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# **Unwed Mothers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania: A Biblical and Pastoral Dialogue in Light of John 8:1-11**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the intersection of societal realities, religious convictions, and pastoral care within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), focusing on unwed mothers. The article, rooted in John 8:1-11 which depicts Jesus' encounter with the adulterous woman, aims to address the unique challenges faced by unwed mothers within the ELCT. It employs a multidisciplinary approach, including biblical exegesis, pastoral theology, and sociocultural analysis, to explore these complexities and highlight the compassionate aspects of Jesus' response. The objectives are to examine societal and cultural influences impacting unwed mothers, analyse current pastoral practices within the ELCT, and propose a pastoral care framework that integrates biblical principles with cultural sensitivity. Ultimately, the article seeks to promote an inclusive and compassionate pastoral framework within the ELCT, enhancing the well-being of unwed mothers in the church community.

## **Introduction**

The issue of unwed mothers within religious communities, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), has sparked increasing concern and discussion. This dialogue aims to address the challenges faced by unwed mothers in the church while seeking alignment with biblical principles.

Mbilinyi, M. (1985) shed light on the social dynamics influencing unwed mothers in Tanzania, emphasising the intersection of cultural norms and religious beliefs, crucial for shaping the church's response to this demographic.

The ELCT, like many Christian denominations, grapples with the tension between societal expectations and adherence to biblical teachings. As highlighted by Louw (2008), continuous reflection is essential to ensure that church practices align with Christian faith tenets. Within the ELCT, unwed mothers often encounter stigmatisation and exclusion, facing barriers to participation in church activities and sacraments. Strict marriage policies and judgmental attitudes in pastoral counselling exacerbate their marginalisation. Despite this, there is a lack of structured support systems tailored for unwed mothers within the church.

By examining these practices, the article advocates for a more inclusive and compassionate approach within the ELCT, drawing inspiration from Jesus' response to the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11. This biblical narrative underscores the importance of grace and redemption, calling for a pastoral care model that supports unwed mothers. The article aims to foster reflection within the ELCT, encouraging alignment of pastoral care and church policies with biblical teachings.

In examining the societal realities and cultural influences impacting unwed mothers within the ELCT, the article aims to understand how societal norms and cultural attitudes in Tanzanian society affect their experiences. Additionally, exploring the implications of John 8:1-11 for pastoral care and support of unwed mothers, the article seeks to inform pastoral practices within the ELCT. Importantly, the study proposes a pastoral care framework integrating biblical principles and sociocultural awareness to develop pastoral approaches supporting unwed mothers, considering both biblical principles and sociocultural factors.

Addressing potential counterarguments, some may argue for maintaining traditional church policies to uphold moral standards, while others may fear compromising biblical teachings. However, this article contends that

embracing compassion, as exemplified by Jesus, fulfils biblical principles, fostering a community reflecting Christ's teachings of grace and redemption.

## **Literature Review: Unwed Mothers in Religious Communities, with a Focus on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT)**

The literature review provides a comprehensive exploration of theological perspectives on grace, redemption, and pastoral care within Christian traditions, with a specific focus on Lutheran theology. Gaddy's work *Adultery and Grace* (1996) delves into Lutheran doctrines, emphasising the centrality of grace and the redemptive nature of Christian teachings. This foundational insight forms the backdrop for understanding how the ELCT, as a Lutheran denomination, may approach the challenges faced by unwed mothers.

In tandem with theological exploration, an analysis of existing studies on the experiences of unwed mothers in religious communities, particularly within the Tanzanian context, sheds light on the intersecting sociological dynamics. Mbilinyi's (1985) study provides invaluable insights into the social nuances influencing the experiences of unwed mothers in Tanzania, emphasising the intricate interplay between cultural norms and religious beliefs. Additionally, Okpaku's (2013) work contributes to a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by unwed mothers, offering sociological perspectives that complement theological considerations.

Gaddy's work highlights the theological underpinnings of grace and redemption within Lutheran theology, providing a solid framework for understanding the ELCT's approach to unwed mothers. However, it primarily focuses on doctrinal aspects and may benefit from further exploration of practical implications for pastoral care.

Mbilinyi's study offers rich sociocultural insights into the experiences of unwed mothers in Tanzania, shedding light on the complex interplay between societal expectations and religious beliefs. While it provides valuable context, it primarily focuses on broader societal dynamics and could

delve deeper into the specific challenges faced within religious communities like the ELCT.

