Humbe, E 2026, 'From Domesticity to Mission: Women's Missionary Agency in African Christian Communities in Buhera, Zimbabwe', *African Women in Theological Scholarship: Emerging Voices and Perspectives : African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2 pp. 74-87

From Domesticity to Mission: Women's Missionary Agency in African Christian Communities in Buhera, Zimbabwe

Esther Humbe
Bondolfi Teachers' College, Masvingo, Zimbabwe
estherbit80@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the missionary agency of African Christian women in Buhera District, Zimbabwe, arguing that everyday domestic and community practices constitute significant yet often unrecognised expressions of Christian mission. Although mission is frequently associated with formal church structures, ordained leadership, and organised evangelism, African Christian women participate in mission through the ordinary spaces of family and community life. This study makes use of contextual missiology and an Afrocentric-womanist paradigm, which provide a theological lens and a culturally-grounded lens for interpreting women lived experiences and missionary agency within the Shona context. A qualitative phenomenological approach is employed, using semi-structured interviews, observations, and desk research. The research findings reveal that, first, marriage provides a context through which women transmit and sustain Christian faith within households and kinship networks. Second, women exercise missionary agency through spiritual giftedness, including prayer, healing, counselling, and spiritual care. Third, caregiving for children, orphans, older people, and other vulnerable members of the community constitutes an embodied expression of Christian compassion. Fourth, women's participation in funerals create spaces for pastoral care, consolation, worship, and Christian witness. Fifth, domestic utensils including clay pots, cooking sticks, and brooms, acquire religious significance within African Christian practices and

become material resources through which women participate in mission. The study argues that Christian mission in African contexts extends beyond formal ecclesiastical structures into everyday spaces where faith is embodied, transmitted, and sustained. It concludes that recognising women's domestic and community practices as missionary agency contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of mission and affirms African Christian women as significant agents in the life and growth of Christianity in rural Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Christian mission has traditionally been associated with evangelism, ordained ministry, and formal church structures. Such understandings have made the everyday spaces in which Christianity is lived, transmitted, and sustained obscure. In African Christian communities, women participate significantly in the life of the church and community through caregiving, hospitality, spiritual practices, family responsibilities, and communal activities. Yet these contributions are often regarded only as domestic responsibilities rather than recognised as expressions of missionary agency. Within the Shona cultural context, women occupy central positions in family and community life, expressed in the concept of *musha mukadzi* ('the home is the woman') which means that women earn a lot of respect because they are viewed as the key holders of the home which underscores the centrality of the woman in a home.[1] These responsibilities create spaces through which women transmit faith, provide care, exercise spiritual gifts, and participate in communal religious practices. Drawing on contextual missiology and an Afrocentric-womanist paradigm, this article examines women's missionary agency through marriage and family life, spiritual giftedness, caregiving, participation in funerals, and the use of domestic utensils in Christian practices. It argues that mission extends beyond formal church structures into everyday spaces where Christian faith is embodied, nurtured, and communicated. Recognising these practices as missionary agency contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of Christian mission and makes visible the significant

[1] Humbe, 'Prayers for women's livelihoods'.

contribution of African Christian women to the life and growth of Christianity in rural Zimbabwe.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by contextual missiology and an Afrocentric-womanist paradigm. Missiology, or mission studies, is the study of the theory and practice of mission. It is wide-ranging as a discipline because it is about Christians' engagement with the world and, therefore, needs to be aware of current concerns and issues.[2] In this study contextual missiology provides the theological lens for understanding Christian mission as shaped by the social, cultural, and lived realities of particular communities. It enables the study to interpret women's everyday practices of caregiving, spiritual ministry, hospitality, and communal participation as expressions of Christian mission rather than limiting mission to formal church structures. Recognising these practices as missionary agency contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of Christian mission and makes visible the significant contribution of African Christian women to the life and growth of Christianity in rural Zimbabwe. On the other hand, the Afrocentric-womanist paradigm provides the complementary gendered and African-centred lens. Amenyedzi develops this paradigm by bringing Afrocentrism and womanism together to investigate African women's experiences within their own cultural contexts. She argues that an Afrocentric-womanist paradigm is a useful tool for researching African women within African cultures.[3] Together the two frameworks provide a theological lens and a culturally-grounded lens for interpreting women's missionary agency. Contextual missiology explains how mission is embodied within particular contexts, while Afrocentric-womanism illuminates how African women negotiate and exercise agency within those contexts. The frameworks consequently support the study's argument that domesticity can become a significant space for Christian mission.

