African Women in Theological Scholarship : Emerging Voices and Perspectives





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The scope/core focus of ATJCS is to promote high quality scholarship in the fields of theology relevant or applicable to church and society in the African context. ATJCS publishes original research and literature studies in within the relevant focus areas. The intended readership of ATJCS is theological scholars (researchers), students, ministers and persons interested in the particular field.

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Schafroth, V 2026, 'A Place at the Table: African Women Writing Theology', *African Women in Theological Scholarship: Emerging Voices and Perspectives : African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2 pp. 1-4

A Place at the Table: African Women Writing Theology

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Let me invite you into the world of women in theological education in Africa. I remember a conversation with a female student in Mozambique. She told me that at first, she did not even know that women were allowed to study theology. She only found out when a friend invited her to a graduation ceremony and she saw a woman graduating. The next day she enrolled immediately. If you never see a woman in a particular role, then, of course, you do not know that it is possible. Today, women are increasingly visible among theology students and occupy administrative and service roles at theological institutions in Africa. Yet their numbers decrease substantially at the faculty level and fall even further in leadership roles. An ACTEA (Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa) survey conducted in 2023 found an 80/20 split between men and women in theological faculty positions. Increasingly, however, another question has emerged. It is one thing for women to study and teach theology, but who gets to write theology? Whose voices become part of the scholarly conversation?

I often think of theology as a bird that needs two wings to fly. One wing is the voices and perspectives of men; the other is those of women. When women are largely absent from the conversation, theology is attempting to fly on one wing – addressing questions and issues that only half the church is raising. How much richer might our theological reflections become if the whole church were able to contribute?

These were the questions and concerns that called ACTEA for Women into being in 2023. We set out with a volunteer team of four senior female scholars from Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa with the explicit aim of developing an

initiative that would strengthen female scholars and bring them together across the continent. The latter was particularly close to our hearts. During an online workshop for female faculty, about 75 women from across Africa had gathered and about fifteen minutes into the first session, there was a bit of a pause and suddenly we could hear someone sobbing. The facilitator asked if the woman could identify herself (with large Zoom gatherings it is often difficult to spot just one person) and share what was going on. She explained that she was the only woman at her institution, and she had never seen so many other women in theological education gathered. She just could not hold back her emotions. The encouragement of discovering that she was not alone was overwhelming. This was a huge motivator for us to start thinking long-term about how to support female faculty and bring them together for mentoring and networking.

This is exactly what ACTEA for Women has sought to do. Monthly webinars mostly led by African female scholars provide opportunities for networking and fellowship, while the ACTEA mentoring programme aims to walk alongside female scholars on a more personal and regular basis. It was with the same desire for African women to not only participate in the life of theological learning, but to also have their voices heard in its conversations that our academic writing workshop took place in Nairobi in July 2025.

Over the course of the week, we explored the academic publishing process from a variety of angles, the practical steps involved in developing a journal article to journal and book publishing. Some sessions went deeper into the particular experience of writing as an emerging African woman theologian. We wrestled with cultural difference in academic writing, explored how to construct and support an argument, and practised giving and receiving peer review. Just as importantly, the programme created space for personal supervision, allowing participants to work on their own writing with experienced scholars. As with all our gatherings, worship, devotions, meals, and time together were woven into the programme. The aim was not simply to teach women how to publish an academic article, but to create a community in which these women could begin to see themselves as scholars with something worth contributing to the wider theological conversation.

The articles in this special issue are some of the fruits of that week, but the journey from workshop to publication did not end when we left Nairobi. We are particularly grateful to Dr Ryan Faber, editor of the *African Theological Journal for Church and Society* (ATJCS), for the time, encouragement, and careful editorial work he has invested in walking with the authors through the process. His commitment has helped bring the vision behind the workshop to fruition. Of the 41 participants, ten are published in this special issue while others have gone on to publish in other academic settings and journals. For some, publication has not been the outcome, whether by choice or through the review process. Yet each of these different paths was part of a larger purpose: to strengthen women as scholars, develop their confidence and voice as writers, and encourage their continued participation in African theological scholarship.

Our vision for African women in theological education is to see their stories of lament become stories of leadership and scholarship. It is to see stories marked by frustration and exclusion become starting points for new collaborations, innovations, and actions that can help transform institutions and cultures that, intentionally or unintentionally, have not made room for women's voices. Through ACTEA for Women, we hope to see women flourish and reach their God-given potential in African theological institutions for the benefit not only of the women themselves or the institutions in which they serve, but ultimately of the African Church. It is our desire that the scholarship represented in this issue will encourage other women to see new possibilities for themselves.

Verena Schafroth, PhD

ADDITIONAL EDITORIAL NOTE

In her guest editorial, Dr Schafroth notes that the articles in the special issue were begun at the ACTEA for Women writers workshop in Nairobi. The workshop helped the writers develop their craft and introduced them to the publication process. Some, but not all, of the 41 workshop participants submitted their articles to ATJCS. All of the articles underwent the journal's standard double blind peer review process. In the end, the following articles were accepted for publication. Careful readers may notice a deviation from ATJCS standard reference style for this special issue. ACTEA for Women adopted Langham Publishing's style guide for its writers' workshop, and ATJCS agreed to follow that style guide for this issue. ATJCS thanks ACTEA, ACTEA for Women, and Dr Schafroth for the opportunity to partner together for this special issue and to contribute to the continuing empowerment of women's voices in the African theological academy.

Ryan Faber, PhD
Editor, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*

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Intersectional dynamics: African Traditional Religion and Christianity in the face of women in Zimbabwe, Africa

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Abstract

This study explores the intersectional dynamics between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity in relation to women in Zimbabwe. In precolonial African societies, women held significant leadership roles as custodians of tradition, community welfare, and social cohesion within both ATR and early Christian expressions. Colonialism and missionary evangelisation contributed to the marginalisation of indigenous religious systems, resulting in the erosion of certain cultural practices. This weakened African cultural identity and reduced the participation and empowerment of women and girls in community and spiritual activities. As a result, many Zimbabwean Christians feel ATR values and practices and other traditional elements are missing from contemporary Christianity. In response to perceived gaps in Christian worship practices, some believers seek to reconnect ATR and Christian traditions, creating a hybrid religious experience shaped by cultural memory, spiritual identity, and historical legacy. This study examines how norms, beliefs, and practices within ATR and Christianity intersect, particularly focusing on women's positions within this hybrid religious space and its implications for social and spiritual justice in Zimbabwe. Using critical documentary analysis and phenomenological methods, the study incorporates insights from ten key informant interviews, analysed through thematic analysis. It investigates how colonial

history, cultural identity, evangelisation, and conversion dynamics continue to shape the relationship between ATR and Christianity. Findings indicate limited formal integration between ATR and Christianity, alongside ongoing tensions, misunderstandings, and cultural discontinuities. The study also highlights emerging possibilities for coexistence and contextual theology that incorporate indigenous African spiritual values into Christian worship. It concludes that ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe exist in a complex, evolving relationship shaped by historical, cultural, and spiritual factors. It argues that constructive engagement through interfaith dialogue, contextual theology, and cultural reconciliation can enhance inclusive worship practices, promote cultural preservation, and strengthen women's roles in religious and community life.

Introduction

This study explores the intersection between African traditional religion (ATR) and Christianity in Zimbabwe, focusing on women's roles, cultural identity, and sustainable development. Zimbabwean Christianity is broadly divided into Western-oriented churches, such as the United Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran churches, introduced by missionaries, and African Independent Churches (AICs), which incorporate African spiritual beliefs and practices.[1]

Historically, African women served as spiritual mediators, healers, priestesses, and custodians of sacred knowledge within their communities.[2] However, Western missionaries in the nineteenth century introduced Christianity alongside European cultural values, rejecting African customs and portraying African spirituality negatively. This weakened women's traditional authority and disconnected Christianity from African cultural identity. Although women became the majority of converts, they experienced oppression from colonialism and patriarchal Christianity and cultural marginalisation simultaneously. Women healers and midwives were excluded from church

[1] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life*, 15.
[2] Yoknyam, "Women as Healers".

leadership despite their continued importance in community health and spiritual care.[3]

Missionaries introduced severe patterns of culture and distorted cultural practices and customary institutions that women could use to challenge Christianity patriarchal systems.[4] Hence, women's intervention was disqualified in both, but needed in both. But religion remains a powerful space for women's participation in community development and cultural preservation. African proverbs and oral traditions affirm women's value, such as the Shona proverb *musha mukadzi* ("a woman is the pillar of the home").[5] Despite missionary condemnation of ATR practices in countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa, many Christians still practice ATR secretly. Moreover, ATR and Christianity intersect with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDGs 3, 4, and 5, which focus on health, education, gender equality, and women's empowerment. [6] This preserves Zimbabwean customary identity. Christianity alone fails to acknowledge the roles of African women as cultural counsellors, healers, prophetesses and spiritual ancestors.[7] As a result, many Zimbabwean converts fail to express their faith, experience their total Zimbabwean human devoutness, and defend their culture, religious worship and traditional community services. They prefer to maintain Western culture and worship.

In essence, Christian liturgy and traditional rites coexist.[8] These were not connected during the inception of Christianity in Africa to develop a contextual Christianity. As a result, religion has become a double-edged sword for women in community development.[9] Psalms 68:31 promotes the African identity and spirituality that were undermined. It teaches that Africans have a responsibility to preach Christ in ways that address the needs of their own people.[10] It argues that women have a respected role that balances religion, culture, and gender,

[3] Phiri and Nadar, "What's in a name?"
[4] Manyonganise, "Oppressive and Liberative".
[5] Chirongoma, "Utilizing Indigenous Cultural Resources".
[6] Ringson,"Gender Equality".
[7] Yoknyam, "Women as Healers".
[8] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 17.
[9] Chireshe, E. "Intersections".
[10] Dube, Shoko, and Hayes, *African Initiatives.*

but African women's status was weakened and separated from ATR and Christian practices in an effort to dilute Africa's cultural identity. For Christ to be relevant to Africa, Africans must develop a theology that speaks to the masses.[11]

Zimbabwean traditional religion is rooted in spirituality, morality, culture, and indigenous knowledge systems. This shapes social, moral, political, and economic life, which are essential resources that need to be integrated into modern Christian practice, particularly within the United Methodist Church, to achieve sustainable culturally and spiritually relevant development.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology using three major approaches: critical documentary analysis, phenomenological analysis, and key informant interviews, with thematic analysis serving as the conceptual framework for interpreting data. Critical documentary analysis involves examining written materials, extracting relevant information, and synthesising findings to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between ATR and Christianity. This method evaluates the authenticity, credibility, and representativeness of documents while comparing findings from interviews, observations, and other sources to minimise bias and strengthen reliability.[12]

Key informant interviews were conducted with ten participants, including five pastors and five chiefs, selected for their extensive knowledge of culture, religion, and community practices. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the interaction between ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwean society. Physical evidence and personal documents were also used to enrich the analysis and clarify meanings within the collected data.

Phenomenological analysis was applied to understand participants' lived experiences and perspectives concerning religion, culture, and women's roles. This approach focuses on how individuals interpret and experience their social and spiritual realities, enabling the researcher to contextualise the study within contemporary Zimbabwean religious life.

[11] Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology*, 9.
[12] Kridel, "An Introduction to Documentary Research".

Thematic analysis guided data interpretation through a six-phase process. First, the researcher familiarised herself with the data through repeated reading and transcription. Second, initial codes were generated to capture significant meanings in the text. Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed, refined, merged, or removed based on their relevance and consistency with the data. Fifth, themes were clearly defined and labeled to reflect their significance accurately. Finally, the findings were compiled into the study while maintaining reflexivity and objectivity.[13]

Overall, the methodology enabled the collection of rich, detailed data and provided a structured framework for examining how ATR and Christianity intersect in shaping Zimbabwean Christian identity, worship, culture, and women's participation in community life.

The study is grounded in contextual indigenous theologies, which are theological reflections shaped by African lived experiences, cultural traditions, struggles, and Christian faith within the Zimbabwean context.[14] These theologies seek to make Christianity meaningful to African communities by integrating biblical teachings with African cosmologies and cultural realities. African cosmologies include religious, philosophical, scientific, and cultural understandings of the universe that influence spirituality and daily life.[15] Through these indigenous theologies, Zimbabwean Christians are encouraged to express their faith in ways that reflect both their Christian beliefs and African cultural identity.

The framework argues that Christianity should not remain confined to the Western interpretations introduced by missionaries during the colonial era.[16] Instead, theology must speak directly to the Zimbabwean soul by recognising women's perspectives and experiences. The study draws on John 1:14 ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us", NIV) to emphasise incarnational theology. Just as Jesus was born in a specific cultural and social setting as a

[13] Rosairo, "Thematic Analysis".
[14] White, *Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis*, 2.
[15] White, *Faith, Spiritualty, and Praxis*, 1
[16] Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 110.

Jewish man from a humble woman, Zimbabwean Christians should develop an incarnational theology rooted in their own culture, experiences, and spirituality.[17] This means God's word can work through all cultures. Therefore, African Christians should freely express worship, healing practices, and spirituality using their own cultural forms, without feeling inferior.

The study emphasises inclusivity, unity, and diversity within Christian worship and ecumenical communities. It supports integrating African cultural practices, health beliefs, and spiritual resources into Christianity to create a more authentic Zimbabwean Christian identity. Such integration allows believers to maintain their cultural uniqueness while participating fully in Christian faith and community life.

A key concept in the framework is the dual allegiance alliance, which is the coexistence of ATR and Christianity in the lives of many Zimbabweans. This alliance recognises that many Africans, particularly women, remain devoted to both systems because each addresses important spiritual, cultural, and social needs. Rather than viewing ATR and Christianity as opposing forces, the study sees them as interconnected sources of meaning and identity.

The framework further critiques colonial missionaries for condemning African traditions and imposing Western interpretations of Christianity as the only valid form of faith. Missionary Christianity often portrayed African customs and beliefs negatively, leading many Africans to lose confidence in their cultural identity. Drawing on scholars such as Kiboko and Roy, the study argues that biblical interpretation is always influenced by culture.[18] Therefore, Africans should interpret Christianity through their own cultural lens instead of relying solely on colonial perspectives.

Ultimately, the theoretical framework seeks to empower Zimbabwean women to reclaim their cultural heritage, affirm their spirituality, and develop an authentic African Christian identity that harmonises ATR and Christianity within the Zimbabwean context.

[17] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 48.
[18] Kiboko, *Divining the Woman of Endor*, 175–76.

Ancestral Veneration and Cultural Identity

Zimbabwean traditional religion is an indigenous African belief system that combines spirituality, morality, culture in community life.[19] The religion developed from African social and cultural experiences and promotes human welfare, justice, and self-determination. It is centred on belief in God, ancestors, mysterious powers, and life after death.[20] Ancestors are believed to influence the lives of the living, strengthening community unity, love, and continuity between life and death. They give individuals a sense of responsibility and provide communities with guidance and purpose. Each generation adapts beliefs and practices to new experiences through sacred specialists, holy places, objects, works of art, and alcohol rituals.[21] This communal lifestyle encourages Zimbabweans women to care for the social and spiritual well-being of others in their society.

Zimbabwean culture underscores rituals connected to important stages of life such as birth, growth, marriage, death, burial, and rebirth. These rituals shape cultural identity and reinforce social relationships within communities. Therefore, ATR is viewed as a living and self-motivated religion expressed through ancestors, who connect humans with God through sacred history and spiritual guidance.[22]

According to traditional leaders such as Chief Rwizi, ancestors established the spiritual foundation of Zimbabwean society. Hence, African traditional ethics consisting of social norms, duties, and moral values, guide people's behaviour and maintain harmony within communities.[23] These ethical principles encourage respect, responsibility, and the collective well-being of society. Zimbabwean Christian spirituality, traditional customs, rituals, and values, therefore, continue to influence worship, morality, and community life.

[19] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life*, 48.
[20] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)".
[21] Husien and Kebede, "The Conception of Morality".
[22] Mudzimu, Religious and cultural encounters.
[23] Husien and Kebede, "The Conception of Morality".

Human Birth and Rites of Passage in Zimbabwe

Women in Zimbabwe are viewed as symbols of fertility, creation, and the nurturing of life in many African indigenous religions.[24] Their responsibilities as mothers and caregivers are connected to reproduction, morality, and cosmological beliefs. As a result, many Zimbabwean women are custodians of human birth and rites of passage. Zimbabwean societies recognise human life as marked by important rituals and rites of passage from birth to death.[25] Pregnancy, childbirth, puberty, marriage, and postnatal rituals are deeply rooted in ATR. These rituals grant women authority within families and communities, particularly in confirming the social and spiritual status of a newborn child.[26] They reflect intergenerational knowledge, communal responsibility, and women's central role in preserving cultural identity and moral values in ways that Christianity alone may not fully provide.

According to Reverend Tsito, childbirth rituals include cutting and burying the baby's umbilical cord and placenta beneath the family kitchen by elderly spiritual women. The placenta is believed to connect the child to ancestors and family lineage, while elders are responsible for naming the child. These practices offer counselling and protect the mother's fertility, and restore and ensure her health and spiritual well-being. Ignoring such rituals brings misfortune to the mother and child.

The rituals emphasise that a child belongs not only to parents, but to the entire community. Elder women act as custodians of family ethics, and social teachings. Although some cultural systems, such as lobola, reinforce male authority over women, women continue to negotiate their survival and identity within both ATR and Christianity.[27] The study therefore argues for a hybrid relationship between ATR and Christianity to preserve valuable cultural

[24] Aboekwe, M. E. The Role of Women in African Indigenous Religion and the Early Christian Church,
[25] Ohaja and Anyim, "Rituals and Embodied Cultural Practices".
[26] Aboekwe, M. E. The Role of Women in African Indigenous Religion and the Early Christian Church,
[27] Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*.

practices while addressing women's needs through African-centred spirituality and counselling.

Human Growth, Rites of Reincarnation, and Circumcision in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwean culture, during early stages of life, children undergo rites associated with reincarnation and circumcision, which introduce them to cultural identity, social values, and communal belonging.[28] Families and communities, especially elderly women such as mothers-in-law, play a central role in caring for both mother and child after birth. Raising a child is viewed as a communal responsibility rather than the parents' duties alone.

According to Chief Dombo, traditional rites of passage prepared young people for adulthood. At around fifteen years old, boys receive training that emphasises responsibility, discipline, and manhood, while girls attend *Chinamwari*, a month-long premarital counselling program conducted in the bush. These teachings equipped young people with practical life skills, moral values, and knowledge necessary for building strong and accountable marriages. The study argues that such cultural practices contributed to stable family systems and social responsibility, unlike many modern marriages that lack traditional guidance.

Zimbabwean cultural traditions, teachings from uncles and aunties, along with practical training in grooming, deportment, and marriage counselling, complement church revival activities. The United Methodist Church's Emmaus retreats for boys and girls are acknowledged, but the study recommends that they become more practical and culturally grounded, similar to the *Chinamwari* concept.

Children are regarded as a divine heritage. Psalm 127:3–5 identifies them as blessings from God. Hence, Zimbabwean rites of passage serve as a cultural

[28] Ohaja and Anyim, "Rituals and Embodied Cultural Practices".

legacy that teach social responsibility and communal accountability.[29] These indigenous practices are valuable resources to be preserved.

Women are important in maintaining these traditions because they are believed to have a close connection to ancestors through childbirth and the continuation of life.[30] Consequently, the study proposes that Zimbabwean children be raised through African cultural values and biblical teachings, allowing them to live faithfully within spiritual worlds, while preserving truth and identity.

Marriage as family-centred institution in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe marriage is a family-centred institution that combines cultural and religious values. It is recognised once the bridegroom's family gives the bride's family dowry (*roora/lobola*). According to Reverend Goche, presenting appreciation gifts to the bride's mother, strengthening family relationships, and upholding the mother's cultural commitments are noteworthy practices. In order to enhance the meaning of both traditional and Christian ceremonies, the study encourages integrating traditional marriage customs in marriage worship serves, community gatherings, and recognising chiefs as marriage officers. This gives equal importance to both traditional and Christian marriage ceremonies.

The participation of pastors, chiefs, *tete/sekuru* (aunts and uncles), and marriage counsellors helps maintain cultural values surrounding marriage while strengthening the relationship between ATR and Christianity.[31] This hybrid approach promotes undivided loyalty to both traditions.

Premarital counselling offers practical tools that equip couples with communication skills, conflict resolution techniques, and marital guidance, but

[29] Lagerwerf, L. (2002). [Review of the book *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*, by N. J. Njoroge]. ***Exchange***, *31*(4), 397–398. doi.org

[30] Aboekwe, M. E. The Role of Women in African Indigenous Religion and the Early Christian Church,

[31] Chitando, "Religion and Masculinities".

roora/lobola provides cultural legitimacy and accountability.[32] Together, these systems help address challenges such as gender-based violence and strengthen family stability. The study argues combining Christian and traditional marriage practices fills gaps left by either system alone.

Ultimately, integrating ATR and Christianity in marriage practices empowers women and supports the SDGs, especially gender equality and women's participation in leadership, decision-making, spiritual life, and community development.[33] Successively, marriage and motherhood would be valued in the hybrid approach making traditional and Christian practices essential for preserving Zimbabwean cultural identity.

Death, Burial, and Rebirth in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwean culture, death, burial, and rebirth are key spiritual events that involve a fusion of ATR and Christian beliefs, emphasising communal identity and respect for the deceased. Reverend Gumbo notes that Genesis 1:26–28 draws humanity to God and influences burial practices, such as the confirmation of dowry(*roora/lobola*) payment for married women before burial. Ritual objects like reed mats and log trays are used to honour the deceased and signify humanity's connection to creation.

According to Reverend Mhishu, special rituals for infant death and mourning involve elderly women guiding grieving mothers through symbolic practices with towels, water, and prayers at the grave. These rituals facilitate emotional detachment, promote healing, and affirm hope in God amid suffering, with mothers-in law playing a key role in comforting families and maintaining cultural significance during mourning.

Burial rituals express the African understanding of life as a cycle from birth to rebirth.[34] During adult funerals, acts like tying strings around relatives and throwing them into the grave represent spiritual protection and communal healing. Family members return the next morning to confirm the death, pray,

[32] Hilukiluah, "A pastoral care and counselling approach".
[33] Chireshe, E. "Intersections".
[34] Idang, "African culture and values".

and mourn together, showcasing ATR traditions and biblical practices, like Mary Magdalene's visit to Jesus' tomb.

After burial, memorial rituals continue. The *svitsa* ceremony, held after one year, invites the spirit of the deceased back into the family, while *kurava guva* reconnects the deceased with ancestors.[35] In Christianity, these resemble memorial services and tomb unveiling ceremonies. The study argues that many Zimbabwean Christians secretly continue ATR rituals because they provide cultural identity, emotional security, and communal belonging that Christianity alone may not fully address.[36]

The article proposes ATR and Christianity should not be opposing systems but be interconnected spiritual traditions. Africans honour ancestors not as gods, but as mediators, guardians, and life-givers who maintain harmony between the living and the spiritual world. Christ is the proto-ancestor, the supreme mediator who fulfils and unites ancestral hopes. [37] Through Jesus Christ, ancestors, the living, and future generations are gathered into one spiritual community under God.

African Ubuntu: God and the Human Community

Zimbabwean spirituality is strongly shaped by belief in the God of action and a deep sense of communal life expressed through the Ubuntu African philosophy.[38] Ubuntu emphasises that a person becomes fully human through relationships with others, highlighting shared family responsibilities, cultural values, and communal duties.

Drawing on African theologian Bujo, African life is communal: "I am because we are."[39] Salvation, therefore, is a communal reality involving ancestors, the living community, and the unborn in a constant moral system.[40] African culture

[35] Idang, "African culture and values".
[36] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 3.
[37] Mapfumo, "Theology Matters".
[38] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)", 3.
[39] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 23.
[40] Bujo, "African Theology".

is thus a partner in Christian faith, helping Zimbabwean Christians negotiate identity, morality, justice, and spirituality within both ATR and Christianity.

ATR Ubuntu's strong emphasis on healing is its central characteristic.[41] Health and illness are understood in physical terms and in relation to the spiritual world. Traditional healers (*n'angas*) play an important role in diagnosing causes of illness and guiding rituals to restore harmony. Herbal medicine is part of therapeutic system. Neglecting ancestral duties may withdraw protection, exposing individuals to spiritual attacks.[42] Ubuntu therefore, places corporate existence at the centre of life, where individuals, families, ancestors, and God are interconnected.[43] Mbiti concurs with Bujo on the principle, "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am," which expresses the inseparable bond between the individual and the community.[44] This interconnectedness builds unity, promotes responsibility, and redefines moral accountability across generations and ancestors.

This African worldview presents a holistic system where spirituality, health, and morality are unified. Integrating ATR with Christianity creates a meaningful dialogue that helps Africans understand the gospel within their own cultural context.[45] In this hybrid approach, Christ is the living bond, the ultimate mediator of life who does not erase African ancestral connection, but fulfils them. This approach promotes faith that is culturally grounded, inclusive, and connected to community life.[46]

[41] Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion*, 172.
[42] Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion*, 172.
[43] Manyonganise, "Oppressive and Liberative".
[44] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-109.
[45] Mapfumo, "Theology Matters".
[46] Mapfumo, "Theology Matters".

Cultural Norms, Human Relationship and Moral Order in Societies

Zimbabwean traditional spirituality consists of beliefs and practices rooted in African understandings of creation, God, divinities, spiritual forces, good and evil.[47] It is deeply connected to moral responsibility within the community.

Morality is shame-based, focusing on human welfare, coordination, and collective responsibility.[48] As such, ethical behaviour is based not only on rules, but grounded in faith in God and ancestors and expressed through values of communion, justice, care, and solidarity. In many cases, society expects individuals to conform to communal responsibility. Failure to embrace solidarity is corrected through social pressure, reinforcing the importance of shared life.

According to Chief Jasi, when a child violates maternal cultural norms, the child is forced to undergo a fugitive or transient journey (*kutanda botso*) that requires the child to leave home temporarily, seek forgiveness within the community. The child later undergoes reconciliation rituals. This process emphasises discipline, humility, and restoration of family unity.[49] Elders play a central role in guiding and reintegrating the child through counselling and communal support. Thus preserving the seeds of the Zimbabwean traditional religion, moral values and culture remain whole**.**

The community occupies a central place in ATR in which ancestors provide social order, moral direction, spiritual identity, wisdom, and guidance.[50] Consequently, caring for vulnerable and marginalised groups, especially women and children, is considered a moral obligation. This aligns with Isaiah 58:6–7, Leviticus 19:34, Matthew 25:35–36, and Hebrews 13:2–3, which encourage compassion, justice, and hospitality. In addition, Genesis 19:1-13; 38:1–30; and 2 Samuel 13:1–22 illustrate moral failures, injustice, sexual violence, and disobedience that bring suffering and separation from God. They

[47] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)", 3.
[48] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)", 3.
[49] Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African philosophy".
[50] Adeate, "Mbiti on Community".

highlight situations that disadvantage women, showing struggles related to gender, power and morality. Behaviours like sexual exploitation and irresponsible sexual relationships violate the commitment, dignity, and trust necessary for healthy human relationships and spiritual life.

However, Zimbabwean culture enhances women wellbeing and strengthens social cohesion and cultural identity. The study argues that Christianity highlights Jesus himself engaged with culture, showing faith can exist within cultural systems without destroying them. Bujo emphasises responsibility in African life as embedded within shared cultural and spiritual contexts where individuals are accountable to themselves, others, ancestors, and God.[51]

A good example of the importance of women and cultural practice happened at Mufusire United Methodist Campsite in 2023. The women's fellowship drilled a borehole without performing traditional rituals associated with ancestors and the borehole failed to produce water. After consulting Chief Makoni and performing appropriate rituals, water flowed. This event illustrates the belief that neglecting traditional practices can disrupt harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. It also demonstrates how indigenous knowledge systems remain influential in contemporary Zimbabwean life.

Grassroots theology references historical heritage, like Great Zimbabwe, which reflects indigenous religious-cultural systems that integrated worship, community, and governance.[52] This encourages Zimbabweans to preserve their cultural identity, drawing on Daniel 1:6–11, which emphasises maintaining faith and identity.

Material and Non-Material Culture

Shared cultural practices distinguish one group from another.[53] They embrace both material culture (tools, art, objects) and non-material culture (beliefs, customs, values) that help people respond to challenges and meet their needs.

[51] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 30–35.
[52] Idang, "African culture and values".
[53] Idang, "African culture and values".

Cultural objects like *mbira* and *bhosvo* are significant as they influence spiritual and social life within communities. Rites of passage, traditional occupations, and moral teachings play an essential role in sustaining society.[54] Communal feasts and coordinated seasonal practices in societies strengthen unity and social responsibility, as mentioned by Chief Miti.

However, orphanages and institutional care systems introduced through Christianity weaken traditional family-based care systems that emphasise extended family responsibility, unity, and cultural identity. This creates a gap between traditional and Christian systems that the study suggests should be bridged through cultural integration. It should incorporate cultural material and non-material expressions to become more relevant to lived experiences.[55] This supports a dual allegiance alliance where individuals maintain both Christian faith and cultural identity. By preserving culture, Zimbabweans can ensure future generations inherit a strong sense of identity. An ATR and Christianity hybrid becomes a pathway toward social harmony, spiritual fulfilment, and sustainable community development.

Chiefs as Custodians of Accustomed and Political Institutions

Zimbabwean traditional society links political authority, spirituality, and community ethics through ancestral shrines and leadership structures led by chiefs including women. These institutions uphold moral codes, justice, and truth, similar to Christian teachings found in Exodus 20 and Ephesians 6:1–3. These chiefs serve as custodians of social order and ensure ethical conduct. In this system, loyalty to chiefs is loyalty to ancestors and God, showing the close relationship between governance and spirituality. This worldview reflects a strong sense of family lineage, dual allegiance where individuals are connected to ancestors and God.

However, the study argues, some Christian traditions influenced by Western practices separate religious worship from cultural expressions. These traditions limit the participation of Zimbabweans in integrated cultural-religious experiences and the expression of indigenous identity within

[54] Aziza, "Relationship", 13.
[55] Aziza, "Relationship", 13.

Christian services. This highlights the need for greater cultural inclusion and contextualisation of Christianity in Zimbabwean society.

Cultural and Moral Tension within ATR and Christianity

The discussion about ATR and Christianity present Christian morality as sharing the justice, communal harmony, and responsible conduct concerns of ATR. However, tensions emerge when interpreting issues related to gender and cultural identity and where Christian teachings condemn certain cultural-spiritual practices accepted within ATR. The study therefore, displays how some Zimbabwean Christians negotiate these moral teachings within their cultural and spiritual contexts.

Bishop Gift Kudakwashe Machinga of the United Methodist Church says, "As United Methodists in Zimbabwe, we hold firmly that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, a position rooted in our understanding of Scripiture—the infallible and authoritative word of God. The conviction is embedded in African cultural and spiritual values. The United Methodist Church develops its theology on the foundation of scripture, illuminated by tradition, refined by reason, and expressed in experience to God's saving acts in the lives of people and in the cosmos."[56]

The statement by Bishop Gift Kudakwashe Machinga reflects the position of the UMC regarding homosexuality and Christian morality. For the bishop, Christian teaching is based on its interpretation of Scripture that homosexuality is unsuited among Christians. The church views Scripture as the authoritative foundation for its theological teachings and moral guidance.[57] It understands morality as shared and linked to traditional beliefs about family, marriage, and social order. The church uses its four interconnected sources of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to interpret God's will and guide Christian life within African contexts. While maintaining what it considers faithful Christian doctrine and spiritual responsibility, balancing biblical teachings with African cultural realities is essential.

[56] Machinga, Communique, 31 May 2025.
[57] Machinga, Communique, 31 May 2025.

The argument is that Zimbabwean law and church leadership should uphold cultural and theological positions regarding morality and worship. Both African cultural values and Christian teachings disapprove the acceptance of same-sex marriages, emphasise women's traditional role in childbearing and family life, and identify domination, injustice, and exploitation as moral evils condemned in Micah 6:8. Both ATR and Christianity promote truth, ethical living, humility, love, care for others, and communal responsibility. John 17:21 further emphasises the importance of overcoming division and fostering harmony among people. Thus, good in ATR and Christianity is interactive and shared ethical knowledge that creates important connections between the two religions. Overall, both Zimbabwean tradition and Christianity affirm that human life involves a continuous struggle between good and evil, requiring moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and actions that promote peace and justice.

Witchcraft Perceptions and Accusations in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwean culture, witchcraft (*uroi*) refers to beliefs and practices associated with witches and wizards who are believed to possess supernatural powers that can harm or help people.[58] Some witchcraft is associated with malevolent acts causing illness, suffering, or social conflict. Some traditional practices are benevolent and protective, forming part of broader cultural understandings of spirituality, healing and protection. This distinguishes between harmful witchcraft and forms of healing practices used to cleanse families and communities, seek guidance, and protect people from life challenges. As such, spiritual practitioners use ancestral knowledge to restore harmony and address socio-spiritual problems.

King Saul's story in 1 Samuel 19:10 of consulting a medium to summon the spirit of Samuel suggests that spiritual mediation has historical and religious parallels within biblical traditions. This comparison questions whether all African witchcraft practices should automatically be condemned by Christianity.

[58] Senokoane. 'Witchcraft".

The study argues that the blanket condemnation of all forms of witchcraft by missionaries contributed to the suppression of African healing traditions. As a result, cultural education and open dialogue about witchcraft within Zimbabwean communities are called for. Such education can help people distinguish harmful practices from cultural healing systems while addressing accusations and fears on witchcraft. This promotes healing and justice, and avoids misuse of Christianity as a tool for rejecting all indigenous spiritual knowledge.

The Influence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) on Christianity

The relationship between ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe demonstrates the need for interfaith dialogue, contextual theology, and reconciliation between the two belief systems. The study argues Christianity introduced during the colonial era often failed to fully address African cultural realities and spiritual needs. Therefore, many Zimbabwean Christians continue to rely on ATR practices, especially during emergencies, illness, and fertility challenges. This continued reliance reveals that ATR remains spiritually meaningful and culturally relevant despite missionary efforts to suppress it.[59] Ancestral reverence, rituals, divination, healing, and communal ceremonies continue to influence African Christian communities.

Traditional leaders in Zimbabwe identified as Christians while simultaneously practicing cultural rituals to maintain community harmony. Ceremonies such as *mukweerera* (rain-making rituals), a women's duty that involves both Christians and non-Christians, demonstrates how ATR and Christianity coexist in community life. Chiefs' courts also involve church leaders in addressing women's social issues such as gender-based violence, showing cooperation between traditional and Christian systems.

The study argues that tensions arise when churches, legal institutions, and traditional leaders fail to integrate ATR and Christian values in public life. This separation creates conflicts among Zimbabweans who practice both traditions

[59] D. T. Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)".

privately. These tensions continue to shape struggles for a distinct Zimbabwean Christian identity.[60] Therefore, the necessity to promote peaceful coexistence, cultural education, spiritual growth in ATR and Christianity. Because the African worldview does not separate life into religious and secular categories, but integrates spirituality into all aspects of community life,[61] ATR and Christianity should be viewed as belonging to one communal reality that strengthen unity, kinship, and cultural identity.

Colonial Legacy and African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Colonialism introduced Christian teachings into Zimbabwe that created divisions within families and communities and disrupted traditional social structures.[62] As a result, some members of the same family now belong to different Christian denominations and avoid open discussions about faith, spirituality, and cultural experiences. This separation weakens communal unity, cultural identity, and shared values that traditionally held Zimbabwean communities together. Many people continue to experience emotional and spiritual pain caused by this disconnect between Christianity and African identity.

The study questions how Zimbabwean Christians can become genuine Christians while maintaining a true Zimbabwean spirituality and cultural identity. It suggests that achieving this requires Zimbabweans to rediscover and nurture their indigenous cultural values, ethics, and spiritual traditions rather than rejecting them. Communities must rethink the mission and methods of Christianity within the Zimbabwean context so that faith becomes culturally meaningful and inclusive.[63]

The study further emphasises the importance of preserving the dignity and the church as a nurturing community that values culture, identity, and communal wellbeing. By adapting and integrating positive African cultural values with

[60] African Thought: A journal of Afro-Centric Knowledge, Vol.1. No. se3
[61] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life.*
[62] White, *Faith, Spiritualty, and Praxis*, 1.
[63] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 17.

Christian teachings, Zimbabweans can develop a contextualised Christianity that strengthens both faith and cultural belonging.

Interfaith Dialogue of ATR and Christianity in the Zimbabwean Context

This passage argues that Zimbabweans inherited a divided Christian church system from Western missionaries, which separated ATR from Christianity and weakened African cultural identity.[64] The historic churches in Africa should not remain silent about this division. They should instead promote ecumenical dialogue and unity between ATR and Christianity. Such dialogue would help Zimbabweans remove barriers created during colonialism: reclaim their lost values and develop a contextual theology that reflects their lived experiences, spirituality, and indigenous identity. Drawing from Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18–19, Jesus is recognised as the incarnation of God and liberator who defends oppressed people and restore dignity to marginalised communities in all cultural contexts This theology allows Christians to worship God while remaining genuine Zimbabwean

The double agreement in commitments: Africanisation of Christian resources and worship

Zimbabwean ATR and Christianity share belief in one God and seek to address human suffering, morality, and spiritual wellbeing within community life.[65] At the same time, the UMC acknowledges that its theology is rooted in African cultural and spiritual values through scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Yet Christians undervalue the role of ancestors in African worldview, despite observing traditional rituals during death and burial ceremonies.[66] Examples include widow cleansing rituals, burial preparations, handwashing with ashes, bathing ceremonies, and burning clothes after burial as symbols for separation from the deceased and practical forms of pastoral

[64] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life*, 17
[65] Kunhiyop, "Christian Relevance".
[66] Mokhoathi, "Religious Intersections".

counselling rooted in African culture for women who perform mourning rituals.

The article therefore advocates for the Africanisation/culturalisation of Christian resources and worship practices surrounding life cycles from birth through death to rebirth. Cultural items such as umbilical cords, placentas, ritual strings, animal offerings, infant towels, and log trays may be openly acknowledged and blessed by pastors and chiefs during appropriate ceremonies. Integrating ATR and Christianity in this way might strengthen pastoral care, cultural identity, community unity, and spiritual healing among Zimbabwean Christians.

