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Beyond Care: Reimagining Ecclesial Belonging for Single Mothers in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa

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Abstract

Single motherhood presents African churches with a theological and ecclesiological question that extends beyond the provision of welfare: who is regarded as a full and valued member of the Christian community? This article examines ecclesial belonging among single mothers in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), drawing on mixed-methods research conducted in Milimani South Presbytery, Nairobi County. The study involved 160 single mothers and eight church leaders through questionnaires, together with two focus group discussions and 18 in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that single motherhood is produced through diverse circumstances, including never-married motherhood, separation, widowhood, and divorce. Participants experienced interconnected emotional, psychological, financial, childcare, social, and spiritual challenges. More significantly for ecclesiology, participants reported a tension between continued participation in church life and inconsistent experiences of recognition, support, and leadership inclusion. Although church leaders identified counselling, support groups, and educational programmes as existing mechanisms, single mothers frequently experienced these interventions as irregular, inaccessible, or concentrated in particular congregations. Stigma and discrimination further weakened belonging, with some participants reporting exclusion from leadership and social activities. The article argues that pastoral ministry should move from a deficit model, which constructs

single mothers primarily as recipients of assistance, toward an ecclesiology of participation in which they are recognised as agents, leaders and contributors. Drawing on the empirical findings, the article develops five dimensions of ecclesial belonging: presence, recognition, participation, empowerment and leadership. The article concludes that the treatment of single mothers provides an important test of the African church's commitment to Christian community, dignity, justice and pastoral inclusivity.

Introduction

The changing structure of family life presents Christian churches in Africa with questions that are simultaneously pastoral, theological and institutional. Marriage remains deeply valued within African Christian communities and provides an important context for companionship, child-rearing, mutual responsibility and social stability. Yet the prominence of marriage as a Christian and cultural ideal can create difficulties when women find themselves raising children without a resident spouse. The resulting social category of "single motherhood" is therefore not merely a demographic description. It can become an identity through which women are interpreted, judged, and included or excluded within religious communities.

Single motherhood is not a single social condition. Women become single mothers through widowhood, separation, divorce, non-marital pregnancy, and other circumstances. These experiences cannot reasonably be reduced to one explanation or one moral category. A woman who becomes a single mother through the death of her husband does not occupy the same social position as a woman who has never married. A separated woman may continue to experience conflict or economic dependence associated with a previous relationship. A divorced woman may face continuing responsibilities toward children and former spouses. A never-married mother may encounter assumptions concerning sexuality, responsibility, and moral failure. African studies likewise demonstrate that single motherhood is shaped by migration, changing family structures, economic pressures, and culturally embedded expectations concerning marriage (Meda 2013; Halwiindi 2024; Ntoimo and Mutanda 2020).

The diversity of these circumstances creates a challenge for the church. When single mothers are treated as one undifferentiated category, pastoral ministry can become generalised and ineffective. More significantly, the label can become a social identity through which women are viewed primarily in terms of what is perceived to be missing from their lives: a husband. The pastoral response then tends to concentrate on what the woman needs rather than on who she is, what gifts she possesses, and how she already contributes to the life of the Christian community.

This article proposes a different starting point. Rather than asking only, 'What challenges do single mothers face?', it asks, 'What does the experience of single mothers reveal about belonging within the African Christian church?' The distinction is important. A church may acknowledge the existence of single mothers, offer occasional assistance, and encourage them spiritually while still failing to communicate that they are full participants in the ecclesial community.

The article draws on research conducted within the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Milimani South Presbytery, Nairobi County. The underlying study found that single mothers remained actively involved in church life while simultaneously reporting stigma, inconsistent support, limited access to structured programmes, and exclusion from some leadership opportunities. The resulting tension provides the basis for a broader theological argument. The central thesis is that the pastoral problem of single motherhood in the PCEA is not adequately understood as a shortage of assistance; it is fundamentally a question of ecclesial belonging.

Theologically, this concern is illuminated by the New Testament understanding of the church as the body of Christ and the household of God. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Paul presents: 'For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit' (KJV, here and throughout). Similarly, Ephesians 2:19–22 describes believers as members of the household of God and as a community being built together. These texts provide a biblical basis for asking not merely whether

single mothers are present in church, but whether the structures and relationships of the church communicate that they genuinely belong.

This argument does not deny the practical needs of single mothers. Financial hardship, emotional distress, childcare responsibilities, and psychosocial pressures emerged strongly from the research. However, these challenges become more difficult when the church itself is experienced as uncertain, judgemental, or inconsistent in its response. The church therefore has to examine not only what it provides but also the social relationships, structures and expectations through which it defines membership.

