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Integrating Biblical Archaeology into Christian Theological Education in West Africa: Its Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The study examines the current state of development of biblical scholarship in West Africa. The problem addressed is the limited integration of scientific archaeological education into biblical studies in the region which thereby creates a gap in interdisciplinary and contextual scholarship. It is this lacuna that the study seeks to fill. Methodologically, the study is applied theological advocatory research, which is expository and descriptive. It uses a mixed-method approach. This involved field-sourced data collected from physical on-site archaeological investigations in Israel and the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and examination of theological curricula in selected seminaries and faculties of Christian religious studies at universities in Benin, Ghana, and Nigeria. Using data sources, it engages in critical debates in biblical archaeology and assesses its prospects and limitations. It also engages in a review of the relevant literature. Data analysis is historical-analytical. Research findings indicate no integration of biblical archaeology in the syllabuses of Christian religious studies in the region. It considers this a serious lacuna in Christian theological training. In summary, this study supplies insights into West African Christian theology and justifies the imperativeness of biblical archaeology. The study concludes that archaeology provides a valuable interdisciplinary framework for biblical studies. Building on these findings, the study

calls for institutionalising biblical archaeology as a theological pedagogical tool in West Africa.

Introduction

Pioneer sources on the imperative of biblical archaeology have come with diverse interests from scholars such as Albright (1960) and Thompson (1980) and from the Vatican (Pius XII 1943). Ongoing developments in the field of biblical archaeology have substantiated its credibility as a scientific tool for biblical analysis. Therefore, the study seeks to employ biblical archaeology as a critical pedagogical tool, which the study notes is critically lacking in West African Christian religious education. The study opines that biblical archaeology remains a critical pedagogical tool for advancing comprehensive theological discussions and therefore seeks its integration into the curriculum of Christian theological institutions in West Africa. As the debate on methodological questions in African biblical study continues (Uwaegbute 2023), the study seeks a new frontier for theological expression in West Africa that includes biblical archaeology. It adopts the views of critical writers like Agboada (2023), Mensah (2023), Oduyoye (2001) and Ukpong (2000, 2002) who shift Christian theology from 'What are Europeans saying?' to 'What is the Bible saying in Africa through Africans?' These engage in decoloniality and the critique of Western-imposed epistemologies. By addressing the future directions of West African theology and the need for new contextual resources in theological reflection, they explore traditional exegesis as a pedagogical tool in biblical study. It is envisaged that this approach sets the pace for the integration of biblical archaeology and Christian religious education in the region.

As noted by scholars, archaeological investigations in the Fertile Crescent in general have contributed immensely to modern biblical research (Picardo 2021; Tubi 2025). The spadework of professional archaeologists so far has yielded immense data on the Bible and the cultures associated with it, and it has become acceptable for archaeology to be considered a necessary tool for biblical scholars and theologians, critics and people of faith alike (Cline 2009, 2025; Lim 2024). The call for the integration of biblical archaeology in West African theological education stems from two fronts: the opinions of scholars

who argue that biblical archaeology holds the key to authentic examination of the Bible (Picardo 2021; Dever 2020, 2026) and African scholars who argue for contextual and historical-cultural theology (Maluleke 2022; Mensah 2023). The study also highlights the limitations of biblical archaeology and raises critical debates over topics such as incomplete archaeological evidence, the inability to prove faith claims, limited correlation with biblical narratives, and researchers' biases, amongst others. In this study, an engagement with causality produces an examination of the causes and effects behind archaeological data unearthed in biblical lands and their applicability to African theological education. Thus, rather than merely engaging in a descriptive study of artefacts, structures, and ecofacts, the study engages with context, to understand Afrocentric questions of *why* archaeological materials came into existence, *what* factors influenced their emergence, and *how* they relate to biblical and African societies.

Statement of the Problem

The issue addressed by the study is the near absence of biblical archaeology in Christian education in West Africa. The study observes that Christian theological scholarship has grown in the region; however, theological discourses are largely limited to textual, historical, intercultural, and dogmatic approaches. This has created a gap in achieving valuable Afrocentric and comprehensive exegesis. Recently Uwaegbute (2023) raised the question of methodology in African biblical studies; he was silent on biblical archaeology. The absence of biblical archaeological study in the region imposes a decontextualised interpretation of biblical narratives. Thus, the situation raises questions about the adequacy of current theological curricula and the extent to which scholars equip themselves. By challenging the absence of biblical archaeology in Bible colleges and Christian theological schools in West Africa, the study seeks to bridge the gap in knowledge which may manifest as a reduced comprehension of the Bible, weaker apologetics, an absence of critical historical data, and less interdisciplinary engagement. Importantly, the limited application of biblical archaeology in theological curricula raises critical questions about how sociocultural and historical-contextual tools are prioritised within theological education in West Africa.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The prime aim of the study is to examine the relevance and prospects of integrating biblical archaeology as a pedagogical tool in Christian theological education in West Africa, in order to enhance biblical interpretation, historical understanding, and theological education. The objectives that helped to achieve the aims were: (1) to assess the current level of integration of biblical archaeology in Christian religious studies in West African institutions, (2) to examine the contributions of biblical archaeology to the understanding and interpretation of biblical texts among Christian scholars in the region, (3) to identify the challenges hindering the effective integration of biblical archaeology into Christian religious studies and propose practical strategies to overcome the challenges.

Methodology of Research

The study adopts an applied theological, advocatory, qualitative research design, which is based on a mixed-method approach using historical-analytical and interdisciplinary methods. As historical-analytical research, it examines historical archaeological data and the realities of the biblical world and its implications for contemporary Christian pedagogy, and it interprets ideas, historical evidence, and scholarly literature rather than numerical collection and analysis. It is interdisciplinary in integrating biblical archaeology and Christian studies, drawing on African studies, epistemology, and theology.

The collection of data was based on (1) open-ended questions and semi-structured, in-depth interviews, (2) an extensive review of literature that is germane to the discussion, and (3) critical examination of theological curricula in selected seminaries, Bible schools, and faculties of Christian religious studies in higher institutions in Nigeria; and, importantly, (4) the study gained from direct participation in archaeological exploration in Israel by me, the researcher. I am a professional archaeologist who participated in archaeological fieldwork at Hippos Sussita, one of the cities of the ancient Decapolis of Israel, and made an extensive survey of archaeological sites in Israel. I have also written on biblical archaeological themes (Tubi 2016, 2025). Analytical procedures involved identifying gaps in existing Christian theological scholarship in West Africa. The study also uses archaeological, ecclesial, and

theological literature. Archaeological interpretations of the chronological provenance of artefacts are applied to data, and historical-cultural analysis was used to explain biblical passages, employing thematic analysis to discuss the relevance of biblical archaeology.

To gauge the state of biblical archaeology in the region, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were used to collate a sample of opinions and measure degrees of knowledge of archaeology among Christian theological institutions in West Africa. It helps the research to have firsthand the knowledge that seminarians have about archaeology in general and biblical archaeology in particular. On-site focused sampling was carried out in Catholic theologates, which were chosen because they have been in existence for a long time and they have pontifical approval. These were the Grand Séminaire Saint-Gall de Ouidah, Benin Republic, a pontifical Catholic institution which admits students from Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and, in Nigeria, the Major Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul, Ibadan, Dominican Institute, Ibadan, and St Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary, Makurdi. A long-established Protestant theologate, Immanuel College of Theology, Ibadan, which trains Anglicans and Methodists for priestly ordination at diploma and degree levels, was also chosen. Random online examination of syllabuses of Christian religious studies at l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Benin Republic, the University of Ghana, and the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, was carried out, while physical examination of the syllabuses for Christian religious studies was conducted at Federal University Lokoja, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Kogi State University, Ayingba, which are public institutions. In addition, more random samplings were conducted at a few Christian universities in Nigeria, namely, Dominican University, Veritas University, Redeemed University, and Caritas University.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for the study is grounded in the interdisciplinary relationship between archaeology, biblical studies, theology, and cultural heritage. Rather than treat biblical archaeology as a discipline limited to research in the Near East, this framework views it as a methodological approach that enriches biblical exegesis through material-cultural, historico-cultural, and scientific

analysis. In this context, biblical archaeology bridges the gap between empirical scholarship and Bible studies, enabling students to critically engage with biblical texts within their historical and cultural context. This integrative framework contextualises learning by equipping students with analytical tools to evaluate archaeological discoveries alongside biblical narratives.

Conceptually, it synthesises existing perspectives, archaeological findings, and theological scholarship to propose a new framework for integrating biblical archaeology into Christian theological education in West Africa. It proposes that theologates in West Africa should integrate biblical archaeology into their curricula. It is envisaged that such integration would not only enhance theological pedagogy but also encourage comparative studies between the ancient biblical world and ancient West African civilisations. Ultimately, the conceptual framework positions biblical archaeology as a catalyst for producing historically informed, academically competent, culturally sensitive contemporary scholars.

Understanding Biblical Archaeology

Etymologically, *archaeology* is derived from two Greek words: *archaios*, meaning ancient things, and *logos*, meaning organised study. Archaeology, an anglicised form of the Greek word *archaeologia*, literally means 'the science of ancient things'. Archaeology emerged from a background suffused with antiquarianism, dilettantism, grave digging, and exotic plundering of ancient monuments, before it became a specialised field of study (Gitin 2021; Lim 2024; Philip 2013). Archaeology is an organised study: the science and art of retrieving, classifying, and interpreting artefacts which shed light on human life and cultural activities in antiquity. This task is done through the discovery and examination of materials abandoned by humans, called artefacts (movable objects) and features (immovable materials). Biblical archaeology is a special type of scientific archaeology that looks at biblical narratives dispassionately (Lim 2024; Picardo 2021). It unearths the Bible in a way no other discipline can (Finkelstein 2022), and it always has a special ring about it. Highly valuable in Christian theology, it has been undertaken as part of modern scriptural scientific study, which must not lose its neutrality. It should be stated at the outset that, on the one hand, it is not the task of biblical

archaeology to prove that the Bible is true, in line with those who take a literal approach to biblical stories, and, on the other hand, it does not seek to disprove the Bible (Dever 2020; Schreiner 2022). One of the leading lights in this approach is the modern Catholic approach to the Bible, which views archaeology as a valuable tool for analysis, exegesis, and dogma. Concerning this approach, Pope Pius XII stated in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943:316),

> The interpreter must, as it were, go back wholly in spirit to those remote centuries of the East, and with the aid of history, archaeology, ethnology and other sciences, accurately determine what modes of writing the authors of that ancient age wished to use and actually did use.

Literature Review

The literature review incorporates the writings of experts in the Bible, archaeologists, Afrocentric scholars, postcolonial scholars, and contextual hermeneutics writers. Popular pioneer treatises on biblical archaeology come from Albright (1960) and Thompson (1980), which highlight the impossibility of carrying out a thorough biblical study in this modern climate without drawing data from archaeology as a veritable handmaid of the Bible. Biblical archaeology, having emerged as a specialised field of inquiry aimed at biblical contexts, was initially motivated by the desire to verify the historicity and reliability of the Bible. Accordingly, archaeology provides concrete data that shed fresh illumination on biblical narratives. Rather than proving and validating the Bible, modern scholarship engages in contextual debates which view archaeology as providing cultural and historical contexts for a proper interpretation of the Bible. The scholars Dever (2020) and Schreiner (2022) argue that biblical archaeology should be construed primarily as the archaeology of the Fertile Crescent or Levant and not solely as an apologetic tool. Dever emphasises that the discipline provides independent data capable of confirming, challenging, completing, or negating biblical narratives. Several excavations conducted in Israel and surrounding areas have been used by scholars to shed light on settlement patterns, agriculture, warfare, social organisation, and religious rites, among other things. These developments

have inevitably broadened the scope of biblical archaeology, making it an essential tool for understanding the cultural and historical contexts of the Bible and not as a mere tool of validation (Dever 2020, 2026; Schreiner 2022).

The Bible is held sacred by both Jews and Christians as the inspired word of God in human language and it is read by millions of people for sundry purposes; therefore, many believe its content is literal truth, accurate history, and scientifically accurate. This belief, however, flies in the face of critical biblical archaeological studies, which have raised some difficulties with such a literal interpretation of the Bible and simplistic admission of its narratives. The study observes that lacunae need to be filled here and there, and some biblical stories and obscured periods in the Bible remain silent, seeking elucidation. Accordingly, archaeological data, including inscriptions, pottery, architectural remains, and manuscripts, continue to shed light on various aspects of the ancient Jewish way of life. As observed by scholars like Gadot (2026), Kennedy (2026), and Rodston (2025), biblical archaeology makes concrete contributions to important narratives of the Bible and enriches theological scholarship by providing datable data. This is where archaeological research has its most enduring impact in biblical studies, which is missing from African theological institutions.

To achieve profound insight into the imperatives for biblical archaeology in theological education in West Africa, we shall be examining two scholarly fronts; firstly, we shall look at Africa-based archaeological treatises, which demonstrate the relevance of archaeology to religious and cultural studies in general, and, secondly, we shall examine the submissions of African scholars that call for an interdisciplinary approach to Christian theology.

Within Afrocentric archaeology, scholars continue to demonstrate the relevance of archaeology in unearthing, deconstructing, and documenting the ancient religious systems of Africa. The work of Shaw (1970), whose excavations in Igbo Ukwu shed immense light on ancient West African religious practices and transformed our understanding of the dynamics of African civilisation, is important. Shaw's discoveries form an essential archaeological reference that provides a methodological and historical model for how archaeological data can shed light on religious traditions and cultural history. Similarly important is Ogundiran (2020, 2023), whose studies on the social

complexity and cultural heritage of ancient Yoruba people have enriched African archaeological scholarship. His studies underscore the need to use archaeological data to reconstruct historical narratives and beliefs of indigenous peoples. His studies provide a model and serve as an impetus for integrating archaeology into religious studies. Though their works were not primarily about biblical narratives, their methodologies reinforce the value of archaeology as a theological tool of inquiry.

African biblical scholars have made significant contributions to global biblical scholarship. In working on textual data, they make impressive contributions to the aspect of Christian theology. Along this trajectory, Mensah (2023) states that theology in Africa must engage meaningfully with the lived experiences and historical realities of Africans. It is at this juncture that biblical archaeology makes its meaningful impact by enabling African theologians to connect biblical stories with contemporary African contexts, and this is very valuable to theologians seeking to contextualise biblical narratives within African social-cultural realities. The works of scholars like Malukeke (2022) and Ukpong (2000, 2002) on inculturation and trado-hermeneutics emphasise the role of reading biblical texts through the lens of African contexts. This position is enriched by biblical archaeology, which supplies historical and cultural data that enhance exegetical positions and theological interpretations. In such a situation, biblical archaeology serves as the bridge between Christian theology, African theological reflections, and cultural studies and performs an important pedagogical and apologetic role. The discipline also contributes to the decolonisation of theological knowledge, which makes Maluleke (2022) and Oduyoye (2001**)** state that Christianity was rooted within concrete historical and cultural contexts and therefore the development of theological methodologies in Africa must reflect African realities and traditional indigenous knowledge systems. Biblical archaeology is best suited for making this intervention because it is concerned with primary data rather than relying exclusively on Western paradigms. This position fosters the emergence of indigenous Afrocentric theological perspectives that are both academically rigorous and contextually grounded. However, the addition of archaeological evidence would give a shared platform for comparative religious studies and the envisaged constructive engagement of African and Jewish traditions. It is biblical archaeology that engages with cultural material that offers tangible

evidence, which illuminates the contexts in which biblical traditions and narratives emerged.

These West African theologians argue that theology should not remain abstract but must engage with concrete historical and social realities. This approach supports the argument that biblical archaeology is not merely about recovering ancient relics but about enriching contemporary African theological reflection through contextual interpretation. They contend that authentic African theology must emerge from the concrete experiences of Africans and that contextual theology conceives Christian theology as arising from concrete experiences and historical realities rather than from abstract doctrinal formulations. This approach provides a valuable framework for integrating biblical archaeology into African theological discourse. However, the exploration of biblical archaeology as a pedagogical tool has not been well advanced, and the exploration of how biblical archaeology can be systematically integrated into biblical education and missionary formation remains untapped in West Africa. This lacuna drives the imperative to further the advocacy of biblical archaeology in enriching the curricula of theological institutions and fostering a thoroughly informed biblical scholarship in the region.

Research Findings: The State of Biblical Archaeology in West Africa

When Pope Pius XII (1943:316) wrote about promoting modern biblical scholarship, he said,

> Let them neglect none of those discoveries, whether in the domain of archaeology or in ancient history or literature, which serve to make better known the mentality of the ancient writers.

After over eight decades it is apparent that West African biblical scholars have not adopted this endorsement. The result of the study shows that curricula for Christian religious studies in West African seminaries and universities are devoid of thorough biblical archaeology but typically engage in a general

overview of the Old Testament and selected New Testament books, biblical doctrines, ethics, church history, biblical languages, and the inculturation of biblical tenets. Syllabuses adopt a multidisciplinary approach combining history, philosophy, and systematic and cross-cultural perspectives. In all these, biblical archaeology and church archaeology are not taught. It is to be noted that in the same region Islamic archaeology is taught as a compulsory course in some universities within the Department of Islamic Studies.

The advent of Christianity and the Bible in West Africa involved a very complex, intricate, and multifaceted history which intertwined the economy with religion. According to Asamoah and Kpalam (2023), the Bible first landed in West Africa in the fifteenth century through Portuguese explorers and missionaries. This was more pronounced in ancient coastal communities in present-day Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. The Portuguese established flourishing trading networks with coastal territories, which were accompanied by Christianising missions by the Capuchin friars. However, this venture collapsed when European missionaries and West Africa experienced a hiatus. The second missionary efforts, which began in the nineteenth century yielded immense success and persist till today. This was achieved through the efforts of Catholic missionaries (Society of Africa, White Fathers, Augustinians), Methodists, and Baptists. European missionaries brought back the Bible, established schools and dispensaries, and baptised converts (Ayegboyin and Ogunewu 2022). The study observes that, despite the long history of Christianity, so far archaeological education has not been added to the Christian educational system in the region, and the advances made in biblical education through archaeology are yet to penetrate West African theological scholarship.

Imperatives for the Integration of Biblical Archaeology in Theological Education in West Africa

It has been noted that biblical archaeology is an integral part of biblical study and the discipline can occupy a unique pedagogical position within African theological discourse by providing an empirical and historical framework through which biblical narratives may be critically examined and contextually interpreted within the African milieu. The study now focuses on a general

thematic explanation of specific ways in which biblical archaeology makes meaningful contributions to biblical education.

Usefulness in Contextual Theology

Integrating biblical archaeology into Christian theology in West Africa serves as the agency of contextual African theology. As observed by Agboada (2023), the works of Kwame Bediako, John Mbiti, Justin Ukpong, and Charles Nyamiti provide a decolonial background, and similarly Maluleke (2022), along with these writers, has advocated for a contextual approach to biblical scholarship that engages with the lived experiences of Africans.

It is Valuable for Scriptural Translation and Exegesis

One of the most pressing needs of the church in Africa is accurate translation of the Bible into our local languages, which would provide a nearly accurate rendition and explanation of the pages of the Bible. This is best achieved through the aid of up-to-date discoveries from biblical archaeology. As observed by scholars like Cline (2025) and Picardo (2021), difficult texts in the Bible have received new illumination through the discipline. Also, Maeir (2024) argues for the epistemological value of biblical archaeology and opines that exegesis has benefited tremendously from archaeological data drawn from kindred languages to Hebrew, which helps to situate critical texts within their cultural and regional milieu. Through archaeological discoveries, scholars have gained new insights into ancient beliefs, a deeper appreciation of words, and a new impression of statutes in biblical narratives (Finkelstein 2022). It is one of the great uses of biblical archaeology that exegetists can get verifiable data to interpret scriptures with an open mind when they possess details the discipline supplies.

It Helps in the Reconstruction of Biblical Historical Context

Historical validation is of primary relevance to African cultures. Biblical archaeology has helped in this area by its painstaking process of gathering, interpreting, and organising credible evidence from the past to construct a reliable account of the past events associated with the Bible. In the African milieu and in traditional societies in general, the onerous task involves sourcing data from diverse sources because the past is not often clearly

annotated, evidence may be biased, available history may be nuanced or damaged; therefore, it is pertinent to derive relevant data from archaeology and its data in the form of artefacts, ecofacts, and ancient inscriptions on rocks and leathers, which are useful in reconstructing past events. This particular point was raised by Lim (2024) as relevant in reconstructing biblical times. Biblical archaeology, in reconstructing the historical past of Israel and its neighbours, unearths and furnishes us with details of buried histories, the reconstruction of history, and its periodisation. This has been achieved in a remarkable way with a minor margin of error hitherto when scholars have relied only on faith and inspiration. With data from biblical archaeology, individuals in the Bible are substantiated, cities are identified, and events are reconstructed with near accuracy.

It Provides a General Background to the Bible

Africans often cherish a general background of stories and events because knowledge is traditionally understood as something which is rooted in context rather than isolated facts. The communal nature of Africans also encourages deep appreciation for background information. In Africa, events are rarely seen as affecting only individuals; they are construed in relation to family, lineage, clans, and community, where ancestors and cultural values play a significant part. For Africans, understanding the historical, cultural, and geographical background of the Bible enhances translation and hermeneutics. To get a general background of the Bible, it is archaeology that is best suited to the task (Cline 2025; Rodston 2025). Though archaeology was not created to prove the Bible's truth, its capacity to generate unassailable concrete evidence has helped greatly in understanding the world in which biblical events occurred. Artefacts have helped us to decipher how people lived, construe their religious system, and reconstruct regional timelines. According to Gitin (2021) and Lim (2024) archaeology has provided immense relevant data on the palaeogeographical and sociocultural contexts of the ancient Near East and furnished us with the fact that biblical narratives like creation and flood stories were popular in the region, and not peculiar to the Jews. Indeed simulacra were found in a Babylonian-Sumerian document called *Enuma Elish* and Babylonian texts depicting primaeval chaos, the creation of the universe, the creation of man and woman, and longevity that tally with the biblical account.

It Has Apologetic Value

The apologetic value of biblical archaeology in Africa lies not in proving miracles or asserting biblical data but in demonstrating that the biblical message emerged from authentic historico-cultural settings. This reduces misinterpretation and encourages sound exegesis within African theology. One of the greatest uses of biblical archaeology is as a science-based tool that is at the service of faith, and it can be stated that preachers and dogmatists have their task made easy by tons of archaeological discoveries. *Apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia*, meaning a defence that gives *a* rational explanation and justification for believers of the Bible. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Bible was subjected to a tirade of criticism as some scholars claimed it was full of historical errors. However, archaeological discoveries have helped to defend the reliability of the Bible in an admirable way (Philip and Cherian 2013). Archaeology has achieved this in four principal ways: (1) providing historical evidence for events, people, and places, (2) confirming the accuracy of biblical records, (3) reconstructing and clarifying difficult and obscure texts concerning the sociocultural background of biblical narratives, and (4) refuting criticisms of the Bible as fictional or mythical texts. The scholars Holden and Enterline (2024) and Philip and Cherian (2013) argue that, with biblical archaeology, it is certain that the Bible cannot be considered a mere collection of myths and legends but a real document that documents the lived experiences of real persons and culture. By ascertaining the historical truthfulness of the Bible, biblical archaeology invariably becomes a veritable tool for apologetics. In line with Holden and Enterline (2024) and Philip and Cherian (2013), by providing external and extra-biblical data on the Bible, archaeology reinforces the credibility of the faith of all who hold the Bible as an article of faith or culture. While archaeology offers strong support to the Bible, it is to be said that it cannot prove spiritual truths, nor can it provide all the data, because many biblical events did not survive in the archaeological records, and some were hallowed myths.

It Sheds Linguistic Insights on the Ancient Near East

Among Africans, linguistic expressions are particularly important as means of dialogue, but also as vehicles of preserving identity, culture, history, and beliefs. Archaeological data continue to play an important role in illuminating the culture, history, and identity of ancient peoples through archaeolinguistic

comparative studies. Many languages were unknown until archaeologists rediscovered and deciphered their scripts. We can easily cite the cuneiform scripts from Nineveh and Ur, which were documented in clay tablets, which brought to light the ancient Akkadians and Sumerians. We can also see the Ugaritic tablets from Ras Shamra Suria, whose cuneiform alphabet gave insight into the language clusters of ancient Canaan, including Hebrew and Phoenician (Lim 2024; Picardo 2021).

Numerous scripts and manuscripts have been discovered in Israel and surrounding countries that give details of the dialectological and lexical structures of ancient languages of the ancient Near East. Biblical archaeology deepens our understanding of biblical languages by digging out ancient inscriptions on walls, pottery, manuscripts, stones, and wood. We can cite the Dead Sea sources, ostraca of Samaria, Ugaritic texts, the Rosetta stone, and Tel Dan inscriptions, among other things (Tubi 2025), whose remarkable data shed light on the language clusters of the ancient Near East. Through biblical archaeology, we have been able to verify the meanings of words and correct impressions and deconstruct idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and other figurative expressions in the Bible. Linguistically, through archaeology, we can decipher the evolution of languages and dialects in the Near East and engage in the comparative linguistic analysis of Semitic languages and their neighbours (Rodston 2025).

It Provides Evidence on Ancient Religious Rites in Israel and its Neighbours

The discipline complements African theological studies by engaging in comparative analyses of the religious traditions of the ancient Near East and those of African indigenous societies. In African cultures, sacrifices, sacred spaces, ritual purification, covenant-making, kinship structures, festivals, and ancestral rites are carefully maintained. Biblical archaeology fosters comparative and contextual reflections on convergences and divergences between ancient Israel and traditional Africans since it is best equipped to provide data on ancient sacred rites and religious practices, such as how ancient societies worshipped, performed sacrifices, conducted obsequies, and honoured their deities. Archaeological excavations have revealed the physical locations of worship and the nature of worship in ancient Israel. As observed

by Cline (2009) and Finkelstein (2022) modern interpretations of ancient Israelites' religious rites that continue from antiquity have been achieved through archaeology, and notably it extends our knowledge of how the ancient people of Israel conceptualised divinity, organised their religion, and gave recognition to the temporal and spiritual worlds and the afterlife.

Challenges Confronting Biblical Archaeology in West Africa and Suggested Solutions

A scholarly assessment of the challenges facing the introduction of biblical archaeology into Christian religious studies in West Africa reveals that the obstacles are institutional, methodological, financial, and theological. West Africa has very few trained experts in biblical archaeology as most biblical scholars specialise in biblical languages, ethics, church history, and dogma, while West African professional archaeologists concentrate on indigenous civilisations such as Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ile Ife, and Jenne amongst others rather than archaeology of the biblical world. Another challenge is that biblical archaeology is resource-intensive which demands access to excavation in biblical lands and specialised technologies. As most West African theologates operate under financial strictures they prioritise their needs, wherein archaeology comes far back. Importantly, curricula of theologates are operating under a heavy colonial legacy and as a result biblical archaeology remains on the periphery of biblical scholarship in the region. The region also suffers from a lack of ecclesial support in the form of funding, the formation of church archaeologists, and the establishment of museums. Addressing these challenges requires firm support in the form of appropriate funding, curriculum reform, investment in biblical education, digital access to archaeological data, and the production of indigenous experts.

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

In summary, the study highlights the current absence of biblical archaeology in Christian theological study in West Africa. It asserts that archaeology, the scientific study of material things which illuminates the biblical world, is a tool for theological education. The study argues that it is an essential part of modern biblical scholarship which has not been well integrated in the region.

The study has demonstrated that biblical archaeology instils a spirit of critical inquiry and academic rigour into biblical study, offers scientific data for biblical narratives, strengthens faith, provides a recalibration of biblical chronological frameworks, and reveals sociocultural contexts of yore. The study identifies biblical archaeology as a requisite discipline.

The uniqueness of biblical archaeology to West African theological education lies in its capacity to generate historical evidence and integrate it with the theological reflections of scholars and the lived experiences of locals. Within the Afrocentric milieu, the works of Agboada (2023), Mensah (2023), Ukpong (2002), Oduyoye (2001), and others demonstrate that African theological discourses are enhanced when they are backed by unassailable data, which archaeology provides.

The study accepts that biblical archaeology is confronted with limitations. Overall, the study has helped to indicate the interconnectivity of history and culture that formed the foundation of the Bible. It shows the nexus between religion and cultural history in the Near East in general, which underlay the history and theology of ancient Israel. The study makes a meaningful contribution to the promotion of modern theological formation in West Africa by calling for the integration of biblical archaeology. By uncovering the ancient cultural dynamics of Israel and the early church, the study is best suited to help African scholars draw parallels with indigenous African societies in areas like human-deity relationships, the afterlife, communitarianism, the veneration of ancestors, ritualism, and the passage of life among other things. This study proves that the search for a formation of an authentic Afrocentric theology that is grounded in the Bible can be achieved.

In conclusion, integrating biblical archaeology into Christian religious studies in West Africa would provide a valuable interdisciplinary framework for deepening biblical interpretation, strengthening theological scholarship, and enriching faith. The study establishes biblical archaeology as a vital discipline that helps to cultivate the envisaged dialogue between faith and science, enabling the church to engage the modern world intelligently, dispel uncritical fundamentalism, and dispel superstition that sometimes clouds biblical reasoning. In general, biblical archaeology is an educational tool for scholars that throws light on the dynamics of sociocultural, political, historical, and

religious changes in various territories which are associated with the Bible. However, it is not every biblical narrative that has been proven, and it is certain that not all will be. And it is even significant that all archaeological statements are prone to fallibility, meaning therefore that it is always within archaeology to reject, modify, and expand its previous conclusions in the face of new data. To achieve the integration of biblical archaeology into Christian theological education in the region remains a critical task.

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African Biblical Interpretation Revisited: The Case of the Gerasene Demoniac in Mark 5:1–20

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Abstract

Due to Enlightenment rationalism, Western scholarship has historically overlooked spirit possession and exorcisms in the New Testament. Most scholars have approached these practices peripherally and associated them with superstitious and pre-scientific societies, especially in Africa. Biblical scholarship, as a Western-dominated discipline, has inherited this perspective and has not fully utilised African experiences or hermeneutics to examine spirit possession in the Bible. In their inquiries, biblical scholars mainly analyse the gospels' demonic possession from a historical-critical approach, disconnecting it from contemporary experiences. This article discusses African biblical scholarship as an emerging field, emphasising its methodological approaches and contributions to biblical studies overall. It also explores spirit possession from an African perspective to rehabilitate this anthropological experience, which remains relevant in some current societies. It demonstrates that African biblical hermeneutics can shed light on biblical stories about possession and exorcism, offering valuable insights for modern readers. The story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1−20) provides the raw material for this treatment.

Introduction

The stories reported in the synoptic gospels about Jesus casting out demons describe a context that is similar to the African cultural worldview (Mbiti 1971:140−150; Mburu 2021:32−33). Consequently, their interpretation can be

illuminated by African anthropological experiences. However, these passages can seem irrelevant to some modern readers because they may point to a different worldview.

This article proposes an approach to investigating biblical spirit possession and exorcism through the lens of African anthropology. Since African biblical scholarship and its methodological approaches may be unfamiliar to some readers, I wish to begin with a survey of the history of African biblical scholarship and of Christianity in Africa. I will then discuss cross-cultural and post-colonial methodological approaches. In the second part, I will explore the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1−20) from an African perspective. To focus this project, special attention will be given to the East African region. This society traditionally believes in supernatural powers and the existence of ancestors' spirits that can possess and harm the living. It is also important to note that, in East African societies, traditional healers still play a key role in helping those possessed by evil spirits.

Towards an African Biblical Hermeneutic

History of African Biblical Scholarship

Many scholars have engaged in historical criticism to investigate spirit possession and Jesus' healings and exorcisms. Others have explored anthropological evidence, comparing Jesus with other exorcists in the ancient Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds. Therefore, the African cultural context and its postcolonial mindset have not interested many scholars. It was in the 1960s that some scholars began to develop a model that interprets the Bible from an African perspective (Ossom-Batsa 2006:91). In the 1970s, African hermeneutics became a discipline within biblical scholarship.

The consolidation of African biblical scholarship can be traced back to the 1966 theological conference of Ibadan (Mbiti 1986:73). To address the issue of a theology that was not adapted to African life, and aiming to make a theology that was relevant to the African context, African theologians gathered for a colloquium in Ibadan, Nigeria. They discussed various topics related to introducing African biblical interpretation as a new approach in biblical hermeneutics. The agenda included the Afrocentric reading of the Bible and

the inculturation of biblical hermeneutics. This new approach highlighted the application of the text to the audience in a postcolonial context (Mbiti 1986:73). Thus, for some Africans, African biblical hermeneutics appears more engaging and transformative.

A few years after this conference of African theologians, John Mbiti, the pillar of this emerging discipline, published an important work in which he discusses the encounter between the biblical texts and African traditional concepts (1971). At the same time, Edward W. Fasholé-Luke (1975) expressed his concern that Africans were not significantly involved in biblical exegesis. Since then, some other scholars have developed an increasing interest in African hermeneutics, seeking to make scripture relevant to the African worldview. Among others, I can mention Justin Ukpong (1994, 2000), who focused his two major works on the inculturation of biblical hermeneutics in the African context, and Loba-Mkole (2008), who joined Ukpong's intercultural biblical exegesis. The publication of *The Bible in Africa* in 2000 (West and Dube 2000) and of an *Africa Bible Commentary* (Adeyemo 2006) marked a decisive step that spurred new efforts in African biblical scholarship.

Over the last two decades, interest in African biblical scholarship has increased among scholars. Some among them are worth consideration. Gerald O. West (2012) focuses his research on how dialogue between the African context and the Bible allows for African appropriation of biblical texts. Mbengu D. Nyiawung (2013) is mainly interested in Jesus' identity from an African perspective. Kabiro wa Gatumu (2009) examines Paul's conceptualisation of supernatural powers and then compares it with the African worldview. Musa Dube is mainly interested in the postcolonial translation of the Bible into African languages and in reading biblical texts through the lens of feminist theories (Dube 2000; Dube and Wafula 2017). Elizabeth W. Mburu engages African hermeneutics, using what she calls the 'intercultural method'. She highlights the fact that the

> parallels between biblical and African cultures and worldviews can be used as bridges to promote understanding, internalization and application of the biblical text. (2021:32)

Finally, Andrew Mbuvi (2017) has provided us with a recent article in which he offers a survey of African biblical studies as an emerging discipline.

African biblical scholarship primarily aims to make theology useful to society as a whole. Those for whom theology is done are implicated in the process. Consequently, theological findings are relevant to the recipients. In other words, the audience, which has been oppressed and ignored, finds a theological platform where its members can find answers to their practical life (Nyiawung 2013:2).

Mbuvi helps us identify, in Mbiti's early work, some elements that should be expected within a framework of African biblical studies (2017:150). The most important ones are worth mentioning: first, critiquing Eurocentric biblical scholarship. Mbiti critiques the imposition of Western eschatological concepts into an African reality (1971:91−125). Second is foregrounding African religious and cultural presuppositions in biblical interpretation. By analysing the African conceptualisation of the 'living-dead', he demonstrates an eschatological aspect that the West had not conceptualised (1971:60−90). Third is recognising the failure of some methods used by Western missionaries, who presented the gospel message to Africans without recognising African religious realities (Mbiti 1971:151). Fourth is exposing the closer affinity of the African religious outlook to the first-century biblical worldview. Along these lines, Mbiti explores a variety of biblical texts by drawing parallels with the African worldview (1971:140−150). Fifth is misapprehensions of the biblical message in African societies due to translation issues. Mbiti analyses various nuances of verb conjugation that the translation of the Bible into African languages failed to convey (1971:26). Lastly, he proposes the inculturation of some African traditional beliefs and practices into Christianity.

As a consolidated discipline, African hermeneutics is diverse and engaged through various categories or approaches. Although these categories overlap, it is legitimate to mention some of them. First, feminist hermeneutics reads the text in light of gender issues and the restoration of female identity (Dube 2000; Mburu 2021:33−77). Second, the postcolonial approach reads the text through the lens of the long history of Western colonialism and imperialism to advance African socioeconomic emancipation (Ela 1980; Kithinji 2021; Maimela 1987; Nyiawung 2013). Third, inculturation hermeneutics engages a

dialogue between the biblical text and African culture to express the gospel through African worldviews. For example, scholars in this group attempt to build an African Christology that looks at Jesus from an African perspective (Bediako 1990; Kithinji 2023; Magesa 2004; Mbiti 1971:27−39; Mugambi and Magesa 1989; Nyamiti 1984; Stinton 2004; Ukpong 1994). Fourth, African Independent Churches, commonly referred to as the community/people-based approach, provide a popular reading for ordinary believers. People appropriate biblical narratives to their daily lives (Nthamburi 2002:15). Lastly, I can mention the interfaith or comparative approach, which reads the biblical text to highlight its relationship with other religions, such as African traditional religions or Islam (Magesa 2010; Ossom-Batsa 2006:95−101).

Brief Consideration of Christianity in Africa

The historical evidence attests that Christianity was known in North Africa long before 180 AD (Decret 2009:9−10). Among the key figures in this early church, history records some leaders and theologians who continue to be celebrated today, such as Tertullian of Carthage (140−220 AD), Origen of Alexandria (184−253 AD), Cyprian of Carthage (195−258 AD), and Augustine of Hippo (354−430 AD). The works of these church fathers still have valuable interest for modern scholarship and in the practices of the church.

However, recent research indicates that the majority of Christians in Africa live in sub-Saharan Africa, including East Africa, and Abraham Smith estimates their number at 470 million adherents (2010:64). The history of this sub-Saharan Christianity dates back three centuries and has been embedded in the context of colonisation. In this framework, in many African countries, 'the Bible has been read and understood within pre-colonial, colonial, struggle for independence, post-independence, neo-colonial and globalization contexts' (Dube 2012:1−2). Consequently, the interpretation of the Bible is firmly framed within the Western historical and theological worldview, which does not easily fit an African context. As a result, some African converts to Christianity have continued to practise their traditional religions as well. Building on Mbiti (1986), wa Gatumu rightly states that, despite the growth of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, the African church continues to face a pastoral and doctrinal problem regarding 'the belief that supernatural powers inhibit or enhance human life' (2009:16).

Reconstructing the World of Spirits in African Pentecostal Hermeneutics

Pentecostals significantly contributed to biblical hermeneutics that valorise the universe of spiritual beings in an African context. The arrival of Pentecostal churches in Africa has been traced back to the 1970s. It is with the rise of these churches that Christian healing came into focus. They mainly focused on an aspect of ministry that has been neglected in mainline churches: the gifts of the Holy Spirit and deliverance. The mainline churches interpret the Bible from a historical-critical perspective common to mainstream biblical scholarship. The merit of the historical-critical methods lies in focusing on the author's intent, which limits subjectivism. However, it reduces the Bible to 'an object of historical investigation' (Fee 2000:8). Furthermore, it underestimates the world of spirits prevailing in African traditional religions and disregards contemporary readers and their context (Habarurema 2024:72). In contrast, Pentecostals took seriously the warning of Saint Paul to the Ephesians:

> For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly place (Ephesians 6:12, NRSV, here and throughout).

This ministry, which valorises some traditional religio-cultural resources, contributes to a significant growth of Pentecostalism in Africa (Anderson 2014:189). Along the same lines, Pentecostal hermeneutics highlights 'the correspondence between African experience and the Bible' (West 2000:38). They sought to integrate the spiritual experience lived in their communities into the exegesis of the Bible (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:170).

In Pentecostal hermeneutics, the languages common to the African cultural worldview, such as ancestors and the supreme being, are used and correlated with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Kalu 2008:184, 266–267). Spiritual beings, including demons and angels, though invisible, are also believed to be active. They can attack and harm people (Avorti 2000:312; LeMarquand 2000:93). In some African cultures, such as in Rwanda, a significant category of spirits consists of the ghosts of the dead, known as *bazimu*. The *bazimu* are also

classified into different clusters. The most important is made up of one's extended family. They can return to possess and harm the living as a form of revenge or punishment against any violation of their commands (Habarurema 2024:70−71; Karamaga 1990:120).

These spiritual beings, remnants of dead persons who can inflict pain or destroy the body, inform my reading of Mark 5:1−20. I look at the text through the eyes of an African reader, living in the context described by the *Africa Study Bible*:

> We in Africa have a greater understanding of the power of the spirits than do most people in the Western world. Many of us witnessed first-hand the destructive power of and oppression of demons. (Jusu 2012:1433)

Potential Methodological Approaches in African Biblical Scholarship

African biblical hermeneutics emerges as a theological discipline. Its general trend consists of reading the Bible through an African worldview. This project follows some African biblical scholars, such as Mbiti (1971), who rightly consider a cross-cultural approach an indispensable tool for reading and interpreting New Testament texts because it enables readers to understand biblical texts from their own cultural and religious context. Most of the time, their works are informed by 'insights from cultural anthropology' (Nyiawung 2013:7). This is why the cross-cultural method can be a valuable tool for examining biblical texts.

As far as the cross-cultural reading of the Bible in an African worldview is concerned, one must recognise that colonisation and postcolonisation are two historical realities that are reflected in all areas of African life. Both have been embedded in the cultural setting. This is why, in their attempt to liberate their hermeneutics from colonial ideas, African scholars have explored the Bible through a postcolonial approach. In this regard, two interdependent methodological approaches appear relevant to the reading of the Bible from an African perspective: the cross-cultural approach and the postcolonial biblical method. Both trends of African biblical hermeneutics will be important to this article as a concretisation of African biblical theology.

The Cross-cultural Approach

African biblical interpretation is defined as an Afrocentric interpretation. It aims to use insights from biblical hermeneutics to address situations and concerns pertinent to African communities (Mbuvi 2017:154). Most scholars describe it as 'an encounter between the biblical text and the African context' (Ukpong 2000:11). They acknowledge that cultural realities inform their work and recognise the rootedness of their endeavours in socio-political realities (Dube 2012:18).

Postmodernity, however, with its subjective tendencies and 'scientific ethos' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:11), seems far removed from the realities of biblical communities and may therefore have something to learn from African scholars. West writes that 'African culture may have resources to understand the Bible differently from Euro-American biblical scholarship' (2018:249). African scholars rightly argue that there are common elements between the African perspective and New Testament worldviews, particularly regarding spirit possession, exorcism, and other cosmological perspectives such as the porosity of the spiritual and physical worlds (Mbiti 1971:127−153; Mburu 2021:32−33). Both worldviews attribute the causality of demonic possession to spiritual agents. The natural causality introduced by modern scientists points to an entirely different cosmology, unfamiliar to both biblical and African worldviews. This argument is founded on belief in the existence of spiritual beings, who have power over the physical world and human beings. In East Africa, the spirits of the dead (*bazimu*) were traditionally considered lower divinities. Consequently, they have full control over the visible and invisible worlds (Karamaga 1990:120).[1] Even natural disasters were attributed to a demonic causality. It is legitimate to note that it is not fair to attribute to spiritual beings full dominion over the physical world. Though demons are still active, some phenomena cannot be explained by the intervention of demonic powers. The best attitude is to recognise both spiritual and natural causality. For example, on one hand, natural disasters, such as floods, and some illnesses

[1] This is a traditional belief, which is still persistent in some communities. However, I believe in both spiritual and natural causalities. For example, illnesses can be caused by diseases or spirit possession.

caused by diseases have no connection with demonic agents. On the other hand, demonic-related patients attest to the presence of malefic evil beings.