The study suggests meaningful agreement between ATR and Christian teachings to reflect Zimbabwean realities, authentic worship, spiritual expression, and community service. Such integration is essential for building responsible societies that transmit cultural and spiritual values to future generations.

Religion as the foundation of African life.[67] It functions as a unified system of beliefs with rituals that provides guidance, counselling, social support across different life situations, strengthening identity and communal solidarity and binding people into a moral community.[68] This helps believers express genuine faith rooted in their lived experiences rather than borrowed identity. It restructures worship and pastoral care systems that promotes the dual allegiance alliance. This integration fosters peace, justice, and resistance to social injustice while preventing violence and fragmentation in society. The synthesis is a pathway to cultural healing, stronger communal relationships, and more effective counselling practices within Zimbabwean societies.

The Impact of Religious Conversions and the Intersection of ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe

The study explains that the introduction of Christianity in Zimbabwe created divisions within communities by separating people from their traditional

[67] Agbiji and Swart, "Religion and social transformation".
[68] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms,* 46.

religious practices. However, ATR remains deeply embedded in everyday life, meaning religion in African society is not optional but a communal reality where people participate through rituals, ceremonies, and cultural practices.[69] Strong communal orientation, moments of crisis like funerals, illness, and disasters often bring Christians and ATR practitioners together. In these situations, religious boundaries become less rigid, and people engage in shared cultural and spiritual practices that reflect kinship, solidarity, and communal responsibility.[70] This creates an informal union that transcends formal religious divisions. This argues that church leaders often struggle to prevent participation in traditional rituals because cultural identity and family bonds are stronger than religious separation. Instead, shared practices provide love, care, healing, and respect, functioning as a bridge between Christianity and ATR. This bridge allows different religious, traditional, and community-based leaders to offer collective support during difficult times.

John 17:11 and 21 offers Jesus prays for unity among His followers so others would believe in Him. The text teaches that unity, even across religious difference, reflects God's model for harmonious relationships.

Summary

The article examined the intersection between ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe, arguing that both systems can be integrated to form an authentic Zimbabwean Christian identity and spirituality. It suggests that, when culturally aware Zimbabwean biblical readers reinterpret and restructure Christian teachings within African cultural systems, a more meaningful and relevant faith expression can emerge.

ATR and Christianity are presented as compatible and complementary belief systems that share moral values, communal ethics, and spiritual concerns. The article argues that their integration can transform Eurocentric forms of Christianity into a hybrid Zimbabwean Christianity shaped by socio-cultural exchange and indigenous knowledge systems. This hybrid faith is seen as more

[69] Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, 3.
[70] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 47.

responsive to local realities and capable of addressing both spiritual and social needs.

Such integration is said to enhance worship, pastoral care, and community support during both joyful and difficult life events. It also strengthens counselling systems rooted in African cultural understanding, making them more accessible and effective for Zimbabwean communities.

A key emphasis of the article is the restoration of women's roles within religious and cultural life. By recognising and revitalising female spiritual authority, the hybrid system supports gender empowerment, cultural continuity, and community cohesion. Overall, the article advocates for a contextual theology that unites ATR and Christianity to promote authentic spirituality, social transformation, and inclusive community development in Zimbabwe.

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Myths and Taboos in the Religiosity of Christian Women: Implications of the Angolan Cultural View of the World

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Abstract

Religiosity and spirituality are deeply embedded in the daily lives of African women, directly influencing social issues and their overall life dynamics. The strength of female spirituality and religiosity is a growing concern in the Angolan religious context, as these elements are intrinsically linked to the cultural worldview. Such cultural manifestations constitute pillars of women's lives, giving meaning to their most decisive and existential moments. Consequently, the rites and taboos often practiced among women are directly related to their basic religious beliefs, conferring not only meaning but also shaping women's Christian identity and spiritual practice.

Thus, there is a critical gap between the insufficiency of the Christian faith, as it has been presented, in providing adequate and contextualised responses to the practical challenges of the lives of Angolan women. This makes urgent and necessary a practical and contextual theology that provides and validates the depth of the Christian faith to provide answers to the vital questions of the life of Christian women in this context. When the church does not offer a theology that responds to the fear of spirits or the protection of the newborn, the Christian woman, pressured by insecurity, resorts to the solutions of the traditional worldview. The result is a syncretistic Christianity that professes Christ in worship services, but resorts to

traditional ritual in moments of crisis, which is the result of a profound weakness in the biblical teaching that is given to women.
The use of amulets, fear of sterility or disease, the value and dignity of women intrinsically linked to their fertility, idolatry of motherhood, and syncretic rituals to ensure the health and protection of children are evidence that there is a fundamental theological tension between trust in providence and ritualistic manipulation. Therefore, it is necessary to bring a teaching that considers the way women interpret the events of life through a practical and contextual theology that applies the gospel to cultural gaps. By empowering women to understand Christ as Lord of life, death, and fertility, the Angolan church not only preserves sound doctrine, but also promotes true social and spiritual liberation. The resulting spirituality will cease to be a refuge from fear and will become a celebration of freedom in Christ, where the Son truly sets people free (John 8:36).

Introduction

The ministry of biblical teaching among women in Angola was developed so that they could know God and guide their lives by divine principles and to allow the issues inherent to the female universe to be addressed with greater depth and care. Consequently, most local churches have established specialised departments for the development of curricula and programs that respond to the religious needs of women, taking into account the challenges they face daily in their Christian walk.

Weekly Bible studies, camps, and lectures are spaces where women teach other women, challenging them in various areas, from spirituality and family to health issues and home economics. These programs provide an environment of freedom for mutual learning and counselling. However, practical observation throughout these programs reveals the existence of various myths and rituals that circulate among women in these Christian environments.

According to Nicholls, if the gospel does not transform the visible behaviour of the community and the person to the point of generating changes at the deepest level, which is the worldview, then this conversion can be considered

partial.[1] The gospel in a culture can never be considered “a visitor”. Rather, it must be judge and redeemer. But type of spirituality observed among Angolan Christian women demonstrates that daily life does not always reflect Christian values.

Through oral culture, forms of traditional spirituality has been transmitted and persistently coexist with Christian principles, resulting in a syncretism that stems from the deficiency of the biblical and theological formation of women responsible for teaching other women. Consequently, several vital problems do not find satisfactory exegetical and practical answers from the Bible, which leads women to repeatedly resort to cultural elements to deal with critical situations. In the Angolan context, common biblical teaching has not confronted the vital cultural beliefs of the immediate sphere of women's reality.

Hiebert states that each culture receives the gospel message differently, and since no culture is impartial, caution is needed in communication to avoid distortions of the biblical message. Among the different aspects presented by Hiebert, the importance of contextualisation so that the local community understands the message in its own cultural horizon stands out. One of the fundamental points he addresses is the need to develop an understanding of Scripture and theology that respond to the contextual environment in a unique way, thus avoiding religious syncretism and rituals in their various forms.[2]

In Angola, even after decades of Christian history, it is possible to observe striking traits in the religiosity of Christian women in which rites, myths, and taboos still make up the expression of their spirituality. According to Lidório, when a culture is confronted with the gospel, it is necessary to conform habits to biblical standards. Although the process of conversion and change of worldview may be slow, the persistence of the rites is a strong sign and indication that there are fundamental issues of the Christian faith that are not yet well understood by the community, generating only religiosity.[3] Religiosity generates myths and taboos to give meaning to daily life. These acts as a source

[1] Nicholls, *Contextualization*, 15–19.
[2] Hiebert, *The Gospel and the Diversity of Cultures*, 141.
[3] Lidório, *Introduction*, 111–113.

of knowledge and are indicative of the level of syncretic understanding that the faithful possess.

In the same vein, McGrath reflects that gender influences the formation of the type of spirituality.[4] At the same time, Altuna states that the Bantu woman, by taking responsibility for the life that comes from the ancestors and by preserving the tradition of connection that unites the sacred within the group, continuing the lineage, has an experience that revolves around various myths and taboos. Therefore, the woman in this context has a different responsibility than the man. She carries within herself the weight of preserving and maintaining home and blood as a symbol of life.[5]

In view of this, the following question arises: Why has Christianity proved to be, to a certain extent, insufficient to respond to the yearnings of Angolan Christian women?

This article presents a study based on participatory observation, carried out among evangelical Christian women who participate in study groups, retreats, and Bible discussions. Many evangelical Christian women, despite confessing the Christian faith, continue to be bound by taboos and rituals as a solution to their existential dilemmas, the result of biblical teachings weakened by little theological instruction. Methodologically, this work is presented as a field research report, whose data were collected through direct experience and immersion in activities, with active interactions and notes resulting from question, answer, and counselling sessions.

Historically, missionary work has had the sensitivity of promoting the education of native peoples, with a focus on rural and domestic education. However, when creating specific programs for women, the focus was essentially on literacy, manual labor, and household management, aiming to form good wives. In this context, the Bible was taught only as a supplementary discipline.[6] There was, therefore, no deliberate effort for women to deepen their theological knowledge. The educational model of Bible schools was limited to the basics, without providing elementary biblical principles that

[4] McGrath, *An Introduction*, 34.
[5] de Asúa Altuna, *Cultura Bantu Tradicional*, 257–273.
[6] Henderson, *The Church in Angola*, 176–177.

could transform the perspective of women's cultural worldview, thus creating a gap between what the Bible says and what is practiced. The weakness of biblical and theological knowledge, resulting from poor training and inadequate preparation in the face of existential dilemmas, has consolidated the strength of cultural ritualistic practices rather than a position based on Christian principles and values.

Lidório reinforces that syncretism and religious nominalism are direct consequences of the lack of understanding of the receiving community's worldview on the part of the communicator of the Gospel.[7] González and Orlandi point out that in Angola, Christianity interacted directly with animist cultures, and although missionary work included evangelisation and social action, the numerical growth led many missionaries to neglect the traditional African vision.[8] The African perspective on the spiritual world and ancestry was little considered in the formation of new converts, allowing syncretism to develop dangerously. This neglect did not favour the theological formation of women, causing weaknesses in the interpretation and application of the Bible.

Henderson corroborates this view by noting that since the founding of the church in Angola in 1870, the gospel has been planted in a deeply religious soil dominated by a worldview where spirits influence every aspect of life, from birth to death.[9] The Angolan religious universe conceives the human being as a composite of material and spiritual elements in constant interaction. As a response to spiritual action, the culture created a variety of rituals. Although there were parallels between the cultural and biblical vision, especially in the concept of community and monotheism, these points of contact were not properly developed, leaving gaps that traditional rituals continue to fill.

Religious syncretism and the persistence of rituals and taboos among Christian women in Angola are not isolated phenomena, but rather the historical result of an evangelisation that, although diligent, prioritised form to the detriment of the worldview. By focusing primarily on female education in the household and basic literacy, the missionary effort (and later church teaching) failed to provide the theological tools necessary for Angolan women to interpret their

[7] Lidório, *Introduction*, 19.
[8] González and Orlandi, *História*, 364.
[9] Henderson, *The Church in Angola*, 29–31.

spiritual reality from the Scriptures. The insufficiency of biblical teaching in answering the vital questions raised does not lie in the limitation of biblical revelation, but in the superficiality of its transmission. When teaching does not confront the universe inhabited by spirits and the anxieties existing in the local culture, the faithful tend to maintain a nominal faith while resorting to traditional rites to solve practical and daily dilemmas, as Hiebert pointed out: 'the absence of a contextualised theology creates a void that syncretism easily fills'[10], and in this way myths and cultural rites arise.

Concepts

Thus, the concept of myth, which, according to the Käser, has Greek origins and is always related to deities and metaphysical issues,[11] is based on the worldview of a specific cultural group and has the practical function of promoting plausible actions for phenomena that often transcend purely rational understanding. Lidório completes this definition by stating that myths explain the way of life of a people based on their faith and beliefs.[12] For the communicator of the gospel, myths serve as a terminological and conceptual guide, revealing the limits of a people's understanding of a given subject, as well as the facilities or resistances that the biblical message can find in local religiosity, giving them a utilitarian value.

Rites, on the other hand, are practices performed by individuals or groups that play a vital role in community life. They originate from a firm interpretative conviction of life and religiosity[13]. As Sardenberg points out, in community contexts, all essential phenomena of human existence are given cultural meanings that give them meaning.[14] Thus, the rites aim to ward off evil and prevent calamities.

In this sense, it is essential to understand that in the Angolan view of the world, myths and rites do not operate only in the realm of the imaginary, but function as mechanisms to manage reality and existential security. For women, these

[10] Hiebert, *The Gospel and the Diversity of Cultures*, 145.
[11] Käser, *Foreign Cultures*, 192.
[12] Lidório, 103–104.
[13] Lidório, *Introduction*, 109
[14] Sardenberg, "De sangrias, tabos e poderes", 320.

practices represent an attempt to exert control over the uncertain and to keep fear at bay, whether in protecting fertility, children's health, or preserving family harmony. The rites continue to be the immediate resource, creating a spirituality fragmented between professed doctrines and the practice of daily survival. In the Angolan context, given its cultural and religious richness, several rites and taboos stand out in the female universe, as detailed below.

Myths and Rites

According to Käser, the rites can be classified as: atonement, apotropaic, purification, transition, natural renewal, and palliative.[15] He repeatedly highlights the rites of transition because they are more visible practices that involve the entire community. However, rites of elimination or removal, although occurring almost silently, are widely practiced among women.

Apotropaic rites aim to eradicate or ward off evils that threaten the community or the individual. In the case of Christian women in traditional contexts, the perception persists that the origin and maintenance of life depend largely on their attitudes and the integrity of their bodies. Cases such as congenital biological deficiencies, miscarriages, or fertility problems are interpreted in the light of the spiritual health of the womb. Consequently, women strive to keep their bodies healthy to avoid any harm from them.

In a certain Christian community, a woman gave birth to twins, one of whom died shortly after birth. This mother was instructed not to cry for her deceased son during the funeral, allegedly risking losing her second child. The belief underlying this orientation is that babies maintain an intimate connection between the visible and invisible worlds. If the mother showed sorrow, the spirit of the deceased son would draw the brother into the world of the dead. To mitigate the risk, they gave her a doll that was supposed to accompany the baby alive, being breastfed and cared for as if it were the lost child. By strictly following this ritual, the mother believed she had eliminated the spirit of death from her home.

[15] Käser, *Foreign Cultures*, 192-210.

In another situation, a newborn became seriously ill. The baby's grandmother performed a ritual in which the child's hair was shaved and roasted with palm oil. Small cuts (scarifications) were made in the genitals, breasts, and belly of the baby's mother, where the mixture of oil and ash was applied. The aim was to purify the mother's milk and uterus, which was considered weak, eliminating the deficiencies that affected posterity.

The widow's bath consists of expiating evil through penances or sacrifices. It is common for the widow, after the burial of her husband, to be subjected to the ritual of bathing. Performed in rivers or, in urban areas, inside houses, bathing aims to cleanse the woman's body of the traces of the deceased. It is believed that, without this purification, her husband's spirit would have lived with her again, causing the premature aging of her face and preventing a new marriage. This practice is particularly frequent among young widows.

The belief persists that the mother's womb may not be a place totally immune to the action of evil spirits. For this reason, many Christian women hesitate to name their babies before birth. It is believed that silence protects the child, avoiding attracting spirits that could prevent birth. After birth, care extends to biological waste: baby faeces cannot be disposed of randomly, as it is feared that they may be handled by sorcerers. These practices highlight how fear can imprison Christian freedom and joy, leading women to follow traditional rules in search of community acceptance and security.

In the context under analysis, pregnancy is understood as the convergence between spiritual forces and the vital-fruitful power of the parents. Consequently, the gestational process is permeated by a series of taboos and protective rituals. Practices such as the omission of the probable date of delivery, the absence of advance naming, and the prohibition of directly touching or mentioning pregnancy highlight the sacred and vulnerable nature of this period. As postulated by de Asúa Altuna, fecundity is interpreted as the highest and most cherished gift in this worldview; it elevates women to a higher social and religious state, for this process is believed to establish blood ties that bind the ancestors to the new lineage.[16] Therefore, women sees this

[16] de Asúa Altuna, *Cultura Bantu Tradicional*, 302–373.

fact as a moral and religious duty: the child must not only be conceived but must survive.

In addition, the relevance of these taboos is manifested in everyday social interactions. This dynamic is exemplified in an episode involving a pregnant woman and a pastor. When she was touched in the abdominal region, the pregnant woman showed great apprehension. Immediate religious intervention, through prayers and words of affirmation, served as a mechanism to mitigate fear and reestablish spiritual protection over the foetus. The symbolic efficacy of these beliefs is reflected in the interpretation of later events. The loss of a subsequent pregnancy, for example, was attributed by the mother to the absence of a ritualistic blessing equivalent to what was received by the first child. It can be inferred that the foetus is perceived as an entity vulnerable to external influences and curses, which justifies the need for strict spiritual protection mechanisms.

Likewise, in the daily life of Christian communities, the persistence of recommendations based on oral transmission persists, which configure a system of beliefs parallel to biblical doctrine. A prominent example is the ritual of *okupitisa* (or "passing"), performed in grieving contexts.[17] The practice involves the use of vaginal secretions in the newborn to repel supposed spiritual influences from the environment of death. This shows a human attempt to manipulate the sacred. Similarly, procedures such as bathing and drinking water used in maternal intimate hygiene for the treatment of dehydration (diarrhoea and vomiting) demonstrate confidence in the mystical virtues inherent in the body to the detriment of medical care and trust in divine providence.

Similarly, existential insecurity is also manifested in the attribution of pejorative names to children who have survived successive births with foetal death with the aim of deceiving death, or in the use of amulets (cords at the wrist and waist) against the evil eye. Such practices constitute a spirituality based on fear. Theologically, these beliefs indicate that Christian conversion has not yet reached the level of a worldview. From the Christian point of view,

[17] Expression in the native language Umbundu to translate the ritualistic process of passing the child into an act of protection.

reliance on apotropaic rituals is a practical denial of Christ's sufficiency and his prevailing victory. These women live under the weight of taboos that produce a state of spiritual slavery. Pastoral theology must approach these phenomena not only as superstition but also as a gap in the understanding of divine protection and Christ's authority over life and death.

The harmony and stability of marriage are also often placed on the shoulders of the woman. In this context, she seeks resources, sometimes syncretic, to maintain the balance of the home. Sardenberg explains that, in several cultures, fluids such as menstrual blood and semen are seen as elements of power. Some women even mix menstrual blood into their husbands' food to ensure their fidelity and stay at home.[18]

Although Leviticus 15:25–27 presents menstruation through the lens of ritual impurity, certain Angolan cultures deify it, linking femininity to spirituality.[19] The elimination of sanitary pads, for example, is surrounded by taboos: the blood must be diluted in water and absorbed into the earth so as not to be used in infertility rituals. This sacralised view of the fluids of the body imposes a routine of constant vigilance that often replaces trust in divine providence.

In this way, “the pressing need to ensure the continuity of the lineage and the stability of the home often override the individuality of the spouse. Being married is even more important than the husband himself. In this context, sterility is stigmatised as a curse attributed to women, placing them in a condition of vulnerability in which procreation becomes the main objective.”[20]

Consequently, for some young Christian women, adherence to polygamy or independent motherhood has become an acceptable alternative to celibacy, which is socially interpreted as a pathology or sign of immaturity. The single mother phenomenon highlights the resilience of cultural beliefs that challenge the biblical one flesh pattern outlined in Genesis 2:24.

Two examples illustrate this tension. In the first case, a young woman from a Christian community, after becoming involved with a married man and

[18] Sardenberg, “De sangrias, tabos e poderes”, 315.
[19] Cardovil, "Feminine Power”, 431–435.
[20] de Asúa Altuna, *Cultura Bantu Tradicional*, 319.

conceiving a daughter, chose to become his second wife. Despite the application of disciplinary measures by the church, which resulted in her exclusion from communion for fourteen years, the woman justified her decision as a search for social honour. From this point of view, the status of second wife is preferable to singleness, prioritising the sacred duty of traditional fruitfulness over the marital exclusivity advocated in 1 Corinthians 7:2, where mutual fidelity is the remedy against immorality.

The second account involves a family whose patriarchs exercised leadership in the church council. They consented to their daughter's polygamous marriage to a non-Christian man. The acceptance of marriage was strictly based on cultural achievement, specifically on the delivery of the dowry or *alambamento*.[21] For the family, conformity to traditional rites validates unity, ignoring the implications of disparity in beliefs and the warning of Colossians 2:8, which warns of the danger of becoming trapped in human traditions that do not follow Christ.

The need to understand God's word

The family, as an institution established by God, is the place of communion and the preservation of life. However, it is observed that in the ecclesiastical context under analysis the values that sustain the family unit are often permeated by a syncretism that fuses biblical precepts with elements of traditional religions. This fusion generates a worldview where home preservation is pursued not only by theological obedience but also by the need for cultural validation that can distort the understanding of divine grace.

Although motherhood and the vocation to care are gifts given by God, the dignity of women must not be reduced to their reproductive capacity. In light of Proverbs 31:25, women are exhorted to take on “strength and dignity,” finding a value that transcends the functional attributions of culture. In Christian anthropology, the value of women is inestimable because they are

[21] *Alambamento* refers to the traditional Angolan custom of dowry. It consists of a set of valuable goods given by the groom's family to the bride's family and is an essential legal and social rite of passage for the legitimacy of marriage before the community. The composition of the list of goods varies, respecting the usual specificities of each ethnolinguistic group.

bearers of the i*mago Dei* (image of God), regardless of their marital status or biological maternity. It is therefore imperative that women in conditions of sterility or celibacy (whether vocational or circumstantial) develop spiritual resilience and inner resources to face stigma and social marginalisation. Identity in Christ must prevail over cultural and biological pragmatism.

Consequently, to mitigate the transmission of ritual symbols and oral counsel that perpetuate generational oppressions, the church must promote a biblical counter-memory. It is necessary to train female leaders capable of discipleship and mentoring (Titus 2:3–5), capable of transmitting, through oral tradition and practice, the liberating truth of the gospel. The theological formation and qualification of women are fundamental to heal existential tensions and free them from structures that imprison their spirituality. The goal is the restoration of feminine dignity from the perspective of the Creator, and not from the expectations of the social group.

In this way, Davis observes that, in cultures guided by the ethics of shame, collective and family well-being is pursued at any cost.[22] The study shows that women have developed systems of self-preservation, especially in the face of gender inequality related to issues of marital infidelity. While female adultery is seen as intolerable, male infidelity is often normalised or forgiven and is even justifiable (even in the ecclesiastical environment), leaving the wife guilty of her husband's moral deviation. For this reason, older women have sought to guide younger women never to confess such conflicts to their husbands, nor to ecclesiastical leaders who, because they are often men, could judge partially, but to treat the matter confidentially with other more respectable and experienced women, so that they can be helped to keep their secrets even when the woman's infidelity results in a pregnancy.

The problem is aggravated by the distance between mostly male spiritual leadership and the realities of the female universe. O'Donovan advocates male primacy in teaching, assuming that women would be more willing to listen to men than the other way around when it comes to religious matters, and that this could have been the reason Jesus appointed men to take care of his

[22] Davis, *Making Disciples*, 168.

church.[23] However, while he presents his approach from an African perspective, he ignores the fact that the teaching of Scripture should produce, not merely believers, but disciples, people who understand and live intimately with God, and that teaching produces transformation in the way they live. The structure that separates men and women can limit women's education to basic, domestic content, preventing them from confronting their deepest fears and dilemmas in the light of Scripture.

Moreover, because education for women has historically been reduced to education for domestic duties, Henderson describes curricula where the Bible was just one subject among many manual skills.[24] This historical path, combined with the assumption that women should not teach the Bible, which justifies low investment in the theological formation of women, is perpetuated by the fact that today there are female leaders who are excellent housewives, but who have a weak theological preparation to face contemporary syncretism.

Thus, in the face of this reality of self-preservation and silence, it becomes evident that overcoming spiritual insecurity does not depend only on the individual effort of women but requires a proactive and empathetic posture on the part of ecclesiastical leadership. The distancing of male leaders from the dilemmas of the female universe, often labeled simply as beliefs, ends up validating and creating an environment conducive to the use of traditional rituals as an emergency solution and practicality. Rites cannot only be forbidden; they must be understood and replaced by a deeper understanding of Christ's protection that can fill the symbolic and emotional void of the woman.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for church leaders to review the model of formation offered to women. It is imperative to move from merely complementary or domestic education to theological instruction that allows teachers to communicate the gospel in a way that redeems the culture without being absorbed by it. Only through biblical literacy that dialogues with the worldview of Angolan women is it possible to break the cycle of dependence

[23] O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity*, 137.
[24] Henderson, *The Church in Angola*, 176–177.

on taboos and rituals, allowing female spirituality to find fullness and practical answers in the Word of God.

Similarly, Stott proposes that genuine discipleship should produce evident marks in both men and women who seek to walk with Christ. Through systematic teaching and exegesis of Scripture, the Christian develops a conviction of God's immanence and sovereignty, understanding that his voice remains active in any cultural context. Therefore, the Bible must be deliberately taught as an apologetic counterpoint, confronting traditions that diverge from the divine standard and allowing the Christian woman to build her life on the solid foundation of Matthew 7:24–27.

Moreover, the teaching of Scripture is invaluable. Through meditation and prayer, the heart prepares itself for the challenges of reality. The transposition of teaching into action produces, according to Stott, four essential marks of discipleship:

1. **Worship:** It is impossible to worship the unknown. Consequently, the more a woman deepens her theological knowledge of God's attributes, the more authentic and profound her worship becomes.

2. **Repentance:** God's word acts as a revealing mirror. By confronting divine holiness, sin is exposed, leading to confession and the abandonment of practices contrary to God's will.

3. **Faith:** The Christian faith does not subsist in a vacuum; it is a response of rational trust based on the knowledge of the one in whom it is worthy to trust. It is faith that anchors life in the midst of cultural pressures.

4. **Obedience and Witness:** Christian spirituality implies practical submission to divine authority. This culminates in testimonies, whether verbal or behavioural. The woman disciple shares Christ's redemptive work in her sphere of influence.[25]

In short, biblical teaching is the indispensable basis for women to develop a spirituality in conformity with God's will. For this reason, the investment of

[25] Stott, *To Understand the Bible*, 207-17.

time and resources in the theological formation of women is not only an ecclesiastical option, but a strategic imperative for the health of the church.

The challenge of the worldview and theology of female discipleship

Kohl and Barro emphasise the need for instructors who translate the word of God for community challenges.[26] The persistence of traditional rites and myths among Christian women is proof that biblical teaching sometimes fails to confront the deeper layers of the local worldview. When the word of God is not transmitted in a way that reaches the heart, there will be a dissociation between the doctrine taught and daily practice.

An example of this occurred at a women's retreat. A lady complained that her mother-in-law refused to perform a protective bath, a ritual intended for her grandchildren. Although the mother-in-law stated that the Christian faith prevented such a practice and that, because they were Christians, they no longer needed these rites, the daughter-in-law interpreted the refusal, not as fidelity to Christ, but as a lack of love and intentional exposure of the children to bad influences. She even asked for the intervention of the church leadership to force her mother-in-law to attend to the ritual. This episode reveals that biblical education needs to go beyond the surface, promoting a radical change in the structure of beliefs so that religiosity is genuinely transformed. The fragility of women's theological training limits the ability of biblical teaching to confront the socio-cultural reality of women. The thirst for the application of biblical values to practical life requires that teachers have access to a robust theological education. Only then will they be able to challenge other women to a discipleship that transforms values and breaks with traditions that conflict with the gospel.

The challenge of traditional cultural aspects demonstrates that there is greater effectiveness when there is a dynamic of teaching from woman to woman. This can be seen in the case of a young woman outraged by her husband's suggestion about family planning: he considered the practice an affront to God's sovereignty and family tradition. When she was advised by another

[26] Kohl and Barro, *Transformative Theological Education*, 234.

woman, who contextualised God's will on health, responsible motherhood, and body management, the young woman's perspective changed. Shared experience became the vehicle for a new theological understanding.

The dynamics of teaching from woman to woman have proven to be highly practical and effective. However, for it to be fully successful, leaders in teaching positions must have a solid theological background and understanding, ensuring a biblical, spiritual, empathetic, and contextual approach. After all, the barriers faced by the female public transcend the intellectual field, being rooted in emotional wounds and asymmetrical cultural marks accumulated over generations. Overcoming this scenario requires the systematic deconstruction of feelings of inferiority and the marginalisation of the female voice through the rediscovery of the *imago Dei*, rescuing the ontological dignity of women based on the example of Jesus Christ himself, who broke sociocultural taboos by meeting the Samaritan woman (John 4), restoring the woman with the issue of blood (Luke 8) and commissioning women as the primary witnesses of his resurrection (John 20).

In this panorama, trained theologians and leaders play an irreplaceable role as they act at the intersection between shared sociocultural experience and the liberating teaching of the gospel. The urgency of this intentional intervention is supported by empirical data collected in the pastoral field. In interviews with local male leaders, including a pastor and an evangelist, it was found that women are often afraid to seek open help in the face of their personal afflictions. Reports indicate that the pastoral attitude of crossing cultural boundaries, offering empathetic listening, and validating women's concerns are a decisive turning point for restoration.

The field research also highlighted the phenomenon locally designated as the woman's secret—a set of rituals, taboos, and veiled beliefs, perpetuated with the primary intention of preserving marital status before the community. Under the imposition of a social structure that considers masculinity culturally normative and free of flaws, attributing to women the unilateral responsibility for dilemmas such as infertility, such veiled practices emerge as mechanisms of social self-preservation. However, as observed by the leaders interviewed themselves, this dynamic compromises spiritual maturity, feeds syncretism, and weakens marital relationships. Overcoming this reductionist teaching,

which limits divine action to only a few areas of life, requires the strengthening of female theologians and leaders for a bold and contextualised biblical teaching, capable of deconstructing prejudices and reaffirming the unrestricted sovereignty and lordship of God over all dimensions of human existence.

The desires to generate and protect children and to take care of the body and the family are legitimate, but the context and the environment present challenges such as the fear of evil spirits that need to be overcome in religious, Christological, and Christian terms. According to Hesselgrave, cultures have layers of depth: The worldview, located at the most abstract level, establishes the values that regulate behaviours.[27]

Stott reinforces that Christianity, as a religion of rescue, must promote liberation from the factors of cultural conditioning that imprison the individual in mundane ritualistic situations.[28] This mental transformation is at the heart of Romans 12:2, which exhorts Christians not to conform to the prevailing system, be it secular or cultural, but to be renewed by understanding God's will. As McGrath explains, the gospel has to transform culture.[29] Although culture presents elements of cohesion, the gospel must act as the sieve through which values are filtered. As Matthew 19:4–6 teaches, human institutions are to be subject to God's creational pattern. Spirituality must reflect Christian ethics to the point of subordinating even natural impulses and socio-cultural pressures to the principles of the kingdom, seeking, as in Galatians 1:10, God's favour before communal recognition. Thus, practices such as polygamy or procreation outside marriage, although validated by tradition, collide with the model of mutual exclusivity established in Genesis 2:24 and reaffirmed by Christ in Matthew 19.

Women are at the centre of God's heart

The woman occupies a central place in God's purpose. Holy Scripture not only includes women in the history of redemption, but reveals the care, dignity, and

[27] Hesselgrave, *Intercultural Communication*, 87–88.

[28] Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 109.

[29] McGrath, *An Introduction*, 54.

value with which the Creator clothes women's lives. God does not see women through cultural limitations or human prejudices, but as persons created in his own image and likeness, beloved daughters and active participants in his mission. This divine attention is manifested in the cry of Hannah (1 Samuel 1), whose inmost being was heard by God for the restoration of her social dignity, and in the revelation to Hagar, who recognised him as *El Roi*, the God who sees (Genesis 16-20). Prominently, divine attention is revealed in the choice of Mary (Luke 1:26-38): a sovereign and intentional decision of the Most High to select a woman so that through her salvation would reach humanity. To ignore the value of women is to despise the very image and likeness of the Creator reflected in her, for divine revelation demonstrates that femininity is an essential part of God's plans for the world.

In view of this, getting rid of prejudices, decrees, and human traditions that marginalise women is an ethical and theological imperative. Female dignity is not a cultural concession or a religiously negotiable right, but a divinely legitimised value. Any debate about women's spaces, rights, and freedom must come from the perspective of the Creator, not from human constructions tainted by the Fall. Seeing and embracing God's will is a sign of spiritual maturity that enables women to understand their identity and calling. The understanding of her integration in the *missio Dei* strengthens the woman to declare, like Mary, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38, KJV), submitting herself in total consecration to divine sovereignty, even in the face of what transcended human understanding, trusting that fidelity to God is the greatest guarantee for the daily journey.

This theological understanding finds practical expression in contemporary ecclesiology in Angola where the church has developed programs aimed at the formation and integral instruction of women. The women's department in Angolan local communities stands out as one of the most dynamic and active sectors, promoting initiatives aimed at spiritual and social transformation. By playing vital roles in structuring the family, in the Christian education of new generations, and in advancing the proclamation of the gospel, women consolidate themselves as indispensable agents both in the growth of the church and in contemporary social and global transformations.

Conclusion

In summary, the persistence of rites and myths among Christian women in Angola is a clear sign that the word of God is not yet fully integrated into the local vision of the world. For education to be transformative, robust educational investment in teachers is needed. They should not only be trained in domestic and manual matters. They must be biblically prepared to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), protecting the community from error and heresy.

Teaching directed at women should be intentional and, when necessary, corrective. Many traditional practices need to be challenged and redeemed through an educational process that can bring clarity about Christian identity and offer guidance from Scripture for the dilemmas of everyday life. The gospel is sufficient to answer the vital questions of women. According to John 10:10, Jesus came to bring life in abundance. By breaking down the cultural barriers of his time, Jesus demonstrated the central place that women occupy in the heart of God, whether in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well, in the instruction of the sisters Martha and Mary, or in the healing of the woman with the issue of blood.

An analysis of the practices and tensions among Christian women reveals that superficial evangelisation is insufficient to consolidate a genuine faith. When theology does not dialogue with fears and cultural traditions, rites and myths remain as the real refuge in moments of crisis, generating a nominal or syncretic Christianity. The effectiveness of woman-to-woman counselling, exemplified in the case of family planning, demonstrates that women's discipleship is not just a secondary activity of the church, but a strategic vehicle for cultural transformation. In order for God's sovereignty to be understood not as a biological fatalism, but as a responsibility for the management of life, the theological formation of these women must be elevated. This requires:

Exegetical depth: Teaching that challenges the local view of the world, offering the protection of Christ as superior to traditional rituals.

Academic training: Investment in formal theological education for women, enabling them to articulate the faith in ways relevant to intimate and family dilemmas.

Practical contextualisation: Discipleship that does not ignore the issues of health, motherhood, and tradition, but redeems them from fear through the vision of Scripture.

In this way, through teachings that penetrate the deepest layers of belief, it will be possible to form true disciples of Christ, capable of leading a change of values that is both biblically faithful and culturally transformative.

Thus, it is essential to emphasise that for there to be effective work among Angolan Christian women it will be necessary for male ecclesiastical leadership to validate existential crises, no longer treating them with disdain but with theological and biblical acceptance. The effectiveness of the mission to teach the word of God will be measured by the transition from fear to trust in Christ, When the void left by the abandonment of cultural rituals is filled by a living Christian life and a deep understanding of God's sovereignty and sufficiency, Angolan women will finally experience the fullness of their freedom and the life in abundance that only Christ Jesus can give.

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Addressing Contemporary Challenges in African Missions: An Apologetic Approach

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Abstract

In recent times, the conversation in Africa's religious circles has attempted to invalidate the Christian faith, raising concerns in the hearts of believers whose knowledge of faith is shallow. Through various platforms such as social media and traditional broadcasting channels, skeptics and agnostics have publicly discredited the finished work of Christ, challenging believers to provide answers to questions regarding their faith. This has discouraged many believers, and many more might still be discouraged. There is, therefore, a need for ministers and ministries around the world to seek ways of inculcating sound biblical knowledge in believers and enhancing their commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission. This study demonstrates the relevance of apologetics in achieving the twin objectives of enhanced faith-based knowledge and increased commitment to the Great Commission. In conducting the research, the study employed a systematic literature review method, drawing on research literature from theological, missiological, biblical, and philosophical fields to analyse the significance of apologetics in the context of the current challenges that African missions face. The sources used in the study include the Scripture as a primary source, along with peer-reviewed journals and academic monographs. The study highlighted some dominant issues in mission and ways to enhance believers' knowledge through the inclusion and adaptation of apologetics in church and ministry settings, thereby helping believers to be more rooted, better able to defend their faith and more

equipped to effectively communicate Christ. The literature indicates that believers are broadly aware of the concept of apologetics, but its acceptance and usage remain at the nascent stage. However, it was established that the appropriate use of apologetics would significantly enhance believers' confidence when reaching the lost.

Introduction

In the world today, there is a decline in the depth of knowledge and faith among Christians of different ages and denominations. As the biblical warnings concerning the age of knowledge and the rise of the Antichrist at the end time find increasing fulfilment (Daniel 12:4; Matthew 24:4–14), Christians are being swept away by diverse winds of doctrine and by the rise of diverse religions that attack the Christian faith and present it as unfounded. Scripture warns that, if vigilance is not maintained, even the elect may be deceived (Hosea 4:6; 1 Timothy 4:1; Mark 13:20–23). Christians in this end time are not merely to hold on to their faith, but must cultivate strong resistance against the prejudice that arises from the diverse worldviews and misunderstandings surrounding the faith.

In Africa, and especially in Nigeria, African traditional religion (ATR), Islam, and secularism have been the major challenges to the Christian faith. In addition, diverse beliefs and practices of the Western world have infiltrated the African religious sphere, instigating provocative questions for young and old alike on the reasons for faith in God. Compounding this challenge, the use of indoctrination is often absent, producing an unsatisfactory and passive outlook in the hearts of Christians. Many remain in faith with a facade and emptiness, thereby easily becoming pluralistic, secretly seeking help outside of the church. This calls for urgent attention: how can believers move from merely imposing the truth to establishing reasoned foundations for that truth? As 1 Peter 3:15 enjoins believers, they should be ready to explain and defend their faith.