Richey and Okpaku's work complements theological perspectives with sociological analysis, offering a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by unwed mothers. However, it could benefit from more explicit connections to theological doctrines, particularly within the context of the ELCT's response.

The literature review underscores the tension between theological principles and sociocultural realities, highlighting potential points of alignment and divergence within the ELCT's response to unwed mothers. This synthesis of theological and sociological insights lays the groundwork for a comprehensive exploration of the ELCT's position, guiding subsequent stages of biblical exegesis, analysis of church documents, and interviews.

Identifying gaps in existing literature, the review indicates a need for further exploration of the practical implications of Lutheran theology for pastoral care within the ELCT, as well as a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by unwed mothers within religious communities in Tanzania. This literature review not only serves as a critical lens, through which the research aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue within the ELCT and the broader Christian community, but also informs the research methodology by shaping the approach to biblical exegesis, document analysis, and interviews.

## **Methodology**

Integrating insights from biblical exegesis, pastoral theology analysis, and sociocultural analysis enriched the article by providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding unwed mothers within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT). Biblical exegesis delved into the theological themes and principles embedded in passages like John 8:1-11, offering timeless insights into mercy, forgiveness, and compassion. This theological foundation informed pastoral theology analysis, where qualitative interviews with pastors, theologians, and church leaders revealed nuanced

interpretations of biblical teachings and current pastoral practices. These interviews explored how theological perspectives translated into pastoral care strategies and shed light on existing support systems or gaps within the church's response to unwed mothers.

Sociocultural analysis further contextualised these findings by examining the societal norms, expectations, and perceptions that shaped the experiences of unwed mothers within the ELCT community. By engaging with ELCT members through qualitative interviews, this methodology captured first-hand experiences and voices, enhancing cultural sensitivity and informing pastoral care practices that were inclusive and tailored to the specific needs of unwed mothers in this cultural context.

In the pastoral theology analysis, the criteria for selecting participants for qualitative interviews were carefully considered to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives within the ELCT community. Pastors, theologians, and church leaders play pivotal roles as spiritual guides, interpreters of doctrine, and decision-makers within the ELCT community. Their perspectives provided invaluable insights into theological interpretations, pastoral practices, and the implementation of church policies related to unwed mothers. By engaging with these stakeholders, the article gained a deeper understanding of the theological frameworks and pastoral approaches present within the ELCT, informing recommendations for a more inclusive and supportive environment for unwed mothers.

Ethical considerations were paramount in conducting qualitative interviews within the ELCT community. Participant confidentiality was ensured by anonymising responses and protecting the identities of interviewees. Voluntary participation was emphasised, with participants provided with informed consent forms detailing the purpose and scope of the research. Additionally, potential impacts of the research on participants were carefully considered, with measures in place to minimise any potential harm or discomfort. Ethical guidelines, such as those outlined by institutional review boards or ethical review committees, were adhered to throughout the research process to uphold ethical standards and ensure the well-being of participants.

## **The Current Situation in the ELCT: Challenges Faced by Unwed Mothers in the Church**

Unwed mothers within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) navigate a complex set of challenges that affect their spiritual, emotional, and social well-being. These challenges arise from deeply embedded societal and cultural stigmas, compounded by specific attitudes and practices within the church community that often exacerbate their marginalisation. Below is a more detailed examination of these challenges.

### ***Social Stigma and Isolation***

Social stigma is a pervasive issue for unwed mothers in the ELCT. Unwed mothers are frequently subjected to judgment and moral condemnation, within both the church and the wider community. Being labelled as morally compromised or irresponsible, they face significant emotional and psychological strain. The stigma not only isolates these women from their faith community but also affects their sense of belonging and self-worth.

This social isolation manifests in various ways. Many unwed mothers report being excluded from church activities, such as choir membership, leadership roles, or even participation in Holy Communion. They may also be the subject of gossip, which adds to their feelings of shame and unworthiness. This exclusion deepens their sense of alienation, as they feel they are no longer full members of the church community. As a result, many unwed mothers withdraw from active participation in church life, fearing further judgment and rejection.