We need to be reminded that attempting to read the Bible in African culture is not a simple exercise. Western interpreters and Western interpretative lenses have long dominated biblical studies. Though the academy has been diversified, the Western perspective remains very dominant. Even when non-Western worldviews are considered, they are often mediated by Western scholarly studies. My purpose is not to replace the Western interpretation with the African one. Instead, I suggest considering insights from different approaches.

For an effective cross-cultural interpretation of a biblical text, Mbuvi proposes that

> even when Western methods are used by African scholars, they are incorporated into a creative impulse that even original proponents have never envisioned. (2017:153)

Rogerson adds a very important insight (2001:4). For him, any study needs to conduct a thorough survey of ethnographic literature on the area, focusing in particular on the chosen themes. This method expressly does not suggest that the context and worldviews on which it draws are the same as those generated or represented in the texts. Only some similarities are needed to begin a comparison with biblical societies. Because the history of Africa and its worldview have been marked by colonisation and its consequences, the cross-cultural approach is more effective when paired with the postcolonial method. In what follows, I discuss the contribution of the postcolonial approach to the study of the Bible in Africa.

The Postcolonial Biblical Method

Postcolonial discourse can also make insightful contributions to African biblical hermeneutics. This approach enables the interpretation of the word of God to address the readers' problems. It considers the historical and socio-political situation prevailing on the continent. The word of God is interpreted and adapted to the reader's real context. Postcolonial scholars consider the fact that the Christianisation of Africa was embedded in a context of colonisation

and neo-imperialism. Postcolonial thought took root in the context of anti-imperialism. It is defined as 'an anti-imperial discourse that critiques the empire and its persistent legacies' (Go 2016:7). Since its beginning, it has emerged from the margins, as subjected people around the globe developed an anti-imperial mindset to protest and resist the metropoles of power. Later, this movement became an academic trend. Julian Go remarks that today when academics speak about 'postcolonial theory', they refer either to scholars who played a key role in the advocacy of postcolonial studies such as Edward Said (1978), Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha or to historians such as Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty who focused their works on subaltern studies (Go 2016:1). However, Go qualifies this group of writers as the 'second wave' of postcolonial thought because the early 'first wave' includes the pioneers of this tendency such as Frantz Fanon (1967), W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), and C. L. R. James (Go 2016:7).

In the 1980s, the postcolonial academic section reached biblical studies (Staley 2006:319). It was embedded in the willingness to contextualise biblical studies in marginalised societies. Fernando Segovia (2000) pioneered this new trend. Some other scholars followed Segovia to critique the Eurocentric focus of biblical studies during the period after the official decolonisation of African countries (Sugirtharajah 2002, 2006:74). Presently, a considerable number of scholars explore biblical texts through a postcolonial lens, including the following: Itumeleng Mosala (1989), Mahatma Gandhi (1997), Musa W. Dube (2012), Andrew M. Mbuvi (2017), Dube and R.S. Wafula (2017), Gerald West (2018), and Chin Ming Stephen Lim (2019).

In their critiques, African biblical scholars point out the underlying racism and the persistent colonialist and imperialist impulses that are pervasive in biblical studies in the modern West. This bias led to a failure to recognise works produced by African biblical scholars as 'authentic' biblical studies (Mbuvi 2017:156). African scholars adopted the postcolonial method in biblical studies as an attempt to address this problem. They recognise that the political colonial system incarnates an oppressive system for African subjects, which persists even after colonisation (Mosala 1989). They define postcolonial biblical criticism as the biblical method whose premise is to expose the colonial project in all its forms by examining the relation between empire, religion, power, and biblical interpretation to decolonise the colonised and formerly

colonised in all aspects of society (Dube 1997:20). For example, Julius Kithinji (2021) examines Jesus' authority in the Gospel of Mark and discusses how, in Africa, the colonisers used the gospel to legitimate their oppressive authority.

This approach consists of 'a reading of the Bible in which imperialist strategies are confronted, exposed, arrested by postcolonial subject' (Dube 2000:23; see also West 2018:246). Since both colonisation and decolonisation have impacted various sectors of African life, the postcolonial approach makes the Bible speak to Africans in that particular situation. However, its limitation consists of focusing more on the actual readers and disconnecting the text from its editorial intent. Mburu notices this limitation, but also observes a similar tendency in traditional historical criticism, which overlooks the context of the actual reader. To address this problem, she suggests an African hermeneutics of the Bible that stands on what she metaphorically calls 'a four-legged stool': the theological, literary, historical, and cultural context (2026:35−36).

Finally, one can argue that spirit possession is a relevant topic in African biblical studies. It enriches postcolonial discourse in both the neo-pragmatic and the socio-pragmatic approaches. Both trends shift the focus from authorial intent to the contemporary audience. The socio-pragmatic approach stresses the cultural and socio-political context of the audience (Anchimbe and Janney 2011). In contrast, the neo-pragmatic approach focuses more on linguistic features and the conceptualisation of realities with little involvement in people's lives (Gert 2023). In the synoptic gospels, Jesus is presented as an exorcist. He is accustomed to encountering spirits and casting them out from their hosts. Since the modern Western worldview disregards spiritual powers, it doesn't recognise the reliability of biblical exorcism stories. However, contrary to this Western bias, African scholars consider exorcism as culturally important and they highlight the affinity of biblical exorcism narratives with the African cosmological reality where physical events are understood to have spiritual provenance (Mbiti 1986:1). Scholars such as Mbiti (1970), Amanda Witmer (2012), and wa Gatumu (2009) state that, as has always been the case in Africa, in the first century the Graeco-Roman world believed that physical events may be caused by spiritual powers. This is why the postcolonial approach can become relevant to liberating the reading of biblical exorcism stories from the post-Enlightenment mindset.

In this first section, I have argued that Western scholarship overly dominates the field of biblical studies. However, I have mapped out some new methodological approaches initiated by African biblical hermeneutics. The following section applies the African biblical approach to a specific biblical passage. I propose to analyse the pericope of the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1−20).

The Case of the Gerasene/Gadarene Demoniac Story (Mark 5:1−20)

The Gerasene/Gadarene demoniac account (Mark 5:1−20, Matthew 8:28−34, and Luke 8:26−39) is the most articulated story among all gospel narratives about spirit possession and exorcism. This story depicts spirit possession, the demoniac, and exorcism in a worldview very close to the African experience. The passage can enrich our exploration of African readings of the Bible. This is why the following section examines the Gerasene demoniac story from an African perspective. It starts by exploring the Jewish and Graeco-Roman background to the Marcan exorcism tradition. Then, it provides a cross-cultural and postcolonial analysis of the pericope, utilising African anthropological literature. The main aim is to draw some analogies between the gospel tradition and the African worldview.

Cross-cultural Reading of the Gerasene Demoniac Story

The Demoniac from the Tomb in an African Worldview

Jewish and Graeco-Roman culture concerning spirit possession does not differ from the African cultural context. Demonology as a phenomenon was familiar to Africans, though the terminology lacks historical evidence. Impure spirits are attested in African anthropological tradition. The term *demon* (this is a Greek translation) appeared in early Bible translations in African languages done by Western missionaries. In these Bibles, 'impure spirits' and 'demons' were both translated as 'demons.' We can mention the first translation of the Bible in Kinyarwanda (*Bibiliya Yera* 1957) and the Setswana Bible (1857; Dube 2017:3−25). However, the intent was not to point out that they are synonymous. Instead, missionaries were very cautious about the term 'impure spirits', which were believed to be mainly dead persons' spirits or ghosts. They

wanted to wipe this African reality away from the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages. Consequently, the spirit beings from pre-Christian cosmology may have been minimised (Dube 2012; John 2019:12; Ndungu'u 2006:488−489).

When it comes to reading that 'a man with an unclean spirit met Jesus' (Mark 5:2), a great majority of Africans can easily think about dead persons' spirits that come to possess and harm the living or ghosts. In East Africa, the general belief is that the possessing spirits come from the dead, especially family members, or some restless spirits from harshly killed people. They can come from persons who died untimely, those who died with envy, or those who didn't receive respectful burial ceremonies (Avorti 2000:312; Erny 2005:121−122).

The Jewish conception of the spirits of fallen angels (1 Enoch 1−36) shares some similarities with the African spiritual worldview. The correlation between African and Jewish beliefs in the return of the spirits of the dead to possess and harm the living is demonstrated by some shared cults. For example, scholars have proved that the *Zar* (or *Sar*) spirit possession cult came from the Middle East and transited through Ethiopia before reaching northern and eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, and Tanzania) long before the Christianisation of Africa. Presently, the *Zar* cult is common in many African countries as well as the Middle East, but with some local variations (Mianji and Semnani 2005:226).

Further, Enochic tradition from Second Temple Judaism is also very relevant to the African reading of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1−20. The book of *Jubilees* (chapter 10) testifies to the Jewish belief in the survival of the spirits of dead giants. *Jubilees* describes how they attacked Noah's grandchildren. Likewise, anthropologists agree that, in Africa, people believe in the immortality of souls. After the death of the body, the soul continues to exist and to act on the living (Erny 2005; Lambek 1988; Mbiti 1970:214). In East Africa, the emphasis is put on ancestors' spirits, especially of direct relatives who have been frustrated by the careless behaviour of the living towards them. They return as ghosts to avenge their frustration. Africans are always open to sharing their experiences of having been attacked by the ghosts. In

this regard, van Duijl reports some testimonies he collected from Ugandan society. The following is one among many:

> Possession began on a hospital bed, where late in the night I uttered words saying 'We want houses' and words like 'you abandoned us'. These voices were spirits from our ancestors. Actually, it was a combination of *omuzimu* and *emandwa,* who were seeking houses. They wanted to be brought back after being abandoned. They wanted a goat to be slaughtered for them, and I should take the blood of this goat to welcome the spirit back. My father, who used to practise rituals for ancestors, has died. I have ignored these rituals. The spirits then decided to manifest themselves through me. (van Duijl, Kleijn, and de Jong 2014:7)

This testimony fits the description of possessing spirits and the experience of possession in the Ugandan context as reported by various authors (Beattie 1969; Rubongoya 2003; p'Bitek 1963:15). In Rwanda, the phenomenon is very similar because the *bazimu* are believed to haunt their relatives and inhabit their bodies (Habarurema 2024:70−71). To cope with eventual attacks, sacrifices are offered to the ancestors. Second, across Africa, the evil spirits are not strange concepts to people because, as Mianji and Semnani observe, they have similar concepts in different African vernaculars with appropriate rituals to exorcise persons possessed by these harmful spirits:

> In Chad, there is the liban sheitan […]; among the Digo of the south Kenya coast, there is shaitani […]; and among Segeju Swahili speakers in Tanzania, there is shetani […]. Moreover, the form of Masabe spirit possession among the Tonga of Zambia […] resembles the Sudanese zār; the bori in Nigeria and North Africa; trumba and patros in Mayotte, Comoro Islands; saka or pepo among the Wataita of Kenya; takuka among the Ndembu of Zambia; holey (specifically, hauka) among the Songhay; and jnun curing activities, Iamadsha in Morocco. (2005:226)

To this open list, one can add *roho mbi* (evil spirits) in Rwanda and *shitani* (Satan), common to both Ugandans and Rwandans. As van Oyen remarks, it is worth noting that there are two words mostly used by the other synoptic gospels that seem closer to these African entities, but which do not appear in the Gospel of Mark: *διάβολος* and *πονηρός* (2011:104).

In current biblical scholarship, some scholars argue that, in biblical times, Jews identified possessing spirits with the souls of antediluvian giants (Bazzana 2020:60−133). This hypothesis is built on the story of the sons of God narrated in Genesis 6 and rewritten in the Second Temple Pseudepigrapha (the books of *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*). The account is known as the myth of the fallen angels (or watchers). In both *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*, demons are described as the souls of the dead giants or the descendants of fallen angels. The watchers transgressed God's commandments and defiled themselves by unlawfully having sexual intercourse with human wives, with whom they begot the giants, hybrid children: half angels, half humans (1 Enoch 6−11). From this disobedience resulted a severe death for their descendants (the giants) inflicted by God. Their human bodies were destroyed while their souls remained. They became *δαιμόνιον* (demons) who possessed humans and inflicted them with illnesses (1 Enoch 15:9, 15:11; see also Job 10).

Building on the myth of the fallen angels, some scholars identify Mark's unclean spirits with these spirits of the dead giants who returned to haunt the living (Elder 2021:81−87). Along the same lines, Bazzana and Anna Angelini argue that Legion was possessed by the spirits of the dead (Angelini 2022:62; Bazzana 2020:72−79). If we consider this belief in being possessed by the spirits of the dead, the story of the Gerasene demoniac can be more accessible to an African worldview. The identification sheds light on both the possessing spirits and the location of their hosts. The possessing spirits can be associated with ancestral spirits. Additionally, as the dead no longer live among the living, they are expected to come from cemeteries where they dwell. For example, in Rwanda, it is commonly believed that malevolent spirits come either from active volcanoes or from the tombs (Erny 2005:128).

In summary, since the tomb is perceived as a privileged location for the demoniac, one can assume that the main cause of possession is the spirits of dead persons. This conceptualisation of spirits and their dwelling location

brings fresh insights to the interpretation of Mark 5. The person with whom Jesus was confronted was probably possessed by violent spirits of the dead. This is why his place was not among the living. Instead, he lived in the gravesite.

Jesus' Encounter with the Demoniac

When Jesus encountered the spirit-possessed man at Gerasa, the demoniac was the first to speak. Therefore, the speech of the demon seems ambiguous to the reader. Van Oyen wonders without an answer whether demons recognise Jesus' power as superior to their own, or if they were trying to get Jesus on their side (2011:114). Often, the exorcist speaks first and interrogates the demon. In this story, the demon wanted to resist the exorcism. In other words, the spirits wanted to intimidate Jesus, take control over him, and cause his exorcism to fail (Bazzana 2020:84). To remove this ambiguity, Jesus moves quickly to exorcise the spirit by inquiring its name, to which the demoniac responds: 'What is your name […] My name is Legion' (Mark 5:9). Stevan Davies notes that 'the speech and behavior of the person possessed are understood to be the speech and behavior of a demon' (1995:36−37).

> The spirit speaks and acts while the host is absent […] Hosts do not remember what occurred while they were in trance but they are told by others what happened. (Lambek 1989:35)

The anthropological study of exorcism demonstrates that, in almost all cultures, the encounter between the exorcist and the possessed begins with a struggle to know the nature and the name of the possessing spirit. Kapferer (1991) shows that this confrontation between the exorcists and the spirits is present in the rituals performed by Sinhalese Buddhists. In a similar inquiry, Lestrade illustrates that the first, long step in Rwandan traditional healing and exorcism consists of forcing the possessing spirit to reveal its name (1954:201–206). It is said that this identification is a decisive step toward exorcism. This is because, in the battle between the exorcist and the spirit, if the latter refuses to reveal its name, the exorcist becomes unable to perform the deliverance. Sometimes, the exorcist ends up being harmed by the spirit. In this case, the intervention of another more powerful exorcist is required. An experience similar to that cited above is examined by Lambek in his cross-cultural study of spirit possession. He observes that communication is not only established

internally between the possessing spirits and their human consociates but also that the curers enter into communication with the spirit (1989:40).

Jesus used his power, as the Son of God, to weaken the spirits that had unsuccessfully attempted to resist and prevent him from performing the exorcism. As I said above, if an exorcist becomes unable to control the spirits, a more powerful one is required. However, it was impossible in the case of Jesus. As we consider the Marcan view, there was no stronger exorcist than Jesus in Israel, not even in the whole Mediterranean region at his time. In this line of inquiry, the story of the Gerasene demoniac needs to be understood in the whole context of Marcan storytelling. Previously, Mark narrates the calming of the storm to illustrate Jesus' power over all kinds of forces, including natural disasters and unclean spirits (Mark 4:35–41). In this regard, the details offered in the pericope of the Gerasene demoniac serve to emphasise the extraordinary power of Jesus over evil spirits (Cohen 2010:157).

Jesus as an Exorcist

When it comes to reading the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is recognised as the exorcist who cast out demons. Further, even the demons recognised him as a powerful exorcist at the point they fell down before him, crying: 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me' (Mark 5:7). In light of such a revelation, Davies observes that, in the first eight chapters of his gospel, Mark is concerned with Jesus' identity and addressing the views of Jesus' opponents (1995:96). Davies assumes that Mark wrote his gospel to insist first on Jesus as the son of man, who came to deliver us, who suffered, died, and rose again. This means that the healing stories seek to highlight his identity.

Regarding his healing activities, many scholars draw parallels between Jesus' activities and cross-cultural healing by giving him different names according to cultural variations and traditions. For Meier (1991–2001), Jesus is an eschatological prophet, and for Peter Craffert (2008) Jesus is a 'Shaman'. For Morton Smith (1978), he is a magician, while for Stevan L. Davies, he is a healer (1995:36−37). For Michael Winkelman (1992:30–32), he is a medium, and for Amanda Witmer (2012) and Graham Twelftree (1993), he is an exorcist. Being aware of some differences with Jesus' healing rituals, all these expressions highlight Jesus' power over demons and various illnesses.

Along the same lines, Smith (1978) assumes that Jesus was involved in healing activities as a 'magician'. Fritz Graf remarks that magic is a gift of the gods (1997:92). Consequently, since Jesus had the identity of the 'Son of the Most High God' (Mark 5:7), he defeated demons more effectively than any other exorcist. In the Gerasene demoniac's pericope and in all gospel episodes about exorcism, Jesus exorcises demons through no other action than speaking. Davies rightly noted that, in contrast to other healers, in the case of Jesus,

> magical techniques would not have been necessary if it were understood that a 'demon' was confronted face to face with 'the Holy One of God', for by the cultural definition the spirit of God would be more powerful than any demon of Satan. (1995:98)

Smith continues by remarking that the gospels minimise Jesus' practice of magic (1978:110). For example, in the case of Mark 5, Jesus does not *send* demons into the swine of pigs. Instead, he permits them to enter (Mark 5:13). However, the demons got out of their host and entered a herd of pigs. This fits well with both ancient Jewish (Matthew 12:43−45) and African beliefs in the possibility of a spirit or ghost moving from one host to another (Lambek 1988:716). Then, the swine rush down the steep bank into the sea. This is confirmation that the exorcism is effectively performed. The demons had left the man, and he recovered 'his right mind' (Mark 5:15).

Twelftree observes that this episode can be paralleled with many ancient and cross-cultural exorcisms by which the spirits pass from the person into some object (a pebble, a piece of wood) which could then be thrown away (1993:75). In a similar inquiry, van Oyen argues that, in his time, Jesus was not the only one to perform exorcisms (2011:100). Some other exorcists were operating in the Mediterranean region. He acknowledges that even today the same magic of exorcism happens in different cultures where it is believed that some illnesses are caused by evil forces or spirits that possess the human body (van Oyen 2011:100). Regarding Jesus' exorcisms as transformative performances within possessed persons and their society, Christian Strecker points out that Jesus' healing sessions did not happen in private like a magician. Strecker, instead, highlights the importance of the public in Jesus' exorcisms (2002:124−125). As far as the Gerasene demoniac exorcism is concerned,

Strecker observes: 'The destruction of the demoniac identity calls for the person's new placement within the social arena' (2002:128). This aspect is clearly discernible in the narrative of the Gerasene, who returned from social isolation at the tombs to the house of his family (Mark 5:19) (Strecker 2002:125).

One can conclude that, in Mark 5:1–20, Jesus is presented as a true exorcist who has full power to defeat Satan and his evil spirits. The ritual he performed is also present in African healing. Exorcists deliver those afflicted by demonic harm. However, in contrast to African traditional exorcism, in which many sophisticated formulas and medicines are required, the effectiveness of Jesus' exorcism resides neither in the magic words nor in the medicines. Instead, it resides in his person: Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Towards Postcolonial Perspectives

The account of the Gerasene demoniac has often inspired a political reading of the Bible. Scholars have used different features of this story to engage in socio-political discourse. Some scholars have built their arguments on the designation of the demon as *λεγιών*, which implies a political resonance. Thus, they see in Mark 5:9 a reference to Roman domination and to the colonised peoples' resistance to political occupation. In this line of inquiry, John D. Crossan argues that Mark names the demon 'Legion' to help his first-century audience connect 'demonic possession and colonial oppression' (1994:89). Bazzana critiques scholars who claim that there is neither Roman imperial allusion nor military connotation in Marcan storytelling (2020:85). For example, among many others, Sugirtharajah remarks that Mary Baird had suggested that *λεγιών* should be understood as literary (2002:92; see Baird 1920). For Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark may have used the term *λεγιών* only to highlight a big number of demons (2007:269). However, Bazzana says that Mark's choice is clear because Jesus had alternative words if he wanted to express something other than the Roman military presence (2020:85). Along the same lines, Davies also points out that 'an implicit critique of Roman power may be subtly present in the background of Mark 5:1–20' (1995:111).

Concerning the implication of a huge number of members in the legion, Bazzana agrees with Garroway, stating that 'Mark is inserting a high number

without really knowing or caring about the exact size or strength of a legion' (2020:86; see Garroway 2009:61−62). Paul Hollenbach and Ched Myers also support a socio-political reading of Mark 5:1−20 (Hollenbach 1981; Myers 1988). Myers frames his argument with the fact that Jesus subdued the strong man: likewise, the colonised can overturn the oppressing powers. Lastly, Jeffrey L. Staley reads Mark 5:15, 'clothed in his right mind', as postcolonial mimicry that deplores imperialism both in political and religious settings (2006). However, I am more interested in the socio-political implications of the language used in New Testament exorcisms.

Cohen points out that, by using the term λεγιών, Mark wants to show that Jesus can not only cast out demons but can also inspire people to drive out unclean colonisers (2010:157). Using the chiastic construction of the story identified by Francis Moloney (2002:102), Cohen draws a connection between the Roman legion and unclean animals:

> A possessed man approaches Jesus
> Jesus encounters the demons
> The swine are driven out
> Jesus encounters local Gentiles
> The cleansed man approaches Jesus. (Cohen 2010:157)

This chiasm illustrates how 'demons and gentiles occupy the same strata in the narrative' (Cohen 2010:157). This means that, while Jesus was fighting against demons, he also mimicked a battle against political forces. Cohen remarks that the gentiles may not have been able to decode Mark's imagery language. However, 'Jews who were living under occupation would know to whom and what Mark was referring' (Cohen 2010:157).

Such imagery-focused language was used in almost all colonised societies, where natives mocked the occupants with expressions that only an informed person could access. As far as East Africa is concerned, an example can be taken from Swahili-speaking communities in Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where an expression of coded imagery was used in the context of divination but carried behind it the incitation to a revolt against colonisers: '*Mzungu atupwe jalalani*' (throw the white into the rubbish). Since the riddles are always in the form of question-answer, the

answer to this question was '*Machicha ya nazi*' (the yellow leftovers of the palm oil fruits). This divination was put into the agricultural context, and colonial officials never realised that it was an attack against their presence on the African land.

The famous ethnographic case by which a comparison is drawn between colonial occupation and the demon Legion as described in Mark 5 is found in an African film, *Les maîtres fous* (1955, 'The Mad Masters'), directed by Jean Rouch, about the *hauka* cults of Niger mimicking Europeans and Europeanised Africans to mock French and British colonial officials and their domination of Africans (Stoller 1995:129−133). Bazzana summarises the content of this film, which records the ritual activities of Nigerians living in the Gold Coast during the British occupation:

> The movie depicts the participants in the cult as they take up – in state of trance − the identities of colonial officials […] and perform actions that are identified as parodic imitations of colonial ceremonies. (2020:85)

The film has been interpreted in an anticolonialist context. Recently, many parallels have been drawn between *Les maîtres fous* and possession practices in different African cultures.

To explain how *Les maîtres fous* has some similarities with the Gerasene demoniac's story, Bazzana joins Kapferer to illustrate that the role of the European occupants consisted of breaking the traditional way of living by expanding their civilisation. To draw a parallel with Mark 5, defeating Legion illustrates the limited power of demons and consequently their inability to harm human beings (Bazzana 2020:90−91). Likewise, the film ironically depicts the colonial power as weak. Paul Stoller observes that the film seeks, above all, to articulate colonial tensions, showing how the powerless can engage in genuine resistance to the terror of the powerful colonisers (1995:130). He imagines, for example, a scene of spirit-possessed men who, during their sacrifices, eat dogs without any bodily harm. Christopher Burdon (2004) argues that Legion's story implies that fear on the side of the colonised is an antidote to liberation. Myers speaks of 'Binding the Strong Man' (1988). It is legitimate

to mention that the problem was not the foreign presence but the marginalising violence perpetrated against the natives.

Although the word 'Legion' has been understood as carrying both political and ethnic connotations, it doesn't mean that possession is political. Instead, Mark conceptualises a metaphorical language embedded in the common experience of spirit possession to describe a flawed political context. Taussig (1986) has rightly assumed that colonial violence in Asia and South America played a very important role in myth, possession, magic, and healing. The same experience is applied to African countries and other societies in development. Traditional healing and exorcism included some sessions against colonial presence on the land.

In summary, while Jesus was exorcising evil spirits, he and his Jewish audience were experiencing Roman occupation. They were enduring a public order imposed by Roman troops, and many brutal attacks against villages with catastrophic consequences. The attacks included burning houses, slaughter, systematic rape, heavy taxes, and a Roman desire to continue their domination (Horsley 2001:140). Mark describes Jesus' exorcisms along with imagery language related to that political situation. His language may imply a longing desire to gain their freedom. The same can be said of African societies. Reading Mark 5:1−20 in the postcolonial context does not only imply victory over evil spirits. It can also inspire their willingness to overthrow foreign domination and gain their full autonomy. In other words, in their struggles against various evils, Africans can gain inspiration and encouragement from Jesus' battle against malevolent spirits (Ndung'u 2006:485−486).

Conclusion

This article has shown that, due to Western dominance, mainstream biblical studies have often overlooked spirit possession. However, it has been noted that the rise of African biblical hermeneutics brought fresh insights into biblical scholarship. Two methodological approaches in this new trend were examined, namely the cross-cultural and the postcolonial approaches.

The discussion of Mark's story of the Gerasene demoniac from an African perspective has demonstrated that Mark inherits his conceptualisation of

harmful spirits from the Jewish tradition, particularly from the Second Temple period and Graeco-Roman beliefs. In these ancient cultures, some possessing spirits were believed to be the remnants of the dead giants (1 Enoch 6−11, Jubilees 10). Some anthropological literature was examined to draw an analogy to African beliefs in the spirits of the dead, which possess people. Consequently, exorcism is always utilised to drive out these unwanted spirits. So, it was shown that African biblical hermeneutics helps shed light on how Mark intentionally depicts Jesus as a powerful exorcist who casts out demons and inspires people in their struggles against various evils.

Finally, when it comes to examining biblical texts about spirit possession and exorcism, biblical scholarship can be informed by the African context for more insightful interpretations. If biblical scholars were aware of the affinities between the African context and what is reported in biblical narratives concerning spirit possession, they would support African biblical hermeneutics for more diversified works. I hope that this discussion will foster further consideration of the African context in biblical scholarship.

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Re-reading Mark 12:41–44 in the Context of Contemporary Tithing and Financial Hardship in Lagos: a Socio-economic Perspective

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Abstract

Mark 12:41–44 does not seem to only endorse sacrificial giving by the poor, but also condemns what appears to be an economically exploitative moralistic-religious system. Such a religious system appears to be reflected in some Pentecostal churches in Lagos in which people of modest means are institutionally exploited to part them from their meagre resources so they can ostensibly claim prosperity, thus increasing their poverty and repeating the process of which Jesus spoke in Mark 12:40. This study, therefore, re-reads Mark 12:41–44 from a socioeconomic perspective, with a view to using African inculturation hermeneutics to weigh the contemporary tithing ethics of financially weak Christians in Lagos State, Nigeria. The social-scientific criticism, in conjunction with Justin Ukpong's contextual hermeneutics, was used to analyse the pericope within its immediate narrative context (Mark 12:38–13:2), examine the first-century temple economy, and draw critical parallels with contemporary tithing culture in Lagos. The paper argues that the offering of the widow is a radical act of trust in a system that Jesus challenges. Such exploitative patterns are seen among some Pentecostal churches in Lagos, where the Deuteronomic rule that positions the poor as recipients rather than donors of tithes is reversed. Thus, the paper proposes that the church in Lagos needs to broaden its perspective on what is involved in tithing to include practices such as the exemption of the poorest members from tithing, shifting the focus towards redistribution in the

form of welfare programmes and creating a transparent and accountable system of church finance in order to live out the principle of the widow's sacrifice, both in her spirit and that of the criticism it offers within the context of the text.

Introduction

Mark 12:41–44 has been read in Christian preaching as a model of sacrificial generosity (Wright 1982:256–257). Malbon (1991:589) documents that this standard interpretation treats Jesus' observation as a direct commendation of the widow's act. Thus, preachers regularly cite the passage to encourage giving beyond one's means, and churches use it as a scriptural justification for the faithful tithing. However, reading this pericope from this perspective only seems to take it away from its Marcan narrative constructs. The widow's deed follows Jesus' scolding of those scribes who devour widows' houses (Mark 12:40) and precedes his prediction in Mark 13:2 that the temple will be destroyed stone by stone, and made desolate. Being enshrouded within these contexts supplies the terms for a critique alongside the traditional reading of commendation.

Thus, reading the text in relation to the surrounding pericopes has definite implications for Lagos State, Nigeria, which has an estimated population of twenty to twenty-three million (United Nations 2022), with one of the highest densities of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in the world (Ojo 2006:23–24). Within this ecclesial background, tithing, which is the return of ten per cent of gross income, is seen as a standard expectation and precondition for divine financial favour (Adogame 2013:85–86). For many low-income congregants, this constitutes a genuine material burden (Anderson 2014:224–225). Thus, a key question regarding the situation of vulnerable members who are returning tithes is: how does it compare with what Christ condemned in Mark 12:41–44, while pointing out the commendation of the widow?

The paper, therefore, draws parallels between the text and its context from the perspective of those giving out of deficiency rather than abundance, thereby exposing how religious institutions can reproduce patterns of exploitation while also recognising genuine expressions of faith and trust.

Mark 12:41–44 in its Narrative Context

Mark 12:41–44 belongs to the Jerusalem section of the gospel, which runs from chapters eleven to thirteen (France 2002:488–489). The pericope exposes Jesus as one who interrupted the commercialisation of commodities in the temple (Mark 11:15–17), engaged religious authorities in controversial dialogue (12:13–34), and addressed messianic authority (12:35–37). He criticised the scribes in Mark 12:38–40 for loving to display their piety before others and, most importantly, for devouring the houses of widows. The use of the verb *κατεσθίω* (to devour) in this context situates the pericope within a socioeconomic context, as it denotes total economic absorption (Bauer et al. 2000:532). Thus, the widow's pericope follows this condemnation without interruption.

Myers (1988:320–321) describes the juxtaposition as the concrete manifestation of how the scribal system devours widows' houses. From his perspective, the depiction of the widow was not a counterexample to scribal conduct but its product, the human result of the economic logic Jesus has condemned. In a similar vein, Wright (1982:261–262) has demonstrated that the passage is a complaint about the institutionalised exploitation and not a commendation. Malbon (1991:596), however, reads the widow as a self-denying giver who stands in contrast to the scribes, while allowing that she may have been victimised by them and by 'the authority of traditional religious teaching'. This socioeconomic perspective is further strengthened by the argument of Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie (2012:98–100) that Mark consistently aligns its narrative perspective with the socially marginalised, so that the powerful are evaluated through the experience of those they affect. France (2002:488–489) also treats 12:38–44 as a single compositional unit in which the scribal indictment and the widow's offering are designed to interpret each other. Nonetheless, whether one follows Wright's lament reading or France's more complex position, in both interpretations the narrative context provides a reason that bars the pericope from becoming an absolute rule enforcing generosity on the poor.

It should be noted at the outset that the widow in Mark 12:41–44 brought a voluntary offering to the temple treasury, not a tithe in the strict Pentateuchal sense. The narrative nowhere uses *δεκάτη* (tithe) or any cognate term, and

provides no lexical basis for classifying the widow's contribution as a tithe in the Pentateuchal sense. The coins she deposited constitute a monetary contribution to the temple treasury whose precise cultic category is not specified by Mark: the narrative does not classify the deposit as a freewill offering, a vow payment, or any other liturgically defined category. The connection between this pericope and the practice of tithing in contemporary Lagos churches is therefore analogical and structural rather than direct: both involve the extraction of material resources from the economically vulnerable within a religious institutional framework. The socio-scientific analysis of first-century Jerusalem's political economy provides the structural grounding that makes this analogy coherent.

Methodology

The study, therefore, employs social-scientific criticism, as developed by John H. Elliott (1993) and Bruce J. Malina (2001), in conjunction with African contextual hermeneutics in the tradition of Justin Ukpong (2000:16–17), as a methodological framework for interpreting the text in view of tithing and the socioeconomic reality in Lagos. The use of social-scientific criticism and African contextual hermeneutics gives room for analysing the economic conditions that surround the Marcan text and the establishment of the legitimacy of reading the text from the social position of the economically marginalised. The paper further draws on models from cultural anthropology and macrosociology, specifically those that informed both the work of Gerhard Lenski (1966), and the adaptation of his agrarian stratification model by Hanson and Oakman (1998), and Richard Horsley's (2009) covenant economics, which were used to examine the offering of the widow not solely as theological but also as strategic within the actual power struggles and economic constraints facing an advanced agrarian society.

Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics, which reads scripture consciously from the social location of African Christians, especially the economically marginalised, complements this historical analysis. By this, parallels between the ancient temple system and contemporary tithing practices in Lagos were identified and the biblical text was interrogated through the lived experiences of low-income believers facing financial hardship. The Greek text of the gospel of Mark in the Nestle-Aland edition (*Novum Testamentum Graece* 2012),

Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (2000), Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1996), Second Temple Jewish literature, and recent works on Nigerian Pentecostalism and Lagos socioeconomics were used as prime data sources for the paper. It is an interpretive and constructive study and is based upon the available empirical reports.

Socioeconomic Conditions in First Century Jerusalem

Hanson and Oakman's study of first-century Palestine applies Gerhard Lenski's social stratification model to the region's political economy (1998:99–129). Lenski's (1966) taxonomy describes an advanced agrarian society in which a governing and priestly elite controls most productive resources, while the peasant majority subsists on what remains after successive layers of extraction. Based on this, Hanson and Oakman (1998:99–100) estimate the Palestinian elite at approximately two to three percent of the population, with the remainder carrying the weight of combined obligations. Similarly, Horsley (1993:54–58) reveals that the Palestinian peasantry footed between thirty and fifty percent of the agricultural output that went towards the combined burden of Roman tribute, Herodian taxes, and temple taxes in the Roman-Herodian period. Sanders (1992:163–169) confirms this, contending that the Jerusalem temple was a veritable financial institution, which accepted deposits from wealthy families, and which depended on required financial contributions from Jewish communities all over the Mediterranean diaspora and the local community.

Malina (2001:30, 32) explains that 'religion' in the first-century Mediterranean world named the respect owed to those who controlled one's existence, and that a person's claim to honour became honour in fact only when others granted reputation. On this basis, the right to be part of the temple's financial system was a prerequisite socio-cultural practice for the widow as part of her religious identity, irrespective of material cost.

Hanson and Oakman (1998:128), list 'expendable' people of various kinds among the non-elites who populated the outskirts of cities, towns, and country villages. Widows not accompanied by a male protector can reasonably be placed in this group, since they had no productive role in the economy of the dominant group and depended on kin or institutional support for survival. .

The class is defined by Lenski (1966:281–284) as those whose life chances are precarious under the social order, for whom there is no secure place of productivity. Based on the narrative, the widow in Mark 12:41–44 seems to have belonged to this category. Her appearance at the treasury seems to make visible what the scribal-temple system produces among those it claims to protect.

Exegetical Analysis of Mark 12:41–44

The socioeconomic conditions of first-century Jerusalem provide the social-scientific context for the interpretation that follows. The agrarian stratification model of Lenski, as applied by Hanson and Oakman (1998), and Horsley's covenant economics inform the reading of the widow's act within a system marked by economic vulnerability and institutional extraction. The exegetical observations in this section should be understood against that socioeconomic backdrop.

Presentation of the Texts

Verse 41:

Καὶ καθίσας κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου ἐθεώρει πῶς ὁ ὄχλος βάλλει χαλκὸν εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον. καὶ πολλοὶ πλούσιοι ἔβαλλον πολλά·

Verse 42:

καὶ ἐλθοῦσα μία χήρα πτωχὴ ἔβαλεν λεπτὰ δύο, ὅ ἐστιν κοδράντης.

Verse 43:

καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἡ πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν τῶν βαλλόντων εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον·

Verse 44:

πάντες γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἔβαλον, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς. (*Novum Testamentum Graece* 2012:157)

The Setting

The text records that Jesus sits 'κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου' (opposite the treasury) (verse 41). The noun *γαζοφυλάκιον* is obtained from the combination of *γάζα* (treasury), which is a Persian loanword transmitted through Aramaic, and *φυλάσσω* (to guard). Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (2000:186) define it as the room or receptacles in the temple precinct where offerings were kept. The Mishnah lists thirteen collection chests in the shape of trumpets (*shōfārot*) in the sanctuary, representing different types of offering (Sheqalim 6.1, 6.5; Neusner 1988:260–261).. Thus, Jesus' position opposite one of these chests is evident in his making the following observation regarding institutional revenue collection. The text reveals that, as Jesus sat opposite the treasury, he saw many rich people cast large amounts of money into it. He also observed as a poor widow came and 'ἔβαλεν' (deposited) her two mites (verse 42). After observing, Jesus made a statement that the rich who gave did so out of their abundance, but the poor widow gave all she had to live on (verses 43–44).

The Act of Depositing (βάλλω)

The verb *βάλλω* governs all five references to the act of depositing coins in the pericope (verses 41 [two instances], 43, and 44 [two instances]). Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich attest *βάλλω* as the standard Greek verb for placing an object in a container (2000:163). Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1996:304) agree with the same range of meaning, and indicate that the usual meaning is of simply setting something in a receptacle with no emotional overtones. Somewhat differently, however, Wright (1982:257) suggests that the central idea of the verb, *throwing*, carries a connotation of negativity on the widow's part, because the action implies desperation for the widowed woman. This claim exceeds the attested range of *βάλλω,* being the ordinary New Testament verb for depositing or placing (see Matthew 6:30 and John 12:6 and 13:2). What is lexically significant in verse 44 is the combination of three phrases that carry the argument's economic weight. The verb *ἔβαλεν* in verse 44 is an aorist active indicative, recording a completed historical action. The grammatical force derives not from verbal aspect but from three substantive phrases: 'ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς' (out of her deficiency), 'πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν' (all that she

had), and ‘ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς’ (her whole means of living). The antithesis between ‘ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς’ (out of their surplus) and ‘ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς’ (out of her deficiency) employs the vocabulary of economic analysis. Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich define *περισσεύω* as having an abundance of something (2000:802), while *ὑστέρησις* is a state of being in need of something essential or a deficiency, want, or poverty (2000:1044). This shows that it is not really that Jesus is contrasting attitudes to giving; he is stating a couple of plain facts about economics. He says the rich men gave because they had plenty more; the woman with the small means gave because that was everything she had. In its context this is rather a comment on structure than a call to imitate its condition. Together these establish that the widow gave not from surplus but from the very resources on which her survival depended. Marcus (2009:858) draws attention to the economic severity registered by ‘ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς’, noting that the phrase denotes the complete depletion of the means of subsistence rather than a spiritual gesture.

The Coins (λεπτόν and κοδράντης)

According to the text, the widow deposits ‘δύο λεπτά’ (two small coins) (verse 42). The ‘λεπτόν’, from *λεπτός* (thin, small), was the smallest bronze denomination in Palestinian circulation; Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (2000:163) give its value as approximately one one-hundred-and-twenty-eighth of a denarius. Mark appends the gloss ‘ὅ ἐστιν κοδράντης’ (which is a quadrans). The word ‘κοδράντης’ comes from the Latin *quadrans*, meaning one-quarter of an *as* in the Roman monetary system (Bauer et al. 2000:163). The gloss is one of many editorial notes made for the benefit of a gentile readership not familiar with Palestinian currency (see Mark 7:3–4, 14:12, and 15:42) (Marcus 2009:857–858). France (2002:489) also points out this kind of gloss is set in the context of readers who are part of the Roman audience of the gospel. Marcus (2009:858) further observes that the gloss draws attention to the offering’s negligible monetary value, which gives Jesus’ subsequent statement its rhetorical force.

The Key Terms (βίος and πτωχή)

Jesus’ concluding statement in verse 44 rests on two terms. First, *βίος* – Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (2000:177) give the primary relevant sense as the resources needed to maintain life or means of subsistence. Unlike *ζωή*, which

denotes life as a vital principle, *βίος* refers concretely to material means of subsistence like livelihood, property, and resources. France (2002:488–489) correctly renders 'ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς' as 'all she had to live on'. In a first-century Palestinian context without formal welfare provision, many peasants, already living on the margins of subsistence, were further impoverished and driven into debt by harsh annual exactions (Häkkinen 2016), which signifies that the loss of one's *βίος* is not a spiritual gesture but an economically consequential act.

The second term is *πτωχή*. Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (2000:896) define *πτωχός* as pertaining to being economically disadvantaged to an extreme degree, poor, destitute, or impoverished. Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1996:1550) confirm that *πτωχός* denotes abject destitution, which is the condition of one entirely without independent means, as distinct from *πένης*, which describes the labouring poor who survive through their own work.

The Argument of the Pericope

Wright (1982:262) interprets the passage as a lament, because the trajectory of the story frames the widow's act as 'a further illustration of the ills of official devotion'. Jesus also uses no formula for commendation or to emulate and imitate here, and the economic element 'ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς', preceded by 'πτωχή', means complete poverty. Myers (1988:320–322) reveals that the pericope seems to be the final episode in Mark's sustained critique on the Jerusalem establishment. However, Malbon (1991:596) critiques Wright's argument to be more ingenious than convincing and reads the widow as a self-denying giver, although she allows that the widow may have been victimised by scribes and by 'the authority of traditional religious teaching'. In a related vein, Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie (2012) show that, consistently in the Gospel of Mark, his audience is identified with people who are wronged by the powerful.