This study searches for answers to questions of faith, seeking to help believers go beyond mere belief to adding evidence to their faith. The following questions are addressed in this work: What are the basic aspects of apologetics in terms of discipleship and evangelism stated in the existing literature? What

challenges for missions in Africa does the literature mention on a consistent basis? What recommendations do the existing literature give regarding the practical implementation of apologetics in the process of training churches and ministries? This paper contends that the decline of belief in Africa, whether owing to Islamic apologetic teachings, traditional African religion, secularism, or inconsistency in the principles of prosperity gospel, should be counteracted by practical steps. Indoctrination alone will not be of use, but should be complemented by well-organised and structured training in the field of apologetics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Cowan's two-purpose model of apologetics[1]—the purposes of apologetics is (1) to strengthen the faith of the believers already in the church, and (2) to help those outside to enter the church—and on Geisler's observation that Jesus was an apologist.[2] He presented evidence, not just statements, for his claims. Thus, the study considers apologetics to be not a specialist academic sub-discipline limited to trained philosophers, but a pastoral tool that is useful for two audiences: the doubting insider and the challenging outsider. This matters immensely for the African situation considering that, as will be noted below, the African has already accepted the existence of a spiritual world. Therefore, the apologetic task in Africa is not so much proof for the existence of God, as is the case in Western apologetic traditions, but rather distinguishing between different explanations of the spiritual world, such as Christianity, Islam, and ATR, to determine their truthfulness and sufficiency. The subsections under contemporary issues in missions are analysed in light of Cowan's two purposes. Is the necessary response primarily aimed at instilling confidence among believers (Cowan's first purpose) or at providing a compelling thesis for evangelisation (Cowan's second purpose).

[1] Cowan, 'Introduction', 8.
[2] Geisler, 'The Apologetics of Jesus'.

History of Apologetics

Apologetics can be traced back many centuries. In 399 BC, Socrates was charged with preaching about foreign gods and teaching corruption to the youth. He did not apologise in the conventional sense of expressing regret, but rather made an unapologetic defence of his teachings and their origin. Five centuries later, the Apostle Peter implored believers to be bold but less abrasive when asked about their faith or the reason for their hope in Christ.[3] 'The early Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian, defended the faith against the attacks of pagans and Jews, while also presenting a positive case for the truth of Christianity'.[4]

Norman Geisler and Paul Hoffman, delving into the rise of skepticism against Christians and their faith, explained that it was not until eighteenth-century modernism and twentieth-century post-modernism that the 'existence of truth about goodness' was seriously challenged through a 'deeply ingrained cultural resistance to truth'.[5] Broadly, apologetics is not just a defence of the faith. It serves two purposes in Christian faith: '(1) bolster the faith of Christian believers, and (2) aid in the task of evangelism' and world mission.[6]

Geisler asserts that Jesus himself functioned as an apologist, calling people to believe by giving them evidence of the fulfilment in his words and works. Jesus used the testimonies of witnesses, miracles, signs and wonders, Scripture, history, teachings, parables, authority, prophecies from the Torah, arguments, a sinless lifestyle, and his death, resurrection, and ascension as evidence and reasons for his lordship.[7]

The Apostle Paul is a great example of an apologist who combined the work of evangelism and apologetics in his ministry. His sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16–34) demonstrates apologetics in action, as Paul engaged with the Athenians, addressing their philosophical and theological concerns.[8] The

[3] 1 Peter 3:15; Markos, *Apologetics*, 17.
[4] Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 23.
[5] Geisler and Hoffman, *Why I am a Christian*, 11.
[6] Cowan, 'Introduction', 8.
[7] Geisler, 'The Apologetics of Jesus'.
[8] Zacharias, *Can Man Live*, 101.

Bereans are another example (Acts 17:10-12). While Paul engaged in apologetics in preaching the gospel, the Bereans examined the Scripture to be sure their faith had not been eroded. As Laue notes, 'The Bereans were open to what Paul and Silas had to say, but they were uncertain about their beliefs until they examined things for themselves',[9] moving from doubt and uncertainty to an unwavering faith.

Laue explains that God has consistently interacted with humanity to clear doubts and uncertainty with proof of His true divinity. 'God meets people where they are in their faith development and invites them into a conversation, using objective evidence and reason to help them move from questions and doubts into an ever-deepening faith relationship'.[10] Laue makes a clear distinction between doubt and unbelief, stating that doubt is a genuine, evidence-seeking attitude while unbelief is a conscious refusal to accept the truth regardless of the evidence presented.[11] John the Baptist had earlier borne witness to Jesus, and later he sent messengers to ask if Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah (Matthew 11:2–6; Luke 7:18–23). Similarly, Thomas also had doubts about the resurrection before he met the resurrected Lord (John 20:24–29). These instances prove that doubts and questions do not necessarily amount to disbelief. Instead, they may highlight a struggle to find the truth. Likewise, the disciples' fear and hesitation in openly siding with Jesus even before the coming of the Holy Spirit could be seen as a lack of courage rather than rejection of faith.

Importance of Apologetics in Christian Discipleship and Evangelism

Apologetics is very important for the Christian faith. It is a great additional aid to existing forms of discipleship because it helps believers to understand the reason for their hope in Jesus Christ and builds the capacity to share the gospel with the world.[12] Although apologetics is vital to defend faith, it goes beyond merely learning propositions and communicating them to others; it is also a

[9] Laue, Apologetics-Based Curriculum, 12.
[10] Laue, Apologetics-Based Curriculum, 11.
[11] Laue, Apologetics-Based Curriculum.
[12] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 19.

strong tool for building a strong foundation for Christian faith. Contrary to the popular misconception, apologetics is not about argument and debate. Rather, it is a persuasive and compassionate way to bring even the most hardened people to the light of the gospel.[13] Conviction and winning people are the major purposes of evangelism and discipleship. It is through biblical knowledge and the power of the Holy Spirit that believers can be successful.

Contemporary Issues in Missions

There are many contemporary issues facing missions in the world, including globalisation and urbanisation, mercy and justice, mutuality, migration, monoculture, the shift in Christian centres, the definition of mission, and reclaiming the gospel message.[14] In Africa, the scenario differs somewhat: contextualising the gospel, church planting and growth, leadership development, the expansion of Islam, cultural barriers, addressing social issues, inculturation and syncretism, persecution and security, limited resources, and the role of technology. In West Africa, these challenges are particularly acute and include: Islamic-Christian tensions, Boko Haram insurgency, poverty and economic challenges, cultural and linguistic diversity, church growth and development, missionary work in Muslim-dominated areas, addressing social issues, reaching unreached peoples, using technology, and partnering with local churches.

The issues named in this section lean fairly cleanly into two groups. The first group is comparative in nature, which addresses the correct spiritual reality: cultural context, polytheism, ATR, and Islam. These are aimed at the outside world; they correspond to Cowan's second purpose, which is apologetics and concerns bringing outsiders to faith (evangelisation). The second group refers to internal issues that have to do with the faith of the current believers and apostasy as one example of the internal issue is addressed through Cowan's first purpose. Thus, below I will regroup the above sections according to the above characteristics: external vs internal apologetic issues.

Cultural Inclinations

[13] Copan, *True for You*, 23.
[14] Fritz, *The Meeting of the Waters*, 1–14.

Across the world, and especially in Africa, cultures are not only transmitted to the younger generation, but are also strictly upheld. In most instances, non-compliance attracts consequences, ranging from mild to grievous. As a result, Christian converts in such societies are caught between wholly following their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and fulfilling their cultural duties. Ndereba illustrates this in the case of Christian men in Gĩkũyũ who felt compelled to give away goat(s) to be recognised as elders in the community.[15] While this rite may appear harmless on the surface, Mbiti notes that prayers offered during this rite are directed not to God but to lesser spiritual beings, divinities, spirits, and the departed,[16] which stands in direct contradiction to the Christian faith. Furthermore, Chege demonstrates that these mediatorial offices often require the shedding of blood,[17] while the Bible clearly states that the only mediator between humanity and God is Jesus Christ.

The Multiplicity of Gods

Skeptics often posit that the Christian faith is guilty of the very stance it seeks to refute, especially concerning the multiplicity of gods. While classical topics such as the existence of God and the problem of evil are critical questions for younger Africans in an increasingly pluralistic context, there is also a need to answer questions that emerge from the African religious heritage.[18] Among them is the question of whether the triune God of Christianity is the same as the gods of ATRs. African urban spaces are increasingly pluralistic in religious, ethical, and philosophical terms, which tends to raise the question: 'Are we all referring to the same God?' As Swinburne notes, except for pockets of atheistic Africans in urban cities, the need for classic apologetic proofs for the existence of God is negligible, since Africans already function within a religious worldview that assumes the existence of God or the gods. The fundamental question is: Which of them, God or gods?[19]

Issues Around African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Mbiti argues that ATRs are like the Jewish religion in having more continuities than discontinuities with the gospel of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ himself being

[15] Ndereba, 'The Supremacy of Jesus Christ'.
[16] Mbiti, *African Religions*, 66.
[17] Chege, *The Meru Religious Beliefs.*
[18] Sochanngam, 'African Christians'.
[19] Swinburne, 'The Social Theory'.

their fulfilment.[20] On the opposite pole, Byang Kato claimed that ATRs have more discontinuities with the gospel message than continuities.[21] Bediako stands in conversation with both of them, delicately balancing African identity and gospel fidelity.[22] ATRs speak of God based on his attributes. For example, the Akan (Ghana) refer to God as 'he who knows or sees all', while the Zulu (South Africa) and Banyarwanda (Rwanda) call him 'the wise one'. These concepts reveal some level of continuity with Scripture in terms of attributes and names for God.

The Christian worldview is unique in its exclusivity concerning how humanity attains salvation. One of the ways that apologetics can help combat issues around ATR is to demonstrate that ATRs are primarily concerned with communal harmony, not salvation. While this expands concepts of reconciliation to a holistic scope, it bypasses the underlying Christian understanding of salvation and atonement. Additionally, the concept of the Trinity, which interfaces with the person and work of Jesus Christ, parts company with the monotheism, pantheism, and polytheism of ATRs.

Issues of Apostasy

Apostasy refers to a situation in which an individual has strayed from biblical truth or denied the faith. The Pastoral Epistles indicate Paul's understanding that apostasy will continuously increase until it reaches its climax just before the second coming of Christ.[23] This expectation is well demonstrated in Gnosticism, which denied or radically reinterpreted the doctrine of the incarnation,[24] the resurrection and the last judgement,[25] with an emphasis on knowledge and wisdom as means of salvation.[26]

According to Paul, the journey into apostasy follows four major steps: People will not endure sound teaching; they will accumulate teachers to suit their own passions; they will turn away from listening to the truth; and they will wander

[20] Mbiti (1979)
[21] Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*.
[22] Hartman, 'Kwame Bediako'.
[23] 1 Tim 4:1–5; 2 Tim 3:1–9; 4:1–5; Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*.
[24] Akin, *1, 2, 3, John*.
[25] Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude.*
[26] Fiensy, *New Testament Introduction*.

off into myths (2 Timothy 4:3–4). Through apologetics, the 'sound teaching' postulated by Paul can be upheld in the face of growing prosperity messages that proclaim grace as an all-around licence for any type of living.

Issues Around Islam

In Islam, there is only one God. His name is Allah and his nature is entirely singular. While this appears like a continuity with the Christian faith, closer examination reveals several deviations. Allah created man, not in his image, but simply to do his will on earth. Allah has no children. As an impersonal god, Allah owes nothing to his followers. Only faithful Muslims have the chance to earn Allah's love through a life of hard work.[27] Moreover, while Jesus is described in Islam as born of a virgin, sinless, a prophet, and the messiah who will come again, he is not acknowledged as the Son of Allah. Islam's concept of salvation is multifaceted, if not unclear and problematic for the Muslim believer.[28]

The words and actions attributed to Muhammad in the Hadith were gathered more than two centuries after his death. Given the lateness of these reports with no external corroboration, it is extremely difficult to confirm their reliability. Furthermore, while the Quran confirms the existence and singular nature of Jesus, it also states that he was not crucified. The biblical account of Jesus' crucifixion, however, is nearly universally accepted by critical scholars, with more than a dozen references in non-Christian sources confirming Jesus' life and death.[29]

Priest documents how Islamic apologists and missionaries are persuasively winning Igbo Christians to Islam through a combination of apologetics, social care, and misrepresentation of Scripture.[30] Most significantly, those who convert are largely nominal Christians — not deeply convicted of their faith. This underscores the urgent need to partner with local churches, ministries, and theological institutions to help Christians become more convicted and

[27] Motzki, 'The Collection of the Qur'ān'.
[28] Campbell, Apologetic Response.
[29] Campbell, Apologetic Response.
[30] Priest, *The Conversion of Igbo Christians.*

grounded in their faith, and be better equipped to bring the lost back to Christ.[31]

Methodology

This research uses the systematic literature review methodology. It also benefits from an African theological approach based on the Holy Bible and its context. Instead of collecting primary data, the research examines the literature of missiology, apologetics, African theology, Islamic studies, and African traditional religions. The research reviews fixed sources, such as the Holy Bible, using biblical exegesis, and secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed articles, monographs, journals, and dissertations. The research also reviews the existing literature in the field by suggesting a context-specific interpretation. Thus, the analysis of the literature allows the researcher to approach the problem from a biblical perspective while ensuring cultural relevancy.

Search and Selection Strategy

In this review, information was gathered from the databases of ATLA Religion and Google Scholar, from theological seminary libraries, along with searches of university institutional repositories for relevant dissertations and theses. The search phrases included combinations of such words as 'apologetics', 'African Traditional Religion', 'contextualisation', 'Islamic apologetics', 'discipleship', 'Great Commission', and 'African missiology'. No limitations were set regarding publication years because the review included texts that are generally recognised as essential to the study, regardless of their year of publication. Such texts include Geisler, Craig, and Moreland. Preference was given to resources published after 1970 because that represents the time period when the African theological tradition started to flourish in terms of the research of ATR and contextualisation, especially by scholars such as Mbiti, Kato, Idowu, and Bediako.

[31] Wagner, *Church Planting*; Borthwick, Strategizing; 2015; Stetzer, *Subversive Kingdom*.

The included sources presented direct discussions relating to apologetics, African missiology, or one or more the challenge areas analysed in this paper. Those areas included cultural practices, a multiplicity of gods, ATR, apostasy, and Islam. Sources that dealt with apologetics in a Western philosophical style without reference to the African case were excluded. Also excluded were literature that dealt with missiology in general, but had no strong apologetic missiology or worldview-comparison aspect or method. The only exception to these exclusions was Scripture, which was treated as a primary source in terms of standard biblical exegesis. The criteria used for secondary literature was not applied to Scripture.

Rationale for a Literature-Review Design

As the research questions involved in this study revolve around existing knowledge and information rather than investigating a new, previously unknown group of people, a systematic review of the literature approach was used in the analysis. The final part of the analysis involved the determination of the main functions of apologetics in relation to the matters of discipleship and evangelism, as well as the main obstacles faced by African missions in recent times. Both questions require the application of systematic search, evaluation, and synthesis of the existing scholarship.

The third research question, concerning the application of apologetics in church and ministerial training, is more practical in nature and must be solved by empirical research. However, in this paper, it has been treated in light of the literature, obtaining what the existing literature says or suggests about its implementation. Therefore, the recommendations in this study should be considered literature-based hypotheses eligible for future empirical research, rather than the results of actual research.

Summary of Findings

The following findings emerge from the systematic literature review conducted in this study.

First, apologetics, though not a widely recognized concept among people in ministry, is not an unknown concept. The reviewed literature consistently

confirmed that apologetics is a way of deepening knowledge of the faith that the believer professes, and has a significant impact on how believers fulfil the Great Commission.

Second, the prominent and recurring challenges identified in the literature included syncretism, secularism, atheism, Islam, agnosticism, and the growing LGBTQ movement. These challenges are compounded by socio-economic and political factors including insecurity, increasing poverty levels, and the temptation of materialism among the youth.

Third, other religious worldviews are increasingly willing to engage Christian believers in debate-like conversations because of the perceived poor knowledge that many Christians have exhibited. Islamic apologetics in particular have developed sophisticated arguments that require an equally rigorous Christian response.

Fourth, the literature affirms that apologetics should not be seen as purely the use of logic to establish the Christian faith. The Christian faith is first and foremost faith-based; apologetics must remain Spirit-led, while being intellectually rigorous.

Discussion

Examined in conjunction with the theoretical framework presented earlier, the results of this research point to one main assertion: the difficulty of the African missions should be understood as a deficiency of trust rather than a deficiency of information. Supporting this conclusion are the three pieces of evidence gained from the analysis.

First, all of the sources collected show the significance of apologetics,[32] but the given sources were written mainly with respect to a traditional apologetic context related to the West. Thus, the principle represented in the sources is the necessity of proof for spiritual reality. The complications pointed out by this review for African missions are the different proof issues one deals with in African missions. The main issue for the majority of Africans is not the

[32] Markos, *Apologetics*; Craig, *Reasonable Faith*; 1994; Geisler and Hoffman, *Why I am a Christian*; Cowan, 'Introduction'.

existence (or non-existence) of spiritual reality, but the question of which position is right and appropriate with respect to that reality. The divergence between the material provided in the relevant literature and the actual challenges African believers face allows one to conclude that the African mission needs to develop its own materials for apologetics, instead of applying materials developed in the Western literature.

Second, the evidence presented in Priest's argument that converts to Islam from the Christian faith in Igbo communities are generally nominal rather than true believers[33] is the most compelling argument in support of the confidence-deficit theory as opposed to the knowledge-deficit theory. If the problem were simply that individuals lacked the necessary information to convert, religious conversion would occur primarily among the least educated. What Priest's findings show is that these individuals probably know the gospel and what it involves but have not, for one reason or another, actually believed it – which is precisely the gap that apologetics aims to fill when it serves the purpose of strengthening the faith of existing believers.

Third, despite initially seeming unrelated to the core of the apologetics literature, the review's findings on socio-economic pressures such as poverty, insecurity, and materialism among youth can be seen to have strong connections to the paper's account of apostasy and prosperity theology. That is to say, because the idea of the prosperity theology gives rise to the belief system that wealth is the measure of success, the socio-economic pressures outlined in the review can be understood as the effects of those religious failings. This link is made to show that the review's contribution is to demonstrate how the wrong theology bridges religious and socio-economic contexts. However, it ought to be clear that these points should not be understood as establishing a causal relationship between the socio-economic pressures and the theological claims made. Further research, as indicated in the limitations section below, is needed to test the argument.

[33] Priest, *The Conversion of Igbo Christians.*

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that apologetics is of utmost importance in the propagation of the Christian faith. The reviewed literature consistently affirmed that the definition of 'apologetics' has yet to reach a consensus. Many people tend to have a partial or limited understanding of the term. Despite this challenge, there is unanimous agreement about the relevance of apologetics for the fulfilment of the Great Commission. Apologetics will enhance believers' conviction and confidence to share their faith with the people around them. The role of the church, apologists, and other Christian organisations in achieving this is indispensable. There is need for more pastors and church leaders to incorporate apologetics into their messages and Bible study programmes, and for 'train the trainer' seminars and workshops to equip pastors and Bible study teachers to learn from renowned apologists. Further research is recommended to explore how apologetics can be formally integrated into African theological curricula and denominational training programmes.

This paper's unique contribution is that it uses the combination of apologetics with the African missiology to demonstrate how the main issue with African mission really manifests itself as a lack of confidence instead of a lack of knowledge. This insight provided real practical implications for the design and organisation of curricula for discipleship programs in churches in Africa.

Recommendations

As a result of the importance and relevance of apologetics established in this study, the following recommendations are made:

- In this age of increasing pluralism, all believers should take advantage of training and seminars that focus on apologetic strategies and techniques, coupled with other aspects of mission training.

- Church leaders, pastors, and ministries should endeavour to organise apologetics conferences and workshops for teachers and ministers in their sphere of influence, equipping members for the challenges they encounter in evangelism and daily life.

- Missionaries will benefit immensely from knowledge of how to constructively and persuasively witness to people of diverse belief; they should therefore seek institutions that teach new and effective strategies for missions and the defence of faith.

- Theological institutions in Africa should consider incorporating apologetics as a core subject in their curricula, particularly with attention to ATR, Islam, and contemporary African philosophical challenges.

- Since the discussion links prosperity theology to economic pressure, apologetics curriculum should be constructed to include a segment devoted to the theology of wealth and suffering rather than only being taught as a component of philosophical discussion.

- Since the literature has treated classical existence of God apologetics and comparative worldview apologetics in isolation, in seminary and lay institute programs the class on apologetics should be integrated with knowledge of ATR and Islam instead of being taught as a separate component.

Limitations of the Study

This study is restricted by aspects specific to the methodology used, namely, the systematic literature review, which limits the study in certain ways. First, and most important, because of the design choice noted in the opening of this paper, the study does not independently test the claims of apologetics and African missions against primary data from believers, pastors, or missionaries; rather, it takes what the literature says about them. The suggestions and recommendations presented above are therefore best interpreted as hypotheses derived from the literature, appropriate for empirical testing in the future. They are not the result of actual testing on a living population.

Second, the sources used in the literature reviewed are mostly sources in the English language and are of a Protestant evangelical nature. A more comprehensive account would also include African theological voices from

Catholic and Orthodox perspectives, as well as from Francophone and Lusophone Africa.

Third, the review focused on Nigeria and West Africa as specific areas. The findings about Islam, ATR, and apostasy may not be as applicable in other parts of Africa where the histories of religion are different. For example, the experience of East Africa with ATR is quite different from that of West Africa in some important ways.

Finally, source selection in any type of literature review is a subjective decision about what is relevant and of good quality; therefore, the review will take a form that may vary from one reviewer to another based on their own theological starting point.

Suggestions for Further Research

Following the limitations discussed above, as well as the recommendation for further research in the conclusion's final paragraph, three possible paths of further research can be suggested. First, and most obviously, to address the major limitation of this study, an empirical follow-up research project in the form of structured interviews or a survey conducted with pastors, seminary students, and ordinary believers would show whether the relevance of the proposed confidence-deficit hypothesis is indeed confirmed in contemporary reality. Second, a study comparing apologetic orientations of West and East Africa or the Anglophone and Francophone regions would address whether the approach and theoretical concept discussed in the theoretical framework are relevant in different regional contexts that have been shaped by diverse histories of development. Third, in accordance with the link established between prosperity theology and socio-economic conditions, research aimed at measuring the impact of an apologetic training curriculum on the community would contribute to the transition of this field of research from literature-summary-based studies to empirical findings-centred investigations.

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

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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.

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The History and Impact of Malawian Mission Schools on Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In Africa, it is almost impossible to talk about United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063 without considering the impact made by mission schools. Mission schools are the foundation of education in most African nations and they need huge support from the government. Unfortunately, with the development of public schools, most mission schools have been abandoned and no longer receive any support from the government. Most mission schools are depleted, and their performance have declined. The article argues that unless the government works hand in hand with and supports the mission schools, the 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063 will end up being a wishful dream. The African population is growing extremely quickly, making it hard for government schools to provide the needed education. This paper explores the history and impact of mission schools on sustainable development in Malawi and the role that the government has in supporting these schools.

This paper employs a qualitative research method, where personal interviews are conducted to collect data, plus a literature review. Its goal is to help the government realise that the issue of sustainable development cannot be achieved only by one entity, but that there is a need to work together with mission schools and the church at large. Government must become aware of the importance of supporting mission schools if sustainable development is to be achieved.

Introduction

Africa is a religious continent where most of its occupants belong to one of the many existing religions. Selhausen says, "one in every four Christians worldwide is an African, and the 2050 projections forecast further Christian growth."[1] A very small percentage of people do not belong to any religion. This is a true reflection of education system in Africa, but also in Malawi in particular, because as Berman says, "formal education was key in missionary conversion strategies, and thus education became firmly connected to Christian missions."[2] Berman and Frankema say that most of those who attended mission schools got converted and helped spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in their local languages.[3] No one can manage to talk about the education system in Malawi without talking about the mission schools.

It is almost impossible for Malawian students to go through their education without passing through mission schools' corridors. This has a very big impact when it comes to carrying out the 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063. Neither of them can be achieved without the contribution of these mission schools since these are the torch bearers for decades insofar as education is concerned. Deryke says, "most African Christians are products of missionary theological traditions that came to us, incorporating a variety of development activities such as education, health, and agriculture."[4] It is for this apparent reason that Banda says, "one cannot doubt that churches in Malawi have played a significant role in promoting the education system in the country. This is as a result of their Christian belief that God created human beings with the ability to learn, teach, and know that God is active in and through education … The church has the distinctive mandate to educate, instruct, and bring forth faithful, courageous, wise disciples and reliable citizens."[5] This is what 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063 are all about. Tembo is of the same view when she

[1] Selhausen, *Mission, Education and Conversion*, 2.
[2] Berman, "African Responses," 527-540.
[3] Berman, "African Responses," 527-540; Frankema, "Colonial Education," 153-177.
[4] Deryke, *Faith in Development*, 208.
[5] Banda, *Influence of Protestant Churches*, 5.

points out that indeed missionaries contributed towards the establishment of mission schools during colonialism.[6]

Hence Ajayi emphasises that "in the absence of major investments in African education by European colonial states, mission schools provided the bulk of education for most of the colonial era between 1880-1960."[7] According to De Haas ad Frankema, these mission schools "did not just provide education where the colonial state did not invest in it, but they primarily relieved colonial governments from financing public education."[8] In fact, Summers further says, "the British colonial administration, interested in keeping costs low in its African colonies, adopted an open-door policy, welcoming missions from all denominations to 'outsource' the supply of formal education to Christian missionary societies. Hence, this fostered competition among mission denominations."[9] It is for this reason that Barro and Lee confirm that "mission schools were responsible for the initial rise in mass education" and that these schools continue to have long-lasting impact on people's lives like that of ending poverty and hunger and letting them have full potential in dignity and equality.[10] The mission schools have also fostered peace and justice. This is what the 2030 SDGs are all about.

History of Mission Schools in Malawi

Roman Catholic Mission Schools

Msusa states that the "first Catholic missionaries, known as 'White Fathers' arrived in Malawi, Mangochi district in the territory of Chief Mponda in 1889. Bishop Du Pont was one of the white fathers' leaders."[11] Chief Mponda thought that these missionaries would protect him from being attacked by either the British or Portuguese, who were also in his territory. Upon discovering that these missionaries were not fighters, "Mponda imprisoned them for eighteen months. After being released, Bishop Du Pont went back home in France in 1901 due to sickness, and while there he persuaded his

[6] Tembo, "Mission Education," 21.
[7] Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria*, 134.
[8] De Haas and Frankema, "Gender, Ethnicity and Unequal Opportunity," 965-994.
[9] Summers, "Education and literacy," 322.
[10] Barro and Lee, "A new data set," 184-198.
[11] Msusa, *The Catholic Church in Malawi*, .

friend Pierre Bourget of the Montfort Fathers to start a mission in the Shire Highlands."[12] "On 25th July 1901, the Montfort missionaries arrived at Nzama, Ntcheu district; the first permanent Catholic Mission, where they were welcomed by the Ngoni chief, Njobvuyalema."[13]

In February, 1902, barely five months after their arrival, the Catholic missionaries opened their first school.[14] The Montfort missionaries also opened another school of carpentry at Mua, and as the church got rooted, more schools and trainings emerged. For instance, the Marist Brothers opened St Johns Teachers Training College and the following secondary schools: Zomba Catholic, Likuni boys and Mtendere Boys. The white sisters opened Bembeke Girls Teachers Training College and the following girls ' secondary schools: Likuni and Nkhamenya. McCracken says that in 1924, the White Fathers also founded a boarding school at Kachebere in Mchinji where students were taught to read, write, and sew.[15]

Education was one of the priorities for the missionaries. As Chu says, "Pope Benedict XVI spoke in 2008 at the Catholic University of America that education is central to the mission of the church to proclaim the good news and that every Catholic education institution is a place to encounter the living God. To the Roman Catholic church, education means openness to the splendor of truth and culture, embracing the sublimity of the human intellect in its search for meaning and wisdom, and appreciating the essence and destiny of all things."[16]

Chu acknowledges that "according to Roman Catholic, education sets people on the path of building relationships and connections with all people and all creation in the search for meaning and truth. It is capable of meeting the challenges of the present moment."[17] It is for this reason that Catholic universities are centres where cultures and faith intersect.

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[12] Msusa, *The Catholic Church in Malawi*, .
[13] Msusa, *The Catholic Church in Malawi*, .
[14] Msusa, *The Catholic Church in Malawi*, .
[15] McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi*, 115.
[16] Chu, "The Future of Catholic Education in Africa," 25.
[17] Chu, "The Future of Catholic Education in Africa," 30.

Universities Mission to Central Africa

"The Universities Mission to Central Africa was formed in 1858 as a direct appeal by Dr. David Livingstone to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to send a mission to Central Africa."[18] The group was led by Bishop Charles Fredrick Mackenzi in 1860 and settled at Magomero. Juma affirms further that in 1904 the government urged these missionaries to give technical education a central place in their schools because before this people were indigent, ignorant, illiterate, superstitious, and considered uncivilised.[19] This led to the introduction of welfare schemes like the eradication of illiteracy, economic development, and social mobilisation, consciousness of health and hygiene. The missionaries also emphasised the development of character like honesty, love, truth, benevolence, and decency (morality and humanitarianism). Brough considers their contribution toward Malawi commendable rather than condemnable.[20]

Church of Central Africa Presbyterian: Blantyre Synod

The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Blantyre Synod started offering technical courses aimed at providing skills among Africans to create skilled workers in 1876. In 1878, a printing press started. The first students were John Macrae Chipuliko and Mungo Murray Chisuse. These became the first printers in Malawi and were assisted by Harry Kambwiri Matecheta and John Gray Kufa. Thereafter John Mcllwain joined the Blantyre mission in 1884 and began training young men as builders and carpenters.[21]

In 1905 the educational code of the General Missionary Conference approved what they called a "five-level graded school system" in which third grade embraced standards IV to VI, combining both academic and technical education with special emphasis on particular trades like carpentry, printing, bricklaying, tailoring, laundry, typewriting, teaching, agriculture, and medical training. Fourth grade, which was called "manual grade" was an advanced education. It was meant for the senior certificated teachers and medical

[18] Brough, "The Role of the UMCA," 13.
[19] Juma, The Contribution of the Church Missionary Society, 52, 62.
[20] Brough, "The Role of UMCA," 24.
[21] Brough, "The Role of the UMCA," 14.

assistants. During this period, Blantyre mission technical education was taught by both male and female teachers like Jonathan and Rose Majonanga.[22]

Apart from academic subjects, male students were also taking a technical subject with the intention of preparing them for a specific area. The girls were offered sewing, laundry, and home care as their technical subjects. In 1947 the Blantyre mission printed the following books: Nyanja-English Dictionary and English Grammar.[23] Mr. Henry Henderson, who was nicknamed *Ntebe* (Tall), helped the mission with money in constructing the Henry Henderson Institute for Africans to learn, which was officially opened in 1909.[24] In 1965, Blantyre Synod accepted a proposal to purchase three printing machines, which tremendously improved printing services and increased the printing trainees from four to ten per session.[25] In 1966, the press became a private company of the Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods, focusing on printing publications for churches in Malawi.[26]

Ross gives an example of how the children of the Magololo and the Yao enrolled in school after the establishment of Nthumbi Mission.[27] One of the beneficiaries was Ngoloweka, who wanted to quit school due to the constant conflict he had with the Magololo children who used to call him a son of *waka chikambi* (a type of unprocessed tobacco) in return he called them *Anyas akudya matesi, acule* (frog eaters). Ngoloweka considered dropping out of school because of their constant fighting. But he acknowledges how Dr. Hetherwick stopped him from quitting school.[28]

Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Church: Livingstonia Synod

The name Livingstonia has a fascinating historical background in the history of Christianity, politics, education, and development in general. It was the first place in Nyasaland to have hydroelectric power and piped water. Livingstonia, where the headquarters of the Free Church of Scotland was situated, was

[22] Brough, "The Role of the UMCA," 18.
[23] Brough, "The Role of the UMCA," 20
[24] Ross, *Christianity in Malawi*, 35.
[25] Ross, *Christianity in Malawi*, 35.
[26] Brough, "The Role of the UMCA," 22
[27] Ross, *Christianity in Malawi*, 28.
[28] Ross, *Christianity in Malawi*, 29.

named after Dr. David Livingstone, in memory of his missionary activities in southern and central Africa. He was a remarkable explorer, missionary, and medical doctor. Although the initial station was at Cape Maclear, the real fruits of the Free Church of Scotland missionaries began to appear in 1881 at Bandawe, before they finally established their mission in Khondowe, which is now called Livingstonia Mission. This was under the leadership of Dr. Robert Laws, one of the great mission strategists of the nineteenth century. Indeed, he was a man of no equal in his ambitions, convictions, dedication, dynamism, achievements, and public relations with the locals he came in contact with. He played an important role in the introduction of education and political life to the Malawians, and also initiated educational policies. Together with his colleagues, Dr. Robert Laws built a magnificent church, the stone house, and other infrastructures of the Overtoun Institute, which were unique in those days and are still standing today. The Overtoun Institute was opened in 1894. This school has a paramount reputation for many generations of Africans because of its exceptional curriculum empowerment.[29]

It was called Overtoun Institute because Overtoun was the first one to contribute 5,000 pounds to develop it. In 1895, the Institute began training teachers and was the first school to provide teacher education in Central and Southern Africa. Nyambose says it was Dr. Robert Laws' passion to let the people who would pass through the Overtoun Institute be a light to the world.[30] As such, they also offered the following courses: commerce, medical courses, arts, knitting, secretarial courses, theological courses, classics, carpentry, bricklaying, and agricultural courses. These varied courses were unique and incredibly rewarding for the African people, and the curriculum ensured holistic development and self-reliance. They also had a school for the blind and a printing press. The first printing was in 1897.

Before 1910, Overtoun Institute provided, on a small scale, secondary education to the brighter students only.[31] It was not until 1940 that the institution had a new curriculum aimed at providing academic development to all young Malawians.[32] They had new subjects like history, geography, general

[29] Nyambosie, "The establishment and contribution of the Overtoun Institute," 28.
[30] Nyambosie, "The establishment and contribution of the Overtoun Institute," 29.
[31] Banda, *A Brief History*, 89-90.
[32] Banda, *A Brief History*, 92-92.

science, English language, English literature, mathematics, Bible knowledge, Chichewa, Latin, and Chitumbuka in the northern region. This affected primary school subjects because they had to conform to the secondary school curriculum.[33] The shared spaces at the Institute helped to bring all students with different interests together to focus on the community problems.

The establishment of the Overtoun Institute brought in several developments such as education, agriculture, health, architecture, commerce, and evangelisation. The acquired skills helped many people to come up with sustainable development in their respective homes.

By 1914, Overtoun Institute catchment comprised of the following stations, schools, and teachers:

Station	**Schools**	**Teachers**
Livingstonia	40	66
Bandawe	122	149
Ekwendeni	86	169
Loudon	190	392
Karonga	72	82
Mwenzo (Zambia)	104	250
Tamanda (Zambia)	64	88

[33] Banda, *A Brief History*, 95.

Chitambo (Zambia)	51	107
Chinsale (Zambia)	41	80
Kasungu	123	235
Total	900	1618

This Institute was also a refugee place for those who were running away from the slave trade (colonialism) and their slave master.[34] In 1898, a group of 28 slaves comprised of men, women, and children were rescued from Mpemba. Mlolo, Mpasa, Kabanda, and Albert of Overtoun Institute brought the captured slaves to Dr. Laws by transporting them by canoe.[35]

The Institute also brought unity among the northern region ethnic groups (Tonga, Tumbuka, Ngoni and Ngonde), which were rivals. Through the Institute, all the academically successful northerners were brought together for training in various fields and skills. This gave a new outlook, a sense of shared experience, and a unity of vision where are instrumental for sustainable development. It is this unity that later led to the formation of the Native Northern Association.[36] The education obtained from the Institute led to the ordination of African ministers,[37] who maintained their good character and self-respect to the extent that their employers from different countries testified to Dr. Laws on how his students stood for Christ against evil conditions.

On 23 August 2003, Overtoun Institute became the University of Livingstonia and was authorised to open a college of education. Later, another campus was opened at Ekwendeni with a theological college and colleges of nursing,

[34] Nyambose, "The establishment and contribution of the Overtoun Institute," 30.
[35] Livingstone, *Laws of Livingstonia*, 187-188.
[36] McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi*, 265.
[37] Livingstone, *Laws of Livingstonia*, 196.

commerce, social science, and human rights. Today there is also at Kanin'gina that offers business studies, journalism, agriculture, and more.

Church of Central Africa Presbyterian: Nkhoma Synod

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) of South Africa is the founding mother of Nkhoma Synod. According to Pauw, the synod's story began "on 28 November 1889 [when] Rev Andrew Murray and Rev Vlok arrived in Dowa, Malawi."[38] This date is taken as the foundation day of the Dutch Reformed Church in Malawi. Before that time, "the early Livingstonia Missionaries who came from Scotland (Presbyterian church) had established a mission post in 1875 at Cape Maclear, which they handed it over in 1894 to the Dutch Reformed Church whose bases were at Mvera, Livulezi and Malembo."[39] According to Pauw, "Murray's goal was to convert the people to Christ,[40] while the goal of Rev Scot of Blantyre was to civilise the native in a Christian way by influencing social, moral, and political life."[41]

About these different approaches, Pauw writes, "this reflected what the DRC would also regard as priorities: First emphasis was a spiritual and secondly was on village schools, whereby many young people, even older ones, were reached out by the teacher-evangelist. During the first five years, the mission opened five more schools."[42] "The first one started in 1890 at Mvera, where the best four male students were sent to Livingstonia Mission for further education."[43]

"At first, the school work grew slowly due to fear and suspicion that children might be captured and sold into slavery."[44] Weller and Linden argue that, "education was also affected by the masked *Nyau,* who stopped children from going to school, such that out of 186 schools in Chewa areas, 80 had lost pupils, and the schools near Likuni were actually closing due to poor attendance."[45]

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[38] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 65.
[39] Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots*, 76.
[40] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi,* 60.
[41] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi,* 60.
[42] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 63.
[43] Phiri, *Women, Presbyterian and Patriarchy*, 44.
[44] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 68.
[45] Weller and Linden, *Mainstream Christianity,* 104.