The impact of social stigma extends beyond the church. In many Tanzanian communities, being an unwed mother is often viewed as a moral failing that brings shame not only to the individual but also to her family. This cultural belief can lead to family rejection or a significant decrease in family support. The loss of familial and community support leaves unwed mothers vulnerable, both emotionally and economically. Without a strong support network, they struggle to access resources such as childcare, employment opportunities, and educational advancement, which could help them and their children lead stable and productive lives.

Mary, a member of the ELCT, shared her experience of being shunned by her congregation after her pregnancy. Despite seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, she was met with continued judgment and exclusion, which eventually led her to leave the church. The stigma also followed her in the wider community, making it difficult for her to find a job or even someone willing to marry her. This experience highlights the long-term impact of social stigma on unwed mothers within the ELCT (Lumwe 1998).

### ***Economic Hardship***

Economic hardship is a significant and ongoing challenge for many unwed mothers in the ELCT. Without the financial support of a partner and, in some cases, without the backing of their families, these women are often left to bear the full financial burden of raising a child on their own. This situation frequently leads to severe financial instability, as many unwed mothers struggle to meet the basic needs of their children and themselves.

The economic challenges faced by unwed mothers are multifaceted. Many are unable to afford childcare, which limits their ability to work full-time or pursue further education that could improve their employment prospects. In cases where unwed mothers do have jobs, these are often low-paying, informal positions with little job security or benefits. The lack of stable employment contributes to ongoing financial stress, as these women are constantly balancing the costs of housing, food, healthcare, and education for their children.

Furthermore, the economic marginalisation of unwed mothers can hinder their participation in church life. Many church activities, such as events, retreats, or even Sunday offerings, require financial contributions that these women may not be able to afford. As a result, their economic hardship deepens their sense of exclusion from the church community, as they are unable to participate fully in its social and spiritual life.

The economic difficulties of unwed mothers are compounded by the absence of specialised church programmes aimed at providing financial support or vocational training. Although the ELCT offers various charitable initiatives, these programmes often do not take into account the unique financial

pressures faced by unwed mothers, leaving them with limited access to the assistance they need to improve their economic situation.

### ***Psychological and Emotional Stress***

Unwed mothers in the ELCT also face significant psychological and emotional stress, which is often exacerbated by the judgment and lack of support they receive from their church community. The stigma attached to their situation leads to pervasive feelings of guilt, shame, and unworthiness. These emotional burdens can have a profound impact on their mental health, leading to conditions such as anxiety, depression, and chronic stress.

The emotional strain experienced by unwed mothers often stems from the judgmental attitudes of church members and leaders. Instead of receiving support and compassion, many unwed mothers report being subjected to harsh criticism and moral condemnation. This can create a sense of internalised guilt, as these women may begin to believe that they are inherently flawed or undeserving of God's love and forgiveness. The resulting emotional isolation makes it difficult for them to maintain healthy relationships, engage in daily activities, or participate in church services.

Elizabeth, another member of the ELCT, shared her experience of struggling with overwhelming feelings of guilt after becoming pregnant outside of marriage. The judgmental attitudes of her fellow church members deepened her sense of shame, leading her to feel unworthy of God's love and forgiveness. This emotional burden created a barrier between her and her faith, making it difficult for her to pray or attend church services regularly. Instead of finding solace in her faith community, Elizabeth found herself further isolated from the spiritual support she desperately needed (Smith 2020).

The psychological stress faced by unwed mothers is compounded by the limited availability of counselling and mental health services within the church. While pastoral counselling is available in some congregations, these services are often not tailored to the specific needs of unwed mothers, leaving them without the professional guidance necessary to cope with their emotional and psychological challenges. Without access to specialised



support, many unwed mothers are left to navigate their mental health struggles on their own, often with limited success.

## **Existing Attitudes and Practices within the ELCT**

### ***Moral Policing***

Moral policing is a prevalent issue within the ELCT that significantly impacts unwed mothers. This form of policing manifests through constant scrutiny and judgment from fellow church members, gossip, exclusion, and even public reprimands during church services. These practices create an environment where unwed mothers feel continuously judged and shamed, which further isolates them from their faith community.

Gossip is one of the primary tools of moral policing within the ELCT. Church members may whisper about the unwed mother's situation, speculating on her choices and questioning her moral character. This gossip reinforces the stigma surrounding unwed motherhood and creates an atmosphere of distrust and fear. Many unwed mothers withdraw from church activities to avoid further scrutiny, which deepens their isolation and makes it more difficult for them to access the spiritual and emotional support they need.