[2] Butler, Kwiyani, and Ross, 'Missiology'.
[3] Amenyedzi, 'The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm'.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of African Christian women and the ways in which their everyday domestic and community practices constitute missionary agency. A phenomenological approach is appropriate because it intends to characterise and interpret an experience by figuring out what the participants believe the encounter to mean.[4] This is done through bracketing the researcher's preconceived beliefs and opinions concerning the phenomenon of research.[5] The approach was convenient in assessing the women's missionary agency as expressed through domestic, spiritual, and community practices. Data was collected using desk research, interviews, and observations directly from the phenomenon. This study was conducted in Buhera District, Zimbabwe within predominantly Shona communities. The setting was selected because family, kinship, community relationships, and Christian faith are closely interconnected, providing an appropriate context for examining mission beyond formal ecclesiastical structures.

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience of women's roles in family, church, and community life. The sample comprised 15 participants. Twelve African Christian women and three men. The participants were aged between 30 and 65 years. The twelve women comprised of three midwives, four prophetesses, two elderly female villagers and three housewives. These were selected because of their direct involvement in domestic, spiritual, and community activities relevant to the study. The three male participants comprised one village head and two married men. Their inclusion was intended to provide complementary perspectives on the social, cultural, and religious significance of women's roles within the Buhera community. The village head was selected because of his knowledge of community practices, traditions, family relationships, and the social responsibilities of women within the local context. The two married men were included because marriage and family life are central to the study's examination of domesticity as a site of missionary agency. Their perspectives provided an opportunity to understand how women's missionary

[4] Ary , Jacobs , Razavieh, and Sorenson, '*Introduction to Research'*.
[5] Creswell and Clark, '*Designing and conducting'*.

contributions are perceived by men within the same cultural and religious environment.

The inclusion of both women and men also enabled the study to examine women's missionary agency from multiple perspectives while maintaining African Christian women's lived experiences as the primary focus of the study. For ethical considerations the researcher assured the participants that pseudonyms, not real names, would be used. The data was analysed thematically. Interview and observation data were organised into recurring patterns of meaning and subsequently developed into themes. The analysis focused particularly on marriage and family life, spiritual giftedness, caregiving, funeral participation, and domestic material practices. The themes were interpreted through contextual missiology and Amenyedzi's Afrocentric-womanist paradigm. This enabled the study to move beyond description and examine how women's everyday practices function as expressions of missionary agency within their cultural and Christian contexts.

Findings and Discussion

The study findings are presented below. Data is given thematically to explicate the missionary agency of African Christian women in their domestic practices.

Status of women in indigenous Shona communities

The symbiotic relationship between a married woman's social status in African culture and their status in the church and community deserves attention. Togarasei assets that in Shona ethics, women were and still are seen as homemakers, with special gift of nurturing and making the home a place of rest and beauty.[6] Study participants confirmed that women were recognised as having great importance in African Shona culture. Shona culture places great respect on women, and participants in this study, especially the men, cited the proverb *mukadzi wemunhu ndiambuyawasha*, which means that a married woman is given high respect by the community similar to that given to a mother-in-law by her son-in-law. The interviewees indicated that this emphasises the respect that men are expected to accord to married women.

[6] Togarasei, 'State as patriarch', 215–224.

