

Coping Strategies among Bereaved African Missionaries in Karen, Langata Sub-County, Kenya

Jojo Sackey^{1*}, Dr. Elijah Macharia Ndung'u², Dr. Antony Amissah³

¹Postgraduate Student, Department of Psychology, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

²Ag. HOD, Department of Psychology, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

³Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Grief is a universal human experience that frequently presents emotional, social, and spiritual challenges. African missionaries serving away from home frequently encounter this challenge when they lose loved ones due to canonical and congregational rules, geographical distance, financial limitations, and limited participation in communal bereavement rituals. Despite these unique challenges, limited empirical attention has been given to the strategies used by African missionaries to cope with grief while in mission. The objective of the study examined coping strategies employed by African missionaries in Karen, Langata Sub-County, Kenya. The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. A sample of 301 African Catholic missionaries was selected from a target population of 1,102 missionaries using multistage stratified sampling with simple random selection for the quantitative strand and purposive sampling for qualitative interviews. A total of 276 completed questionnaires were analyzed alongside 16 in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential procedures in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 29), while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings from both results were integrated during interpretation. The findings demonstrated that spirituality and psychosocial support constituted the principal coping resources among bereaved missionaries. Most participants reported relying on prayer, celebration of the Holy Mass, spiritual direction, meditation, and trust in God to cope with grief. Community living, emotional support from fellow missionaries, acceptance of loss, years in the ministry, and meaning-making also emerged as significant psychosocial coping mechanisms. Qualitative findings further revealed that faith, shared community life, and continued engagement in missionary ministry enhanced resilience despite disrupted participation in culturally significant mourning practices. In conclusion, spiritual and psychosocial support remain central to grief adaptation among African missionaries. Integrating culturally responsive grief counselling with existing pastoral and spiritual support structures may strengthen psychological well-being and improve bereavement care within missionary communities.

Keywords: Grief, African missionaries, coping strategies, psychosocial support, spirituality

INTRODUCTION

Grief is a universal human experience that follows the loss of a significant person and the most common emotions associated with grief include sadness, anger, anxiety, and loneliness (Bourhill, 2023). Although grief is generally regarded as a normal response to bereavement, successful adaptation depends largely on the availability of appropriate coping resources. The World Health Organization (WHO) advocates that grief support should integrate community support, personal coping strategies, and professional mental health interventions, while recognizing the importance of culturally responsive approaches to bereavement care (WHO, 2022).

Research across different regions demonstrates that individuals employ diverse coping strategies following bereavement. In the Americas, grief interventions include psychological counselling, bereavement support groups, religious rituals, prayer, and culturally meaningful mourning practices such as rosaries, novenas, and

open casket services (Falzarano et al., 2022; Pedraza et al., 2024). Social support from family members, friends, elders, and faith communities has also been shown to strengthen emotional resilience and facilitate healthy adaptation following loss (Biancalani et al., 2022; Gameon et al., 2024). Moreover, Putri et al. (2023) also has confirmed that social support is important for mental health and bereavement recovery. Furthermore, religiosity and spirituality have consistently been identified as important protective factors that promote psychological well-being and meaning making among bereaved individuals (Alexandre et al., 2025).

European studies similarly emphasize the importance of comprehensive bereavement support. Contemporary interventions include professional grief counselling, group-based therapies, culturally sensitive bereavement care, and digital support programs designed to address prolonged grief and related psychological distress (Ramkissoon, 2021; Müller et al., 2024; Coelho et al., 2025). Moreover, evidence from Pakistan further demonstrates that prayer, participation in faith communities, and religious coping contribute significantly to resilience by fostering hope, coherence, and emotional stability following bereavement (Ayaz & Jafar, 2025). These findings suggest that effective grief coping extends beyond psychological intervention alone and should integrate spiritual, relational, and cultural dimensions.

Within African societies, coping with grief is deeply rooted in communal relationships, cultural identity, and spirituality (Kgatlé & Segalo, 2021; Khosa-Nkatini, 2023). Bereavement is rarely regarded as an individual experience but rather as a shared family and community responsibility. Funeral participation, communal mourning, religious rituals, and social solidarity provide opportunities for emotional expression, acceptance of loss, and restoration of interpersonal relationships (Rammutia, 2025). Consequently, disruption of these culturally significant practices may interfere with healthy adaptation and increase emotional vulnerability among bereaved persons (Khosa Nkatini, 2022; Asatsa et al., 2025).