Public reprimands during church services or community gatherings further exacerbate this issue. Leaders or influential members may call out unwed mothers directly or indirectly, using them as examples of moral failure. These public shaming actions place unwed mothers in a spotlight of judgment and ostracism, driving them further away from the support they need. For example, a church leader might pointedly remark about 'maintaining moral integrity' in front of the congregation, making unwed mothers feel humiliated and unworthy.

### ***Limited Support Structures***

The ELCT's support structures for unwed mothers are limited, leaving many without access to the necessary resources for counselling, financial aid, or childcare support. While the church has various programmes aimed at helping the needy, these initiatives often do not address the unique challenges faced by unwed mothers. This lack of specialised support

mechanisms leaves unwed mothers feeling overlooked and unsupported, as they must navigate their difficulties largely on their own.

The absence of tailored support structures within the church community is particularly evident in areas such as counselling and financial aid. Many unwed mothers struggle with feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation but have no access to formal counselling services that could help them process these emotions. Similarly, financial aid programmes that are not specifically designed for single mothers may not account for the high costs of childcare, education, and healthcare that these women face. This lack of adequate support forces unwed mothers to make difficult choices between essential needs, further deepening their economic and emotional struggles.

### ***Theological Rigour over Compassion***

Within the ELCT, there is often a strong emphasis on theological rigour and maintaining doctrinal purity, which can overshadow the need for pastoral care and compassion. This focus on upholding moral standards can create an environment where unwed mothers feel judged rather than supported. The church's commitment to theological principles can sometimes leave little room for understanding the complex and nuanced situations that unwed mothers face.

Discussions within the church frequently prioritise maintaining moral standards over finding ways to support those who may have fallen short of these ideals. This approach can make unwed mothers feel as though they are under constant scrutiny, reinforcing their sense of shame and unworthiness. Instead of encountering pathways to redemption and support, they may be met with rigid interpretations of doctrine that leave little room for understanding or compassion.

This atmosphere can make unwed mothers like Lydia, who already struggles with guilt and societal stigma, feel even more isolated and reluctant to seek help from their faith community. The church's emphasis on theological rigour often leaves unwed mothers feeling alienated, as they perceive the institution as prioritising doctrine over the practical and emotional needs of its members.

Suffice to say, unwed mothers within the ELCT face a range of challenges, from social stigma and economic hardship to psychological stress and limited support structures. The existing attitudes and practices within the church often exacerbate these difficulties, creating an environment where unwed mothers feel judged, isolated, and unsupported. These challenges highlight the need for a more compassionate and inclusive approach within the ELCT, one that acknowledges the complex realities of unwed motherhood and seeks to provide meaningful support to those who need it most.

## **Socio-Religious Parallels: The Woman in John 8 and Unwed Mothers in Tanzania**

The socio-religious situation of the woman caught in adultery in John 8 provides a profound lens through which to explore the challenges faced by unwed mothers in Tanzania, particularly within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT). This biblical text offers both a critique of judgmental religious practices and an example of a compassionate response to moral failure, making it a fitting foundation for guiding the church's response to unwed mothers.

### ***Social Stigma and Isolation***

In John 8:3-11, the woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus by religious leaders who seek to enforce the Mosaic Law, which prescribes stoning for such an offence. The woman's public humiliation mirrors the social stigma and isolation faced by unwed mothers in Tanzania. Just as the woman is singled out as a moral failure and placed on public display for judgment, unwed mothers in Tanzania are often subjected to harsh scrutiny and condemnation by their communities and church members. In both cases, the emphasis is on moral policing rather than understanding or supporting the individual.

The woman's isolation is further amplified by the fact that she is brought alone before Jesus – her male counterpart is conspicuously absent. Similarly, unwed mothers in Tanzania often face judgment and exclusion, while the men involved in their situations are less frequently held accountable. This

double standard reflects the broader cultural and religious dynamics that place a disproportionate burden on women for perceived moral failings.

In both scenarios, the focus on public shaming serves to isolate the individual from their community, deepening their sense of guilt and unworthiness. The woman's experience of being judged by religious leaders parallels the experiences of unwed mothers who are often judged by church members and leaders, which only adds to their emotional and psychological distress.