The article develops three arguments. First, single motherhood in the PCEA is a heterogeneous reality that requires differentiated pastoral attention. Second, the empirical evidence reveals a gap between church participation and institutional belonging. Many women attend worship and contribute to church activities, yet participation does not always translate into recognition, support, or leadership. Third, the church's response should move from a deficit-oriented model to an ecclesiology of participation. Single mothers should not be viewed primarily as people for whom the church must provide services. They are members of the body of Christ who possess spiritual, professional, relational, and leadership resources that can strengthen the church.

The article consequently proposes five dimensions of ecclesial belonging: presence, recognition, participation, empowerment, and leadership. These dimensions provide a practical and theological framework for evaluating whether congregations merely accommodate single mothers or genuinely receive them as members of the body of Christ.

Single Motherhood as a Question of Ecclesial Identity

A recurring problem in discussions of single motherhood is the tendency to define women through their family status. The phrase 'single mother' can function descriptively, but it can also become reductionist. It tells us that a woman is raising a child without a resident spouse, but it tells us little about her education, occupation, faith, personality, relationships, abilities, economic position, or contribution to the church.

This reduction has theological consequences. When a woman is defined primarily by her single motherhood, pastoral attention can become paternalistic. The church sees her needs but not necessarily her gifts. It sees vulnerability but not agency. It sees a recipient of ministry rather than a participant in ministry. Such a pattern is inconsistent with a New Testament understanding of the church as a community in which different members contribute different gifts. Paul's body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27: 'That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.' The verse does not divide believers into permanent providers and permanent recipients. It portrays mutual dependence and reciprocal contribution.

The empirical literature reinforces the need for a differentiated approach. Halwiindi (2024) identifies separation, divorce, widowhood, and unmarried motherhood among the pathways into single motherhood and emphasises the economic and cultural difficulties associated with the condition. Meda (2013) demonstrates how urban migration and changing gender relations affect family and motherhood in Nairobi. Ntoimo and Mutanda (2020) situate single parenthood within wider demographic and social transformations across Africa. These studies caution against interpreting single motherhood simply through a moral lens.

The present research adds an institutional dimension: the church can either reproduce or challenge the vulnerabilities associated with single motherhood. If congregational culture labels single mothers as morally suspect, social marginalisation is reinforced. If church programmes provide only occasional assistance, economic vulnerability remains. If activities assume the availability of a second adult caregiver, childcare becomes a barrier to participation. If leadership opportunities are informally associated with marital status, women may remain permanent participants without becoming recognised leaders.

Thus, the question of single motherhood becomes inseparable from the question of ecclesiology. The church's treatment of people whose family circumstances do not conform to dominant expectations reveals what the church believes membership actually means. If belonging depends upon

conformity to a particular family form, then ecclesial identity becomes narrower than the gospel's vision of a people gathered around Christ.

This ecclesiological concern also resonates with Galatians 3:26–28, where identity in Christ relativises social distinctions as determinants of standing within the Christian community. The text does not erase social or personal differences; rather, it challenges the use of such differences as grounds for unequal spiritual status. Applied carefully to the present study, this suggests that marital status should not become a theological measure of a woman's value, access to Christian community, or service capacity. The question is therefore not whether marriage is valued in Christian teaching, but whether marital status is being allowed to determine who is treated as a full member of Christ's body.

Ecclesial Belonging as a Theological Category

Belonging is more than attendance. A person may attend church every Sunday and still feel excluded. Conversely, belonging involves recognition, relationship, participation, responsibility, and mutuality. This distinction is particularly important for Christian understandings of the church. The church is not merely an audience gathered to receive religious services. It is a community in which members are joined to one another and equipped for service.

A biblical theology of belonging strengthens this distinction. Ephesians 2:19 describes believers as 'members of the household of God,' while 1 Peter 2:9–10 portrays the people of God in terms of shared identity and vocation. Belonging, therefore, is not merely proximity to a religious institution; it involves incorporation into a people whose members share dignity, responsibility, and vocation. This provides a theological foundation for interpreting the empirical distinction between attendance and belonging identified in the present study.

This theological starting point challenges a purely welfare-oriented model of ministry. The question should not simply be, 'What should the church give single mothers?' It should also be, 'How can the church create conditions in which single mothers exercise their gifts and participate fully in the life of the

body?' This is more than a semantic change; it has implications for the design and evaluation of pastoral ministry.

A welfare-oriented approach may prioritise financial assistance, counselling and food distribution. These interventions can be necessary. An ecclesial approach asks additional questions: Are single mothers represented in decision-making? Are they trusted with ministry responsibilities? Are their experiences heard when programmes are designed? Can they participate in church activities without childcare becoming an insurmountable barrier? Are their children treated with dignity? Can they raise concerns without fear of being labelled? Do church leaders know them personally? Are they regarded as contributors rather than permanent beneficiaries?