In contrast, France (2002) makes similar observations but insists that the text at the same time postulates the devotion of the widow as a reality, keeping both of these evaluations in a state of total tension. Nevertheless, a reader may accept this position and still conclude that the institution receiving her last coins stands under condemnation. Thus, though the text may be read from a commendatory perspective, its context also suggests a narrative of critique

towards marginalising systems: a condemnation of a system that marginalised the vulnerable.

Tithing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism

A survey of the financial system of God's people in the biblical texts of the Old Testament gives us no clear sense of a uniform system of tithes. In Leviticus 27:30–33, Numbers 18:21–32, and Deuteronomy 14:22–29, Stackert (2014:92–97) argues that there are multiple discrete literary strands, with different beneficiaries and different purposes. Weinfeld (1972:215) also demonstrates that these Deuteronomy holds 'a less sacral conception of the tithes than the other Pentateuchal sources'. The tithing mandate in the Pentateuch is found in Leviticus 27:30–33 which speaks about the consecration of agricultural produce and animals to YHWH but without specifying how it is to be administered, Numbers 18:21–32, which claims that a tenth of what the Levites receive is to be put under the direction of the priests, instead of giving them lands, and Deuteronomy 14:22–29 and 26:12–13 which deal with the Levite, the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow to prescribe a tithe for this group to be eaten at the central sanctuary, offered once every three years.

As a tax on the 'increase' of the land and livestock, it is not a levy on individual existence but on the productive capacity of the soil (Uroko 2021:4, 6). Here, the status of the vulnerable regarding the requirement to pay tithes is determined by their intrinsic landlessness and, thus, they are systematically excluded from the role of the tither (Okunoye 2026:596). Rather than granting a specific legal exemption clause for the poor, the law functionally repositioned these classes as the primary recipients of redistribution (Hiers 2002:67, 71).

The Deuteronomic Code (D) is the primary source for the humanitarian application of tithing. Deuteronomy 14:22–29 establishes a cycle in which, for two years, the second tithe (*ma'aser sheni*) was consumed by the owner and his household during a festive pilgrimage to Jerusalem to foster national cohesion (Sacks 2015). However, in the third and sixth years of the sabbatical cycle, this festive tithe was replaced by the poor man's tithe (*ma'aser ani*). This triennial tenth remained within the local gates or towns, ensuring that those without a land portion, including the Levite, who was landless by divine decree,

could eat and be satisfied (Pierce 2021:368). This localised storage system served as a rudimentary social welfare programme, preventing abject starvation within the kinship community (Hiers 2002:71).

Conversely, the Priestly Code (P) in Numbers 18 focuses on the first tithe (*ma'aser rishon*), which was surrendered annually to the Levites (Sassoon 2015). It was necessitated by their exclusion from territorial inheritance and was regarded as a wage for their service at the sanctuary (Uroko 2021:4). While the Priestly Code (P) focuses on clerical maintenance and the Deuteronomic Code (D) on social welfare, the latter Holiness Code (H) and the Second Temple era sought to harmonise these disparate commands into a concurrent, cumulative system of taxation (Keddie 2019:147). This harmonisation significantly increased the economic pressure on smallholders, who were now expected to separate multiple tithes simultaneously (Keddie 2019:148). However, from a biblical-theological perspective, Croteau concludes that the triennial tithe was intended as a redistributive welfare-tax mechanism rather than an overall tax-revenue mechanism for a hierarchical institution (2010:53–62).

The various biblical tithing laws were brought together during the Second Temple period, especially under the influence of the Hasmoneans, to form a more complex system of tithing obligations, which was a system that involved multiple requirements that evolved throughout the sabbatical cycle (Keddie 2019:148). Neusner's (1990:42–48) work on the Mishnah's economic structure shows that the rabbinic attempt to systematise these divergent traditions produced a combined obligation: Levitical tithe, festival tithe, triennial poor tithe, and first-fruit offering, amounting to between twenty and twenty-three per cent of agricultural produce, from which faithful Judaeans were expected to separate the first tithe for the clergy and either the second tithe for pilgrimage or the poor man's tithe for local relief (Ashton 2023). Keddie (2019:152) further notes that this system may have been a mechanism of class stratification, in which high-priestly elites often used the tithing apparatus to consolidate wealth.

Horsley (2014:91) reveals that the centralisation of power in the Jerusalem temple led to high priestly families using force to seize tithes from the threshing floors. These diverted resources meant for lower-order priests and

the local poor into the coffers of the urban elite, effectively subverting the Deuteronomic intent of localised welfare (Horsley 2014:91). Horsley (2014:91–92) further argues that this centralisation generated a new class of indigents among those who were theoretically protected by the law, as the high priests seemingly ate the goods of the poor while claiming to act out of compassion. Thus, this transition to a centralised temple-bank model shifted the vulnerable from legal beneficiaries to victims of clerical exploitation, fundamentally altering the tithing experience for them.

The ambiguities of the tithing system were sought to be resolved in early rabbinic literature, particularly the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud, by establishing precise fiscal criteria for vulnerability (Gardner 2022:74). In the tractate *Pe'ah*, the rabbis shifted away from the broad social identities of widow or orphan toward a liquid wealth threshold. It is revealed that possessing less than two hundred *zuz* (denarii) (a sum estimated to provide basic sustenance for one year) was an indication that an individual was legally poor (*ani*) and they remained eligible to collect agricultural offerings like gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and the poor tithe (Gardner 2022:74). Furthermore, the two-hundred-*zuz* limit was applied only to free capital and as such if a person's money was encumbered by debts or a wife's *ketubbah* (marriage settlement), they were still considered poor and eligible for aid (Gardner 2022:74). For those who were into commerce, a lower threshold of fifty *zuz* was also applied to them (Gardner 2022:74). This system ensured that the rights of the vulnerable were grounded in objective economic data and thus the dignity of the vulnerable was protected as the law required them not to sell their primary residence or the tools of their trade to qualify for assistance (Gardner 2022:74).

The complexity of the second temple tithing system led to the emergence of the category of *demai*, or doubtfully tithed produce (Sarason 2022:76). This arose from a social reality where a significant portion of the population, termed the *amme ha'aretz* (people of the land), were suspected of neglecting the separation of the Levitical first tithe or the second tithe, while still being scrupulous about the great *terumah* for priests; however, the tractate *Demai* regulates the interaction between those scrupulous about tithing (*ne'emanim*) and the common folk (Sarason 2022:76).

Sarason (2022:84) revealed that the law permitted leniency that prioritised the welfare of the vulnerable as the poor were fed with *demai* produced without first separating the doubtful tithes and those distributing charity were not required to tithe the produce they collected before giving it to the poor (Sarason 2022:84).

Anderson (2013:107–114) further argues that Deuteronomy treats social welfare provision among the people and the tithe as paired obligations. He integrates the tithe obligation with the mandate to provide for the socially vulnerable. By implication, the vulnerable (the widow and the orphan) were intended beneficiaries of the Deuteronomic tithe, not contributors to it. A religious economy that extracts tithe contributions from these groups rather than distributing to them has inverted the redistributive logic the tithe was designed to serve.

Tithing and Financial Hardship in Contemporary Lagos State

Falola and Heaton (2008:5) estimated the population of Lagos at over 9.2 million and described it as the largest city in West Africa. Ojo (2006:23–24) traces the growth of Lagos Pentecostalism from university campus fellowship movements of the 1970s to the establishment of megachurches with memberships ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands. These institutions are fuelled by the prosperity gospel, which teaches that the tithe is the minimum obligatory contribution and material blessing is a covenantal promise conditional on faithful giving and, thus, withholding it constitutes 'robbing God', as declared in Malachi 3:10 (Adogame 2013:85–93). Anderson (2014:224–232) argues that the theology of the tithe in these Pentecostal contexts is inseparable from the perception that material prosperity is evidence of divine favour. He reveals that the practical outcome is that low-income congregants are expected to tithe on gross income before meeting basic subsistence needs (Anderson 2014:228).

Jenkins (2006:68–75) notes that Malachi 3:10 operates not as a theological principle but as a contractual promise because of the intensity with which poor African Christians apply biblical texts to immediate material circumstances. According to Jenkins (2006:70), when the promised financial returns fail to materialise, the theological framework attributes the failure to the individual

believer's insufficient faith, compounding material hardship with spiritual self-reproach.

Falola and Heaton (2008:219-221) situate the growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Nigeria within its specific historical context. The collapse of the oil economy in the 1980s and the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund produced a sharp fall in the purchasing power of the average Nigerian (Falola and Heaton 2008:219). American Word of Faith theology was transmitted through evangelical missions and returning Nigerian graduates. They came with tithing teaching that inverted the Deuteronomic logic, which placed the widow and the orphan among the tithe's beneficiaries rather than its contributors, asserting that the tithe is an individual investment for supernatural financial leverage (Adogame 2013:89).

Lagos, therefore, faces a tough economic situation, where there is a shortage of housing and rising energy costs that strain most people's finances. Meanwhile, a small group of wealthy individuals continues to prosper (Economic Intelligence Department 2025:9). Religious practice in this environment of hyperinflation and policy-driven shocks has shifted, as what used to be solely spiritual has become a way for many to cope and survive (John, Raphael, and Nnadozie 2026:136). Tithing now sits at the centre of a high-stakes theological and sociological debate, with prosperity preachers in the city often presenting the payment of one-tenth of gross income as a 'cash-back system', promising that financial seeds sown in faith will inevitably trigger material abundance (Akabike, Ngwoke, and Chukwuma 2021:2). This transactional theology finds fertile ground among a population grappling with unemployment and the failure of government institutions to provide a robust social safety net (Omavuebe 2021:175).

In some prosperity-oriented Pentecostal congregations, preachers deliver sermons designed to reduce anxiety, pledging heaven on earth and freedom from poverty, and often framing financial struggles as a curse for failing to follow the law of tithing (Oyedepo 1995:81). This idea shifts the responsibility for poverty from structural factors to individual spiritual shortcomings. For many people in Lagos, religion is often their last hope in a world of limited options (Omavuebe 2021:305). They engage in provocative giving, sometimes

sacrificing money needed for food or medical care, hoping for a hundredfold return (Onyejiuwa, Eze, and Olatunbi 2024:145). However, the lived experience of these tithers often tells a different story, with empirical data suggesting that regular tithers continue to face significant financial difficulties, robbery, and sickness, mirroring the experiences of non-tithers (Omavuebe 2021:347).

Within some Pentecostal church contexts in the city of Lagos, this has led to a visible disconnect in income levels, as some respected pastors pave the way for their personal wealth with multimillion Naira land acquisitions and a sensuous display of private jets and other fantasy vehicles, sending some members of the congregation into a deep trough of poverty; the latter are recorded in the study by Akabike, Ngwoke, and Chukwuma (2021:3). In this context, Ughaerumba (2016:1937) notes that certain religious organisations operate like family businesses. This is not the pattern in all Pentecostal churches in Lagos, as there are many Pentecostal churches that have good examples of pastoral care and financial accountability. However, the capabilities of this kind of prosperity gospel to secure financial wealth has, in certain recorded instances, made wealth the criterion for a minister's success (Omavuebe 2021:342).

Analytical Points of Comparison between the Jerusalem Temple Economy and Contemporary Lagos

The two contexts are two millennia apart, with different theological traditions; and, at a surface level, there are few structurally common things between the two religious systems. Thus, this is not a historical parallel but a comparison of the religious economy of the Jerusalem temple with the Pentecostal religious economy system in Lagos. What they share is narrower and more specific as they are both examples of a religious authority structure that extracts material resources from people unable to donate, and they both perform as if following a scriptural tradition that seemingly grants permission to extract but which, read carefully, also forbids it.

The first common feature is religious authority. The Jerusalem temple in the late Second Temple period operated as a financial institution run by high-priestly families who combined cultic power with economic control. Keddie

(2019:152) reveals that priestly elites benefited heavily from tithes and temple taxation, and these institutions could reinforce existing inequalities by transferring resources towards politically influential priestly elites. Certain Pentecostal megachurches in Lagos seemingly operate under a comparable concentration of authority where pastoral founders hold doctrinal, financial, and social power simultaneously, and the tithing obligation is defined and enforced through the same voice that defines membership and belonging. The institutional form is different but the logic connecting spiritual authority to financial extraction is not.

The second point concerns the vulnerable (widows, peasants, landless labourers) who are really paying for it. These were the people who made up the bottom of a hierarchy of people, who constituted in first-century Palestine the 'economically expendable' category as described by Lenski (1966:284), and confirmed by Hanson and Oakman (1998:68–72), and who were those who would be characterised as having no male support and had no productive relationship with the dominant group's economy. They were affected by the tithe, nevertheless. Similarly, in Lagos, Omavuebe (2021:347) reported that, in some Pentecostal environments, the tithers are experiencing difficulties in their finances that are not perceptibly different from those of the non-tithers. Onyejiuwa, Eze, and Olatunbi (2024:157) depict members who are willing to sacrifice funds for feeding or getting medical attention which signals a strong commonality with the old widow. They both give compensatory yields, less than optimal yielding, and not from their surpluses.

Interpretive and Ethical Implications

In view of Ukpong's (2000:16–17) inculturation hermeneutics, reading scripture from the social location of the marginalised, the widow of Mark 12 is presented as a figure whose situation names the structural dynamic of a religious economy that requires the destitute to sustain it by taking away the *βίος* of those the covenantal tradition mandated it to protect, and not just as a model for homiletical imitation. The three-part narrative sequence places it under prophetic judgement. Elliott's analysis of the *οἶκος* (household) as the primary social and economic unit of the ancient Mediterranean world illuminates that the widow's two *λεπτά* are the remaining material basis of her social existence and not surplus (1993:32). As against the efforts of established

protective laws for the vulnerable during the Second Temple period, the widow of Mark 12:41–44 gave all her *βίος* (livelihood). Similarly, in the Lagos context, there is a proliferation of churches with tithing structures that resemble the institutional logic that the Marcan text condemns – contemporary ecclesial systems that require giving from the destitute, instead of calculating whether congregants should give. This interpretation focuses on the institutional structures that normalise financially burdensome demands. A critical distinction must be observed here. The widow in Mark 12:41–44 was not explicitly commanded or institutionally compelled to bring her offering in the coercive manner in which tithes are demanded from Pentecostal congregants in contemporary Lagos. She acted within a cultural and religious environment that morally pressured her participation, as Malina (2001:27–57) demonstrates through the lens of honour-shame dynamics and religious identity, but no temple official confronted her, threatened her with spiritual consequences for non-payment, or framed her poverty as the result of her own faithlessness. Nonetheless, both contexts exploit the vulnerable through a religious economy, but the Lagos context adds a layer of direct institutional pressure absent from the Marcan narrative. The concept of covenant economics founded in biblical legislation, described by Horsley (2009:27–32), supplies the constructive alternative as it consistently prioritises the subsistence of the poor over institutional accumulation. In Deuteronomy 14:28–29, the financial economic system was meant to redistribute to the vulnerable (the Levite, the alien, the orphan, and the widow) alongside other systems like gleaning. It was not meant to extract from them.

This paper does not, in principle, target tithing or institutional religious giving, as Mark 12:41–44 acknowledges the commendation of the widow's act. The Marcan narrative holds two realities in tension: it indicts the exploitative institutional structures that reduce vulnerable persons to such desperate acts, while simultaneously highlighting the widow's radical trust and devotion. Churches today must support and protect expressions of radical trust and should neither romanticise sacrificial giving by the poor nor dismiss the genuine piety that may underlie such acts.

The inclusive reading of Mark 12 has implications for twenty-first-century Christian communities, particularly in contexts such as Lagos State. A contextual theological implication of this reading is that the church's financial

structures must be evaluated against the Deuteronomic norm that positions the vulnerable as recipients rather than donors of communal resources. The following practical implications emerge from a synthesis of the biblical evidence and the socioeconomic realities of vulnerable believers, and are offered as constructive proposals grounded in the text's logic rather than derived directly from Mark 12:41–44 itself. (1) Consistent with the Pentateuchal distinction that the landless vulnerable (widows, orphans, and resident aliens) were not producers but recipients of the tithe, churches can explicitly exempt individuals and households living below the poverty line from any required tithing. Their participation in the community should not be tied to financial contributions. (2) Drawing from the Deuteronomic poor man's tithe (*ma'aser ani*), churches should ensure that, as the storehouse functions primarily for the funding of the gospel, it should be a mechanism of redistribution (community support, including food relief, medical assistance, skills training, micro-enterprise development, and education), rather than centralised accumulation. (3) Every local congregation should adopt open, regular financial reporting to its members. Such transparency counters the abuses of centralisation witnessed in the second temple period and rebuilds trust among congregants.

These guidelines seek to realign contemporary tithing practices with the biblical emphasis on justice, the protection of the vulnerable, and localised kinship solidarity, as also emphasised in African communal understanding. By implication, they do not abolish institutional giving or the support of full-time ministry, principles affirmed in the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 9:13–14). With these, churches can transform tithing from a potential burden into a genuine instrument of socioeconomic restoration and covenant faithfulness.

Conclusion

The context of the widow's story in Mark 12:41–44, framed by the criticism of the scribes in 12:40 and the prophecy about the temple's destruction in 13:2, allows us to see her action not only as a genuine act of giving but also as a pointed critique of how religious institutions exploit the vulnerable. This is affirmed by the use of the terms *βίος* and *πτωχή*, which designate material livelihood and complete destitution respectively. Additionally, there are two economic conditions set against each other, between *περισσεύω* (to have

more than is needed) and *ὑστέρησις* (to have what is lacking). The text also records a radical trust that the church is to honour and protect and not exploit. Lagos State offers some frightening similarities everywhere tithing is demanded as a prerequisite for (and the supposed reason behind) receiving blessing from the divine will, where no attention is paid to the possibility of financial consequences from such actions, such as financial insecurity, and where the institution extracts wealth from its weaker members rather than from the thriving economy of those who operate it, much as the temple economies did. These financial models are seen as coercive and unaccountable.

The Bible highlights the need for redistribution, specifically the Deuteronomic three-year tithe that was to go to those in need within God's community. The storehouse is a repository of foodstuffs for the needy, rather than the last collection. The paper refuses to oppose tithing and institutional giving, which have solid biblical foundations in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 9:13–14). In Mark 12:41–44, it is not the giving that is the concern but the system, the environment, and the direction of the resources. The idea is that the Deuteronomic framework included the widow, the orphan, and the alien as recipients but not contributors to the tithe and that it therefore deliberately and intentionally has a burden upon congregations to ensure that their financial structures are not part of the institutional dynamics the Marcan narrative condemns. Thus, twenty-first-century churches can restore the full picture in the tithing tradition to community flourishing by adopting the Deuteronomic vision, excluding the poorest (the real poor) from tithing, making detailed local welfare payments, and having clear governance structures. By this, the church transcends criticism to become a true implementer of God's judgment and provision for the oppressed.

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Eco-theological Pathways for Faith Formation: a Case Study of Young Theologians Initiative for Climate Action, Kenya

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Abstract

This article explores the topic of faith formation in the communities residing in the Ngecha-Tigoni ward, in Kiambu County, from an eco-theology perspective. The study made use of Richard Osmer's four-task model of practical theology in examining the practical integration of eco-theological elements in faith formation. The study was qualitative, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty participants, including eight members of Young Theologians Initiative for Climate Action (YTICA), five teachers, and seven faith leaders. Study participants were purposively selected from within the Ngecha-Tigoni ward in Kiambu County, Kenya, and recruited to the study. The study found effective integrations of eco-theological teachings in sermons and church activities, which was found to be effective in enhancing the overall understanding of the concept of sustainability among congregants. As a result of the integration of eco-theological teachings, participants reported engaging in different activities such as praying for the environment, which is an indication of faith formation. The study further found that, while school activities were implemented in public schools within the Ngecha-Tigoni ward, the students did not engage in environmental conservation activities beyond the school. The rationale was that the faith-based initiatives for environmental sustainability by the YTICA group and faith leaders were largely one-off and short-term without the continuous follow-up that would result in sustainable change. The study recommends meeting the need for capacity building for faith leaders, teachers, and

YTICA members in order to improve their general understanding of eco-theological practices and their application within social and cultural contexts.

Introduction

This study seeks to explore faith formation through the lens of eco-theology, specifically within the context of the Ngecha-Tigoni ward in Kiambu County, Kenya. This study aims to research and document the special needs and characteristics of faith formation in places like the Ngecha-Tigoni ward, in Kiambu County, with a case study of YTICA (Young Theologians Initiative for Climate Action) and further delve into potential theological impacts on communities in the future. YTICA is a faith-based organisation whose goals are consciously drawn from the precepts of one or more religious or spiritual tradition. The goal of this study is to understand how eco-theology can shape and enhance the faith formation of individuals and communities, fostering a more profound spiritual connection with the environment.

Eco-theology is a theological discourse that investigates the link between religion and the environment. This area of study looks at religious perspectives on nature, creation, and the place of humans in the natural world. Eco-theology primarily focuses on the interrelationships between ecology and the natural world.

The phrase 'faith formation' refers to the conscious, planned processes that individuals undergo to grow in religious faith and spirituality (Lytle 2013:17). In her study on the process of faith formation, Lytle (2013:17) observed that it is not just about giving out information on the teachings of the church. Rather, it's about leading and facilitating an encounter with the mystery of God in Christ. Faith formation does not just take place in the Sunday worship service. It's the way we live our lives, being formed and transformed, individually and collectively, in our hearts, minds, and relationships through the power of the Holy Spirit (Roberto 2010:106).

Application of Eco-theological Concepts

In the past few decades, eco-theology has been considered a critical area of theological research, especially when dealing with environmental crises that face the world. Based on research conducted by Hwang (2024:376), theological reorientation should mainly focus on ecological concerns. Through the above, it will be possible to advocate for a spirituality that majors on the interdependence of humanity and creation. Through eco-theology, traditional Christian views can easily be challenged based on how they have seen nature as separate from humanity. As noted by Vincent (2023:66), a number of faith-formation models have been overlooking ecological principles as they major on doctrinal teaching and morality. However, they have not been able to address the environmental implications of such teachings. As a result, there has been a disconnection between spiritual life and ecological responsibility, which has caused neglect in many faith communities.

There is an urgent need for eco-theological integration, especially due to global environmental degradation. Giller *et al.* (2021:1432) observe that, by neglecting the environment, the community can easily experience dire consequences. Different research conducted by Potts (2023:152) indicates faith communities should always be involved in the transformation of environmental advocacy and education. Through the incorporation of eco-theology into religious teachings, faith communities will play a critical role in empowering individuals to consider the environment as a moral and spiritual obligation. In a Christian context, faith formation has a theme highly disconnected from the material world of salvation and morality. Due to such separation, many believers have not been able to recognise the importance of taking care of the earth as a critical aspect of their faith. As recommended by Potts (2023:152), eco-theology can play a critical role in correcting such imbalance through the connection of religious teachings to practical ecological actions. Integration of such principles into faith formation will also educate people on faith, which nurtures spiritual wellbeing and encourages ecological justice.

The Ngecha-Tigoni ward, situated in the central highlands of Kenya, is a region characterised by its rich natural environment and strong Christian heritage. The area is home to diverse ecosystems, including forests, rivers, and

agricultural lands, which are vital to the livelihoods and cultural practices of the local population. However, these ecosystems are under increasing pressure from deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, and the impacts of climate change. The degradation of the environment not only threatens the ecological balance but also poses challenges to the wellbeing of the community. The region is predominantly Christian, with various denominations practising their faith. However, environmental degradation, driven by deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable agricultural practices, poses a significant threat to the area's ecological balance.

In this context, faith communities have a critical role to play in promoting environmental stewardship. The Christian faith, which is predominant in Ngecha-Tigoni, offers theological resources that can be mobilised to inspire and guide the community in caring for the environment. Eco-theology, with its emphasis on the sacredness of creation and the moral imperative to protect it, provides a theological basis for integrating environmental concerns into faith formation. Eco-theology offers a theological response to environmental challenges by emphasising the interconnectedness of creation and humanity's responsibility towards the environment. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Ngecha-Tigoni ward, where the relationship between faith and the environment can be deepened through targeted faith-formation programmes.

Being within a predominantly Christian community, churches in Ngecha-Tigoni play a critical role in social and spiritual life. Different faith-formation activities, such as mentorship and community outreach, are very vibrant in the above community. As described to me by Kevin Maina, the YTICA team lead, the above initiatives have mainly led to the spiritual and social wellbeing of the community. However, despite so much effort, the Ngecha-Tigoni ward is still experiencing environmental challenges such as waste-management issues and soil erosion. The ward mainly depends on farming, which has led to rapid urbanisation due to shrinking arable land. The above calls for attention to sustainable practices. However, the Ngecha-Tigoni ward lacks faith-formation programmes that consider the above issues, as they only focus on traditional Christian teachings. Due to such limited perspectives, community members have not been fully equipped with different ways of addressing the environmental challenges that have a direct impact on their livelihoods.

In the Kenyan context, religion plays a crucial role in shaping community values and practices. Churches and religious leaders are influential in guiding moral and ethical behaviour, making them key players in promoting environmental stewardship. However, the integration of eco-theological principles into faith-formation processes remains limited, necessitating a study that explores how these concepts can be effectively incorporated into the religious life of communities like Ngecha-Tigoni.

Methodology

This is the methodology employed in investigating faith formation through an eco-theology lens in the Ngecha-Tigoni ward, in Kiambu County, Kenya, with a focus on the activities of the Young Theologians Initiative for Climate Action (YTICA). The methodology encompasses research design, data-collection procedures, participant selection, and ethical considerations. The approach applied in the current study was based on Richard Osmer's four-task model of practical theology (Smith 2010). The current read involves the first task, which entails gathering empirical data to describe practices and experiences that relate to eco-theology and faith formation.

The study is qualitative with a phenomenological design and uses a case study to capture the multifaceted dimensions of eco-theological engagement facilitated by the YTICA team. The rationale for the study design therefore is based on the fact that it examines the lived experiences of faith leaders and community members of the influence of eco-theological practices on faith formation (Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger 2020:14). The selection of qualitative methods in this study is based on the fact that they are likely to result in an enhanced understanding of the context under study, which is faith formation as seen through eco-theological perspectives. The selection of YTICA is based on the fact that they are a group of young theologians who are involved in activities such as tree planting and taking care of the environment while also promoting faith-based beliefs. The engagement of this group in environmental activities makes it an appropriate case study. A thematic approach to analysis was adopted in the study. The method entails developing themes from a set of qualitative data (Lochmiller 2021:202). The current study seeks to examine faith formation from an eco-theological perspective by focusing on the YTICA activities, making thematic analysis most appropriate.

Results

These are the findings from interview responses. The study targeted a sample of twenty-five participants; however, only twenty consented to the study. The participants included eight members of YTICA, five teachers, and seven faith leaders. The section below includes participant demographics as well as the thematic analysis of the twenty transcripts. The chapter engages with the second task in Osmer's four tasks of practical theology, which involves interpreting the data acquired in a study.

Participant Demographics

The table below shows the demographic characteristics of participants. Out of the eight YTICA members, three were male and five were female. The study involved YTICA members who perform different roles including founding member (1), group secretary (1), projects mobilisation (2), social media (1), advocacy (1), and ordinary members (2). Equally, out of the five teachers, four were male and only one was female. Three of the five teachers reported that they were in charge of environmental activities while two others reported that they had witnessed or experienced YTICA activities. At the same time, there were seven faith leaders out of whom five were male and two were female. The faith leaders involved assume different roles including deacon (1), priest (1), pastor (2), coordinator (1), theologian (1), overseer (1), and ministry head (1). Among the faith leaders, there was a fair representation of different denominations: Catholic (1), Anglican (2), African independent (1), and other Pentecostal churches (3).

Demographic Characteristics

	Male	Female	Total
YTICA Members	3	5	8
Teachers	4	1	5

Faith Leaders	5	2	7
Total	12	8	20

Integration of Eco-theological Teachings

The theme examines participant responses on the extent to which religious leaders within the Ngecha-Tigoni ward are able to integrate eco-theological teachings in their sermons and the influence that this has on the audience. One of the teachings in the current context has concerned the role of God not just as a creator but also as a sustainer of life. One of the participants observed that:

> One of the teachings that I have found effective has been informing people that God is interested in sustaining life. I find this to be consistent with the story of creation and the story of Noah.

The findings above are an indication that God is interested in all life and that human beings have a responsibility to take care of all creation as designed by the creator. A number of participants emphasised the element of responsibility, arguing that human beings are mere stewards rather than owners of living things on earth. In this context, one of the participants reported that:

> I keep emphasising that we are just stewards on earth and that we have a role of taking care of the environment, not just today but for future generations. I have achieved this by demonstrating that taking care of the environment is not just a social issue but also a religious and ethical concern.

Some of the faith leaders reported that they have specific periods when they teach about environmental and ecological issues:

> My church has set apart the month of June to celebrate and teach about environmental issues. Here, we have four Sundays, during which we create awareness about the environment while at the same time drawing possible links to biblical teachings. I believe that setting aside this specific period has resulted in better understanding and involvement of believers with environmental activities.

Beyond the faith leaders, the primary school teachers selected for the study also reported that they have been able to integrate the concepts of environmental sustainability into school-based learning. One of the participants indicated that:

> I like to train my students in the element of responsibility and environmental maturity early enough. I have consistently told them that it is their responsibility to plant trees and not to litter the environment. When the same information is also shared by faith leaders and other persons within the society, we begin changing their minds and perspectives about the environment.

The participation of educators in this study reflects the significance of environmental education at a young age on the formation of ecological values. Schools and religious institutions provide persuasive formative influences when the messages about environmental stewardship they convey are compatible. Nonetheless, this potential synergy may be destroyed due to differences between the teaching lessons of the institutions and the practices of the community. Children who learn about creation care in school but witness environmental neglect in their faith communities may experience value conflicts. This highlights the importance of collaboration between religious leaders, educators, and local organisations to exemplify consistent environmental stewardship.

Evidence from some of the study participants indicates that the integration of eco-theological concepts into sermons is not just about informing them what the Bible says but also about having a clear call to action, which could result in behavioural change. In this case, one of the respondents noted that:

> After informing the congregants that God expects us to be stewards, I move ahead to demonstrate how exactly we could be stewards. Some of the examples that I use include using water sparingly and practising appropriate approaches while farming.

The practical approach described above is an indication that, in some cases, environmental activities result in a call to action, which may result in tangible changes in behaviour.

Faith Formation through Environmental Initiatives

This section examines the extent to which engagement in various environmental activities influences faith formation among local communities in the Ngecha-Tigoni ward in Kiambu County, Kenya. Based on the findings, one of the impacts of environmental activities is that it influenced their overall understanding of God. One of the study participants noted that:

> I have always known that God is the creator. However, I feel like I have always focused more on how he meets my needs without looking at his broader role in creation. I feel like the teachings have assisted in developing a broader understanding of God. I even appreciate small things about creation.

Another participant observed that:

> For me, engaging in environmental conservation has become more of an act of faith and worship rather than just any other civic duty. My understanding is that I have a role to take care of God's creation.

Another participant reported that they pray for the environment, which is considered an act of faith formation.

> My group has a prayer for the environment. For me, the prayer is that God may change the hearts and minds of men so that they are more supportive of the environment.

The findings indicate that the current teaching of and participation in eco-theological practices have created a belief among participants that they have a moral and spiritual obligation towards the environment. From the findings above, the integration of environmental care into faith formation appears most effective when framed as a holistic spiritual discipline rather than a separate social issue. Respondents also stated that other activities such as community gardening or clean-up campaigns would add value when clearly associated with biblical teachings concerning the care of creation. This is consistent with studies that demonstrate how experiential learning enhances moral growth and religious identity (Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber 2022:21). The physical act of caring for the environment thus becomes a spiritual practice that shapes character and deepens faith commitments.

Some participants also reported being sceptical at first, which changed with teaching and direct engagement in practices.

> I am among those who did not attend the environment events. I saw it as a responsibility of local government. I have not only learnt but also seen firsthand how these issues affect us. I believe God wants us to keep the environment clean.

Findings, therefore, imply that eco-theological practices can be critical in shifting perceptions and overall mindsets about environmental activities. A further analysis of the findings indicates that the ways that environmental efforts promoted faith formation varied by generation. Participants who were younger and especially those who had experienced the YTICA programmes were more readily open to the concept of environmentalism being a part of their spiritual identity. This indicates that exposure to eco-theological practices during early years can influence lifetime dynamics of faith and environmental awareness (Olowo 2021:65). Older congregants needed to be convinced of the theological soundness of the faith-formation process in and through

environmental action more often, whether through framing conservation as an expression of neighbour love or intergenerational responsibility.

Besides, faith communities with the desire to enrich faith formation via environmental actions are supposed to pay attention to building coherent initiatives with understandable spiritual dimensions. This could involve establishing environmental ministries with specific faith-formation objectives, combining conservation efforts with scripture study, or developing eco-retreat options. The challenge lies in maintaining the delicate balance between ecological action and spiritual reflection – ensuring that *doing* remains connected to *being* in relationship with the creator. When achieved, such integration provides an effective example of faith formation that resolves both spiritual and ecological crises in our era.

The next part examines whether engagement in eco-theological practices results in sustainable change.

Influence of Faith-based Environmental Initiatives on Sustainability

The theme examines the extent to which eco-theological practices, as well as faith-based initiatives, have resulted in sustainable development in the context of increasing the participation of community members in environment-related activities. A majority of participants noted that, while there has been a general change of mindset toward the environment, the impact is often short-term, as only a few individuals are able to follow through with the suggestions. One of the participants reported that:

> The church and other groups tend to organise environmental activities regularly; however, I feel that the impact is always short-term. For instance, most people would only plant trees during those specific days. If you walk by the road on a random day, you will find litter. I am not critical; I am just saying that the behaviour change may not be sustainable.

Similar observations were made by another participant, who noted that;

> I am a member of a religious group, and when members are called upon for an environmental activity, only a few actually show up. There is obviously a link between faith and sustainable activities, but I cannot explain why some people are still not interested.

The findings above are an indication of a lack of direct connection between eco-theological teachings and sustainable engagement in environmental conservation. The rationale for this would be that a majority of faith-based environmental initiatives are one-off activities which may not necessarily result in behavioural change. One of the faith leaders, however, reported that they had witnessed actual engagement in sustainable activities:

> We have been very consistent with environmental stewardship, and one of our calls to action has been to have members engage in activities such as tree planting and home gardens. I can confidently report that this has been achieved. Some members have actually planted trees and are also involved in conserving the environment.

The findings above could be taken to mean that many of the changes that have been witnessed so far have been individual and on a small scale. While such environmental activities may still have a cumulative sustainable impact, findings indicate that there is a general lack of personal initiative to engage consistently in environmental activities after the eco-theological teaching.

The study also involved interviewing primary school teachers to understand the impact that eco-theological practices have on the likelihood of school students engaging in actual sustainability activities. Teachers interviewed in the study had different perceptions. Some reported that they had witnessed significant positive changes:

> I would say that there has been some change in terms of developing some positive values. Previously, environmental studies used to be just any other subject. When you integrate faith elements, I have witnessed students become

> more engaged and participating in activities such as managing waste.

The argument above is based on the assumption that eco-theological teachings create some spiritual connection, which leads students to believe that they have some sense of duty or obligation towards the environment. Other participants had different perceptions of the effectiveness of the interventions:

> One of the obvious impacts of the eco-theological teachings is that there is an increase in the overall awareness of environmental and sustainable activities among school children. However, among the children, sustainability is based on, among others, the amount of infrastructure and support that is available. For instance, a child may understand the value of cleaning the environment. However, actual engagement is dependent on how well teachers and parents support them.

Another participant noted that:

> I have seen children being excited about the story of creation and why we should continuously take care of the environment. However, the fact that environmental degradation remains an issue means that a majority of children do not carry what they learn into adulthood.

The results gave rise to a sharp discrepancy in the data: on the one hand, children were more open to the teachings of eco-theology, and adults, on the other hand, were more resistant or indifferent. Teachers speculated that this disparity stemmed from generational differences in environmental values and the inertia of established lifestyles. The success of faith-based sustainability initiatives depends on interventions that bridge these generational gaps by modifying messages for various age groups. For example, appealing to adults on the basis of a theology that links environmentalism with other convictions, including health, frugality, or intergenerational justice, might lead to greater commitment. Meanwhile, nurturing children's innate curiosity through hands-

on projects and storytelling could solidify their commitment to sustainability as they mature.

The findings above indicate that there are gaps in the actual implementation of eco-theological concepts so that they have a sustainable impact over time. For schoolchildren, teaching is important in instilling values and a general appreciation for the environment. However, sustainability is based on factors such as continued reinforcement and support.

In order to have a better understanding of the gaps described above, the study included questions on challenges faced in implementing eco-theological activities. A major challenge identified by a majority of participants was the lack of immediate benefits. Given that a majority of individuals within the community are farmers, they are often more focused on their daily survival needs, which implies that participating in environmental activities is not considered a priority.

> In my understanding, most people know that they are supposed to take care of the environment. But I feel like these aspects often get lost between the day-to-day activities.

Equally, on priority, one of the faith leaders observed that:

> We tend to place most of these activities during the weekend due to perceived availability. However, most people do not perceive this to be a priority, which explains the low numbers.

The findings are an indication that, despite the teaching and practice, a majority of people are not intentional about the integration of environmental activities into their daily lives. Another challenge identified was that some community members view participation in environmental activities as an elitist agenda and, therefore, only for specific members of the community. In this case, one of the YTICA group members observed that:

> I have witnessed some sense of resistance from some community members. They feel like they do not have the

> financial means to implement sustainability projects. While they appreciate biblical teachings associated with the idea, they often feel like they belong to others.

As a result of the prioritisation of socioeconomic needs, some participants in the study reported that they viewed environmental initiatives as an elitist agenda often for persons with financial means within the society. The findings align with observations by Conradie (2012), who observed that, in most cases, engaging in environmental activities such as tree planting may require time and financial investment which causes some community members to feel that it is not a priority. This aspect becomes a significant barrier to long-term engagement, especially given that individuals fail to perceive the long-term ecological benefits.

From the findings above, faith-based environmental initiatives in Ngecha-Tigoni demonstrate both promise and pitfalls. Such initiatives are excellent at increasing awareness and spurring occasional action, but have not succeeded in creating inbuilt community-wide sustainability practices. To overcome this, religious institutions need to go past organising symbolic activities to making ecological consciousness a part of spiritual practice. This requires sustained education, structural support, and creative approaches to bridge generational and ideological divides. Overcoming these issues, faith communities will be able to exercise their distinctive moral authority to make not only short-term connections but lasting, revolutionary change, both to individuals and the world around them.

Mitigating Eco-theological Practices

There are different barriers and challenges in the implementation of eco-theological practices. One of the recommendations for mitigating the challenges involves capacity building for teachers and faith leaders. One of the faith leaders noted that the integration of eco-theological practices into sermons and church activities may, at times, be difficult to achieve. On capacity building, a participant reported that:

> My submission is that faith leaders need more theoretical backing. There is a need, for instance, to have seminars and

> workshops which show how to structure eco-theological sermons and how to ensure that they have a sustainable impact on the community members.

The concept of capacity building above is an indication that some faith leaders may not have relevant and appropriate knowledge about the mitigation. Another approach to mitigating the challenges would be to ensure that teachings on eco-theological practices as part of faith formation should be linked directly to people's livelihoods.

> People need to see directly how the eco-theological practices influence their day-to-day lives. I think there is a need for more practical examples while demonstrating that we are merely stewards of what God has created.

The recommendation above indicates the need to demonstrate the perceived benefits of the activities in people's lives. When people are able to draw direct benefits and connections, it is possible that theological teachings will be more openly embraced, resulting in sustainable environmental activities over time.

Integration of Eco-theological Practices in Teachings

The study findings revealed that religious leaders in the Ngecha-Tigoni ward have an active practice of integrating eco-theological commitment into their preaching, where they preach eco-theology as part of spiritual calling and moral responsibility. This is in line with wider theological theories, based on which faith groups are seen as fundamental players in mitigating ecological crises with the help of biblically underpinned environmental ethics (Habel 2000:18). Under Osmer's framework, we can interpret findings in the context of Genesis 2:15 where God places Adam in the garden 'to work it and take care of it' (NIV). Churches therefore ought to integrate eco-theological teachings into sermons, Bible studies, and catechism classes as part of holistic faith formation. Ignoring this leaves out a vital aspect of God's mission.

In achieving the above, churches can develop sermon guides that connect scripture to practical environmental issues. Faith leaders stated in the study that they included real-world examples in their eco-theological lessons, such

as planting trees and conserving water. The results show that raising awareness usually is insufficient to establish lasting change in environmental behaviour unless enhanced by supporting structures. The challenge lies in moving beyond moral exhortation to develop tangible and community-based sustainability initiatives (Cheng et al. 2021:112). Effective eco-theology must close the gap between theological study and embodied ecological practice in faith communities.

Faith Formation through Environmental Initiatives

The results of the study found that faith communities' efforts to protect the environment are a great way to grow spiritually and strengthen their faith. The participants explained how the activities, such as tree plantation, conservation schemes, and environmental education, took the form of transformative spiritual practices that helped them become more connected to the creation as well as the creator. The findings could be interpreted in the context of James 2:17 which states, 'Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead'. Environmental initiatives provide a concrete way for believers to express faith in action, embodying stewardship, responsibility, and love of one's neighbour.

The study however revealed that there have been challenges relating to the sustenance of the spiritual aspect of environmental efforts. Other respondents pointed out that conservation actions were prone to becoming empty rituals unless seriously considered theologically. The findings imply the need to ensure that environmental initiatives are considered as spiritual discipline rather than just another church activity to be fulfilled. One of the approaches for addressing the above is through practical integration such as encouraging testimonies from members whose faith deepened through eco-practices.

The Influence of Faith-Based Environmental Initiatives on Sustainability

The results revealed a complex relationship between eco-theological teachings and sustainable environmental practices within the Ngecha-Tigoni community. Although faith-based activities have been successful in increasing awareness about environmental stewardship, the effects on long-term behavioural change have not been entirely consistent. One practical integration of the

findings would involve religious institutions modelling sustainability by reducing waste, promoting renewable energy, and managing church land responsibly. In religious circles, the research revealed that, in theory, there is acceptance of environmental stewardship but, in practice, it is not practised. There were some faith leaders who felt they had succeeded in engaging the members to participate in sustainable living such as maintaining home gardens or conserving water, although, in such instances, it was usually on an individual level as opposed to a collective engagement. The sporadic participation in environmental activities points to a gap between doctrinal teaching and personal conviction. Flam (2022:63) suggests that good eco-theology should fill this gap by integrating sustainability into the very definition of spiritual identity, such that sustainability cannot be separated from faith practice. In the absence of such an integration, environmentalism may be treated as an optional add-on rather than a core manifestation of religious commitment.

