of this inspiration can be drawn from some Old Testament biblical accounts e.g. the popular King David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Queen Esther and others who used to gather regularly in prayer and worship for sustenance of Jewish people (Esth. 4: 16). Others cases are reflected in the account of Israelite's sojourning where altars of worship and thanksgiving were raised at strategic points as divinely instructed by God, or directed by their leaders ((2 Chron. 7:1). Other forms of worship took place other than in temples 1 Tim. 2:8, Acts 8:4 (*all scriptures from Kings James Version, 2014). Biblical admonitions have proffered guidance and inspiration for nations and kings to draw forth godly life, faith and general conduct.

In Nigeria, devotional gathering at corporate, social, educational and government circles are not strange observance either. Up to economically developed nations like Canada, Loo[5] notes equally that spirituality in workplace has become an organizational behavior issue. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria devotes sections of chapter 26 to the provision of social and human rights. Section 14(1) of it upholds that "the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a State based on the principles of democracy and social justice." Sections 38, 39 40 stipulate for the following: i. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion: This is guaranteed in all its ramifications though nobody has a right to form, take part in the activities of or be a member of secret society (S.38). ii. Freedom of expression: Every person has a right to hold, express and disseminate opinions, ideas and information without let or hindrance (S.39). iii. Peaceful assembly: Every person is entitled to freely assemble and associate with other persons. Such an association may be for political, trade or professional purpose and may be for protection of his (or her) interests (S.40).

Public awareness campaigns and sensitisations across national broadcast stations till date, resound the need to imbibe virtue from both the Bible and Quran in a bid to appeal to citizen's conscience to moral living and to assuage insurgence. When therefore any government official marks an event / milestone, it is often accompanied with celebration and thanksgiving at a place of worship, or at an official venue to offer accolades to God. English *et al.*[6] notes that here is growing interest in spirituality at work in organisational settings including colleges and universities, through shared values, love, trust and respect. It brings a sense of spirituality in the workplace can produce employees who are: i. Less fearful of their organizations, ii. Are far less likely to compromise their basic beliefs and values in the workplace, iii. Perceive their organization as significantly more profitable.

Many Nigerians in accordance with the afore-mentioned rights, have taken advantage of these rights and privileges to exercise their moral, social and religious duties. Karakas[7] asserts that

"incorporating spirituality at work provides employees and managers a deeper sense of purpose and meaning at work." Other scholars[8] recap that organisations that enable employees to engage in spirituality in the workplace foster the inner life, meaningful work and a sense of community.

## Religious and Philosophical underpinnings

Scholars in classical contend that there are about 200 kinds of views on human beings and these views are being flooded by respected legendary philosophers like Thomas Aquinas, Plato, Kant, Hegel, Feurbach and others. Karl Marx noted man as a social being though did not throw more light on the essential features of man, but relatively put forth a rather controversial view of God and religion in his critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right that 'religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world…it is the opium of the people' (*culled from* http://www.kfausa.org). Nonetheless, prayer no matter the form it takes, is deemed as an avenue of relating man to his source of being. Ekwunife[9] corroborates that prayer is 'spiritual means through which the religious man interiorly and externally communicates with God.'

A social psychology theory of symbolic interaction focuses on the ways by which meaning, via close observational work and familiarity are basis to develop an understanding of the underlying forms of human interaction[10]. Its prime concern has been the exploration of meanings in everyday life which emerges through interaction. The worship penchant of human beings therefore cannot be over-emphasised, as man by nature is a social animal. Some philosophers therefore contend that an individual found to be unsocial deliberately and not accidentally, is either beneath notice or more than human!

Theological view holds that man instinctively and adaptively is a religious being and based on the truism that what one constantly hears, s/he is apt to succumb to, suggests why persons naturally yield to regular admonitions and devotions up to work environment. Consequently, congregational devotions at public places for most Christians, appeal in some ways to unity thereby affording the opportunity for persons to tone down their differences. It is a mark that one recognises and believes in God, hence the reason for the devotion. Religious activity solemnises social order by prescribing moral norms, provides a kind of social control, cohesion and solidarity needed for meaningful social transformation.