These questions move pastoral ministry from care for to belonging with. The difference is particularly significant in contexts where vulnerable groups can become permanently identified with need. Once the church names someone primarily as a "needy person", it can unintentionally establish a hierarchy between those who provide and those who receive. An ecclesiology of belonging seeks mutuality: people receive care, but they also give care; they receive resources, but they also possess resources; they are supported, but they also serve.

The Kenyan literature on singlehood within churches supports this concern. Mwongera (2024), studying women's singlehood in Kerith Churches of Kenya, found that women continued to experience substantial challenges despite being church members and concluded that existing mitigation strategies required reconsideration. The finding is significant for the present argument because it demonstrates that church presence and church membership do not automatically produce effective support or full inclusion.

Romans 12:4–8 further develops this theology through the language of one body with many members and different gifts. The passage directs attention away from a provider–recipient hierarchy toward a community in which members contribute according to the gifts entrusted to them. Likewise, 1 Peter 4:10–11 calls believers to use their gifts in service of one another. These texts are particularly relevant to the article's argument that single mothers should

be recognised not only as recipients of pastoral care but also as participants whose gifts, experience and leadership can contribute to the church.

Research Context and Methodology

The research on which this article is based was undertaken in Milimani South Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nairobi County. The presbytery provided a useful context because it contains congregations operating within an urban environment where family structures, employment patterns, mobility, and economic pressures are changing rapidly.

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were combined to capture both patterns in the experiences of single mothers and the meanings they attached to those experiences. The target population included approximately 1,000 single mothers within the presbytery. The final research sample comprised 160 single mothers and eight church leaders. Twenty single mothers were selected from each of eight parishes, while church leaders were purposively selected because of their knowledge of pastoral structures and church programmes (Mwangi 2026).

Two focus group discussions, each comprising seven single mothers, were conducted, together with 18 in-depth interviews. Questionnaires were administered to the single mothers and church leaders. The study also incorporated documentary review. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while interview and focus-group material was examined thematically. The combination of methods permitted triangulation between what church leaders reported, what survey respondents reported, and what participants described in qualitative settings.

The questionnaire response rate was 100% for both single mothers and church leaders in the final study. Ethical procedures included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The research was undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis at Laikipia University.

The use of the thesis data in this article requires an important qualification. The article does not reproduce the thesis as a whole. It selects and reinterprets

the empirical material through the distinct analytical category of ecclesial belonging. The purpose is therefore not to restate all four thesis objectives but to develop a theological argument from selected findings. Because the study was conducted in one PCEA presbytery, the findings should be treated as a contextual case study rather than statistically representative of all PCEA congregations.

Findings: Participation without Full Belonging

Single mothers are already present

The first significant finding is that single mothers are not a population outside the church. The underlying study found that 85.6% regularly attended church services and participated in church activities. Many participants had long histories of PCEA membership and had participated in ministries from childhood through adulthood.

This finding challenges any assumption that single mothers have simply withdrawn from church. They are present. They worship. They serve. They raise children within the Christian community. They contribute to church activities. The problem, therefore, is not simply bringing single mothers into the church. They are already there. The more difficult question is whether their presence produces genuine belonging.

This distinction is central to the article. Attendance is an observable behaviour, while belonging is a relational and institutional experience. A congregation can report high participation while some members simultaneously experience judgement, silence or restricted access to leadership. Consequently, church statistics based only on attendance may obscure the quality of participation.

Diverse pathways into single motherhood

The study identified four major reported sources of single motherhood. Of the 160 single mothers surveyed, 32.5% had never married, 31.3% were separated, 26.9% were widowed, and 6.3% were divorced. These figures demonstrate why a single pastoral response is inadequate.

Widowhood involves bereavement and the loss of a spouse. Separation may involve relational conflict, abandonment, or unresolved family responsibilities.

Divorce may involve the consequences of marital dissolution. Never-married motherhood may arise from multiple circumstances, including unintended pregnancy, relationship breakdown, or other personal and social conditions. The categories may overlap in lived experience, but they cannot be assumed to carry identical pastoral needs.

The church should therefore resist a single moral narrative about single motherhood. A pastoral programme that assumes all single mothers are unmarried because of irresponsible sexual behaviour will be pastorally and theologically inadequate. Equally, a programme that treats every single mother primarily as a victim may deny her agency. The diversity of pathways requires differentiated pastoral care within a common ecclesial framework of dignity and belonging.

Stigma as an ecclesial barrier

The most important threat to belonging identified by the study was stigma. More than half of the single mothers reported social stigma, while church leaders also identified stigma as a major challenge. Participants described being labelled irresponsible, immoral, or responsible for broken marriages.