In the Shona culture, being a married woman and having children is a prestigious position, especially in Buhera District, regardless of age. Hamutyinei and Plangger agree saying that every married woman should be treated with respect, like a mother-in-law.[7] Otherwise, there is danger of courting somebody's wife. In a family setting, the husband is fully aware that any behavior which might lead to the demise of his wife is treated as *ngozi* (vengeance). For the children, the teaching against offending one's mother is even more pronounced. Amai Chengeto, a midwife (35 years), said that although a married woman is considered an alien in her husband's family, she is recognised as the key figure in a Shona family. She emphasised the *musha mukadzi* concept. In the context of this study, Shona culture enabled women to take part in missionary agency with ease.

Women and caregiving in domestic mission

Family caregivers play a significant role in healthcare, as they are the main source of valuable information about the patient. In African Christian circles, caregiving is gendered and is associated with the women who advanced Jesus' ministry of healing and caring for the sick.[8] In the context of this study caregiving is looked at, not only as caring for the sick, but also as missionary agency. It is very common in Buhera to find a homestead with members of the family of different ages from babies to very old family members living under the same roof. The issue of children's homes and old people's homes are non-existent as women look after their orphaned grandchildren and their old-aged parents. Mai Zera, a housewife (45 years), said in an interview, '*Misha mizhinji muno muBuhera mune nherera dzinochengetwa zvakanaka chaizvo nana mbuya. Musha unongoda mudzimai zvisinei nezera*' ('In most homesteads here in Buhera there are many orphaned children who are looked after very well by their old grandmothers. A homestead always needs a female figure no matter how old').

An observation made by the researcher was that there was not a single homeless child in Buhera because the children are taken care of by their relatives. The extended family is very much valued in Buhera, so every child

[7] Hamutyinei and Plangger, '*Tsumo-Shumo'*.

[8] Humbe, 'Stigma and discrimination'.

has a roof over their head. In all these homesteads there are always women figures. No matter how old she is, she takes care of the whole extended family living with her. Ross thinks that hospitality is a good metaphor for mission and an appropriate concept for missiology because it implies invitation, warmth, sharing of food, and relationships.[9] Women nurture and educate their children, practice philanthropy within their communities, and thereby begin to effect some social transformation.[10] Furthermore, it is the woman who instills discipline within children because she spends more time with them.

Though a woman is married to the individual who pays a bride price and stays with her as her conjugal partner, in reality the woman belongs to the whole clan. Among the Shona people of Buhera there no concept of private ownership in marriage. This was confirmed by Moahi, who said, 'In traditional African culture, women played a central role in their communities. They were responsible for taking care of the household, raising children, and providing food for the family.'[11] There are also women looking after the elderly in their homes against the contemporary the view of taking them to old people's homes. The belief of the people in the area investigated is that taking one's parents or in-laws to an old people's home would incur avenging spirits (*ngozi*). Women are expected to be hospitable at their homes. According to Adeny, the practice of hospitality in the home has been traditionally practiced by women through serving meals and giving shelter.[12]

Women missionising through their spiritual giftedness

In Buhera there are prominent women figures who are spiritually gifted. Kgatle assets that the spiritually gifted in African Christianity use both diagnostic and prescriptive prophecies, the laying on of hands, and other rituals as part of the divine healing process.[13] In this study, spiritual giftedness refers to perceived God-given spiritual capacities through which African Christian women exercise service, care, healing, prayer, prophecy, and spiritual guidance within their families, churches, and communities. Such giftedness is understood as a form

[9] Ross, 'Without Faces'.
[10] Ross, 'Without Faces'.
[11] Moahi, 'The Changing Role'.
[12] Adeney, 'Women Doing Mission Theology'.
[13] Kgatle, 'Diagnostic and Prescriptive Prophecy', 65-78.

of missionary agency because it enables women to communicate Christian faith and respond to the spiritual and social needs of others. These include *nyamukutas* (birth attendants) who assist the barren women in getting pregnant, prevent miscarriages, prepare the passage way of the child during birth, and strengthen the babies' fontanel. Those who wish to change the sex of a child before conception are also assisted. The *nyamukutas* make use of prayers, herbal water, and squeezing of the woman's belly as procedures to assist the women who come to them for help. In an interview with Mbuya Dhegu, a midwife (55 years), the researcher learnt that Mbuya Dhegu was a Christian adherent of Zion City Apostolic Church who helped women who came to her home with pregnancy problems. Mbuya Dhegu said that she prayed for women before giving them herbal water to drink, depending on the problem to be addressed. For her no client left unsatisfied after receiving her services. Most of her clients joined her religious affiliation as a show of gratitude. This confirmed Mbuya Dhegu's missionary activity without her knowledge.