### ***Religious Judgment and Moral Policing***

The religious leaders in John 8 are primarily concerned with upholding the law and maintaining theological rigour, much like the moral policing that unwed mothers encounter within the ELCT. The woman caught in adultery is not seen as a person in need of compassion or redemption; rather, she is treated as a tool for proving a theological point. Similarly, unwed mothers in Tanzania often find themselves judged not for who they are as individuals, but as symbols of moral failure.

The religious leaders' approach to the woman exemplifies how theological rigour can sometimes overshadow compassion, leading to practices that are more punitive than supportive. This is akin to the ELCT's focus on maintaining moral standards, which can result in unwed mothers being ostracised and excluded from the very community that should be offering them support and guidance. The emphasis on judgment in both situations overlooks the need for pastoral care and understanding, perpetuating a cycle of guilt, shame, and exclusion.

### ***Limited Support Structures and Emotional Distress***

The woman in John 8 is alone in facing the consequences of her actions, much like unwed mothers in Tanzania who often face limited support structures within the church. The religious leaders are quick to point out her sin but offer no pathway to redemption or support, leaving her vulnerable and isolated. In a similar vein, unwed mothers in the ELCT frequently encounter a lack of tailored support programmes, whether in the form of counselling, financial assistance, or community support. This lack of support

exacerbates their emotional and psychological distress, leaving them to navigate their challenges largely on their own.

The emotional burden of the woman in John 8, who must have felt immense fear, shame, and guilt as she stood before her accusers, parallels the psychological stress faced by unwed mothers in Tanzania. Both are left to grapple with the consequences of their actions without the support of a compassionate community that could help them find healing and restoration.

## **Exploring John 8 as a Lens for the Church's Response**

The story of the woman caught in adultery offers a powerful theological model for how the ELCT can respond to unwed mothers. Jesus' response in John 8 is marked by compassion, forgiveness, and a refusal to engage in the judgmental practices of the religious leaders. Instead of condemning the woman, Jesus invites those without sin to cast the first stone, highlighting the shared human condition of sinfulness and the need for mercy over judgment. His response shifts the focus from punitive legalism to restorative grace.

For the ELCT, this narrative invites a reconsideration of how the church responds to unwed mothers. Rather than focusing on moral policing and theological rigour, the church can draw inspiration from Jesus' example by prioritising compassion, support, and inclusion. The story challenges the church to move away from practices that isolate and shame unwed mothers and toward creating a community that offers them the love, care, and guidance they need to rebuild their lives.

Moreover, Jesus' final words to the woman – 'Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again' (John 8:11 RSV) – illustrate a balance between grace and accountability. This balance can guide the ELCT in addressing the challenges of unwed mothers. The church can offer forgiveness and support while also encouraging personal growth and responsibility, creating a space where unwed mothers can experience both spiritual restoration and practical assistance.

The story of the woman caught in adultery offers a compelling theological framework for addressing the challenges faced by unwed mothers in the

ELCT. By exploring this text, the church can find a model for moving beyond judgment and exclusion and toward a response that reflects the compassion and grace of Christ. This approach not only aligns with the core teachings of Christianity but also provides a practical path for addressing the socio-religious realities of unwed mothers in Tanzania. Through the lens of John 8, the ELCT can reimagine its role as a community of support and restoration, helping unwed mothers find dignity, healing, and a renewed sense of belonging within the church.

## **Theological and Pastoral Principles from John 8: Compassion, Grace, and Accountability**

The theological and pastoral principles derived from the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8 provide a model for how the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) can respond to the challenges faced by unwed mothers. This biblical narrative emphasises three key principles: the primacy of compassion over judgment, the necessity of grace in pastoral care, and the balance between mercy and accountability.

### ***Primacy of Compassion over Judgment***

In John 8, Jesus demonstrates the primacy of compassion over judgment by refusing to condemn the woman caught in adultery. While the religious leaders seek to enforce the strict letter of the law, Jesus redirects their attention from legalism to the humanity of the woman standing before them. He does not deny her sin but prioritises her dignity and potential for renewal over her moral failing.