Mitigating Measures for Enhancing Eco-theological Practices

The study also sought to examine possible approaches to mitigating the challenges and improving the contribution of eco-theological practices towards sustainability. One of the recommendations was capacity building for teachers and faith leaders, to ensure that they have a better understanding of eco-theological practices, including how they could be effectively integrated in a way that meets social and cultural contexts. Another practical application of the findings would be religious institutions creating awareness campaigns to educate the general public while at the same time building strategic partnerships with public and private institutions to access capacity and resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study sought to answer various research questions. The first was in regard to the integration of eco-theological practices and the influence on faith-formation processes. The study found that faith leaders within the Ngecha-Tigoni ward in Kiambu County have been able to efficiently integrate eco-theological practices into their sermons and teachings. The above was achieved by demonstrating the role of God as a creator while also informing congregants of their role as stewards of God's creation. The evidence of faith

formation was illustrated in aspects such as individuals praying for the environment as well as an integration into mainstream church activities.

The second research question was about perceptions of and beliefs about environmental conservation. While participants had mixed reactions to the relevance of eco-theological practices, YTICA members and faith leaders interviewed in the study reported that a majority of community members did not necessarily engage in environmental and sustainability activities as a result of eco-theological teachings. The findings link with the third research question on the actual impact of eco-theological practices in addressing environmental challenges. The study found that eco-theological teachings resulted in practices such as tree planting and environmental conservation, which are largely one-off and short-term. Lastly, the study examined different mitigating measures for enhancing eco-theological practices. The measures examined include capacity building for teachers and faith-leaders and demonstrating the direct benefit of eco-theological practices to community members.

A number of the limitations of this study indicate useful future research directions. The sole emphasis on religious leaders and teachers raises unsolved problems concerning congregational acceptance and the implementation of eco-theological teachings. The opposition to environmental messages in certain religious groups should be studied, especially where environmental interests are seen to contradict traditional religious values. Longitudinal research could help determine whether eco-theological training leads to long-term behavioural change. Cross-cultural comparisons of religious traditions could present other possibilities of uniting ecology and spirituality. These research trajectories would greatly expand the knowledge of faith-based environmental participation.

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Imago Dei and the 'Perfect' Body: a Theological and Missiological Reflection on Liposuction Trends Among Urban African Christians

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of theology and missiology with the contemporary social realities of African life. It focuses on the increasing prevalence of elective liposuction patronised by both men and women despite reported instances of post-operative complications and mortality. The study pairs the *imago Dei* doctrine with Bourdieu's physical capital theory. This framework contrasts the theological baseline of sacred human dignity with secular socioeconomic pressures compelling urban African Christians to modify the body as capital. It postulates that the drive for body modification often signals deeper existential and psychological anxieties. From a theological perspective, purely cosmetic liposuction challenges foundational Christian virtues such as bodily stewardship, the *imago Dei*, and divine sovereignty in creation. It concludes that the prevalence of elective liposuction necessitates a robust missiological response, urging theologians to address how 'body re-creation' impacts the integrity of the Christian witness in a modernised African context.

Introduction

This paper provides a critical analysis of liposuction as a burgeoning medical and cultural phenomenon by applying theological and missiological paradigms

to contemporary societal issues. Drawing on empirical data, the study categorises participant motivations into socioeconomic, psychological, and physiological frameworks. The discussion evaluates the clinical implications of these procedures and engages with the conceptual debate surrounding liposuction as either a form of body enhancement or a more radical body re-creation.

It provides a robust theological and missiological reflection on the phenomenon of cosmetic body modification, culminating in a synthesised evaluation of its broader implications for the contemporary faith community. By examining the practice of liposuction through the lens of Christian stewardship and cultural engagement, the analysis investigates how such physical alterations intersect with the core tenets of the gospel. This examination unpacks the profound impact of these procedures on both the collective Christian witness in a modernising society and the fundamental anthropological integrity of the individual believer. Through this critical synthesis, the study offers a nuanced framework for understanding how the church could constructively respond to the shifting bodily ethics of its adherents while safeguarding the holistic scriptural view of the human person.

Generally, liposuction is a procedure in cosmetic surgery for removing excess fat from under the skin by suction and in some cases depositing it in preferred parts of the body such as the bottom, thighs, abdomen, back, arms, and legs, in which case sculpting is needed (Beidas and Gusenoff 2021:658e–668e). Liposuction as a procedure of local anaesthesia was developed by a dermatologist called Jeffrey Klein and there are many types, namely: suction-assisted liposuction, tumescent liposuction, ultrasound-assisted liposuction, and laser-assisted liposuction. Each of these procedures has its own merits and demerits (Henke and Coleman 1999:899–902).

Through liposuction, the body shape of an individual is no longer a matter of external features peculiar to a particular family or bloodline but an ‘asset’ that could be acquired. The results of liposuction in terms of tremendous body shape transformation challenges the science of acquiring the same through regular exercise and healthy dieting. This is because, while regular exercise may take a longer period for the desired body transformation to occur,

liposuction is able to offer it within three to six months after the procedure, albeit with some considerable risks.

According to the University of Rochester's online 'Health Encyclopedia', plastic surgery is not artificial surgery. The word 'plastic' is derived from the ancient Greek word *plastikos*, which is rendered as 'mould' or 'given form'. Thus, plastic surgery helps those who opt for it to improve their appearance and get their facial and body tissue defects caused by accidents, illness, trauma, or birth disorders reconstructed or repaired (University of Rochester Medicine 2022).

Medicine is not the field of expertise of this researcher. Medical claims and assumptions made in this paper with respect to the issue of liposuction are based on general reading and conversations with a plastic surgeon, general medical practitioners, and research participants. However, the theological and missiological assumptions made in this paper are the author's.

This study adopted a dual-theoretical framework, pairing the substantialist doctrine of the *imago Dei* with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of physical capital. While the former provides the theological baseline regarding the sacred, immutable dignity of human embodiment, the latter illuminates the secular economic and social pressures that compel urban African Christians to treat the body as modifiable capital (Barth 1958:183–194; Bourdieu 1986).

At this juncture, the central inquiry concerns the underlying motivations for elective liposuction among African Christians. This fundamental question provides the conceptual framework for this study. To operationalise the primary research objective, the following subsidiary inquiries were established. (1) What are the clinical and conceptual definitions of liposuction within the current discourse? (2) What is the extent of empirical exposure to the procedure among the target demographic, either through personal experience or secondary observation? (3) Through what theological frameworks can practitioners justify the recourse to liposuction within the Christian faith?

The next section discusses the methods selected by the researcher.

Methods

The primary research question is why some African Christians choose to undergo liposuction. To comprehensively address this question, the study systematically deployed a carefully selected suite of qualitative research methods. Operating within this paradigm allowed for a deep, nuanced exploration of the intersection between religious faith, cultural pressures, and modern body modification choices. The methodological architecture of this investigation was structured into three distinct, interconnected phases: participant sampling, rigorous data collection, and systematic data analysis. By utilising these synchronised phases, the study successfully captured the lived experiences, personal testimonies, and underlying theological and missiological rationales of the participants. This ensured a robust, contextualised interpretation of the phenomenon within contemporary African Christian spaces.

Sampling

To assemble a highly relevant and articulate cohort, this phase of the investigation strategically combined two non-probability techniques: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The initial stage of recruitment relied on a purposive approach, which deliberately selected information-rich cases that aligned directly with the core objectives of the research. Specifically, the researcher established a strict inclusion criterion targeting individuals within the age demographic of twenty-five to fifty-five years. The methodological literature establishes that this specific lifecycle bracket demonstrates the highest statistical interest in, and psychological inclination toward, undergoing liposuction procedures. Following this initial selection, snowball sampling was integrated to leverage the personal networks of the primary participants, expanding the sample size through a trusted chain-referral mechanism highly effective for sensitive or deeply personal subjects (Bryman 2012:416; Sarantakos 2013:277–279).

Two Christian traditions in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, were selected for the study. One of them was the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition and the other, the historic mission-oriented tradition. The former was selected due to its ability to attract a lot of middle-class women and men. Also, the

Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition was adjudged by scholars as the fastest growing Christian tradition globally. As such, it represents the face of global Christianity in contemporary times (Anderson 2013:1; Lindhardt 2018:1; Ma, Kärkkäinen, and Asamoah-Gyadu 2014:8).

The historic mission-oriented tradition was also selected due to its longevity, its solid theological foundation, and the ability to provide an opportunity for a comparative analysis of the data collected.

Research participants were identified with the assistance of key informants within the selected traditions. The study comprised a total sample size of thirty-three, consisting of one plastic surgeon, ten women, and five men from each tradition, and two individuals who openly discussed their procedures in a video online. Participants were engaged through informal conversations conducted via telephone, WhatsApp voice call, and WhatsApp video call (James and Busher 2016).

Data collection

Data were collected between June and December of 2025. Two primary methods were used to collect data: informal online conversations and the analysis of online video interviews with individuals who had undergone liposuction and a plastic surgeon. The use of informal conversation with a person or group of people has gained recognition as a viable means of data collection in a qualitative study. This is because informal conversations flow out of a natural environment and therefore data collected are reliable (Swain and King 2022:2).

Data analysis

The study used the thematic data analysis approach to analyse the collected data from both the informal conversations and the online video interviews watched by the researcher (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012:3–18; Sarantakos 2013:379–380). The data analysis method was selected due to its flexible nature. In both qualitative and quantitative research, thematic analysis is seen as an option for analysing data. Thematic analysis has various steps. These are understanding the data collected, developing codes, developing

themes, revising themes, defining themes, and then, finally, writing up. The study followed the inductive approach of thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013:175–178; Starcher, Dzubinski, and Sanchez 2018:61).

Results

The focus of this study was to find out why some African Christians choose to undergo liposuction and how that decision reflects on their Christian faith. It is obvious that the motivation for liposuction among some African Christians is real. This is because all the research participants demonstrated adequate knowledge of liposuction.

Twelve research participants, comprising seven from the Pentecostal/ Charismatic tradition and five from the historic mission-oriented denominations, disclosed having undergone elective liposuction of varying degrees between 2022 and 2026. The residual cohort indicated no personal history with the procedure, though they possessed secondary knowledge of individuals who had opted for such surgical interventions.

It was evident that the most common forms of liposuction patronised by the research participants were removal of excess fat in the abdomen and buttock enhancement. A majority of the respondents did not view liposuction as a medical procedure that offended the Christian faith although they were not too sure if they would encourage someone to opt for liposuction.

In the next section, data from both the informal conversations and online video interviews watched by the researcher are thematically presented.

Data from Informal Conversations

The qualitative data gathered from informal conversations regarding why some African Christians chose to undergo liposuction could be comprehensively categorised into four primary thematic dimensions: social, economic, psychological, and physiological drivers. Far from being a superficial or singular decision, the motivations voiced by the participants reveal a highly complex, multidimensional matrix of personal and societal influences. Socially and economically, individuals are often responding to the powerful dictates of

peer dynamics, digitised beauty standards, and the professional currency associated with enhanced physical appearance. As a result, the psychological and physiological dimensions capture deep-seated struggles with body image, self-esteem, and the desire to correct perceived physical imperfections or somatic changes. Categorising the narrative data into these distinct domains enabled a more systematic and nuanced exploration of how modern bodily practices intersected with the lived experiences of contemporary African believers.

Social reasons

Some of the social reasons for the desire for liposuction in contemporary times according to research participants were:

(1) To be able to wear some clothes and measure up

For some individuals, the size of the dress they wear matters to them. Therefore, their inability to wear the dress size they preferred was a serious cause of worry. Opting for liposuction was, therefore, a panacea for the constant bother of struggling to wear a particular dress size.

(2) For social acceptance

Despite demonstrating robust health outcomes and elevated levels of socioeconomic achievement, individuals outside of mainstream somatic ideals often encountered distinct institutional and interpersonal biases. The impact of pejorative comments, particularly the contemporary rise of digital body shaming, often led to diminished self-esteem. In an effort to secure social validation and mitigate the effects of this unfortunate trend, some felt compelled to undergo liposuction to align with the more widely accepted body shape.

Economic reasons

Research participants cited the following economic rationale:

(1) To gain endorsement deals from companies looking to sell new products

It has become fashionable for advertising companies in Africa to use beautiful curvy women and handsome men for their television and billboard

advertisements. Companies who chose to advertise their products online also recruited young attractive men and women as brand ambassadors. The economic implications of these opportunities served as enough encouragement for some individuals to opt for liposuction to acquire a distinct body shape.

The economic reason assigned by research participants fits into Pierre Bourdieu's theory of physical capital where the body is treated as modifiable capital (1986).

Psychological reasons

The two psychological reasons given by the research participants are as follows:

(1) To improve self-confidence

Conversations with research participants suggest that when the shape of the body was transformed, it made them feel more confident. This psychological disposition obviously has implications for how they see themselves and are seen by the outside world.

(2) To feel and look young

Another psychological reason that those who had successfully undergone liposuction gave, according to the research participants, was that the result after the procedure made them feel and look young. This feeling and perception boosted their relationship with others. Eleven of the research participants cited Queen Esther in the Bible to justify their opinion (Esther 2:12).

Physiological reasons

The physiological reasons given by the research participants were as follows:

(1) To remove stubborn fat

Particularly, individuals who felt they had excess fat stored in parts of the body where it was not needed resorted to liposuction after unsuccessful attempts to remove it through regular home and gym exercises.

(2) To improve the ability to exercise and maintain a healthy cardiovascular status

For individuals who felt their body weight was an impediment in their quest to engage in regular exercise and improve the health status of their heart, liposuction, according to them, was a viable option.

(3) To reclaim body size after childbirth

Childbirth is a strenuous process. For some who experienced physical change after childbirth, the suggestion was that the surest way to reclaim their once 'adorable' body shape was to undergo liposuction.

Although these reasons were cited, research participants who had never undergone liposuction mentioned that liposuction, in their view, only held aesthetic value. To them, neither body enhancement nor 're-creation' was necessary, particularly if one was a Christian. They cited Bible verses such as:

> 'I have the right to do anything,' you say, but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything', but I will not be mastered by anything. […]
> Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:12, 19–20, NIV here and throughout)
>
> Therefore, I urge you, brothers, and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will. (Romans 12:1–2)

The aforementioned Bible verses were quoted to support their position. These research participants strongly asserted that

liposuction challenged the divine sovereignty of God and the perfection of the human body he created.

Data from Online Video Interviews Watched

The researcher analysed three online videos, comprising two personal accounts from African individuals who underwent liposuction and an interview with a Ghanaian plastic surgeon.

In video one, Blessing CEO (2022) shared her experience on Facebook. According to her, she underwent a procedure to remove excess belly fat and deposit it inside the buttocks. She went on to describe the precautionary measures taken to reduce pain after going through the procedure. It was mentioned that after the procedure it was forbidden to sit for two to three weeks, lying down on the belly most of the time. After the two-to-three-week period, sitting was done using a liposuction pillow. The reasons for opting for liposuction were to look good, happy, and confident.

In video two, Koko Khloe (2022) a Nigerian discussed her liposuction experience. In her case, she had excess fat removed from the belly and back. These were used to redesign the hips and buttocks. It was disclosed that, six months after liposuction, the process of the pumped fat trying to survive in the new environment caused a lot of discomfort. Koko Khloe stated that if she was offered a hundred million (in whatever currency) to undergo another liposuction, the offer would be declined because the procedure was painful.

In video three, the plastic surgeon consulted for this study had offered an interview to a television station on liposuction. In this interview aired on Joy FM, naval captain Kwesi Nsaful (*The Hard Truth* 2022) explained that 'body re-creation' was not possible through plastic surgery and that all liposuction did was to enhance the body.

Discussion

This section analyses the empirical findings of the study based on the collected data. By evaluating these results, the discussion highlights critical patterns and emerging questions. Ultimately, this analysis contextualises the data to

demonstrate its broader implications for missiological and theological responses to contemporary issues in African society. To explore these findings, the following key observations are made.

First, the desire for liposuction appears to be increasingly prevalent in several African societies, marking a significant cultural shift in body image management. This growing demand occurs despite the fact that orthodox medical infrastructure and specialised aesthetic surgery are still developing within the region. This paradox suggests that the globalised pressure of social media, digital beauty standards, and the normalisation of body contouring procedures heavily outweigh local structural limitations. Consequently, individuals are highly motivated to seek these invasive modifications, even when navigating a healthcare system that lacks the advanced, specialised care found in Western or Asian cosmetic medical hubs.

Additionally, while some Africans compromised their health and, in severe instances, lost their lives to undergo liposuction, the situation diverged significantly in other contexts. For example, European markets favoured slimmer, subtle silhouettes and leaned heavily toward minimally invasive procedures, strictly governed by rigorous safety frameworks and pre-surgical psychological assessments.

Second, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the patronisation of liposuction is not confined to secular spaces but is actively occurring among young demographics within both Pentecostal/Charismatic and historic mission-oriented Christian traditions. This cross-denominational trend reveals a significant generational shift, which suggests that modern aesthetic desires cut across different theological paradigms, ranging from the highly expressive, prosperity-oriented environments of Charismatic churches to the traditionally conservative structures of historic mission institutions. The data indicates that young Christians, regardless of their specific denominational doctrines on modesty or the sanctity of the body, are increasingly navigating the tensions between contemporary secular beauty standards and their religious identities. At some point in their lives, they choose to reconcile these tensions through surgical body modification.

These observations prompt the following questions:

(1) Should missiology and theology concern itself with issues such as liposuction?
(2) Does the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition's emphasis on material prosperity contribute to the desire to have a compelling physical appearance to symbolise prosperity?
(3) What motivates individuals who belong to the historic mission-oriented tradition where material prosperity is not overly emphasised to opt for liposuction?

While certain inquiries necessitate further empirical investigation, a critical question remains regarding the extent to which celebrity culture, the prosperity ethos, and media-centrality historically associated with African Neo-Pentecostalism have incentivised the rise in elective surgeries. Conversely, there is a growing necessity to acknowledge that these sociocultural drivers may no longer be confined to specific theological traditions but rather reflect trans-denominational human inclinations toward self-actualisation.

Moving beyond these initial observations, this section provides an analytical focus on the following thematic areas.

Removal of Excess Fat

From the reasons advanced as noted in the previous section, it is safe to suggest that the issue of excess fat is fundamental to the thought of liposuction. All the listed benefits in terms of social, economic, psychological, and physiological reasons are all tied to the issue of excess fat removal or depositing of fat at preferred parts of the body.

Although the unwantedness of excess body fat is the glaring undercurrent in the popularity of liposuction in contemporary African society, the importance of applying discipline to life's daily choices to reduce excess body fat does not appear a cogent consideration. This consideration is important because, if attention is paid to daily life choices such as eating habits, routines after childbirth, and regular exercise, the amount of fat in the body could be controlled, thereby reducing the need for liposuction in the case of those who were worried about excess fat in their bodies.

Although the reasons advanced by research participants may be tenable, the potential adverse health implications associated with the procedure should not be discounted. These risks, however, appear to be secondary to the anticipated benefits of liposuction. Notably, the participant in online video two underscored the severity of these physiological risks (Khloe 2022).

Health Implications

Some of the possible health hazards associated with the procedure are numbness, kidney and heart challenges, internal injuries such as a puncture of the blood vessel leading to bleeding into tissue, and damaged nerves resulting in muscle dysfunction. There could also be infection or sepsis and fluid collection in some parts of the body (Scarborough and Bisaccia 1991).

Despite these acknowledged health hazards, some people do not seem deterred. The quest to fit in and be socially accepted, make some gains economically, satisfy a psychological deficiency, and feel accomplished seem to override critical engagement with the reality of the side effects of liposuction.

Beyond the issue of health hazards, there is also the thorny debate as to whether liposuction amounts to body enhancement or re-creation. The upcoming section discusses this debate.

Liposuction as Body Enhancement or Body Re-creation

Despite the significant physical transformation resulting from the surgical procedures, a majority of participants resisted the categorisation of their outcomes as body re-creation. Instead, they consistently framed their experiences within the language of body enhancement. This preference suggests a potential cognitive or theological boundary where participants seek to reconcile their elective surgeries with their religious identity. By adopting the terminology of ‘enhancement’ over ‘re-creation’, individuals may be attempting to mitigate the perceived ethical tension between modern medical interventions and the foundational tenets of their Christian faith.

According to the online video interview with the plastic surgeon, the procedure did not amount to 'body re-creation' irrespective of the severity of the procedure (*The Hard Truth* 2022). To him, 'body re-creation' was not possible through plastic surgery in general. His position utterly challenges the assumption that any form of liposuction or plastic surgery in general could amount to 'body re-creation'.

While the perspectives of both medical professionals and surgical recipients are significant, a critical threshold exists between marginal enhancement and comprehensive corporeal re-configuration. When interventions extend beyond localised sculpting to encompass multiple anatomical regions including the facial structure, torso, and extremities, the result constitutes a fundamental transformation of the biological form. In such instances of extensive adipose redistribution, the altered physical identity may significantly diverge from the individual's original appearance, challenging traditional notions of somatic continuity.

Whichever way the argument goes, the question worth addressing at this point is the implications of liposuction for theology and missiology in light of the views expressed by research participants.

The next section reflects on this medical procedure and the experiences of people in light of theological and missiological ideas.

Theological Reflection on Liposuction

The substantialist view suggests that God's image resides in human nature, that is the soul, rationality, or the physical body as a consecrated vessel of the spirit. With respect to this view, liposuction could be said to be an attempt to fix a perceived flaw in this sacred substance (Farris 2017).

The general theological view is that the *imago Dei* transcends physical appearance, and so traditional theology usually separates the physical from the divine image. However, some contemporary scholars such as Joshua Moritz (2011) suggest a hylomorphic view. This view contends that, because humans are integrated beings of body and soul, the physical body is the necessary sacrament or visible sign of the invisible *imago Dei*. However, this

still does not correlate the image with specific looks, as doing so would create a theological hierarchy based on physical looks. The *imago Dei* is understood to be universally and equally present in all humans, regardless of physical characteristics. To correlate it with specific physical looks would contradict the doctrine of universal human dignity (Moritz 2011).

Furthermore, it is debatable to suggest that the Christian faith rejects medical procedures meant to improve the general health condition of a person or correct an anomaly which otherwise could jeopardise the health of an individual. The area of contention is the motive, value, and content of the medical procedure a person subscribes to in light of his/her religious faith.

While some of the reasons advanced by individuals who opt for liposuction, as discussed above in the section 'Results', appear convincing, from the theological standpoint, the situation prompts the question as to whether the desire for liposuction does not rather reveal much deeper unresolved issues such as insecurity, identity crisis, insatiability in the human heart, and humans' broken relationship with the supreme being. These issues are important as they relate to the condition of fallen humanity (Mavropoulos 2024a).

A theological interrogation of elective cosmetic procedures, such as liposuction, necessitates an interdisciplinary analysis of body stewardship, the perfection of the divine essence, and the notion of free will. Additionally, such an inquiry must critically evaluate the virtue of contentment and the importance of motive.

Stewardship of the Body

Within the Christian tradition, the believer's physical existence is defined by the pneumatological indwelling of the Holy Spirit; thus, the body is regarded as a sacred temple belonging to God rather than the individual as noted in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (Gupta 2010).

Moreover, the Petrine exhortation to prioritise interior virtue over external aesthetics (1 Peter 3:3) establishes a clear framework for body stewardship. This perspective asserts that the physical form is not an object for autonomous

modification but a divine trust to be managed in alignment with spiritual values.

Since Christians do not own their bodies, they are restricted in the extent to which they could 'violate' or 'exploit' their bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). To this end, the decision to undertake moderate body enhancement or 'body re-creation' must be informed by the teachings of the Christian faith.

As noted above in the section 'Psychological Reasons', the story of Esther and other maidens who were groomed before they were introduced to King Xerxes was quoted as a justification for liposuction. The text reads:

> Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. (Esther 2:12)

According to the text, Esther and the other maidens underwent six months of oil of myrrh body treatment and another six months of perfume and cosmetics treatment. It could be suggested that, in their case, things like facial waxing, pedicure, manicure, and other personal grooming lessons were given (Berlin 2001:27–28). There is no indication of any simple or elaborate plastic surgery performed and that is understandable because contemporary medical procedures were not available in those days.

For some individuals, the surgical procedures undertaken function as mere physical enhancements. For others, however, these interventions represent a comprehensive re-creation of the biological form. Regardless of the intent, the principles of the Christian faith offer a critical theological pushback to such results. Central to this perspective is the doctrine that the believer's body is a stewardship belonging to God; consequently, any physical modification must be conducted in a manner that aligns with divine will and glorifies the creator.

God's Attribute as a Perfect Being

Another issue worth exploring is the implications of liposuction as an affront to God's attribute as a perfect being. Great mediaeval philosophers like

Anselm, Aquinas, and Augustine described God as a perfect being. Although contemporary philosophers question this attribute of God, Christianity defends and upholds this description of God (Rogers 2019:1–10).

The ontological premise of divine perfection suggests that the created order, in its original intent, reflects the flawlessness of its creator. Consequently, elective body modification specifically body re-creation via liposuction for non-pathological reasons critically challenges the assertion of biological perfection within the human form. This tension invites a rigorous inquiry into whether such procedures implicitly critique the perfection of the divine essence (Mavropoulos 2024b:195–196).

From a Christian perspective, any defence of extensive corporeal alteration must provide a teleological justification that does not diminish the foundational attribute of divine sovereignty. Therefore, believers who have undergone such body re-creation are tasked with reconciling their elective choices with a theology of creation that affirms the inherent integrity of the *imago Dei*.

The Notion of Free Will

Beyond the ontological challenge to divine perfection, the discourse on elective body modification necessarily intersects with the concept of moral agency. Critiques of body re-creation often confront a reductionist interpretation of free will, one that posits an absolute liberation from external oversight. However, within a theocentric ethical framework, human volition is not absolute; rather, it is a delegated autonomy that must be exercised through the lens of stewardship and accountability to the creator.

While humanity possesses the liberty of self-determination, such agency requires a high degree of moral circumspection to ensure it does not devolve into doctrinal subversion or ethical negligence (Kenny 2011:43–46).

Consequently, the pursuit of body re-creation for purely aesthetic reasons invites a critical inquiry into whether such choices constitute an exploitation of human agency. When the motivations for body modification are divorced from

theological responsibility, the exercise of free will may fundamentally contradict the purposes for which that liberty was originally bestowed.

Contentment

The question that warrants critical examination at this juncture is whether liposuction reflects discontentment. Burroughs describes the virtue of contentment as unique. This is because the virtue of contentment is central to Christian life and life in general (Burroughs 2015:17–19).

Paul emphasises the virtue of contentment as a key ingredient to the Christian life to which believers are called. He notes:

> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11–13)

Fundamental to Paul's emphasis on the virtue of contentment in the text is the recognition that no human being will ever have it all and that life has seasons. When a person learns to be happy despite obvious deficiencies, that means the individual is content. So contentment is not resignation but recognition of the positive sides of life over seeming negatives (Hansen 2009:314–315).

To the Christian, this virtue is acquired through Christ who provides strength and grace to overlook deficiencies and stay thankful, particularly for the gift of life which is the ultimate gift, hence the saying: 'Godliness with contentment is a great gain' (1 Timothy 6:6).

The Importance of Motive

The underlying motive driving any action is a crucial determinant of its ethical validity. Intentionality in human conduct serves as a foundational element in

both the individual's relationship with the divine and the practical outworking of Christian faith (Abelard 1995:3–5).

Drawing from sapiential literature, specifically Proverbs 16:2, it is established that while human actions may appear subjectively justified or 'pure' to the actor, the divine prerogative involves an evaluation of the underlying motives.

Consequently, from a theocentric perspective, the moral value of an action is not determined solely by its external manifestation but by the internal disposition that prompted it. For the Christian practitioner, therefore, the teleological motive behind any course of action becomes a critical site of ethical and spiritual scrutiny.

Missiological Reflection on Liposuction

Contemporary Christian missiology faces a multifaceted array of emerging challenges that necessitate a departure from traditional paradigms. Because mission does not occur in a vacuum, its boundaries must expand to address the sociocultural complexities of the modern era, including the increasing prevalence of elective liposuction. This phenomenon raises a critical question: to what degree has the missional church critically engaged with the implications of cosmetic surgery within both ecclesiastical and secular spheres?

Given that the *missio Dei* in which the church is a participant encompasses the holistic restoration of the human person and their environment, the medical, ethical, and moral dimensions of liposuction must be integrated into contemporary mission praxis. Consequently, missiological practitioners are tasked with developing nuanced, multidisciplinary responses to these bodily interventions.

Historically, missiological frameworks have focused heavily on geographical or socioeconomic boundaries, often overlooking how the localised human body serves as the primary site of cultural and spiritual contestation. In an era dominated by a commodified cult of the body, elective medical interventions like liposuction are frequently driven by deeper existential anxieties and a fragmented sense of self-identity. This shift demands that the church pivot

from a posture of passive detachment to one of active pastoral and prophetic engagement. If the church fails to deconstruct the societal idolatry of physical perfectionism, it abdicates its role in offering true, holistic redemption to a generation physically and psychologically altered by consumerist beauty standards (Mavropoulos 2024a:6–9).

Furthermore, a missiology that ignores body modification risks rendering its gospel message abstract, detached from the lived reality of individuals navigating severe body image crises. Integrating these concerns into missional theology requires a careful evaluation of the underlying human motives, ensuring that the quest for self-improvement does not entirely eclipse spiritual formation. Pastoral practitioners must explore how the medicalisation of secular beauty standards operates as a competing salvific narrative, promising bodily regeneration through surgical alteration rather than divine grace. St Paul's theology treats the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit; the contemporary church must explicitly confront the psychological and secular narratives that pathologise natural physical features to sell surgical corrections (Karkkainen 2025).

Therefore, missional communities must position themselves as spaces of countercultural sanctuary, reaffirming the inherent dignity of the *imago Dei* over malleable physical appearance. Ultimately, a modern theology of mission must articulate a robust theology of the body that speaks directly to the bioethical dilemmas of cosmetic enhancement, establishing that true human flourishing cannot be engineered by a scalpel.

To effectively reach a contemporary demography, advocacy should leverage digital ecosystems. Strategic social media campaigns, utilising culturally resonant media such as music, performance art, and concise digital content, can provide a platform for disseminating the health, social, and theological implications of these procedures. Such an approach ensures that the missiological response is communicated through the primary linguistic and cultural channels of the current generation.

Conclusion

This paper explored the motivation for liposuction among some African Christians and its implications for theology and missiology. While it did not seek to be judgmental of the decision of people to opt for liposuction, it suggested that beside health reasons, the many other reasons cited for choosing liposuction by research participants may reveal much deeper human challenges such as insecurity, insatiability, identity crisis, and vainness in the individual.

Drawing upon Pauline ethics, specifically the discourse in 1 Corinthians 6:12, a foundational principle for Christian conduct is established: while personal liberty is acknowledged ('all things are lawful'), it remains secondary to the criteria of constructive utility and self-governance. Within this framework, the believer's autonomy is not an end in itself but must be moderated to ensure that liberty does not devolve into habitual subjection or detrimental behaviour.

Consequently, this shifting landscape demands that the church move beyond superficial moralism and instead cultivate a robust discipleship of the body that addresses these underlying psycho-spiritual anxieties. Rather than remaining silent or purely reactive, contemporary pastoral care and missional outreach must actively engage the sociocultural forces driving believers toward surgical re-creation. By reframing the conversation around holistic stewardship and internal transformation, the Christian community could offer a compelling counter-narrative to secularised bodily perfection, guiding the younger generation toward finding their ultimate security in Christ.

In conclusion, the increasing prevalence of elective liposuction among some Africans necessitates a comprehensive theological and missiological critique. This trend directly challenges contemporary mission praxis, requiring a re-evaluation of how the church engages with bodily autonomy and cultural shifts. Specifically, procedures categorised as potential body re-creation, those performed for aesthetic enhancement rather than medical necessity, present a fundamental tension with Christian anthropology. Such practices may be analysed as the adoption of an exteriorised identity, prioritising a departure from the *imago Dei* in favour of transient cultural ideals.

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Contextualising Rites of Passage to Negotiate an African Christian Identity: A Kenyan Community in Liminality

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Abstract

In pre-colonial times, transitional rites of passage anchored individuals to cultural identity and norms in communities such as the Kikuyu of Central Kenya. Missionary and colonial work discouraged many of these rituals, eventually banning practices such as female circumcision. This caused disagreements among native Christian converts, with some opting to start their own churches and schools rather than abandon practices they considered core to cultural wholeness. A recent resurgence of quasi-traditionalist rituals alongside the advent of contemporary church-led adolescent rites of passage has generated hearty debate over how to appropriately contextualise cultural practices. This paper proposes that such disagreements are evidence of the wider Kenyan church in extended cultural liminality transitioning from missionary domination, post-independence optimism, and now wrestling with identity as African Christians. Focusing on the Kikuyu community as a case study, it proposes that healthy debate and critical reflection are crucial elements for ecumenical identity formation in a fast changing, globally connected, multi-ethnic nation.

Introduction

An article in the Kenyan *Daily Nation* newspaper in December 2018 declared,

> Kikuyu elders maintain that the church has no business engaging in the rite of passage [of circumcision] and that it

> has no structures to carry out any advisory role on the initiates. (Gachane 2018)

In pre-colonial Kenya, traditional rites of passage were core to the societal structures of many ethnic communities such as the Kikuyu people (Bunche 1941:49). They helped establish an individual's identity, sense of belonging, and social status as they transitioned from one stage of life to another. Early in the twentieth century, missionaries opposed and eventually forbade the transitional rite of female circumcision and related rituals among their church adherents, leading to divisions among African Christian converts. The cultural discontinuity that followed over the decades is among the factors often blamed for contemporary challenges involving youth in the country.

Over the last three decades, a growing number of Kenyan churches have sought to redesign elements of traditional rites of passage as strategies to minister to a disproportionately large youth demographic in the country (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019). In the same period, a reawakening of ethnic cultural celebration has led to questions over the rightful superintendence of such initiation rites. Self-proclaimed ethnic leaders charge that church-led rites of passage are acts of invasion into cultural spaces that usurp their rightful leadership (Mugambi 2023:53–54). They accuse churches of diluting core cultural practices and capitulating to Western hegemony. Within the churches is a mix of opinions on how Africans should contextualise the gospel. Some propose the bold use of traditional rituals and symbols, especially to celebrate life transitions such as weddings, leadership graduations, and adolescent rites. Others are wary of traditional practices which they deem syncretic, if not altogether antithetical to faith.

This paper explores possible historical sources of these disagreements, which have animated recent debate. It focuses on the Kikuyu, who at seventeen per cent constitute Kenya's largest ethnic community (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019:4.423), as a case study for how the church might engage this quest for sociocultural identity with a doctrinally sound and hospitable posture, safeguarding 'the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). I cautiously propose approaching the conversation through lenses of liminality as Africans contextualise their faith in pursuit of an authentic African, Christian identity.

An African Identity

Diaspora scholar Afeosemime Adogame notes that African identities are as vast as the continent itself and are not static. 'Identities,' he writes,

> are actively constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. […] Every modicum of identity may be understood in terms of whether it is largely a self-ascribed, self-defined representation or a public-ascribed, reified identity representation of the 'Other'. (2014:13)

Historian Ali Mazrui adds that ascribed African identities have always been impositions of foreign invaders. European, Semitic, and Arab neighbours, he writes, identified sub-Saharan Africans as 'Sudan' or black, named the continent and '*continentalised*' it by demarcating territorial colonies (2005:75). Eventually, the quest for self-governance gave birth to African nations that needed to craft common identities and aspirations across diverse ethnicities, beliefs, cultures.

African identity is also self-ascribed and self-defined. Granted, it would be impossible to articulate an 'African identity' that adequately encompasses the continent's almost 1.6 billion people, whose estimated three thousand ethnic groups speak over 2,100 languages and live in fifty-four recognised countries. Nevertheless, Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa identifies spirituality and communal values as two useful overarching commonalities that traverse the diversity of African peoples (2013:4). Regarding the first, Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti famously declared, 'Africans are notoriously religious' (1969:1). African narratives perceive life as transcending the physical realm – preceding birth and continuing beyond death into the spirit world. The second African commonality is captured by the term *ubuntu*, humanness, from whence the expansive Bantu peoples derive their name. Mbiti summarises *ubuntu* relatedness with the dictum, 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' (1969:108). One's identity is thus inseparable from kinship and is mediated by holistic spirituality that binds all things (people, the visible environment, and the invisible cosmos) past, present, and future.

Among traditional Kikuyu of central Kenya (the case-study focus of this paper), the most intimate kinship was the extended family (*mbarī*). It consisted of those related directly by blood and marriage, including cousins, uncles, and aunts broadly defined, and generations of grandparents. Conglomerates of distant *mbarī* relatives constituted clan (*mũhĩrĩga*) units, each of which descended from Gīkūyū and Mūmbi's nine daughters in Kikuyu origin lore. Although Kikuyus would introduce themselves citing their *mbarĩ* and *mũhĩrĩga*, it was the age-set (*riika*) system – established through a lifelong series of rites of passage – that united and solidified the whole community, ascribing social status and functional belongingness (Waweru 2011:36).

Kikuyu Rites of Passage

In his seminal 1908 text on rites of passage, ethnographer Arnold van Gennep reported on patterns of three stages he observed in many cultures during life transitions. Pre-liminal rites separated initiates from their old statuses; liminal or threshold processes instructed them; and post-liminal rites reintegrated them into society in their new statuses (van Gennep 1960:21). As with many Bantu communities, physical circumcision, 'the cut', marked definitive separation from childhood for the Kikuyu. As candidates healed in ritual isolation, threshold guardians facilitated instruction and other liminal processes, preparing graduates for reintegration in their new status. *Riika* age-set cohorts were established when adolescents within defined age brackets went through circumcision together.

There were other childhood rites prior to circumcision, such as rebirth and earlobe piercing to ritually welcome them into their clans. Circumcision was, however, the most important of all rites and the key point of emergence (*kiumĩri*) into being 'whole, complete persons' (Ndereba 2021:46). Over the following decades, men were initiated into tiered levels of elderhood that conferred commensurate leadership and veneration. The rites involved offering designated numbers of goats for ceremonial feasts with councils of elders (*mbũri cia kĩama*) (Waweru 2011:40–47). Senior members of the *mbũri igĩrĩ* (two-goats) council of elders discerned the timing for all transitional rites including adolescent initiation (Kenyatta 1962:105). (This is one cause for the current debate as the church does not call on such councils to determine the

ritual's timing.) Women too had systems of *riika* seniority after adolescent rites, often linked to their children's age-levels and husbands' statuses.

> Thus, in every generation, Gīkūyū tribal organization [was] stabilized by the activities of the various age-grades of old and young people who act[ed] harmoniously in the political, social, religious and economic life of the Gīkūyū. (Kenyatta 1962:3)

Full public status was therefore defined by relationships within the extended family, alongside primal age-set kinship. This was the worldview Western missionaries and colonial partners found as they started work among the Kikuyu at the turn of the twentieth century.

Contextualising the Gospel

Communicating the good news of the redemptive work of God has always required contextualising it for relevance to those receiving it. As Abraham waited for his promised offspring in the Genesis narrative, God descended to confirm the covenant by passing between the halves of animal carcasses he instructed Abraham to prepare (Genesis 15:9–21). This symbolism must have been clearly understood by Abraham in his religio-cultural context (Begg 1988; Hasel 1981; Walton and Keener 2016:42–43). Centuries later, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God on the cultural canvas of Jewish law and traditions (Matthew 5:21–48), clarifying that he did not come to delete the law but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17–20). After Christ's ascension, the apostles wrestled to contextualise the gospel to surrounding cultures without requiring Jewish circumcision (Acts 10, 15).

Darrell Whiteman traces use of the term *contextualisation* to the early 1970s, describing the task of communicating the gospel to make sense for people in their local cultural context

> in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture. (1997:2)

Done well, contextualisation allows transformation by the redemptive work of God while honouring cultural identity. Citing Revelation 7:9–10, missiologist Scott Moreau conceptualises universal and local poles of contextualisation 'in continual dialogue' (2018:2). Worshippers in this text wear white robes representing the universal pole of the gospel that unifies them as those washed by the blood of the lamb (Revelation 7:13–14). The local pole is the local cultural uniqueness of 'every nation, tribe, people and language', which is evidently not obliterated by unity in Christ or by his return (Revelation 7:9).

Stephen Bevans offers a useful model of how Christians have historically contextualised faith across cultures (1985). His model conceptualises a continuum spanning two philosophical poles: the translational and the anthropological. The translational model conceptualises a culturally 'naked' (Bevans 1985: 191), never-changing, inspired word of God transmitted to assumed theologically deficient, *tabula rasa* local contexts. It however (often inadvertently) conflates the missionary's own culture with an idealised '*supra-cultural*' (Bevans 1985: 190) starting point from which the inspired gospel is masticated and communicated. The synthetic model is closer to the centre of the continuum, and begins to acknowledge distinct sending and receiving cultures, placing them in conversation or synthesis over a neutral gospel. It is however inevitably captive to power imbalances between any two cultures engaging the synthesis. Praxis and transcendental models favour recipient cultures. The praxis model assesses and responds to contextual and social realities, illuminated by scripture. It then reflects on the outcome of its action and responds to it back and forth in adaptive cycles. The transcendental model is often considered subjective as it focuses on an individual's culturally-translated experiences as transcendent encounters with the Holy Spirit. Finally, the anthropological model sees culture as the theatre of God's revelation. Moreau explains, 'The initiation point for contextualisation is not an unchanging message but ever-changing [cultural] settings' (2012:39).

Missionary Non-Contextualisation

Western missionary activity in the in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries communicated a gospel that was captive to their own cultures. Their *modus operandi* fits Bevans' translation model where the 'supra-cultural' gospel was

a *theologia perennis* conceived in the West. Paul Hiebert attributes these hegemonic tendencies to an exceptionalist historical zeitgeist. By the end of the nineteenth century, Western science and technology 'had conquered the world' and was making 'giant strides in conquering nature' (Hiebert 1987:105). Colonialism was in full stride, demonstrating

> the superiority of Western civilization, evolutionism legitimized this in terms of history, and science and Christianity provided the intellectual foundations on which the whole was built. (Hiebert 1987:105)

Local cultures that missionaries encountered were dismissed as pagan and primitive, in need of conversion and assimilation. To many missionaries of the time, evangelism was equivalent to saving natives from their 'demonic cultures' of origin.

By 1910, as many as five missionary societies worked among the Kikuyu people in central Kenya (Githieya 1997:27). Kenyatta writes, 'As far as religion was concerned the African was regarded as a clean slate on which anything could be written' (1962:259). New Christians were taught to follow Christ as a personal choice, contrary to traditional collective decision- and identity-making. Nevertheless, missionaries drew a healthy following, often attracting the downtrodden who came to seek shelter from poverty, incidental misfortunes, and ancestral land displacement, and to seek treatment for ailments and infirmities. They often prospered due to the trappings of missionary patronage, upending the social order which now privileged them over their kin.