African missionaries experience bereavement under unique circumstances. While serving outside their countries or communities of origin, they frequently lose parents, siblings, relatives, and close friends but are often unable to return home to participate in funeral ceremonies because of missionary responsibilities, geographical distances, financial limitations, or institutional obligations. Although these circumstances may interrupt culturally meaningful mourning practices, missionaries continue to rely on prayer, spiritual direction, community life, pastoral ministry, and their religious vocation as alternative sources of strength and resilience. Despite the importance of these coping resources, empirical evidence describing how African missionaries cope with grief remains limited.

The available literature has largely focused on coping strategies among bereaved parents, widows, refugees, migrants, healthcare workers, and other vulnerable populations. Comparatively little attention has been given to African missionaries, whose grief experiences are shaped simultaneously by pastoral commitment, communal African worldviews, and separation from culturally significant mourning rituals. This represents an important contextual gap in grief research and limits the development of culturally appropriate bereavement interventions for missionary communities.

Guided by the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (2010) and Relational Cultural Theory (2017), this study sought to assess the psychosocial coping strategies employed by bereaved African missionaries residing in Karen, Langata Sub County, Kenya. Specifically, the study examined how spirituality, social support, meaning making, community life, and missionary experience contribute to resilience and healthy adaptation following the loss of loved ones while serving away from home.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design to examine the coping strategies adopted by bereaved African missionaries residing in Karen, Langata Sub County, Kenya. Since neither the quantitative nor qualitative approach alone could answer the research question, the mixed-method approach was adopted (Taherdoost, 2022). The design was selected because it enabled the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing both statistical evidence and rich descriptions of the lived experiences of grief and coping (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). The design was particularly appropriate because grief is both a measurable psychological phenomenon and a deeply personal and culturally embedded experience (Leavy, 2023).

The study was conducted among African Catholic missionaries residing in Karen, Langata Sub County, Kenya. The target population consisted of 1,102 missionaries drawn from various male and female religious congregations. Participants represented diverse African nationalities including, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, Uganda, Malawi, Gabon, Togo, and Ethiopia. Using Cochran's sample size determination formula, a sample of 285 participants was obtained for the quantitative strand, and 16 participants were selected for the qualitative strand, bringing the total sample size to 301 participants. Quantitative respondents were selected through multistage stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation of different congregations, while qualitative participants were purposively selected based on their bereavement experiences and willingness to share their lived experiences. A total of 276 completed questionnaires were returned for quantitative analysis, representing a response rate of 96.8%, while all the 16 participants took part in the in-depth interviews.