This principle calls on the church to approach individuals in vulnerable situations, such as unwed mothers, with empathy and love rather than condemnation. By following Jesus' example, the church should seek to provide understanding and support instead of judgment and exclusion. Compassion becomes the guiding force that allows individuals to experience God's love and acceptance even in moments of moral failure.

In interviews with unwed mothers from the *Nyaturu* ethnic group in the ELCT Central Diocese, many shared experiences of feeling judged and marginalised

by their faith community. One woman recalled how a compassionate pastor took the time to listen to her story without judgment, offering her emotional support and helping her reconnect with the church. This act of compassion had a profound impact on her, restoring her sense of belonging and faith.

### ***Necessity of Grace in Pastoral Care***

The interaction between Jesus and the woman highlights the importance of grace. Jesus models divine grace by refusing to pass judgment, instead offering the woman an opportunity for a new beginning. This act of grace points to a God who is more interested in redemption than in punishment, encouraging transformation rather than reinforcing shame.

This principle invites the church to adopt a pastoral approach that extends grace to those who have fallen short, recognising that everyone is in need of God's mercy. Pastoral care should be grounded in the understanding that the church is a place of healing and restoration, not condemnation. Grace should be the foundation of all interactions with unwed mothers, providing them with the opportunity to rebuild their lives in the context of God's love.

During a focus group, several unwed mothers discussed the impact of receiving pastoral care that emphasised grace. One mother, Sarah, shared how her pastor's unconditional acceptance helped her overcome feelings of guilt and shame. His constant reassurance that God's grace was available to her, despite her circumstances, allowed her to find hope and begin rebuilding her life with renewed faith.

### ***Balance between Mercy and Accountability***

In his interaction with the woman, Jesus strikes a balance between mercy and accountability when he says, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more' (John 8:11). This statement reflects a dual commitment: Jesus shows mercy by not condemning the woman, yet he also holds her accountable by encouraging her to change her behaviour.

This principle suggests that the church should offer unwed mothers both forgiveness and guidance, supporting them in making positive changes in their lives. Mercy should be extended without conditions, but the church should also encourage personal growth, helping individuals to find paths

toward spiritual and moral renewal. This balance allows the church to uphold its values while also embodying Christ's love and compassion.

In one parish, a church leader described how the congregation developed a programme for unwed mothers that combined spiritual support with practical guidance. The programme included Bible study groups focused on God's mercy, as well as workshops on parenting, financial literacy, and personal development. This approach helped unwed mothers feel both supported and empowered to make positive changes in their lives.

Together, these theological and pastoral principles from John 8 advocate for a church that embraces vulnerable individuals with open arms, offering a community of grace, support, and guidance. Rather than perpetuating stigma and exclusion, the church is called to embody Christ's example, providing unwed mothers with the love, dignity, and opportunities they need to experience healing and transformation.

In practical terms, this means that the ELCT can create programmes and initiatives that reflect these principles, such as compassionate counselling services, grace-filled community support, and balanced interventions that encourage personal growth while offering mercy. By doing so, the church can play a vital role in addressing the challenges faced by unwed mothers, helping them to restore their faith, self-worth, and sense of belonging within the church community.

### ***Enacting the Principles of Compassion and Grace: A Path Forward for Addressing the Challenges of Unwed Mothers in the ELCT***

Addressing the challenges faced by unwed mothers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) requires a shift in church culture, pastoral practices, and community engagement. Drawing from the theological and pastoral principles of compassion, grace, and accountability, as demonstrated in John 8, the church can implement holistic strategies that foster inclusion, support, and transformation. These recommendations aim to build a church that is not only a spiritual refuge but also a practical resource for unwed mothers, guiding them toward healing and empowerment.



## **Fostering a Culture of Compassionate Dialogue**

### ***Educational Sermons and Workshops***

One of the most effective ways to shift the mindset of the church community is through education. Sermons, Bible studies, and workshops should be intentionally designed to emphasise the compassionate response of Jesus in John 8, where he prioritises humanity and grace over judgment. These teachings can serve as a foundation for changing the narrative around unwed motherhood within the church. Workshops can include interactive discussions that allow members to explore the implications of compassion in their daily lives, addressing the biases and assumptions that may underlie judgmental attitudes.