Many converts however still wrestled with having to discard deeply ingrained worldviews that seamlessly integrated *ubuntu* spirituality into all aspects of daily life. Conflicts were inevitable, and they soon arose on several fronts. Missionaries were irked by many Kikuyu rituals, but none as much as female circumcision. Africans protested subjugation and the often-involuntary loss of traditional land to missionaries and colonial authorities whom they perceived as one and the same (Galgalo 2012:13). Political organisations soon sprouted, led by an emerging class of educated locals who gave voice to grievances over land and taxation. Among them was the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA),

which by 1924 had broadened its agenda to include missionary opposition to female circumcision (Murray 1973:202). KCA leaders formally accused missionaries of waging war on Kikuyu identity and cultural practices, aligning the interests of traditionalists and large portions of Kikuyu Christian converts alike (wa Kangethe 1981:265).

In response, three missionary societies called a crisis meeting and, in late 1924, crafted 'The Thogoto Declaration' (wa Kangethe 1981:270). It required African church members to sign a resolution dissociating themselves from female circumcision or risk excommunication. Acquiescing Kikuyus who could not write used thumbprints to affirm the declaration, earning the moniker *kĩroore* Christians. A significant number of converts however refused to sign it and called themselves *karĩng'a* (steadfast) for their attachment to cultural traditions and practices. A critical turning point of resistance came with the '*Mũthĩrĩgũ*' crisis of 1929 (wa Kangethe 1981:271). *Mũthĩrĩgũ* was a call-and-response protest song that gleefully mocked uncircumcised women, their *kĩroore* families, anti-clitoridectomy missionaries, and colonial authorities alike. Energised by agile youth, the song gained wide notoriety and was eventually banned by the colonial governor in 1930, who blamed it for violent incidents (Githieya 1997:88).

Indigenous Church Movements

Swathes of *karĩng'a* converts responded by leaving protestant missionary churches. A rising number of their leaders could now read the recently translated Kikuyu Bible for themselves and joined a growing agitation for self-determination. They formed African independent schools and churches where they could express their faith in culture more freely (Githieya 1997:93–94). Their efforts were catalysed by South African Orthodox Church archbishop William D. Alexander, who helped them establish their own seminary in 1935, and the Kenya African Teachers College (KATC) in 1939 (wa Kangethe 1988:38–40). *Karĩng'a* adopted missionary hymns and prayer books, while contextualising traditional practices of praying with hands raised and eyes open facing Mount Kenya (wa Kangethe 1988:38–39). Colonial and missionary authorities eventually banned the movement using emergency laws, alarmed by its rapid growth to over two hundred *Karĩng'a* schools all over Kenya and

Tanzania by 1952. Though African independent churches have since then experienced chequered fortunes, 'they were an early example of Africans' appropriation of the Christian faith as their own' (Mugambi 2020:53). As such, they were the genesis of current conversations on traditionalism and Christian faith.

Meanwhile, *kĩroore* adherents remained in mainline churches, with many benefitting from missionary patronage. Some rose to positions of authority as colonial chiefs and councilmen, pastors and church leaders, with others even collaborating in colonial suppression of the nationalist struggle (wa Kangethe 1988:41). The majority were however swept up by the East African Revival movement which from the 1930s revolutionised African Christianity beyond sects and ethnic identities.

East African Revival

The origins of the East African Revival (EAR) are associated with Anglican doctor Joe Church who in the 1920s was sent by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) base in Uganda to launch a station in Gahini, Rwanda. He invited his Ugandan friend Simeoni Nsibambi to recruit young, zealous hospital workers and educators he had mentored in Kampala (Ward 2012:3). Revival broke out when these indigenous Christians went out to surrounding villages preaching brokenness, confession of sin, forgiveness, and thanksgiving. Their message soon attracted thousands of Africans and quickly spread. Dr Church, who never claimed to be the EAR leader, scaffolded the movement with his organisational skills and extensive social capital in the East African colonial milieu, enabling these youthful African evangelists to travel and preach (Ward 2012:3–4). The movement soon breached territorial boundaries as Revivalists emerged as an ecumenical subculture with a strongly pietistic identity among mainline denominations. In March 1937, Dr Church helped organise the first Revival convention in Kabete on the outskirts of a fast-growing Nairobi City. The movement soon expanded all over Kenya including among Kikuyu Christians (Hoehler-Fatton 2012:73).

Revivalist contextualisation of the gospel would roughly fit Bevans' synthetic model. Its

> genius lay in its ability to create a synthesis of biblical teachings and indigenous cultural and religious practices that was uniquely its own. (Karanja 2012:143)

They sought a counter-cultural biblical identity that held in tension Western values such as 'the nuclear family, […] clean and tidy houses, [and] schooling for their children' and 'a purified form of traditional community' (Ward 2012:5). At the same time, they were ambivalent to elements of both cultures, resisting the compromises of mainline protestant churches with their hierarchies and colonial overtones, as well as 'traditional spirituality and idolatrous practices of the old religion' (Ward 2012:5). The result was a new clan that recreated old communitarian values in a new form of piety, one that demanded decisive transformation. As the decades ushered political and social change, Revivalists resisted nationalist and tribal politics, often at great personal risk. Kikuyu brethren distanced themselves from blood oathing during Kenya's *Mau Mau* independence struggle, and later during the post-colonial ethnic allegiance demanded by the young nation's president Kenyatta in 1969 (Gatu 2012:39).

Some missionary-educated Revivalists eventually pioneered African leadership in mainline denominational churches. Rev. John Gatũ became the first African general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa (PCEA). Gatũ became internationally renowned when in 1971, speaking at an evangelical conference in Wisconsin, USA, he issued the clarion call for a five-year moratorium from Western missionary activity and funding in developing countries, to create space for autonomy in the indigenous leadership (Wagner 1975:166). Gatũ's call was widely misconstrued as isolationism and anti-evangelism (Larsen 2022:231; Wagner 1975:168). This reflected the very mindset he was confronting: that Western funding and supervision of local leaders were indispensable for legitimate 'Third World' ministry. By resisting hierarchies separating Western and indigenous leadership authority in the denominations, Gatũ championed a global, ecumenical, post-colonial activism.

Gatũ's contextualisation straddled Bevans' synthetic and praxis models as he wrestled with the questions, 'What does it mean to inhabit a truly African Christianity? What form should Christianity take in a particular African culture?' (Larsen 2022:240). Acting on his call to pause Western funding, he

demonstrated success within his denomination by initiating 'Jitegemee' (self-sufficiency) projects which became a model for churches in the developing world. He led his church towards adopting African forms of worship and, as a prolific Kikuyu poet, wrote hymns that were incorporated into the hymnal. Gatũ was one of the first mainline denominational leaders to propose contemporary church-led adolescent rites of passage (Larsen 2022:243).

Kenyan Churches in Liminality

Gatũ was among a generation of parents and leaders who, in a newly independent Kenya, embraced its stated priorities to combat poverty, illiteracy, and disease, and sought the best lives and education they could afford for their children (Oranga, Obuba, and Nyakundi 2020:411). While many adopted Western lifestyles in the heady post-colonial optimism, Revivalists generally retained the movement's strict legalism and resisted the trappings of Western fashion and excess consumerism in their homes. Their *uhuru* (post-independence) children, however, found this strictness alienating from the emerging youth culture they encountered at their schools. This led to a generational waning – but not death – of the Revival movement into the 1980s. Some adolescents completely rebelled against their families' faith, especially while in high school.[1] Others, however, found spiritual belonging in student movements such as the Kenya Students Christian Fellowship (KSCF) at their schools (Mugambi 2020:75).

A renewed task for post-independence Kenyans was to navigate the tension between their communal ethnic cultural heritage and assumptions that Western education, white collar jobs, and nuclear family structures would lead to prosperity. The school curriculum was becoming Africanised, and students now read Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Okot p'Bitek, alongside Shakespeare and Dickens. Young people danced to Congolese Lingala and adopted African American soul and hip hop. They were shaped by an increasingly global youth culture and drawn to the rising Afrocentricity of the 1970s and 1980s (Asante 2021). Many were not shackled by direct experiences

[1] This was my personal experience. My parents became Revivalists in the 1950s. I unfortunately rebelled against their strict faith and lifestyle requirements while in a boarding high school.

with the darker elements of traditional ethnic practices as they explored their African identities. The country was in liminal post-independence reimagination, and its youth vacillated between Western and African identities, proud to be African but strongly embracing Westernised lifestyles. By the 1990s this *uhuru* generation, many of them now old enough to start their own families, were domiciled in three broad categories of reformed Kenyan churches: mainline denominations, newer Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, and progressive Pentecostal churches (Gitau 2018; Mugambi 2020).

Mainline denominational churches retained echoes of missionary ecclesiology and enjoyed Western financial patronage. They were initially dominated by older generations of conservative Revivalists. Affiliations with traditional denominational networks such as the Anglican Lambeth Conference continued until controversies over sexual identity forced a fork in the road at the turn of the twenty-first century. African churches aligned with a conservative biblical interpretation of sexuality and joined movements such as the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON Global Anglicans 2024). They rejected what they perceived as capitulation to liberal cultural thought by their Western brethren.

They however went beyond earlier EAR non-political involvement when their leaders began to confront the rampant corruption and political excesses of government, especially during Daniel Arap Moi's presidency. Activist clergymen emerged, fighting sociopolitical ills with prophetic voices from their pulpits, grounding their praxis in an evangelical understanding of biblical justice. They included Presbyterians John Gatũ and Timothy Njoya, and Anglican bishops Alexander Muge, David Gitari, and Peter Njenga, all self-proclaimed Revivalists. Some youth remained in these denominations, drawn by the charisma of these leaders and by emerging youth programming within their churches. Influenced by student movements at their schools, they brought a Pentecostal fervour that might have irked earlier Revivalists.

A second stripe of churches are categorised by Mugambi (2020:90) as 'Newer Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (NPCCs)'. These emerged from movements such as the Kenya Student Christian Fellowship (KSCF) and youth-focused church leaders seeking to address the gap created by Revivalists' radical conservatism. Denominations such as Deliverance Church (Wasamu 2024) and Nairobi Pentecostal Church (now Christ Is The Answer Ministries) attracted

droves of young people from the early 1970s. They eventually spread into lower income neighbourhoods in cities, peri-urban and rural areas, spawning a plethora of independent churches often planted by a 'big man or woman of the big God' persona (Gitau 2018:36). Heavily influenced by Western television evangelists, they drew large crowds of mostly younger, energetic congregants to open-air 'miracle crusades'. They contextualised the gospel somewhere between Bevans' praxis and transcendental models, audaciously proclaiming God's abundant blessings upon their audiences' current circumstances, while rather subjectively declaring the Holy Spirit's actions. Like their denominational parents, they retained Revivalists' focus on personal salvation and repeated testimonies of transformation. Older denominational adherents tended to consider these churches as rootless and opportunistic, and their glossolalia as raucous and chaotic (Mugambi 2020:79–80).

A third stripe of churches has been named Progressive Pentecostal Churches (PPC) (Mugambi 2020:131–160). These appeal to highly educated urbanites who were also influenced by charismatic student organisations and now form the middle to upper socioeconomic strata of society. Many of them grew up connected to the denominational traditions of their parents and maintain strong, nostalgic links. Mugambi posits that a distinction of PPCs is that they went beyond the personal transformation rooted in Revivalists and NPCCs, and the political activism of mainline denominational clergy, to embrace a more comprehensive, holistic societal transformation. Progressive Pentecostal Churches' contextualisation praxis engages their generally younger, more globally exposed congregants in matters of economic, political, family, local, and international missions, leadership development, and church planting. They apply market research and state of the art technology to understand emerging contemporary culture. Their denominations include the Nairobi Baptist Church, Parklands Baptist Church, Nairobi Pentecostal Church, Nairobi Chapel, and International Christian Centre (ICC).

These three stripes of church would be considered evangelical in Western ecclesiology as they bear Bebbington's (1989) quadrilateral characteristics: centrality of the Bible, the cross, conversion, and activism. Their Pentecostal bent expresses a holistic African spirituality with strong relationality and orality. The Holy Spirit permeates all aspects of life, including socio-political concerns. Their diverse contextualisation blend is a quest for self-ascribed

identity as African Christians living in a postcolonial, multiethnic, globally connected milieu. In this liminal state, they are willing to experiment with elements of traditional cultures of origin. They explore authenticity in worship, music, and dance rhythms and wear colourful contemporised African outfits to church.

Contextualising Rites of Passage

It was into this diverse ecclesial context that institutionalised expressions of church-based rites of passage emerged in the last three decades (Karianjahi 2024:107–108). Parents were alarmed by the evident discontinuity of kinship values and the risky, pseudo-adulthood rituals they saw emerging among their young in the absence of traditional rites (Githiga 2009; Meade 1996). Families responded to this loss of community guidance in different ways. Some chose to circumcise their sons postnatally at hospitals, altogether decoupling it from adolescent transitions. Others gathered extended kin and likeminded friends to facilitate 'the cut' when their boys came of age. Transitions for girls remained vague because clitoridectomy was definitively illegal (National Council for Law Reporting 2012) and widely considered part of a dark past. Churches rising to address this lacuna with programming for both boys and girls found eager congregants and even drew unchurched families.[2]

Gatũ was an early proponent of such church-led adolescent programmes. Later, Rev. Wilfred Kogo created a Presbyterian adolescent rites programme 'as an avenue to fight alcohol and drug abuse, and other forms of indiscipline through mentorship' (Njoraa 2022:4). Anglican bishop Timothy Ranji personally led large adolescent rites camps in his Mount Kenya South diocese in the early 2000s (Karianjahi 2024:104–105). Heavily influenced by their Revivalist roots, these Kikuyu men of the cloth attributed youthful moral decline to Western influence and were confident of the efficacy of intergenerational connectedness inherent in communal rites of passage. They were however resistant to the spiritual and sexual tenor of traditional *mambura* rituals, which Kenyatta described as 'divine services' (1962:129; see also Bernardi 1993).

[2] My parents organised such an event for me alongside five other boys from neighbourhood Revivalist families as we transitioned from primary school to high school in the late 1970s.

Their resultant synthesis was the redemptive dialogue between African culture and Christian faith championed by Gatũ.

In November 1997, I led six boys from my youth group at the Nairobi Chapel, a Progressive Pentecostal Church (Mugambi 2020:255), on a weeklong transitional camp to explore how they might successfully transition into high school. This initiative eventually led to the 2002 formation of Tanari Trust, a non-profit organisation overseen by five non-denominational PPC churches. Tanari Trust has since made its flagship Rites of Passage Experiences (ROPES) (Tanari Trust 2026) programmes available to over one hundred churches and youth-focused institutions by training facilitators and offering follow-up support. The ROPES programme has been the subject of some academic interest (Moreau 2018:170; Ndereba 2021:51). In addition to these church-led initiatives, Christian faculty from public universities in Nairobi and Uasin Gishu counties independently started transitional programmes for their local communities, compelled by their research endeavours (Karianjahi 2024). These efforts by PPCs and scholars reflects a spontaneous contextualisation praxis that exemplifies

> discerning, through analysis, where God is acting, and then attempting through reflective action, to act in that same situation as God's partner. (Bevans 1985:192)

To foster purposeful reflection and dialogue, scholars from Moi University in Uasin Gichu County organised a 'National Initiation Rites Conference' in 2017 through their African Christian Initiation Programme (ACIP), gathering an eclectic group of Christian adolescent rites practitioners.

Renaissance Traditionalist Efforts

Meanwhile, a resurgence of traditionalist rites occurred among sections of Kikuyu men in the early 2000s. It was a gilded renaissance of traditional kinship identity replete with age-grade graduation mediated by self-ascribed *mbũri*

(age graduation goats) offered to elders.[3] Some renaissance champions chafed at church-based rites of passage which they considered capitulation to Western cultural hegemony and a usurping of the prerogative of Kikuyu elders to impute societal wisdom (Mũkũyũ 2018). Anglican bishop Francis Omondi attributes the new wave of ethnic reawakening across the country to political expediency. In the 1980s, he recalls, President Moi banned ethnic organisations which he considered a threat to his leadership, especially among the numerically dominant Kikuyu (Omondi 2023). After Moi left office in 2002, Omondi continues, newfound freedom germinated vernacular media whose wide reach fuelled ethnic awareness and political alignments. When widespread inter-ethnic, post-election violence erupted in January 2008, Kikuyus felt vulnerable after violent land evictions, especially in the Rift Valley. An emergent *Kĩama kĩa Athuri a Ma* (*Kĩama*) Kikuyu council gained recognition for brokering peace by successfully engaging elders from other ethnic groups. The promulgation of a new 2010 Kenyan constitution cemented the rights of ethnic organisations (National Council for Law Reporting 2010).

A new generation of Kikuyu men embraced this cultural renaissance and refreshed the traditional ritual of offering requisite *mbũri cia kĩama* (initiation goats) to attain elderhood. A study by Anglican Diocese of Mount Kenya South (DMKS) scholars describes how adherents include some Christian leaders and professionals – doctors, lawyers, politicians, businessmen, pastors, and priests (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021). They

> attend Church service in the morning, partake [of] the Holy Communion and in the afternoon attend *Kiama kia Athuri kia ma* and equally participate in its rituals and ceremonies

they wrote (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:655). It is this anthropological contextualisation of faith, vaguely reminiscent of the days of Arathi and Karĩng'a, that has stirred vigorous discourse within the church. A

[3] I use the terms 'renaissance' and 'renaissance traditionalists' as metaphors for those who repudiate an immediate past during which 'pure' African or Kikuyu culture was corrupted by Western hegemony. My use of the metaphor fails to account for the complexities of cultural continuity, just as the term is inadequate in its classical conception of three 'gilded' European historical periods.

majority of the DMKS study respondents, for instance, indicated that *kĩama* promotes much needed societal values 'such as respect, morality, men responsibilities [*sic*] and integrity [that] are genuine concerns in the society, [and] are lacking today' (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:670). Apropos, retired DMKS bishop Peter Njenga narrates how he introduced a rule for his synod after gross lack of confidentiality within diocesan leadership. 'I directed that nobody would be elected unless they produced a mbuzi (goat) to the Kĩama' (Njenga 2023:321). He argues that the gravitas of traditional *kĩama* elderhood would instil 'that deeply engrained understanding of […] commitments' implanted by culture.

Other Christians object to this *kĩama* renaissance, arguing that such ethnic movements propagate exclusion and political divisions in the church.

> The church stands to be destroyed not with the blood of the slaughtered goats of *Kĩama* ceremonies, but with the logic of tribal politics that conditions us to act […] without a commitment to the nation's common good

writes Omondi (2023). Theologically, some see the mixing of faith with *kĩama* as syncretic. This was exemplified by the immediate discontinuation of Njenga's *kĩama* requirement by his DMKS prelate successor, Timothy Ranji (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:661; Njenga 2023:322). Butchering goats to initiate *athuri* elders is seen as the veneration of ancestors 'who will guide the initiate into the future as a leader' (Kamau, Katola, and Waweru 2024:55). Praying with eyes open and arms raised towards *Kĩrĩnyaga* (Mount Kenya) and dripping the blood of *kĩama* goats into the soil alongside splashes of traditional, cow-horn-served *mũratina* brew is considered offering libations 'to call upon the participation of the departed as witnesses' (Kamau, Katola, and Waweru 2024:55). St. Paul's University faculty member Kevin Ndereba (2021:48) writes,

> Since in *Gĩkũyũ* traditional religion, priests, kings, the living dead and ritual elders are seen as mediators between man and God, then it would be fair to conclude that the eldership system in *Gĩkũyũ* traditional religion is also seen as a mediatorial office.

Clearly, the argument continues, this is contrary to faith in the adequacy of the blood of Christ for all spiritual and physical needs.

> Kikuyu Christians are sacrificing goats when they feel the challenge they are facing cannot be overcome through prayers and the blood of Christ

write Kenyatta University scholars (Kamau, Katola, and Waweru 2024:55). Revivalist John Ng'ang'a concludes,

> The consequences of mixing traditions in Christianity are tragic. If you blend your faith with cultural practices, you will never truly experience the freedom that comes from being in Christ. (2023:184)

This tension is explained by the St. Paul's University scholars:

> it clearly came up that *kiama* are using cultural hermeneutics while Christians [uncomfortable with the practices] are using biblical hermeneutics. Cultural hermeneutics means that one understands and uses the culture to interpret the scripture. Biblical hermeneutics […] uses the scriptures to interpret the culture, [and] scripture takes the imminence [*sic*]. These are two parallels with no point of convergent [*sic*]. (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:668)

A cultural hermeneutic (closest to Bevans' anthropological contextualisation) is considered syncretistic while a biblical hermeneutic (closest to translational contextualisation) is seen as supra-cultural, with the two seen as antithetical binaries.

Liminal Antistructure as Syncretism

Syncretism is often defined as the mixing of Christian and traditional beliefs and practices in ways that undermine the gospel (Ndereba 2021; Ng'ang'a 2023). Recent scholarship, however, challenges this narrow definition. Michael Green tracks the term to its first-century Plutarchan Greek usage, where it

meant the unifying of feuding parties to meet a particular common good (2024:208). Over time, the term lost favour, leading to its nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary appropriation to condemn cultural expressions of worship emerging from non-Western contexts (Green 2024:202). Green argues that the term can and should carry both positive and negative meanings. Whereas there are indeed syncretic practices that water down the gospel, the dominant use of the term often ignores transitional journeys of whole persons and cultures towards following Christ. Green opposes assumptions that only certain cultures can reflect the transcendent, omnipresent, trinitarian *imago Dei*. 'Instead,' he writes,

> we come to a liminal space in which […] we see God revealing himself and Christ's image through a kaleidoscope not only of different ethnic groups but also of their epistemologies, cosmologies, and ontologies. (2024:221)

Half a century after Arnold van Gennep's aforementioned seminal text describing the threefold stages of rites of passage (1960), anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) focused on the liminal, in-between stage of transitions. Turner described the three stages as 'dialectical processes' of structure, antistructure, and restructuring that are the very fabric of individual and cohort rites (1969:97). Transitional antistructure is that liminal in-between stage during which old norms are shed as new ones are explored and considered (Turner 1979:234). Liminality is characterised by ambiguity, exploration, and renegotiation with elements of both the old and the new interacting in dynamic tension. 'Liminal entities,' Turner writes,

> are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (1969:95)

A society in transition similarly goes through inter-structural states, sometimes testing the new with the familiar old as it communally explores and considers what it should become. The Israelites were in such antistructure as they journeyed forty years from structural slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12–13) and arrived as not-yet-fully-formed God's people into the promised land (Joshua 3). The adventures of those liminal years involved sometimes defaulting to what

they were familiar with and testing it against what they were learning through laws, rituals, and ceremonies. They sometimes experienced God's displeasure in their exploits (Exodus 32) but it was always accompanied by his mercy that endures forever (Exodus 33).

Transitioning from traditional African worldviews into an authentic African Christian identity similarly includes an exploration of the good news in ways that sometimes present as liminal syncretism. I propose that some transitional Old Testament examples, of the patriarchs (see Genesis 31:10–20), of Israelites in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4–9), and of gentiles joining the New Testament church (Acts 10, 15), were similar forms of liminal syncretism. These were pilgrims in formational antistructure contextualising the incarnational gospel of Jesus Christ as whole, cultural, and material persons. Defending his people's gospel contextualisation practices, Native American theologian Richard Twiss writes,

> a transitional process of syncretism is a normal part of our spiritual growth – yes, normal! It might even be thought of as 'transitional' syncretism or a syncretistic process of transformation. (2015:31)

He proposes that, as people are transformed by the gospel, they might

> move in and out of syncretism as they embrace, reject, modify, learn and grow toward spiritual maturity as sociocultural persons following Jesus. (Twiss 2015:31)

Might the conversation on contemporary rites of passage be evidence of a people in religio-cultural liminal antistructure negotiating how to be authentic African disciples of Jesus Christ in a rapidly changing world? Anglican bishop Joseph Galgalo encourages such discourse, and calls it a conversational model. 'Christianity,' he writes, 'is necessarily dynamic in that the Gospel usually finds a cultural re-expression in every new context and historical setting' (2012:99). When viewed through the dynamic lens of liminal antistructure, a conversational approach offers a hospitable posture for

> interpreting scriptures with (not for) the Christians who read and understand scriptures in their own ways as informed by their particular cultural setting and situations in life. (Galgalo 2012:101)

It becomes less about accusations of syncretism by one side and of capitulation to the West by another. Rather, a conversation sets guardrails against excesses, enhancing healthy unity in diversity (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Contemporary designers of adolescent rites of passage from different convictions in Kenya have this in common: a desire to influence the holistic formation of an outsized demographic of restless and globally connected youth in rapidly changing times. Christian practitioners yearn for an authentic African faith, unshackled from outdated Western ontological assumptions. How they contextualise that faith is key to this quest.

Conclusion

Earnestly pursuing an authentic African faith is akin to navigating a metaphorical cultural-identity moratorium (Marcia 1966) due to the uncertainties of liminal antistructure. The starting point for such a moratorium is complex for most Kenyans, who were born into a context that was already in identity flux. The erosion of their ancestral spirituality was triggered by a missionary-colonial architecture a century ago and subsequently corroded by the transitional currents of an emerging, multiethnic, globally connected nation. Rising Afrocentricity (Asante 2014) since independence led Kenyans to question Western cultural norms previously assumed to be supra-cultural, and to desire authenticity as African Christians. The liminal task of contextualising this faith includes exploring and incorporating elements from their cultural traditions that reflect the *imago Dei*. Moreover, they want to discern the universal or normative elements (Moreau 2018:3) of faith through theological lenses that account for contextual realities (Orobator 2015:6). Emmanuel Katongole writes,

> Christian identity is not a ‘static’ essence, spiritual or otherwise, but an invitation to a journey, with a definite direction and telos. (2023:63)

That *telos* is an eschatological aspiration to be achieved when all cultures, alongside heavenly hosts, worship the Lord in perfect harmony when he returns (Revelation 7:9–12). Meanwhile, we remain a pilgrim people 'looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Hebrews 11:10).

The extended liminal state of the Kenyan ecumenical landscape comes with the untidy uncertainty of liminal antistructure. I have proposed that the debate over contemporary rites of passage exemplified by the Kikuyu of central Kenya is symptomatic of this uncertainty. Honouring God as a pilgrim people calls for leveraging commonalities that strengthen unity (Ephesians 4:2–6), in humble tension with inevitable differences on how to recover this cultural gem. The felt need to creatively minister to a youth-heavy population is one such commonality. Another is the desire for a decolonial African faith (Green 2024:203) that meets Kenyans where they are as twenty-first-century contemporary cultural beings. Above all, the foundational cement of love (Galatians 5:14) must superintend the enterprise of humbly listening to and caring for one another with the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:3–5).

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Reimagining Salvation and Sin through the Lens of Power and Weakness for the African Context: a Theological and Contextual Analysis

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa presents a theological paradox: a continent characterised by vibrant faith while simultaneously plagued by systemic violence, corruption, and poverty. To address this dichotomy, this paper argues for a reimagining of the Christian doctrines of salvation (soteriology) and sin (hamartiology) through the lens of power and weakness within the African context. Drawing upon the African cosmological worldview, the philosophy of Ubuntu, and the Christus Victor motif, this article examines how traditional African pursuits of spiritual and physical power intersect with the biblical theology of the cross. By redefining sin as a communal fracture and the abuse of power, and salvation as holistic deliverance, the paper proposes that the gospel subverts conventional notions of dominance. Ultimately, it asserts that God's power, made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), offers a prophetic witness that challenges both Neo-Pentecostal triumphalism and socio-political oppression, fostering a transformative political theology for Africa.

Introduction

Christian social reflection in Africa must begin with what theologian Katongole (2011) describes as a 'disturbing observation': the continent is defined by the competing images of churches and coffins. This stark reality captures the central paradox of contemporary African reality. On one hand, the

demographic centre of global Christianity has decisively shifted to sub-Saharan Africa, a region experiencing astonishing church growth, vibrant worship, and a pervasive public display of faith. On the other hand, this same region is beset by the persistent 'coffins' of civil war, political corruption, systemic poverty, and social unrest. Katongole (2011) notes that between 1994 and 2003, over nine million of the world's thirteen million conflict-related deaths occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. This grim reality compels a critical theological inquiry: What difference does Christianity make in the face of such profound distress?

In this article I argue that the dissonance between Africa's growing faith and its lived socio-political turmoil stems, in part, from a theological disconnect. Foundational Christian doctrines, specifically salvation (soteriology) and sin (hamartiology), have often been imported through Western missionary paradigms that individualise sin and spiritualise salvation (Harold 2019:3–7; 2024:119-130). Such frameworks fail to adequately address the communal, structural, and cosmic dimensions of African life and its inherent anxieties. The result is a faith that may offer personal solace but often lacks the theological resources to confront the systemic forces that produce the "coffins." As Katongole (2011) poignantly asks, if the church represents hope and the socio-political systems represent tragedy, how do we probe the complex relationship between the world of churches and the world of coffins?

To bridge this gap, this paper proposes a reimagining of salvation and sin through a lens uniquely suited to the African context: the dialectic of power and weakness. In Africa, these are not merely abstract theological categories; they are existential realities that dictate survival, social harmony, and spiritual security, as traditional African cosmologies envision a universe animated by spiritual forces, where power is actively sought for protection and flourishing. Weakness is feared as a state of vulnerability to malevolent entities and misfortune (Boaheng 2023:12–18). This worldview shapes how African Christians interpret the gospel, often seeking a 'power encounter' that promises victory over the forces of darkness.

In this article, I further argue that a robust evangelical African theology must engage this indigenous understanding of power and weakness, not simply to baptise it, but to show how the gospel both fulfils and subverts it. By integrating the communal ethic of Ubuntu, the holistic nature of African

soteriology, and a nuanced reading of the Pauline theology of the cross, I will demonstrate how the gospel relates to and transforms the African understanding of power. Sin will be reframed as a relational fracture and the abuse of power, while salvation will be presented as a holistic deliverance that culminates in the *Christus Victor* motif. However, this victory is not one of triumphalist dominance but, paradoxically, is achieved through the 'weakness' of the cross. Ultimately, this theological reframing offers a prophetic witness that embraces vulnerability as a conduit for divine grace, challenging both the excesses of Neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospels and the oppressive political structures that plague the continent.

The original contribution of this article lies in bringing four theological perspectives, namely African cosmological accounts of power, Ubuntu's relational anthropology, the *Christus Victor* motif, and Paul's theology of power perfected in weakness, into a single constructive framework for African hamartiology, soteriology, and public theology. Although these ideas have been discussed separately, insufficient attention has been given to how their integration can simultaneously affirm African concerns about spiritual power and protection while challenging triumphalism, authoritarian leadership, and socio-political domination. The article therefore argues that sin should be understood as the personal, ecclesial, and structural abuse of power that fractures communal personhood. In contrast, salvation is God's holistic restoration of persons, relationships, communities, and creation. Crucially, Christ's victory is interpreted through the weakness of the cross, thereby presenting divine power not as coercive dominance but as sacrificial, restorative, and life-giving power. This synthesis provides a contextual evangelical foundation for the African church's prophetic witness against corruption, poverty, violence, spiritual abuse, and other practices that efface human dignity.

The African Worldview of Power and Weakness: A Foundational Matrix

Any attempt to construct a contextual theology for Africa must begin with a deep appreciation of the continent's indigenous intellectual and spiritual heritage. The concepts of power and weakness are central to this heritage, forming a foundational matrix through which reality is interpreted. This matrix

comprises at least two major, interconnected strands: the cosmological pursuit of spiritual power and the philosophical-ethical understanding of communal power embodied in Ubuntu.

Cosmology and the Pursuit of Spiritual Power

To understand how salvation and sin are perceived in many parts of Africa, one must first understand the traditional African worldview, which posits a dynamic and interconnected cosmos. African cosmologies, while diverse, generally recognise two intertwined spheres of existence: the visible, physical world and the invisible, spiritual realm that is not a distant, abstract heaven but a vibrant, ever-present reality populated by a hierarchy of beings: the Supreme Being (God), ancestors, divinities, and a multitude of other spirit powers, both benevolent and malevolent (Boaheng 2023; Mbiti 1980). Human existence is therefore understood as a continuous navigation of these forces, a delicate balancing act to maintain harmony and secure the well-being of all living beings.

Within this framework, power is understood as a vital force, a life-energy necessary to secure health, wealth, fertility, and, crucially, protection against evil, as observed by Boaheng (2023) in his study of the Akan people of Ghana. This entrenched worldview causes many to live in perpetual fear of evil spirits, witchcraft, and curses that can negatively affect their lives; consequently, power is not an abstract good but a pragmatic necessity for survival. It is how one overcomes the inherent weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the human condition in what is often perceived as a hostile spiritual environment. Weakness, conversely, is therefore not merely a physical or moral failing but a dangerous depletion of this vital force, rendering an individual or community susceptible to misfortune, disease, death, and spiritual attack.

The transition from African Traditional Religion (ATR) to Christianity has not eradicated this deep-seated cosmological anxiety. In fact, for many African Christians, the gospel is appealing precisely because it is seen as a more potent source of spiritual power. This has fuelled the explosive growth of neo-Pentecostal and charismatic movements across the continent, which emphasise ‘power encounters’, spiritual warfare, and deliverance from demonic oppression (Kgatle & Frahm-Arp 2022). Prophets and pastors are often revered as mediators of this divine power, capable of breaking

generational curses and securing supernatural breakthroughs. While this focus on power resonates deeply with the traditional worldview, it also carries the risk of distortion, leading to a 'theology of glory' that prioritises triumphalism and overlooks the biblical emphasis on suffering and weakness.

Ubuntu: Communal Power and Human Fragility

While Western cosmology emphasises a spiritual and often individualistic pursuit of power, African philosophy offers a profound social and ethical corrective through the concept of Ubuntu. Rooted in the Bantu languages of southern Africa, Ubuntu is a complex and rich philosophy of personhood encapsulated in the maxim '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' ('a person is a person through other persons') (Mpetsheni 2019; Tutu 2000). It posits a relational form of personhood where individual identity and well-being are inextricably linked to the community.

From the perspective of Ubuntu, true human power and excellence (humaneness) are not found in individual dominance, autonomy, or material accumulation but in interconnectedness, compassion, hospitality, and the promotion of communal harmony. Ogude (2019) explains that Ubuntu imposes a moral obligation to prioritise the well-being of others, recognising that one's own humanity is fostered and affirmed in relation to other people. This stands in stark contrast to the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am', which grounds identity in individual consciousness. Ubuntu proposes, 'I am because we are'.

This philosophy radically redefines weakness. Within an Ubuntu framework, human fragility is not a defect to be despised or overcome, but an intrinsic and essential part of the human condition that necessitates mutual dependence and care. Mokoena (2025) observes that African culture embraces our humanness. Our fragility is not a weakness but part of us. It is this shared vulnerability that binds the community together in a web of mutual responsibility. Therefore, power in the African social ethic is inherently communal; it is the collective strength derived from solidarity, consensus-building, and restorative justice. Weakness, in this sense, is isolation, individualism, selfishness, and the severing of the communal bonds that sustain life. To lack Ubuntu is to lack human excellence, to be less than fully human.

The dual lenses of cosmology and Ubuntu create a productive tension. The former highlights a pragmatic desire for power to overcome existential threats, while the latter grounds power in communal well-being and ethical responsibility. A credible African Christian theology must hold these two in creative dialogue, showing how the gospel addresses the deep-seated need for spiritual security without sacrificing the communal ethic that is the bedrock of African social life.

Reimagining Sin: Relational Fracture and the Abuse of Power

A contextualised understanding of sin (hamartiology) is crucial for addressing the African paradox. Traditional Western theological formulations, heavily influenced by Augustinian thought and forensic models of atonement[1], have often defined sin primarily as an individual transgression against divine law, a legal debt owed to God. While not biblically incorrect, this emphasis can feel abstract and disconnected from the communal and structural realities of African life. Reimagining sin through the lens of power, weakness, and the African worldview reveals it to be a profoundly relational and systemic reality. Such a perspective challenges conventional Western forensic notions by critiquing their focus on individual guilt, which can obscure the ways that systems of domination undermine solidarity and justice (Delport & Lephakga 2016: 6). Rather than viewing wrongdoing as a matter of personal failure alone, the African approach highlights the importance of power relations and communal fragility, interpreting acts of exploitation as disruptions to the collective fabric rather than isolated moral lapses (Conradie 2006).

Sin as Ukunxaxha*: Communal Breakdown and the Effacement of Personhood*

In African theological thought, sin is commonly understood as a breach in communal and interpersonal relationships, setting it apart from Western approaches that tend to view sin as an individual infraction against divine law (Knoetze 2020: 5). This viewpoint shifts attention from personal guilt to the well-being of the community, interpreting sin as a shared breakdown that is evident in broader patterns of oppression and diminishing human connection

[1] For a more in-depth study on atonement within evangelicalism see Michael Horton (2020) *Five Views on the Extent of Atonement.*

(Gobodo-Madikizela, Bubenzer, and Oelofsen 2019: 123). Therefore, sin is less about breaking an abstract rule and more about disrupting a concrete relationship. Mpetsheni (2019:101-104), in his work on Ubuntu as a soteriological ethic, explores the concept of sin through the isiXhosa term *ukunxaxha*. This term means 'missing the mark' or, more vividly, deviating from the path of communal harmony and wholeness. Sin is a breakdown of the social order; it is any action, attitude, or system that diminishes another person's life force, violates their dignity, or disrupts the delicate equilibrium of the community. This aligns with the broader African understanding of evil as that which destroys life, while good is that which enhances it.

When sin is viewed through the dialectic of power and weakness, it becomes evident that sin is fundamentally the abuse of power against the weak. It is the powerful using their strength, be it physical, economic, political, or spiritual, to exploit, oppress, or diminish the vulnerable. Mpetsheni (2019) describes this as the 'effacement of *Umntu*' (personhood). Actions like selfishness, greed, corruption, and violence are sinful not just because they are morally wrong in the abstract, but because they actively dehumanise others and tear the fabric of Ubuntu. This communal understanding of sin bridges the gap between personal morality and social justice, making it directly relevant to the contemporary African socio-political landscape, where the abuse of power is a daily reality for millions.

Structural Sin: The Legacy of Power Abused

A reimagined African hamartiology must also grapple with the reality of structural sin. The continent's history is a testament to the devastating consequences of systemic abuses of power. The transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the apartheid regime in South Africa were not merely collections of individual sinful acts; they were sinful systems that institutionalised the effacement of African personhood on a massive scale (Katongole 2011). These historical injustices created enduring structures of inequality and trauma that continue to shape the continent today. Post-colonial governance failures, marked by what Katongole (2011) calls the legacy of 'King Leopold's Ghost', represent a continuation of this structural sin, where national elites often replicate the exploitative patterns of their former colonial masters.

Endemic corruption in public office is a particularly glaring modern manifestation of structural sin. Defined as the misuse of public power for private profit, corruption is a profound relational fracture that perpetuates poverty, undermines development, and erodes public trust (Coetzer & Snell 2013:31–35). When a government official diverts funds meant for a hospital or school, it is not just a financial crime; it is an act of *ukunxaxha* that denies life and flourishing to the most vulnerable members of the community. Prophetic theologians in Africa have increasingly identified corruption as a primary moral and spiritual crisis that the church must confront (Ishaya 2017; de Wet 2014). Building upon these frameworks, an analysis of religious complacency in the face of widespread poverty and corruption in Africa reveals how the instrumentalisation of religion by some leaders can exacerbate socio-economic disparities, despite the continent's profound religiosity (Agbiji & Swart 2015:15). This highlights the urgent need for deliberate strategic interventions by religious institutions to transition from mere pulpit criticism to active anti-corruption crusades and comprehensive accountability strategies (Orogun & Pillay 2021:7). This necessitates an examination of how ecclesial leadership, particularly within sub-Saharan Africa, often grapples with maintaining public trust amidst perceptions of corruption driven by financial greed and an inability to critically distance itself from neoliberal ideologies (Hewitt 2017:115–118) including evaluating the historical trajectory of capitalism in Africa, which has frequently prioritised profit over equitable development, thereby contributing to inequality and systemic underdevelopment despite abundant natural resources (Koskey et al 2025:17–18). Indeed, African theological discourse has, at times, faced criticism for its delayed engagement with political theology and its overemphasis on cultural liberation rather than direct advocacy for social justice and integral human development (Iheanacho 2021:10). However, recent initiatives by bodies such as the Zimbabwean Catholic Bishops' Conference demonstrate a renewed prophetic mission, directly addressing corruption and advocating for national cohesion amidst political instability (Iheanacho 2022). This emerging trend underscores a critical shift towards an intensified engagement with issues of governance and ethical leadership, thereby challenging frameworks that have historically legitimised corruption (Kretzschmar 2020: 2).

The Sacralisation of Power: Sin within the Church

The abuse of power is not limited to the secular realm; it has deeply and tragically infiltrated the church, the very institution called to be a sign of God's kingdom. The rise of neo-Pentecostalism, while bringing spiritual vitality to many, has in some circles been accompanied by the sacralisation of human authority. Charismatic leaders are sometimes elevated to a status beyond critique; their words treated as divine oracles. This concentration of unchecked spiritual authority creates a fertile ground for abuse.

Scholars like Kgatle and Frahm-Arp (2022:2-7) have documented the harrowing reality of spiritual and sexual abuse of vulnerable congregants by powerful church leaders. In their analysis of the public trial of pastor Timothy Omotoso, they highlight how discourses of faith and spiritual authority can be manipulated to silence victims and protect abusers. In these instances, the pursuit of spiritual power becomes a tool for domination, exploitation, and control rather than for service and empowerment. This represents a profound distortion of the Christian gospel and a grave communal sin; a betrayal of the trust placed in the church as a place of refuge and healing. It is a stark reminder that the human propensity to abuse power is a universal temptation, and the church is not immune.

Reimagining Salvation: Holistic Deliverance and *Christus Victor*

Just as sin in the African context is comprehensive and communal, so too must the understanding of salvation (soteriology) be. A gospel that offers only a spiritualised, otherworldly salvation is inadequate for a continent where the threats to life are immediate, tangible, and multi-faceted. African Christianity, in its most authentic expressions, has always intuited this, understanding salvation as a holistic deliverance that addresses the whole person in their communal and cosmic context.