Workplace spirituality has been adduced as a mechanism for managing work stress and related issues[11]. This extends to spiritual wellness brought about by religious participation, prayer, to meditation and all aspects of faith, value, believes and morals. Seven elements of wellness can be identified in the following areas: emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, social, environmental and occupational e.g. librarianship (Source: apawellness.wordpress.com). Moralists and health advocates adduce that true justice involves healing the wounds

of conflict, mending broken hearts, reviving dampened spirits and so forth which is more than punishments for the wrongs done. This assertion is well supported[12]. The discussion further upholds that people with good spiritual wellness are apt to make value-guided decisions and connect with personal sense of purpose. To others however, it is subsumed that open/ public prayer and related activities can be a function of lip service for recognition[13]. It is therefore suggested that agencies particularly government-based, maintain neutrality in issues of religion[14]. Presently, legal framework surrounding spirituality in the public sector and public institutions tends to base on neutrality principle.

## Review of Studies

A doctoral study[15] tried to correlate spiritual intelligence, mindfulness, and transformational leadership within a public higher education setting such as a university. Findings was noted that "Leadership literature has expanded to include the role of spirituality in particular leadership settings, such as higher education." Subbiondo[16] added that higher education in western nations e.g. America, is in an age whereby academic study and practice of spirituality on campuses is gaining renewed interest.

A related study[15B] also showed nearly three quarters of respondents (71%) attesting that they gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power. Additionally religious or spiritual beliefs provided strength, support, and guidance (74%) helped develop personal identity (73%), and gave meaning/purpose to one's life (67%). Though these findings were linked to students in higher institution, it nonetheless serves as backdrop to the efficacy of work place devotions by personnel in higher education setting. In this regard, it is suggested that faculty (library inclusive) to consider the function of spirituality to scholarly work[17] as well as in the classroom.

Further research has shown the impact of spirituality in the workplace (from Christian perspective)[18]. It was found that the impact it has on individuals and organisations are in the following ways: boosts morale, influences satisfaction, strengthen commitment, increases productivity and improves bottom line.

Another study[19] analysed the relationship among teachers' workplace spirituality, sense of meaning in life, and psychological well-being which can increase the employees' sense of commitment in the workplace[20] with good performance and development of ethical values[21].

Psychological well-being relates to an individual's awareness that they are likely to have a meaningful and self-fulfilling life[22]. The foregoing is in line with the study that psychological well-being can enhance resilience, endurance, and optimism, in addition to having a sense meaning and self-fulfillment in one's job[23,24].

Spirituality (spiritual faith) is also associated with positive thinking (optimism, positive attitude), social connectedness (having love and support from family and friends), and making a difference[25]. A response from a research subject reports that "being hopeful helps me to feel good about myself and my job".

Additional study[26] aimed to investigate the impact of organizational spirituality on productivity among high school teachers randomly sampled in Nikshahr town. The study noted that Spirituality at work place, helps to perceive issues of leadership and management. The results equally upheld that there was a positive and significant relationship between organisational spirituality and human resource productivity components. This outcome is in accordance with many other studies[27-29]. More so, people who felt they can bring spiritual values to workplace tended to be productive and happier compared to those who cannot.

To recap, the submissions are that when employees experience spirituality at work place, they show high efficiency and productivity in organization, and that there is positive relationship between spirituality and productivity[30,31].

## Congregation meetings at UNIUYO Library and Environs

Various congregational gatherings at UNIUYO library notably reflect the dominant faith of its locality being Christianity coupled with the already existing socio-religious ideals attached to devotions. The University of Uyo (UNIUYO) library though in an academic community, has maintained this mode of gathering which comes up either frequently, or periodically. This practice which had been on-going became formalized from March 2006, barely three months after new library management came on board. The devotional gatherings consequently took on various shades as follows: i. Weekly devotions on Wednesdays for edification and other meaningful effects, ii. Thanksgiving occasion: e.g. following a successful handing over of leadership/ change in management, after a successful library outing or activity. iii. Seasonal observance celebrated in recognition of significant day such as the first day of a New Year, and so forth, or official holiday/ state event. iv. Special dedication e.g. the declaration of university community annually to the Divine for guidance, protection, great achievements and success. v. Volunteer therapeutic counseling, vi. Felicitation with members of the university community as moral support and fellowship, particularly over demise, achievement or other endeavours.

A cursory look at the form in which the religious Christian gatherings at UNIUYO library took place are more elaborately discussed below:

**Morning devotion/ prayer**: this was introduced by a former university librarian of UNIUYO since 2006. It holds once weekly every mid week and for 30 minutes before opening hour for patrons. Duration is strictly adhered to despite the short time

allotted and takes the form of short prayer sessions and requests, brief rendition from 'library hymnals' procured through staff benevolence to serve devotional purposes, scripture exhortations and admonitions in addition to testimonies of any blessing attributed to the devotion, all wrapped up within the time frame of the devotion.