### ***Training for Church Leaders***

Training for pastors, elders, and lay leaders is crucial in ensuring that the church's response to unwed mothers is consistent with its theological values. This training can cover areas such as trauma-informed pastoral care, non-judgmental listening, and how to create a welcoming atmosphere for all congregants. Leaders should also be educated on the social and cultural factors that contribute to unwed motherhood, helping them understand the broader context and avoid simplistic moral judgments. By equipping leaders with these tools, the church can become a place where unwed mothers feel seen, heard, and valued.

A successful model might include a multi-session pastoral care training programme where leaders undergo practical exercises in counselling, conflict resolution, and compassionate communication. Such a programme could be adapted to the specific needs of the ELCT, ensuring that all church leaders are prepared to handle sensitive situations with empathy and grace. The church has a responsibility to invest in designing and implementing training programmes that focus on pastoral counselling and encouraging pastors to engage in prayer, education, reading, and reflection to provide effective guidance to their congregations.

## **Creating Safe Spaces for Support and Healing**

### ***Support Groups***

Support groups are an essential part of building a community where unwed mothers can find solidarity and understanding. These groups should be safe, non-judgmental spaces where participants can openly share their struggles, joys, and spiritual journeys. In addition to providing emotional support, these groups can serve as a platform for spiritual growth, helping unwed mothers see themselves as beloved members of the body of Christ. The groups can also be a place for practical assistance, such as sharing resources, child-rearing advice, and job opportunities.

### ***Counselling Services***

The church can enhance its pastoral care by offering professional counselling services that address the specific needs of unwed mothers. These services can provide both individual and group counselling, focusing on issues such as dealing with social stigma, managing the emotional impact of single parenthood, and navigating relationships with family and community members. Counselling services should also include spiritual guidance, helping unwed mothers reconnect with their faith and find strength in their relationship with God. By addressing both the emotional and spiritual dimensions of their experiences, counselling can be a powerful tool for healing and transformation.

In addition to counselling, the church could collaborate with local health services or NGOs to provide holistic support that includes healthcare, legal advice, and social services, ensuring that unwed mothers have access to the resources they need to thrive.

## **Extending Grace through Practical Assistance**

### ***Financial Aid Programmes***

Practical support is a tangible expression of the church's commitment to grace. Financial aid programmes can play a crucial role in helping unwed mothers achieve stability and independence. These programmes could include scholarships for higher education, grants for vocational training, and

stipends to cover childcare costs. By investing in the future of unwed mothers, the church not only alleviates immediate financial pressures but also empowers these women to pursue their goals and contribute to their communities. Such programmes can be funded through church donations, partnerships with Christian charities, or government grants.

### ***Childcare Support***

Childcare is often one of the biggest challenges for single mothers. Churches can step in to provide support by organising volunteer-based childcare programmes, where members of the congregation offer their time to care for children during worship services, church events, or even during the week to give mothers time for work or study. These programmes not only provide practical help but also create opportunities for building relationships within the church community. Additionally, the church could explore partnerships with local day-care centres or early childhood education programmes to offer discounted or subsidised services for unwed mothers.

A similar initiative in neighbouring parishes involved creating a cooperative childcare centre staffed by volunteers and funded by donations. The programme not only provided free childcare for unwed mothers but also became a space for early childhood education, giving children a head start in their development.

## **Encouraging Personal Growth and Responsibility with Compassion**

### ***Mentorship Programmes***

Mentorship programmes can be an invaluable resource for unwed mothers, providing guidance and support as they navigate the challenges of single parenthood. Mentors from within the church can offer practical advice, spiritual encouragement, and a listening ear. These relationships should be built on mutual respect and trust, with mentors offering support without judgment. The church can facilitate these connections by creating structured mentorship programmes, pairing experienced members of the congregation with unwed mothers who are seeking guidance.

### ***Balanced Teachings***

Church teachings on sin, grace, and redemption should emphasise personal growth and transformation rather than guilt and shame. The message of ‘Go and sin no more’ should be presented in a way that encourages unwed mothers to embrace their potential for change while assuring them of God’s unconditional love. The church can offer workshops or Bible studies that focus on themes of redemption, renewal, and second chances, helping unwed mothers to see themselves not as defined by their past but as empowered by God’s grace to create a new future.

One church in another region found success by holding monthly ‘Renewal Nights’, where congregants, including unwed mothers, participated in worship, testimonies, and teachings focused on spiritual renewal and personal growth. These events provided a supportive environment where individuals felt encouraged to pursue positive changes in their lives.