Theologically, stigma within a Christian community raises the question of whether social distinctions are being permitted to contradict the church's confession of shared dignity in Christ. James 2:1–9 explicitly warns Christian communities against practices of partiality that assign different social value to members. Although James addresses a different social setting, its theological principle is relevant here: Christian fellowship is called to resist forms of status-based treatment that humiliate or marginalise members. In the context of single motherhood, this provides a biblical lens through which labels concerning morality, marriage, or family status can be examined critically rather than accepted as natural features of church life.

The problem extended to children. Some participants reported that their children were negatively labelled or treated differently because of their mothers ’marital status. This finding is important because it shows that stigma can become intergenerational. A woman may tolerate an uncomfortable label directed at herself, but discrimination against her children can affect her willingness to remain deeply involved in church life.

Stigma does not merely hurt feelings. It changes patterns of participation. If a woman anticipates judgement, she may stop seeking help. If she fears gossip, she may conceal difficulties. If she believes leadership positions are unavailable to her, she may stop aspiring to them. If her children experience discrimination, she may reduce her family's engagement with church activities. The study found that a large majority of participants believed the PCEA needed to pay greater attention to stigma and that some participants experienced themselves as second-class members.

This is not a minor pastoral issue. It is an ecclesiological problem. A community can possess inclusive doctrine while practising exclusion through informal social norms. The church therefore needs to address not only explicit policies but also the informal language, assumptions and social practices through which members interpret one another.

The emotional cost of conditional belonging

Emotional and psychological difficulties were reported by a substantial proportion of single mothers, while church leaders also identified emotional and psychological challenges among the major problems facing this group. The qualitative data revealed loneliness, anxiety, stress, emotional exhaustion, and fear of judgement.

These pressures were connected to the practical realities of single parenting. Participants described balancing work, childcare, and household responsibilities. Widowed participants carried grief. Separated and divorced mothers could experience continuing relational difficulties. Some worried about how to explain the absence of fathers to their children. Such pressures demonstrate that pastoral care must be relational rather than merely programmatic.

The study indicates that participants wanted safe spaces where they could discuss their experiences without condemnation. This suggests that the church's pastoral ministry should create environments in which vulnerability does not result in social punishment. A congregation cannot expect members to disclose their struggles if disclosure threatens their dignity.

Financial pressure and the limits of spiritualised care

Financial hardship was another major challenge. Participants reported difficulties meeting household obligations, including food, rent, healthcare and school fees. Some also lacked capital to establish income-generating activities. These findings correspond with wider literature showing that single-parent households can carry concentrated economic and caregiving burdens (Clark et al. 2017; Halwiindi 2024; Olotch, Muraya and Kagwe 2025).

Participants also identified prayer, trust in God, worship, and fellowship as important coping mechanisms. These spiritual resources should not be dismissed. They are central to Christian pastoral care and to the ways believers interpret adversity. However, spiritual resilience does not eliminate material needs.

If a mother cannot pay school fees, prayer may sustain her psychologically, but it does not replace school fees. If she lacks capital for an income-generating activity, encouragement alone does not create employment. If she cannot attend church because of childcare responsibilities, an invitation alone does not remove the practical barrier. The church must therefore resist spiritual reductionism: the assumption that material and psychosocial problems can be adequately addressed through spiritual encouragement alone.

Holistic pastoral care must attend to spiritual and material realities together. This does not require the church to become a government agency or professional welfare department. It requires the church to recognise material hardship as part of the lived context of discipleship and to build responsible partnerships, referral systems and support mechanisms.

This integrated approach is consistent with the biblical pattern of Christian care in which spiritual fellowship and practical responsibility are held together. Galatians 6:2 calls believers to ‘bear one another's burdens,’ while Acts 2:42–47 depicts the early Christian community as a fellowship characterised by teaching, prayer, shared life and practical concern for members' needs. These passages caution against separating spiritual ministry from material realities. At the same time, they do not require the church to replace professional social or health services. Rather, they support a model of pastoral ministry in which

prayer, fellowship, practical assistance, referral, and mutual responsibility are understood as complementary dimensions of Christian care.

Childcare and the hidden architecture of exclusion

Childcare is a particularly revealing issue because it demonstrates how exclusion can occur without intentional discrimination. Single mothers reported difficulty balancing work, parenting, and church participation. Some church activities occurred at times when they could not easily secure childcare.

The result is that church programmes may unintentionally privilege members who live in households with multiple adults. A married household in which one spouse can remain with children possesses a practical advantage over a single-parent household. This means that apparently neutral church structures are not always neutral in their effects.

If churches genuinely want single mothers to participate, they must examine their programme architecture. This may include childcare during selected meetings, family-friendly scheduling, children's activities integrated with adult programmes, transportation support and flexible ministry structures. These are not merely conveniences. They are mechanisms of ecclesial accessibility.