**Special monthly devotion**: this comes up once in a month for an hour to intercede for those in authority primarily the library and university management, for special projects and issues on ground. Unlike the general meeting meant for entire staff, this particular meeting is meant for select librarians who are clergymen as well. The session would sometimes be supported by other clerics outside the library and university community invited by the librarian of UNIUYO.

**Psychotherapy**: at other times, monthly meeting held for an hour with staff would be conducted as a free counseling and 'talk back' session with staff in a small group (and not the usual general meeting) to avoid distraction and disruption of services to patrons. The intent was usually to address pressing issues ranging from family, personal development projects, to health issues with a management staff e.g. the then Deputy librarian who volunteered to do same without a fee. It also serve to draw strength and learn how to tackle peculiar issues without being overwhelmed or over-burdened which latent effect can be borne on work output generally. During those moments, other experienced personnel in life-issues render advice while participants would freely share how they overcame certain personal obstacles as lessons to gain from. The study by[32,33] regarding spirituality and organisational performance supports same. The authors noted that spirituality in organisation supports and increases performance at work place performance.

**Seasonal thanks giving**: this takes place following special calendar events such as the dawn of a New Year, ending of a year and following the successful accomplishments of certain projects such as accreditation. Others are send-off events, earmarking professional activities such as the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) week in Akwa Ibom state, or UNIUYO library week and so forth. These gatherings furthermore afford library staff at various levels the opportunity to interact with not only the library management, but other management members of UNIUYO invited to grace any of such occasions. Such gathering also served as platforms whereby topical issues which factor to library work progress in general, and staff welfare at large are aired out. Quite important was the fact that genuine discussions which otherwise would have been stalled by reason of bureaucratic process, becomes freely dialogued on. In situation in which there was anxiety over some staff feeling disgruntled, this would furthermore be ameliorated through exhortations centered on piety, moral rectitude, temperance with other values deemed fit, and of course their well-being to quell feeling. It is adduced that such forms of expressions are necessary and significant. Again, informal talks and speeches during such occasion were more often handled by a management staff of the university such as a deputy vice chancellor, the librarian (host), a dean or a high ranking cleric. Central themes were meant to spearhead adherence to the course which the library profession is identified with such as, the administration of diligent services as well as staff character molding (edification) to advance honest services without fear of reprimand.

**Solidarity and comradeship**: aside devotions held in library settings, related gatherings at the instance of a staff equally offered moments of encouragement and support through special occasions marked in gratitude to God. At such times, some library management team with staff with other well-wishers would gather and join a staff in celebration at some worship centre or other designated venue. This move for most times have served as strong moral backing and encouragement particularly for the lower cadre staff as it accords them a sense of belonging and acceptance. Some of the private occasions are in commemoration of promotion to a higher cadre or other forms of elevation, debuts such as musical CDs and book launch, or other solemn celebrations e.g. dedication of new born babies, cars, marriages, and obsequies.

## Catharsis and Outcomes

Devotional meetings at UNIUYO library grew warmer such that the library management fondly referred to it as 'family'. Various observations made, coupled with positive feedbacks directly obtained from benefitting staff who verbally expressed improvements following the various meeting which they participated in. Some of these were quickened promotions with accrued benefits including improved health and psycho-therapeutic issues which beneficiaries (staff) attested to. No statistics were taken as the purpose of these solemn gatherings and admonitions were mutually inspired, in addition to enabling privacy which often characterises worship moments. It was equally noted that the weekly devotions particularly strengthened harmony, with an overall extra-serene atmosphere dispensed on work situation. Not less than four staff in a month, particularly those aggrieved or with issues to settle, used to express informally that they were morally touched by messages of faith, inspiration and peaceful co-existence. This ascription was in view of the appeal to staff conscience for a more service-oriented duty at the library work place.