Salvation as Total Deliverance: Beyond the Spiritualised Gospel

Pioneering African theologians like John Mbiti have long argued that for African Christians, salvation is not merely a future, eschatological deliverance from hell, but a present, tangible rescue from all factors that constrain and confine human flourishing. Adelakun (2011:25-27), reflecting on Mbiti's work, notes

that African Christians understand salvation as 'total deliverance, not from sin alone, but from all misfortunes'. This encompasses physical healing from disease, economic provision in the face of poverty, social restoration from alienation, and spiritual deliverance from the oppressive powers of witchcraft and evil spirits.

This holistic expectation is not a departure from biblical teaching but a recovery of its breadth. The Greek term for salvation, *soteria*, and its verb form, *sozo*, carry a range of meanings in the New Testament, including being rescued from physical danger, being healed from sickness, and being preserved from destruction, in addition to the more common theological meaning of being saved from sin and its eternal consequences (Adelakun 2011:25–27). In a continent where poverty, disease, and violence are ubiquitous, the African emphasis on a salvation that touches every aspect of life is a faithful response to the biblical promise of abundant life (John 10:10). It addresses the African believer's acute awareness of human weakness and vulnerability in the face of overwhelming cosmic and socio-economic powers.

The Christus Victor *Motif: A Resonant Atonement Model*

To effectively relate the gospel to the African pursuit of power and protection, theologians have increasingly found the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement to be particularly resonant. First articulated systematically by Gustaf Aulén, this model, which was dominant in the early church, presents the work of Christ on the cross not primarily as a legal transaction (penal substitution) or a moral example (moral influence), but as a cosmic battle. In this divine drama, Christ confronts and defeats Satan, evil spirits, and the powers of sin and death that hold humanity in bondage (Aulén 1965).

This motif speaks directly to African cosmological anxiety. Boaheng (2023:24-29) has powerfully contextualised this model for the Akan people of Ghana, coining the term *Nkunimdie* (victory) Christology. He argues that for Akan Christians, who live with a persistent fear of malevolent spiritual forces, the message that Christ has won a decisive victory over these powers is the heart of the gospel. The cross is the scene of this triumphant victory, where the forces of darkness are disarmed (Colossians 2:15). This *Nkunimdie* Christology empowers African Christians to discontinue their syncretistic reliance on

traditional priests, amulets, and rituals for protection, and to place their complete and sole trust in Christ's victorious atonement.

In this framework, salvation is understood as a definitive transfer of allegiance and citizenship. It is a movement from the kingdom of darkness, characterised by fear and vulnerability, into the kingdom of light, characterised by divine security and belonging (Magezi & Magezi, 2016:1–2). This soteriological model affirms the reality of the spiritual powers that populate the African cosmos but declares them decisively defeated and subjugated by the superior power of Christ. It provides a robust theological foundation for the deliverance ministries central to African Pentecostalism, while grounding them in the finished work of the cross.

The Gospel's Subversion: Power Perfected in Weakness

While the *Christus Victor* motif powerfully addresses the African need for spiritual victory, it carries an inherent danger. If not carefully balanced by other biblical themes, it can devolve into a superficial triumphalism, a 'theology of glory 'that mirrors the world's obsession with dominance and strength. The biblical gospel, however, contains a radical and subversive core: the theology of the cross, which declares that God's ultimate power is revealed and perfected in weakness.

The Theology of the Cross versus Prosperity Triumphalism

The danger of an unbalanced *Christus Victor* model is most evident in the excesses of the neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospel. This theology often equates divine favour with material wealth, physical health, and worldly success, treating weakness, poverty, and suffering not as part of the fallen human condition, but as signs of a lack of faith, personal sin, or demonic oppression (Heuser 2016; Smith 2021). This creates a spiritual meritocracy where the 'strong' are blessed and the 'weak' are blamed for their own suffering. It is a theology that, in its worst forms, baptises materialism and offers a crown without a cross.

The biblical gospel, particularly as articulated by the Apostle Paul, radically subverts this human understanding of power. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul recounts his plea for God to remove a 'thorn in my flesh'. The divine response is not a demonstration of overwhelming power, but a profound theological

revelation: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’. Paul’s conclusion is equally revolutionary: ‘Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.’ Shawa (2024:80-86) argues that Paul’s theology presents a triadic formula where the experience of weakness is a prerequisite for experiencing God’s grace and the power of the resurrected Christ.

The incarnation, life, and crucifixion of Jesus are the ultimate embodiment of this principle. The cross, a symbol of Roman imperial power and ultimate human degradation, is transformed into the site of God's greatest victory. This victory is achieved not through coercive dominance, but through sacrificial love, non-violent resistance, and apparent defeat. The ‘scandal of the cross’ (1 Corinthians 1:23) lies precisely in this paradox: that God's wisdom appears as foolishness to the world, and his strength appears as weakness. Reframing spiritual power in African Christianity, considering this scandal, is a critical theological task. It requires acknowledging that suffering and fragility are not necessarily indicators of spiritual failure or divine displeasure. Instead, human weakness can become the very channel through which the grace and power of the resurrected Christ are most profoundly experienced. This paradigm shift is crucial for a continent intimately acquainted with suffering; it offers a theology where the marginalised, the poor, and the broken are not at the periphery but at the very centre of God's redemptive work.

Prophetic Witness in Weakness: A New Political Theology

Embracing a theology of weakness has profound implications for the church's public and political role in Africa. If sin is the abuse of power and salvation is found in the God who identifies with the weak, then the church’s mission cannot be a quest for worldly power or political hegemony. Instead, it must be a prophetic witness enacted from a position of solidarity with the vulnerable.

Katongole (2011, 2017), a leading voice in articulating this new political theology, argues that post-colonial African states have largely failed to deliver genuine transformation and that the church's hope lies not in aligning with dominant political narratives but in cultivating ‘new stories’ of hope from the grassroots. He points to examples of peacemakers like Bishop Paride Taban in South Sudan and Maggy Barankitse in Burundi, who operate from a place of

vulnerability and lamentation to build communities of reconciliation amid violence. For Katongole, authentic prophetic witness in Africa requires a 'prophetic solidarity' with the weak and a 'hopeful imagination' born from lament, not from cheap optimism or triumphalist declarations.

African women's theology, pioneered by scholars like Oduyoye, provides another powerful example of this prophetic witness in weakness. Oduyoye has consistently challenged the patriarchal power structures within both traditional African culture and the institutional church, which have historically marginalised and silenced women's voices and experiences (Headley 2023:160–165). Her work is a theological 'insurrection of the subjugated', insisting that the experiences of those deemed 'weak' are essential for a complete and authentic understanding of God. By redefining Christian leadership not as dominance but as servanthood and 'foot-washing' (Mark 10:44-45), Oduyoye and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians demonstrate that true Christian power is exercised through care, nurture, and the relentless pursuit of communal equity (Gathogo 2010). This directly counters the oppressive use of authority, whether in the home, the church, or the state, and embodies the subversive power of the gospel.

Conclusion: A Transformative Theology for a Distressed Continent

Reimagining salvation and sin in the African context are not merely an academic exercise; it is an urgent pastoral and political necessity. In this paper, I argued that such a reimagining must begin with a deep and respectful engagement with the continent's indigenous understandings of power and weakness. The traditional cosmological drive to seek power as a defence against life's vulnerabilities finds a resonant answer in the *Christus Victor* model of salvation, which proclaims Christ's decisive victory over all malevolent forces. Simultaneously, the philosophy of Ubuntu provides a crucial ethical framework, reminding us that true strength lies in communal interdependence and that sin is fundamentally the abuse of power that fractures community.

This article therefore makes a significant theological contribution by integrating the relational worldview of African cosmology and Ubuntu with the themes of

Christus Victor and Paul's theology of weakness proposing a public theology that directly confronts authoritarian tendencies in church leadership. By redefining vulnerability as a space where divine power is revealed, the model addresses issues arising from the centralisation of pastoral authority and the misinterpretations caused by prosperity theology. By anchoring the formation of ministers in this self-giving, or kenotic, model shifts ecclesial leadership from an emphasis on personal control to a focus on communal service, reflecting the deep relational bonds found in Ubuntu philosophy (Mashau & Kgatle, 2019: 5). This perspective may therefore reshape both preaching and discipleship, encouraging open dialogue and practical engagement with the real-life challenges faced by African communities (Nanthambwe, 2024:9).

This approach suggests that viewing *Christus Victor* through the perspective of Pauline weakness disrupts the fragmented and individualistic systems prevalent in modern governance, restoring a sense of communal wholeness. Such a shift enables faith communities to move past surface-level acts of charity, fostering a transformative ministry (*diakonia*) that tackles the root causes of exclusion and marginalisation. By situating this theological vision within the unique realities of African public life, the church surpasses Western, individual-centred frameworks and collectively addresses social and political challenges as a strong, united body (Nanthambwe & Magezi, 2024). This intentional realignment of Christian mission encourages the church to take on a 'practical-critical 'stance, therefore helping to prioritise the needs of marginalised groups within society (Dames, 2017: 8).

Thus, the gospel does not merely fulfil the African desire for power; it radically redefines and subverts it. Through the theology of the cross, Christianity makes the scandalous declaration that God's ultimate power is manifested in the weakness, suffering, and sacrificial love of Christ. This is the critical corrective to the triumphalist tendencies of prosperity theology and the sacralisation of abusive leadership within the church. It challenges the notion that weakness is a sign of divine disfavour and instead presents it as the locus of divine grace.

For the African church, embracing this paradox calls for a new mode of being in the world: a prophetic witness in weakness. This involves a conscious rejection of the quest for worldly dominance and a deliberate commitment to solidarity with the marginalised, the poor, and the victims of injustice. It means

lamenting the systemic sins of corruption and violence rather than offering premature declarations of victory. It requires fostering communities of Ubuntu where the vulnerable are protected, the weak are empowered, and leadership is defined by service. By embodying this subversive, cross-shaped power, African Christianity can move beyond the paradox of churches and coffins, offering a truly transformative political and spiritual theology that brings genuine healing, justice, and holistic salvation to a distressed but hopeful continent. The contribution of this study is therefore both doctrinal and public-theological. By integrating African cosmology, Ubuntu, *Christus Victor*, and Pauline cruciformity, it proposes a theology in which salvation answers the African search for deliverance while transforming the very meaning of power.

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Moving with Meaning: a Biblical-Theological Study of Dance in Churches of Christ Worship

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Abstract

This paper addresses the biblical, theological, and practical aspects of dance in Christian worship. It explores the reasons why conservative traditions, especially Churches of Christ, in Ghana, have long disallowed dancing in corporate worship, and claims that dance is not sinful in nature, nor is it prohibited in scripture. Based on biblical exegesis, African liturgical studies, and research in embodied spirituality, five theological principles are worked out to help the faithful use dance in various ecclesial and cultural contexts. Through this analysis, embodied prophecy, liturgical inculturation, and African Christian worship practice are addressed, which provides a framework that gives due respect to the scriptures and the values of the culture. Special attention is given to the African context, where dance is a constitutive dimension of cultural and spiritual identity and where the inherited prohibition of dance in many conservative traditions raises urgent questions about the relationship between biblical faithfulness and cultural authenticity. It concludes that the problem of dancing is one of wisdom, discernment, and love and does not pertain to the sphere of categorical prohibition or licence.

Introduction

The question of dance in Christian worship lies at the intersection of biblical interpretation, cultural identity, and pastoral practice, and is particularly urgent in the African context. The relationship between physical movement and religious devotion has been a site of longstanding theological debate

across multiple centuries and traditions worldwide. At the regional level, African Christianity has developed rich traditions of liturgical embodiment in which dance is not an adjunct to worship but a primary language of communal encounter with God. At the national level in Ghana, this tension between indigenous cultural expression and inherited theological frameworks is especially visible: churches spanning the mainline, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and conservative restoration traditions navigate it with varying degrees of success (Ayettey 2022:41; Brewu et al. 2024:1; Peprah 2024:352).

Where Western conservative traditions have historically refused dance in corporate worship, many African and Pentecostal communities have embraced it as a constitutive expression of indigenous spirituality and communal life. This divergence is not merely aesthetic; it reflects deep disagreements about biblical authority, hermeneutical method, and the proper boundaries of faithful worship. Charismatic and African Initiated Churches have cultivated rich liturgical movement traditions that incorporate local performance aesthetics into Christian devotion in ways many practitioners describe as deepening rather than eroding theological integrity. The Methodist Church Ghana represents an instructive middle path: it has incorporated traditional musical and dance forms through a process of careful theological assessment, preserving doctrinal consistency without excluding cultural expression (Brewu et al. 2024:1). Conservative Western-origin traditions, by contrast, have generally restricted or forbidden dance in worship on hermeneutical and pastoral grounds (Ademiluka 2023). The argument proceeds in four stages. The article first reconstructs the historical and theological rationale behind the avoidance of dance in conservative Christian traditions, taking the Churches of Christ as a primary case study. It then conducts a systematic biblical investigation of whether dance is inherently sinful, attending to both affirming and cautionary texts across both testaments. On that exegetical basis, it proposes five theological principles for the discerning use of dance in worship. A comprehensive biblical reference table is appended as a resource for further study.

Problem Statement

The central problem this article addresses is the apparent conflict between the inherited prohibition of dance in Churches of Christ and the broader biblical

and African theological evidence suggesting that dance can constitute a legitimate form of Christian worship. This conflict is not simply academic. For African congregations within the Churches of Christ tradition, it raises an urgent pastoral question: is the prohibition of dance in corporate worship a faithful and necessary application of scriptural teaching, or does it reflect the cultural assumptions of nineteenth-century American Protestantism that were transmitted to Africa through missionary activity and that may carry no binding biblical authority in the African context?

This question carries specific pastoral gravity for this researcher. As Youth President of the Church of Christ, Dansoman, and Zone 4 Churches of Christ Youth President in Ghana, my years of engagement with young people in these communities have made the question inescapable, both as a theological issue and as a pastoral one. Teaching 'Research in Ministry' at the Heritage Bible Institute deepened the conviction that these questions demand rigorous scholarly engagement, not the solace of inherited answers.

Research Aim and Methodology

The aim of this article is threefold: to examine the historical and theological rationale behind the Churches of Christ tradition's avoidance of dance in worship, to conduct a systematic biblical investigation of whether dance is inherently sinful, and to propose theological principles for the discerning use of dance in worship across diverse ecclesial and cultural settings, with particular attention to the African context.

The article employs a biblical-theological method, which operates by engaging the canonical text of scripture systematically across both Testaments as the primary norm for theological reflection, whilst bringing that textual engagement into dialogue with historical, contextual, and systematic theological considerations. This method is appropriate to the research question because the central dispute concerns the interpretation and application of scripture; it is therefore to scripture that the argument must primarily return. Secondary sources in African liturgical studies, inculturation theology, and embodied spirituality research are engaged throughout to provide contextual grounding and to broaden the conversation beyond the immediate biblical-exegetical question.

Definition of Key Concepts

Three key concepts require definition before the argument proceeds.

Dance is understood in this article as coordinated, intentional bodily movement performed in a communal or individual context. For the purposes of this study, dance in worship refers to rhythmic or expressive physical movement that is performed as part of or in direct response to corporate or personal religious devotion, whether spontaneous or choreographed, individual or collective. The article does not restrict the term to any single cultural form; it applies equally to the structured liturgical dance of mainline traditions and the spontaneous expressive movement characteristic of African Pentecostal and Charismatic worship.

Worship is used in its broad theological sense to denote the community's directed, responsive engagement with God, encompassing praise, prayer, proclamation, sacrament, and the whole life of devotion. The article focuses specifically on corporate worship as the gathered assembly's common offering to God.

Inculturation refers to the theological process by which the Christian gospel is expressed, practised, and interpreted through the cultural forms of a given people in ways that maintain theological integrity whilst affirming the dignity and validity of indigenous cultural identity (Peprah 2024:353). It is distinguished from syncretism, which involves the uncritical fusion of Christian and non-Christian religious elements, and from accommodation, which implies mere surface-level cultural adaptation without genuine theological engagement.

Historical and Theological Context: Why Conservative Traditions Avoid Dance

Any responsible biblical and theological engagement with the question of dance must first take seriously the tradition of avoidance that has characterised much of conservative Christianity. The Churches of Christ, a movement that emerged from the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement of nineteenth-century America and that now maintains a significant global

presence, including in Ghana, has historically maintained a principled abstention from dance in corporate worship. This position is neither arbitrary nor simply culturally reactive. It rests on coherent hermeneutical commitments, genuine pastoral concerns, and a specific understanding of the nature of Christian worship (Ademiluka 2023; Brewu et al. 2024:2). To engage it fairly is not to concede its conclusions, but it is a prerequisite for any argument that takes the authority of scripture and the integrity of the church seriously.

The Regulative Principle and New Testament Authority

The most significant hermeneutical value that directed the Churches of Christ on the matter of worship is what theologians refer to as the regulative principle, which is the belief that Christian worship must consist of only those elements expressly authorised or modelled in the New Testament. These elements traditionally include congregational singing (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16), prayer, the reading and preaching of scripture, the observance of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:23–26), and freewill giving (1 Corinthians 16:2, 2 Corinthians 9:7). This principle works on the assumption that the silence of scripture is not in any way permissive, but it is prohibitive: where the New Testament does not prohibit a practice and does not give an example of it, the silence prohibits. The principle has a respectable tradition in Reformed theology and is directly related to the formulation of the Westminster Confession's assertion that God is to be worshiped according to his own revealed will.

In relation to dance, the argument is quite simple. The most important New Testament passages dealing with early Christian worship are the four-fold pattern of apostolic instruction, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer described in Acts 2:42, the list of psalms, teaching, revelation, tongues, and interpretation applied to Corinthians 14:26, and the focus on teaching and admonition through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in Colossians 3:16, which have no reference to dance. This silence is determinative for the advocates of the regulative principle. The replacement of Old Covenant worship by a New Covenant worship is the creation of a new pattern, which does not continue the dancing that typified the cultic life of the Israelites. The high tradition of dancing in worship of the Hebrew Bible is therefore divided

into a previous dispensation, a dispensation that has been replaced by the New Testament church order.

This interpretive position is deliberately opposite to what is sometimes termed the normative principle, which is shared by most other Christian traditions, allowing whatever is not specifically forbidden by scripture, and which considers culture, pastoral wisdom, and lived religious experience as valid auxiliary sources to the theological reflection of worship (Addaquay 2025:146; Peprah 2024:354). It is worth noting that within the Stone-Campbell tradition itself, this hermeneutical question has been the subject of sustained scholarly debate, with some scholars questioning whether the regulative principle as applied to worship is exegetically defensible or whether it reflects a particular hermeneutical tradition rather than a straightforward reading of the New Testament (Ademiluka 2023). This internal conversation is significant for African Churches of Christ, since it indicates that the tradition's own scholars have not considered the question of worship practice closed.

Moral and Pastoral Concerns

Conservative traditions have articulated substantial pastoral concerns about dance in worship that deserve honest engagement. These concerns are not reducible to cultural squeamishness; they reflect a serious attempt to guard the holiness and integrity of the worshipping community.

The biblical record itself provides grounds for caution. The narrative of Herodias's daughter dancing before Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:6, Mark 6:22), an act of calculated seduction that resulted in the beheading of John the Baptist, establishes with force that physical movement can be deployed as an instrument of manipulation, immorality, and violence. This episode does not condemn all dance; it demonstrates that bodily expression, like any human capacity, is susceptible to sinful use. Historical scholarship confirms that similar anxieties about the moral valence of dance attended its regulation across various cultural and ecclesiastical settings throughout history (McCarty 2024).

Pastoral risks specific to dance in corporate worship may be identified under four heads. First, there is the risk of misdirected attention: that the congregation's gaze, and perhaps the dancer's own, shifts from God to the

human body in motion, inverting the proper direction of worship. It must be acknowledged, however, that this risk is not unique to dance; any element of worship, including music, preaching, or ritual, can become a distraction when it draws attention to itself rather than to God. Second is the risk of disorder: that spontaneous, uncoordinated physical movement disrupts the structured progression of corporate worship, replacing clarity with confusion. Third is the risk of emotionalism: that the kinaesthetic excitement generated by dance produces an affective response mistaken for spiritual depth, cultivating a spirituality that privileges feeling over faithfulness to the word. This concern must be held in tension with the legitimate recognition, particularly in African theological reflection, that embodied emotion is not antithetical to genuine worship; the integration of feeling, movement, and devotion is a hallmark of African Christian spirituality and is itself grounded in the biblical tradition of whole-person worship (Asare 2022:44; Ayettey 2022:42). The pastoral task is therefore not to suppress emotional expression but to ensure it is theologically governed and Spirit-led rather than merely self-generated. Fourth is the risk of moral stumbling: that certain forms of physical movement, even when sincerely intended as worship, arouse lustful responses in other worshippers, becoming an occasion of sin rather than edification (Ademiluka 2023).

Simplicity, Reverence, and Pauline Order

Churches of Christ has also always expressed a theology of worship which values simplicity, devotion, and adherence to what they believe to be the apostolic pattern. Worship according to this interpretation is all to God, is a spiritual exchange whereby the community praises, prays, declares the Word, and remembers the supper of the Lord. Anything that takes away focus towards this transaction, anything that brings human performance, emotional spectacle, or aesthetic elaboration in itself is considered a perversion of true worship.

The Pauline injunction in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that ‘everything must be done decently and in order’ (KJV, here and throughout) has been the central proof text for this position. For the Churches of Christ, this verse establishes an apostolic standard of ordered, dignified worship against which all proposed additions must be measured. Physical expressions that appear chaotic, that draw undue attention to individual participants, or that seem more

characteristic of entertainment than of devotion are judged incompatible with this standard. Notably, contemporary scholarship on contemplative movement traditions suggests that this concern is not unreasonable: the literature on contemplative dance practice consistently distinguishes between embodied movement that is disciplined, inwardly focused, and directed toward God, and movement that is primarily performative or emotionally self-indulgent (Hellsten 2021:118; McMillan 2018:72). The concern itself is valid; the question is whether it justifies total exclusion.

Historical Background: The Churches of Christ and Missionary Transmission of Dance Prohibition

Understanding why dance prohibition became embedded in Churches of Christ practice in Africa requires attention to the tradition's historical formation and its missionary transmission. The Churches of Christ emerged in the context of the American Restoration Movement of the early nineteenth century, a movement that sought to restore what it understood as the pattern of the New Testament church by stripping away what it regarded as human accretions to apostolic worship. In the American cultural context of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, popular dance was closely associated with drinking establishments, sexual impropriety, and a lifestyle regarded as incompatible with Christian morality (McCarty 2024). This cultural matrix produced a tradition of prohibition that extended well beyond the corporate assembly into everyday social life.

When Churches of Christ missionaries arrived in Africa in the twentieth century, they brought with them not only the gospel but also the worship practices and cultural assumptions of their American tradition. The prohibition of dance was transmitted as an integral part of what faithful Christian worship required, not as a culturally specific application of biblical principles, but as the biblical position itself. The concept of being 'pagan' was applied broadly to many aspects of African cultural life, including dance, song, and communal ritual, reflecting the missionaries' own cultural formation rather than a nuanced engagement with African theology or the African biblical tradition. As a result, generations of African Christians within the Churches of Christ tradition have inherited a prohibition of dance shaped not by the African

cultural context in which they live and worship but by American frontier culture.

The association between dance and moral degeneracy that shaped American conservative Protestantism has no direct counterpart in most African societies, where dance is understood as a fundamental dimension of communal life, spiritual expression, and cultural identity (Addaquay 2025:148; Ayettey 2022:42). This disjunction raises a significant and urgent question for African Churches of Christ: to what extent does the inherited position on dance represent a faithful reading of scripture, and to what extent does it represent a cultural import carrying the assumptions of its American origin, assumptions that may have no biblical necessity and may actively distort the African Christian's relationship to their own cultural heritage?

Biblical Investigation: Is Dancing Inherently Sinful?

Having seriously considered the custom of avoidance, and the problems which perpetuate it, we now turn to the bigger question, which is, what scripture truly says about dance. An attentive study of the biblical corpus in its entirety, taking into consideration both Testaments, both confirming and warning examples, and the theological framework of the corresponding passages leads to an even more refined conclusion than a complete ban or blind approval. This finding holds particular significance for African hermeneutics. It suggests that the question of dance should not be settled by importing Western cultural taboos, but rather evaluated within each cultural context according to the normative standards of scripture.

Biblical Evidence of Dance as Legitimate Worship in the Old Testament

The biblical account has a number of examples in both narrative and prescriptive literature of dance as a legitimate, in fact a praised, way of worship, thanksgiving, and spiritual gladness before God. These examples are not marginal and accidental; they are found in various genres and eras of biblical literature, and they always identify dance with real, God-approved experience.

Miriam and the Women of Israel (Exodus 15:20–21)

The first and perhaps most theologically rich instance of dance as worship in a biblical narrative occurs at the shores of the Red Sea. Following the dramatic deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian army, Miriam the prophetess, identified by her title as one who speaks authoritatively for God, leads the women of Israel in dance and song. The text records:

> And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously. (Exodus 15:20–21)

It was a kind of embodied prophecy, a declaration by movement and music of the nature and saving work of God. The prophet in ancient Israelite culture was not only to speak the word of God but to be and to do it; the dancing of Miriam was therefore a testimony of prophecy, visible in the community as a kind of physical action of demonstration to the community of the reality of divine salvation. As Portier-Young (2024:210) points out, this celebration was both an expression of gratitude for the previous deliverance and also a proclamation of the nature of God and the saving action of God by movement and music. The reading is based on the close study of the Hebrew text and the rules of the genre of the victory song; although some scholars might doubt that the genre of embodied prophecy is entirely justified within the text, the reading is based on exegesis and is aligned with the overall Old Testament correlation of Miriam with prophetic leadership. This passage documents that there is no divine condemnation of the dance of Miriam. The fact that she was a prophet, that she was leading the festival, and that the song she was leading contained themes of divine sanction, all suggest that this kind of worship could be sanctioned by God, which could be felt almost instantly in African Christian communities where dance and song served the same purposes as an integrated act of communal spiritual witness (Ayettey 2022:41).

David's Dance before the Ark (2 Samuel 6:14–16)

The most theologically significant Old Testament instance of dance as worship and the one most frequently cited in discussions of this question is the account of David's uninhibited celebration as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem. The text states plainly:

> And David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. (2 Samuel 6:14–15)

Three features of this passage are theologically determinative. First, the dance is explicitly performed 'before the LORD'; it is directed toward God, not performed for a human audience. Secondly, it is done 'with all his might'; David does not hold back and gives his whole physical and emotional heart to worship. Third and most significant, the story gives a divine judgment of the event with regard to the story of Michal. David's wife hates him in her heart (2 Samuel 6:16) because, to her, his actions are undignified conduct for a royal. In the moment when she confronts him, David answers theologically:

> It was before the LORD, which chose me before thy father, and before all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the LORD, over Israel: therefore will I play before the LORD. (2 Samuel 6:21)

The line of defence David uses is not the aesthetic or cultural, but theological: David does not base his worship on the judgment of human beholders, but on the approval of God. It then tells us that, until her death, Michal bore no child (2 Samuel 6:23). According to the traditional reading, this is divine punishment of her disposition, but other scholars interpret it as a narrative result of the relational breakage between David and Michal, not as a literal punishment. Either interpretation substantiates the fact that the text does not justify contempt of embodied worship. Madden (2021) places this episode in the greater liturgical life of Israel and does not see it as a unique and embarrassing incident but as a theologically vital revelation of the type of worship that God delights in.

The Psalter: Prescriptive Commands to Worship through Dance

The psalms do not just talk of dancing but command it. This difference is of hermeneutical importance, especially to those who believe in the regulative principle, as it puts in place the fact that the inclusion of dance in worship was not merely an accommodation to cultural practice, but a directive of the covenant community worship manual.

The wording of Psalm 149:3 is as follows: 'Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp'. The imperative mood is incontrovertible. Psalm 150:4 places dance in an all-encompassing list of musical instruments for worship: 'Praise him with the timbrel and the dance: praise him with the stringed instruments and the organs'. Psalm 30:11 takes a more individual turn, giving thanks for the transformative effect God has on one: 'Thou hast turned my mourning into dancing: Thou hast dispersed my sackcloth, And bound me with gladness'. Combined, they point to the fact that dance was not an embarrassing or peripheral aspect of Israelite worship but a mandated and glorified way of praising God. These commands in the Psalter do not seem abstract or alien according to African hermeneutics. The unification of rhythmic movement with communal praise is not something secular culture has brought to the Ghanaian and broader West African Christian tradition, but rather something the biblical text itself has authorised, a fact that a number of African biblical commentators have stressed in their studies on inculturation and worship (Ayettey 2022:42; Peprah 2024:354).

More theological provocations have been extended by recent scholarship on these texts. The connection between biblical dance and the doctrine of perichoresis, the mutual indwelling and co-inherence of the three persons of the Trinity, has been addressed by Hikota (2022a:51, 2022b:192); Hikota suggests that embodied, coordinated movement can be a creaturely reflection of the divine relationality which is the inner life of God. Although this is a hypothetical theological suggestion, it is an indication of how seriously modern scholarship is taking the theological aspects of dance, going far beyond the issue of whether dance is even acceptable to question what it can affirm about God and about human beings who have been created in his image.

New Testament Evidence

There is no particular command or prohibition concerning dance in corporate worship in the New Testament. Proponents of the regulative principle consider this silence to be prohibitive. Evidence in the New Testament, however, when carefully read, indicates that the silence is not prohibition but reflects a change of the forms of worship without any denial of the theological validity of embodied worship that is instituted in the Old Testament.

Dancing is also contained in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25) in the description of the joyful reunion when the prodigal son returned to his father:

> Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and neared the house he heard music and dancing.

Jesus does not condemn the dancing; it is given as a fit manifestation of the rejoicing of the father over his son returning home, and in the parabolic reasoning of the passage the father is actually God. The theologically important datum of the picture of God celebrating the finding of the lost through dancing should be addressed by the supporters of prohibition. Jesus, similarly, in his allusion to children 'who have piped unto thee, and thou hast not danced' (Matthew 11:17, Luke 7:32) also employs the metaphor of dancing as joyful human responsiveness, with no indication of disapproval.

The entire teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 regulates all corporate worship on the twofold principles of order and edification, but does not give a complete list of things that can be done in worship. The omission of dance is in itself not prohibition; by the normative-interpretation principle, what is not prohibited is within the domain of Christian freedom and falls under the general standards that Paul sets. Paul's assertion of the various gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, and his explanation of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 (including joy as one of the major fruits of the work of the Spirit), are both indicators that the physical manifestation of Spirit-generated joy in worship is not a New Testament departure but rather a possible manifestation of it.

The Theological Neutrality of Physical Movement

The above evidence confirms that dance is present in scripture as a valid and mandated form of worship in the Old Testament and as a form of expression that is not outlawed in the New Testament and which is theologically expressive. The question is, is it intrinsically problematic to move physically – is the body a morally dubious means of worship? The biblical response is evident. The incarnation defines the theological honour of the body: in Jesus Christ, the Son of God assumed the flesh of humans and the bodily resurrection proves that the body is not a prison in which the spirit is confined but a creation of God that will be redeemed. The body is an appropriate tool of divine worship as Paul taught believers that they were to glorify God in their body and in their spirit (1 Corinthians 6:20). The physicality of a given bodily act does not define the moral character of that particular act; the orientation of the heart and the intention behind the performance of the act is what defines the moral character of the action – a fact that the scripture spells out: 'The LORD looketh not on the outward appearance but the LORD looketh on the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7). Dance is not necessarily sinful: as with all human powers, it may be used either holily or sinfully, and its nature in any particular instance is decided by the heart whence it is produced.

Cautionary Examples and the Conditions of Misuse

A comprehensive biblical theology of dance will have to come to terms with the passages where dance is not the instrument of devotion but the tool of sin. The picture of dance in scripture is not always favourable and the warning examples are as theologically educative as the positive ones.

The best example of the abuse of dance is the scene of the daughter of Herodias in the presence of Herod (Matthew 14:6, Mark 6:22). The dance in this story is calculated seduction, an act instigated by a vengeful woman in order to deal with a king who was in love with her by manipulating him into an oath that led to the judicial murder of John the Baptist. The reading does not moralise on the ethical nature of the dance in itself; it does not have to. The context of the story renders the fact that the movement was used as a tool of manipulation to serve unjust violence. The narrative does not praise or

disparage all dance; it sets with chilling directness the fact that the powers of expressiveness of the human body may be enlisted to the service of the devil.

The case of the golden calf (Exodus 32:19) is another yet no less educative example. Dancing about the calf, the Israelites sinned because the item they were worshipping was an idol. The sin of idolatry was one thing manifested by the dance. The fact that Moses reacted to it, he saw the calf and the dancing (Exodus 32:19), shows that the idol and the dance around the idol were both signs of the spiritual adultery of the people. The evil under condemnation is the worshipping of a false god and not the physical movement *per se*. This point is essential: the same physical activities, which amount to worship of the living God, amount to blasphemy when toward an idol.

An archaeological history of dance in ancient Greek mystery cults proves that the reversion of sacred motion to false objects of worship is not a rare religious process in the Israelite story (Schlapbach 2021). The moral of these warning passages is not that we should not dance but that all worship, be it of the body or otherwise, must be brought to the test of whether it is offered in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:24), in sincere devotion to the living God who has revealed himself in scripture.

The Importance and Challenges of Dance in Worship

The theological validity of dance as a mode of worship is provided by the biblical evidence. To African Christian communities, especially, the role of dance in worship is not just permissible. In most African cultural traditions, dance is a major form of community expression, spiritual experience, and the unification of the entire self (body, mind, and soul) in the act of worship (Asare 2022:44; Ayettey 2022:42). Indigenisation of the gospel through the incorporation of African dance into African Christian worship can be a unique and potent inculturation of the gospel, by affirming the truth that the God of scripture is known and encountered not only through the cognitive and verbal but also through the embodied and communal (Peprah 2024:356). Several Ghanaian settings have been recorded to have been integrated with indigenous music and dance: Asare (2022:44) reports on the successful application of local music and dance in the healing liturgy of the Twelve

Apostles Church, and Quarcoo, Osei, and Acquah (2025) report the theologically purposive dance practice in Lighthouse Chapel, Ghana.

Simultaneously, there are real challenges in the incorporation of dance into worship that cannot be dismissed. The first one is the difficulty of theological intentionality: dance that starts as a prayerful practice may easily turn into performance or indulgent emotionality without conscious spiritual control. The second is the problem of community discernment: that which is felt by one group in a congregation as edifying, Spirit-filled worship may be felt by another as a distraction, immodesty, or disruption, and the Pauline criterion of care of the weaker brother must guide the way communities manage these differences. The third is the issue of cultural discernment: not every form of dance in the surrounding culture is appropriate to Christian worship, and communities must learn to have the theological acumen to tell which cultural forms can be baptised to the service of the gospel and which cannot. The fourth is the difficulty of prohibition by tradition: in communities whose traditions have long excluded dance, the introduction of dance into worship must be made with pastoral care, catechetical preparation, and a sense of true reverence towards those whose conscience has been trained by a tradition of moderation.

The exegetical inquiry brings a definite result: that dance is not necessarily sinful, that scripture furnishes not only positive precedents but negative warnings, that the moral nature of dance is conditioned by direction, intention, and circumstance, and not by the actual movement. This conclusion provides the theological basis upon which communities can be held accountable by making responsible choices regarding dance in worship. The challenge of the next section is to develop these exegetical results into normative theological principles that can inform practice in a variety of ecclesial and cultural contexts – including those African settings where this question is most in need of urgent attention.

Mitigation of Challenges

These are real challenges that cannot be conquered. The five theological principles constructed in the ensuing section form the main guide in dealing with them. A few additional mitigating measures can be observed as well. The

theological intentionality dilemma is resolved by making liturgical preparation deliberate: the idea of the inclusion of dance in worship must be properly framed theologically, either by the teaching of pastors, explanation before the service, or integrating the movement with the proclamation of scripture in such a manner that the movement is seen to be fixed in the word. The problem of community discernment requires a way of congregational dialogue where the many voices, the more conservative ones included, are actually heard prior to introducing changes of worship practice; community is not unanimity but when a community has reasoned within itself on what it is doing and why. The dilemma of cultural discernment is addressed by the type of inculturation theology exemplified by Sarpong and characterised by Peprah (Peprah 2024:356): a theologically responsible process whereby cultural forms are judged, not by their popularity and emotional appeal, but by their ability to be channelled, in full, towards the worship of the God of scripture. Perhaps the most pastorally sensitive challenge is inherited prohibition, and it demands always, above all patience: reforms of this kind should be gradually introduced, with prolonged catechesis, clear leadership, and the readiness not to proceed as fast as the most zealous reformers.

Theological Principles for the Appropriate Use of Dance

The five principles presented below are based on the larger scriptural doctrine of worship, behaviour, and spiritual formation and are guided by the study of embodied spirituality and contemplation (Hellsten 2021, 2022; LaMothe 2017; McMillan 2018). They are suggested not as rules that have a solution to all cases but rather as guidelines according to which cases should be judged.

Principle 1: God-centredness

The primary and the most basic principle is that everything in worship, including physical expression, should be aimed at glorifying God as opposed to the enjoyment, fame, or emotional satisfaction of the worshipper. This is not a fringe benefit but the qualifier of Christian worship *per se*. The first commandment teaches that the only right object of worship is God (Exodus 20:3); the New Testament teaches that the glory of God is the final standard of everything Christian people do (1 Corinthians 10:31).

In David dancing in 2 Samuel 6:14, there is the paradigmatic biblical example of this principle at work. 'He dances in the presence of the LORD', the line is repeated, defiantly where God is the only listener, receiving all his adoration. The defence of his attitude to Michal is purely theocentric: 'It was in the presence of the LORD' (2 Samuel 6:21). According to Madden (2021), this theocentric intentionality is the one that differentiates between an authentic liturgical dance and performance or entertainment. The theoretic model of movement as having fulfilled quite specifically theological functions, when ordered with a proper intention, can be found in the conceptualisation of shaker dance, as theopraxis or embodied action aimed at the experience of divine communion and not self-gratification of an aesthetic or emotional nature (LaMothe 2017:105). Every dance in worship where the focus of thought is no longer upon God, but on the dancer, where the dancing is judged not by Godly approval of the dancers but by human approval of the dancers, has fallen at the first and most vital test.

Principle 2: Spirit-led Expression

Real worship is what the Holy Spirit does and does in and through the worshipping community; it is not created by human method, human feelings, or social inclination. According to the teaching of Paul in Galatians 5:22–23, the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, are the typical manifestations of a life changed by the spirit of God. This list is directly relevant to the question of dance: one of the main fruits of the Spirit is joy, and the bodily manifestation of joy has strong biblical roots in the practice of worship. When joy is truly produced by the Spirit and not a work of the emotions, its manifestation in worship is a true product of the work of the Spirit and not a man-made supplement. The additional instruction of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 about the Spirit working within corporate worship affirms that the Spirit does provide diverse gifts and manifestations to the community to help each other; physical movement is not the only gift the Spirit has to offer. The research conducted by McMillan (2018:74) on the practice of Authentic Movement implies that embodied testimony may be the result of sincere spiritual attentiveness when the practitioners learn to be open to divine guidance and not to act before the human audience. The article by Hellsten (2021:120) on contemplative practice, as a form of dance, suggests that trained interior attentiveness is necessary to achieve authentic spirituality of movement. These reflections are reflected in

the African Christian tradition, which incorporates dance and Spirit-led worship: in most Ghanaian Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, dance in worship is seen as not a method of generating spiritual experience but as a reaction to the Spirit at work already within the community (Asare 2022:44). The work of the church is not to forbid physical expression but to nurture the inner shaping out of which Spirit-inspired worship, whether embodied or not, is possible at all.

Principle 3: Order and Edification

The fact that Paul has gone into an elaborate explanation of corporate worship in 1 Corinthians 14 presents two parameters that can be generalised to all aspects of Christian worship without any exception: order and edification. The orderliness, the structure of worship, is established by 'Let all things be done decently and in order' (1 Corinthians 14:40). Mutual upbuilding is established by 1 Corinthians 14:26 in the statement, 'Let all things be done unto edifying'. Both are standards of dance, and each has practical application.

The first standard is broken by dance that interrupts the sequential flow of corporate worship, that causes the congregation to focus on other things than scripture and proclamation, that creates confusion and not clarity. It does not imply that dancing should be strictly choreographed or that spontaneous movement is necessarily improper; it simply implies that, however dance is expressed in worship, it must be adding to, and not subtracting, the God-focused, coherent movement of the common prayer of the gathering. Dancing that results in spectacle instead of piety, in separating the congregation between actors and spectators, in weakening the weaker believers, either by distraction, offence, or temptation, is contrary to the second standard. The edification standard is tough: worship embodiment has to contribute actively to the faith of the people present and strengthen scriptural truth and help with the development of the entire community spiritually.

These standards are attainable according to African Christian evidence. Research by Asare (2022:44) on the Twelve Apostles Church in Ghana records how the incorporation of indigenous music and dance in the healing service of the church is successfully done in a manner that is personally felt by the community as highly edifying. Quarcoo, Osei, and Acquah (2025) also record the usage of popular styles of dance in Lighthouse Chapel, Ghana, in a way that

is purposeful, contextually relevant, and theologically structured. These illustrations indicate that dance may play a role in the Pauline standards of order and edification in situations when it is theologically motivated and contextually aware.

Principle 4: Modesty and Concern for Others

The New Testament also makes a constant appeal to believers to think about the consequences of their behaviour to other people in society, especially those who are lesser in faith or who are more prone to temptation. The principle directly relates to the shape that should be taken by the dance in worship. Modesty of dress as taught by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:9 is also a subset of a wider Pauline question of the external testimony and the inner integrity of the worshipping people; the suggestion is that how one presents one's physical self in worship needed to be restrained by the concern of other people rather than just by the desire to express oneself or the beauty of things.

The most worked out Pauline form of this principle is given in Romans 14:13–21. The point is Christian freedom, such as freedom in matters of practice where scripture neither commands nor forbids, has to be exercised with unceasing consideration as to its influence upon the other believer:

> it is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother is offended, or made weak. (Romans 14:21)

In its application to dance, it also implies that not only is it theologically permissible that a particular kind of physical expression is pastorally sound, but it is also serviceable and productive of the overall spiritual wellbeing of the community. Dancing that provokes erotic urges in other believers, that incites those who are of a more conservative conscientiousness or who introduce an air of separatism into the congregation, has not passed this test, however good may be the spirit with which the dancer does it.

Principle 5: Cultural Contextualisation and Authenticity

The issue of dance in worship cannot be discussed independently of the issue of cultural identity, indigenous theological expression, and the heritage of missionary Christianity in the African Christian setting, in particular. This last

principle deals with that intersection. The studies conducted in various African settings have proved that indigenous dance practices, given appropriate contextualisation and theological interpretation, could be viewed as a valid and genuine means of Christian faith and worship (Addaquay 2025; Ayettey 2022; Peprah 2024). Dancing in African Christian liturgy is not giving in to syncretism; when done with theological clarity and pastoral tact it can be an authentic and loyal inculturation of the gospel.