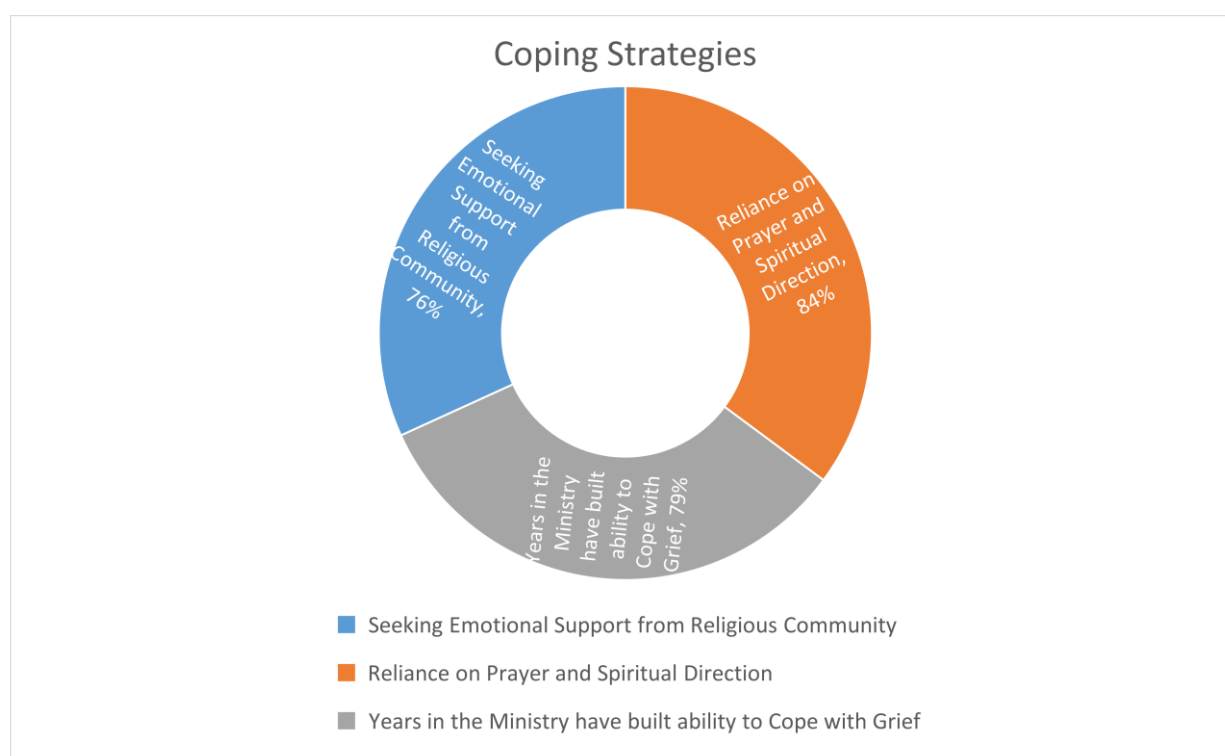
Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire contained sections on demographic characteristics, grief experiences, grief-related disruptions, coping strategies, and cultural influences on grief. Participants also responded to open-ended questions that provided additional insight into their coping experiences. The interview guide explored participants lived experiences following bereavement, the coping strategies they adopted, and the role of spirituality, community support, and culture in facilitating adaptation.

Content validity of the instruments was established through expert review by specialists in counselling psychology and research methodology before data collection commenced. A pilot study was conducted to improve clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the research instruments. The Cronbach alpha for the psychometric scales used exceeded 0.7, which ensured internal consistency.

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were used to describe the coping strategies adopted by the missionaries, while Pearson's correlation examined the relationship between cultural influence and grief coping strategies. Qualitative interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to identify recurrent themes describing the participants' coping experiences. Quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of spiritual and psychosocial coping strategies among bereaved African missionaries.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Coping Strategies



The quantitative findings shown in Figure 1 demonstrate that spirituality was the primary coping resource among the missionaries. Most participants reported relying on prayer, celebration of the Holy Eucharist, meditation, spiritual direction, and trust in God to cope with grief. A large proportion of respondents also indicated that participation in religious activities strengthened their emotional resilience and enabled them to continue their missionary responsibilities despite experiencing bereavement.

The study further established that psychosocial support played an important role in facilitating healthy adjustment following bereavement. Most respondents reported receiving emotional support from members of their religious communities, superiors, spiritual directors, friends, and fellow missionaries. Community living created opportunities for emotional expression, encouragement, shared prayer, and practical assistance, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness and emotional isolation. Acceptance of loss, maintaining meaningful interpersonal relationships, and continued engagement in missionary ministry also emerged as important psychosocial coping strategies.

Qualitative interviews provided further insight into the lived experiences of coping with grief. Four major themes emerged from the analysis.

Theme One: Spiritual Practices as Sources of Strength. Participants consistently described prayer, celebration of the Eucharist, meditation, Scripture reading, and spiritual direction as their principal sources of comfort during bereavement. Many explained that their faith strengthened hope, promoted acceptance of loss, and enabled them to find meaning despite their emotional pain.

Theme Two: Community Support and Shared Belonging. Respondents emphasized that support received from fellow missionaries, religious superiors, friends, and members of their religious communities reduced emotional distress and reinforced their sense of belonging. Shared prayer, listening, encouragement, and communal living promoted resilience during periods of grief.

Theme Three: Acceptance and Meaning Making. Many participants described gradually accepting the reality of loss by interpreting bereavement through their religious vocation and Christian faith. Viewing death within the context of eternal life enabled participants to reframe their experiences positively while maintaining hope and emotional stability.