The paradox of existing church support

One of the most revealing findings was the discrepancy between church leaders 'understanding of available support and single mothers 'experiences of that support. Church leaders reported the existence of counselling, community support groups and educational programmes, yet single mothers reported substantially lower levels of access to such interventions.

This produces a crucial distinction: a programme can exist without being accessible. Church leaders may know that a counselling service exists while a single mother does not know how to reach it. A programme may operate in one parish while another parish has nothing comparable. A seminar may occur once while a mother requires continuing support. The issue therefore involves not merely programme creation but institutional consistency, communication, accessibility and evaluation.

The qualitative evidence reinforced this conclusion. Participants acknowledged that counselling services existed in some settings and were helpful where available, but they emphasised that support was not consistently available across congregations. Many participants reported receiving spiritual support while receiving little financial or emotional support.

The church therefore needs to distinguish between institutional provision and lived accessibility. The relevant measure is not simply whether a ministry appears in a programme document. The relevant question is whether the intended recipients can actually reach, trust and benefit from it.

Single mothers as agents of ministry

Perhaps the most promising finding is easily overlooked: the research did not reveal a population devoid of capacity. Some participants expressed desires to study theology, preach, rebuild youth and children's ministries, visit homes and contribute to church growth. Such testimony challenges the deficit model.

The woman is not merely asking, 'What can the church do for me?' She is also asking, 'How can I contribute to the growth of the church?' This is precisely where ecclesial belonging becomes visible. A person experiences belonging when she is not merely served but trusted.

The church's response should therefore include mechanisms for identifying and developing the gifts of single mothers. These could include theological education, leadership training, mentoring, ministry appointments, youth ministry, children's ministry, evangelism, counselling support, community development, women's ministry and church administration.

The study found that some participants had already been involved in leadership and church activities, while others reported discrimination in accessing such opportunities. The implication is that the church does not need to invent capacity. It needs to recognise and release existing capacity.

From Welfare to Ecclesial Participation

The findings support a shift from a welfare model to an ecclesiology of participation. Welfare has an important place in Christian ministry. The Good

Samaritan provides a biblical picture of concrete assistance to a person in need. Yet Christian community is not exhausted by relief. The church also calls people into service, responsibility, and mutuality.

The biblical basis for this movement lies in the fact that Christian community is both a community of care and a community of service. The Good Samaritan narrative (Luke 10:25–37) demonstrates concrete compassion toward a person in need, but the wider New Testament witness also portrays believers as active participants in the life of the body. Romans 12:4–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 therefore help to prevent an interpretation of Christian care in which vulnerable members remain permanently positioned as recipients. Theologically, care should create conditions in which people are restored to dignity, relationship, responsibility, and participation.

The distinction can be represented as follows. The welfare model begins with need and moves toward assistance and temporary relief. The participation model begins with presence and moves toward recognition, participation, empowerment, and leadership. The first model is often crisis-oriented. The second seeks long-term incorporation into the life of the community.

The participation model should not be interpreted as a rejection of material assistance. Some single mothers require emergency help and should receive it. Rather, welfare should become a bridge toward agency rather than a permanent identity. Assistance should stabilise households while the church simultaneously creates opportunities for skills development, social connection, economic strengthening and ministry participation.

This approach also corrects a common asymmetry in pastoral relationships. When the church continually gives to a group, it can unintentionally communicate that the group has little to give. Yet every Christian community contains gifts. An ecclesiology of participation asks what single mothers bring to the church, not merely what they lack.

Five Dimensions of Ecclesial Belonging

Presence

The first level is presence. Are single mothers physically and socially present? The study suggests that many are. Yet presence alone is insufficient. A person can attend worship without feeling welcome. The church should therefore distinguish physical attendance from relational inclusion.

Recognition

The second level is recognition. Does the congregation recognise the dignity and individuality of single mothers? Recognition requires rejecting stereotypes and refusing to define women primarily through marital status. It also requires recognising their children as full participants in the church community. Recognition is communicated through language, pastoral relationships, public affirmation and the absence of humiliating assumptions.

Participation

The third level is participation. Can single mothers participate meaningfully in worship, fellowship, service and ministry? The study indicates that some do, but others face practical and social barriers. Participation therefore requires attention to programme design, childcare, financial pressures and congregational attitudes. A church cannot claim inclusive participation if its structures make participation practically impossible for a significant category of members.

Empowerment

The fourth level is empowerment. Does church ministry strengthen women's ability to manage their circumstances? This includes counselling, economic empowerment, parenting support, education, financial literacy, vocational training and social networks. The underlying research specifically identifies entrepreneurship, vocational skills, financial literacy, savings groups and employment opportunities as areas requiring greater attention. Empowerment differs from dependency because it increases the member's capacity to act.

