

Could This Biblical Ritual Kill You?

It's a rite that dates to the time of Jesus, who was dunked in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. But Christians in East Africa are now taking stock of their faith's central rite after one such ritual turned tragic in northern Tanzania.

Two Christian farmers, aged 30 and 47, died as their pastors attempted to baptize them in the fast-moving current of the Ungwasi River in Rombo District in the Kilimanjaro region.

The ritual was organized by Shalom Church, a charismatic group in the country.

"Following the incident, we have agreed on some measures that will ensure the safety of our followers during baptism in the rivers," Samuel Kamigwa, a pastor at the Victory Christian Center, a Pentecostal church in Tanzania, said in telephone interview.

Kamigwa said churches were considering increasing the number of ministers at one baptism event. They would also baptize one person at a time, while others are kept at a safe distance, and will choose a time when the water is calm enough for the ritual.

"As churches, we have to be careful. Baptism is one of the core rites in our faith, and it has to continue," he said.

Drowning during baptism is not uncommon in Africa, and Tanzanian police detained a pastor in connection with the deaths of the two. Local news reports say Kilimanjaro Regional Police Commander Hamis Selemani has warned against using the rivers for such activities unless the safety is confirmed.

In Africa, river baptism is popular, particularly among

Pentecostal and charismatic churches.

Immersion is viewed as a way of cleansing one's sins and being reborn into a new life. Affusion, where water is poured over the head, and aspersion, where water is sprinkled on the head, are more common in mainline churches.

The Rev. Wilybard Lagho, vicar general of the Mombasa Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Kenya, said pastors need to be prudent: "If they choose the river, they must take a careful review to avoid endangering lives."

Last year, six children died in Zimbabwe's eastern province of Mashonaland during an early morning baptism in a stream by a self-styled prophetess.

And in January 2015, two elderly Pentecostal church pastors drowned in Mutshedzi River in Limpopo Province of South Africa, where they had gone to baptize four junior church members. {eoa}

© 2017 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.© 2017 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.