Theme Four: Continuing Ministry as a Coping Resource. Participants reported that pastoral ministry, community responsibilities, and service to others provided purposeful engagement that prevented prolonged preoccupation with loss. Remaining active in ministry promoted emotional recovery while reinforcing commitment to their missionary vocation.

Integrated Findings

Integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that effective coping among bereaved African missionaries was multidimensional, involving the interaction of spirituality, psychosocial support, cultural values, and personal resilience. While prayer and religious practices constituted the principal coping resources, their effectiveness was strengthened by supportive community relationships, acceptance of loss, meaning-making, and continued participation in missionary ministry. Collectively, these findings indicate that successful grief adaptation among African missionaries is achieved through the integration of spiritual, psychological, relational, and cultural resources rather than reliance on a single coping mechanism.

Table 1: Correlation Between Culture Influence and Grief Coping Strategies

		Grief Coping Strategies	Culture Influence
Grief Coping Mechanism	Pearson Correlation	1	.480**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	276	276
Culture Influence	Pearson Correlation	.480**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	276	276

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Pearson's correlation analysis demonstrated in Table 1 a statistically significant positive relationship between cultural influence and grief coping strategies, indicating that cultural values and beliefs significantly shaped how missionaries coped with bereavement. Missionaries who maintained stronger cultural and communal connections generally reported more adaptive coping strategies than those who experienced greater disruption of culturally meaningful mourning practices.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the coping strategies employed by bereaved African missionaries residing in Langata Sub County, Kenya. The findings revealed that spirituality and psychosocial support were the primary resources used to cope with grief. Prayer, celebration of the Holy Eucharist, meditation, spiritual direction, trust in God, community support, acceptance of loss, meaning-making, and continued engagement in missionary ministry emerged as the principal strategies that promoted resilience and facilitated adaptation following bereavement. These findings demonstrate that coping among African missionaries is a multidimensional process in which spiritual, psychological, relational, and cultural resources operate together to support recovery.

The predominance of spiritual coping strategies is consistent with previous studies cited in this research, which indicate that spirituality provides meaning, hope, emotional comfort, and psychological resilience during bereavement (Ramkissoon, 2021; Guldin & Leget, 2023; Müller et al., 2024). The missionaries in this study consistently described prayer, participation in the Eucharist, meditation, and spiritual direction as essential sources of strength. Rather than removing the pain of loss, these practices enabled participants to reinterpret suffering through faith, maintain hope, and continue fulfilling their missionary vocation. This finding reinforces the view that spirituality functions as an adaptive coping resource that promotes resilience in the face of significant life stressors.

The study also established that psychosocial support from fellow missionaries, religious superiors, friends, and members of the religious community played a significant role in facilitating healthy grief adaptation. Participants reported that shared prayer, emotional encouragement, active listening, and communal living reduced loneliness and strengthened their capacity to cope with bereavement. These findings corroborate previous research demonstrating that supportive interpersonal relationships enhance emotional adjustment following loss (Biancalani et al., 2022; Gameon et al., 2024). Within missionary communities, communal living appears to provide an environment in which emotional support and shared faith reinforce one another, thereby promoting psychological well-being.

Acceptance of loss and meaning-making also emerged as important coping strategies. Many participants described interpreting bereavement within the framework of Christian hope and their missionary vocation. This enabled them to accept the reality of death while maintaining confidence in the meaning and purpose of their lives. These findings are consistent with studies by Foucauld et al. (2024) and Coelho et al. (2025), which reported that meaning-centered coping contributes to emotional resilience and long-term psychological adjustment among bereaved individuals. The findings therefore suggest that acceptance is not passive resignation but an active psychological and spiritual process through which individuals reconstruct meaning after loss.

Another important finding was that continued engagement in missionary ministry contributed positively to coping with grief. Participants explained that pastoral responsibilities, service to others, and daily community life provided structure, purpose, and opportunities to redirect emotional energy constructively. This finding supports earlier studies indicating that purposeful engagement and meaningful social roles facilitate adaptive coping following bereavement (Putri et al., 2023; Alexandre et al., 2025). Remaining actively involved in ministry appeared to strengthen resilience while reducing excessive preoccupation with loss. Further still, this finding is related to Hewson et al. (2023) results on the influence of maintain bonds, which was found to ease the process of grief. On top of that, the claim of Neimeyer and Steffen (2026) authenticates the responses of the African missionaries that continuing bonds aid in reorienting the mind of the bereaved away from anticipating loved ones to let go of the relationship with the deceased towards discovering significant ways to remain interconnected.