In another interview, Mai Chimuti, a housewife (49 years), acknowledged that she became a devotee of the Zvapupu Apostolic Church where Mbuya Mbire went after Mbuya Mbire helped her conceive through prayers and giving her herbal water to drink. Mai Chimuti had had marriage problems due to miscarriages; her husband always threatened to marry another wife. She was introduced to Mbuya Mbire who prayed for her and gave her herbal water to drink. Thereafter Mai Chimuti conceived and bore a daughter. At the time of this research, Mai Chimuti had three children, two daughters and a son. She and her husband have since joined Mbuya Mbire's church and give credit to Mbuya Mbire for their current status. These interviews suggest that Mbuya Dhugu and Mbuya Mbire became missionaries who converted people through their spiritual giftedness.

Women's role at funerals as missionising

The researcher observed that at funerals women have an important role in consoling the bereaved as they are obliged by both culture and religion to spend the greater part of the funeral in the kitchen hut where the body of the deceased lies before burial. The closest female relatives sit in a semi-circle around the deceased body all day and all night until burial. Other community and church women sit a bit further away from the body while others sing songs

outside the kitchen hut consoling the grieving. Muchemwa confirms that dancing, mourning and other obscene antics displayed during this period are meant to appease the spirit of the dead and also play a central role in Shona funerals since they take away the negativeness of death and help mourners to regard death in a positive way. [14]From the observations made, men only enter the hut to console the bereaved relatives for a short time and go outside to sit around a fire. Mai Jiri, an elderly villager (52 years), noted: '*Yazhnji vanoti munhu afa anotyisa nokuti anenge ava kuvadzimu uye anopfuka akasabatwa zvakanaka asi madzimai ane basa guru rekurinda mufi vasingavhunduki*' ('Many people are of the view that a dead person is fearsome because they will now be with the ancestors and might avenge if not handled well, but women have a great role of fearlessly sitting with the deceased body').

Baba Runde, a local village head (63 years), confirmed the role played by women of jesting (*kunemera*) at a funeral as a way of consoling the bereaved. The daughters-in-law approach their uncles, husbands, and husbands' sisters teasingly insulting the way they might be weeping. This helps to calm the grieving who might fall sick or even collapse due to grief. These women at times imitate the deceased, which could be funny, and the moment one laughs, grief reduces. The approached relatives of the deceased are expected to willingly pay a certain amount of money to these daughters-in-law as a token appreciation for their role of calming the grieving. Mai Gase, a housewife (37 years), confirmed the importance of jesting, saying '*Panonemera varoora hama dzemufi dzinovapa mari uye havafiniri kuramba nokuti mutemo werufu*' ('When jesting is done, daughters-in-law are given money by the family members who should not refuse to pay because it is a funeral rite.') Death is the culmination of life so roles played by women help in interceding for the deceased to enter the spiritual world. The money collected from the relatives during jesting assists in buying things that are used at the funeral.