The number started growing when they discovered that their fears were baseless. The first boarding facilities to be built were of the boys who were twenty in total by November 1890.[46] According to Phiri, the girls' boarding school started in 1895 after the arrival of Miss Martha Murray, a sister of Andrew Murray.[47]

Besides education, Andrew Murray also began a small medical practice. Pauw records how "between May and August 1890 Murray treated 200 patients."[48] The mission work started expanding with the coming of more missionaries from South Africa. Phiri records the following new missionaries: Rev. Robert Blake came in 1892 and started Kongwe Station; Rev. William Murray came in 1894 and took over Livulezi Station from Livingstonia in 1895; Mr. A. van der Westhuizen, who laid the foundation of the mission's agricultural teaching; and Miss Martha Murray, the first lady missionary.[49]

"In 1897, a group of nineteen converts, thirteen men and six women, were baptised by Andrew Murray. Among the women was the youngest, Sarai Msumwa (15 years), who was later called Sarah Lingodzi Nabanda."[50] According to Phiri,[51] Sarah Nabanda was the first woman in the Nkhoma Synod to work at Nkhoma Hospital. As a sign of appreciation for her special contribution, a girl nurses home at Nkhoma Mission was named after her, which she officially opened it on 8th December 1961. The missionaries' work in this synod was what Pauw calls a "comprehensive approach" in that they were not only targeting the spiritual part of a person but also the physical part.[52]

This is how Pauw summarises the work of the missionaries:

The work of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in Malawi had reached great heights. An intensive medical, educational, industrial and agricultural

[46] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 68.
[47] Phiri, *Women, Presbyterian and Patriarchy*, 44.
[48] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 69.
[49] Phiri, *Women, Presbyterian and Patriarchy*, 44
[50] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 60-70.
[51] Phiri, *Women, Presbyterian and Patriarchy*, 45.
[52] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 86.

programs were developing and the printing press was in full production with amongst others a magazine in Chichewa appearing regularly. In 1905 there were five mission stations, 152 village schools with 16,125 pupils and 683 teachers. The figure in 1914 rose to 669 schools with 43,292 pupils and 1,715 teachers. There was a total communicant membership of 5,071 with 8,370 catechumen people.[53]

Seventh Day Adventist Malawi

Malawi Adventist University (MAU) is an institution of higher education owned and operated by the Malawi Union Conference of Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) located in the Central Region of Malawi. "The education work started in 1902 when the General Conference purchased the Plainfield mission, which was renamed *Malamulo* in 1907, meaning 'Commandments' because the mission was associated with teaching people about the commandments of God."[54] According to SDA historian T. Katseketera, "education was one of the greatest needs of the people in Malawi. Hence, the church spread its influence through the territory by establishing mission schools and out schools (village schools), which first taught people how to read and write."[55]

A second mission school was opened at Lake View under the leadership of Pastor Roman Chimera in 1936. Thereafter, the number of mission schools and out schools increased. These were autonomous, operating independently from the government.

In 1947 Malamulo Nursing School, which offered health-related certificate programs, was opened.[56] Those who wanted to obtain a diploma and degree were referred to Solusi College in Zimbabwe, which was offering business, education, and agricultural degree programs. It was because of this, in 1995, the Malawi Union Mission session meeting at Malamulo Mission expressed the need to establish a college in Malawi to enable Adventist youth locally access Christian higher education. This dream was realised in 2000 when the Malawi Union Mission executive decided to run a four-year degree program under the name Malawi Adventist College. Courses were offered in business

[53] Pauw, *Mission and Church in Malawi*, 86
[54] Katseketera, *History of Seventh Day Adventist*, 1
[55] Katseketera, *History of Seventh Day Adventist*, 3.
[56] Katseketera, *History of Seventh Day Adventist*, 6.

administration (accounting and marketing), education, theology, and religious studies. The student hostel was built with money collected from the thirteenth Sabbath offering.[57] In 2008, Malawi Adventist College changed its name to Malawi Adventist University and began offering degree programs. Today MAU is one of the best-known private universities in Malawi, and most of its graduates have good prospects for employment upon graduation due to their integrity and competence.

As of 2020, MAU offered degrees in education, theology, religious studies, agriculture, agri-business management, medical laboratory science, and public health; diplomas in clinical medicine, biomedical sciences, and nursing; and a certificate in clinical medicine.[58] MAU also offers one post-graduate program: a Master of Science in Global Community Enterprise which prepares post-graduate students to work alongside indigenous people to implement sustainable enterprise and community-building projects. In collaboration with the Adventist University of Africa in Kenya, MAU also offers degree programs in accounting, human nutrition, and community development.

Churches of Christ

The Churches of Christ started schools from the onset of their mission at Gowa where they first turned the building that had formerly been used to grade tobacco as a classroom.[59] A 1932 report reports on a new school being built to replace the inadequate former tobacco grading building. The new school contained five rooms. Thiesten says that the"Churches of Christ considered schools with high priority and education was part of the mission philosophy."[60]

For this reason one of the main tasks of Georgeson upon his arrival in Malawi in 1931 was to train efficient teachers for their primary and senior schools. There were 59 children in primary school and 96 in the senior level. Thiesten continues to say that school-trained teachers could go for a higher-level certificate in English or a lower-level one in the vernacular. Students had both class and "hands-on" work. Those who completed the English certificate were particularly in high demand and were recruited as teachers. Students were

[57] Katseketera, *History of Seventh Day Adventist*, 9.
[58] Katseketera, *History of Seventh Day Adventist*, 11.
[59] Thiesten, *Churches of Christ*, 1.
[60] Thiesten, *Churches of Christ*, 2.

also prepared socially so that they would be expected to fit into mid-20th-century Malawian society.[61]

The Context in Which Mission Schools Operated in the Past

The Political Situation

Before independence Malawi was called Nyasaland and it was under the British protectorate. During this British colonial rule the political landscape was associated with indirect rule such that African political participation was very minimal. Political power was in the hands of the colonial governor and European settlers who worked with the local chiefs and traditional leaders. During this era, Africans were not allowed to vote and political associations were restricted or banned. After independence in 1964, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, a beneficiary of mission schools, became the first president and dominant political figure. The political environment was marked by fear, surveillance and suppression of free speech.[62]

The Role of Mission Schools

Pre-Independence

During the colonial rule mission schools were the primary source of education for Africans. The mission schools educated the early elite who led the independence movement against a restrictive colonial regime. Even though the missionaries pioneered the education, the curriculum was controlled by the British government, forcing the missionaries to remain loyal to the colonial administration.

Post-Independence

When Kamuzu Banda became the president, the government controlled education such that mission schools ceased to work autonomously. Instead, they came under strict state regulations; they operated under an authoritarian one-party state. Even the curriculum was adjusted to emphasise loyalty to the state and to the political party. Students were also expected to show respect to the president and the Malawi Congress Party. While mission schools

[61] Thiesten, 4.
[62] Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi*, 25.

continued to provide education, it was within a tightly controlled political environment.[63]

Church State Relationship

The relationship between the church, the mission schools, and the government was complex, ranging from initial support and mutual support to open tension and persecution as Banda's regime became more oppressive. Throughout both the colonial era and the Banda regime, political expression was strongly constrained. Initially several religious leaders supported Banda, seeing him as a unifying leader. However, things changed as his regime became more repressive.[64] Under his leadership, any form of political dissent from religious leaders or educators was dangerous.

Even so, the legacy of mission schools in Malawi is deeply intertwined with the country's political history because the mission schools were instrumental in creating the educated class that fought for independence, even though the schools had to navigate the challenges of the colonial government and later the authoritarian Banda regime.

The Current Situation of Mission Schools

All the denominations describe above have mission schools to this day. These schools have grown, not only in number, but also in terms of impact on society. Roman Catholic mission schools are among the best in Malawi in terms of academic performance. They consistently score higher than both their fellow mission schools and public schools. They are followed by Presbyterian (CCAP) schools and then Seventh Day Adventist schools. During personal interviews with the following general secretaries: Rev. Brian Kamwendo of CCAP Nkhoma Synod, Rev. Dr. William Tembo of CCAP Livingstonia Synod, Rev. Anderson Juma of CCAP Blantyre Synod, Fr. Samuel Malamulo of the Roman Catholic Church, and Dr. Rubani of the SDA, all agreed on that reason way Malawian parents prefer mission schools against public schools. They said its mainly because of character and discipline. Mission schools, beside academic

[63] Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi*, 112.
[64] Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi*, 206.

excellence, are also serious about moral behaviour. Hence, they produce students who are academically sound and morally good.

Currently, there is a very good relationship and mutual agreement between the mission schools and the Malawian government. For example, in some mission schools, the mission provides the infrastructure while the government provides teachers and books. These schools are called grant-aided. Both mission schools and public schools are supervised by the same government agency, the National Council for Higher Education.

The Significance and Impact of Mission Schools To Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063 are hinged on improving human lives; protecting the environment; balancing economic and social life; ending poverty and hunger; helping people realise their full potential in dignity, health, and equality; fostering peace, justice, and freedom from fear and violence; enjoying a prosperous life; and developing partnership and solidarity. None of these SDGs can be achieved in Africa without the contribution of the mission schools because the success of these goals is rooted in the foundation of education, which is also one of the pillars of Agenda 2063. The champion of education in Africa is none other than the church, which is the custodian of the mission schools and thus very instrumental towards the achievement of the 2030 SDGs and Agenda and 2063.

Mission schools have satisfactorily built individuals into responsible citizens with good character and skills that are useful to society. Being educated is one thing; having an education with good character is another. Malawi as a nation does not just need educated people to achieve the 2030 SDGs and to attain the vision of Agenda 2063. It needs educated people who have good character, and the mission schools are best placed to do that.

Malawian mission schools create opportunities for the marginalised and reinforce advantages for the relatively privileged. For example, in 1895, the

Overtoun Institute created jobs for 1,200 labourers. The number increased to 3,500 by 1903.[65] It has increased tremendously to date.

The 2030 SDGS want to realise people's full potential in dignity, health, and equality. None of these can be realised if a person is still dependent on another person. It is not until one gains independence that full dignity, health, and equality can be realised. They are only attained only when you have your own means of earnings, either through working or through business. By creating opportunities for the marginalised and less privileged, mission schools contribute towards the achievement of the 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063.

Ross claims that mission schools have helped to bring the sense of unity and true peace among those who were once great enemies.[66] As Livingstone explains, before mission schools, the regions of Malawi were divided along ethnic lines, but after the establishment of the mission schools, all of the students were brought together.[67] Mission schools in Malawi are interdenominational and intercultural. Thus friendships have developed regardless of the region or religion from which one comes. These friendships have even led to intermarriages, which have, in the long run, fostered unity and peace—aspects which are key to the realisation of 2030 SDGs.

Mission schools have also facilitated the introduction of political reforms and African social identities through their curriculum. In these schools, students were and are still learning courses like political science, liberal theology, psychology, philosophy, and English, which are eye-openers to those who were once considered illiterate. These courses politically motivate students, teachers, and the local community and also help them realise their God-given human rights. These courses equipped people with the knowledge and instruments necessary to fight for their rights against any attitudes that demean or oppress Malawians to the extent that they cannot realise their dreams.[68]

[65] Livingstone, *Laws of Livingstonia*, 198.
[66] Ross, *Christianity in Malawi*, 35.
[67] Livingstone, *Laws of Livingstonia*, 188.
[68] Kiruki, *Women's Liberation*, 7.

Mission schools are also offering nursing programs as well as post-graduate programs in science. These are highly motivating health care services. The attainment of healthy lives and well-being is one of the 2030 SDGs and a key component of Agenda 2063. Without good health care services, these goals cannot be achieved. Mission school education in nursing and their advanced degrees prepare students to work alongside others to achieve sustainable development in the health care sector.

The 2030 SDGs will also only be attained through the development of skills, something for which the mission schools are well-known. For example, since 1876 Blantyre mission schools have been offering integrated technical education intended to produce skilled workers for both the church and the community. The mission has produced many carpenters, bricklayers, printers, shoemakers, agriculturalists, and domestic workers. Development of these skills make people self-reliant.

The establishment of mission schools has also improved agriculture, which in turn has helped people have sustainable development in their respective homes. The 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063 both talk about ending poverty and hunger. A primary reason why the mission schools teach about agriculture is to impart the knowledge and skills necessary to end hunger.

Mission schools are also highly recommended for graduating students with integrity and moral values. Livingstone says that "the good reputation of the boys and girls spread far such that even governments, planters, and merchants offered them jobs as soon as they finished their training."[69] There is a Chewa proverb which says, *Khalidwe liposa chuma*, which means "good character is more important than money". Mission school students gain good character and self-respect. The 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063 are achievable only when their implementers are God-fearing and trustworthy, people with integrity and good morals. A nation whose citizens are involved in stealing, corruption, backbiting, laziness, and the like cannot achieve any of the 2030 SDGs. Therefore, the mission schools as incubators of character, remain the backbone and the enabler of 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063.

[69] Livingstone, *Laws of Livingstonia*, 198.

The challenges confronted by the 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063 can mainly be addressed by the mission schools. For example, the challenge of environmental degradation can be mitigated by following agricultural rules of land preservation, which the mission schools offer in one of its courses. The challenge of poverty and inequality is dealt with through inclusion of both girls and boys in the enrolment of students in these mission schools. There is a local saying, *ukaphunzitsa mwana wa nkazi waphunzitsa mudzi wonse*, means "when you teach a girl child, you have educated the whole clan". Population growth and resource depletion are other challenges which mission schools have the potential of dealing with it. Graduates from the mission schools are conversant in resource management. The schools offer courses in nursing that also address issues of family planning. For these reasons, the Malawian Government has no other option but to vehemently support the mission schools if it is indeed serious in attaining the 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063.

Challenges and Limitations of Mission Schools

Just as challenges are everywhere, so even the mission schools have not been spared. Below are some of their challenges and limitations.

Unequal opportunity to education between boys and girls: Unequal access to education due to gender disparity results in unequal human capital between men and women. In most African Schools, which is also true of mission schools, there are still more boys than girls.[70] For example, in 1943 only 13% of the student population were girls.[71] Not only was access to education unequally shared between the sexes, but also the nature of the school curriculum was markedly different for boys and girls.[72] Boys, apart from literacy, arithmetic, and Bible study, also learned vocational skills such as carpentry and masonry which prepared them for wage employment. But for girls, "beside basic literacy and numeracy [the schools] also emphasised domestic skills with the goal of marriage and motherhood."[73] Consequently, women became practically excluded from employment in the labour market. As a result,

[70] Reichmuth, "Islamic Learning", 45-46.
[71] Musisi, "Colonial and Missionary Education."
[72] Musisi, "Colonial and Missionary Education," 188; Leach, "African Girls," 340.
[73] Musisi, "Colonial and Missionary Education," 190.

demand by parents for their daughters education diminished as it yielded no visible economic advantage.

Financial Problems: Most of the mission schools that were sponsored and run by missionaries are now experiencing financial problems. Most missionaries left and handed over the churches and schools to the local people, who are struggling to support the schools financially. Staff members are sometimes not paid their monthly salaries for several months or, if they are paid, only receive half-salaries. This directly or indirectly impacts the effectiveness of teaching and the performance of the students. For this reason, the government is encouraged to support these schools. Failure to do so will have a negative impact on the process of achieving sustainable development. Of late, the Malawian government has tried to assist some church schools, whereby the church provides the buildings while the government provides teachers, salaries, and textbooks. These schools are called grant-aided.

Inadequate staff members: Most of the mission schools do not have enough qualified staff members. This is mainly a result of insufficient funds for salaries. Having qualified teachers demands increased salaries. The inadequacy of more qualified teachers jeopardises the standards of education offered to students. Consequently, the nation may end up having unqualified graduates with very minimal impact on sustainable development.

Old Buildings: Most of the mission school buildings are very old. Some are as old as one hundred years. The buildings that were built and left by the early missionaries are still being used for classes and teacher houses today. This is a risk to both the students' and teachers' lives because they can collapse at any time. If these institutions are struggling to support their staff members financially, how much more are they struggling to maintain adequate infrastructure?

Insufficient textbooks: Most mission schools do not have enough or updated textbooks. Unfortunately, the Malawian government, which is supposed to provide these books, is also struggling to provide books to its own schools. If the government and grant-aided schools are struggling to have sufficient books, how much more will these self-supporting mission schools also

struggle? Unfortunately, even the few books that are mostly in these schools, their libraries are also outdated.

Conclusion

The study has established and discussed various aspects of mission schools. Their presence cannot go unnoticed among the contemporary generation. The study has covered the history and the impact of mission schools on sustainable development, the context in which mission schools operated, current situation of mission schools, challenges and limitations of mission schools. The first missionaries had a passion for helping the indigenous people acquire some knowledge and skills. This was well achieved, thus one cannot talk about the 2030 SDGs and Agenda 2063 without mentioning the impact of these schools. Their main outstanding achievements and contributions have been highlighted, including ending poverty and hunger, fostering peace and justice, providing a prosperous life, and blending academic information, skill development, and the cultivation of good character. Mission schools have also created opportunities for the marginalised to go to school and reinforced advantages for the relatively privileged. They have brought unity and peace among the students, facilitated the introduction of political reforms and African social identities through their curriculum, produced committed people in health care services, and improved agriculture which has, in turn, helped people come sustainable in their own homes.

Despite these remarkable achievements and contributions, the mission schools have also faced several challenges that have affected their performance. Issues like unequal opportunity to education between boys and girls, financial problems, inadequate staff members, old buildings, and insufficient textbooks. As such, the Malawian government is encouraged to support these institutions by providing qualified teachers, adequate salaries, and updated textbooks. Despite these challenges, the mission schools still have great potential to continue contributing towards the achievement of the 2030 SDGs and the realisation of Agenda 2063.

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Evangelism in the Digital Age: Social Media as an Effective Tool for Missions in African Churches

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication has transformed the context in which Christian mission is carried out, presenting both opportunities and challenges for evangelism in African churches. While traditional methods of evangelism remain valuable, they are increasingly complemented by digital platforms that enable broader and more immediate engagement with diverse audiences. This study examines social media as an effective tool for missions within African churches, arguing that its effectiveness depends not merely on technological adoption but on its integration within a biblically grounded, contextually relevant, and theologically informed missiological framework. In order to achieve this, the study employs a qualitative research methodology to engage missiological literature alongside selected examples of African churches that utilise social media for evangelistic ministry. The findings indicate that social media provides significant opportunities for gospel proclamation, discipleship, community formation, and outreach beyond geographical boundaries. However, its effectiveness requires sound theological grounding, strategic content development, digital literacy, and integration with traditional forms of evangelism rather than their replacement. The study concludes that social media should be understood not simply as a communication technology but as a contemporary mission tool through which African churches can participate more effectively in the Missio Dei while remaining faithful to the Church's biblical mandate.

Introduction

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) lies at the heart of Christianity and defines the identity and occupation of the church. As observed by David Bosch, mission did not originate from human initiative, but from God's redemptive purpose for the world, accomplished through Jesus Christ and continued by the Holy Spirit. The Church does not have its own mission; rather, it participates in God's mission by proclaiming the gospel, making disciples, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God among all peoples.[1] While the content of the gospel remains the same, the methods through which it is communicated continually adapt to changing historical, cultural, and technological contexts. Throughout Christian history, the Church has used the communication media available in each generation, from oral proclamation and handwritten manuscripts to the printing press, radio, television, and the internet to fulfil Christ's great commission (Matt. 28:18–20). The advent of digital media should therefore be understood not as a deviation from the Church's missionary mandate, but as the present media in which the unchanging gospel is proclaimed.

The twenty-first century has witnessed a groundbreaking transformation in human communication through digital technologies and social media. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok, and Telegram have fundamentally reshaped how individuals communicate, form relationships, access information, and engage in social and religious life. As evangelism naturally is communicative, these developments have inevitably influenced the church's missionary practice. Digital platforms have created opportunities for churches to proclaim the gospel beyond geographical limitations, engage diverse audiences, facilitate discipleship, and cultivate communities of faith within virtual spaces. Consequently, social media should not be viewed as simply a communication technology but as a contemporary mission context that needs serious theological and missiological reflection.

Within Africa, this digital transformation has occurred alongside remarkable growth in mobile phone ownership, internet accessibility, and social media participation, particularly among young people. Although challenges relating to digital infrastructure, affordability, and unequal access remain, digital

[1] Bosch, *Transforming Missions*, 389ff.

communication has become completely inserted in everyday life across much of the continent. Some African churches are incorporating social media into their evangelistic ministries through live streamed worship services, online Bible studies, digital prayer meetings, pastoral counselling, and other forms of virtual engagement.[2] These developments shows that digital media has become an important platform through which some churches explore to fulfil their missionary calling in contemporary African society.

Despite this growing adoption, significant theological and missiological questions remain. While many churches celebrate social media as an effective platform for evangelism, others question whether online ministry can sufficiently nurture the genuine Christian community, discipleship, and pastoral accountability. Critics warn that digital ministry may encourage monetisation, fame chasing, doctrinal compromise, and shallow expressions of faith when numerical popularity determines ministerial success. On the other hand, advocates argue that refusing to engage digital platforms risks ignoring a very important sphere of human interaction where millions of people around the world live, communicate, and search for meaning. These contrasting perspectives shows that the central issue is no longer whether African churches should engage social media but how they can do so faithfully and effectively within the framework of God's mission.

Although scholarship on digital religion and African Christianity has expanded considerably in recent years, much of the existing literature has concentrated either on the opportunities presented by digital technologies or on the ethical and theological concerns arising from their use. There is not much research that provides a biblical and mission-based model for judging whether social media is helping African churches fulfil their mission effectively. Furthermore, discussions of effectiveness often focuses on digital metrics such as number of

[2] Examples of some African churches using social media to preach the gospel are Streams of Joy pastored by Pst. Jerry Eze (Nigeria), Enlightened Christian Gathering pastored by Prophet Shepherd Bushiri (Malawi), Koinonia pastored by Apostle Joshua Selman (Nigeria), Christ Embassy pastored by Dr. Chris Oyakhilome (Nigeria), Living Faith Church Worldwide pastored by Bishop David Oyedepo (Nigeria), Redeemed Christian Church of God pastored by Pst. Enoch Adeboye (Nigeria), Kingsway International Christian Centre pastored by Matthew Ashimolowo (Nigeria), Mike Okoronkwo of the Redeemed Evangelical Mission, and Bimbo Odukoya of the Fountain of Life Church.

followers, online visibility, likes, views, and engagement, while paying little attention to theological criteria such as faithful gospel proclamation, authentic discipleship, spiritual formation, and participation in the *missio Dei*. Consequently, an important gap remains in understanding how the effectiveness of social media for mission should be evaluated from a biblical and missiological perspective.

This study addresses that gap by examining social media through an integrated conceptual framework that brings together three perspectives. First, *missio Dei* provides the theological foundation by tracing evangelism within God's redemptive mission rather than within technological development or church expansion. Secondly, contextualisation confirms that while the gospel message remains unchanged, the methods through which it is communicated should respond appropriately to changing cultural and technological contexts. Third, the study understands effectiveness not simply in quantitative terms but as the faithful communication of the gospel that leads to authentic discipleship, spiritual growth, and meaningful participation in the life and mission of the Church. These interconnected concepts provide the lens through which social media is evaluated throughout this study.

Accordingly, this paper argues that social media effectiveness for mission in African churches is not determined by use of technology or digital popularity but by merging it within a biblically grounded, contextually appropriate, and theologically informed missiological framework that augments rather than replaces traditional methods of evangelism. Social media is therefore understood not merely as a technological development but as a contemporary mission field in which African churches are called to engage faithfully and strategically in God's redemptive mission.

To investigate this argument, the study employs a qualitative research methodology based primarily on documentary analysis. It critically engages biblical, theological, and missiological literature alongside scholarly studies on digital religion, media, and African Christianity. In addition, selected examples of African churches that have incorporated social media into their evangelistic ministries are examined as illustrative case studies to demonstrate contemporary practices and emerging trends. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study adopts an interpretive approach aimed at developing theological understanding and missiological insight.

The study is subject to several methodological limitations. First, because it is based primarily on documentary research, findings depend solely on the scope and quality of the available literature rather than empirical fieldwork. Second, the discussion focuses primarily on African churches, particularly with examples from Nigeria, and therefore does not claim universal relevance to all religious contexts. Third, the selected case studies are not intended to provide empirical evidence for all expression of online ministry across Africa but to illustrate broader developments. Finally, the study evaluates effectiveness primarily through theological and missiological criteria rather than quantitative indicators such as conversion rates, church membership growth, or social media analytics.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study contributes to contemporary missiological scholarship by proposing an integrated framework for evaluating social media as a tool for mission within African churches. It demonstrates that digital evangelism should neither be uncritically celebrated nor categorically rejected. Rather, when grounded in biblical theology, guided by sound missiological principles, and practiced with intentionality and contextual sensitivity, social media can serve as an effective complementary instrument through which African churches faithfully participate in the ongoing mission of God in the digital age.

Evangelism and Its Importance in Christianity

Evangelism lies at the centre of the Christian faith. The word evangelism is derived from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means "good news," specifically the good news of Jesus Christ.[3] Evangelism is the act of preaching the gospel to individuals and communities. It is the means through which the great commission is carried out and people come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for humanity. As the proclamation of the gospel, evangelism has shaped the mission and identity of Christianity since the early church. It is the primary and permanent task given to the church without which the church ceases to exist.[4]

[3] Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World,*18.
[4] Ogunewu, "The Church and Effective Evangelization," 67

The biblical foundation of evangelism is seen in the great commission, where Jesus commanded His disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19-20). Over the years, there have been debates questioning the great commission as the basis for missions for the generations after the Apostles. According to C. R. Stam, the great commission was a command meant only for the eleven Apostles to carry out after Jesus's ascension. It is not to be carried out by any other generation at a later time.[5] He argues that the great commission for this dispensation was not the one Jesus gave His disciples, but the one spoken by the Apostle Paul, the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21.[6] Contra Stam, Jerram Barrs argues that, the command was not only given to the Church for that period of time but for generations to come, especially because Jesus used the phrase, "I will be with you to the end of the age" in Matthew 28: 20. He suggests that the Church in every age is called to participate in the great commission.[7] Ogunewu also suggests that Jesus' command to his disciples was a tool he gave for the expansion of the church from generation to generation.[8] Whether the great commission is that which Jesus gave or the ministry of reconciliation described by Paul, one thing remains clear, the church has been saddled with the responsibility of preaching the good news to the world for unbelievers to come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Consequently evangelism is how the church participates in the *missio Dei*.

Any discussion of evangelism within the Christian context would be incomplete without considering its importance First, evangelism demonstrates believers' commitment to God's redemptive plan for humanity and reflects their faith and obedience to his Word. By proclaiming the gospel, Christians obey Christ's command and participate in his mission of bringing salvation to the world. Furthermore, evangelism serves as a catalyst for church growth. Throughout history, the church has expanded primarily through the proclamation of the gospel as new believers have been added to its fellowship and communities have experienced spiritual transformation. Evangelism remains one of the primary means through which God continues to build his church. Finally, evangelism has played a major role in shaping values, promoting education,

[5] Stam, *Our Great Commission*, 17.
[6] Stam, *Our Great Commission*, 66
[7] Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism*, 37-38
[8] Ogunewu, "The Church and Effective Evangelization," 67

advancing social justice, and encouraging peace and reconciliation globally. It is through evangelism that some African countries like Nigeria got access to education, medicine, freedom from slavery, and even the prohibition of the gruesome killing of twins.

Evangelism in the 21st Century and the Need for Innovative Evangelism

In the twenty-first century, evangelism has continued to improve with more mission bodies being established, more missionaries being sent out to the fields, more gospel materials (Bibles, tracts and Jesus films) being translated into different languages around the world, making it possible for the gospel message to be preached in many countries. Despite all these advances, according to the Joshua Project, only 43.5% of the world's population has been reached with the gospel so far.[9] Ogunewu observes that although evangelism has achieved significant success, it continues to face major challenges including religious hostility, demographic shifts, and competing non-Christian religious movements and ideologies.[10] Pakpahan et al suggests that secularisation and rapid technological change have transformed how people receive and respond to the gospel.[11]

Ogunewu observed that historically evangelism in Africa has been primarily rooted in traditional methods. These methods include missionary activities, mass evangelisation, evangelistic preaching, evangelistic counselling, Sunday school evangelisation, and media evangelisation.[12] These approaches proved particularly effective during the colonial and post-colonial eras when African societies were predominantly oral and communally structured. Lamin Sanneh argues that the indigenisation of the gospel in Africa was made possible through missionaries who translated the Bible and communicated Christian teachings in culturally relevant ways.[13] This helps explain why these traditional methods achieved considerable success during that period.

[9] https://joshuaproject.net/
[10] Ogunewu, "The Church and Effective Evangelization," 73-76.
[11] Pakpahan et. Al, *Social Media and Contextual Evangelism*, 119.
[12] Ogunewu, "The Church and Effective Evangelization," 81.
[13] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 4–7.

While these traditional methods proved effective in their historical context, Scripture does not give a single model of evangelism. Sam Chan argues that Jesus commanded his followers to carry out the great commission but is not establish a one-size-fits-all approach for fulfilling it.[14] That suggests that the church must continually develop evangelistic strategies that are appropriate to the cultural and social contexts of the people.

Over time the church has employed different methods of evangelism, each reflecting the context in which it was practiced. Although traditional methods remain valuable, their effectiveness is influenced by changing cultural realities. Many of these approaches emphasised organised outreach through gospel tracts, witnessing programs, and public evangelistic campaigns, which were highly effective in societies where the Christian worldview was more widely understood or where communal patterns of life encouraged interpersonal engagement.[15] However, as cultures evolve, evangelistic methods must also adapt. Strategies that were effective in one generation may not achieve the same results in another because people's worldviews, lifestyles, and patterns of communication have changed.[16]

This is particularly evident in the twenty-first century. The church now ministers in a rapidly changing environment shaped by technological advancement, urbanisation, youth culture, demographic shifts, and broader cultural transformations. African societies, particularly those in urban centres, are becoming increasingly digitally connected. According to Daniel Slotta, about 570 million Africans use the internet as of 2022, while social media penetration continues to rise, especially among young people.[17] Consequently, traditional evangelistic methods, which rely heavily on physical proximity and analogue communication, are becoming less effective in engaging this digitally oriented generation.

[14] "There is no one size fits all model for our evangelism. We have different audiences with different thinking and learning styles, different socioeconomic groupings, and different existential entry point. So, we should be prepared to engage in a wider variety of models of Evangelism." (Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World,* 41.)
[15] Greenway, "How Should We Then Witness," 91.
[16] Towns, "Changing Paradigms," 157.
[17] Slotta, "Internet Usage in Africa".

The limitation of relying primarily on traditional methods became even more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted public gatherings and face-to-face ministry. Churches that had previously invested in digital technologies adapted quickly, while others experienced significant decline in outreach and participation.[18] Chitando and Gunda observe that "Covid-19 exposed the vulnerabilities of the African church's over-reliance on physical structures and traditional method of engagements."[19] The experience of Covid-19 demonstrated the need for innovation in evangelism by developing approaches that can effectively reach people beyond the physical walls of the church. One such approach is social media evangelism. In supporting the inclusion of social media evangelism, Pakpahan et al argues that social media evangelism should replace the physical evangelism.[20] Online or social media evangelism refers to the use of internet-based platforms such as social media, websites, blogs, video conferencing, podcasts and mobile applications to share the gospel message. In Africa, where mobile-first internet access is increasingly common, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp provide unprecedented opportunities for churches to engage audiences across geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. But to completely replace physical evangelism with social media evangelism appears extreme.

Digital evangelism presents several advantages over traditional methods. These advantages include lower costs, reduced risk, wider geographical reach, the ability to utilise multiple media formats, the capacity to reach entire language groups, convenience, accessibility, the ability to target particular niches, and the ability to explain complex concepts and enhanced credibility.[21] These advantages make digital platforms particularly effective for reaching today's interconnected society.

Despite these advantages, online evangelism should complement rather than replace traditional methods. Pakpahan et al advocate replacing physical evangelism entirely with online evangelism, a position that appears extreme. On the contrary, Towns argues that since the traditional method was effective

[18] World Council of Churches, "Churches Respond to COVID-19".
[19] Chitando and. Gunda, *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Africa*, 121.
[20] Pakpahan et al., *Social Media and Effective Evangelism*, 119
[21] Nsereka and Nwanze, "Evangelism in the Era of New Media," 645.

during a period, it shows that it can still be effective. However, it is important to note that the church must use methods available in every generation.[22]

While online evangelism provides broader reach and greater accessibility, it does not fully facilitate the deep personal relationships and deep meaningful face-to-face engagement that traditional evangelism promoted. Likewise, traditional evangelism alone cannot adequately reach many people, and cannot collaborate with mission bodies around the world who primarily interact within digital spaces. Therefore, integrating both approaches enables the church to maximise its outreach while preserving the strengths of each method. Ultimately, the message of the gospel remains unchanged, even though the methods of communicating it must continue to evolve. As technology advances and digital communication increasingly shapes everyday life, the church must adapt its evangelistic strategies if it is to engage future generations effectively. Rather than viewing traditional and online evangelism as competing approaches, the church should employ them side by side, creating a balanced and complementary model of evangelism that faithfully proclaims the gospel while responding to the realities of the twenty-first century.

Social Media: A Transformational Communication Tool

In the twenty-first century few innovations have had as profound an impact on human interaction as social media. What began as simple platforms for connecting friends and family have evolved into a global phenomenon that shapes how people communicate, learn, conduct business, and even practice their faith. Social media is a web-based tool for interaction that, in addition to facilitating conversations, allow users to create and share other contents such as photos, videos and links to resources. Unlike traditional media, social media encourages two-way communication, allowing users to interact with content and with one another rather than merely receiving information. This interactive nature has made it an influential medium for communication across different sectors of society. Some religious organisations view social media as a tool that can be used to spread the gospel.

[22]Towns, "Changing Paradigms," 159.

Although social media has been in existence since late 1990s, it gained recognition and a certain level of influence in the twentieth century, following rapid changes in technology.[23] The invention of blogging sites in the early 2000s led to the popularity of social media. These platforms were given recognition in 2006 when Facebook and Twitter were made available and accessible to users globally.[24] Since then social media platforms has continued to evolve. While platforms such as Facebook and YouTube continue to maintain global influence, some, like Flickr and Myspace, waned, and others, like Xanga, have gradually disappeared. At the same time, new social media platforms continue to emerge, showing the dynamic nature of digital communication.[25]

van Dijck enumerates different types of social media platforms: social network sites, user-generated content, trading and marketing sites, and play and game sites.[26] This classification is not exhaustive because there are many other categories. The major sites this research focuses on are social network and user-generated content sites, which are mainly sites where sociality and creativity thrive, making these platforms a better option for social media evangelism.

The rapid growth of internet-enabled smartphones has played a significant role in expanding the use of social media across the world.[27] Increased availability and accessibility of these smart phones and affordable internet access have enabled billions of people from diverse parts of the world to participate actively in one or more social media platforms. Consequently, social media has evolved from being just a technological trend to an essential medium for communication.

Today, social media platforms extend beyond entertainment and personal updates. Governments, businesses, non-profits, and religious institutions all use these platforms to communicate with their audience. Their ability to provide instant access to information, facilitate interaction, and encourage

[23] Drew, "Complete History of Social Media," 1.
[24] Drew, "Complete History of Social Media," 2.
[25] van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity,* 8.
[26] van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity,* 8.
[27] Poushter, Bishop, and Chwe,"Social Media Use Continues to Rise," 7.

active participation has transformed the way individuals and organisations communicate. As a result, social media has become one of the most influential communication tools in contemporary society.

Despite its widespread use and many benefits, social media presents both opportunities and challenges.

Challenges

Generally, social media has had a positive impact on communication over the years; however, it is not without challenges. According to Agbawe, some scholars argue that social media has brought about significant opportunities that have led to transformation in societies and advancement in communication, but it has also brought about challenges affecting societies.[28]

One significant challenge is misinformation. Ling Hang observes that through these social media platforms, wrong information or fake news can easily spread like wildfire due to the ease of sharing content across platforms such as Facebook and Twitter which has caused more harm than good in the real world.[29] Another challenge is addiction. Social media, if not properly checked, can easily be addictive, affecting the productivity of individuals.[30] This addiction can expose them to different content, both those considered as healthy and unhealthy.

Cyberbullying also is of major concern. The anonymity and accessibility social media provides can encourage harassment, trolling and abusive behaviours online. People can easily harass others on social media which may damage reputations, emotional distress, and in extreme cases lead to depression and suicide. Privacy and data security are also a challenge because personal data are often collected on these social media platforms, and most times these data shared online can pose as a threat if misused or obtained by the wrong people. This raises concern because it can lead to scandals and breach of privacy.[31]

[28] Agbawe, "Challenges and Prospects of Social Media," 18-32.
[29] Hang, "The Impact of Social Media," 2.
[30] Agbawe, "Challenge and Prospects of Social Media," 28.
[31] Hang, "The Impact of Social Media," 2.

Advantages

Despite the challenges enumerated above, social media offers different advantages that have transformed modern communication. One of its greatest strengths is ability to reach wider audiences from different communities, states, countries, and continents at the same time. Social media transcends physical boundaries. Nona Jones describes social media as the "digital public square" emphasising that unlike the traditional public square it is not restricted by location or time; instead, it makes enables people around the world to interact with shared content.[32] Another major advantage is the speed through which information is communicated. News, educational resources, scientific discoveries, employment opportunities, sporting events, and other forms of information can be shared and accessed almost immediately by users around the world.

Unlike many traditional forms of communication, social media promotes two-way interaction rather than one-way communication. Users can respond to content by commenting, asking questions, sharing posts and participating in online communities. Such an interactive environment encourages dialogue, collaboration, and strong relationships between content creators and their audiences.

Another advantage is the permanence and accessibility of digital content. Information shared on social media platforms can easily be retrieved through online searches. Consequently, messages can continue reaching new audiences long after they were originally published. An additional advantage is that social media is cost effective compared to traditional media. Research by Bocala-Wiedemann shows that social media is not just accessible, but also free, fast and convenient to make and share posts.[33] This is particularly beneficial for churches and Christian organisations that may not have the resources to utilise more expensive forms of media for evangelism.

These characteristics make social media a particularly valuable platform for contemporary Christian evangelism. Its global reach, interactive nature,

[32] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, 39.
[33] Bocala-Wiedemann, "Social Media as a Tool," 29

accessibility, permanence, and cost-effectiveness provide churches with unprecedented opportunities to proclaim the gospel beyond geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, the church must also navigate challenges such as misinformation, cyberbullying, and privacy concerns to ensure that these platforms are used responsibly, ethically, and effectively in fulfilling the great commission.