The findings strongly support the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement. The spiritual and psychosocial strategies reported by participants illustrate healthy movement between confronting the emotional

reality of loss and engaging in restorative activities through ministry, community participation, and daily responsibilities. These findings demonstrate that adaptive oscillation was facilitated by both spiritual practices and supportive relationships, thereby extending the practical application of the model within missionary settings.

The findings likewise support Relational Cultural Theory, which emphasizes that healing occurs through growth fostering relationships. Participants consistently attributed their recovery not only to personal faith but also to supportive relationships within their religious communities and constant communication with the family back home. Community life reduced emotional isolation, strengthened belonging, and promoted resilience during bereavement. This highlights the importance of relational connectedness in understanding grief within African missionary contexts.

The present study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that coping with grief among African missionaries is best understood through the interaction of spirituality, psychosocial support, cultural identity, and purposeful engagement in ministry. Unlike many previous studies that examined these coping resources independently, the present findings show that they function synergistically to strengthen resilience despite the disruption of culturally significant mourning practices. This integrated understanding provides valuable evidence for counselling psychologists, pastoral caregivers, missionary formators, and religious institutions seeking to develop culturally responsive bereavement support programs.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the coping strategies employed by bereaved African missionaries residing in Karen, Langata Sub County, Kenya. The findings demonstrate that coping with grief among missionaries extends beyond individual emotional regulation to encompass spirituality, supportive relationships, cultural identity, and meaningful engagement in missionary ministry. Prayer, celebration of the Holy Eucharist, spiritual direction, meditation, trust in God, community support, acceptance of loss, and meaning making emerged as the principal coping strategies that promoted resilience following bereavement.

The study further established that psychosocial support from fellow missionaries and religious communities complemented spiritual practices by reducing emotional isolation and fostering a sense of belonging. Although many participants experienced significant grief due to their inability to participate in culturally significant funeral rites, the integration of spiritual resources and communal relationships facilitated healthy adaptation and sustained their commitment to missionary service.

The study concludes that effective grief coping among African missionaries is multidimensional and culturally embedded. Thus, bereavement care within missionary communities should intentionally integrate spiritual formation, psychosocial support, culturally sensitive counselling, and opportunities for meaningful communal accompaniment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Practice

Religious congregations should establish structured bereavement support programs that integrate professional counselling, spiritual accompaniment, and peer support for missionaries experiencing the loss of loved ones. Formation houses should also incorporate grief education and emotional resilience training into missionary formation programs to prepare missionaries for bereavement during overseas ministry.

Recommendations for Policy

Missionary institutes should develop institutional bereavement policies that provide clear guidelines for supporting missionaries following the death of close family members. Where circumstances permit, institutions should facilitate participation in culturally significant funeral rites or provide culturally meaningful alternative memorial practices. The policy of being strict on the type of family member with whom one can attend the funeral, by family classification limited to biological parents, can be reconsidered and replaced with the emotional attachment the African missionaries have with the deceased. Collaboration between religious institutes and

mental health professionals should also be strengthened to ensure timely psychological support for bereaved missionaries.

Recommendations for Theory

The findings reinforce the relevance of the Dual Process Model and Relational Cultural Theory in explaining grief adaptation among African missionaries. The study further suggests that future theoretical developments should explicitly incorporate spirituality, communal relationships, and culturally significant mourning practices as interconnected determinants of adaptive grief coping within African contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how coping strategies evolve over time among missionaries experiencing bereavement. Comparative study on grief among African missionaries and non-African missionaries to assess the influence of cultural background on bereavement experience and coping strategies. Additional studies are also recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of structured grief counselling programs within missionary communities.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa prior to data collection. Research authorization permit was also obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and permission was sought from the leadership of the participating religious congregations. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage were guaranteed throughout the research process.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The datasets are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant confidentiality and violate the ethical conditions under which the study was conducted.

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