Leadership

The fifth and strongest test is leadership. Are single mothers trusted with responsibility? This is perhaps the clearest indicator that the church has moved beyond a charity model. If a congregation says, 'We care for single mothers,' but rarely says, 'We trust single mothers to lead,' its understanding of belonging remains incomplete. Leadership communicates institutional recognition and treats women as subjects of ministry rather than objects of ministry.

The five dimensions can therefore be conceptualised as a movement: Presence → Recognition → Participation → Empowerment → Leadership. The movement is not necessarily linear for every individual. Rather, it is a framework for evaluating the maturity of congregational inclusion.

Each dimension can also be related to a biblical understanding of Christian community. Presence corresponds to the visible gathering of the people of God; recognition reflects the equal dignity of members of Christ's body; participation reflects the shared exercise of gifts described in Romans 12:4–8; empowerment reflects the equipping of believers for service; and leadership reflects the trust and stewardship involved in Christian ministry. The five dimensions should therefore be understood not as a secular management model imposed upon the church, but as an analytical framework that can be interpreted in conversation with biblical ecclesiology.

Reimagining Pastoral Leadership

The study suggests that pastoral leadership requires more than sympathy. Some church leaders were perceived as distant, less supportive, or insufficiently concerned about the experiences of single mothers. This calls for leadership training that develops empathy, listening skills, confidentiality, safeguarding awareness, and referral competence.

This understanding of leadership is consistent with the pastoral imagery of the New Testament. Christian leaders are called to shepherd rather than dominate, and 1 Peter 5:2–3 cautions leaders against exercising authority in a domineering manner. Ephesians 4:11–13 likewise presents ministry leadership in terms of equipping the saints for service. These texts support a pastoral

model in which leaders create conditions for members to mature, contribute, and exercise their gifts. For the present study, this means that pastoral leadership should not simply speak for single mothers; it should listen to them, equip them, and create legitimate spaces in which they can exercise responsibility.

A minister does not need to be a professional psychologist, but should know when psychological counselling is required. A church elder does not need to become an economist, but can help connect a woman to economic empowerment resources. A congregation does not need to become a social-service agency, but it can establish partnerships with organisations that possess specialist expertise.

Pastoral leadership increasingly requires networking and referral competence alongside preaching, teaching and visitation. A mature pastoral system should therefore have a clear map of available professional resources, confidential referral pathways and follow-up mechanisms. The absence of professional expertise should not become an excuse for doing nothing, nor should ministers attempt to perform roles for which they are not trained.

Leadership should also create conditions in which single mothers can speak without fear. Listening is not a symbolic activity. It is a form of pastoral power-sharing. When those most affected by a problem participate in identifying its causes and designing its solutions, ministry becomes more responsive and less paternalistic.

Institutionalising Belonging in the PCEA

The findings suggest that institutional reform should occur at congregational, presbytery and broader denominational levels. At congregational level, individual parishes should establish clear mechanisms for counselling, referral, fellowship, childcare, economic empowerment, mentoring and leadership inclusion. These mechanisms should be accessible rather than merely formally established.

At presbytery level, shared resources can address inequalities between congregations. Professional counselling, training, economic empowerment

and safeguarding resources need not be duplicated in every parish. A presbytery-wide system could maintain a directory of approved service providers, organise leadership development and support smaller congregations that lack specialist personnel.

At denominational level, the PCEA could develop a policy framework concerning vulnerable and single-parent families. Such a framework could articulate principles concerning dignity, non-discrimination, pastoral confidentiality, children's welfare, leadership participation, counselling referral, economic empowerment and programme evaluation. A policy would not replace local pastoral judgement; it would establish minimum standards and institutional accountability.

Such institutional measures also have a theological dimension. If the church understands itself as one body, then the dignity and participation of members cannot depend solely upon the goodwill of individual office bearers. The biblical emphasis on mutual responsibility (Galatians 6:2), impartiality (James 2:1–9) and the use of diverse gifts (1 Corinthians 12:12–27) provides theological grounds for institutional practices that protect dignity, facilitate participation and make pastoral care more consistent. Policy, therefore, need not be understood as bureaucratisation of ministry; it can serve the church's responsibility to embody its theological commitments in concrete structures.

Institutionalisation also requires monitoring. Churches should ask whether single mothers know about available services, whether they can access them, whether the services are used, whether participants report benefit, and whether leadership opportunities are genuinely available. Evaluation changes support from an assumption into an evidence-based ministry.

Listening to Single Mothers as Co-Creators of Ministry

One of the strongest implications of the study is methodological as well as pastoral. Churches frequently design programmes for vulnerable people without sufficiently involving them in programme design. The present findings demonstrate why this approach is inadequate. Church leaders may believe that programmes exist while single mothers report that those programmes are difficult to access or largely absent from their lived experience.

