

PHILLIP PEMBA,
NEWS ANALYST

Message has gone out that Malawi's population is projected to be nearly 40 million by 2040 if the current average of about six children per couple is not reversed.

While this projection seems to have raised extensive concerns over the inevitable increase in the scramble for the country's limited resources, programmers of population management have been left hunting for every available means of reaching the masses to slow down child bearing.

With about 97 percent of the country's current close to 15 million population being either Christians or Muslims, would the church or mosque pulpits be the most effective platforms to deliver family planning messages to achieve maximum reach?

Arguably, placement of family planning messages in churches and mosques is faced with the challenge that God did not give man a specific number of children to have.

Just like Muslims, Christians believe that God is the one who provides for one's survival and therefore, to some, there is no problem to have as many children as possible because God would take care of them.

Reverend John Mchakama who is Vicar General and Canon at St. Mary's Anglican Church at Malindi in Mangochi says if the church cannot tell its flock about the need to manage population growth, it risks having members who are always overloaded with development problems and poor health.

To engage religious leaders of all faith in spreading this message, the USAID-funded Health Policy Project, in collaboration with the six major religious mother bodies, held a Population Weekend between August 23 and 25. During Population Weekend, priests, pastors, reverends and sheikhs integrated family planning messages in their sermons.

In his population weekend sermon, Reverend Mchakama said while God encourages man to multiply like sand, the responsibility to do so was not left in the hands of one person.

In Genesis Chapter 1 verse 28, the Holy Bible says: "Then God blessed them [Adam & Eve], and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"

"The verse does not say that one person is responsible for the multiplication and filling of the earth. While God tells us to

Religious leaders rise for population management



Reverend Mchakama preaching about Family planning

multiply, we need to consider that that responsibility is shared and not for one person".

"While multiplying is good, as members of the church, we should also consider the impact of having more children in our families," said Mchakama.

As Malawi and her partners are working to improve health and reduce mortality by focusing on the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Malawi's population growth continues to pose challenges for development, unless families have fewer children, health experts say.

Mchakama urged his flock to slow down on bearing of children, worrying that Malawi's population has almost quadrupled from about four million people in 1966.

According to African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), Malawi is one of 15 population and climate change hotspots on the continent characterized by a high population growth rate, a high projected decline in agricultural production, and low resilience to climate change.

"In addition, Malawi faces severe water scarcity. The combined effects of climate change and rapid population growth are increasing food insecurity, environmental degradation and poverty levels in Malawi.

"Addressing population growth and climate change together should be a top development priority for Malawi," Afidep says.

Health and demographic experts recommend family planning as a means of easing pressure on available resources, contributing to sustainable economic growth and development, and leading to a

healthy and prosperous nation.

Mchakama was not the only preacher who delivered family planning related sermons during the population weekend.

Howard Kasiya, Programme manager at Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM) also had a turn to caution the flock at Free Methodist Church in the district on the dangers of high population growth.

"God does not specify the number of children a man should have but encourages man to have the number of children he can afford to look after.

"While we preach about heaven, we should also preach about the need for people to leave good life on earth. Having fewer children helps families to ensure that the limited resources they have are enough to support everybody within the family".

"Having many children eventually chokes your spiritual life because you spend more time worrying about how to provide for the family instead of having some time to worship God," said Kasiya.

He said child marriages can end if churches are fully involved in the fight against marrying girls while they are young.

"The people who marry girls are found in church. As church leaders, we should be the first to speak against child marriages. We should not officiate such marriages. It's very dangerous for girls to start giving birth while they are young," said Kasiya.

At least half of young women in Malawi are married before the age of 18, according to World Health Organisation (WHO).

"Teenage pregnancies contribute between 20 and 30 percent of maternal deaths in the country. By ending early



Population weekend

marriages we can avert up to 30 percent of maternal deaths and also reduce the neonatal mortality rate," says WHO in one of its briefings.

Malawi Council of Churches (MCC) also participated in the population weekend with its executive member Gilford Matonga saying it would be difficult for the country to achieve many strides on family planning methods uptake without involving the church as some people continue bearing more children based on religious beliefs.

"If churches incorporate family planning messages in all their programmes, we believe that a lot of progress can be achieved. It's about making people realize that they have a responsibility to have family sizes they can manage without problems.

"With the current economic challenges people are facing, it is difficult for parents with many children to properly provide for and educate all the children because school fees have been skyrocketing time and again, especially for tertiary education," said Matonga.

Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM) Central region coordinator Hamid Kongwe said they also participated in the population weekend through delivery of family planning related sermons in their mosques on August 23.

"Our concern is that many parents are struggling to raise their children. Without giving children good education, the children cannot grow up into responsible citizens.

"We also have many girls who are dropping out of school and going into early marriages. We want Muslims to

have the number of children they can afford to take care of," said Kongwe.

Mangochi Diocese St Augustine Parish Priest Raphael Mkuzi said the Catholic Church fully supports natural methods of family planning and encouraged his faithful to use them for safe motherhood.

The Health Policy Project's Senior Policy and Advocacy Advisor Olive Mtema said they facilitated organisation of the population weekend in collaboration with the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and the six religious mother bodies (Episcopal Conference of Malawi through Catholic Health Commission; Malawi Council of Churches; Evangelical Association of Malawi; Quadria Muslim Association of Malawi and the Seventh Day Adventist). The objective was to enhance the public's understanding of the impact of rapid population growth on development.

"If currently arable land is scarce, health services and educational services are being compromised, unemployment is increasing on a daily basis, natural resources are being depleted and land is being degraded, what will be the magnitude of the problems if faith leaders remain quiet?" said Mtema.

With more than half of the country's population being youth, Mtema says churches and mosques will remain critical in the delivery of family planning messages to reach most people including youth to prevent early child marriages and teen pregnancies, thereby put some brakes on population growth.