The theology of inculturation by Peter Kwasi Sarpong is studied in detail by Peprah (2024:356), which provides a relevant case study. The work of Sarpong shows that the integration of Asante cultural forms, such as music, movement, and ritual gesture, into Catholic worship in Ghana is not always impossible to achieve in a manner that maintains full theological integrity and at the same time respects the dignity and richness of indigenous cultural expression. The standard that he applies is not a question of cultural accommodation but of theological discernment: what aspects of Asante culture can be baptised into the service of the gospel and what cannot? According to Addaquay (2025:149), the main issue of such work is that it is difficult to reconcile the authenticity of culture and faithfulness of theology in a globalised world where each is subject to pressure.

This principle asks African churches to disobey two extreme yet equally dangerous misjudgements. The former is blindly adopting secular or syncretic dancing without theological scrutiny, bringing into the worship whatever happens to be culturally popular or emotionally stimulating, and not even questioning whether it is actually addressed to the living God. The second is the almost equally unthinking abandonment of indigenous cultural expression in worship due to inherited Western theological presuppositions which might have been culturally prejudiced instead of a biblical requirement. Both fallacies are failures of theological discernment; it is difficult to discover the wisdom to discern between the two.

Conclusion

This paper has contended that the issue of dance in Christian worship is not an issue that can be answered easily and generally, but it is also not an issue that can be resolved by inherited norms or cultural impulses, whether such

impulses are restrictive or permissive. The argument has followed three steps: a sober and sympathetic exploration of the tradition of avoidance, especially in the version it has taken in the Churches of Christ; a systematic biblical inquiry that proves the moral impartiality of dance as an act of physicalness and the lawfulness of dance as a mode of worship in narrative and prescriptive biblical literature; and the expression of five theological principles: God-centredness, Spirit-led expression, order and edification, modesty and concern to other persons, and cultural contextualisation, which can be employed to guide critical practice in various ecclesial and cultural contexts.

The inferences made via this inquiry are evident. The Churches of Christ and the other conservative traditions have been correct in their warning. Hermeneutical dedication to New Testament authority, the pastoral interest of order and holiness, and also awareness of the vulnerability of dance to moral abuse are all indicative of sincere and admirable theological beliefs (Ademiluka 2023). They cannot be brushed aside; they need to be involved, listened to, and permitted to make the nature of that attentive discrimination which the effusion of dance into worship demands.

Meanwhile, the biblical support fails to support the fact that dance is essentially sinful or that its application in Christian worship is absolutely forbidden. This physical, kinetic glorification of God has an honourable place in the life of faith, through the embodied prophecy of Miriam at the Red Sea (Portier-Young 2024), the wholesome devotion of David before the Ark (Madden 2021), and the express reference of the Psalter to the use of dancing to praise God. The evil examples in scripture, the dancing of the daughter of Herodias, the dancing round the golden calf, persuades, not that dance is in its nature sinful, but that every human faculty, the faculty of bodily movement included, must be placed under the rule of theological intentionality and the law of true worship in the spirit and in the truth.

The stakes of this question for the churches of Africa in particular are high. The conservatism of much of the traditional approach to dance in the West is, to some extent, the heritage of cultural assumptions of nineteenth-century Protestantism, assumptions within which the concept of embodied movement has little organic relation to African cultural contexts in which embodied movement is a major source of communal meaning-making, spiritual identity,

and contact with the sacred. The difficulty with African Churches of Christ (and other conservative African congregations) is being able to determine what scripture actually demands, rather than what a certain cultural tradition has come to suppose, and to be able to affirm the former with some measure of confidence and cast a critical eye over the latter.

This article presents five principles which are articulated and provide a framework for that scrutiny. They are not the answers to all questions, the cases that should be resolved; they are the criteria according to which cases should be judged. They celebrate the liberty in Christ enjoyed by believers, yet remind them that it must and must always be exercised in love: in love to God, which is worship directed to him; in love to the neighbour, which is the care of the spiritual welfare of the entire community taken at all times. Since the African church continues to seek its own path in the vexed dialectic of cultural identity and theological faithfulness, between heritage and indigenous expression, may it do so in the unity of scriptural rigour and pastoral wisdom and humble discernment, which the question demands and to which the people of God are entitled.

Recommendations

Based on this exploration, a number of suggestions can be provided. To leaders in the congregations of African Churches of Christ and similar conservative traditions, the suggestion is to engage in a new, congregational-specific engagement with the biblical and theological evidence herein presented, not to dictate to it an outcome but to provide the environment within which communities may make informed, biblically based decisions regarding dance in worship that are consistent with their own culture but not necessarily the inheritance of another time and place.

To theological educators and institutions, the suggestion here is to make the theology of embodied worship, African liturgical studies, and inculturation theory part of the curriculum of ministerial formation so that the next generation of church leaders will have the means of responding to these questions theologically and pastorally.

To the greater African church, the suggestion is to shun the false dilemma of biblical faithfulness and cultural authenticity, and to seek rather the type of creative and discerning theologising synthesis that has defined the most productive moments of Christian mission in every cultural setting. The application of worship practices in Churches of Christ in Ghana and West Africa in general, the acceptance of dance by conservative African Christian communities, and the creation of contextually relevant liturgical instructions, which can serve as a practical tool to help the community to address these issues in a faithful way, require further study.

Appendix: Comprehensive Biblical References to Dance

Reference	Quotation (KJV)	Context	Purpose	Classification
Genesis 31:27	Dance implied: 'with mirth, songs, tabret and harp'	Household celebration after family interaction	Cultural expression of joy	Cultural/ family
Exodus 15:20–21	Miriam 'took a timbrel […] and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances'	Women dance after Israel's deliverance from Egypt	Thanksgiving, worship, embodied prophecy	Sacred/ worship
Exodus 32:19	Moses 'saw the calf, and the dancing'	Israelites dance around the golden calf	Dance directed toward a false god	Idolatrous/ negative
Judges 11:34	Jephthah's 'daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances'	Daughter celebrates her father's return	Family and community celebration	Secular/ social
1 Samuel 18:6	'the women came out […] singing and dancing, to meet king Saul'	Celebrating David's victory over Goliath	National joy, recognition of God's hand	Secular/ celebratory

2 Samuel 6:14–16	'David danced before the LORD with all his might'	Bringing the ark to Jerusalem	Worship, thanksgiving, spiritual expression	Sacred/ religious
1 Chronicles 15:29	'David dancing and playing'	Bringing the ark to Jerusalem	Worship and praise	Sacred
Psalm 30:11	'Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing'	Personal expression of deliverance	Worship of restoration	Sacred
Psalm 149:3	'Let them praise his name in the dance'	Command to praise God through dance	Worship, spiritual offering	Sacred
Psalm 150:4	'Praise him with the timbrel and dance'	Comprehensive doxology	Worship and praise	Sacred
Ecclesiastes 3:4	'a time to mourn, and a time to dance'	Dance as part of life's rhythm	Expression of joy in God's order	Secular/ human
Jeremiah 31:4, 13	'shalt go forth in the dances' 'the virgin rejoice in the dance'	God promises Israel restoration	Symbol of healing and restoration	Sacred/ joyful
Lamentations 5:15	'our dance is turned into mourning'	National lament and loss	Dance mirrors	Contextual/ symbolic

			communal joy or grief	
Matthew 11:17 / Luke 7:32	'We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced'	Jesus illustrates human unresponsiveness	Social illustration	Cultural imagery
Matthew 14:6 / Mark 6:22	'the daughter of Herodias danced before them'	Dance leads to John's execution	Cautionary example of misuse	Negative/ secular
Luke 15:25	The elder son 'heard music and dancing'	Prodigal son's return celebrated	Joy, communal celebration, restoration	Sacred/ cultural

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

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Single Motherhood as a Question of Ecclesial Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ecclesial Belonging as a Theological Category

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Research Context and Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

Findings: Participation without Full Belonging

Single mothers are already present

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

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

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

Diverse pathways into single motherhood

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

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

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

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

Stigma as an ecclesial barrier

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

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

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

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

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

The emotional cost of conditional belonging

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

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

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

Financial pressure and the limits of spiritualised care

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

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

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

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

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

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

Childcare and the hidden architecture of exclusion

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

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

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

The paradox of existing church support

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

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

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

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

Single mothers as agents of ministry

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

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

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

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

From Welfare to Ecclesial Participation

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

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

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

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

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

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

Five Dimensions of Ecclesial Belonging

Presence

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

Recognition

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

Participation

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

Empowerment

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

Leadership

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

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

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

Reimagining Pastoral Leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

Institutionalising Belonging in the PCEA

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

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

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

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

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

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

Listening to Single Mothers as Co-Creators of Ministry

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

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

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

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

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

African Theological Implications

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Practical Recommendations

Establish consistent support structures

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

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

Develop professional counselling networks

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

Address stigma explicitly

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

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

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

Integrate economic empowerment

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

Remove practical barriers to participation

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

Open leadership pathways

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

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

Establish participatory evaluation

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

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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One in Christ? Ethnocentrism in the Kenyan Church: a Paradox of Romans 10:12

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Abstract

This article examines Romans 10:12 as a Pauline theological response to ethnocentrism. It applies this response to the Kenyan church. Although studies have addressed negative ethnicity, political tribalism, church polarisation, and ecclesial schisms in Kenya, this article offers a more focused contribution by reading Romans 10:12 exegetically and socio-culturally as a theological corrective to ethnic superiority within Christian communities. Paul's declaration that there is 'no distinction between Jew and Greek' because there is 'the same Lord of all' challenges any ethnic privilege that seeks to rival Christian identity. This article, therefore, correlates Jew-Greek tension in Paul's context with Kenyan patterns of ethnic exclusion in church leadership, fellowship, and public witness. It argues that Romans 10:12 provides a theological foundation for resisting ethnocentric superiority. It also fosters interethnic fellowship and recovers the church's mission as a visible community of reconciliation. The article further shows that shared lordship, equal access to grace, and unity in Christ undermine ethnic privilege and support practical ecclesial renewal. It therefore proposes practical ecclesial responses grounded in these Pauline themes.

Introduction

How can ethnocentric divisions have such a profound impact on a church when Paul declares that **"**there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him" (Rom. 10:12, NIV)?

Ethnocentrism is not a new issue or one that has disappeared. It remains a persistent challenge in many societies, including the Christian community in Kenya. Kenya's colonial past and ethnic conflicts have shaped society in ways that have reinforced ethnocentric attitudes. In such attitudes, one ethnic group may view itself as superior to others. This article looks at the ethnocentric tension in Kenya from a sociocultural perspective to demonstrate the presence of legacies of colonial practices in ethnic relations in Kenyan Christianity. Kenya's ethnic divisions are examined within the context of the colonial administration, which classified, dominated, and occasionally favoured ethnic groups. These practices further solidified social divides and affected access to land, education, leadership and public employment (Berman 1998; Kwatemba 2008; Ndege 2009:1–12). The colonial 'divide and rule' thinking has helped to explain the assimilation of ethnic identity into political rivalry, institutional leadership, and social integration in Kenya (Kenya Human Rights Commission 2018:14–22; Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission 2013:45–60). This larger social world in which the Kenyan church emerged meant that ecclesial communities were not free of the influences of ethnic loyalties that they had had previously. Ethnic identity has remained important in some settings. It has shaped leadership, worship practices, denominational affiliation, and fellowship. As a result, the church's public profession of unity was not always matched by unity in practice (Ekitala and Wosyanju 2015; Mutuma and Kiboi 2023; wa Gatumu 2019). Within this context, Romans 10:12 provides a theological basis for challenging ethnocentrism. It also supports the formation of a more inclusive and reconciled ecclesial community.

In recent years, the problem of negative ethnicity has also been an issue of soteriology and of the church in theological reflection in Africa. Mutuma and Kiboi (2023) offer important descriptions of negative ethnicity and schism in the Kenyan church. Their discussion goes beyond treating these issues as merely sociological. It presents them as contradictions of the saving and reconciling work of Christ. This article continues this work but focuses on Romans 10:12 and proposes that it offers an exegetical and theological tool for addressing ethnocentrism in the life of the church in Kenya.

Method

This article uses a sociocultural exegetical method. First, it situates Romans 10:12 within Paul's wider argument about Jew-Greek equality, shared lordship, and universal access to salvation (Dunn 1998:351–354; Esler 2003:211–218; Stanley 1997). Second, it examines contextual evidence from the Kenyan context. This includes public reports, scholarly literature, and ecclesial studies on ethnocentrism. These sources address ethnic identity, leadership, fellowship, and church witness (Kamara 2010:135–140; Mutuma and Kiboi 2023; National Cohesion and Integration Commission 2023:6–8; wa Gatumu 2019). Third, it helps to put the Pauline text into a controlled theological discussion with the Kenyan context. The study cannot be said to suggest that the relationship between Jews and Greeks in the first century and the relationship between the various Kenyan ethnic groups are the same. Instead, it makes analogical comparisons: both contexts indicate how social identity can be a boundary of superiority that excludes and breaks fellowship (Esler 2003:211–218; Njoroge and Kirori 2024:357–365). Therefore, the approach adopted is a Romans 10:12 theological lens for assessing ethnocentrism in the Kenyan church. It does so without making a one-to-one historical comparison.

Theoretical Aspects of Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is another important concept that should be defined before implementing the teachings of Paul in the Kenyan church. Ethnocentrism, coined by William Graham Sumner in 1906, is a notion of cultural narrow-mindedness when people or communities belittle other cultures and glorify their own (Njoroge and Kirori 2024:357). The ideology encourages the superiority of in-groups, discrimination against non-in-groups, and support of one's own ethnic group, which is very close to the concept of tribalism as presented by Musvosvi (2010:45). The presence of ethnocentrism is commonly regarded as a harmful process resulting in dividing, segregating, and socially unstable situations, which are frequently followed by the aggression of strangers (Onyancha 2022:97). In Kenya, ethnocentrism manifests itself as tribalism, ethnic favouritism, and social exclusion. However, in the Graeco-Roman world, it was manifested as conflict between Jews and non-Jews. The Christian objective is not cultural assimilation, whereby communities sink into

uniformity and lose their identity, but rather reconciled diversity: ethnic identities are made subordinate to the unity of Christ as Lord.

Similar to the early church, the Kenyan Christian community struggles with ethnocentrism. Ethnic allegiance frequently triumphs over Christian brotherhood, causing divides along tribal lines despite the church's theological teaching on oneness. Scholars have pointed out that this kind of ethnocentrism in the Kenyan church affects members' spiritual lives as well as the church's mission, making it a sociocultural problem in addition to a theological one. According to Nyaundi (2015:54–84), ethnocentrism in Kenya compromises the church's capacity to serve a varied society by frequently excluding ethnic groups from leadership or positions of authority inside churches.

Ethnocentrism in Kenya and in the Kenyan Christian Community

One of Kenya's most serious societal challenges, since independence, has been tumultuous ethnocentric relations. Kenya's coloniser, Britain, utilised the 'divide and rule' scheme by capitalising on ethnic groupings to their advantage in governing the rebellious indigenous groups (Njoroge and Kirori 2024:358). Such perpetuated divisions among the indigenous groups resulted in the current chronic ethnocentrism. There is also ethnic stereotyping that has led to social suspicion among communities in Kenya. It is not necessary to rehash stereotypes of ethnic groups as such, but it is enough to say that stereotyping communities into caricatures increases mistrust. The theological interest of this article is not the number or size of Kenya's ethnic groups. Kenya has many ethnic communities, including larger groups such as the Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, and Kamba. The concern is the possibility that ethnic identity may become a basis for exclusion, suspicion, and superiority within the church (Mbugua 2008:3–4; Ndonye, Yieke, and Onyango 2015:45–47).

The number of ethnic group clusters in Kenya varies depending on the classification scheme, with forty-two in 1969 and over seventy in 2019. Ethnic groups are often referred to in terms of their larger ethno-linguistic groups, such as the Bantu, Nilotic, and Cushitic groups in Kenya. The associations of these classifications are important for descriptive purposes but should not be regarded as theological or moral types. The important thing to note for this

article is that the Kenyan community is diverse and is spread out across the counties, which means that the social environment in which churches practise fellowship, leadership, and witness varies from county to county (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019:7; Njoroge and Kirori 2024:357–358).

All facets of Kenyan society are affected by ethnocentrism, including the educational system. Illustratively, unstable ethnic relations in Kenyan universities have been established regarding the admission of students, the hiring of personnel, the makeup of university councils, the appointment of vice-chancellors and chairpersons of university councils, and the distribution of universities and their constituent colleges across the nation's counties (Taaliu 2017:22). Intending to increase inclusivity, on Friday, 17 November 2023, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) launched an audit report on diversity and ethnicity in the public sector. The report showed that more than eighty per cent of jobs were held by members of ten ethnic communities. It also found that twenty-nine ethnic communities held approximately one per cent of the reported jobs (National Cohesion and Integration Commission, 2023:6). An employment diversity audit also revealed differential ethnic representation in parliament and other public institutions (Committee on National Cohesion and Equal Opportunity, 2023:195). The report also revealed that the employment distributions were highly concentrated in some counties, with Bomet county having a higher percentage (3,268 of the 3,357 workers, 97%) of Kalenjin, while Kisii had a lower percentage (26 of the 3,357 workers) (National Cohesion and Integration Commission, 2023:6). These statistics are simply included here in a spirit of comparison, not to point fingers at any community but to illustrate the overall social context of unity and leadership in Kenyan churches. Given this state of affairs, the infiltration and socio-settings in which the Kenyan church operates are antagonistic; the church has regrettably become an accomplice of ethnocentrism (Aylward 1999:28–29).

Kenya's post-election violence in 2007–2008 was one of the biggest episodes of ethnicised political violence any country has ever seen (Oucho 2010; Waki, McFadyen, and Kambale 2008). There were much ethnic-voting-bloc politics and increased suspicion among communities in this regard. Other media platforms were also reportedly used to spread ethnic hostility during the crisis.

These included some vernacular radio stations and emerging social media spaces (Makinen and Kuira 2008:331).

A high price was paid for the instability of ethnic relations. The immediate impact of the post-election violence was loss of life, displacement, destruction of property, and long-term social trauma (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2008:8). Evangelical churches in Kenya were also faulted for not giving an adequate united witness in and after the crisis (Nyaundi 2015:99). This has been described by scholars as being impacted by the ethnic polarisation (Aylward 1999:28–29; Kamara 2010:135). Wa Gatumu (2019:194) asserts:

> Unfortunately, negative ethnicity is also rife in Kenyan churches. […] In fact, the tendency to manipulate ethnic identities prevails in all Christian churches like in the political circles. A person not belonging to an ethnic group in a region where the church is confined does not qualify for leadership. The loyalty of church leaders usually stops within their ethnic groups rather than the Christian faith.

Ethnocentrism in the Kenyan church has been a significant challenge undermining its unity. The church in Kenya has not only been described as the birthplace of negative ethnicity (Nyaundi 2015:57), but also as ethnically polarised, with church members often unable to transcend their ethnic identities (Kamara 2010:135). Aylward (1999:28–29) states: 'The church has become both a victim and an accomplice of ethnocentrism'. Ekitala and Wosyanju (2015:56) concur:

> In Kenya as in other countries in Africa and around the world, the church is divided, compromised and at times even silenced.

Since they cannot overcome ethnic attachments, Kenyan Christians, though a group of Christians, often mirror the ethnic differences that exist in the society (Kamara 2010:135).

One of the significant impacts on Kenyan politics, education, and religion has been ethnocentrism or the belief that the ethnic group one belongs to is the

best. Ethnocentrism is not a political issue *per se*; it is a social issue that occurs in all spheres of life. The church is not exempt from these ethnocentric differences. Although the Kenyan church has taught equality and unity, ethnic differences have polarised Christian communities because of the differences that have influenced leadership, congregational compositions, and denominational affiliations (Kamara 2010:135). Ethnocentrism still influences the leadership organisation of churches, the relations between denominations, and the apportionment of resources (Oluoch 2015:136).

Ethnocentrism also impacts the life of the church through the composition of congregations, the selection of leadership, the allocation of resources, and the church's denominational identity. Previous research found similarities between churches in Kenya and the broader Kenyan environment with respect to region and ethnicity (Ekitala and Wosyanju 2015:55–64; Kamara 2010:135, 140; Lee 2000:14; Wandera 2016:783–793). The studies, however, should be used critically. They reveal trends and attitudes among groups sampled, and not evidence that all members or all congregations in any specifically named denomination are ethnocentric. For this reason, this article employs them as contextual markers instead of comprehensive empirical evidence.

First, even though the Roman Catholic Church is one of the most ancient Christian organisations in Kenya and is ethnically diverse, the ethnocentric affiliation within the church was somewhat predetermined by the missionary activity in the country. Certain missionary groups targeted the representatives of certain ethnicities, which resulted in the creation of a regional cluster of Catholic members (Oluoch 2015:134). To illustrate, central Kenya, dominated by the Kikuyu, has a more equitable Catholic and Protestant population, whereas the Luhya and Kisii of Nyanza and western Kenya have a large population of Catholics. Missionary histories shaped regional concentrations of Christian traditions in different parts of Kenya. Such regional concentration does not automatically prove ethnocentrism, but it can influence local leadership expectations, congregational identity, and perceptions of representation. Ethnocentrism is manifested in local church management and appointing leaders, and this can influence internal dynamics and representation, despite the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church, which is meant to surpass ethnocentric identities (Gifford 2009:78–79, 211).

The denominational examples should thus be considered illustrative in nature, and not an exhaustive list. The issue is not whether any single denomination is ethnocentric. Rather, Christianity in Kenya exists within a wider social context where ethnic identity can influence membership, leadership, worship, and trust. Across the Roman Catholic Church, missionary history also helped to shape localised Catholic identity in some communities, and so demonstrated that the sense of belonging can at times be more geographically than theologically based (Gifford 2009:78–79, 211; Oluoch 2015:134). Sometimes in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, the ethnic clustering has been exacerbated by the founder-led nature of their institutional models, their mother-tongue worship style, and culturally oriented preaching within often fast-growing urban congregations (Gifford 2009:81). Early Africa Inland Church mission activity among the Kamba in Ukambani, and later among communities such as the Kalenjin and Maasai, influenced its membership and leadership patterns. These patterns later shaped perceptions of ethnic clustering, leadership representation, and resource distribution. The Anglican Church of Kenya, however, has had its own share of doubts regarding ethnic representation in church leadership and the governance of the dioceses, which tend to be dominated by the Kikuyu, because of its historical links with central Kenya (Githiga 2001:118; Mbugua 2008:4; Ndonye, Yieke, and Onyango 2015:45–47). Strong Kikuyu association in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, due to missionary Scots from central Kenya, has had an impact on Presbyterian membership, liturgy language, and perceptions of inclusion for non-Kikuyu believers (Gifford 2009:79; Gitari 1996:112). The examples reveal that the problem of ethnocentrism is not only political and cultural but also ecclesial, as fellowship, leadership, and representation in church may be influenced in different ways by ethnic identity, which is contrary to the church's confession of unity. The pattern is challenged in Romans 10:12, which lays the basis of Christian fellowship in the lordship of Christ rather than in ethnic identity.

Yet, stable ethnic relations in the Kenyan Christian church are paramount. The church is a community of believers of all ages, from various distinctions and expressions, and dissimilar cultural and tribal settings. Jesus established and envisioned a diverse yet cohesive and united church (John 17:22–23, 1 Corinthians 12:13) as a result of her transcendence of tribal restrictions. Jesus himself prayed for unity in his church: 'I pray that they may all be one' (John

17:21). Correspondingly, there are numerous admonitions of stable ethnic relations within Paul's epistles, e.g., the church possesses 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Ephesians 4:5), or Paul's defence of the claim that since they 'were baptized into Christ', they are all 'one in Christ Jesus', and that there is no such thing as a Jew or a Greek (Galatians 3:27–28). Further, to the Romans Paul contends that since all share and are ruled by the same lord, Jesus Christ, there ought to be no difference between Jews and Greeks (Romans 10:12). This is besides other exhortations of the local audience to regard one another as 'one body in Christ' (Romans 12:5; see also 1 Corinthians 12). Such admonitions are commonly cited as the scriptural foundation for oneness among Jesus' followers, with the intention of freeing society from ethnocentrism for stable ethnic relations.

Christ had a vision of a united church, but the relations within the Kenyan church remain unstable due to its ethnic nature. Ethnocentrism undermines the ethical authority of the church and its capacity to be an example of true unity, which casts doubt on the reality of the lived power of the redemptive work of Christ through the trials of ethnocentric divisions (Romans 10:12). The same strains had existed between Jews and Greeks in the case of Paul when he encouraged them to be united regardless of tribal lines. This study thus juxtaposes Jewish-Greek relationships in the Graeco-Roman world and modern Kenyan Christianity to bring out the parallels and ethnocentric predicaments.

The ethnocentrism within the Kenyan church is an antithesis to Romans 10:12, which postulates equality in the eyes of God irrespective of ethnicity. Rather than cutting across social lines, the church has been a reflection of the tribal allegiances of Kenya, and tribal identity has oftentimes taken precedence over spiritual identities. wa Gatumu (2019:194) notes that Kenyan Christians find it hard to detach faith and ethnicity, which is weakening the mission of the church. Based on Romans 10:12 and corresponding unity passages (John 17:22–23, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Ephesians 4:1–6), this article presents a sociocultural critique of what causes churches to disintegrate as a result of ethnocentrism. It further suggests both theological and practical solutions to achieve convincing inclusiveness, reconciliation, and genuine unity in Christ.

Sociocultural Context of Romans 10:12

It is important to contextualise the sociocultural aspects that shaped the early Christian church to determine the meaning of the unity message in Romans 10:12. It involves examining the ethnocentric contact between Greeks and Jews in the Graeco-Roman civilisation that was marked by high degrees of cultural superiority and ethnocentric conflicts. Paul's words in Romans 10:12 are 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all'. It was not just a call for harmony. It was a declaration of theology, which stood in opposition to ethnic hierarchy in a socially stratified world.

The pervasive ethnocentrism of the time was forcefully challenged by the apostle Paul's argument that Jews and Gentiles had equal standing in Christian society. The Jewish people considered themselves superior to other ethnic groups, especially the Greeks and gentiles, because of their special covenantal relationship with God (Sanders 1977:178). Jewish laws, religious traditions, and customs, which distinguished them from the rest of society, supported this viewpoint (Dunn 1998:351). However, the Greeks also considered their culture to be the best one. This was because of ancient Greek philosophy and the historical context. As a result, they tended to dismiss other ethnicities as barbarian (Hall 2002:57). This profound rift had an impact on the cohesiveness of early Christian society.

The early church had a hard time accommodating the gentile believers. This was because most of the Jews were insisting on the observance of Jewish rituals, which included circumcision, prohibited foods, and other practices (Acts 15:1–21). The Jerusalem council arose due to this dialogue and brought the challenges of integrating multiple ethnicities and cultural orientations into the same religious group (Witherington 1995:105). In his letters, especially in the letters to Romans and Galatians, Paul says that righteousness rests with faith and not by adherence to the Mosaic law. Galatians, for example, underlines that faith in Christ exceeds such cultural and ethnocentric fences (Galatians 3:28; see also Romans 3:29–30).

This means that the ethnic wrangles between the Greeks and Jews were a threat of serious consequences to the cohesiveness of the early church. Without these differences being resolved, the purpose of the church was

under threat by not being a community of believing people who trusted in Christ. The message that is important in the rejection of these ethnocentric divisions and the enhancement of a church that appreciated unity in diversity was contained in the message of Paul in Romans 10:12 (Esler 2003:211). This is a biblical idea of unity that creates an essential basis for resolving similar ethnocentric aspects in modern Christian communities, including the Kenyan church. Difficulties faced by early Christians in solving the ethnocentric tensions can be similar to those existing in Kenya today, since the sense of ethnicity is likely to affect social and political interactions (Githiga 2001:89). Romans 10:12 calls for the rejection of ethnocentric boundaries that treat cultural difference as a basis for superiority, exclusion, or unequal access to Christian fellowship. The teachings of Paul are still applicable in contemporary society in promoting unity among various Christian groups when the social-cultural setting of the early church is reviewed.

Jew-Greek Ethnocentric Relationships in the Graeco-Roman World: Towards an Analysis of Romans 10:12

One of the greatest challenges the early church faced was its growth from a Jewish foundation to reach a greater extent of the gentile population. Due to this development, as argued, the Jews and Greeks were subjected to serious cultural and ethnic challenges because they had distinct views regarding racial and cultural superiority. Jews even had an ethnocentric nature that demeaned the gentiles, given that they held that they were the chosen people of God. The history of Jewish isolation and their personal connection with God were other factors that supported this stance, especially the law that God gave to Moses and the covenant between God and Abraham. Equally, many Greeks influenced by Hellenistic culture adopted ideas of the superiority of the Greek language, education, and civic ideals and often referred to non-Greek peoples as culturally inferior (Milton 2009; Stanley 1997).

This Jewish-Greek rivalry in early Christian culture is widely recorded in the New Testament. This is illustrated especially in Acts 15, where a quarrel arose over whether the Gentiles who had been converted to Christianity should follow the Jewish traditions. The Greek Christians were the ones who did not believe that they should abide by the Jewish traditions, such as circumcision, to fully fit into Christian society. One of the major changes that took place

against the ethnocentric perspective of the Jews was the fact that the Gentiles did not need to be subjected by force to behave as Jews.

Paul addressed this issue directly in Romans 10:12 by saying there was no difference between Jew and Greek. This is a radical reconsideration that is necessary regarding ethnic relations within the church. Paul issued a declaration that stressed the equality of all believers as the body of Christ, irrespective of their nationality. Furthermore, he avowed that faith in Christ relativises ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. As a result of the intense ethnic separations among the members of the early Christian community, this needed unity was associated with significant social and cultural implications as well as theological ones.

Sociocultural Analysis of Romans 10:12: A Strategy for Unifying the Church and Addressing Ethnocentrism

In this sociocultural discussion, the way through which Paul attempted to conquer ethnocentrism and create unity in the early church is discussed in Romans 10:12. This discussion provides the context of the teaching of Paul in this passage and shows how it can be applied as a model to fight ethnocentrism in contemporary Kenyan Christian society. Paul's interactions with Jewish and Greek mindsets throughout the first century are examined in this study, which provides insightful guidance on fostering inclusion and unity in a multicultural setting (Whiteside 1961:218), such as the modern Kenyan Christian community.

Exegesis of Romans 10:12

The denial of ethnic distinction in Romans 10:12 should be read alongside Romans 3:22–30, where Jews and gentiles are equally in need of God's saving righteousness in Jesus Christ. It should also be read in relation to Romans 4, where Paul appeals to Abraham's faith before ethnic identity markers. This wider Pauline argument is echoed in Galatians 3:25–28. The claim is not just an isolated slogan of tolerance, but is closely connected to Paul's argument that salvation in Christ makes ethnic privilege look ridiculous and, in the end, constitutes one people under one Lord.

Romans 10:12 in Greek reads: 'οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολὴ Ἰουδαίου τε καὶ Ἕλληνος, ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς κύριος πάντων, πλουτῶν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους αὐτόν'. A direct translation of this would be:

> For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek,
> for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him.

According to verse 12, Paul's opening phrase is 'οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολὴ Ἰουδαίου τε καὶ Ἕλληνος' ('for there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek'). The word *for* (*γάρ*) links this verse to the preceding verse. In verse 11, Paul cited Isaiah 28:16, which states that 'everyone [*πάς*] who believes will not be ashamed'. Everyone from every nation and family, irrespective of ethnicity, is incorporated by the word *πάς*. This implies that faith-based freedom from shame wasn't exclusive to Jews. Then Paul proceeds in verse 12 to further clarify and explain this idea by stating unequivocally that there is no distinction (*διαστολὴ*) between Jews (*Ἰουδαίου*) and Greeks (*Ἕλληνος*).

The word *διαστολὴ* denotes difference, distinction, eminence, excellence, or disparity, which also implies something outstanding or unique (Bauer et al. 2019:207). When it comes to salvation or justification before God, there is no superiority or eminence that the Jews have over the Greeks. The ethnocentric hierarchy of the first century is being challenged by Paul's claim that there is no difference between Jews and Greeks in terms of salvation (Whiteside 1961:218).

The argument that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek ('οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολὴ Ἰουδαίου τε καὶ Ἕλλ ηνος') was designed to destroy ethnocentric relationships between Jews and the gentiles. The term 'Jews' refers to people who are subject to the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic law. 'Greek[s]' are non-Jews who were influenced by the culture and language of the Greeks. In sum, 'Jew and Greek' functions as a representative pair for humanity in Paul's argument. Both covenant insiders and gentile outsiders stand in equal need of the same Lord. Paul confirms that all have the same conditions to receive salvation. This was a threat to Jewish beliefs about covenantal privilege and the superiority of the nation. Jews had also prided themselves on superiority due to their covenantal position (Whiteside

1961:220). The apostles intended to create this new reality of inclusion (Acts 10:9, Galatians 3:28).

Romans 10:12 eliminates any difference in terms of descent or carnal privilege and past religious decrees. According to Whiteside (1961:218), although the Mosaic law separated Jews from the gentiles, this separation was only temporal. It was a greater plan of God to unite the two factions. Jews and gentiles needed to be one in the body of Christ by removing the law (Ephesians 2:13–18). Jewish privilege was on the basis of covenantal and legal privilege. Associating with the prestige of Hellenistic language, education, philosophy, and civic life, Greek identity could also be a source of disparagement towards non-Greek peoples. Paul provides a solution to both in Romans 10:12. He appeals to unity, inclusiveness, and joint lordship in Christ. This is a message that challenges the social and theological obstacles of the first century. It also fosters peaceful ethnic coexistence as opposed to ethnocentric superiority and separatism.

Then Paul goes on to offer two reasons why ethnocentric superiority has been dissolved. First, for the same Lord is lord of all ('ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς κύριος πάντων') and, second, 'πλουτῶν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους αὐτόν' (is rich to all who call upon him). For Paul, the shared lordship ought to be the basis for diminishing the ethnocentric superiority of either Jews or Greeks. Asserting that Jews and gentiles have equal access to redemption, the term 'the same Lord' (*ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς κύριος*) highlights the shared lordship of Christ. The Jews are no longer given special favour because of their race or observance of the Mosaic law, which is a fundamental principle at the heart of Paul's teaching. The theological foundation for unity is the shared dominion (Bauer et al. 2019:348; Whiteside 1961:222). Paul's assertion that 'the same Lord is Lord of all' serves to affirm that all believers, regardless of their ancestry, have the same connection with God. This religious solidarity aimed at overcoming the cultural differences and building a new world in which individuals of different origins were accepted instead of being demeaned. Paul urged his Christians to embrace a common doctrine of lordship that transcended ethnic boundaries. The church was to serve as an example of harmony, embodying the gospel's inclusiveness. This could be in agreement with Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

The remote context for this argument is Romans 3, which argues that both Jews and Greeks are sinners in need of salvation through Christ. In Romans 3:22 and 29–30, Paul claimed that there was (and still is) no difference between Jews and Greeks due to sin. Every person is a sinner who is guilty before God. Equally, salvation for both is only by Christ and by faith alone. There is therefore no distinction in this case between individuals or nations since salvation is contingent solely upon faith, which is necessary regardless of whether it is possessed by a Jew or a gentile. In Romans 10:12, Paul directly confronts ethnocentrism by stating that there is no difference between Jews and Greeks because they are both equal in the eyes of God. He underlines that everyone can be saved through faith in Christ, not by following traditional or ethnic customs.

Consequently, that saviour is 'the Lord of all' (*αὐτὸς κύριος πάντων*). This *κύριος* is Christ. That is to say, through redemption, he has bought with his blood all, both the Jews and the gentiles, so that the shared *κύριος* has the same equal propriety in one as another, and they (both Jews and gentiles) have the same claim to him, and the same encouragement to believe in him, for righteousness and life. Meaning, there is no lord (*κύριος*) who is kinder, more loving, and friendlier to Jews than to gentiles; rather, he is the same to everyone (*πάντων*), a common father to all men.

Besides the shared lordship, the second ground for dissolving ethnocentric superiority is that the same Lord 'is rich to all who call upon Him' (*πλουτῶν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους αὐτόν*). Whether a Greek or a Jew, the same Lord is rich to everyone who calls on him. 'Rich' (*πλουτῶν*) is an abundant state, usually associated with riches; nevertheless, when applied to God, it denotes an abundance of kindness or benevolence towards others (Ephesians 2:4, 1 Timothy 6:17, 18). Paul emphasises the necessity of a faith-based unity that cuts beyond racial or cultural barriers by insisting that salvation is inclusive (Whiteside 1961:225). In this context, most properly, because of his abundance of kindness and mercy towards everyone in the salvation plan, God is thus considered to be rich towards humanity, Jews and gentiles inclusive. He is gracious, generous, and unrestricted in giving everyone who approaches him forgiveness, justification, and sanctification. All who call on God will receive their needs, for he can supply them. As a result, there's no cause for Greeks or

Jews to be envious of others' blessings, as if anything were lost as a result of other ethnicities' inclusion.

To summarise, Paul's anti-ethnocentric argument continues in Romans 10:12, where he makes three related claims. First of all, *οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολὴ* is an assertion that there is no salvific difference between Jew and Greek. Second, *ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς κύριος πάντων* establishes Christian unity as sharing in the lordship of Christ. Third, *πλουτῶν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους αὐτόν* reminds us of the overflow of God's grace towards everyone who calls upon him. These claims break the Jewish belief of covenantal superiority and the Greek mindset of cultural pride, placing the basis of salvation in Christ and not in ethnic, cultural, or inherited privilege.

In short, the following are the four main terms and implications of Romans 10:12. First, the Greek phrase *οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολὴ* ('there is no difference'), which is connected to Romans 10:11 with the usage of *γάρ*, was intended to highlight the openness of salvation to everyone and rejection of the ethnocentric hierarchies of the first century. The second phrase is *Ἕλληνος τε καὶ Ἰουδαίου* ('Jew and Greek'). This was a designation of the two ethnicities, Jews, who were under the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic law, and Greeks, who are the representatives of the gentiles. However, it does not give any pretence of the superiority of Jews. The third phrase, *ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς κύριος ράντων* ('because the same Lord is Lord of all things'), assents to the universality of Christ and the theological unity that it creates. And the fourth phrase is *πλουτῶν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους αὐτόν* ('is rich to all who call upon him'). This affirmed that their belonging to the covenant was faith-based rather than based on their ethnic superiority.

Romans 10:12 also makes the argument of anti-ethnocentrism by Paul, who openly opposes the Jewish principle of ethnic and covenantal superiority. The fact that Paul included Greeks (gentiles) in the scheme of God saving everyone is extreme because it asserts that salvation is based on faith in Christ, the lord of all, not within racial and cultural backgrounds. Based on the belief that all are equal in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28), Paul denies the possibility of an ethnic distinction (*διαστολὴ*) in the saving purpose of God (Whiteside 1961:227, 229). Jews and Greeks, thus, are on par before God, and they require

the same grace through faith in Christ, as Paul tries to break down the social and theological barriers that classified them.

Implications of Romans 10:12 for Overcoming Ethnocentrism in the Kenyan Church

The interpretation of Romans 10:12 offers an important theological ground on which to deal with the issue of ethnocentrism in Kenya, where tribalism remains a cliché that cuts across society and the church. Paul provides a basis that will help in destroying ethnic divisions and encourages Kenyan Christians to accept equality, just as he did to the Jews and the Greeks by stating that there is one Lord and that everyone should have equal access to God (Whiteside 1961:238). Unlike the ethnocentric practice in society and the church, Romans 10:12 focuses on faith and salvation but not on ethnicity. It challenges the Kenyan church to embrace inclusiveness through interethnic fellowship, good leadership, and biblical teachings. It further demands conscious opposition to tribal favouritism to allow the church to portray true oneness in Christ.

Romans 10:12 also significantly conveys a lot of values to the Kenyan church in fighting ethnocentrism. The first one is equality in Christ. According to Paul, there is no ethnic superiority in terms of spirituality. And, as such, there is no distinction between Jews and Greeks. This makes the notion that certain tribes are more blessed or favoured by God questionable in Kenya, where social and political affiliations are often based on tribal affiliations. Every believer is equally given an opportunity to be saved, irrespective of tribe.

Second, it is the universal lordship of Christ that, despite ethnicity, ought to be a source of unity to the entirety of Kenya. Christ governs all the ethnic groups, as is outlined in the statement that 'the same Lord is Lord of all'. The Kenyan church and its leadership need to resist the inclination to open tribalistic churches that serve to divide the church ethnically even more, instead of establishing unity in the body of Christ. Moreover, none of the tribes can boast of owning the gospel.

Third, the grace of God should unite all believers in Kenya, regardless of ethnicity, as it is inclusive. God, according to Paul, has an abundant grace for

everyone who addresses him, and the richness of the divine grace is available to all. In Kenya, where tribal affiliation sometimes plays a role in the distribution of resources and leadership roles in churches, this fact is a reminder to the congregants that the benefits of God are granted to those who trust in Christ. Nothing should be ethnised.

Fourth, unity based on faith must be prioritised over ethnicity in the Kenyan church in an attempt to overcome ethnocentrism. Romans 10:12 challenges Christians to place their faith over their people and ethnocentric notions of their culture when ethnic pride is sometimes more vital than being Christian. The church must ensure it clarifies that there is a common identity between believers in Christ that transcends national and ethnic borders.

Practical Strategies for Overcoming Ethnocentrism in the Kenyan Church

Four ecclesial responses may be drawn from the theological logic of Romans 10:12. First, churches should teach that ethnic superiority is incompatible with Christian confession, because the same Lord reigns over all believers irrespective of ethnicity. Second, leadership selection should be based on spiritual maturity, integrity, and competence, not ethnic loyalty, regional pressure, or clan patronage. Third, worship and fellowship should intentionally build interethnic belonging through shared services, cross-community discipleship, and multilingual sensitivity. Fourth, the church should practise reconciliation by acknowledging ethnic prejudice, confessing communal failure, and cultivating a shared mission. These responses do not deny cultural identity. Rather, they place ethnic identity under the lordship of Christ and the unity of the gospel. In this way, the Kenyan church can model Christ-centred unity, interethnic fellowship, reconciled leadership, and national healing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Romans 10:12 provides a Pauline theological basis for confronting ethnocentrism in the Kenyan church. Paul's declaration that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek rests on two central claims: the same Lord reigns over all, and divine grace is rich toward all who call upon him. When applied to Kenyan Christianity, this text challenges ethnic superiority,

leadership exclusion, regional loyalties, and fellowship patterns that weaken the church's witness. The article has argued that the church's response must be both theological and practical. Shared lordship must shape preaching, leadership selection, worship, discipleship, and reconciliation. In this way, Romans 10:12 calls the Kenyan church to become a visible community of reconciled diversity, where ethnic identity is not erased but brought under the lordship of Christ and the unity of the gospel.