The solution is not simply more programmes. The solution is participatory programme design. Single mothers should be represented in committees that design services intended for them. They should participate in evaluating programmes. They should be asked what support is useful, what support is harmful, and what barriers prevent participation. They should have avenues for confidential complaints and recommendations.

This changes the relationship between institution and beneficiary. The woman ceases to be the object of ministry and becomes a co-creator of ministry. Such participation also has theological value because it enacts the mutuality of the body of Christ rather than merely describing it.

Theologically, co-creation also reflects the New Testament picture of the church as a mutually contributing body rather than an institution in which ministry flows in only one direction. Paul states that “the members may have the same care for one another” (1 Corinthians 12:25), emphasising mutual concern rather than a permanent distinction between those who minister and those who receive ministry. Listening to single mothers therefore becomes more than a participatory technique. It can be understood as a practical enactment of ecclesial mutuality in which the knowledge and gifts of members contribute to the common good.

The approach can be implemented through annual listening forums, parish-level advisory groups, confidential feedback mechanisms and periodic evaluation of programmes. Importantly, these processes should not create a separate ecclesial class of “single mothers”. Their representatives should participate alongside other church members in ordinary governance and ministry structures.

African Theological Implications

The findings have significance for African theology because they expose a tension between communal ideals and the lived experience of women within Christian communities. African theological reflection frequently emphasises community, relationality, mutual responsibility and social solidarity. Single motherhood provides a practical test of these ideals.

Biblical ecclesiology provides an important conversation partner for this African theological reflection. The New Testament's language of household, body, fellowship and mutual service resonates with African emphases on relationality, communal responsibility and shared life, while also providing resources for critically examining forms of community that become exclusionary. In this sense, Christian community is not simply validated by its communal character; it is also judged by whether that community reflects the dignity, mutuality and service expected of the body of Christ. African ecclesiology can therefore draw simultaneously from indigenous communal values and the church's biblical vocation to resist practices that produce humiliation or unequal belonging.

If community is genuinely valued, then a woman raising children without a spouse should not become socially invisible. If mutual responsibility is genuinely valued, then the burdens carried by single-parent households should become communal concerns. If Christian fellowship is genuinely relational, then stigma and exclusion cannot be dismissed as private matters.

This is where African ecclesiology can make a distinctive contribution. The church should not merely reproduce the social hierarchy surrounding marriage. It can become a counter-community in which dignity is not determined by marital status. Such an ecclesiology does not reject marriage. It rejects the assumption that marriage is the measure of Christian worth.

The challenge is particularly important because African family systems remain highly relational. Extended kinship can be a source of support, but it can also reinforce expectations concerning marriage, gender and respectability. The church therefore operates within a social environment in which marital status carries substantial meaning. Its pastoral ministry must be able to acknowledge cultural values while critically examining practices that produce humiliation or exclusion.

The Kenyan studies considered in this article show that the church is already a significant social location for addressing singlehood and single motherhood. Wachege and Omwoyo (2018) demonstrate the complexity of single motherhood among younger women and the need to distinguish categories rather than treat all single mothers as one group. Mwongera (2024) similarly

argues that churches need to rethink mitigation strategies. The contribution of the present article is to frame these practical questions as a question of ecclesial belonging.

Practical Recommendations

Establish consistent support structures

The theological rationale for consistency is that pastoral care should reflect the church's continuing responsibility for one another rather than depend entirely upon exceptional acts of charity. Galatians 6:2 and Acts 2:42–47 provide biblical resources for understanding care as part of ordinary Christian community life. PCEA structures can therefore seek to make support dependable while preserving the relational character of pastoral ministry.

Support should not depend entirely on individual parish initiatives. The PCEA should establish minimum standards for pastoral support, including basic referral procedures, confidential counselling access, information dissemination and mechanisms for identifying members who require assistance.

Develop professional counselling networks

Counselling should be available consistently and confidentially, with trained personnel and referral mechanisms. Pastoral counselling should be distinguished from clinical mental-health care where specialist intervention is required.

Address stigma explicitly

Biblical teaching can form an important part of this response. James 2:1–9 provides a direct theological critique of partiality, while 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 emphasises the interdependence and value of different members of the body. Preaching and congregational teaching can use such texts not merely to condemn stigma abstractly but to form a Christian imagination in which marital status does not determine spiritual worth, dignity, or the possibility of service.

Church leaders should directly challenge stereotypes about single mothers through preaching, teaching, leadership training, and congregational education. The language used in sermons, announcements, and informal

pastoral conversations should be evaluated because stigma can be reproduced through seemingly ordinary speech.

Integrate economic empowerment

Church support should include financial literacy, vocational training, entrepreneurship, savings groups and links to employment or economic institutions. The purpose is not to turn churches into commercial organisations but to strengthen household resilience and agency.

Remove practical barriers to participation

Childcare and programme scheduling should be considered when designing church activities. Where childcare cannot be provided, scheduling and communication should recognise the realities of single-parent households.