Others yet found the weekly devotions as an overture for divine covering, protection and blessings. These outcomes are in line with a study[33] which showed that spiritual employees have significant and purposeful works and experiences. The results furthermore showed that organizational spirituality was formed via relation with other people which shows sensitivity of employees with spirituality to the other's needs. Additionally, sober attitudes were also observed among few other staff as they continued to reflect on exhortations which seemed to bring about rectitude, level-headedness, sobriety, edification, spiritual adherence, inclinations to loyalty, obeisance to regulations and

constituted authority, commitment to library duties and empathy towards patron's needs. Erring staff after being admonished were also enabled to bear forms of reprimand which in turn quelled their moods from flaring up as they understood it to be a necessary form of discipline. Reconciliation requires honesty in accepting guilt and responsibility for wrongs done committed upon which forgiveness can be realised. This honest process can lift dampened spirits, heal broken hearts and mend broken relations both at personal and community levels[34]. Members of staff furthermore soon learned with penitence that discipline is consequential to godliness. From the fore-going, [35]notes that the life of honest devotion is a key to the formation of sound and correctly informed conscience.

For the library personnel, this was meant to translate into providing good services tapered with good conscience[36]. Serving a set of clientele require a lot of flexibility, creativity and understanding. As found in the submissions raised so far, this can be actualized not only by professional skills, but character moulding through recognition of moral and godly values which in essence, *enable honest services without fear of reprimand (as doing service unto God).* A renowned academic in the humanities at UNIUYO in an inaugural lecture, unraveled in a resounding note that 'it would be…a mindless trade-off if we should…produce generations of technically skilled persons (like library personnel) but bereft of human values …such as altruism, self-sacrifice, love of the other person, humility and honesty'[37]. The foregoing discussions furthermore justify devotional gatherings at UNIUYO library which endemically orchestrates work environment and serves as ligament for immediate and latent manifestation of hope and sense of purpose for staff, and institutional purposes generally. Man's needs are countless and cannot be fulfilled by themselves alone, thus there is a recognition to the possibility of fulfilling necessities through the support of others.

## Challenges and Resolutions

Every worthwhile event naturally faces some trials, as such despite account of the advantages derived from devotional gatherings at UNIUYO library, certain setbacks are worth considering as well for possible adjustments where necessary. Some aspects which faced challenges were in the following areas: i. Scheduling: staff on afternoon shift duty were not able to attend the weekly morning devotion. Based on the experience of participants, time allotted the weekly early morning devotion was relatively short and had to be halted abruptly to contain the usual quiet atmosphere of a library, even though devotions were held prior to opening hours. This arrangement was strictly adhered to, being in line with the library's professional ethics with consideration to its users. To paraphrase in the words of one attributed as the father of modern librarianship[38], time is the very essence of a ready information service. ii. Differences: certain other staff were not favourably disposed to partake some of the devotional meeting with respect to their religious stand-point. This did not however raise any unusual demeanor since

the devotional meetings were not entirely mandatory, therefore not binding. iii. Misconceptions: During the initial years of the meetings, there were misgivings regarding their intent and expectations. Nonetheless, the presence of the university librarian and other management staff at the meeting, in addition to exuberance from staff who participated, made it obvious that the experience was worthwhile. iv. Proxy: Most of the staff attached to branch libraries could not be involved by reason of proximity coupled with the few hands to man the branch libraries. Also, with the imminent transfer of any staff member that used to handle certain aspects of the devotional meetings, it used to take quite a while for new volunteers to act effectively. v. Dispositions: Quite naturally, some participating staff were shy of public glare even during moments of celebration and for fear of being called upon to say something though after a while, would blend with others.

Devotional gatherings require un-interrupted fellowship and absorption. As such a meeting room or space could be created within the library block for related gatherings. This will help unnerve both patrons and staff who require unique ways to express themselves beyond regular work atmosphere and without inhibitions in whatever form. To this end, both personal and collective effort is required to develop this aspect of social-religious relations.

## Conclusion

This paper is a modest contribution to project aspects of non-formal activities in UNIUYO library through socio-religious gatherings. It has also tried to establish a connection between library staff work attitude with positive work outcomes. The issues so far raised has established how periodic devotional gatherings even during official settings, strengthens library staff members toward moral conduct in general. It also affords the edification of participants in subtle yet impactful ways by gingering work attitudes which support management efforts. Religious activity as discussed in this paper, allows various group of persons to take cognisance of their selves collectively, to symbolise their social order, unity and gain an objective sense of their own society[39]. Devotional gatherings in this wise fostered solidarity while prescribing an atmosphere of moral norms and social order. It follows that when firm work values and morals are entrenched, staff work attitude and personal commitment to service is consequently re-enforced. The discourse has furthermore established the therapeutic effect dispensed on job related ethics and moral values on the mind of some personnel in UNIUYO library.

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