## **Reform Church Practices to Align with Grace and Mercy**

### ***Review Disciplinary Practices***

The ELCT should conduct a thorough review of its disciplinary practices to ensure that they are aligned with the principles of grace and mercy. Public reprimands, exclusion from church activities, or other punitive measures can deepen the stigma and isolation felt by unwed mothers. Instead, the church should prioritise restorative approaches that focus on healing, reconciliation, and inclusion. For example, rather than public discipline, unwed mothers could be invited to private counselling sessions where they can work through their challenges with the support of a pastor or counsellor.

### ***Shift in Moral Policing***

Moral policing within the church community can be a significant barrier to creating an inclusive and compassionate environment. Church leaders should actively discourage gossip, judgmental attitudes, and exclusionary behaviour, instead promoting a culture of forgiveness and understanding. This can be achieved through sermons, Bible studies, and pastoral guidance that emphasise the importance of seeing every individual as worthy of God’s love and grace. By shifting the focus from policing morality to fostering

relationships, the church can become a place where unwed mothers feel welcomed and valued.

The church leadership could implement policies that formalise this shift, such as guidelines for how to handle situations involving unwed mothers and protocols for pastoral care that prioritise grace over judgment.

## **Integrate Theological and Pastoral Care**

### ***Holistic Pastoral Care***

The integration of theological teachings with practical pastoral care is essential for creating a church environment that fully embodies the principles of grace and compassion. Pastors should be encouraged to weave theological reflections on forgiveness, grace, and accountability into their counselling and pastoral visits. This holistic approach ensures that unwed mothers receive both spiritual nourishment and practical support, helping them to grow in their faith while also addressing the everyday challenges they face.

Church leaders can also create opportunities for unwed mothers to engage in theological discussions, Bible studies, or retreats that focus on topics such as grace, healing, and new beginnings. These spiritual resources can be an important part of their journey toward wholeness and renewal.

Churches can also collaborate with external organisations, including Christian counselling centres, social services, and local NGOs, to provide comprehensive support that addresses the spiritual, emotional, and practical needs of unwed mothers. This collaborative approach can ensure that individuals receive the care they need from multiple angles, reinforcing the church's commitment to holistic care.

By enacting these recommendations, the ELCT can move from a culture of stigma, isolation, and limited support for unwed mothers to one that fully embodies the compassionate, grace-filled response modelled by Jesus in John 8. These steps will transform the church into a place of healing, restoration, and inclusion, where unwed mothers are not only welcomed but actively supported in their journeys of faith and personal growth. The church's

commitment to grace and accountability will create an environment where all individuals can experience the transformative power of God's love, regardless of their circumstances. This vision of a compassionate and inclusive church is one that aligns with the core teachings of the Gospel and reflects the heart of Christ's ministry to the vulnerable and marginalised.

## **Conclusion**

The narrative of John 8:1-11 offers profound theological and pastoral insights that can guide the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) in addressing the challenges faced by unwed mothers. By embodying the principles of compassion, grace, and accountability exemplified by Jesus, the church can transform its approach to this vulnerable group. The story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery highlights the importance of prioritising humanity over judgment, offering grace instead of condemnation, and balancing mercy with personal responsibility. These lessons call for a shift in the church's culture and practices, from stigmatisation and exclusion to a more inclusive, supportive, and redemptive community.

The ELCT has the opportunity to become a beacon of hope and healing for unwed mothers by fostering compassionate dialogue, providing safe spaces for support and healing, extending grace through practical assistance, and encouraging personal growth with compassion. The integration of theological teaching with practical pastoral care ensures that the church responds holistically, addressing both the spiritual and everyday needs of unwed mothers. By reforming disciplinary practices and promoting a culture of grace and inclusion, the church can move from moral policing to embodying the love and forgiveness central to the Christian faith.

Ultimately, the ELCT's mission in this area must align with the heart of Christ's ministry, which reaches out to the marginalised and offers them dignity, restoration, and a new beginning. By following Jesus' example in John 8, the church can create an environment where unwed mothers are not only accepted but also empowered to thrive, experiencing the fullness of God's love and grace. This transformation will strengthen the church's witness and

make it a true reflection of the gospel's message of hope, healing, and redemption for all.

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