A reflection on the traditional way of managing funerals shows that among the Shona people women take center stage. The researcher observed that women were very active in singing, clapping hands, ululating, and dancing from the funeral vigil to the day of burial. It is very common to hear people saying '*Madzimai echurch imbai rufu rureruke*' ('Church women, can you sing to

[14] Muchmwa, 'Death and Shona Christians'.

lighten the funeral?'). Mai Gase noted that in the Johanne Masowe eChishanu, one of the African Initiated Churches in Buhera, women's main role is to sing. This was confirmed by Madzimai Scolar (62 years) who reiterated the role of women as singers saying, '*Ibasa ramadzimai rekuimba pasowe. Mazwi avo akaita seengirozi saka anoburutsa mweya mutsvene kuti utaure muvatumwa*' ('It is the role of women to sing at the shrine. Their voices are angelic so they invoke the Holy Spirit to come down and speak through the messengers/prophets and prophetesses'). Singing is thus largely women's responsibility. Many prophets in Johanne masowe eChishanu get into ecstasy through songs by *vaimbi* (singers) who sing songs in line with the sermon. The study revealed that it was common in African Initiated Churches in Buhera for women to take the lead in singing, whether it was during church service or at funerals. Most of the songs sang at funerals are Christian songs which were appealing to the audience. Participation of churches at funerals is a way of committing the spirit of the deceased to God. The understanding is that the burial of a Christian is more dignified in outlook than that of a non-Christian. This has resulted in a lot of people embracing Christianity. Bediako maintains that Christianity in Africa flourishes when it engages local cultures and recognises the ways in which African communities embody and communicate the Christian faith.[15]

Women's domestic utensils and domestic mission

Utensils which are perceived to be sacred used in African culture, especially in the home, are also used in the African Initiated Churches for healing purposes. These include clay pots, sweeping brooms, and cooking sticks, which are basically women's utensils. This finding confirms Musoni, P., Machingura, F., and Mamvuto, A. (2020)'s study which understands the use of clay pots in AICs as objects which store anointed water and anointed salt used for healing.[16]

In African culture, the clay pot (*mbiya*) is used for brewing or serving beer to invoke the ancestors. In church, they are used to store anointed water for cleansing rituals(*kueresa*) by people who are disturbed by evil spirits. Women

[15] Bediako, 'Christianity in Africa'.
[16] Musoni, P., Machingura, F., and Mamvuto, A. (2020) 'Religious Artefacts, Practices and Symbols'.

are the ones who mould clay pots in Buhera. Clay pots are moulded into the shape of a woman's womb which carries children. So, the clay pot symbolises life. God created people using clay, and prophets and prophetesses in Johanne Masowe eChishanu church use clay pots to restore life. The clay pot is fragile and easily breaks when handled clumsily and cannot be repaired. This is taken in Johanne Masowe eChishanu to represent and remind people of the fragility of life, that once one is dead, there is no remedy. The clay pot is used when curing the sick who visit the shrines seeking help.

Cooking stick (*mugoti*) is also sacred in African Christianity. It is used in the home to cook *sadza* for the family. It is believed that witches use the cooking stick to bewitch individuals. The witches make use of a cooking stick that is left smeared with *sadza* (thick porridge). The prophets and prophetesses use the same cooking stick to cure those bewitched. The cooking stick is also used for fertility restoration. This was indicated by a prophetess Madzimai Tendai (63 years), who said that if one has *sari* (a growth that develops on the private parts of a women after having been bewitched) she can never have children because it causes infertility. Madzimai Tendai used a cooking stick to reverse the witch's curse. As was noted earlier, having children is held in high regard in Buhera, so this use of cooking stick by prophetesses becomes domestic mission is it is used to restore the dignity and importance woman and to secure her marriage.

A traditional sweeping broom (*mutsvairo*) is another utensil used by women of Buhera in domestic mission. Culturally, as women do their household chores early in the morning using traditional brooms to sweep the house yard to remove dirt. Humbe (2021) claims that they will be warding off the evil spirits of the night.[17] In the church it is used to sprinkle holy water on the congregants before, during, and/or after the healing sessions are done. It is a symbol of sweeping away the diseases. From the preceding discussion on cooking utensils, it can be inferred that the association of women's utensils with mystical powers is an indirect way of women's participation in domestic mission.