The African Church and Social Media

As technology continues to evolve, the African church faces an important decision: whether to resist digital technologies because of their perceived risks or to embrace them as strategic tools for evangelism. Given the increasing influence of digital communication on contemporary society, the church cannot afford to ignore the opportunities that technology presents for proclaiming the gospel. The digital age is characterised by technology and media. Technology over the years has continued to influence different aspects of human communities and facets of life such as religion, morality and even productivity, solving problems and ensuring improvements. Technology and media are intertwined because it is through technology that media was created. Media is a platform through which communication takes place and information is shared. It has different forms, including print, digital and electronics.

Since Scripture does not give a one-size-fits-all method for evangelism, the church should remain open for contextualisation and innovation in fulfilling the great commission. Nevertheless, some African Christians remain skeptical of social media, viewing it as a secular or even morally compromising space. Heidi Campbell confirms that while these concerns are valid, they should not discourage engagement. Instead, they should call for theological reflection and ethical practice in the digital realm.[34] Instead of rejecting digital platforms because of their misuse, the church should focus on how they can be used responsibly to faithfully preach the gospel and fulfil its calling as the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:16).

The African church's engagement with technology should therefore be intentional rather than indifferent. Nyarko observes that although digital

[34] Campbell, *Digital Religion,* 56–58.

platforms are often associated with immoral or harmful content, the platforms themselves are not inherently evil. Rather, their impact depends on how they are used. Nyarko argues that if the church withdraws completely from these digital spaces, it risks surrendering valuable opportunities to positively influence society with biblical values and the message of the gospel.[35] Consequently, the challenge before the African church is not whether technology should be used, but how it can be used wisely, ethically, and effectively for evangelism.

Encouragingly, many churches in urban areas across Africa are fully exploring social media platforms for evangelism. Some churches now livestream their services, conduct online Bible studies, publish devotional materials, interact with followers, share gospel messages through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. Well known examples include Redeemed Christian Church of God (@rccgworldwide), Dunamis Intternational Gospel Centre (@DunamisGospel), Streams of Joy International (@streamsofjoyinternational), Loveworld (@loveworld.globalfellowship), and Koinonia (@koinonia)—all of which maintain active digital ministries that extend their outreach beyond the physical walls of the church.

Despite these encouraging developments, the adoption of digital evangelism remains uneven across Africa. Haruna Akebok observes that urban churches generally adopt digital ministry more readily than rural churches because of the digital divide. He explained that many rural communities continue to experience limited internet connectivity, inadequate technological infrastructure, and reduced access to digital devices. In addition, digital literacy tends to be lower in many rural areas, making the implementation of online evangelistic strategies more challenging.[36]

While some churches have embraced and taken advantage of social media platforms to win more souls, disciple and update their members, extend their membership beyond their geographical location, preach the gospel, and share their church activities to mass audience, many African churches encounter significant obstacles that hinder their full engagement with social media. Beyond infrastructural challenges, many African churches also encounter

[35] Nyarko, "The Church, Digital Technology and Media," 6
[36] Akebok, "The Role of Social Media," 117.

institutional and cultural barriers that hinder their effective use of social media. Some of these challenges include dependence on foreign technologies, unstable electricity supply, poor network infrastructure, limited digital literacy, inadequate availability of quality Christian content, and concerns about online criticism or cancel culture. [37]

In addition to these institutional barriers, digital platforms present several ethical and practical challenges. These include cyberbullying, the spread of false information, online incivility, pornography, sexting, cyber fraud, and excessive use of social media. Such concerns have led some Christians to regard social media as a secular space unsuitable for evangelism.[38] However these risks should not result in complete rejection of digital platforms by the church. Rather, they highlight the need for responsible digital engagement, sound theological guidance, and appropriate digital literacy within the church.

Although significant challenges remain the growing adoption of social media by African churches demonstrates that these obstacles are not insurmountable. With intentional investment in digital infrastructure, improved digital literacy, ethical online practices, and sound theological reflection, the African church can effectively integrate technology into its evangelistic mission. Rather than replacing traditional methods of evangelism, digital media should serve as a complementary tool that enables the church to proclaim the unchanging gospel in ways that are relevant and accessible to contemporary society.

Opportunities for Evangelism through Social Media

Social media does not only have negative influence on its users like some suggest. It also presents unparalleled evangelism opportunities for the church. It is not the platform that is the problem, but how it is been used. Pakpahan et al give the possibilities and opportunities presented to the church by social media for evangelism as follows:

1. Privacy and confidentiality in sharing of information.

[37] Ojeifo, "The Church, Social Media, and Politics," *84-85*
[38] Bocala-Wiedemann, "Social Media as a Tool," 27.

2. The gospel can be preached with no time or location limitation.
3. It presents opportunity for establishing relationships, communication, and conduct discussions without being limited by time or place.
4. It makes rooms for hosting meetings without having to be present physically.
5. It gives access to wider audience.
6. Youth can easily be accessed through these platforms.
7. It makes information available quickly and precisely reaching places and people. Therefore, it could extend the reach of the church and propagate the message of the gospel beyond the four walls of the church, beyond physical meetings and physical barriers across different countries, including the unreached in closed countries.
8. Through groups, relationships and conversations online, the church has the opportunity to disciple and mentor people they have never met or might never get the opportunity to reach without the help of social media.
9. Different types of videos can be posted and accessed by wider audience.
10. There are different formats which contents can be posted such as text, images, sounds, animations and other multimedia data.[39]

One of the churches that have leveraged on these opportunities is Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). The church has a Facebook page with over 28k followers where they post sermons and prayers. From audience engagements, one can see impacts of the sermons and prayers posted on their pages. Since social media impacts are seen through comments, likes, shares, engagement and followership, it is evident that RCCG are having positive impact on followers. Apart from the RCCG Sermon and Prayers Facebook page, some branches of the Church also have their pages where they post sermons, church activities, post program invites, and prayers across social media.

[39] Pakpahan et al, *Social Media and Effective Evangelism*, 121-122.

The digital space is not without challenges, as we have seen, but the ability of the African church to find ways through these challenges, to change their attitude towards social media, and to adopt the numerous opportunities provided by these platforms will increase her effectiveness in fulfilling her mission.

Effective Strategies for Social Media Evangelism

Bocala-Wiedemann observes that simply having a presence on social media does not guarantee effective evangelism.[40] Rather, the effectiveness of social media evangelism largely depends on the quality and faithfulness of content produced, the strategic use of the social media platforms, meaningful audience engagement, and a clear understanding of how these platforms work. Therefore, churches seeking to adopt social media evangelism must be intentional and strategic. Effectiveness for the church should not be measured by online followership or visibility but by the extent to which engagements shows that the gospel is faithfully communicated, discipleship takes place, and the church's work continues to advance the *missio Dei*.

One of the most important principles of effective social media evangelism is creating biblically faithful and contextually relevant content. While engaging visuals, short-form media, infographics, and other available multimedia formats are effective in attracting the younger audiences that dominate these platforms, the church's primary concern should not be audience attention alone. Rather created content should faithful communicate the gospel and lead to repentance, discipleship, and spiritual growth.

Pakpahan et al opined that much of the content on social media produced by Christian influencers focuses more on personal branding and appearance than on the transformative power of the gospel.[41] Therefore, African churches must be careful not to make the desire for engagement surpass the purpose of sharing the gospel. Instead, engagement should be the vehicle for communicating the gospel not the end itself.

[40] Bocala-Wiedemann, "Social Media as a Tool," 22.
[41] Pakpahan et al, *Social Media and Effective Evangelism*, 119.

Bocala-Wiedemann suggests that contents such as memes, quotes, facts, and info graphics using short videos or pictures attracts more engagement than other content formats.[42] These formats can serve as valuable tools for evangelism when they are made in such a way that the gospel is proclaimed in clear, relatable, and contextually relevant way. This reflects contextualisation, whereby the unchanging message of the gospel is proclaimed through ways that people from different background or context can easily understand. Churches should produce professional, well edited, high quality content that captures audience attention while still being biblically sound.

Beyond producing quality content, churches should also understand the different characteristics of different social media platforms. Knowing the appropriate platform is essential because each platform attracts different audiences and emphasises different content formats.[43] Just as missionaries adjusted their method of evangelism to different cultural contexts without changing the message of the gospel, African churches must also understand the communication culture of different platforms to effectively proclaim the gospel online..

Nona Jones identified the strength of various social media platforms: YouTube is solely for video content, Instagram is for visual contents, X is more conversationally driven, TikTok is for video sharing, Facebook which is mainly for connection allows for contents in different forms.[44] Other platforms to also consider are WhatsApp and Telegram. African churches should prayerfully choose platforms according to their objectives, audience, and the nature of their message. Platforms analytics, posting schedules, different content formats, and a study of other successful digital ministries will go a long way to ensure success in strategically proclaiming the gospel.

Another important element of effective social media evangelism is the development of a strong online identity known as page persona. Page persona is the church's online identity, which distinguishes the church from others. This is characterised by a unique voice, consistent message, and visual identity. Maintaining a strong online identity demands that the church be actively

[42] Bocala-Wiedemann, "Social Media as a Tool," 29.
[43] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry,* 40.
[44] Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry,* 42-52.

involved with content and followers, maintaining consistency.[45] The persona of the Church should reflect convictions, missionary vision, and commitment to proclaiming the gospel.

There must be authenticity and consistency when it comes to the church and her contents or message. Ensure transparency in the post and share biblically sound messages; be consistent in sticking to a posting schedule and do not compromise but keep your focus on the message, the gospel. Build your brand identity (logos, colours, hash tags) and post consistently on your page to keep your audience updated and in touch. And in order to ensure that you meet the needs of your audience, know your audience, their preferences, pain points and their interests.[46] Knowing all these will help the ensure effective interaction.

Beyond building an online presence through followers, likes, and comments, effective social media evangelism requires nurturing genuine relationships and discipleship. Among the platforms suitable for online evangelism, communities can be formed through Facebook groups, WhatsApp broadcast groups, and live sessions. These communities can facilitate Bible studies, discussions on faith-related issues, prayer requests, testimonies, and responses to questions. In this way, social media becomes more than a broadcasting tool; it becomes a platform for Christian fellowship, spiritual growth, and discipleship.

The effectiveness of social media evangelism should also be evaluated continuously through intentional reflection. Statistics such as views, shares, comments, and reach provides a valuable insight on audience engagement on social media platforms that can help the church strategise better on how to effectively communicate the gospel and interact with the audience. However, these metrics should not be the main measure of success.

As argued throughout this study, effectiveness for the church is measured theologically not technologically. Therefore, the interpretation analytics for the church's social media platform should be interpreted alongside sound biblical interpretation, discipleship, spiritual growth, meaningful Christian online community formation, and the church's involvement in God's mission.

[45] David, "Content Creation," 2.
[46]David, "Content Creation," 2.

When the attention of the church shifts from its primary goal which is faithfully preach the gospel, it risks replacing that goal with online popularity and monetisation. Analytics should be a supporting tool for online mission, not its definition of success.

A practical case study of an African church that has strategically been using social media is Streams of Joy International led by Pastor Jerry Eze. The church's daily online program New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations has consistently had thousands of viewers. According to official analytics given by the ministry, a total of 1,130,665 views through their Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram page and a total reach of 4,531,973 was recorded.[47] This success illustrates the importance of selecting appropriate platforms, maintaining consistency in content production, and fostering continuous audience engagement. These statistics alone do not prove the effectiveness of this platform. Instead, the comments and testimonies of followers show its effectiveness. This is an example of a digital Christian fellowship beyond physical boundaries because people from all over the world participate on this platform.[48]

Ultimately, effective social media evangelism requires more than enthusiasm. It requires knowledge, intentionality, and continuous learning. Church leaders and members who desire to participate in digital evangelism should therefore receive adequate training in theology or Bible interpretation, digital literacy, content creation, audience engagement, online ethics, and the effective use of personal and organisational social media accounts.

Such training will help the church to not merely master technology but to also use it effectively for the proclamation of the gospel. When the church ensures sound theology, contextual sensitivity, and digital competence, social media becomes an effective tool to faithfully carry out the *Missio Dei* in a digital age.

Conclusion

In the digital age where technology and social media continue to shape human communication, the African church must embrace digital evangelism as an

[47] Jerry Uchechukwu Eze, https://www.facebook.com/share/17uWzriSfU/
[48] Streams of Joy International, https://www.facebook.com/share/1MBg4RFiBM/

essential tool for its missionary strategy. Such adoption does not mean changing the message of the gospel, but rather communicating the unchanging message through contextually relevant methods. Social media evangelism should not be viewed as replacing traditional methods but as a complementary approach that enables the church fulfil its mission. The words of the Apostle Paul provides a foundation for this approach: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22). Paul's willingness to use this method without compromising the gospel shows the importance of contextualising evangelism in every generation. In this generation, "all possible means" includes the responsible and intentional use of online platforms.

Social media platforms present the African church with an opportunity to reach diverse audience with the gospel across geographical, cultural, and generational boundaries. It enables the church to engage both believers and unbelievers alike, extending the message of the gospel beyond the walls of the church into homes, offices, schools, and other digital spaces where young people interact daily. However, the effectiveness of online evangelism is not guaranteed simply by maintaining an online presence. Rather, it requires intentional planning, biblically sound and engaging content, strategic use of appropriate platforms, meaningful audience engagement, consistent communication, and a commitment to building authentic online communities that encourage spiritual growth and discipleship.

Finally, this study argues that the effectiveness of social media evangelism is not measured by visibility, audience size, likes, or comments. Rather, it is evaluated by how faithfully the gospel has been proclaimed, how discipleship takes place, how it promotes spiritual growth, and the extent to which the church is actively involved in *missio Dei*. When the African church employs social media evangelism within a biblically grounded, contextually relevant, and theologically informed framework, it becomes more than a communication tool; it becomes an effective contemporary mission tool. Through these platforms the church continues to proclaim the unchanging message of the gospel in a digital world.

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Beyond Prescriptivism: Reimagining Scripture's Role in Christian Counselling for Transformation

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Abstract

Christian counselling invites a hermeneutical approach that is not only faithful to Scripture but theologically sound and psychologically safe. This study is situated within evangelical Christian counselling in South Africa and focuses specifically on how Scripture is interpreted and integrated in counselling practice. Responding to this invitation offers Christian counselling participation in theological discourse that questions whether Christian counselling aligns with sound biblical hermeneutics. This paper argues that misalignment often takes place when counsellors view the Bible as a prescriptive counselling manual, overlooking its deeper message. Further to this, misalignment transpires when Scripture is omitted entirely from counselling sessions.. To avoid both, evangelical Christian counselling must align with hermeneutical training for ethical practice. By centring the Bible as an authority alongside ethically and psychologically safe integrated praxis, Christian counselling can facilitate transformative sessions. The paper conducts a qualitative study using literature analysis, interviews and thematic analysis.

The study aims to offer insights into the faithful integration of Scripture in counselling that is both theologically rigorous and supportive of the client's psychological needs. The primary research questions asks: How might Christian counsellors more faithfully integrate Scripture in transformative Christian counselling praxis? Supporting questions consider prescriptivism, dismissivism, hermeneutics, and the redemptive use of Scripture. The study contributes a practical-

theological framework for faithful, contextually sensitive, and ethically responsible scriptural integration.

Introduction

The debate surrounding the integration of psychology and theology is ongoing and it encourages a healthy tension within Christian counselling. This debate mostly centres on whether counselling should rely on Scripture exclusively or exclude it from counselling completely. Despite these seemingly opposing views, both sides are ultimately hoping for the same thing–healing in Christ. The central problem addressed in this article is that Scripture is often either over-applied in prescriptive ways or under-applied in ways that detach counselling from its Christian theological identity.

This paper explores an approach beyond prescriptivism and dismissivism that is especially significant in the South African context where Christian counselling operates amid religious plurality, trauma, inequality, and complex histories of spiritual authority and harm[1]. The discussion highlights misuse of Scripture and proposes a framework across counsellor, practice, and session. The purpose of this study is to develop a practical-theological account of Scripture's role in Christian counselling that avoids both rigid prescriptivism and functional dismissivism.

In this article, prescriptivism refers to the rigid use of Scripture as if biblical texts function as direct counselling techniques without sufficient attention to genre, context, interpretation, or client complexity. By dismissivism this article refers to the functional minimising, avoidance, or exclusion of Scripture from counselling practice, even where counselling is explicitly Christian. This article is limited to evangelical Christian counselling and does not attempt to represent all Christian traditions, counselling models, or African contexts.

[1] Dames and Dames, "Pastoral Care and Counselling".

What is Christian Counselling and where has the Bible featured up to this point?

The distinction between biblical counselling and Christian counselling is frequently blurred in both conversation and literature, yet they represent fundamentally different approaches. Biblical counselling, as defined by Peteet is,

…a fundamentalist approach to mental illness which, in contending that truth can be known only through revelation in Scripture, rejects mainstream psychology and psychiatry as humanistic, secular, and antithetical to Christianity. Fundamentalist, highly literal interpretations of the Holy Scripture are often reflected in positions on gender roles, divorce, substance use, and domestic violence.[2]

While both biblical and Christian counselling share the goal of guiding individuals from brokenness to wholeness in Christ through the Holy Spirit's transformational work, biblical counselling rejects the integration of psychology with theology[3], whereas Christian counselling embraces it. According to Hull and Romig, Christian counselling operates within a Christian worldview and theological training, integrating psychological and theological principles to provide care not only to believers but also to those outside the faith[4]. Christian counsellors, particularly those with professional training, utilise various therapeutic models from both secular and Christian traditions to support clients' emotional and psychological well-being[5]. Within South Africa, this distinction is especially important because Christian counselling frequently overlaps with pastoral care, ministry practice, and community-based forms of support[6].

[2] Peteet, "Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma," 846.
[3] Johnson argues that the "absolute sufficiency" of Scripture for all mental health concerns in Biblical counselling is not held by everyone in the movement ("A Doxological Necessity," 239).
[4] Hull and Romig, "The Changing Landscape of Christian Counsellor Education," 20.
[5] Blain, "What Is Christian Counseling?"
[6] Dames and Dames, "Pastoral Care and Counselling in Current Times."

For the purposes of this discussion, the definition most aligned with the topic is that of the South African Theological Seminary (SATS), which describes Christian counselling as "a Spirit-led journey alongside people towards healing in Christ and living their God-ordained purpose as redeemed bearers of God's image, flourishing in community"[7]. This definition is adopted because it explicitly names healing in Christ, vocation, community, and spiritual formation, all of which are central to the present study.

What's the Problem?

The problem is not whether Scripture belongs in Christian counselling but how it is interpreted, mediated, and embodied without causing theological distortion or psychological harm. Christian counselling exists where theology and psychology intersect. It is a field that integrates psychological insight with a Christian worldview and theological training. This integration is based on the theological belief that God is the Creator of all truth. Thus, properly understood science does not oppose his divine purposes. Psychology, approached with discernment, can illuminate aspects of human nature aligned with biblical truth.

The integration of theology and psychology sustains ethical integrity that nurture mind and spirit, illuminating God's redemptive love. This integrative approach, however, brings a tension between overuse and neglect of Scripture requiring discernment to avoid harm and oversimplification. Harm includes spiritual coercion, theological distortion, oversimplified interpretations of suffering, and the neglect of legitimate psychological or medical needs.

Prescriptive Scriptural Practices

When practitioners take an anti-psychology stance, prescriptivism ensues. This reinforces traditions that reject psychological integration. The nouthetic tradition[8] allegedly claims that "Scripture is sufficient for all that a counsellor needs in counselling to help those they are serving" [9]. This kind of

[7] Millar, "A Case for the Holy Spirit".
[8] Nouthetic counselling can be described as an approach that treats Scripture as entirely sufficient for counselling, often rejecting psychological integration and applying biblical texts prescriptively to address mental health concerns.
[9] Hathaway, "Introduction," 258.

prescriptivism often comes from a skepticism of psychology because it is based on Enlightenment secularism[10]. Here, skepticism refers to suspicion that psychological knowledge is secular, dangerous, or incompatible with biblical faithfulness.

When counselling is grounded in prescriptivism, it may oversimplify the mental health struggles of those seeking help, especially when Scripture is prioritised without sound exegesis and hermeneutics. Hathaway clarifies that hermeneutics is "the science of the rules of exegesis…."[11] Without careful application, however, prescriptive approaches open avenues of misuse of Scripture. Johnson raises his own concerns in this regard, specifically in relation to prayer and fasting (Matt 6:2–8) and legalism (Gal 2:16, 3:2). He warns against what he terms "orthodox idolatry" or "bibliolatry", asking whether an excessive veneration of Scripture leads to the rejection of "other relevant, creation-graced sources of knowledge" as impure[12]. These terms describe a distorted use of Scripture, not a dismissal of biblical authority.

This critique echoes Matthew 23:4, where Jesus condemns the imposition of heavy, cumbersome loads that misrepresent God's intent. Rigid prescriptivism distorts God's intent and overlooks knowledge that could serve his kingdom. Heberle draws from Anton Boisen's reminder to counsellors to explore the inner world of humanity as "living human documents"[13]. While this is an invitation to include experience and knowledge in the counselling encounter, Herberle emphasises continual integration of sound hermeneutics amid interpretive complexity[14]. Belief in the Bible with a sound hermeneutic is both theoretical and practical. From his experience, Heberle suggests a self-investigation into one's own self-hermeneutic to be more self-aware in order to reduce imposing views on both the text and the client[15].

In African pastoral and counselling settings, where biblical hermeneutics recognise orality and where spoken religious words can carry divine spiritual

[10] Hathaway, "Introduction," 258.
[11] Hathaway, "Introduction," 258.
[12] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 251.
[13] Boisen cited in Heberle, "Hermeneutics," 1.
[14] Heberle, "Hermeneutics," 7.
[15] Heberle, "Hermeneutics," 8.

authority[16], the misuse of biblical language may be especially potent and therefore requires careful hermeneutical accountability.

Dismissive practices

Christian counsellors may minimise or dismiss the role of Scripture in practice due to contextual, secular, and professional pressures. Concerns over licensing restrictions, ethical constraints, and fear of proselytising contribute to this trend. Three key challenges emerge: a misunderstanding of one's scope of practice, professional pressure from secularism, and professional drift. Prescriptivism and dismissivism should therefore be understood as opposite distortions of the same underlying problem: the failure to integrate Scripture through responsible hermeneutics and practical wisdom. Ethical sensitivity requires discernment concerning consent, appropriateness, timing, and scope.

Issues with Dismissive Practices Explored

The first issue, a misunderstanding of one's scope of practice, arises when counsellors begin to align too closely with psychological frameworks and, in so doing, lose sight of their distinctive Christian mandate[17]. According to the definition outlined in the introduction, Christian counselling is a Spirit-led journey toward healing in Christ, centring on his redemptive work and flourishing in community. When hermeneutical integrity is neglected, Christian counselling becomes ethically compromised, losing its biblical anchor.

The second challenge is professional pressure from secularism, which Johnson refers to as the Secular Revolution–a dichotomy between biblical knowledge and empirical knowledge[18]. In this environment, Christian counsellors risk being "taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (Col 2:8).

The third issue, professional drift, occurs when counsellors neglect theology, allowing personal views to replace sound biblical exegesis[19]. Proverbs 16:2 warns that "all a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed

[16] Hombana, "Hearing the Text, Seeing the Text."
[17] Peteet, "Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma," 846.
[18] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 235.
[19] Hathaway, "Introduction," 257–58.

by the Lord". Without a biblical framework, assessment and treatment approaches risk becoming human-centred rather than Christ-centred.

The absence of a biblical foundation for counselling creates vulnerability for clients. Without Scripture as a framework, counsellors risk harm; Christian counselling must be built on the foundation of biblical truth. Paul reinforces this necessity in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, stating that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work".

Johnson underscores the restorative nature of God's work, emphasising that Scripture testifies to his relentless pursuit of his children "in hundreds of ways"[20]. A practice lacking psychological training is at greater risk if it also lacks biblical depth. Johnson acknowledges the difficulty of advancing a Christian approach to counselling within a secular psychological climate, noting that, "the secular imaginary… makes envisioning an alternative extremely difficult"[21].

The research questions thus remain: How might Christian counsellors more faithfully integrate Scripture into transformative Christian counselling praxis? And how may Scripture be integrated within the counsellor, the practice, and the encounter?

The Research

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design in order to explore how Christian counsellors experience, interpret, and integrate Scripture in practice. The final sample comprised of nine participants who self-identify as evangelical Christians and were registered with the Council for Pastoral and Spiritual Counsellors. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of one year of professional experience as registered Christian counsellors, hold at least a master's degree, maintain affiliation with a recognised professional Christian counselling organisation, be over the age of 25, and be actively engage in counselling practice with a caseload of at least

[20] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 254.
[21] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 246.

three clients per week. The participants were male and female, and represented four different ethnicities. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' lived experiences, theological reasoning, and practical decisions regarding the use of Scripture in counselling. Ethical procedures included consent, confidentiality, and anonymisation.

Systematic thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's phases of familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, and analytic definition[22]. The study is limited by its small sample and focus on evangelical counsellors.

The Counsellor: Primary Integrity in Christian Counselling

A Christian counsellor is first and foremost a Christian before being a counsellor. "Being a Christian counsellor is not just applying the principles of Christianity, you have to *be* Christian" asserted P7[23]. This distinction underscores the responsibility to cultivate faith and spiritual maturity. P5 appealed to Christian counsellors to "live a life one hundred percent according to Scripture". The integrity of Christian counselling is built on the counsellor's personal faith, theological grounding, and commitment to biblical truth.

Participants emphasised daily Scripture engagement and transformation through it. "If you don't know Scripture, you can't bring Scripture into the session", asserted P1. P6 shared their concerns that "using Scripture at any moment has risk. I might think I am using it right but might be using it according to my own biases". What makes a Christian counsellor trustworthy, according to P4, is "my relationship with the Lord". It is a humble journey with the Scriptures; being challenged by Scripture such that "you are Christ for the client." Such language should be understood analogically, referring to Christlike presence and witness rather than any replacement of Christ himself.

[22] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."
[23] Participants are identified as P1-P9 to ensure anonymity.

The Bible as the Counsellor's Measuring Rod

"Scripture informs my view of people. Our journey towards wholeness is a journey towards reclaiming that image of God in you", postulated P7. A Christian counsellor's values, ethics, and moral compass must be anchored in a consistent and unwavering standard–Scripture. The Bible serves as this measuring rod. Without Scripture, the Christian counsellor lacks knowledge of who God is, the redemptive work of Christ, and the Holy Spirit's role in transformation. P7 shared this sentiment based on the "responsibility I feel towards God for the people that he sends to me."

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul highlights, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Handling Scripture correctly is not an academic discipline per se, but a spiritual practice requiring theological study and discernment. There is a need for a dependence on the Holy Spirit. P5 summated, "Commit yourself to study. Learn and read."

The Role of Responsible Hermeneutics in the Life of a Counsellor

P3 emphases the responsibility of depth and integrity in Christian counselling imploring Christian counsellors to be "digging into the Word himself". In contexts of spiritual authority, maturity and humility safeguard against misuse. Hathaway confirms that "a person who can't interpret the Word of God cannot counsel biblically"[24]. It is important to properly interpret the Bible to ensure that Scripture is not misapplied or reduced to simplistic self-help principles. "It is not about having all the answers," claimed P4, to which P2 added, "it is about delving into Scripture personally and properly, using commentaries, learning the words that don't make sense." Smith outlines six key components of responsible hermeneutics that can be integrated into the counsellor's personal Bible study, aiding in the faithful integration of Scripture in their own lives and their practice:[25]

1. Literary analysis: understanding the genre and structure of the passage.

[24] Hathaway, "Introduction," 257.
[25] Smith, *A Practical Guide for Studying God's Word*.

2. Historical context which examines the cultural and historical background.

3. Verbal study to analyse the original language and meaning.

4. Christological focus: identifying how the passage relates to Christ.

5. Theological insight extracts doctrinal meaning.

6. Personal application for application of the passage ethically and responsibly.

Scripture is often approached for inspiration alone. Hathaway argues that theological foundations must be built on proper hermeneutics rather than interpreted by subjective explanations or current presenting cultural trends[26]. P4 shared their experience, "When it's about the client, Scripture motivates change. But when it's about the counsellor, people get hurt." Each participant had studied theology and presented a case for ongoing theological study. "If who I am and how I interpret the Bible doesn't help them live and love God more and more, then I am wrong somewhere," declared P4.

A Call to Deep Theological Engagement

Joshua 1:8 and Psalms 1:2–3 remind believers, including Christian counsellors, to cultivate deep, personal engagement with Scripture. P5 claimed that, "You can't water down Scripture, you become ineffective." The cultivation understood by the participants is through disciplined study, which includes Spirit-led discernment. This can help guard against distorted interpretation. The ethical and professional dimensions of a counsellor's ministry can be strengthened by a growing understanding of the Word of God, enhancing a practice that is deeply connected to biblical truth, not personal or public opinion. P7 encouraged Christian counsellors to allow Scripture to show them their biases and prejudices—even their "denominational background, lean, or bent." When revealed, counsellors can present these biases to the Holy Spirit for their own ongoing spiritual transformation.

[26] Hathaway, "Introduction," 260–61.

This engagement is about embracing a posture of surrendering to God and centring Jesus as one embraces the Holy Spirit's transformative work. A surrendered life bears fruit, equipping the counsellor to serve in a way that is both ethical and spiritually grounded. P6 appealed to Christian counsellors: "I would like to see Christian counsellors study theology, delve deeper into the study of theology, to help them interpret in a more responsible way."

Practical Application: Strengthening the Role of Scripture in Counselling Praxis

From the analysed data based on the transcribed words of the participants and the theoretical framework, the concept of incarnational counselorship refers to counselling as an embodied expression of Christian faith. It is a way of being present where truth is embodied. As Jesus himself embodied the love of the Trinity extended to creation through connecting with humanity, "the practical application of love through meaningful actions can potentially bridge the gap between theological concepts and the lived experiences of people"[27].

Themes of embodied faith, spiritual connection, and a lived integrity shaped the data analysis are based on Scripture, which offers "the foundation of what we do and why we do it" (P7). "Believe in the God that you purport to work under", which is more than "memorised scripture but knowing what it means" (P7). Counsellors are invited not to hide their Christian identity.

Faithfully integrated Scripture in Christian counselling praxis incudes commitment to a disciplined Bible study routine. It includes a daily exegetical work that deepens their knowledge and understanding of Scripture. One strategy is regular hermeneutical reflection on passages before meaningful use in sessions. Counsellors should approach Scripture as humble servants of Christ, not as counsellors searching for a quick-fix resource for a session. It is divine revelation through the work for Scriptural exploration that shapes both the counsellors' personal faith and their professional ministry. Reliance on the Holy Spirit is paramount for insight and to guard against human perspectives that do not align with God's purposes.

[27] Nanthambwe, "Embodied Grace," 2.

It is not easy. “To surrender myself to the authority of Scripture was a wrestle” declared P9. Over time however P9 now claims, “I take responsibility to be informed, to keep informed of interpretation of Scripture integrating according to personal conviction … it is a living document in living relationship with the living God.” Prioritising sound hermeneutics in spiritual formation safeguards practice and upholds ethical standards.

Ultimately, being led by the Spirit in counselling necessitates a deep knowledge of who he is through the truth of Scripture. “I never want to lose the fascination I find in God’s word, the newness” asserted P3. P9 added, “We have to stay fresh in the Scripture.” As Scripture shapes the counsellor, it shapes the client. Scripture is “identity over confidence” and one can “speak the truth in love, it flows out of you, part of your being as a counsellor” offered P8.

P6 urged, “I would like to see Christian counsellors study theology to help them interpret in a more responsible way and use it more effectively.” By embedding sound biblical hermeneutics into their spiritual and professional formation, Christian counsellors safeguard their practice against misappropriation of Scripture and ethical compromise. P4 reminded Christian counsellors that they are to be “living the Bible.” It is not enough to merely read it. P4 asked, “Are the ethics and the Bible in me?” P7 challenged counsellors, “Do you know when the Holy Spirit is nudging you? How?” Ultimately, to be led by the Spirit in counselling requires knowing who he is through the truth of Scripture.

The Counselling Practice: Building a House on a Solid Foundation

“Jesus shifts the atmosphere. This room belongs to God,” asserted P8. A room built on a solid foundation is one of “accountability through integration and collaboration,” imparted P1. At the level of practice, the question is how beliefs about Scripture are embedded in supervision, referral, collaboration, and ethics[28].

For ethical integrity and professional identity, Scripture offers biblical authority through themes of faithfulness and moral grounding. A biblically grounded

[28] Dobson, “Ethical Considerations,” 3, 9.

framework informs practice. According to Johnson, the central role of Scripture in Christian counselling is truth that equips believers for "every good work" (2 Tim 3:17), noting that it reveals the fundamental principles of governing human life[29]. "Sound theological, biblical bases are important in counselling practice," asserted P3 as they claimed that "a shallow study of the Bible doesn't work." Theology forms the foundation and structural integrity of Christian counselling. Psychology can be integrated in a way that does not compromise the load-bearing theological structures. Hermeneutical integrity is thus essential for biblical interpretation as well as discerning the validity of psychological principles in light of Scripture.

In Christian counselling there is both philosophy and method, not just technique. Philosophy shapes the method. Sound biblical hermeneutics goes a long way in preventing the misuse of Scripture. Holding onto theological integrity directly influences the method and technique. In this way, the Bible does not become a prescriptive handbook but serves as the framework that holds the structure together.

Imagine Christian counselling as a well-constructed house with a firm foundation build on sound biblical principles. It should include strong load bearing walls–essential uncompromised theological and ethical convictions– and structural beams that support biblical truths. Now imagine that the walls and windows are the integration of psychological insights that can bring clarity and perspective, without compromising biblical integrity. Practically, this includes referral pathways, collaboration, and ethical reflection.

As Hathaway argues, if Scripture is truly God's authoritative Word, then all psychological claims must be evaluated in light of it[30]. However, when psychological research appears inconsistent with Scripture, it is the responsibility of the Christian counsellor to critique both the validity of the research and their own exegetical interpretation[31].

[29] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.
[30] Hathaway, "Introduction."
[31] Hathaway, "Introduction," 262.

Knowing Your Foundation and Framework

"Scripture is the foundation of what we do and why we do it," maintained P8. A weak foundation cannot withstand complex counselling encounters. A strong biblical hermeneutic ensures that the counsellor rightly understands God, humanity, and redemption. The Bible reveals who God is and who we are: people created in God's image and called to reflect his wisdom; fallen, yet redeemable through Christ. Scripture also tells God's metanarrative, the grand story of redemption with which counselling should align.

As stewards of this theological house, counsellors must ask: What is the foundation of my practice? Is it firmly built on Scripture, or does it lean too heavily on secular philosophy? As the lamp on a lampstand in Jesus' description of Christians brings light to all in the house (Matt 5:14–16) there is a responsibility in praxis. Scriptural exegesis includes a rigorous engagement with Scripture, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to ensure accurate interpretation.

Similarly, Christian counsellors must establish non-negotiable theological and ethical principles drawn from careful exegesis, avoiding proof-texting or vague assumptions. At the same time, there is wisdom in recognising areas of flexibility–certain methods, assessments, and interventions can be adjusted, while core theological convictions must remain unshaken[32].

Scripture is sufficient for its divine purpose; counsellors must avoid both exaggerating and diminishing its role[33]. "Scripture holds and determines our ethics… we are accountable to sound ethics" described P4 when issuing the metaphor of theology and psychology being like two legs, "they walk together." For P4, Scripture is this framework mentioned above, and the integration is, as P8 confirms, that which "Christian counsellors are accountable for, that requires diligence."

[32] Hathaway, "Introduction," 264.
[33] Hathaway, "Introduction," 264.

A biblically grounded practice also requires clarity regarding scope: Christian counsellors are not exempt from recognising trauma complexity, psychiatric need, or situations that require multidisciplinary referral[34].

The Integration of Psychology and Theology

Integrating theology and psychology requires careful discernment, as both contribute to a holistic understanding of humanity. P3 affirmed that "psychology and theology intersect, yes, but they don't go into the same spaces," while P6 added, "There is a road between the two… I can hold both theology and psychology in the deepest parts of my heart." To think God's thoughts after him requires evaluating psychological insights through Scripture's lens, maintaining a high view of biblical authority. A biblical foundation does not require rejecting psychology. God's world, will, and Word will never contradict one another. Psychology, when rightly applied, can function as the walls and windows of the house, providing practical insights that allow the practice to function effectively. However, when a counselling practice is built primarily on secular psychology, sociology, or anthropology, it becomes unstable and spiritually unsafe. The Bible remains the stabilising element, ensuring that psychology is used wisely within biblical truth.

Johnson contends that, if Christians are to think all of God's thoughts after Him, then it follows that both theological and psychological fields should be explored–provided they align with God's creation grace and biblical authority[35]. While psychology may provide valuable knowledge, God alone is omniscient, making Scripture the ultimate source of unchanging truth.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

P7 maintained that "self-awareness is about knowing one's own biases and prejudices, hangups and denominational background lean or bent and presenting that to the Holy Spirit." The person and practice reveal ethical, hermeneutical, and spiritual complexity. If counsellors are to "believe in the God that you purport to work under," as P7 claimed, then, as P8 reminded, the counsellor "cannot separate ethics and Scripture. One can't practice outside of your foundation of your practice… Scripture is foundational in the practice." In

[34] Dames and Dames, "Pastoral Care and Counselling in Current Times."
[35] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.

the interpretation thereof, according to P6, "it is the Holy Spirit that guides and teaches."

The Holy Spirit is not an optional feature in Christian counselling; he is the presence of God who guides and sustains the practice. The Spirit reveals the truth of Scripture (1 Cor 2:12–14; John 14:26), ensuring the theological foundation remains sound. He grants wisdom and discernment to counsellors (Isa 11:2; John 16:13), enabling them to distinguish what is biblically and ethically right (1 Cor 2:10–11; Rom 8:27). Most importantly, the Spirit empowers transformation, making counselling spiritually restorative (Rom 8:11). A proper hermeneutic reveals that the Holy Spirit is a person in the Trinity–one with whom we have a living relationship. The counsellor-client relationship and the transformation that occur within a Spirit-led practice are made possible through dependence on the Holy Spirit, who ensures right interpretation of Scripture and ethical effectiveness.

Practical Application: Strengthening the Biblical Framework of Christian Counselling

For faithful integration of Scripture into Christian counselling that is transformative, counsellors should be continually assessing their theological foundation. This incudes holding to Scripture as central to their praxis rather than cultural trends. They should assess which theological structures are non-negotiable when integrating psychology. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is fundamental in the strengthening of a biblical framework, allowing his wisdom to dynamically transform their practice.