Open leadership pathways

Theologically, opening appropriate leadership pathways can be grounded in the New Testament emphasis on spiritual gifts and the equipping of believers for ministry. Romans 12:4–8 and 1 Peter 4:10–11 describe believers as recipients and stewards of diverse gifts, while Ephesians 4:11–13 presents ministry as a means of equipping the wider body. These texts support careful discernment of gifts and calling rather than assumptions that marital status alone determines capacity for Christian service.

Single mothers should not be excluded from leadership simply because of marital status. Where doctrinal or constitutional requirements exist, these should be distinguished from informal cultural prejudice. Leadership decisions should be transparent and based on relevant ministry criteria.

Establish participatory evaluation

Programmes for single mothers should be evaluated with the participation of single mothers themselves. Evaluation should examine access, utilisation, perceived usefulness, and outcomes rather than merely counting activities.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it was conducted in one PCEA presbytery in Nairobi County. The findings therefore

cannot automatically be generalised to all PCEA congregations or to other denominations. Second, the research focused on single mothers and church leaders; the perspectives of children, former spouses, wider family members and congregants who are not directly involved in church leadership were not examined in equal depth. Third, the article interprets existing empirical material through the conceptual lens of ecclesial belonging, which means that further studies should directly operationalise and test the five dimensions proposed here.

The theological interpretation should also be understood within these limitations. The biblical texts discussed in this article provide theological resources for interpreting the empirical findings; they do not by themselves prove the prevalence of particular experiences within PCEA congregations. The movement from Scripture to pastoral recommendation is therefore interpretive and contextual, requiring continued dialogue between biblical theology, empirical evidence and the ecclesial traditions of the PCEA.

Future research could compare rural and urban PCEA congregations. Such a study could examine whether stigma, economic hardship, childcare barriers and leadership access differ by context. Comparative denominational research could also examine whether the same patterns occur in Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Kenya.

Further research should also examine children's experiences. If belonging is genuinely ecclesial, children of single mothers should not be treated as secondary participants. Their experiences of stigma, friendship, youth ministry and educational support could provide an important measure of congregational inclusivity.

Finally, longitudinal research could examine whether interventions such as counselling, economic empowerment and leadership development actually change women's experiences over time. The present study establishes important patterns, but future research should assess outcomes after interventions have been implemented.

Conclusion

The question of single motherhood in the PCEA cannot be adequately answered by asking how much assistance the church provides. The deeper question is whether single mothers experience themselves as belonging.

The biblical-theological perspective developed in this revision reinforces this conclusion. The church is presented in Scripture not simply as a provider of religious services but as a body, household and fellowship in which members are called to mutual care and service (Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 2:19–22). These images provide a theological basis for asking whether single mothers are recognised as full members whose dignity, gifts and responsibilities are affirmed within the Christian community.

The evidence from Milimani South Presbytery reveals an important paradox. Single mothers are already active in church life. They attend worship, participate in ministries, raise children within the Christian community and, in some cases, exercise substantial leadership capacity. Yet many simultaneously experience stigma, inconsistent support, financial hardship, emotional distress, childcare pressures, and exclusion from some forms of leadership.

The church therefore faces a challenge that is deeper than programme provision. It must reconsider how belonging is constructed. A church that gathers single mothers but does not recognise them has not achieved belonging. A church that recognises them but does not allow meaningful participation has not achieved belonging. A church that provides assistance but does not empower them has not achieved belonging. And a church that empowers them but refuses to trust them with leadership has only partially embraced the ecclesiology of the body of Christ.

The movement proposed in this article—from presence to recognition, participation, empowerment, and leadership—offers a way of evaluating that journey. The significance of the model is that it does not treat single mothers as a permanent pastoral problem. It treats them as members of the Christian community.

Single mothers need pastoral care, but they should not be reduced to people who need care. They need support, but they should not be defined by dependency. They need protection from stigma, but they should not be defined by stigma. They need opportunities, but they should not have to prove their worth before receiving them. They possess gifts that the church needs.

The most faithful response of the PCEA, therefore, is not merely to construct more services around single mothers. It is to create an ecclesial culture in which their presence is normal, their dignity is protected, their participation is expected, their development is supported, and their leadership is possible. In that sense, the experience of single mothers becomes more than a pastoral concern. It becomes a test of the church's understanding of itself.

Such a response is consistent with the New Testament vision of a community in which "the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Corinthians 12:25) and in which each member contributes according to the gifts received (Romans 12:4–8; 1 Peter 4:10–11). The theological objective is therefore not simply to make services more available, but to embody an ecclesiology in which care and participation belong together. Single mothers are recipients of pastoral care, but they are also fellow members, bearers of gifts and participants in the church's ministry.

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