[17] Humbe, B.P. 2021. 'The Meaning of African Traditional Religion'

Conclusion

This article has argued that African Christian women in Buhera are significant agents of Christian mission whose contribution is largely expressed through the ordinary spaces of domestic and community life. By examining marriage and family life, spiritual giftedness, caregiving, funeral participation, and the use of domestic utensils in Christian practices, the study demonstrates that mission extends beyond formal church structures and ordained ministry. Women's everyday activities provide spaces through which Christian faith is embodied, communicated, nurtured, and sustained.

The study's use of contextual missiology and Amenyedzi's Afrocentric-womanist paradigm makes it possible to interpret these practices within their African cultural and religious contexts while recognising women's agency. Rather than treating domestic responsibilities merely as culturally prescribed duties, the article shows how they can function as expressions of Christian service, witness, and spiritual ministry. The study challenges narrow understandings of mission that privilege formal church structures, ordained leadership, and public evangelism. It demonstrates that mission also takes place in homes, families, and community spaces where women exercise spiritual, relational, and cultural agency.

The central contribution of the study is therefore its proposal to move 'from domesticity to mission' by recognising the home and community as important sites of Christian mission. Giving greater theological and missiological recognition to women's everyday agency can contribute to a more inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of African Christianity.

Bibliography

Adeney F. S. 'Women Doing Mission Theology', *Missiology: An International Review* 33/3 (2005): 277-286.

Amenyedzi, S. B. 'The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm', in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa: World Religions and Environmental Imagination*, eds. S. Chirongoma and W. Kiilu, Mother Earth, Mother Africa: World Religions and Environmental Imagination, 199-214. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2022.

Ary, D., L. C. Jacobs, A. Razavieh, and C. Sorenson. *Introduction to Research in Education* 7th ed. Belmont: Thompson & Wadsworth, 2006.

Bediako, K. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

Butler, J., H. Kwiyani, and C. Ross. 'Missiology', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 23 May 2024. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Missiology

Creswell, J. W. and V. L. Clark. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007.

Hamutyinei, M. A. and A. Plangger. *Tsumo-Shumo: Shona proverbial lore and wisdom*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987.

Humbe, B. P., 'Prayers for women's livelihoods in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 lockdown era', *HTS Telogiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81/1 (2025). doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10086

Humbe, B.P. 2021. "The Meaning of African Traditional Religion for Modern Society: Zimbabwe as a Case Study." PhD diss., University of the Free State.

Humbe, E. 'Stigma and discrimination of female caregivers for mentally ill women: A theological reflection on the Shona people's perspectives on mental health,' in *African Women, Covid-19, Religion and Mental*

Health: An African Religious Interventionist Perspective, eds. A. Hlatywayo, M. Sipeyiye, C. Mwandayi, and S. Chirongoma, 183-196. Cham: Springer, 2026. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-16069-0_12

Kgatle, M. S. 'Diagnostic and Prescriptive Prophecy in African Independent Churches: A Distinct Ritual Healing Process', *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 3/15 (2025): 65-78. https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v15i03/65-78

Moahi, V. 'The Changing Role of Women in African Culture', *Africa Rebirth*, 25 May 2026. https://www.africarebirth.com/the-changing-role-of-women-in-african-culture/

Muchemwa, B., (2007) Death and the Shona Christians: A Theological Analysis of the Catholic Burial Rite https://www.scribd.com/document/46928407/Death-amp-Burial-Project?v=0.719

Musoni, P., Machingura, F., and Mamvuto, A. (2020) Religious Artefacts, Practices and Symbols in the Johane Masowe Chishanu yeNyenyedzi Church in Zimbabwe: Interpreting the Visual Narratives, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae,* Volume 46 | Number 1 | 2020 | #6588 | 17 pages

Ross, C. '"Without Faces:" Woman's Perspectives on Contextual Missiology,' in *Putting Names with Faces,* eds. C. Lienemann-Perrin, A. Longkumer, and A. S. Joye, 361-381. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012.

Togarasei, L. 'State as patriarch and biblical discipline: theorising state sponsored violence in Zimbabwe', *African Identities* 20/3 (2020): 215–224. doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2020.1813549