Spirit-led practices offer a safe healing journey. This is especially evident when counsellors are continually reinforcing their theological foundations, ensuring that their work remains faithful to Scripture and responsive to the ever-dynamic complexities of their clients. As Johnson succinctly states, "Being in Christ, Christians are able to practice science redemptively, seeking the triune God, and His knowledge and His love, at every step of the scientific process, for His glory"[36].

[36] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 236.

The Counselling Encounter: Walking Towards Wholeness in Christ

"It's about relationship and conversation. Bring heaven to earth don't try get people into heaven," appealed P4. Continuing, P4 asserted that when Scripture is about the counsellor, "people get hurt." P3 invited Christian counsellors to "strive to relook at Scripture and its effectiveness in counselling and in your own life and the contribution to the person's life." P2 asserted that Scripture is not to be exploited in sessions and that people should be invited to "process Scripture in light of God's love." P2 suggested, "Ask yourself the question, will Scripture bring them closer to Christ, or cause harm? Do we gather or scatter?" The study revealed through various themes that Christian counselling is a sacred, relational journey toward healing, growth, and wholeness in Christ.

In South African contexts marked by communal identity, trauma, poverty, and diverse spiritual vocabularies, the counselling encounter requires special attentiveness to how Scripture is heard, trusted, responded to, or resisted.

While Christian counsellors may work with both believers and unbelievers their core mission remains the same: to facilitate transformation toward Christlikeness through the Word, the Spirit, and the grace of Jesus Christ. Even when faith is not explicitly expressed, the counsellor remains anchored in Christ, perceiving the client through God's eyes rather than through human brokenness. The calling to become more like Christ with a cultural mandate to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth (Gen 1:28) as an image bearer of God is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual development. Johnson affirms, "Proper physiological, relational, cognitive, and emotional development provides the creational platform for humanity's holy imaging of God, at least on earth"[37].

The counsellor's role is to see the client through God's perspective, rather than through the distorted lens of human brokenness. This process occurs through the Word of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the grace of Jesus Christ, integrating theological and psychological research.[38]

[37] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.
[38] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.

While secular psychological insights can be valuable as walls and windows in the metaphorical house, the Christian counsellor must critically examine their root. Johnson argues that if God created humanity for His glory, then all avenues of knowledge should be explored responsibly and ethically, to align with who he is and his divine purpose–generating more glory.[39] This includes responsible counselling skills in the counselling encounter.

The Dynamics of the Counselling Encounter

The research illuminated kingdom resources–divine tools and sacred models viewed through scriptural lenses–forming a sanctuary framework within a biblical worldview. The Christian counsellor integrates theology and psychology, discerning how to ethically facilitate healing within a biblical framework. Effective Christian counselling relies on the Holy Spirit's discernment, sensitivity to the client's faith journey, and wisdom in integrating Scripture. P4 stated, "My ethics is to bring heaven to earth, not try to get people into heaven."

Discernment from the Holy Spirit guides the counsellor in asking questions that heal rather than harm and prevents the God complex–taking on the role of expert in the client's life. Sound scriptural and psychological hermeneutics keep the counsellor within ethical boundaries. P5 maintained that "Scripture must be applicable to the session," adding, "I bring in additional Scripture, then they must decide for themselves." For P7, integration should avoid shame, offering clients "the power to choose and have boundaries.

Sensitivity to the client's faith journey ensures respect while gently inviting them deeper. Peteet observes that psychiatrists, patients, and religious communities do not always agree on the labels assigned to symptoms.[40] A sound biblical hermeneutic integrated with psychological discernment helps counsellors facilitate a healthier understanding of God and self.

Wisdom in integrating Scripture involves knowing when and how to introduce it, while considering cultural and contextual factors. There will always be healing practices that align with Scripture and those that do not. Discernment

[39] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 240.
[40] Peteet, Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma."

is required, and the wisdom of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 can help: "Test everything hold fast to what is good." Peteet cautions against discouraging medical care and equating mental health struggles with spiritual failure[41]. A more faithful practice includes a collaborative approach that integrates carefully chosen Scripture and psychological principles to support healing while remaining ethical. Practitioners should value the intrinsic good in spiritual practices and community support, yet remain alert to potential harm such as delayed treatment, trauma from exorcism, or internalised shame.

Not all models include direct Scripture references, yet all should be biblically grounded and ready to integrate Scripture wisely when appropriate. "How they [clients] enter my space and how they leave will be determined by how carefully I use Scripture–even if I don't say it out loud," offered P6.

The Responsible Use of Scripture in Sessions

Hermeneutical discernment in Christian counselling is the ongoing effort to apply Scripture faithfully in real life, holding together biblical truth and practical wisdom. A sound biblical hermeneutic is essential–not only for the counsellor's personal study but also for shaping their professional practice – avoiding reductionism and fundamentalist misrepresentation of God's word.

1. When the Counsellor Introduces Scripture

"There should be no imposition of Scripture," claimed P9, "It is complex to integrate Scripture. You must have patience within the process." Counsellors should avoid using the Bible prescriptively, introducing it only when it prayerfully aligns with the client's journey and nurtures transformation. When it is contextually relevant, Scripture can be brought in meaningfully. P9 suggested that the counsellor introspects, "Is it fitting? Will it bring clarity?"

Counsellors may invite clients to reflect on a passage related to their struggle, explore biblical metaphors such as lament in Lamentations or restoration in Psalms, or encourage prayerful study and return with reflections. The Psalms and Lamentations may be especially helpful where clients need language for grief, protest, confusion, waiting, or trust, because these texts legitimise suffering without reducing it to personal failure. In practice, such texts may be

[41] Peteet, "Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma."

used as prompts for reflection, emotional naming, prayer, journalling or collaborative discussion rather than as directives imposed on the client. "If you love the Scripture and how it is shaping them, then present the Scripture in such beauty," summated P9.

2. When the Client Brings Scripture into the Session

P8 suggested that counsellors should "see where God is in the person in front of us" and "be curious, ask them to help you understand it [the Scripture that they bring]." When clients share Scripture–often from places of pain–it becomes a sacred moment requiring a Spirit-led ear to reach the person behind the problem.

Counsellors should respect clients' beliefs and values. Where significant disparities arise, a referral may be necessary. When clients reference Scripture through misinterpretation or struggle, the counsellor's task is not correction but understanding what the passage means to them–how it shapes their emotions, choices, or pain. The counsellor can invite the client to consider the context related to their chosen passage, trusting that the Holy Spirit can and does lead toward deeper understanding.

For example, if a client misuses Scripture in a way that reinforces self-condemnation, the counsellor can gently ask, "When you read this passage, how does it make you experience yourself and God?" And then, "Would you be open to exploring another passage that speaks to this theme in a different way?"

3. When Scripture Has Been Used Harmfully in a Client's Life

Having worked with clients who have experienced harm from the misuse of Scripture, P9 declared, "I get quite irritated with the way Scripture is forced, misused, or Bible bashed." Some clients may have experienced spiritual abuse— "coercive control and misuse of power in a religious context"[42]—or received harmful interpretations of Scripture. In such cases, the counsellor's role is not to impose an alternative interpretation but to help clients process the emotional and theological impact of those experiences.

[42] Oakley et al., "Responding Well to Spiritual Abuse," 189.

Instead of immediate refutation, the counsellor can invite a conversation by asking, "I wonder if we can take a step back and explore what this verse means in its broader context—would you be open to that?" As P8 appealed, "Don't force it! Don't abuse Scripture. You are walking on holy ground."

Wong and Xie remind Christian counsellors to try to understand the client's context so that Scripture can be used redemptively[43]. This helps client rediscover the depth and truth of meaningful passages for themselves through Spirit-led reflection. P9 paused, shook their head and spoke slowly and deliberately, "The motive is what's important. If you're concerned for them, then be ethical with Scripture." Where spiritual abuse or trauma is present, counsellors should prioritise safety, pacing, and consent before engaging disputed biblical material.

The Holy Spirit's Role in the Counselling Encounter

P7's concern was posed through the question "Do you know when the Spirit is nudging you?" to which P6 asserted, "You need to know the difference between your conscience and the Holy Spirit." Confirming their contribution, P8 declared, "The Holy Spirit must speak loudest."

Christian counselling is a divine partnership between humans and the Spirit of God. Relying on the Holy Spirit is what keeps counsellors attuned to God's voice. This reliance informs their discernment of the right timing, the most helpful words, useful techniques, and the posture they are to assume within the session. Without this reliance on the Spirit, the counselling risks becoming purely psychological. A Holy Spirit-led counsellor does not force change but creates a space where God can be glorified and Scripture becomes a means of grace rather than a tool of coercion.

Practical Application: Strengthening Scripture's Role in the Counselling Encounter

"Clients need to be heard. Scripture comes in gently, as a reflection" offered P3. Allow people to "process Scripture in light of God's love" (P3). Invited them to "read the verse aloud, if that is what has more meaning for them" (P5). P6 cautioned that "using Scripture has risks", to which P7 recommended, "allow

[43] Wong and Xie, "Theocentric Therapy within the Christian Context," 1.

the client to bring the Scripture." P9 did not shy away from integrating Scripture into the session, though claims that "it is complex to integrate Scripture. Discernment and guidance of the Spirit are necessary."

Actionable practices include seeking client consent before scriptural engagement, documenting the rationale for Scripture use in ethically sensitive cases, using lament texts where appropriate, and building referral or supervision structures for cases involving trauma, abuse, or severe psychological distress.

To integrate Scripture faithfully in transformative Christian counselling praxis, counsellors must develop expertise in exegetical and theological study, ensuring that Scripture is approached with accuracy and responsibility for God's glory. It is equally essential to remain attentive to the Holy Spirit's guidance when Scripture arises in a session, discerning whether its use will be beneficial or potentially harmful. Not every session needs a Bible verse. Wisdom is required in discerning when and how to introduce a Scripture competently that will be meaningful and helpful.

Reflective questioning supports healing without oversimplification. It is most helpful when clients are invited to wrestle with, grieve over, and deeply process their experiences in ways that are authentic and Spirit-led. It is certainly possible to uphold both the integrity of Scripture and the uniqueness of the client and their journey through safe healing encounters that lead to wholeness in Christ. Herein lies the sacred moment where Scripture wisely introduced or discovered opens the door for psychological healing and deepened theological insight.

Conclusion

In response to the main research question, the study argues that Scripture is most faithfully integrated in Christian counselling when it is interpreted through sound hermeneutics, embodied by a spiritually formed counsellor, and applied with discernment, consent, and contextually sensitivity. A biblically coherent framework for sound Christian counselling practice is the responsibility of the practitioner. Johnson reminds counsellors that "God's psychological knowledge and wisdom is the ultimate archetype and source of

everything valid in any human psychologies and vastly exceeds them all in quality and quantity"[44].

It is recommended that the church explicitly engage incarnational counselorship within a sound Scriptural framework to better serve their congregations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where the application of embodied grace[45] is needed. The commitment to truth does not exclude interdisciplinary competence. Rather, it motivates spiritual formation in counsellors. This includes professional counselling practices built on sound biblical hermeneutics and wisely integrated psychological practices. Concrete recommendations for training and practice include stronger formation in hermeneutics, clearer attention to scope and referral, trauma-sensitive use of Scripture, and greater practical use of biblical genres such as lament in counselling work.

The calling for Christian counsellors is to integrate exegetical excellence with ethical integrity while remaining aware of their own spiritual limitations and how these influence the care that they provide. Studying the Bible cannot remain an academic task but should become a spiritual discipline. Moving away from prescriptivism invites counsellors to be adaptable without losing their biblical anchor. Christian counsellors must build their practice on solid theological foundations. This is where Scripture shapes ethical care with integrity and dignity, holding onto the created worth and well-being of every individual–each one deeply loved by their Creator.

[44] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 247.
[45] See Nanthambwe, "Embodied Grace," 3.

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The Role of Art, Music, and Drama in Trauma Counselling in the Christian African Context

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Abstract

Traditionally trauma counselling in the African church has not been afforded the attention that it deserves. Some qualitative research studies on trauma counselling in the African context reveal that traumatised people are often merely advised to read their Bibles, pray, and participate in religious rituals to deal with their traumatic experiences. Stigma, untrained pastors and counsellors, as well as a lack of financial resources often prevent people from receiving effective trauma counselling. Recent literature further highlights the concern that although effective Western trauma counselling modalities, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and narrative therapy, have demonstrated positive results, the unique contextualised needs of traumatised Africans in their non-Western contexts are not always sufficiently met. This article presents art, music, and drama as part of an accessible counselling approach and method to facilitate emotional and spiritual healing from trauma in the African context. Creative non-verbal expressions through art, music, and drama form part of everyday life in African communities. These familiar creative expressions have the potential to merge traditional trauma counselling approaches with more contemporary innovative counselling methods. A significant implication of this research is making trauma recovery more accessible to African church communities by equipping Christian counsellors to address trauma safely and effectively within the scope of their training. The research employs a literature-based methodology to explore secular and

Christian scholarly literature and studies on the application of creative expression in counselling to promote emotional and spiritual healing from trauma. The article explores how creative expression facilitates the empowerment of trauma survivors to reconstruct their narratives as they discover renewed meaning in Christ. The research offers practical recommendations for implementing creative counselling modalities in the African church context and identifies potential challenges and areas that require further research.

Introduction

Africa is rife with violence. Persistent warfare, political and social injustices, and slavery have left millions of Africans impoverished, diseased, and traumatised.[1] Conditions are exacerbated by cycles of rampant corruption that contribute to the increasing burdens of poverty and lack of access to many life-enhancing resources and services. In many instances, the church continues to be a beacon of hope and a conduit of mercy and comfort. Research identifies the church as a community resource and agent of change.[2] However, the church is increasingly compelled to engage more intentionally and substantively with individuals and communities affected by trauma, rather than remaining a silent or complicit bystander.[3] Despite the urgent need for trauma intervention, financial constraints and the shortage of trained pastoral, clinical, and medical personnel within many African church contexts have resulted in the neglect of trauma care and the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

There is a tendency to over-spiritualise suffering and mistreat trauma survivors in the African church context instead of dealing with the effects of trauma holistically.[4] Traditional ways of dealing with trauma include continuing with life as though the person is unaffected by the traumatic experience and forgiving offenders without processing feelings. The effects of trauma that has not been dealt with can manifest as mental issues which are mostly misunderstood within the church due to stigma.[5] Religious practices that

[1] Musisi and Kinyanda, 'Long-Term Impact', 20-21.
[2] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 1.
[3] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 3-4.
[4] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 3.
[5] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 5.

reinforce judgment and shame often re-traumatise survivors and cause them to withdraw and remain silent.

This research provides an overview of the historic and current state of trauma counselling in the African church. The research motivates the need for trauma counselling in the African context, and demonstrates how art, music, and drama can potentially contribute toward addressing trauma in the African church more effectively. The advantages of using creative modalities in the African context lie in their accessibility, affordability, and applicability for untrained professionals. Furthermore, creative forms of expression hold significant potential to facilitate healing from trauma due to their prominent role in the daily lives of many Africans.

This study explores the gap in research regarding the application of artistic expression (art, music, and drama) in trauma counselling in the African church. The research explores: The historical foundations of trauma counselling in the African church, what is currently being observed regarding trauma counselling in the African church, the potential value of art, music, and drama in trauma counselling in the African church, and how artistic expression can be implemented in trauma counselling in the African church. The research concludes with practical suggestions, potential challenges, areas for further research, and recommendations. The research follows a literature-based methodology and engages secular and Christian literature.

Overview of Trauma Counselling in the African Context

Historical foundations of counselling

Research on the use of trauma counselling modalities in the African church is limited.[6] Historically, indigenous healing traditions and the influence of Western Christian missionaries have primarily shaped pastoral care and counselling in the African church.[7] Traditional counselling practices in the African context are rooted in a collective approach to addressing and resolving problems. This is based in a traditional African philosophy and worldview,

[6] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 86.
[7] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 102.

typically referred to as *Ubuntu* ('I am because we are').[8] A person exists through their interconnectedness with others and thus one person's problems affect the entire community.[9]

The African collective counselling approach typically includes the traditional counsellor, client, family, and other prominent community members who give advice and guidance for living and making decisions.[10] African traditional counselling is grounded in respect for cultural norms, practices, and spirituality as it draws on generational knowledge and wisdom throughout the counselling process.[11] Dealing with problems remains within this familiar and trusted sphere. However, traditional counsellors often lack specialised training to adequately understand the complexities of individual problems and traumatic experiences.[12]

A key strength of the traditional African counselling is its reliance on rich verbal forms of communication, such as folklore, which serves as a catalyst for fostering interconnectedness throughout the counselling process.[13] The elderly pass on traditional knowledge and instructions regarding living as responsible members of society. The aim of teaching problem-solving, and behavioural or attitudinal change is to benefit the whole society as cultural traditions are established.

However, twenty-first-century lifestyles, marked by rapid social change and increasing individualism, place significant strain on the communities' coping mechanisms in the face of trauma.[14] The African scenario begs the questions, How do African communities effectively deal with increasing mental health challenges in response to being exposed to continuous traumatic events? and What is the role of the African church in this context?

[8] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 3.
[9] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 27-28, 39.
[10] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 29.
[11] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 29-30 .
[12] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3-5.
[13] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 27, 32, 34. .
[14] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 102.

There is a significant need for culturally relevant pastoral care and Christian counselling that can address psychological and spiritual needs of traumatised African communities.[15] There has been increasing efforts from numerous African institutions, such as theological seminaries, universities, and specialised institutions, to provide training in this regard.[16] However, Western models of pastoral care and counselling have often been applied without considering the African context.[17]

Unrealistic expectations that African clients should conform to Western counselling norms, such as specific modes of engagement or the disclosure of deeply personal information, have hindered efforts to address the complex needs of traumatised individuals.[18] Despite the value placed on verbal communication in African cultural contexts, the open verbalisation of deeply personal matters is generally discouraged.

Since 1993, indigenous psychology has advanced steadily in its examination of human behaviour across diverse cultural contexts.[19] There is a renewed recognition of the importance of developing and applying culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches. Literature acknowledges the value and efficacy of Western counselling approaches to trauma counselling[20] while also advocating for the application of a relevant African approach to understanding, assessing, and treating trauma more adequately in the African context.[21]

African psychology offers a distinct framework for understanding human behaviour, community, spirituality, and well-being as part of interconnected dimensions of life.[22] An integrative approach to counselling that addresses psychological, spiritual, and physical dimensions of trauma holds significant potential in the African context to facilitate healing for individuals as well as

[15] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 102-103.
[16] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 104.
[17] Goss and Adebowale, 'Counselling and Guidance', 354.
[18] Goss and Adebowale, 'Counselling and Guidance', 354.
[19] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 2.
[20] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 162; Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1-2.
[21] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 39; Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 4-5.
[22] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 16.

their communities.[23] In contrast, reductionist counselling models that focus on only one aspect of lived experiences, tend to overlook the cultural richness of African contexts and thus potentially compromise holistic wellbeing within African communities.

Trauma counselling in Africa

The nature of the experience of trauma is highly individual, meaning that each person perceives, processes, and responds to a crisis event differently. As rural African communities live in close proximity, behaviour and actions of individuals are closely monitored, and social deviances are dealt with through communal shunning or punishment.[24] Due to the active involvement of community members in each other's lives, it is believed that traditional counselling is effective in dealing with issues, such as struggles with isolation, poor adjustments, sleeplessness, nervous disorders, and suicidal ideation after experiencing a crisis event.[25] Despite communities' faith in these traditional practices, there is limited research on how effectively these traditional counselling methods address all the emotional, psychological, and physical manifestations of trauma, particularly PTSD.

There is a lack of documentation and scholarly material on traditional forms of counselling and their effectiveness, especially in the field of individual and communal trauma counselling.[26] The effectiveness of Western psychotherapy to address psycho-socio-spiritual wounds, damages, and stresses in a post-colonial Africa is uncertain.[27] Rather than focusing on the individual's experience of trauma, African psychotherapy is broadly applied to the general social system and aspects of clients' backgrounds in their communal contexts.[28] While it is important to address the collective processing of trauma, individual trauma counselling remains equally significant for the wellbeing of the community. More research is required regarding how Western counselling

[23] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 16.
[24]Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 29.
[25] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3.
[26] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3.
[27] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 3.
[28] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 3.

approaches might be adjusted for specific African cultural contexts to address individual and collective trauma.

The use of rituals in the healing process might be a culturally significant way to address individual and collective trauma in African communities. Rituals focus on the holistic worth of the person extending outward to their community, considering the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of being.[29] In the case of collective trauma due to loss, meaningful rituals are effective in dealing with grief.[30] The use of rituals is integral to African culture and might be a challenging concept for Western counsellors to grasp, as they might not have an in-depth understanding of communal African traditions. By developing cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, pastors and Christian counsellors can cultivate an environment of respect and trust to empower individuals within their unique cultural and spiritual values.[31] The narrative component in African rituals is an effective tool through which to facilitate emotional and spiritual healing from trauma.

Cultivating an environment of emotional safety for traumatised Africans is the first step to addressing trauma contextually and effectively. Emotional safety that includes non-judgmental acceptance is crucial to reduce the stigma attached to receiving counselling for severe emotional stress and debilitating manifestations of PTSD.[32] The over-emphasis of the spiritual aspects in traditional healing could overlook the neurological effects of trauma due to lack of scientific training,[33] limited Gospel-centred theological training,[34] and the lack of a uniform code of ethics[35] which is important in trauma counselling– knowing when to refer clients who have developed mental conditions from prolonged trauma is an ethical requirement that is often overlooked.

[29] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 16.
[30] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 104.
[31] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 105.
[32] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 106-107.
[33] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 106-107.
[34] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 9.
[35] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 19.

Counselling resources in Africa are often limited,[36] hindering extensive trauma counselling training for pastors and Christian counsellors. Using traditional healing rituals and narrative components as a framework for implementing more creative trauma counselling strategies could potentially eliminate restrictions placed on counselling, such as financial constraints, inaccessibility to trauma counsellors and counselling, and cultural contextual ignorance.

The church possesses significant potential to address trauma in a safe and ethical manner. Churches can be catalysts for fostering trusting relationships and paying attention to deeper issues, such as forgiveness, inner healing, and spiritual transformation.[37]

Unaddressed Trauma in the African Context

There is inadequate access to comprehensive medical trauma care in Central Africa, West Africa, and conflict regions of East Africa, especially in rural communities due to underdeveloped trauma systems in sub-Saharan Africa.[38] South Africa is believed to have the most mature medical trauma systems available, but trauma access is highly restricted by socio-economic factors accounting for high health disparities in general.[39] These measures include disparities before, during, and after medical trauma care.[40]

Together with inadequate and restricted access to medical trauma care is the lack of trauma counselling as part of holistic trauma care in Africa. There is an acute shortage of psychiatrists to attend to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of trauma patients in Africa,[41] resulting in the processing of various types of traumas, such as sexual trauma, war-induced trauma, trauma due to displacement, and grief-induced trauma, being left unaddressed. The most vulnerable are women and children who have little to no access to formal trauma interventions in poverty-stricken and war-torn areas.

[36] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 102, 104, 106-107.
[37] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 9.
[38] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 66-67.
[39] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 66.
[40] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 72.
[41] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 82.

Most Western medical and psychiatric viewpoints regarding trauma are based on an egocentric approach and thus the generalised definitions of trauma do not represent the African perspective.[42] The egocentric view regards psychological function as a purely internal process,[43] disregarding the importance of social origins which is an integral element in the lives of Africans. As Africans view their identities as interwoven with their original close-knit communities, trauma is understood to affect the whole person and the entire wellbeing of the community.[44] In the context of social, political, and economical instabilities in Africa, redefining trauma is critical to effectively and holistically diagnose and treat the complex symptoms of trauma in the African context.

In Africa, the diagnostic term post traumatic stress syndrome is not commonly applied to survivors of repeated trauma, including torture.[45] Many trauma survivors continue to struggle to process traumatic experiences, even up to fifty years after the events. Due to inadequate expertise available in the African context to assess and treat traumatic experiences, survivors are left to cope with debilitating emotional, psychological, and physical wounds, often in isolation.[46] One example is the impact of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that has left countless individuals still traumatised today.[47] The church, a complicit actor in the Rwandan genocide,[48] abandoned severely traumatised survivors who had nowhere else to turn for emotional and spiritual support or trauma counselling. Trauma counselling for survivors in war-torn African countries is severely limited in general.[49]

Despite numerous humanitarian interventions across Africa to relieve starvation, political violence, displacement issues, and other social crises, there are limited reports on available trauma counselling for affected communities that are affected by large-scale trauma.[50] There is limited research on the

[42] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1.
[43] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 2.
[44] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1.
[45] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 4.
[46] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 7.
[47] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 5.
[48] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 1.
[49] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 161.
[50] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 162.

African church effectively assisting traumatised survivors of war toward inner healing and spiritual transformation.[51] The lack of research and data confirm the general perception that emotional and psychological trauma are mostly left unaddressed in the African church context.

There is a mandate for more active church involvement in addressing trauma in communities and to engage in resolving the effects of trauma and grief, as well as tending to physical and spiritual needs of the traumatised.[52] The church is in an ideal position to implement creative methods that resonate with the African context to address trauma effectively, safely, and within the framework of how trauma is understood in African communities.[53] Exploring the effectiveness of various art therapies to address trauma in African church communities could allow for more accessible treatment for trauma that is free from stigma and less influenced by Western approaches that might be ignorant of African contexts.

The Role of Art Therapy in Trauma Counselling

Traditional counselling methodologies view communication as the primary medium of dialogue between counsellor and client, enabling the exchange of meaning within family, community, and therapeutic contexts.[54] Communication serves as a catalyst for human connectedness, extending beyond verbal interaction. Artistic expression offers an alternative mode of communication that reflects the inner world of its creator–art thus becomes a language.[55] Expressive forms, such as visual arts, dance, movement, dramatic enactment, creative writing, imaginative play, and music, provide non-verbal means of conveying emotions and perceptions.[56] Creative art therapies serve

[51] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 9.
[52] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 1.
[53] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 7.
[54] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 27.
[55] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[56] Malchiodi, *Trauma and Expressive Arts*, 1.

as a gestalt language that enables symbols and imagery to transcend the limitations of verbal expression[57] and cultural barriers.[58]

Regulating persisting sensory experiences linked to trauma remains challenging in traditional psychotherapy because therapeutic interventions might not effectively address recurring manifestations of trauma.[59] There has been an increase in implementing creative art therapies that are informed by recent neurobiological research in response to verbal psychotherapeutic methods that are lacking more effective biological, mental, and psychological integration toward social well-being.[60]

Regardless of how long ago traumatic events occurred, an individual often experiences ongoing mental and emotional distress.[61] An example, as previously mentioned, is prolonged PTSD in survivors of war.[62] Creative art therapies can help trauma survivors to safely deal with the ongoing symptoms that keep them anchored in past traumatic experiences. According to research, creative expression facilitates post traumatic growth that is characterised by progressing from merely surviving to discovering renewed purpose and meaning in life.[63]

Trauma survivors can utilise creative art therapies to narrate traumatic experiences through spatial perception and bodily movements that express emotional and cognitive interpretations of trauma.[64] Creative writing and expressive drawing provide opportunities for survivors to verbalise their traumatic experiences and so reconnect fragmented emotions and thoughts.[65] Individuals also connect to their artwork and the therapist in a meaningful way.

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[57] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 6.
[58] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[59] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[60] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 7.
[61] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[62] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 161; Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 5.
[63] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[64] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385-386.
[65] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 386.

The potential for art as a therapeutic tool in trauma counselling is therefore evident.

Art offers a safe, collaborative environment in which survivors are free to explore their traumatic narratives without prescription or unrealistic expectations. This accepting environment aligns with *Sinawe*–an African approach originated from the Zulu meaning 'We are with you'–that signifies unity through community and communal support and understanding.[66] This aspect of communal unity aligns with Scriptures that encourage the church to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2) and to demonstrate selfless compassion to those who struggle in certain areas of life and faith (Rom 15:1). The concept of communal togetherness can be extended to 'God is with you' (Ps 46:1) as the survivor is invited to collaborate with God during the healing process.

It is in the safety of a familiar collaborative environment that the application of art can foster reconnection with self, others, and God. The community of believers can enhance collective and individual healing, as well as encourage survivors to actively participate in rewriting their life narratives.

Art provides a safe pathway for restoring connection to lived experiences, internal equilibrium, and communication, all of which have been fragmented because of trauma.[67] Trauma often disrupts connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain which is rarely addressed in traditional African counselling due to ignorance.[68] Artistic expressions have been found to promote the reintegration of brain hemispheres without medical intervention. For lay and pastoral counsellors in the African context, the challenge lies in effectively engaging survivors 'perceptions and cognitive processing of trauma using art in trauma counselling.[69]

Art in trauma counselling aligns with the holistic African worldview of human existence, as it serves as a psychological and cognitive processing tool, an emotional outlet, and a conduit for spiritual healing.[70] In a Christian

[66] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 5.
[67] Schnetzer, *Creative Arts*, 233-234.
[68] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 6.
[69] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1.
[70] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 2.

therapeutic space, the Holy Spirit is invited to offer spiritual insight into survivors' trauma-saturated perceptions of self, God, and the world, and to provide opportunities for survivors to reconnect with God. As survivors participate in artistic expression to explore their trauma-saturated narratives, God's redemptive and restorative narrative emerges through themes of hope, compassion, and healing for the broken (Ps 34:18; 147:13; Mt 9:36).

Easily accessible art forms in the African context include drawing and writing, which require minimal resources. Other art forms associated with African cultures that lend themselves to symbolic representations of trauma and the healing process include painting, weaving, beading, and wood or clay sculpting. Engaging in various artistic expressions stimulates dialogue that facilitates the processing of traumatic experiences and memories. The focus is not on the art as a finished product but on enjoying the creative process and fostering a trusting therapeutic relationship.[71] One does not have to be artistically inclined to participate, which makes art therapy accessible to all people of all ages.

Art also functions as a form of storytelling in group trauma counselling sessions that allow participants to share individual and communal experiences while relieving anxiety and emotional pain.[72] When words fail to express, art communicates survivors' understanding of God and his presence in their suffering and enables the survivor to discover God's perspective and purposes despite past traumatic experiences.

The Role of Drama Therapy in Trauma Counselling

According to the South African Arts Therapies Association (SANATA), drama therapy involves the intentional and systematic use of drama and theatrical processes to promote symptom relief, emotional, cognitive, and physical integration, and personal growth.[73] Drama therapy can be conducted individually or in groups. Drama enables the exploration of experiences and symbolic and metaphorical reflection through techniques, such as role play,

[71] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 8.
[72] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 20.
[73] SANATA, 'Drama Therapy'.

improvisation, enactment, ritual, storytelling, miming, puppetry, mask work, drama games, and text-based exercises.[74]

Trauma survivors often struggle to verbalise their experiences and may become withdrawn or even mute.[75] For some individuals, no amount of prompting will elicit discussion of their trauma. In such cases, artistic expression through drama or play provides a means to 'tell without talking,' allowing survivors to convey somatic dimensions of their experiences non-verbally.[76] Dramatic expression bypasses dissociative mechanisms, facilitates self-reflection, and enables the articulation of unconscious conflicts, thereby promoting verbal expression.[77]

Traumatic events overwhelm a person's boundaries, autonomy, and capacity for action, as the body is the primary site of impact.[78] Traumatic memories are stored in the body and are expressed through symptoms, behaviours, and body language when the nervous system is triggered into a state of hyper-arousal. The cortical midline regions of the brain–medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, lateral parietal cortices, lateral temporal cortex, hippocampal formation, and precuneus–are disrupted, and the accurate integration of information is impaired.[79] Imaginative dramatic re-enactment promotes the reconnection of the brain's cortical midline and supports the restoration of physical, emotional, and cognitive self-regulation. Imaginative re-enactment of traumatic experiences through bodily expression facilitates the brain's reinterpretation of past events and memory consolidation.[80]

Bodily expressions provide significant insight into trauma survivors' coherence of traumatic experiences.[81] Survivors' active participation in the healing process through bodily expression fosters awareness and reintegration between body and mind. This deeply personal process reflects the individual's

[74] SANATA, 'Drama Therapy'.
[75] Malchiodi, *Trauma and Expressive Arts*, 3.
[76] Malchiodi, *Trauma and Expressive Arts*, 6.
[77] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[78] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 14.
[79] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 15.
[80] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 15.
[81] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.

unique interpretation of their traumatic experience. For example, collective trauma, such as a bomb explosion, is expressed differently by each affected individual through unique dramatic re-enactments. These divergent bodily expressions provide valuable insight regarding the personal coherence of their experiences. To avoid hindering effective processing and healing, facilitators must guard against imposing expectations that trauma be expressed in a specific way.[82] There is no right or wrong when it comes to dramatic expression of trauma. Participants should feel comfortable, safe, and accepted throughout the process.

Dramatic expressions give voice to traumatic experiences that might otherwise have remained unaddressed. Storytelling through imaginative dramatic expression enables safe exploration of traumatic sequences as the participant and counsellor are transported to a different time and space. The survivor engages with their unconscious thoughts related to the traumatic experience and gradually deconstructs complex emotions as they emerge into conscious understanding.[83]

In African cultures, drama has played a central role in religious rituals and tribal ceremonies. Collective village experiences of cultural history are re-enacted through role play and miming, often accompanied by music and dance. Dramatic expression as a cultural practice utilised for psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing, holds significant potential for trauma recovery within diverse cultural contexts. Dramatic expression facilitates post traumatic growth as survivors engage and process their traumatic experiences, and develop renewed competence, agency, empowerment, connection, and self-insight.[84] Participation in dramatic expression of traumatic experiences allows participants to freely re-enact their understanding of God's presence and comfort during suffering, engage their restoration process, and develop a deeper spiritual connection with God.

[82] Goss and Adebowale, 'Counselling and Guidance', 354.
[83] Schnetzer, *Creative Arts*, 87.
[84] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 18.

The Role of Music Therapy in Trauma Counselling

Music therapy is highly effective for treating trauma.[85] Improvisation, singing, instrument playing, and active listening are ways through which informal engagement with music can be incorporated into therapy or counselling.[86] Research indicates that music improves concentration and creativity, reduces depression, anxiety, and stress, and benefits overall physical, emotional, and cognitive health.[87] The enjoyment of performing or listening to music lowers cortisol levels and stimulates the release of endorphins, which counteract painful and complex emotional responses to trauma. Playing background music has a calming effect and promotes inner peace and well-being.[88]

Vocal and instrumental music facilitate communication beyond language barriers.[89] Music is a medium for emotional reflection, expression, and recreation that fosters insight into self and relationships, particularly in group contexts.[90] The non-prescriptive nature of improvisation provides freedom to explore personal and shared interpretations of traumatic experiences as participants engage with one another. As a central part of African music culture, improvisation can be effectively integrated into music therapy to address collective trauma.

In African societies, music is an integral part of storytelling, communicating messages, and celebration of life events.[91] Music and dance are associated with social and religious rituals, means of communicating with nature and God. The healing properties of music are recognised and applied to facilitate healing of children and adults suffering from mental deficits in African schools, hospitals, and churches. Although music therapy is not specifically linked to the healing of trauma, music therapy is often utilised as a tool to help communities deal

[85] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 101; Swart, 'From Trauma', 195.
[86] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 101.
[87] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 101.
[88] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 102.
[89] Jones, *The Arts*, 41-42.
[90] Jones, *The Arts*, 45.
[91] Nnamani, *The Role of Music Therapy*, 455.

with traumatic communal calamities, such as the death of family members or natural disasters.[92]

Due to the imbedded practice of music, singing, rhythms, and dance in religious expression, the therapeutic value of music for the healing of trauma is often overlooked in African cultures. This might be connected to interpreting trauma manifestations as tormenting evil spirits[93] rather than understanding the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of traumatic experiences. Using music and singing to communicate inner experiences and perspectives helps the trauma survivor to reconnect with their true sense of self as a valuable created being.[94] Spiritually speaking, music and singing are pathways to expressing worship, lament, prayers, and declarations of God's faithfulness, which have profound positive healing effects on the human soul (Ps 30:11–12)

In contexts of societal violence, such as South Africa, improvisational music therapy enables survivors, especially children, to reimagine and transform painful experiences.[95] Music interaction between therapist and child fosters control, normalises engagement with trauma, and aids healing by integrating imagination and play.[96] Music conveys stories of trauma without complicated words, reducing stress, fear, and hyper-vigilance, and allowing emotional release without re-traumatisation.

Music can be used as a creative expression of painful stories and promote holistic healing.[97] Studies show that pitch, rhythm, and timbre of music produce specific emotional effects on people, linking those to the reduction of stress, fear, hyper-vigilance, and other symptoms related to trauma.[98] Instrumental music can facilitate the expression of emotional pain as well as faith and trust in God (Ps 92:1–2).

[92] Nnamani, *The Role of Music Therapy*, 457.
[93] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 20-23.
[94] Swart, 'From Trauma', 203.
[95] Pavlicevic, 'South Africa', 111.
[96] Pavlicevic, 'South Africa', 112.
[97] Gouk, *Musical Healing*, 171.
[98] Gouk, *Musical Healing*, 181.

Different aspects of music offer opportunities for survivors to express traumatic stories, and release trauma-associated emotions. Music and song are ways in which to communicate one's deepest despair in moments when God seems far away (Ps 13:1–2), and to express hope, joy, and adoration to God (Pss 13 5–6; 100:1 –2; Hab 3:17–19). Music becomes the storyteller and healing agent that provides insight into the inner world of the survivor without the stress of harsh confrontation and re-traumatisation.

Music can be integrated as an additional expressive narrative tool for healing alongside drama and art therapy. However, the potential of addressing trauma through these culturally familiar forms of creative expression has not been fully explored yet.

Suggested Practical Application

The practical application of the arts in Christian counselling in the African church offers trauma survivors the opportunity to experience Christlike non-judgmental compassion while they make sense of their traumatic experiences. Creative arts are helpful in Christian counselling to connect trauma survivors to God in their individual faith journeys and in cultivating resilience. Practical guidelines will follow to demonstrate the application of creative expression in relation to Christian counselling within the African context.

Practical guidelines

To create a sense of safety, Christian counsellors can invite trauma survivors to participate in familiar activities of their choice, such as beading, drawing, clay work, or basket weaving. Counsellors must emphasise that there is no prescribed way of creating art to relieve unrealistic expectations to please the counsellor. The counsellor invites survivors to share their traumatic experiences while engaging in the creative activity and use the art materials to represent emotions and thoughts related to their experiences. Spiritual meaning enters the activity as participants use specific materials to represent Scripture passages, such as Psalm 23, that speak of God's goodness, faithfulness, and love. The activity becomes deeply personal and prophetic by applying Scripture to the healing process. The assurance that God is present,

even in one's darkest hour (Ps 23:4) becomes a concrete reminder that fosters resilience as the participant creates a tangible object, like a bracelet.

Another example is moulding clay into shapes that represent specific traumatic experiences–survivors concretise and interpret their experiences by making abstract metaphors tangible. Clay figures figuratively 'speak' to help survivors verbalise their inner thoughts about what happened to them. The counsellor prepares a clay figure in the middle of the room that represents God. Each participant is given the opportunity to merge their own clay figures into the central figure (God) as a prophetic act of surrendering their trauma into God's hands. The counsellor avoids promising survivors that all consequences of their trauma will disappear. Instead, survivors are invited to read or narrate relevant Scriptures about God's presence and comforting love during those experiences, such as Psalm 56:3–4. The survivor's perspective regarding God's presence during times of trouble is transformed through the activity as they discover the truth of God having been present all along (Heb 13:5).

Basket weaving can represent carrying the burden of trauma by placing various objects inside the completed basket. Objects can represent negative emotions, such as fear, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and grief. These objects could include broken pieces of pottery, crumpled balls of paper, torn clothing, or damaged items. By replacing these objects with elements that symbolically correspond to scriptural truths, participants 'foci are directed toward hope in Christ and God's comfort and faithful presence. This process represents transformation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Each item may be replaced with different fresh foliage like flowers, green leaves, or uniquely shaped small stones of different colours, each representing truths from Scripture. Examples are crumpled paper (fear) replaced by lilies to represent Isaiah 41:10, and torn clothing (hopelessness) replaced by a small shiny black stone to represent Psalm 27:1. Symbols are uniquely interpreted by the participants instead of the counsellor assigning meaning to symbols and colours. The goal is for participants to apply learned insights from Scripture to their experiences of suffering, and to connect with the emerging message from the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26–27).

Participants embody their survival narratives through dramatic enactment of traumatic experiences. This process might be emotionally charged for

participants, but it facilitates the processing of trauma and integration of healing. God's protection can be dramatised in response to initial trauma re-enactments and so reinforce the truth of God's constant presence (Ps 34:18; 46:1; Is 43:2). Group interaction in this instance is valuable as participants play different roles and engage in each other's narratives.

Dance and movement within the cultural contexts of participants are powerful tools for expression. The spontaneous, improvisational nature of dance and movement in African cultural traditions eliminates the issue of rigid choreography. Survivors can freely express their interpretation of traumatic experiences as those memories and related thoughts come to mind in real time. Instrumental music facilitates free-form dance and expression, and participants choreograph their own movements while processing their trauma. The enjoyment of free-form dance helps alleviate anxiety and stress related to the trauma.

Singing worship songs in participants' native languages promotes community cohesion. Painful stories are communicated through call-and-response songs, and collectively, the group responds to affirm God's compassion, goodness, and love, thereby reinforcing emotional and spiritual healing as well as joy (Ps 42:5; 71:23; 95:1–2)

The extensive variety of African traditional music instruments enables survivors to tell their stories through music in a non-verbal and enjoyable way. While one participant is providing a steady drumbeat, others may take turns playing different instruments spontaneously and improvise to the drumbeat. Sitting in a circle during the activity provides a sense of togetherness and enjoyment that release stress and suppressed emotions.

The safety of a familiar, culturally communal environment promotes artistic expression as a means of processing trauma collectively instead of in isolation. The collective reinforcement of biblical truths about God's presence during times of suffering binds the community of trauma survivors together, fostering enhanced understanding of and compassion for one another.

As Christian counsellors journey alongside the traumatised through their journeys of discovery and healing from trauma, the rest of the church

community is positively influenced. Communicating one's pain in a safe environment through various artistic expressions fosters renewed connections to self, others, and God. Survivors gradually develop empathy for other survivors and discover their individual and communal purposes as they grow in confidence and faith through their healing process. As a result, the mental, psychological, and spiritual health of the church benefit significantly.

Christian counsellors can facilitate informal trauma workshops and invite leadership to participate in experimenting with what might work effectively in their unique church context. Facilitating artistic expression does not require formal training which makes it accessible for pastors and ministers, whereas psychotherapy requires training. Collecting art materials from church members and the environment is an inexpensive suggestion that involves the church community preparing safe spaces in which to address trauma ethically and free of judgment and stigma.

This research addresses the gap regarding how pastors and Christian counsellors can address trauma within the scope of their training and apply easily accessible cultural contextual tools to give voice to emotional, spiritual, and psychological pain due to trauma. Churches in Africa possess great potential to assist in the process of making meaning of traumatic experiences through facilitating art, drama, and music as powerful healing tools that promote holistic wellbeing to the community. However, there are also potential challenges to consider.

Potential challenges

The implementation of creative counselling modalities in trauma counselling poses some challenges. Various forms of art therapy is a predominantly Western idea that might be viewed as a white practice[99] that could cause distrust, skepticism, and fear in participants. Counsellors may need to adapt activities and techniques to align with African sociocultural practices and symbolic meanings which differ significantly from those of mainstream European traditions.[100]

[99] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[100] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.

Facilitating connections between past traumatic experiences and present realities to reconstruct personal narratives requires the use of culturally relevant metaphors that participants can meaningfully identify with.[101] Counsellors might face challenges regarding avoiding culturally biased counselling approaches that might hinder trust and respect between counsellors and participants. When counsellors adopt an open and playful stance, a welcoming environment is created through which participants are encouraged to explore and experiment freely with artistic expression.[102]

Pertaining to the use of art, music, and drama within trauma counselling, there are important ethical implications to consider. Informed consent must be obtained from participants and their spiritual leaders.[103] This aspect is often overlooked by Christian counsellors due to lack of training.[104] Maintaining strict confidentiality is a significant ethical challenge due to spiritual leaders often insisting on accessing participants' privately shared information. Ethical boundaries regarding confidentiality and when referral is warranted should be communicated clearly before therapy begins.

In war-torn countries, counsellors might experience significant practical challenges, such as access to art resources, lack of safe environments for meaningful participation, and participants fearing emotional risk-taking.[105] Participants might struggle expressing themselves freely and processing activities afterward because basic safety needs are overwhelmed. Counsellors must be sensitive to the cultural, spiritual, and political contexts of traumatised participants to facilitate and foster the process of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and meaning-making.[106]

Conclusion

This research highlighted the value of art, drama, and music in trauma counselling within the African church context. The research explored the role

[101] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[102] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[103] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[104] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3-5.
[105] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9844.
[106] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 18.

of creative modalities as familiar forms of creative expression that enable trauma survivors to safely express their experiences and emotions. The church can create opportunities to de-stigmatise trauma and its manifestations, and address the profound psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects of trauma non-judgmentally and compassionately. This study explored the gaps in research regarding the application of art, drama, and music in Christian trauma counselling and include the facilitation of trauma survivors' narrating their stories, processing their complex emotions, and discovering redemptive meaning from their traumatic experiences through engaging with Scripture and fostering an embodied awareness of God's presence in their suffering.

This research explored how creative modalities in Christian counselling promote holistic healing through a non-confrontational approach that transcends psychological, cultural, and spiritual barriers that often prevent recovery. Art therapy is effective in facilitating emotional and psychological processing of trauma; drama therapy facilitates a non-threatening exploration and embodiment of traumatic experiences; and music therapy creates the opportunity for renewed collective meaning-making by strengthening communal emotional and spiritual expressions. The study explored innovative ways to apply these creative modalities practically and within ethical boundaries while respecting African cultural contexts.

This research contributes to the call for the African church to support their traumatised communities in more creative ways that could foster communal resilience and spiritual growth. The research encourages the African church to create safe, compassionate, and non-judgmental healing environments for traumatised individuals. Through the use of creative modalities in Christian counselling within the African church, trauma survivors may reclaim agency over their trauma narratives and experience holistic healing in Christ that promotes meaningful participation in their faith communities.

The researcher recommends that trauma education regarding the nature, manifestations, and effects of trauma be prioritised for Christian counsellors in the African church. Understanding trauma and its debilitating effects promote deeper compassion toward those who struggle with persistent symptoms, especially PTSD. Church leaders are encouraged to demystify and de-stigmatise their church community's understanding of traumatic experiences.

Pastors and Christian counsellors may initiate expressive art workshops and guided conversations while participants engage in one artistic expressive activity at a time. Collaboration between leadership and Christian counsellors creates trust, church unity, and reflects the biblical call to carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Christian counsellors are encouraged to remain culturally sensitive and ethical when using artistic expression as a tool for addressing trauma.

Further research is required to evaluate the practical implementation of creative modalities and their effects on the mental, emotional, and spiritual health of congregations and communities. Suggested research includes potential development of structured training programmes for Christian counsellors and pastors within culturally sensitive frameworks, ongoing evaluation regarding their effectiveness on trauma survivors, and establishing policy guidelines for ethical practice.

Future research is also needed to examine the possibility of trauma survivors serving as peer facilitators for other survivors on their journey toward healing in Christ through creative expressions.

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Healing Beyond Theory: SIL Ethiopia's Journey from Trauma to Hope through Contextual Theology

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Abstract

This study examines how the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) Ethiopia applies trauma-healing and contextual theology to address the Ethiopian context. In Ethiopia, which faces many sources of trauma, faith-based organisations are required to play an important role in responding to the community wounds.

The study combines two approaches: a review of existing literature and direct participant observation of trauma-healing sessions facilitated by SIL. It explores the barriers that hinder the accessibility and long-term effectiveness of trauma-healing initiatives offered to survivors. The results show that contextual theology and a theology of hope offer tools for trauma-healing, yet their implementation is often hindered by limited resources, cultural misconceptions about suffering, and skepticism from academic and church circles.

SIL Ethiopia's healing initiatives indicate the effectiveness of trauma-healing that recognises spiritual aspects, community values, and local stories of hope. This study offers insights for faith-based organisations working on trauma-care and for policymakers to be inclusive. It urges theology and trauma-healing practitioners to listen while survivors reclaim their lives and to be present to strengthen resilience by acknowledging cultural and spiritual practices.

Introduction

Ethiopian communities are experiencing trauma from political instability, ethnic tensions, and natural disasters. Recent studies show that between 19.4% to 67.5% of the population have experienced severe trauma leading to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[1] The impact is especially heavy in war-affected areas, increasing to 48.42% of the population, with women and children being the most vulnerable.[2] These figures indicate the urgent need for effective healing strategies, especially from faith-based organisations (FBOs).

Beyond the statistics, the pain became clear during a trauma-healing session led by Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) Ethiopia and Mekane Yesus Seminary (MYS). I saw people whispering, crying, praying, and starting to reclaim their stories. This experience revealed that there is a gap between academic work and lived suffering, which this study seeks to bridge.

Despite the significance of trauma and faith-based healing, little empirical work has examined how organisations such as SIL Ethiopia put theological frameworks into practices in ways that are culturally sensitive and sustainable. Existing scholars often question whether trauma-healing approaches are effective and practical, but few have studied their actual impact in Ethiopian contexts.

This study aims to address the gap by exploring how contextual theology can support trauma-healing initiatives, using SIL Ethiopiaas a case study. This study provides insights for FBOs and policymakers by combining theory with practice, working for recovery that honours faith, culture, and community. As a participant, I bring an observer-perspective to examine theological frameworks and the experiences of trauma-healing in Ethiopia.

We should distinguish Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD). Judith Herman proposed this distinction in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*:

[1] Anbesaw et al, 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder'; Makango, et al, "Prevalence and Factors", 81; Melkam, et al, 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder'.
[2] Tinsae et al, 'Post-traumatic Stress Disorder'.

> The syndrome that follows upon prolonged, repeated trauma needs its own name. I propose to call it 'complex post-traumatic stress disorder.' The responses to trauma are best understood as a spectrum of conditions rather than as a single disorder. They range from a brief stress reaction that gets better by itself and never qualifies for a diagnosis, to classic or simple post-traumatic stress disorder, to the complex syndrome of prolonged, repeated trauma.[3]

Research Questions

- What are the challenges and opportunities faith-based organisations, particularly SIL Ethiopia, encounter when implementing theologically-sound trauma-healing initiatives in Ethiopia?

- How do cultural contexts influence trauma-healing practices?

- How is contextual theology translated into practical trauma-healing within SIL Ethiopia's programming?

- How do communal African practices shape trauma recovery, as observed in SIL Ethiopia sessions?

Methodology

This study uses two methods: a qualitative literature review and participant observation. A systematic review is employed for literature, organisational reports, and frameworks in order to establish a foundation for trauma-healing and contextual theology. The review was then analysed thematically to identify challenges and opportunities in trauma-healing, focusing on the intersection of theology and mental health in Ethiopia. The research also draws from the researcher's own experience in SIL Ethiopia-led healing sessions. This study explores how theology can be put into practice. The combination of academia and lived experience provides a deeper understanding of both theory and practice.

[3] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 138.

Purpose of the Research

By using SIL Ethiopia as a case study, this research explores how faith-based organisations in Ethiopia use theological concepts in trauma-healing. It draws on a literature review combined with participant observation to identify barriers to accessibility and effectiveness. It looks for ways to bridge the gap between theory and practice by giving practical insights for FBOs and policy makers. It also advocates for trauma-recovery approaches that recognise faith, culture, and community.

Scopes and Limitations

This study focuses on the Ethiopian context by comparing it with pan-African theology and selected global trauma studies. To bridge the African context with wider Christian trauma conversation, it engages with contextual theology, trauma-informed care, and indigenous practices.

Reliance on secondary sources for wider contextual analysis, particular attention to Psalms and Lamentations, and limited access to rural data might be considered limitations of the study. Participant observation adds to the dialogue but may not fully apply to non-Ethiopian contexts. In addition, the recommendations are mainly for FBOs rather than secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Ethiopia's Trauma Landscape

Ethiopia's many ethnic groups, languages, and traditions have created complex social and cultural relationships that affect community life and responses to trauma. Ethnic identities shape representation, governance, and social interactions.[4] Ethnic federalism, adopted in 1991, institutionalised fragmentation and fuelled mistrust, generating inter-communal trauma that complicates reconciliation.[5] *The Healing of Memories*[6], which offers an exploration of how African Christians respond to politically-induced trauma,

[4] Tesfaye, 'Challenges and Boons'.
[5] Selassie, 'Ethnic Federalism'; Mengistu, 'Ethnic Federalism'; Moreda, 'Imperial Regimes'.
[6] Girma ed., *The Healing of Memories*.

has a particular relevance to Ethiopia's complex historical and socio-political realities.

Historical episodes such as the Derg regime's Red Terror created intergenerational trauma,[7] while recent reforms (2018-2021) including the release of political prisoners, expansion of civic freedoms and peace initiatives with Eritrea[8] together with subsequent inter-communal conflicts in Tigray intensified mass displacement, famine-related trauma, and widespread CPTSD.[9] Amsalu K. Addis examines the ethnic cleansing of the Amhara people, emphasising the historical roots of ethnic tensions and calling for urgent dialogue and reconciliation.[10] Scholars such as Theodros Teklu and Addis highlight how violence generates collective victimhood narratives. They further show how cycles of fear reflect the suffering of marginalised groups and emphasise the pervasive trauma landscape.[11]

Ethiopia also contends with natural disasters, including floods, earthquakes, landslides, and volcanos, resulting in food insecurity, displacement, and environmental trauma where loss of livelihood and forced migration erode resilience and deepen vulnerability. The destruction of churches and mosques erodes cultural heritage, producing spiritual trauma through the loss of sacred spaces and identity markers.[12]

The combined impact of natural disasters and conflicts have led communities to internally displace, often now living in crowded camps that lack adequate water, sanitation, and healthcare, which exacerbates PTSD and depression. As Emmanuel Katongole reflects, violence 'shatters the foundations of human and social existence' and produces 'inexpressible grief and suffering.'[13] Amidst these increasing challenges, faith-based organisations have emerged as vital actors of hope and resilience.

[7] Teklu, 'Mirror of Memory'.
[8] SOAS, *Forced Displacement and Social Cohesion,* 14-15.
[9] Amnesty International, 'We will erase you'.
[10] Addis, 'Ethnic Tensions'.
[11] Teklu, 'Mirror of Memory'; Addis, 'Ethnic Tensions'..
[12] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma'.
[13] Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 31-32.

Role of Faith-Based Organisations in Ethiopia

Addressing Ethiopia's crises requires contextual, inclusive, and sustainable solutions. FBOs can serve as mediators, leveraging moral authority and extensive grassroots networks to foster dialogue among conflicting ethnic groups.

The Deputy Head of the Addis Ababa Peace and Security Bureau stated, 'Though Ethiopia is a secular state, the collaboration between the government and religious leaders is vital to the nation's stability and development.'[14] The deputy's call emphasises the unique collaboration between religious institutions and faith-based organisations in Ethiopia's peace-building efforts.

Religious institutions, including the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) and Catholic, Orthodox, Islamic and Protestant bodies collaborate with local FBOs and international organisations, such as World Vision Ethiopia, the World Council of Churches, and Caritas Internationalis to strengthen contextualised peace-building capacity.[15] Programs like Faith Leaders Trauma Training in Northern Ethiopia and IRCE's reconciliation workshops provide collective healing through interfaith dialogue.[16]

These efforts draw on community-based healing frameworks, providing psychosocial support, counselling, and trauma-informed spiritual care, which are important for reconciliation and social cohesion.[17]

Trauma-healing Initiatives, SIL Ethiopia

SIL Ethiopia, with over fifty years of local experience, has expanded from a language development organisation to trauma-healing, Scripture engagement, and Bible storytelling. SIL Ethiopia offers participants opportunities to process wounds caused by war, violence, poverty and disasters.

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[14] Girma, 'Ethiopia: National Dialogue'.

[15] 'World Vision Launches €2 Million Peace Building Project'; World Council of Churches, 'WCC's Peace-Building Work'; Caritas Internationalis, 'Peacebuilding'.

[16] Live Global, 'Faith Leaders Trauma Training'; Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, 'Conflict Management'.

[17] Grindall, 'Local Ethiopian Languages'.

Bible-based sessions employ group consultations for victims of traumatic events and training of trainers, supported by the manual *Healing the Wounds of Trauma,* which has been translated into over 150 languages.[18] Storytelling, music, art, and paired listening enable participants to express pain and emotions creatively. These diverse approaches resonate with the trauma-informed care principles that emphasise narrative reconstruction, creative expression, and communal validation in fostering resilience.[19]

A notable example is the December 2024 seminar at MYS, facilitated by SIL and the Norwegian Mission Society. With approximately 130 participants, each day included devotions, trauma-related scripture readings, and structured sessions. Activities included paired-listening exercises, artistic reflection through drawing and poetry, lamentation letters, and symbolic acts of bringing hurts to the cross. Participants reported greater openness in sharing grief, deeper awareness of listening practices, and renewed capacity of forgiveness. Facilitators noted improved group cohesion and willingness to discuss experiences of displacement and violence. The session concluded with certification for participants to continue trauma-healing work within their communities.

While SIL's documentation and immediate participant feedback provide valuable insights into the psychosocial impact of trauma-healing, systematic outcome measurements remain limited. Nevertheless, initiatives such as the MYS seminar illustrate how FBOs can operationalise community-based healing frameworks and trauma-informed care principles, contributing to reconciliation and social cohesion in post-conflict Ethiopia.

Theological Frameworks

Contextual Theology for Trauma-healing

Contextual theology considers the context in which faith is lived, engaging with the social, cultural, political, and economic realities shaping human experiences. Effective Christian counselling speaks biblical truth in language

[18] SIL International, 'Supporting Survivors of Violent Conflict'.
[19] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 45.

and cultural idioms familiar to the community.[20] African theologians have led in developing contextual theology, emphasising how African history, cultures, and struggles inform Christian faith and practice.

Contextual theology in Africa is a dynamic and continuing conversation among the community. It refuses to accept theology as fixed or universal but sees it as something that must be continually reinterpreted in light of changing contexts. Contextual theology urges theologians to listen to the voices of marginalised people and to engage with the realities of trauma.

African Theology and Contextualisation

African theologians have argued that African Christianity must be understood in light of African history, culture, and everyday struggles. Emmanuel Katongole argues that African theology cannot be separated from the continent's history of violence, colonialism, and ongoing struggles for justice. He asks, 'How can one even begin to think about hope and what hope would look like in the context of Africa's ongoing realities of war, violence and social disruptions?'[21] For Katongole, theology must listen to the stories of suffering and hope, rooting reflection in lived realities rather than abstract theory.

Other African theologians contribute by exploring how cultural values, storytelling, and community life deepen Christian faith, countering Western theological frameworks that may not fit African contexts. Kwame Bediako argues that Christianity in Africa must be expressed through African cultural lenses rather than imported Western individualism. His work has helped to shape the understanding of African theology as a genuine expression of faith within African experiences.[22] John Mbiti's work on African traditional religions and philosophies provides a foundation for Christian theology and African perceptions of God.[23] Adrian Hastings adds that local contexts influence the development of African church history.[24]

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[20] Gingrich and Gingrich, eds., *Treating Trauma*, 12.
[21] Katongole, *Born from Lament,* 22.
[22] Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*.
[23] Mbiti, *African Religions*.
[24] Hastings, *The Church in Africa*.

Community Healing and Trauma-healing

Communal practices are a crucial feature of contextual theology in Africa, expressed through storytelling, cultural values, and shared rituals, deepening Christian faith and values. These communal practices are not only theological and therapeutic, they are also a significant part of African life. These practices help communities integrate trauma-healing into faith and daily life.

Katongole's reflections on reconciliation and peace-building show how theology can help communities envision life after trauma.[25] Bediako and Mbiti recognise the role of cultural idioms and African religious worldviews in shaping healing experiences. These assertions suggest that healing communities and trauma-related initiatives are inseparable. Contextual theology can offer practical tools for reconciliation and strengthening social cohesion in post-conflict African contexts.

A Theology of Hope for Trauma-healing

A theology of hope and contextual theology are closely related in Africa where hope becomes a gateway to reconciliation and the restoration of social cohesion in times of suffering. Hope in an African Christian understanding depends on God's covenantal faithfulness; it is not naive optimism, but a courageous stance confirmed by God's promise of restoration and re-creation.

> Without God re-creation is impossible, since both 'creation' and 're-creation' points to God and God's ongoing work of 'reconciling all things', which offers the gift of 'new creation', not simply as a future promise but as a present reality.[26]

Building on Briere and Scott, hope functions as a sign of recovery, helping survivors to look beyond pain.[27] In Ethiopia this forward movement is expressed through lament, which refuses silence amidst suffering while proclaiming God's redemptive work.[28] The Psalms model this pattern as raw cries of distress are followed by declarations that God will turn our 'mourning into dancing' (Ps. 30:11, NIV). This type of lament invites churches to express

[25] Katongole, *Born from Lament*.
[26] Katongole, 33-34.
[27] Briere and Scott, *Principles of Trauma Therapy*, 23.
[28] Teklu, 'Mirror of Memory', 119-122.

themes of hope, joy, and the transformation of sorrow into unending happiness in God.

Judith Herman reminds us that recovery requires narration in which survivors regain agency and meaning.[29] Social healing as described by John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach, is the 'reconstruction of communal relations after mass violence… through initiatives that re-humanise broken relationships, rebuild trust, normalise daily life and restore hope.'[30] Katongole elaborates this notion by defining re-humanising as 'rebuilding the shattered foundations of social and human existence in the wake of violence.'[31] He then asks how re-humanisation occurs and through what practices it can be sustained.

African theologians such as Motsi and Masango argue that hope is inherently communal, sustained through worship, storytelling, and mutual care,[32] which support the re-humanisation process. This challenges individualistic models and calls churches to be agents of hope, providing safe spaces for restoration, solidarity, and empowerment, by acknowledging pain.

In Africa, suffering often generates hope, a refusal to accept despair as final. Hope inspires action and resilience by encouraging communities to pursue transformation.[33] Katongole's theology of hope links hope with forgiveness and rebuilding relationships after conflict.[34] It challenges fatalism, affirming God's promises for a joyful future even amid hardship and calling Christians to act as salt and light (Matt 5:13-16). Contextual theology and a theology of hope are thus intertwined, reflecting a living faith responsive to African realities.

SIL Ethiopia operationalises hope through practices such as writing lamentation letters, symbolic acts of naming and bringing hurt to the cross, and reading narratives from Job and Lamentations. The daily devotions, scripture readings, and shared prayers reinforce hope as a collective stance.

[29] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 45.
[30] Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 7.
[31] Katongole, 33.
[32] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma'.
[33] Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 23-29.
[34] Katongole, *A Future for Africa*, 55-60.

The creative expressions such as arts, music, and paired listening allow participants to express pain and envision transformation, fostering resilience and joy.

Spirituality and Trauma-healing

Trauma in Ethiopia is communal, historical and spiritual, shaped by ethnic violence, displacement, and spiritual disorientation. Faith is integrated into everyday life; trauma-healing that ignores spirituality overlooks the importance of community. Contextual theology rooted in lived faith addresses trauma not only psychologically but spiritually, asking how God speaks into community suffering. Healing must engage both soul and story.

In *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining,* Shelley Rambo does not rush to redemption but rather dwells in the 'middle Saturday' where suffering lingers and healing is slow, challenging triumphalist healing narratives.[35]

> There is a Spirit of witness that persists after death and before resurrection. This Saturday Spirit does not erase the sting of death. This Spirit is, rather the breath on which any Easter proclamations must be carried.[36]

Rambo's pneumatology, based on the Gospel of John, presents the Holy Spirit not as a revolutionary force but as a quiet presence who remains with the wounded. Rather than offering closure, the Spirit represents divine love through silence and solidarity.[37] 'Trauma shatters the frameworks by which persons and communities have oriented themselves in the world.'[38] Her pneumatology echoes deeply with Ethiopia's ongoing trauma where resolution is often abstract, leading to a slow communal and spiritual healing.

Building on Rambo's emphasis on presence and solidarity with survivors, SIL's trauma healing sessions represent these practices through rituals of lament, shared silence, and prayer, embodying the Spirit's solidarity with the wounded and offering accompaniment rather than quick-fix solutions. In this way, SIL's

[35] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 8.
[36] Rambo, 'Saturday in New Orleans', 229-240.
[37] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 12-15.
[38] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 8.

sessions mirror Rambo's refusal to rush past suffering, grounding hope in biblical narratives while fostering patience and solidarity.

Seren Jones similarly indicates that trauma 'ruptures the self', requiring theological frameworks that honour brokenness.[39] 'Grace is not a magic wand. It is the presence of God in the broken places.'[40] She argues that grace is not a quick fix but a divine presence in fragmented places, providing an insight significant for FBOs like SIL in combining theology with psychological care.

Katongole's emphasis on lament, memory, and community as pathways to healing mirrors Ethiopian communal traditions of mourning and storytelling. His perspectives complements critiques off Western individualistic models by highlighting the communal and theological dimensions of healing, this approach is reflected in SIL Ethiopia's healing sessions.

Katongole's insists healing should include lament, memory and community.[41] This perspective resonates with Ethiopian mourning practices, where grief is expressed through storytelling and collective remembrance. In practice, SIL Ethiopia's healing workshops integrate these key aspects with Ethiopia's rich community traditions of healing and grieving into their programs.

Ethiopian theologian, Reverend Gudina Tumsa emphasised a theology of wholeness encompassing body, soul and society.[42] His vision challenges FBOs to address trauma spiritually and structurally, confronting injustice while fostering reconciliation. Together, these voices affirm that spirituality is indispensable to trauma-healing in Ethiopia, offering frameworks of presence, lament, grace, and wholeness that empower communities to move toward restoration.

Communal Spirituality in Trauma-healing

Ubuntu, which Desmond Tutu defines as 'A person is a person through other persons',[43] grounds reconciliation in shared humanity and divine image.

[39] Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 31.
[40] Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 45.
[41] Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 102-105.
[42] Tumsa, 'Theology of Wholeness', 45-60.
[43] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 29.

Mogobe Ramose expands *Ubuntu* to a 'philosophy of being-becoming', emphasising rationality and justice.[44] This communal ethic aligns with trauma-healing practices such as group lament, storytelling circles, and reconciliation workshops.

Similarly, the indigenous Oromo philosophy of *Namummaa* — translated as humanness, personhood and rationality — emphasises being fully human in the community as necessary for wellbeing.[45] In trauma-healing, it means restoring the individual through sustaining relationships.[46] *Ubuntu's* 'I am because we are' communal concept echoes the same, providing a framework for collective healing and reconciliation.[47] Together, *Ubuntu* and *Namummaa* reflect values of shared humanity, dignity, and interdependence, offering rich resources for collective healing. These values align with the theological understandings of the body of Christ and the interdependence of believers that supports the notion that healing is communal and spiritual.

Lament plays a central role in African spirituality. It is not merely an emotional outpouring but also a theological act of naming the suffering persons experience before God and community. Katongole describes lament as 'a refusal to forget', holding memory and hope together.[48] In Ethiopian communities, lament is expressed through song, prayer, and ritual, creating sacred spaces for communal trauma. SIL Ethiopia embodies these communal values through group sessions, communal lament services and storytelling circles, where survivors form new bonds, a community of healing and resilience.

A critical tension arises when the survivors' original communities are the sources of trauma and when survivors are marginalised, silenced, or re-traumatised by these social structures. Healing in such environments needs redefinition. Community healing does not mean returning to the same environment. Instead, *Ubuntu* and *Namummaa* enable the formation of new

[44] Ramose, *African Philosophy*, 35-40.
[45] Tolessa, *Oromo Indigenous Philosophy*, 54-67.
[46] Gerbi, 'Theorizing Namummaa'.
[47] Battle, *Ubuntu*.
[48] Katongole, *Born From Lament*, 4.

and safe 'communities of memory and hope',[49] sanctuaries where survivors make new connections and reclaim dignity and solidarity. These communities are not bound by geography, but by grace, trust, shared resilience, and support.

Obse Mekonnen explores the complex dual role of faith; it can inspire acts of compassion and solidarity and yet, when politicised, can justify division and conflict.[50] The challenge is to redirect faith toward healing, encouraging narratives that unify rather than divide. Trauma-healing groups thus become places of lived practice of restoration, embodying *Ubuntu* and *Namummaa* as frameworks sustaining community bonds and resilience.

Conceptual Models for Trauma-healing Initiatives

Motsi and Masango argue that trauma in Africa contexts is inherently communal, challenging Western models that isolate the individual while neglecting the community.[51] This suggests the need for contextualised, culturally-sensitive approaches that reflect African values such as *Ubuntu* and *Namummaa*.

SIL Ethiopia's trauma-healing initiatives have adopted story-based, Bible-centred sessions and training materials from trauma-healing institutes based in America. Yet questions arise whether this adoption has been contextualised and tailored for Ethiopia's diverse religious and communal settings.

Kobe Campbell's research on personal narratives shows that people make sense of suffering by embedding their experiences into larger cultural communal stories. Churches can facilitate this process through offering spaces for collective testimony.[52] Girma similarly noted that responses to politically-induced trauma must engage communal memory, ritual, and symbols which enable communities to name their losses and reimagine the future.[53]

[49] Katongole, *Born From Lament*, 10-11.
[50] Mekonnen, 'Political Pentecostalism and Violence'.
[51] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma,' 1-2.
[52] Campbell, *Why Am I Like This?*, 57.
[53] Girma, 119–122.

When theology is rooted in local idioms such as Amharic cries of lament (ዋይ *way*, ሰቆቃ *säqoqa* or የሀዘን እንጉርጉሮ *yehazän engurguro*), a theology of hope becomes a language that honours cultural identity and grief calling out for God's restoration.

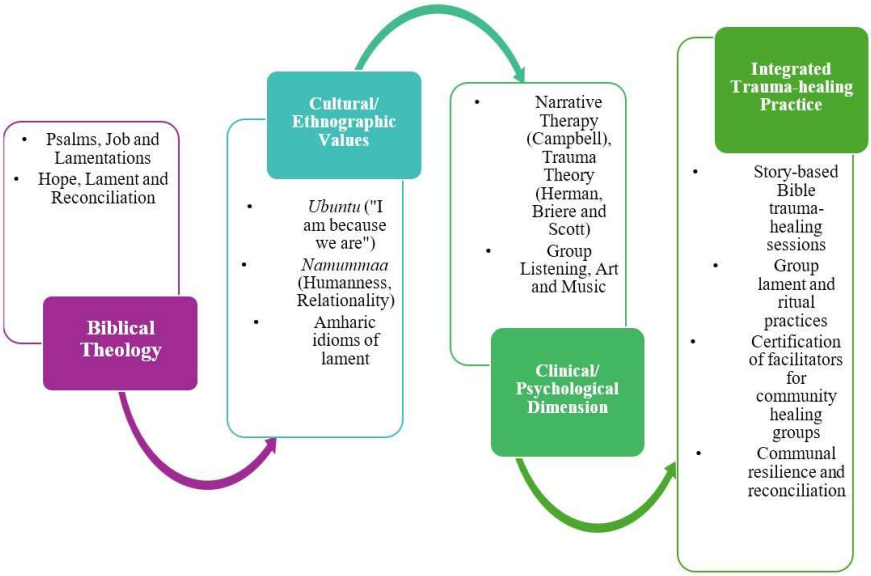
Ndung'u J. B. Ikenye's integrative Biblical-Ethnographic-Cultural-Clinical framework offers a holistic model that incorporates scripture, African ethnography, cultural practices, and clinical psychology for personal and communal restoration.[54] Complementing this, the article 'Training and Education of Pastoral Care Professionals in Africa' highlights the importance of capacity-building programs that integrate indigenous knowledge with contemporary psychological and theological frameworks, engaging local leaders and communities.[55]

These strategies recognise the holistic nature of African spiritual, cultural, and social realities. They encourage collaboration among churches, FBOs and NGOs, while empowering professionals to provide compassionate and sustainable care. Conceptual models such as those adopted by SIL Ethiopia demonstrate the necessity of contextual theology that respects African values and incorporates biblical, cultural, and clinical dimensions. Trauma-healing then becomes both an individual and communal process that deeply reflects African lived realities.

The diagram below illustrates how trauma-healing practices at SIL Ethiopia are shaped—converging to form a holistic, context-sensitive approach to trauma-healing that fosters communal resilience, reconciliation, and facilitator empowerment.

[54] Ikenye, 'African Christian Care'.
[55] Afolaranmi, Odeleye, and Ojo, 'Training and Education'.

Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework for Trauma-healing in SIL Ethiopia



SIL Ethiopia: Integrating Spiritual Practices into Trauma-healing

SIL Ethiopia incorporates these theological insights into trauma-healing initiatives, often beginning with prayer, Scripture reading, and reflection to initiate the spiritual healing. Drawing from the author's participant observation of the SIL Ethiopia/MYS trauma-healing seminar, sessions were opened with devotional readings from passages such as Romans 8:35-39 and Psalms 34:18-19. These readings, which emphasise suffering as part of the Christian journey, are followed by reflection. These practices helped participants to focus on faith before moving into trauma-focused discussions.

In storytelling workshops, facilitators invite participants to share their stories in light of biblical narratives, particularly from the perspectives of lament (e.g., Job and Lamentation) and hope (e.g., the resurrection accounts). Participants wrote lamentation letters and placed them at the foot of the cross; later they

were burned as a symbolic act of release. These storytelling rituals made lament and hope tangible.

In rural areas communal lament practices provide a safe space for collective trauma naming through songs, prayer, and symbolic acts such as lighting candles or planting trees in memory of the deceased. Similarly, the seminar participants were paired in listening exercises, learning to hear pain without judgment and reflected their experiences. Later they expressed their hurt through poems, drawings or songs. These practices reflect the theological concepts of communal memory and presence found in Rambo's and Katongole's works.

Participants reported that these spiritual practices helped them feel seen and held in ways secular approaches failed to do so. SIL Ethiopia's systematic integration of faith into trauma-healing enables it to relate with local religious values that enhances accessibility and sustainability. During the trauma-healing session, participants said that prayer and lament rituals were powerful, though some also noted the difficulty to listen without judgment and noted the risk of neglecting emotional needs when practices leaned too heavily on spiritual language.

Despite the positive outcomes, FBOs such as SIL Ethiopia are facing difficulties. Some frameworks adopted from Western models may not recognise the importance of local faith expressions. When trauma-healing is over-spiritualised, it risks neglecting the physical and emotional needs of survivors. This negligence fails to practice the wholeness theology of Reverend Gudina Tumsa. Additionally, sometimes Christian trauma initiatives are not tailored to accommodate other faith communities where careful adaptation is needed.

At the same time, there are opportunities that benefit both SIL and the community. The integration of faith into the healing practices encourages communities to stand together in difficult times, renewing identity and creating pathways for forgiveness and reconciliation. The reputation SIL Ethiopia has with the local community make them key players in addressing trauma. In order to contend with trauma, SIL has recognised and incorporated local values of wholeness, community well-being, spirituality, and culturally

relevant symbols. This recognition addresses both the spiritual and material needs of the community.

Re-Conceptualising Trauma-healing

Biblical-Theological Foundations

Motsi and Masango criticise Western psychiatric models that focused particularly on individual PTSD treatment, thus neglecting the communal nature of African societies. They argue for healing initiatives to consider the context, culture, and history in which they will be applied. [56]

The African concepts of *Ubuntu* and *Namummaa* show that effective healing involves the active participation of community. These concepts reflect the ways Lamentations and Psalms are narrated, where the Israelites cry out to God for restoration and the transformation from lament to cries of praise, noting the presence of God in the suffering.[57] These biblical narratives offer the theological ground on how initiatives should respect human dignity and communal wholeness. SIL healing programs can utilize these texts to cultivate a deeper theological understanding while creating space for lament as integral to healing and sustaining hope within the community.

Cultural-Communal Model

Motsi and Masango's emphases on cultural-sensitivity and respecting faith, rituals, and community values support biblical lament and hope.[58] Other African scholars expand this vision: Vhumani Magezi and Christopher Magezi proposed an Adamic Christological model of pastoral healing that is Christ-centred and culturally resonant, addressing African suffering through incarnational ministry.[59]

Glenda A. Dames and Gordon E. Dames emphasise the need for contextually-grounded care models that reflect local realities.[60] Willem A. Dreyer offers a Reformed-theological approach that identifies societal wounds and the need

[56] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma,' 3-4.
[57] Katongole, 4-6.
[58] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma,' 6-8.
[59] Magezi and Magezi, 'Pastoral care and healing in Africa'.
[60] Dames and Dames, 'Pastoral Care and Counselling'.

for theological commitment at a national level.[61] Christoffel H. Thesnaar adds depth to the conversation by examining multi-generational trauma through a relational-theological lens, highlighting the continuing effects of historical violence on African families and communities.[62] SIL Ethiopia's trauma-healing practices reflect these cultural-communal models through group lament services, storytelling circles, and rituals, such as candle lighting and tree planting, which embody *Ubuntu*'s 'I am because we are' and *Namummaa*'s emphasis on relationality.

Clinical-Psychological Approaches

African voices also critique Western psychology's dominance. Gladys K. Mwiti criticised the dominance of Western psychology and advocates for counselling frameworks rooted in African values,[63] while Gideon Ngi Nganyu offers practical models for biblical psychotherapy in local churches.[64]

S. F. Sotobe's research reveals clergy-led grassroots strategies for healing.[65] Charles B. Manda contributes a holistic narrative model that re-authors life stories after trauma, integrating spirituality into both psychotherapy and pastoral care.[66] SIL Ethiopia incorporates these clinical-psychological insights by combining narrative therapy, paired listening, and creative exercises with biblical storytelling, ensuring that trauma-healing is both spiritually and psychologically grounded.

Practical Implications and Challenges

Ikenye's Biblical-Ethnographic-Cultural-Clinical framework for African Christian care adds depth to the discussion of how to respond to pain and suffering in African context.[67] Additionally, the article 'Training and Education of Pastoral Care and Counseling Professionals in Africa' suggests effective strategies to equip caregivers to meet trauma with theological depth and

[61] Dreyer, 'A Theological Response'.
[62] Thesnaar, 'Divine Discomfort'.
[63] Mwiti, 'Counseling and Psychotherapy'.
[64] Nganyu, 'Pastoral Care and Christian Psychotherapy'.
[65] Sotobe, 'The Traumatized'.
[66] Manda, *Re-Authoring Life Narratives.*
[67] Ikenye, 'African Christian Care'.

cultural sensitivity.[68] Together these voices form effective trauma-healing in Africa that honours lament, fosters hope, and restores communal wholeness.

For SIL Ethiopia, the practical applications include developing training modules that combine scripture engagement, communal rituals, and clinical techniques, ensuring that trauma-healing is sustainable and rooted in local leadership.

However, it is essential to acknowledge potential critiques, such as the risk of oversimplifying complex trauma experiences or the challenge of reconciling diverse cultural practices within a unified healing framework. Trauma-healing initiatives should not expect uniformity from participants but should be attentive to Ethiopia's diverse religious background and ensure that material needs are addressed together with spiritual practices. Gudina Tumsa's wholeness theology would serve as a ground to counter these critiques, thereby strengthening the credibility and sustainability of trauma-healing.

Conclusion

In Ethiopia Complex Post Traumatic Stress disorder (CPTSD) affects approximately forty-three percent of the population. These statistics highlight the urgent need for trauma-healing responses. This study combined literature review with participant observation to examine how SIL Ethiopia response to challenges. The frameworks of contextual theology, a theology of hope, and African communal concepts of *Ubuntu* and *Namummaa* are employed to guide the exploration.

SIL Ethiopia's practices of narration, reflection, and communal lament indicate how biblical lament can be used as a source for community restoration. These experiences affirm that trauma-healing must integrate spiritual, cultural, and relational aspects of community. Some challenges remain such as reliance on conceptual frameworks that lack contextual grounding and limited availability of trained facilitators, resources, funding and trauma healing sessions affect accessibility and sustainability. Even so, SIL Ethiopia continues to prioritise

[68] Afolaranmi, Odeleye, and Ojo, 'Training and Education'.

spiritual practices and community engagement in shaping an African model of trauma-healing.

The integration covered by Ikenye's Biblical-Ethnographic-Cultural-Clinical framework combines important aspects of human life, including scriptural grounding, cultural values, and psychological insights. Ikenye's recognition of cultural sensitivity allows African communal concepts *Ubuntu* and *Namummaa* to be incorporated into healing approaches. These concepts confirm that trauma-healing is effective when it acknowledges context.

Trauma-healing in Ethiopia must be grounded in faith practices. FBOs have theological and practical resources to lead initiatives that encourage resilience, dignity, and community unity. The findings of this study suggest insights for trauma-healing workshops, theological institutions, and interfaith collaboration. Theology rooted in context and compassion becomes a lifeline, not a trend.

During SIL Ethiopia's healing sessions, trauma-healing is not merely a theory but a lived experience that occurs in churches, hearts, and communities. In Ethiopia trauma-healing is transformative when theology engages faith, culture, and community, changing suffering into resilience and hope.

Recommendations

In order to strengthen trauma-healing within the Ethiopian context and enhance the effectiveness of faith-based organisations such as SIL Ethiopia, after a careful thematic analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Integrating theology and culture

    - Partner with local leaders to develop theological frameworks that integrate Ethiopian culture and faith into trauma-healing practices.

    - Use indigenous cultural values to enrich healing practices.

2. Community building through inclusivity and collaboration

    - Establish healing communities (communities of memory and hope) for the marginalised and trauma survivors to create a sense of belonging and shared resilience.

    - Encourage community inclusivity and engagement to promote interfaith collaboration.

    - Work in collaboration with faith-based organisations, academic institutions, and mental health professionals to strengthen trauma-healing initiatives.

3. Capacity building for trauma session facilitators

    - Organise continuous trainings in listening skills, cultural awareness, and trauma-healing practices rooted in context and hope.

    - Create awareness on various community dynamics, such as political violence, ethnic diversities, and marginalisation.

4. Trauma-healing program development and evaluation

    - Evaluate trauma-healing initiatives in order to identify best practices and strengthen future programs.

    - Develop themed guides in order to check the theological alignment with clinical approaches.

    - Conduct research on healing models that involve trauma survivors and communities in the assessment process.

5. Holistic structural approaches

    - Combine spiritual and psychological healing with efforts to address poverty, injustice, and violence.

- Support trauma-healing programs that connect recovery with social change and justice.

6. Advocating for policy influence

    - Work closely with policy makers and government agencies to include trauma-healing in national health and education plans.

    - Advocate for laws and funding that support trauma care in schools, churches, and communities.

    - Collaborate with health, education, and social services to make trauma-healing a priority in public health.

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Religion and Disability: Developing an Intervention Model for Persons with Disabilities

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Abstract

Persons with disabilities continue to be marginalised in many areas of life the world over. Religious communities routinely draw on the interpretive and moral authority of religion to shape how disability is understood and addressed, yet few scholars have proposed intervention models that translate these interpretations into structured institutional practice. This paper responds to that gap by developing an intervention model, the IEF, to guide religious institutions toward a structured and sustained response to disability rather than the ad hoc gestures of goodwill that currently predominate. The framework identifies three interdependent components—awareness and education, support systems, and empowerment—that religious institutions can use to organise their response to disability around persons with disabilities themselves rather than around institutional convenience. A qualitative research approach was adopted to examine perceptions of disability held by representatives of African traditional religion (ATR) and Christianity. An ethnographic, cultural-anthropology design was used to collect data from ten traditional healers and ten pastors in Zimbabwe, selected through purposive sampling. Data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. The resulting model is intended to help both Christian and ATR institutions move from theoretical commitments to inclusion toward practices that preserve the dignity and self-worth of persons with disabilities.

Background and Theoretical Context

Accommodating and understanding disability in church and in society has never been straightforward. Religions differ widely in how they interpret disability, and these interpretations shape how persons with disabilities are perceived and treated within and beyond their communities. Masiga and Nkabala note that persons with disabilities in Africa continue to be perceived as objects of pity and abuse, a pattern they attribute to ignorance and harsh economic conditions. They cite killings of persons with albinism carried out in the false belief that burying a person with albinism's head in a building's foundation brings wealth.[1] Ndlovu similarly finds that persons with disabilities sit at the bottom of the social scale in terms of impoverishment, powerlessness, and exclusion, routinely denied amenities and privileges that others take for granted.[2] Such evidence points to the need for religion, which retains considerable moral authority in African communities, to be enlisted deliberately in raising awareness and developing structured interventions that promote the dignity of persons with disabilities, rather than being left to reproduce the stigma they have sometimes helped to entrench. Masiga and Nkabala further argue that stigma and discriminatory attitudes rooted in cultural practice can be challenged through biblical teaching[3], a claim this study revisits empirically in the thematic findings below.

The continent's legal and policy architecture reflects a formal commitment to inclusion that has not always translated into lived practice. Africa is a signatory to the African Charter on Human and Peoples 'Rights (1990) and the African Decade for Persons with Disabilities (1992), commitments reinforced globally by the Salamanca Statement (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), the Millennium Development Goals and, more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals and Zimbabwe's own Vision 2030. Domestically, Sections 22 and 83 of Zimbabwe's National Constitution (2013) obligate the state to ensure that persons with disabilities realise their full potential, access medical, psychological, and functional treatment, and are protected from exploitation and abuse. Section 22 specifically promotes their full inclusion and

[1] Masiga and Nkabala, 'The Biblical Discourse'.
[2] Ndlovu, 'African Beliefs'.
[3] Masiga and Nkabala, 'The Biblical Discourse'.

participation in society. This study takes that policy commitment as its point of departure: if disability inclusion is already established in law, the outstanding question is how religious institutions, as trusted and proximate community actors, can be organised to deliver on it in practice.

Two theoretical lenses inform the analysis. The first, theological anthropology, is the branch of theology concerned with the nature, purpose, and destiny of human beings, explored here through the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the belief that human beings are made in the image of God. That doctrine has historically been interpreted in ways that exclude persons with disabilities, associating divine likeness with rationality, independence, or physical wholeness. Amos Yong's *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* challenged this reading directly, arguing that all individuals, including those with disabilities, are created in the image of God. Swinton extends this argument, observing that marginalisation is produced partly through language that reduces persons to their condition, and distinguishing 'inclusion', which he treats as a passive, programmatic gesture, from 'belonging', which requires persons with disabilities to be accepted, valued, and embraced as full participants in the life of a faith community.[4] For Swinton, personhood is rooted in relationship and divine recognition rather than intellectual capacity, which is why he calls on faith communities to build reciprocal relationships rather than deliver one-directional assistance. Swinton develops the same argument through Christ's command to 'love one another', framing the celebration of difference, rather than its correction, as the theological basis for inclusion. No society, on this account, is complete without persons with disabilities.[5]

The second lens, the social model of disability, locates the origin of disability outside the individual, in the barriers that society erects. It stands in contrast to the moral model, which frames disability as sin or affliction, and the medical model, which frames it as a deficiency requiring clinical correction. The social model instead attributes disability to external barriers of discrimination, devaluation, and stigmatisation. It was developed specifically as a reaction

[4] Swinton, 'From Inclusion to Belonging'.
[5] Swinton, 'Disability, Vocation, and Prophetic Witness'.

against the tendency of the medical model to locate the 'problem' in the person with the impairment.

Because cultural and religious constructions of disability in African settings are deeply entangled, it is often difficult to separate how disability is constructed by culture from how it is constructed by Christianity or by African traditional religion (ATR); a study of one is necessarily a study of the other.[6] Together, theological anthropology and the social model give this study a way of reading the empirical findings below: the former explains why religious interpretation matters for the dignity of persons with disabilities, and the latter explains why the barriers persons with disabilities encounter in religious spaces are properly understood as socially produced, and therefore as amenable to structured, institutional intervention rather than individual charity alone.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore religious perceptions of disability, an approach chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of religious perspectives and the lived experiences of persons with disabilities that a quantitative design would not capture. An ethnographic, cultural-anthropology design was adopted. Sharma and Sarkar describe ethnographic research as concerned with the discovery and description of a culture or a group[7], which suits a study seeking to understand how two distinct religious traditions construct meaning around disability. Purposive sampling was applied to select a population of twenty participants, ten leaders of ATR and ten Christian pastors, all based in Zimbabwe. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, and the resulting data were subjected to thematic analysis, from which eight thematic areas emerged. These are reported below, followed by the intervention framework the study proposes in response to them.

[6] Amenyedzi, '"We are forgotten"'.
[7] Sharma and Sarkar, 'Ethnography Research'.

Findings and Intervention

Thematic Area 1: Religious Interpretation of Disability

The findings on religious interpretation reveal varied and sometimes contradictory perspectives. Some Christian participants believed that disability is part of God's creation; others believed it is congenital or acquired; still others attributed it to witchcraft or personal sin. A minority position holds that disability does not, in a theological sense, exist at all, since God does not specify what a 'full' person should look like.

One pastor said, 'as a pastor, I know that disability is caused by chromosomes.' Another pastor said, 'Christians believe there is witchcraft. According to the Bible, all are made in the image of God … only a disabled relative of mine used to say it is a "dysfunction" of something.'

ATR participants similarly attribute disability to witchcraft or to angry ancestral spirits requiring appeasement, though some hold simultaneously that disability is God's creation and that ATR can cure it. Read together, these views suggest that within ATR, disability is understood as externally caused rather than natural. One herbalist explained, 'according to ATR it appears as if people must appease ancestors so that disability does not recur.' In this framing, disability is treated as something that can, in principle, be eradicated. Another herbalist offered a more theologically layered account: 'a disabled person is a God's creation, we believe that it's God, but from ATR we think it's from outside.'

Sentiments held by ATR participants further indicate that disability is understood to entail a loss of function, capability, and cognitive capacity. One herbalist put it this way: '[they are] unable to do other things. We care and think for that person.' Statements of this kind reflect a paternalistic and, at points, negative attitude: able-bodied participants across both traditions tended to assume that persons with disabilities are incapable and dependent on the goodwill of others.

Thematic Area 2: Myths, Taboos and Prevalent Beliefs Regarding Disability

The most common myth reported by Christian participants is that disability results from witchcraft practised by, or a curse upon, the family of the person with a disability. ATR participants hold a parallel belief that disability results from witchcraft or from punishment by ancestors, alongside more specific taboos, for instance that laughing at a person with a disability may cause the person who laughs to bear a disabled child themselves. Another belief holds that persons who have suffered a stroke have been struck by *izulu laphansi* ('underground thunder'), and that traditional healers can treat the condition on that basis.

The striking similarity between Christian and ATR belief in this area can most plausibly be attributed to a shared cultural substrate: the two traditions, despite their theological differences, draw on the same underlying culture, and it is that culture, more than either religion's formal doctrine, that appears to shape how disability is understood.

Thematic Area 3: Biblical Passages that Shape Perspectives on Disability

Christian participants 'perceptions are shaped directly by biblical texts, while ATR participants 'perceptions are shaped primarily by ancestral guidance, though with an acknowledgement of God's presence. Two pastors independently identified John 9 as a familiar and formative scripture on disability, and one referenced the story of a crippled man seated at the temple gate, evidence that disability is treated within Christian teaching as a recurring feature of human existence rather than an aberration from it.

A traditional herbalist described being guided directly by ancestral spirits in the provision of herbal therapy: 'my ancestors show me and guide me how I can help the person, and that shapes my understanding.' Despite their different sources of authority, both traditions converge on a shared preference for care within the community over institutional referral. A participant from ATR said, 'we believe that no disabled person should be sent to a rehabilitation centre', a sentiment closely echoed by a Christian pastor.

Thematic Area 4: Common Beliefs Between Christianity and ATR

Both traditions maintain that disability can be caused by witchcraft or a curse, while simultaneously encouraging care and support for persons with disabilities, a tension the findings do not resolve so much as document. A herbalist offered a particularly candid account of this shared ground: 'In most cases we have common understanding that disability is a result of spirits. We only approach it differently.' Another participant went further: 'all of us struggle, Christians and non-Christians … ninety-nine per cent of our faith is informed by our culture.' A third herbalist added, 'in life in general, we are not different. The way Christians handle those with disabilities … we are the same,' a view echoed by another participant who stated plainly, 'we are the same in caring for the disabled, we usually help them.' Culture, rather than doctrine, again emerges as the more powerful determinant of how disability is understood and treated.

Thematic Area 5: Ways of Actively Including Persons with Disabilities

Evidence on the involvement of persons with disabilities in religious activity points, across both traditions, to a considerable gap between stated commitment and practice. A Christian pastor conceded, 'theoretically, we encourage members, but practically it does not exist.' Another was more blunt: 'we want to use them if they are there, we don't have them.' Both remarks indicate that inclusion in Christian settings, where it is discussed at all, tends to remain rhetorical.

ATR participants reported a more concrete pattern of inclusion: some persons with disabilities serve as traditional healers themselves and participate actively in ritual dance, where their spirits are reportedly regarded as unusually powerful. One herbalist confirmed, 'we have some who are traditional healers who are disabled,' and another added that persons with disabilities are 'usually' present during ritual dances. A further participant confirmed that persons with disabilities visit and consult ATR practitioners and are assisted with herbal therapy on each visit. This pattern suggests that persons with disabilities consult ATR practitioners considerably more often than they attend church, a finding with direct implications for how the intervention model below is targeted.

Thematic Area 6: Initiatives to Promote the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

Some initiatives were reported in both traditions, though inconsistently. A Christian pastor described appointing persons with disabilities to church leadership and gave the example of a blind congregant being given the opportunity to share through music during a church conference. Another participant, by contrast, stated flatly, 'there is nothing.' ATR participants reported that the needs of persons with disabilities are considered in training and in the procurement of herbal treatment, including a fee waiver for those unable to pay in full, since, as one participant explained, 'most of persons with disabilities do not work … so they pay whatever they can.' Persons with disabilities who possess an ancestral spirit are, according to another participant, actively trained to become traditional herbalists in their own right. Taken together, ATR practitioners appear to hold a keener and more consistent interest in including persons with disabilities than their Christian counterparts, though this inclusion is, as the next section shows, conditional rather than unconditional.

Thematic Area 7: Programmes to Address the Needs of Persons with Disabilities

Neither tradition reported dedicated, structured programmes for persons with disabilities. One pastor noted that the church has organs formally representing persons with disabilities but could not identify any specific needs those organs addressed in practice, adding 'we allow them to advocate for themselves.' ATR participants likewise reported no designated programme; whatever assistance persons with disabilities receive is left to individual compassion. In Zimbabwe more broadly responsibility for disability care has historically defaulted to government and non-governmental actors, a pattern this study links to the disengagement of communities, including religious communities, from disability care as a shared obligation. It is this gap, a policy commitment on paper, goodwill in principle, but no institutional mechanism in practice, that the intervention model developed in this paper is designed to close.

Thematic Area 8: Support and Resources Required to Serve Persons with Disabilities

Participants from both traditions identified training as the resource religious institutions most urgently require: one specifically named sign language training, while others called for broader training on disability, knowledge and care. Material resources, including clothing, food, and assistive technologies, were also identified as pressing needs.

ATR participants additionally called for government partnership toward self-sustaining projects. One participant raised the absence of identity documentation as a particularly acute obstacle, describing a relative with a disability who had no identity documents at all. Without such documentation, she noted, organisations can rarely provide assistance of any kind, a finding that echoes Ndlovu's observation that persons with disabilities are frequently denied access to the amenities and privileges available to others.[8]

[8] Ndlovu, 'African Beliefs'.

The Inclusive Empowerment Framework (IEF)

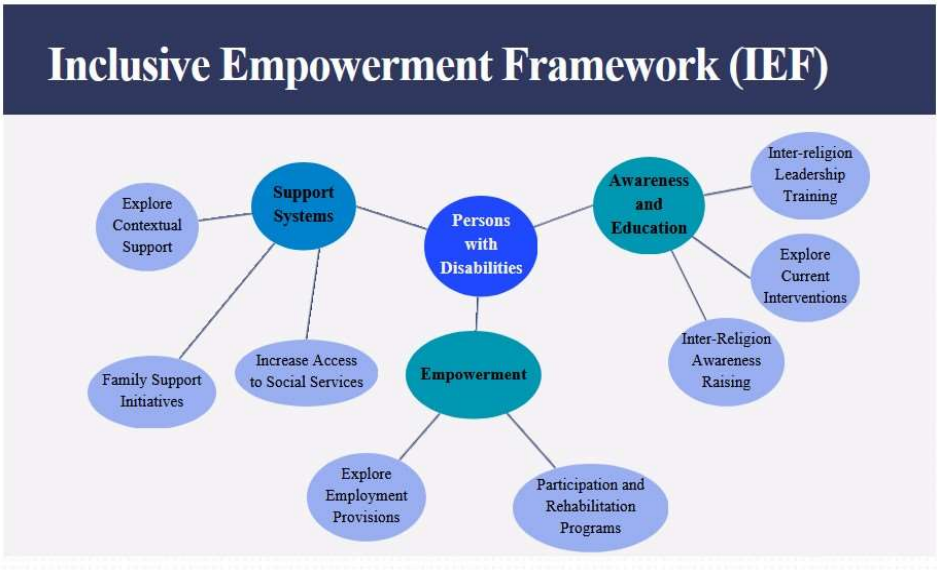


Figure 1: The Inclusive Empowerment Framework (IEF)

In view of these findings, this study proposes the Inclusive Empowerment Framework (IEF) as an appropriate model for intervention. The section develops the framework in detail: it situates the model within the broader conceptual-framework literature on disability inclusion, explains the structure of the diagram in Figure 1, and unpacks each of the model's three pillars and their constituent sub-elements in turn, grounding each in the thematic findings reported above.

Positioning the model

Conceptual frameworks for disability inclusion have proliferated across disciplines in recent years. Situating the IEF among them clarifies both its debts and its distinctive contribution. Several recent frameworks organise disability inclusion around a small number of interacting components in a way the IEF shares structurally: Sarancha and Fushtey proposes a 4P model of rights,

resources, partnerships and performance for inclusive education[9]; Mckenzie et al propose a four Ps curriculum framework of planning, practice, person-centredness and participation for learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities[10]; and Evangelista et al propose a dual-axis, four-quadrant framework mapping formal and informal, enabling and constraining mechanisms of workplace disability inclusion.[11] What these frameworks share with the IEF is a refusal to treat inclusion as a single variable; each breaks it down into interacting components that must be addressed together rather than traded off against one another. Where the IEF departs from this literature is in its centring device. Selisko et al and Simplican et al both build their respective frameworks around models of disability—medical, relational, social, and ecological—rather than around persons with disabilities as the organising node.[12] Theall et al similarly centre the learning environment rather than the individual.[13] Kumari et al, whose Disabled Older People's Empowerment Model draws, as this framework does, on empowerment theory and the social model of disability, comes closer, treating empowerment as a mediator between internal and external resources and specific wellbeing outcomes.[14] The IEF adapts this empowerment-theoretic logic to the religious institutional setting specifically, and takes the additional step of placing the person with a disability, rather than a mediating construct, literally at the visual and conceptual centre of the model, a choice further explained below.

A related, and equally relevant, body of work asks not how inclusion should be organised but what genuine participation, as distinct from mere presence, actually consists of. Ginis et al, reviewing conceptualisations of participation among persons with physical disabilities, find that most existing frameworks measure participation only in terms of roles performed and activities attended. They argue for a broader conceptualisation encompassing autonomy, belongingness, challenge, engagement, mastery, and meaning—dimensions

[9] Sarancha and Fushtey, 'Social Design'.
[10] Mckenzie et al, 'A Conceptual Framework'.
[11] Evangelista et al, 'Disability-inclusive HRM in practice'.
[12] Selisko et al, 'Models of Disability'; Simplican et al, 'Defining social inclusion'.
[13] Theall et al, 'Promoting Disability Inclusion'.
[14] Kumari et al, 'Pathways to Empowerment'.

that performance-based measures routinely miss.[15] This distinction matters directly for how the IEF should be read: thematic area 5 found that a blind congregant was permitted to share through music at a single church conference and that some persons with disabilities participate in ritual dance within ATR, instances of presence that, on Ginis et al's account, would not by themselves demonstrate meaningful participation unless they were also experienced by the participants as autonomous, belonging, and purposeful.

Suarez-Balcazar et al, reviewing five decades of community psychology research on disability, reach a related conclusion from a different angle, arguing that promoting empowerment and advocacy, supporting organisations and settings, and including persons with disabilities in knowledge production are recurring, mutually reinforcing themes across the field[16], themes that map, respectively, onto the empowerment, support systems, and awareness and education pillars developed below. Read alongside one another, this literature cautions against treating the IEF's three pillars as satisfied merely because a religious institution can point to an instance of each. The framework's indicators, discussed below, probe the quality and durability of participation, not only its occurrence.

Two further bodies of literature ground the model's specific components. Tyabashe-Phume and Kleintjes develop a conceptual framework for self-advocacy among people with intellectual disabilities built around personal development, a supportive environment, and improved participation opportunities[17], a structure that maps closely onto the awareness, support, and empowerment pillars developed below. Nanthambwe's work on religion and disability-inclusive development in sub-Saharan Africa argues that African churches, given their influential community position, are well placed to act as catalysts for disability inclusion once approached through a practical, rather than purely doctrinal, theology[18], a claim this study's findings substantiate empirically. Participants across both traditions in thematic areas 1 and 2

[15] Ginis et al, 'Broadening'.
[16] Suarez-Balcazar et al, 'Disability rights'.
[17] Tyabashe-Phume and Kleintjes, 'A Conceptual Framework'.
[18] Nanthambwe, 'Reimagining Inclusion'; Nanthambwe and Magezi, '"Leave no one behind"'.

showed that belief, not institutional capacity, is the more immediate obstacle to inclusion. Tagwirei documents a comparable gap between the Zimbabwean church's stated commitment to disability inclusion and the continued inaccessibility of its leadership and liturgical and infrastructural spaces[19], a gap this study's own thematic areas 5 and 7 reproduce almost exactly. Matumbu and Kutama, working within the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe, likewise find that Pentecostal cosmology shapes which disabilities are accommodated and which are not[20], underscoring that theological interpretation, not simply resource scarcity, drives the exclusion that the IEF is designed to address.

Reading the diagram

Figure 1 depicts the IEF as a hub-and-spoke diagram. At its centre sits a single node, persons with disabilities, rendered in a darker shade than any other node in the figure to signal its conceptual priority. Three larger nodes—awareness and education, support systems, and empowerment—are arranged around this centre and connected to it directly. These are the model's three pillars. Each pillar is, in turn, connected to a set of smaller satellite nodes representing its constituent sub-elements. Awareness and education branch into inter-religious leadership training, exploration of current interventions, and inter-religious awareness raising. Support systems branch into exploring contextual support, family support initiatives, and increasing access to social services. Empowerment branches into exploration of employment provisions and participation and rehabilitation programmes. No arrows or directional lines connect the three pillars to one another directly. Each connects only to the central node and to its own satellites. This is a deliberate design choice, not an oversight. A linear or sequential diagram, in which awareness fed into support which in turn fed into empowerment, would imply that a religious institution could complete one pillar before beginning the next. The hub-and-spoke structure instead implies that all three pillars act on the same centre simultaneously, and that the connection each pillar requires is not to the others but to the person with a disability that the model is organised around.

Placing persons with disabilities at the centre of the diagram, rather than at its edge as a beneficiary category, is the single most consequential design decision

[19] Tagwirei, 'Enabling Abilities'; Tagwirei, '(Dis)Abling church spaces'.
[20] Matumbu and Kutama, 'Exploring the Inclusivity Gap'.

in the model. It follows directly from the theological-anthropological argument developed in the background section above, most notably Swinton's distinction between 'inclusion' as something done to a category of people and 'belonging' as a relationship persons with disabilities are drawn into as full participants.[21] A diagram in which persons with disabilities appeared as one satellite node among several, attached to the support systems pillar, for example, would visually reproduce exactly the passive 'inclusion' Swinton criticises. Centring them signals that the model treats persons with disabilities as the point around which religious institutions organise support, education, and empowerment. Persons with disabilities are not passive recipients of programmes designed elsewhere without their input, a design principle the findings section shows is currently absent in practice. Thematic area 5 found that Christian inclusion efforts, where they exist, are designed and delivered without any apparent consultation of the persons with disabilities they are meant to serve.

Pillar 1: Awareness and Education

The first pillar responds directly to the confusion documented across the thematic findings. Christian and ATR participants offered starkly different, and at times internally inconsistent, explanations for the origin of disability, ranging from chromosomal causes to witchcraft to congenital difference and divine creation. Participants explicitly named training as the resource religious institutions most urgently require. As Figure 1 shows, awareness and education is unpacked in three sub-elements: inter-religious awareness raising, inter-religious leadership training, and exploration of current interventions.

Inter-religious awareness raising is positioned as the pillar's foundation because the findings show that misinformation directly shapes how persons with disabilities are treated. For example, the belief that laughing at a person with a disability will cause one to bear a disabled child, or that disability results from being struck by *izulu laphansi*. A structured awareness-raising component is intended to replace such beliefs with a disability-affirming understanding informed by the theological anthropology and social model perspectives discussed above, and to do so jointly across religious traditions rather than

[21] Swinton, 'From Inclusion to Belonging'.

within each in isolation, since thematic area 2 found that Christian and ATR myths about disability are strikingly, almost interchangeably, similar.

Inter-religious leadership training responds to the finding that Christianity and ATR, despite their theological differences, draw on the same underlying culture. Rather than training pastors and traditional healers separately, and so reproducing a division the findings suggest is largely artificial, the model proposes joint training, so that the striking similarity observed between the two traditions becomes a shared platform for reform rather than two uncoordinated, and potentially contradictory, efforts.

Exploration of current interventions commits religious leaders to auditing what, if anything, their institutions are already doing—an audit the findings suggest is overdue. The evidence indicates that existing efforts are largely rhetorical. One pastor described inclusion as something the church 'encourage[s] … but practically it does not exist'; another indicated the absence of any disability-specific programme, saying 'we allow them to advocate for themselves'. Building this audit into the model is intended to narrow the gap between the theological commitment to 'belonging'[22] and the largely rhetorical programming the study documents, a gap Tagwirei identifies as the central obstacle facing disability inclusion in Zimbabwean church spaces specifically.[23]

Pillar 2: Support Systems

The second pillar addresses the practical, everyday needs that participants raised largely unprompted. Chief among these was the near-total absence of identity documentation: one participant described caring for a relative with a disability who had no identity documents, an obstacle both Ndlovu and the participant herself identified as a major barrier to accessing social services[24]. As Figure 1 shows, support systems are unpacked into three sub-elements: increasing access to social services, exploring contextual support, and family support initiatives.

[22] Swinton, 'From Inclusion to Belonging'.
[23] Tagwirei, '(Dis)Abling church spaces'.
[24] Ndlovu, 'African Beliefs'.

Increasing access to social services operationalises the constitutional obligations set out in Sections 22 and 83 of Zimbabwe's National Constitution (2013) at the level of the religious institutions, positioning churches and traditional healers as intermediaries who help members obtain the documentation and referrals that formal social services require, given that, as thematic area 8 shows, the absence of such documentation is currently the single greatest obstacle participants identified.

Exploring contextual support acknowledges that Christianity and ATR already provide informal forms of support—traditional herbal therapy in ATR, and informal pastoral care in Christianity—that the model seeks to formalise and resource rather than replace. These including the reduced fees some traditional healers extend to persons with disabilities who cannot pay in full. The pillar's function is therefore not to introduce support from nothing but to make existing, ad hoc supports systematic and sustainable.

Family support initiatives respond to the finding that the care of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe has historically defaulted to government and non-governmental actors, a pattern the study links to communities becoming disengaged from disability care. The exact nature and extent of this disengagement is stated only in general terms in the original findings and would benefit from more precise specification in a future, larger study; nonetheless, embedding family support within the model is intended to relocate some of this responsibility back into the immediate community rather than leaving it to external actors alone.

Pillar 3: Empowerment

The third pillar shifts the model from awareness and support to agency. The findings show that where persons with disabilities are included in religious life at all, inclusion rarely extends beyond presence. Christian participation was described as largely symbolic, while ATR inclusion, though more visible in ritual practice, was reported as conditioned on the disabled person possessing an ancestral spirit rather than on capability or membership. As Figure 1 shows, empowerment is unpacked into two sub-elements: participation and rehabilitation programmes, and exploration of employment provisions.

Participation and rehabilitation programmes build on the few positive examples the study surfaced: a blind congregant given the opportunity to share through music during a church conference, and persons with disabilities who serve as traditional healers within ATR. It proposes that such inclusion become structured and expected rather than exceptional. This is consistent with Tyabashe-Phume and Kleintjes's finding that structured participation opportunities, not simply goodwill, are what convert nominal inclusion into genuine self-advocacy.[25]

Exploration of employment provisions responds to a gap the study observed: none of the eight thematic areas surfaced a religious initiative connecting persons with disabilities to livelihoods or income. This is inferred from the absence of employment-related findings in the data reported above rather than from a question that directly probed employment. The inference echoes Tinta and Kolanisi's finding that persons with disabilities in sheltered and community settings face compounding barriers to income-generating activity that require a dedicated, rather than incidental, intervention strategy[26], and Chumo et al's argument that social inclusion in employment specifically requires deliberate, targeted support rather than the by-product of broader inclusion efforts.[27]

Read together, the three pillars are conceived as interdependent rather than sequential. Reducing the circulation of harmful beliefs about disability without a corresponding support system or empowerment pathway would leave any resulting change in attitude unsupported in practice. Conversely, expanding access to services or employment without first addressing the awareness deficit documented in thematic areas 1 and 2 risks reproducing the same stigmatising assumptions within better-resourced programmes. It is this interdependence, rather than any single pillar in isolation, that the hub-and-spoke structure in Figure 1 is intended to convey. It is also, per the framework comparison above, what most clearly distinguishes the IEF from linear or stage-based models of disability inclusion elsewhere in the literature.

[25] Tyabashe-Phume and Kleintjes, 'A Conceptual Framework'.
[26] Tinta and Kolanisi, 'Overcoming barriers'.
[27] Chumo et al, 'Social Inclusion'.

Towards implementation

A conceptual framework of this kind is of limited use to a religious institution unless it can be operationalised. In practical terms, the model implies a phased entry point rather than the simultaneous rollout its diagram might otherwise suggest. Given that thematic area 8 identifies training as the most urgently requested resource, joint inter-religious training under pillar 1 is the most immediately actionable starting point, since it requires no new infrastructure, funding stream, or partnership arrangement. It only requires the willingness of religious leaders to be trained together. Support systems and empowerment, by contrast, are more resource-dependent. Increasing access to social services presupposes the documentation-assistance pathway described above, while employment provisions presuppose partnerships with government or non-governmental actors that lie substantially outside any single religious institution's control. A realistic implementation sequence would therefore begin with awareness and education, use the resulting shift in leadership understanding to motivate the resourcing of support systems, and treat empowerment, and employment provision specifically, as a longer-horizon goal pursued in partnership with external actors rather than delivered by religious institutions alone. Indicators of progress might include the proportion of participating religious leaders who have completed joint training, the number of members assisted in obtaining identity documentation through the institution, and the number of persons with disabilities occupying non-symbolic leadership or service roles within the institution. Consistent with Ginis et al's caution, a crude count of participation instances would not be sufficient on its own[28]; any indicator set adopted would need to be paired with a qualitative check, such as brief follow-up interviews with the persons with disabilities involved on whether the resulting participation was experienced as autonomous and meaningful rather than merely permitted.

Given how the findings describe the current division of labour, responsibility for implementation cannot rest with religious institutions alone. Thematic area 7 found that the state and non-governmental organisations have historically absorbed responsibility for disability care by default, a pattern this study reads as communities, including religious communities, disengaging from an

[28] Ginis et al, 'Broadening'.

obligation rather than the state stepping in to fill a genuine capacity gap. The model does not propose reversing that division outright; rather, it proposes that religious institutions take primary ownership of pillar 1, retain a coordinating role in pillar 2 while drawing on existing government and non-governmental documentation and social-service infrastructure, and act as a referral and advocacy partner rather than the primary provider for pillar 3 where formal employment programmes typically sit outside any individual church's or traditional healer's practical reach. This division of labour is consistent with Nanthambwe's argument that African churches are best positioned to act as catalysts and advocates for disability-inclusive development, rather than as its sole delivery mechanism, working through their standing in the community to mobilise other actors rather than substituting for them.[29]

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe interpret disability, and to translate that understanding into a structured model religious institutions can use to organise their response to it. On the first question, the findings show that both religions hold ambivalent and, at points, internally inconsistent perspectives: some participants regard disability as part of God's creation, others as congenital or acquired, and still others as a curse or punishment originating with ancestral spirits. A further, smaller group denied that disability exists as a meaningful theological category at all. Despite their doctrinal differences, Christianity and ATR arrive at strikingly similar beliefs, a convergence the findings attribute to a shared cultural substrate rather than to any direct theological borrowing between the two traditions. Perspectives specific to Christianity are shaped substantially by biblical passages such as John 9, while ATR's understanding is shaped by practices guided by ancestral spirits.

The two traditions differ more in application than in belief. Christianity engages persons with disabilities only minimally in practice, while ATR involves them, albeit conditionally, in rituals and ceremonies and, in some cases, as practitioners in their own right. Both traditions 'willingness to include persons

[29] Nanthambwe, 'Reimagining Inclusion'.

with disabilities is, on the evidence gathered here, weaker than either claims. ATR's inclusion is constrained by the requirement that the person with a disability possess an ancestral spirit, while Christian institutions remain broadly reluctant to include persons with disabilities in programmes or activities beyond token gestures. Neither tradition reported a specific programme designed to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. Whatever support exists is sporadic, and largely through individual compassion rather than institutional commitment.

Taken together, these findings point toward the same conclusion from several directions: both religions require training that builds knowledge of disability and improves communication with persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities themselves require documentation to access social services and assistive technologies that neither tradition is currently positioned to provide on its own. The IEF developed in this paper is a proposed answer to that need. It does not claim to resolve the theological disagreements documented in the findings, nor does it assume those disagreements must be resolved before institutional practice can improve. Its contribution is narrower and more practical, offering religious institutions in Zimbabwe and elsewhere a structure through which existing goodwill can be converted into sustained, coordinated, and person-centred practice. Future research should prioritise piloting the framework's three pillars within a small number of religious institutions, using the implementation indicators outlined above, to establish whether the model changes institutional practice and not merely institutional rhetoric.

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