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Developing Curriculum for Urban Missions in Africa

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Abstract

Urban missions, in recent contexts, is the Christian mission's response to the shift in population from rural areas to urban centres. The phenomenal growth of urban centres, particularly in Africa, underscores the need to rethink how missions are conducted. Traditionally, missions have been considered a necessity in rural and underdeveloped places. However, with the massive movement of people into cities, there is a paradigm shift in how missions should be conceived and developed. In African theological institutions, mission studies have broadly categorised mission fields into rural contexts where emphasis has been laid on mono-cultural or cross-cultural missions. However, the contexts have changed with urbanisation and the growth of urban centres, as more people need to be reached with the gospel. This article shows the need for curriculum development to train gospel ministers for urban missions. The paper utilises the literature to provide an overview of urban missions, discuss the need to revise the curriculum, and contextualise it for the African context. The paper submits that curriculum development for African urban missions should prioritise raising mission practitioners to understand and adapt to city life and culture, proclaim the gospel appropriately to city dwellers, emphasise contextual theology of missions, equip mission leaders with skills that will help them mobilise and train others for urban missions, and emphasise the need for missional ecclesiology in city churches.

Introduction

Urbanisation has become a recurrent phenomenon in Africa since the mid-twentieth century. The phenomenon is not limited to Africa but is more pronounced due to internal migratory pressures fuelled by the belief that urban centres offer greater opportunities for a better life and a change in social status than rural areas. This influx of people to towns and villages indicates that most people targeted for salvation in traditional mission fields are now moving to urban centres and need the gospel. However, for a long time, mission studies curricula have apparently focused on designating rural and underdeveloped areas as mission fields, while cities have not been declared mission fields. There seems to be a shortage of scholarly work on how to engage with the reality of the world's changing landscape due to urbanisation, which could have helped some city churches that have been struggling to be missional in their immediate context reach people for Christ.

Therefore, the mission's curriculum in Africa must reflect the changing face of missions. It will equip mission practitioners to engage with the phenomenon of urbanisation and turn it to the advantage of Christian missions. This paper utilises the literature to provide an overview of urban missions, discuss curriculum development in missions, and develop a contextual missional curriculum for African theological institutions.

An Overview of Urban Missions

The world's landscape has been rapidly changing in recent decades, with people moving from agrarian communities (rural areas) to industrialised centres (towns and cities). This movement is common among youth as they pursue their dreams. Cities are rapidly expanding, a process known as urbanisation. Ali and Rahman (2024:153-155) define urbanisation as a pervasive and historical transformation driven by the population shift from rural to urban centres, fuelling the growth of cities and towns worldwide. Economic, political, and social factors resulting from globalisation have led to a shift in the population to urban areas. Industrial development, employment opportunities, migration, commercialisation, modernisation, improved transportation and communication, social factors, political turbulence, the growth of service centres, and market forces always influence urban pull.

Urbanisation has positive effects, including improved access to education and healthcare, enhanced communication, employment opportunities, recreational facilities, and generally superior infrastructure. Adverse effects include environmental pollution, global warming, overpopulation, homelessness, poverty, marginalisation, unemployment, rising crime, traffic congestion, overload of social amenities, and health problems. From Ali and Rahman's point of view, one of the main causes of urbanisation is people's movement from surrounding rural or underdeveloped areas into more developed regions, such as towns and cities, due to various reasons, known as migration. This migration presents both opportunities and liabilities to the evolving urban centres.

Furthermore, two major global migrations are identified: urbanisation, the movement of people from rural areas to urban centres, and international migration, the movement of people across state borders, which is changing the world's demographics. The overlap between the two migrations has posed a central concern for urban missions. These movements create opportunities for evangelism and other mission activities, such as church planting, social ministry, and cross-cultural and multicultural ministry. Also, these mission activities are structured in simple models for urban missions that factor in large congregations for worship and multiple small groups for discipleship and fellowship (Walters 2011:54-59). Thus, as urban centres rapidly expand, the church should also respond by strategically shifting its mission efforts. The spread of the gospel through evangelism and social ministry is about saving people's souls. If most of the people the churches target for missions in rural areas are moving to cities, the church should inevitably give more attention to missions in urban centres.

Moreover, Santos (2014) notes that, historically, people lived in rural areas, relying on agriculture and hunting to survive. By 1800, 3% of the world's population lived in cities. This percentage increased to 14 per cent by 1900; since 2007, more than 50 per cent of the world's population has lived in urban areas. The United Nations further projects that by 2050, over 70 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities. These realities challenge the church to give serious thought to how to minister the gospel in urban centres, as the Church is God's "Plan A" for reaching the cities, with no "Plan B". The church is not the building but God's people who should reveal God to the world

(70-72). Therefore, city churches should realise that they are God's primary agency for Missions in their locality. They should see urbanisation as an answered prayer, as many people who spend so much time preaching the gospel in rural places are coming out in droves to the city. Also, city churches should be missional and strategic to ensure that those migrating to the town encounter the gospel, which transforms them into agents of transformation in the world.

Moreover, there are numerous opportunities for missions in urban centres. People moving from rural areas or from one nation to another experience an overwhelming change in their social lives, which creates immense opportunities for believers and churches to reach out to them with the gospel and the demonstration of Christ's love. Another opportunity is that these people, when they move into urban areas, do not disconnect from their home base, which provides added opportunity for missions because, when converted in the city, they can facilitate the movement of the gospel back to their people in the home base (Walters 2011:54). Urban missions then could exploit the gap created by the social change factor occasioned by migration, to connect with immigrants and present Christ's message and love to them.

Furthermore, Paul Hoffman (2017:10-11) notes that urbanisation is changing the world. It is the contemporary defining trait that represents the significant and final shift of humans out of rural and agricultural life into cities, suggesting that humans will end this century as a "wholly urban species." This assertion clearly speculates that by 2100, there may be no place called a rural area again. However, it should be noted that missiological studies in Africa seem fixated on traditional or nationalistic methodological frameworks that emphasise rural missions over urban missions. (Norton, 2016:81). Although awareness and sensitisation to urban missions have begun in Africa, a growing interest has been observed in the academic attention given to urban missions.

Furthermore, Alawode and Jangado (2023:12) corroborate Hoffman's observation that emphasis has often been on rural missions carried out in underdeveloped places, but that recently, attention is being given to urban missions, which is peculiar because urban residents are familiar with churches and Christian programmes, which made some people feel they do not need missionaries. There may be many people in the city, but several are yet to be

effectively engaged with the gospel. Some urban residents view the church from a distance and are not necessarily part of it. Santos (2014:75-80), when discussing how urban missions can be engaged, identifies five models useful for urban missions: small groups that emphasise discipleship; churches becoming missional communities; church planting; leadership development; and churches engaging in social ministries by establishing centres of influence. He concludes that cities are at the epicentre of "God's earth-shaking movements" in contemporary times, and that the principles from the models he developed can be contextualised in any part of the world. These models help to engage people in the urban community practically with the gospel and secure their commitment towards the Christian faith. Some may not be peculiar to urban missions alone, but can be adopted and adapted to meet the urban missional need of helping people believe in Christ.

The world at large is experiencing expansive urbanisation. Africa, in particular, witnesses urbanisation largely driven by migration from rural areas to cities due to the concentration of power and development in cities (Tomuseni, 2018, 78). People are in search of better opportunities and livelihoods, which is the main urbanisation driver being witnessed on the continent. Also, it was noted that Sub-Saharan Africa has been identified as the region with the fastest urbanisation relative to other continents, at an alarming pace. According to reports from 1950, it had no cities with populations exceeding 1 million, but now has over 40 cities with populations over 1 million, and 11 of the 25 growing cities in the world are in Sub-Saharan Africa. With this reality comes the challenge of social invisibility, psychological overload, and social isolation for city dwellers (Abrahams-Appiah 2022:304). These challenges indicate that there is less communal interaction and a widening social gap in the cities.

Furthermore, Alawode and Jangado (2023:3-4) presented about five main challenges to urban missions, namely secularism, postmodernism, pluralism, multiculturalism, and social stratification. The challenge of secularism centres on people seeing religion as a fallacy. Postmodernism centres on self-worship and relegates God to the background. Pluralism presents the challenge of a wide range of religious teachings and practices dotting the city's landscape, making Christianity seem just one of many religions through which humans can find spiritual reality. Multiculturalism, as a common feature of urban centres, can create space for ethnocentrism that may hinder gospel proclamation.

Then, social stratification, in which people classify themselves into castes based on their social status, poses the challenge of segregation and division along social status. These challenges show diverse ideologies, beliefs, identities and statuses that characterise urban missions' experience, which mission practitioners should be aware of and prepared for.

Additionally, there are other challenges like demography (diverse demographic representations in age, education or religion), politics - where political decisions affect livelihoods and make people imbibe city culture, transforming their worldview. There are also ecclesial challenges, in which churches have diverse versions of the gospel due to their denominational traditions, theological interpretations, and competition for membership (Bakke, 2002:33-35). Ortiz (2022: 58) also notes the challenge of dynamism by stating that cities are dynamic, like culture, and it is in constant fluidity, which places demands on the church to constantly evolve strategies for urban missions due to political, economic, technological and sociological systemic changes in urban centres. These challenges, however diverse and difficult they may seem, should reinforce the impetus for churches to declare cities as immediate mission fields. The reason is that several people groups the churches are targeting, who are far away to reach with the gospel, may have some representation in the cities. Meeting the people groups in the cities with the gospel, regardless of the challenges, will be a strategic move that makes world evangelisation more feasible. Those reached in the cities may then carry the gospel message back to their home base. Ishola and Ugbedima (2023:6-7) note that urban centres are strategic in transmitting cultural, social, and ideological changes to surrounding areas, and that they can also serve as bases for spreading Christianity. Cities can serve as a springboard for reaching wider regions with the gospel if city churches become more intentional about missions in their immediate localities.

Meanwhile, city churches often struggle to reach the urban population with the gospel, probably because they have held on to traditional concepts and strategies of missions that perceive missions as reaching remote, uncivilised places with the gospel. Thus, city churches must employ effective programmes and methods to carry out urban missions and embrace new, creative, and strategic ways to address contemporary trends in the urban environment. One way of achieving the above is the emergence of Public theology, a well-

established discipline in South Africa, spearheaded by Ignatius Swart and Stephan de Beers, two leading scholars in its advocacy. The discipline focuses on how the church can address challenging situations in urban contexts and be part of the discourse that shapes urban experiences (Tomuseni, 2018: 96-97). This innovative approach must start with training and engaging Christian leaders to equip them with a theological background that supports proactive engagement with urban phenomena in their missions. To achieve this, there is a need to develop a curriculum for Church pastors, Mission Pastors, and Missionaries in theological institutions that addresses the theological response to urbanisation and the demographic realities of contemporary times, making missions available and appropriate for multitudes in urban centres that need the gospel.

Curriculum Development in Mission Studies

In other disciplines, educational curricula have been upgraded several times to address changing circumstances and make learning more relevant to field realities. Theological education should not be left out, necessitating curriculum reviews and development in theological institutions to meet the changing face of missions. Santos (2014:70) observes that the world is rapidly changing, and educators must adapt their curricula and pedagogy to prepare students for occupations that do not yet exist, using technologies yet to be invented to solve difficulties yet to be encountered. Thus, theological studies also need to adapt their knowledge to engage current realities. In a narrow sense, curriculum is the list of subjects offered in a school setting, such as a syllabus, course of study, or field of study, which is regarded as the traditional, scholarly and theoretical view of curriculum. However, from a broader, more progressive perspective, it is the overall learning experience of individuals in school and society. It is not just scholarly and theoretical, but also experiential and practical. Thus, curriculum development is a dynamic process that must reflect this dynamism, as development connotes systematic and progressive change. Therefore, curriculum development should be purposefully planned and progressive (Bilbao et al, 2008:5-6). A relevant curriculum must reflect current realities and equip students with practical skills to make their training applicable beyond the school walls.

Furthermore, Abdelbaki (2023), *A Guide to Curriculum Development: Purposes, Practices, Procedure. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370441134* describes and defines a curriculum as a structured document that clearly states the philosophy, goals, objectives, learning experiences, instructional resources, and assessments that encompass an educational programme. It is a guide intended to establish the philosophy and overarching goals and objectives the program is set to achieve. It establishes a sequence within and between levels of the programme and outlines a basic framework showing what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and how to know if it has been achieved. It allows flexibility and encourages experimentation and innovation in the programme implementation. Curriculum also promotes interdisciplinary approaches and suggests methods for assessing the programme's goals and objectives, and provides means for its revision and improvement. It also provides guidance on securing human, financial, and administrative resources for program implementation. Its development process includes planning, articulation, implementation and evaluation. Abdelbaki's position gives an exhaustive description of a curriculum as an all-encompassing directory for acquisition and implementation of knowledge and skills to solve existential problems.

Thus, Barron, (2025), *Theories and Models of Curriculum Development," https://www.start-teaching.com/theories-and-models-of-curriculum-development/* opines that the definition of curriculum varies in relation to "scope, structure and the breadth." He also notes that curriculum can be broken down into five areas, namely the official, actual, formal, informal, and hidden curriculum, and that it can be developed using several models. For example, the product model developed by Tyler (1949) and Bloom (1956) focuses on end results, the process model developed by Stenhouse (1975) focuses on procedures rather than product, the thematic model focuses on implementing themes within the learning environment, and the spiral model developed by Bruner (1960) focuses on learning through building up on previous knowledge. These models show that the curriculum focuses on knowledge acquisition, its methodology, and outcomes that prepare a student to implement what has been learned. Therefore, the curriculum is the key to making knowledge relevant to real-world societal experiences. Missiology is not left out in being relevant to societal realities; if the gospel is to bring people of the world to the saviour, those being prepared in theological schools must

be keen to acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to reach human souls with the gospel adequately and appropriately.

Moreover, curriculum development is also described as a planned, purposeful, progressive, and systematic process that produces positive improvements in the education sector. Societal changes necessitate that the educational sector be updated and addressed (Mohanasundaram 2018:S4). Thus, the primary curriculum is a purposive design that connects knowledge acquisition to practical realities for its implementation. Consequently, curriculum design is defined as the positioning of curriculum components. Irrespective of the curriculum model of design, there are four components of the curriculum: the rationale for initiating instruction or the aims; what to teach (content) to realise the set aims and objectives; the interconnected target learning experiences; and evaluating and recommending actions to correlate instructional programs, learners, and teachers. Thus, to design a curriculum, the following considerations should be given attention: communication, personality development, environment, field preparation, pluralism, ease of teaching and learning, learning to learn, curriculum planning activities, initiatives and self-direction, flexibility and adaptability, social and cross-cultural interaction, technological skills, constructivism and leadership and responsibility (Mohanasundaram 2018:S4-S6). These considerations will help guide the design of the curriculum to focus on its intended purpose. Therefore, curriculum design should connect students' learning experiences with the practical realities of the world to prepare them to respond to emerging trends in ministry.

Furthermore, Bilbao et al. (2008:35-37) highlight different models of curriculum design, such as the subject-centred model, which comprises subject design, discipline design, correlation design, and interdisciplinary design. There is also the learner-centred model, which includes student-centred, experience-centred, and humanistic design. A third model is the problem-centred model, which supports life-situation design and core design. Theological institutions, however, should consider which model is most appropriate for their mission's curriculum design to best prepare gospel ministers for the task ahead. It would be best if the mission's curriculum were designed with a combination of models to help students minister contextually to the world, mostly in contemporary cities. Therefore, the curriculum, the

medium through which codified knowledge is transmitted, should be suited to enable the next generation to become progressively knowledgeable and take control of situations rather than be at the mercy of prevailing conditions.

Consequently, curriculum development within a Christian system should be value-driven and reflect the missional nature of the Christian vocation (Du Preez 2013:32-33). Malau et al. (2024:252) also note that curriculum development involves compiling and adapting mutually binding curriculum components that support a particular profession and the community's needs. They further define missiology as the science of proclaiming the gospel of God's gifts of salvation to humankind and note that a missiology-based curriculum must prioritise students' involvement in the Great Commission Jesus entrusted to His disciples. Therefore, there must be a radical shift from a traditional missions curriculum to a more relevant one that teaches gospel ministers new methods for disseminating the gospel in a changing world. The principles remain the same, but the procedures should be reviewed to address current challenges and mission terrains.

Urban Missions' Contextual Curriculum Development in Africa

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that Africa is at the forefront of urbanisation. Meanwhile, Western theological education has been discussing and developing a curriculum for urban missions since the 1970s; however, it appears that African theological mission education has not fully developed an educational framework that engages with city mission. Stephan De Beer (2022:214) notes that there is a dearth of religious or theological scholarship engaging African cities, aside from sporadic contributions; nevertheless, there is no coherent body of knowledge on theological engagement with African urban centres. Also, Jeff K Walters (2011:53), citing Conn and Ortiz, notes that in Africa, Asia, and Latin American cities are growing as more people migrate to seek better life opportunities and that only a few churches have been able to respond, with many others overwhelmed and slow in their response to the urban challenge. These assertions clearly show that in Africa and other Global South regions, relevant scholarly materials for engaging in city missions remain in short supply.

Moreover, Du Preez (2013:20), in researching curriculum development for African theological institutions, notes that curricula need to be relevant to the African context and foster students' spiritual and character formation, without sacrificing academic excellence. He also asserts that the curricula should be missional and contextualised to the African experience in the field. Adopting a Western curriculum is seen as counterproductive for African theological institutions, depriving them of the opportunity to take full ownership and train their students to be relevant in the field (Du Preez, 2013:20-22). The curriculum through which gospel ministers are trained will then largely determine how churches respond to the urban challenge. Therefore, the following areas need attention in developing a contextual curriculum for African urban missions.

Engaging the city life and culture with the gospel

The curriculum relevant to African urban missions should be contextual, taking into account African city life and culture. Alawode and Jangado (2023:4-5), in discussing principles guiding urban missions' context in Nigeria, point out that the missionary must know and understand the urban environment, which involves understanding the life and culture of the city people, their dressing, language, relationships, way of thinking, general worldview, family structure, social and economic life, to reach them appropriately with the gospel. Also, the missionary must know that an urban centre is a place of anonymity where communal living is apparently non-existent. People are on their own, with no particular binding cultural standards. African cities have their own peculiarities: most are amalgamations of indigenous communities with strong cultural ties, while many people from other cultures also migrate to them (Alawode and Jangado 2023:5). Thus, African cities are noted for their strong multicultural and heterogeneous character. Therefore, the urban missions curriculum should reflect the city's diverse outlook and be tailored to equip students with ministerial skills suitable for a multicultural and pluralistic environment.

Ministering Christ's love through Sound Relationships and Social Action

To be prepared to minister effectively in urban centres, one must understand the dynamics of relationships in urban settings. Urban residents live isolated lives because they do not want to get bogged down with relational

responsibilities, a fallout from Westernisation. City dwellers struggle to build trusted relationships due to the diversity of urban centres. The missionary needs to cultivate a trusting relationship with the residents to lead them to Christ (Alawode & Jangado, 2023:5). These isolationist lifestyles are significant impediments to Christian mission. They are sometimes aided by advancements in digital technology that limit physical social interactions. Thus, the curriculum must address the situation by integrating how Information Technology can be used for missions to meet people in their privacy and impart relational skills appropriate for reaching out to people living with isolationist principles.

Also, Tiersma (1994:22-23) notes that Christian missions in the city should respond to social issues like poverty and injustice and must not just deal with the powerlessness of the people but also the injustices and evils that cause it, without increasing the feelings of powerlessness, turning the people into dependents when they could also do some things for themselves. It is not enough for the curriculum to teach how to preach a sound gospel message in the city without practically imparting to gospel ministers the ideology of holistic missions, which combines the message of Christ's love with its practical demonstration to city dwellers to validate the message.

Urban Missions Theology and Praxis

Theological institutions should consciously develop a missional curriculum grounded in Trinitarian Mission theology. Du Perez et al. (2014:1-6) note that if theological institutions can be changed to be truly missional, there will be a notable impact in sub-Saharan Africa. Missional curricula will eventually lead to missional congregations, and Trinitarian missiology, which stresses *Missio Dei* as its theology of missions, serves as the foundation for an all-encompassing missional curriculum in theological institutions. The authors further note that all theology should be regarded as fundamentally missional because God is revealed as a missionary God in the scripture. They also opine that the theology of the laity should be incorporated into the curriculum so that pastors can involve them in the missional church. Gospel ministers in training need to have the proper theological perspective on urban missions and impart it to their congregation.

Kim Kirsten (2004:3) also advocates for contextual theologies in missiology, noting that the missionary context in which the gospel is proclaimed in new cultures and traditions will lead to the development of theological reflections peculiar to those cultures and to the use of methods incongruent with classical theologies. These new theologies use social analysis as the starting point for Christian praxis and reflection, or use different philosophical or cultural frameworks to express the gospel. The dynamic approach of contextual theologies, if utilised by mission practitioners, will help city dwellers to understand the gospel in their immediate context and respond correspondingly.

For African urban theological education, Stephan de Beer (2021:240-242) notes that there may be a need for some shifts in curriculum development for urban missions in Africa, namely epistemological shifts that emphasise the need for students to be exposed to diverse and experiential knowledge of the factors that shaped urban centres, beyond their classrooms. Disciplinary shifts that focus on equipping mission workers with skills to engage cities in transdisciplinary ways to proffer solutions to real-life problems. Location shifts, where the appropriate way of learning should be more practical and students learn on the streets rather than in the classroom environment. Theological shifts in which theological assertions shift from confessional to contextual and ecumenical theologies that emphasise liberation and the fusion of theological, conceptual, and theoretical horizons, giving them a global appeal. These shifts help African ministers to relate classroom knowledge to their ministerial contexts. Likewise, Naidoo (2024:226-228) asserts that curriculum development in African theological education should promote a theology that is contextually relevant and demonstrates the progression of theological education in Africa by engaging with African realities, attending to world Christianity, and decolonising theological education. Thus, urban theological education should contextualise the African experience in theological training and, at the same time, globalise its theological stance to achieve universal appeal and unique application.

Historically, Conn notes that since the inception of formal theological education, Missiology, unlike Theology, has often been treated as a marginalised discipline and not recognised as a central one in theological education. It was treated as an appendage to other theological disciplines,

grouped as practical theology, treated as a theological discipline in its own right, or incorporated into other theological disciplines, not taught as a separate subject, particularly in Britain. Mission and theology remain "distant cousins in the theological encyclopaedia." Missions has been treated severely as a colourful extra, still finding its way to take its place in the theological ecosystem, so that missiology can be recognised as a contextualised global response to the evolving urban ministry that churches need to give. He then advocated for a theological education curriculum that reflects global solidarity in its totality and prioritises mission and justice for urban missions (Conn 2002:15-16). Therefore, developing a contextual, missional curriculum for urban centres in Africa should have global appeal, enabling cross-fertilisation of theological concepts among African theologians and missiologists and their colleagues from other parts of the world.

Furthermore, missiology, the systematic study of all aspects of mission, should have a curriculum that reflects intercultural theology, emphasising evangelism as the heart of mission. Missiology is not just the study of mission practices but also the explanation of underlying theories and their representation within the broader perspective of mission studies, serving as the scholarly voice of Mission (Paas 2016:37-52). However, Keelan Cook (2017:7-10) suggests a theological rubric to evaluate urban mission methods, which are: the priority of cities in missional engagement, the right presence of churches (making themselves visible) in cities, a prophetic voice towards culture to transform it, and a focus on gospel proclamation. He also notes that the missiology curriculum in Africa should be conscious of reflecting African philosophy and worldview in its development in a contextual manner. Cook's recommendation is necessary to equip the missionaries to respond to the peculiar existential realities of Africans, such as misgovernance, indigenous beliefs, widespread corruption, political and elite impunity, and ethno-religious violence, through social action and gospel proclamation.

Leadership Development

Leadership training and development are necessary for effective urban missions. The missionaries should be equipped to train others as leaders in assisting in spreading the gospel in the city (Alawode & Jangado, 2023:6). A primary purpose of a missionary or a Christian mission worker, according to Alawode (2022:3), is to raise local church leaders who can lead the new

congregations formed, which will ensure the continuous production of missional disciples. Urban missions leaders should also be trained to overcome challenges and hindrances to urban missions, including rapid growth, limited theological knowledge, cultural barriers, competition, financial constraints, and a lack of hope in urban communities (Ishola & Ugbedinma, 2023:6-11). The curriculum should equip mission practitioners in the city with leadership skills to mobilise and train other Christians and the entire church congregation to develop a passion for missions in their urban localities.

Missional Ecclesiology for Urban Missions

The church also has a role to play in the city and must engage in missions. Christianity in Africa is growing phenomenally, but the church has not done enough to impact the public life of the continent positively (Bitrus & Kinison, 2021:141). Haney (1994:70-73) notes that the mission of the church in the city is to transform the town by serving God faithfully, touching lives in the pluralistic city, affirming hope, sharing love, and engaging in unified gospel action as God's agent of salvation. It should also be noted that defining the city's mission is not just about transforming individuals; it involves the transformation of the town itself, through the formation of faith communities (church planting) (Tiersma 1994:22). Viv Grigg (2017:5-9), in his works, advances new paradigms and fields of knowledge in Urban missiology that help the missional church transform the city. They are: incarnational missions (empathetic identification with the needy), Protestant apostolic orders (servanthood, missional approach), city-wide transformation leadership (developing city leadership teams for transformation), transformational conversations (grassroots relational networks for holistic missions), and urban poor missiology (missions in the slum). These domains are critical for developing an urban missiology curriculum that is both theological and practical, equipping missionaries and urban ministers in the field, particularly within churches.

Furthermore, Abraham-Appiah (2022:308-209) suggests that churches that will function in urban missions must diversify their personnel and intentionally train and mobilise their members in the following training tracks: leadership, evangelism, ministry equipping, age-group ministry, music development, women's enrichment, men's ministry, missions education, special interests and special needs. Appiah, citing Van Engen and Guder, also means that a

missional church should be conscious of being contextual, intentional, proclaiming, reconciling, sanctifying, unifying, and transforming. It should also be noted that many forces contend for control of the city space, including social institutions, criminals, civic organisations, businesses, governments, and private interests, which strive to push the church out of the mix.

Likewise, urban missiology curriculum should then be developed for equipping leaders to strategically make the gospel contextual and relevant to existential realities of the people by training them in Social Advocacy, to identify with the plight of the community through; resisting adverse programmes and policies, participating and contributing towards development of programmes, policies and projects that makes the community better, making alternative proposals to adverse policies, and disciple making efforts with the congregation to become good representative of Christ in public places (Stephan De Beer, 2008:183, 191-198). All these qualities must be incorporated into curriculum development to equip gospel ministers to apply them in the field. Susan Baker (2002:64-65) also notes that in the training curriculum for urban ministers, there are troublesome areas that need to be included, namely: the shaping power of culture, the need for incarnational living, the danger of neglecting ministers' spirituality, and the need for regular evaluation of the curriculum. The inclusion of these areas will help raise a thoroughly prepared urban minister who understands the dynamics of urban missions. Therefore, the academic sector of missions must lead in changing its practice by preparing and equipping leaders attuned with urban missions in churches. If the roles and functions of urban ministers are well captured in the missional curriculum for theological institutions, they will be thoroughly prepared to turn cities into mission fields.

Pedagogical Approach for the Curriculum

Pedagogy concerns the relationship between teachers and learners that facilitates learning; it emphasises the strategies by which teaching and learning occur. According to PsychologyFor. (2025), *The 5 Fundamental Pedagogical Models" https://psychologyfor.com/the-5-fundamental-pedagogical-models/* there are about five pedagogical models (theoretical frameworks that guides how learning is designed and delivered), these include, Traditional Model (Teacher-Centred), the Constructivist Model (Student Centred), the Collaborative Model (Social Learning), the Inquiry- Based Model (Exploratory

Learning), the Personalised Learning Model (Adaptive and Student-Led). For a missiological curriculum, a combination of the highlighted models should be utilised to train missionaries. There should be a blend of learner-based models, such as student-centred learning, social learning, exploratory learning, and adaptive and student-led learning, to construct a pedagogy that suits ministerial training. It is assumed that missionaries in training are adults and that missiology is a practical discipline; a model designed for younger students may not be applicable. Nevertheless, the combination of the listed models will help urban missionaries and ministers gain the knowledge needed to minister effectively in urban contexts.

Moreover, a study conducted in Uganda found that theological institutions in Kampala remain predominantly didactic (classroom-based), failing to equip students with the critical, adaptive, and relational skills needed to engage with the dynamic realities of urban life. Also, limited field experience and minimal integration of interdisciplinary and professional input into the theological education framework are other pedagogical gaps identified within the institutions, despite growing awareness and innovation in urban ministry (Akatukunda and De Beer, 2026:5-6). It is also discovered that most theological educational models for urban ministry reflect a disconnect from the city in their presence, content, and pedagogy. Therefore, theological education in Africa is encouraged to provide tools, languages, and networks that will equip a new generation of missional urban leaders through intentional ministerial formation in urban calling, from personal, pastoral, professional, and theological perspectives, in their curriculum development (Stephan de Beer, 2022: 219). Thus, a fusion of the highlighted pedagogical approaches will help address de Beer's concerns and entrench urban missions as a distinct vocational calling, preparing students for such a calling.

Conclusion

Urbanisation results from massive population migration from rural and underdeveloped places into big towns and cities, and this phenomenon is changing the world's landscape. As more people flock to more developed settlements, settlements expand to accommodate more people, businesses, services, and socio-cultural activities. People from diverse cultural, religious and social backgrounds move into urban centres for various reasons, mainly to

pursue a better standard of living. Traditionally mission fields have been categorised to be rural or underdeveloped places and mission efforts have been directed at such places. With the influx of people into the cities there is now a possibility of having more unreached people in the towns, who though seeing church structures, have not been effectively engaged with the gospel due to the hustling and bustling of the city environment with its attending inequalities and injustices.

Therefore, there is a need for an alliance between mission educators and practitioners to see urban centres as mission fields that require particular strategies to reach cities for Christ. This response to urban needs for the gospel needs to start, or be supported by, the development of curriculum that trains mission practitioners to respond to the urban trend. Such curricula needs to prioritise theological understanding of the import of missions in the city, be contextual to effectively train mission practitioners to effectively and adequately minister to urban dwellers, teach holistic missions to make Christ's love known in preaching and practice and emphasise the need for churches in the city to be mission centres that reproduce themselves by having missional leaders that can mobilise and train their congregations how to be involved in urban ministry.

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Review

Lim, Boh H., *Contextual Theological Interpretation: an Integrated Model for Reading the Bible.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2025. ISBN 9781540968890, vii, 158 pp.

Reviewed by Melesse K. Woldetsadik, PhD[1]

Boh H. Lim's monograph *Contextual Theological Interpretation* critically examines modern biblical and theological interpretations in light of their historical, cultural, and political contexts. Lim highlights the importance of contextual interpretation for the church's mission and critiques current practices in Theological Interpretation of the Scriptures (TIS), which prioritised theological readings of Scripture over traditional grammatical-historical interpretation. He advocates a more inclusive approach that incorporates global perspectives and engages with diverse interpretive models in contextual and theological hermeneutics. He supports socio-critical methodologies and emphasises a reader-response framework as a valuable interpretive lens.

Lim presents a comprehensive model of biblical interpretation that he believes is both theologically grounded and contextually relevant' (vii), while acknowledging its limitations. He emphasises the importance of biblical studies in contemporary scholarship and advocates a corrective approach rather replacement of traditional methods. Lim then identifies an urgent need for a pedagogical guide to help readers engage with the Bible in a contextual and theological manner.

Contextual Theological Interpretation is organised into two parts. The first four chapters are devoted to various aspects of biblical interpretation. These chapters address readers' challenges, recent trends in biblical studies, and concerns about contextual interpretation. In the opening chapter, Lim argues

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that both trust and suspicion are feasible in interpretation. The second chapter reviews recent advances in the field, while the third highlights the importance of contextual interpretation. The fourth chapter advocates a critical theological approach, noting that TIS has not consistently upheld its promises or effectively addressed contextual issues.

The book's second section outlines a model of biblical interpretation across three chapters. It establishes a framework grounded in 'evangelical and Trinitarian principles' (116) while accounting for colonisation's impact on theological views. Chapter five presents postcolonial Christian interpretation as an alternative to historical-critical methods, focusing on a reader-response approach rooted in personal context. Chapter six explores models of contextual and theological interpretation from multicultural perspectives. Chapter seven emphasises that effective biblical interpretation must be both theological and contextual.

Lim articulates his theological and ecclesial commitments as Trinitarian and missional with a focus on multicultural churches. These churches encompass diverse communities that affirm ecumenical creeds and recognise the growing presence of Christians of colour and evangelical congregations in the Global South. Lim aims to develop a hermeneutic that addresses four overlooked realities in theological education: (1) the experiences of women and people of colour, (2) white hegemony, (3) the dynamics of Asian, African, and Latino/a Christianity, and (4) the growth of evangelical and charismatic spirituality. His goal is for readers to understand the current landscape of biblical interpretation and to adapt it to multicultural contexts.

Lim passionately argues that the crisis in biblical interpretation requires scholars to move beyond historical concerns and address ethical and ideological challenges. He asserts that 'Christian discipleship today requires Christ's followers to read the Bible critically and as a sacred text' (4) and proposes that a hermeneutic of trust can coexist with a hermeneutic of suspicion. He warns against the allure of the current culture wars, noting that naïveté and cynicism may offer false comfort but should not be mistaken for true Christian discipleship.

Lim contends that a contextual theological interpretation is necessary, highlighting the limitations of existing frameworks. His main reasons are the neglect of the Bible's moral objections, the church's ethical failings, and perspectives from the global church beyond the Western context. Citing Moore and Sherwood, Lim critiques biblical scholarship for overemphasizing historical analysis, which sidestepping theological and ethical issues. He calls for a postcolonial re-appropriation of fundamental church doctrines that engages within inheriting colonial ideologies.

Lim argues that the global church's transformative theological interpretation requires a postcolonial re-appropriation of doctrinal traditions, acknowledging Western theological influence while resisting colonial ideologies. He cites Kwame Bediako on reclaiming precolonial patristic theology from African primal religions and Renie Choy's glocal hermeneutic, which engages colonial history, to demonstrate the gospel's transcultural potential. He also highlights Gustavo Gutierrez's interpretation of liberation theology and Love Sechrest's associative hermeneutics. These frameworks, he argues, promote an authentic theological interpretation that integrates ecclesial traditions, indigenous elements, and postcolonial critique, thereby serving the global church's mission. Thus, Lim's analysis confronts the misuse of the Bible to dominate and oppress minority groups. Socio-critical approaches help uncover those oppressive intentions.

In his critique of TIS, Lim highlights shortcomings in adequately representing diverse voices and in incorporating contextual awareness. He emphasises the need to include non-Western perspectives and to understand readers' contexts. However, his analysis appears to sidestep the Bible's authority as the Word of God; while he recognises its status as a sacred text, he does not explicitly address the author's intended meaning. Furthermore, although Lim champions fairness and inclusivity in scholarly work, he fails to address crucial questions about whether the meaning within Scripture is determinate or indeterminate/polyvalent. These considerations are particularly relevant for evangelicals who value the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Addressing these fundamental issues would significantly enhance his evaluation.

Lim's work on theological interpretation stands out for its emphasis on integrating diverse global perspectives and challenging traditional interpretive

methods. He innovatively retains the reader-response approach while striving to include voices from around the world. However, his call for an integrative model would be strengthened if he placed greater emphasis on the discipline's advances and self-corrective measures. While his assertive tone effectively challenges dominant models and sheds light on the realities faced by minority groups, incorporating these developments would further strengthen his argument. Overall, Lim's monograph serves as a valuable resource for students and scholars, particularly when approached with an ethical interpretive mindset that respects the author's authority and the text's intended meaning.

Ajayi, O 2026, Review of *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships*, SOY Baba, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 279-282

Review

Stephen Oluwarotimi Y. Baba, *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships*. Carlisle: Langham Academic, 2025. ISBN 9781786412829. xx, 158 pp.

Reviewed by Olufunmilola Ajayi[1]

Few passages in the Minor Prophets have generated as much sustained and varied interpretive debate as Malachi 2:10-16. Scholars have focused on themes such as intermarriage, divorce, covenant, and cultic infidelity, producing significantly different interpretations of both the passage and its theological implications. In *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships*, Stephen Oluwarotimi Y. Baba enters this debate with the conviction that these differing interpretations arise from the various interpretive frameworks applied to the text rather than from the complexity of the text itself. Baba proposes that Malachi's understanding of marital unfaithfulness is best interpreted through the cohesive theological concept of covenant fidelity. Published by Langham Academic, this revised doctoral dissertation supports its thesis through detailed historical-grammatical exegesis, situating it within the broader Old Testament canonical theology. The significance of this study is not simply in offering another interpretation of Malachi 2:10-16 but also in presenting an integrated hermeneutical approach that combines exegesis, biblical theology, and pastoral theology.

Baba's argument unfolds with deliberate methodological progression. Instead of moving directly to the exegesis of Malachi 2:10-16, Baba begins by surveying the principal scholarly interpretations of the passage, demonstrating how divergent readings have emerged from different understandings of covenant, marriage, divorce, and intermarriage. He then justifies his use of the historical-grammatical method, arguing that careful attention to the Hebrew text, literary

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features, historical context, and canonical setting provides the most reliable basis for interpretation. Following this, he surveys covenant theology in the Old Testament, which sets the theological framework within which the subsequent exegesis is to be understood. The nearly seventy pages devoted to interpretive history, methodology, and covenant theology before the exegetical discussion begins are not a sign of delayed analysis but of deliberate persuasion. Baba implicitly suggests through the structure of the book that exegetical conclusions cannot be separated from the interpretive and theological frameworks from which they arise. In this respect, the introductory chapters function not merely as background materials but as the hermeneutical foundation upon which the entire study rests.

The study ultimately depends on the detailed exegesis of Malachi 2:10-16. Having argued that covenant fidelity provides the appropriate hermeneutical framework, Baba demonstrates that this claim is drawn from the text itself rather than being imposed upon it. The real achievement of Baba's exegesis is not that it privileges covenant over divorce but that it explains the coherence of the passage as a whole. Rather than treating marriage, divorce, treachery, and covenant as separate themes, he argues that they become mutually intelligible only when examined through the overarching concept of covenant fidelity. His analysis is characterized by sustained engagement with the Hebrew text, careful attention to lexical and grammatical features, and responsible interaction with competing interpretations. How he explored the recurring language of treachery (*בגד*), which functions as the rhetorical thread uniting the passage's concerns with marriage, covenant, and communal responsibility, is particularly noteworthy. The persuasiveness of Baba's proposal is not in the novelty of identifying covenant as a central theme, but in his demonstration that covenant fidelity offers the most coherent explanation for the diverse motifs of the passage.

The significance of Baba's study extends beyond its interpretation of Malachi 2:10-16. Its more enduring contribution is the model of biblical interpretation that it embodies. Rather than treating historical exegesis, biblical theology, and pastoral theology as distinct or competing modes of inquiry, Baba presents them as successive stages of a single interpretive process. Historical-grammatical exegesis establishes the meaning of the text; biblical theology situates that meaning within the broader context of Scripture; and pastoral theology explores its significance for the life of the church. Baba does not

propose a new hermeneutic; rather, he demonstrates the explanatory power of an integrated evangelical approach to biblical interpretation through sustained engagement with a notoriously difficult text. This is particularly evident in the transition to the book's pastoral reflections. Baba avoids moving directly from exegesis to application, allowing the theological and ecclesial implications of Malachi 2:10-16 to be earned rather than assumed. The pastoral conclusions derive their persuasive strength from the cumulative argument that precedes them.

If the study invites some criticism, it is not because its central thesis is unconvincing but because the argument occasionally limits itself to a specific theological perspective. Baba effectively demonstrates that covenant fidelity offers the most coherent framework for interpreting Malachi 2:10-16; however, in the exegetical chapters, his engagement with alternative interpretations sometimes moves too quickly from critique to synthesis rather than transitioning from sustained dialogue to persuasion. A more extended interaction with the strongest contemporary defences of competing interpretations would have strengthened an already compelling case. Similarly, while the pastoral reflections are thoughtful and arise organically from the preceding exegesis, readers might have appreciated greater engagement with contemporary African biblical scholarship and with the diverse social, ecclesial, and cultural contexts in Africa. Such interaction would have further enriched the contextual dimension of the study without altering its central thesis.

The value of Baba's study is twofold. Firstly, from an exegetical perspective, it offers a coherent and well-reasoned interpretation of one of the most contested passages in the Hebrew Bible. Secondly, from a methodological perspective, it demonstrates that historical-grammatical exegesis, canonical theology, and pastoral reflection need not be competing approaches but can collectively constitute a coherent and intellectually responsible approach for interpreting Scripture. Baba has not written the final word on Malachi 2:10-16, nor does he claim to have done so. However, his study compels future scholars to seriously consider covenant fidelity as the central theological principle of the passage and, more broadly, to examine the connection between exegesis, theology, and the life of the church. For this reason, *Malachi's Understanding of Unfaithfulness in Covenantal Marriage Relationships* deserves careful attention from Old Testament scholars, theological educators, graduate

students, pastors, and all who are interested in the faithful interpretation of Scripture.

Yola, YC 2026, Review of *Trinity and Inculturation: The Humanity of God and the Future of African Theology*, BU Ukwuije, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 283-285

Review

Ukwuije, Bede Uche, *Trinity and Inculturation: The Humanity of God and the Future of African Theology*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2026, ISBN 9780268211141, 360 pp.

Reviewed by Dr. Yure Comfort Yola[1]

African Christian theologians and educated Africans have often wondered how their pre-Christian heritage relates to their present faith and especially how to think biblically as Africans whose pre-Christian thoughts permeate their lives. Being a product of this background and writing for the same audience, Bede Uche Ukuije, in this great book *Trinity and Inculturation*, addresses a critical issue: the naming of God in African theology. *Trinity and Inculturation* is an attempt to move discussions of African theology forward, contrary to the initial efforts of African theologians who focused on the definition of African religious identity. These theologians sought to bridge the gap between Christian monotheism and African monotheism and frequently Africanised Jesus, referring to him as our ancestor or elder brother. Ukuije's book answer another question: How shall we view Jesus, not only in his humanity, but also as a member of the Godhead?

To answer this question in African theology requires an unapologetic theological method in which there is no middle ground from which the argument can be built. That is, viewing Jesus as our ancestor or elder brother may tally with African thought, but viewing him in his position as a member of the Godhead does not necessarily find a parallel or point of departure in African thought. Hence, Ukuije's book is an attempt to avoid the temptation to eradicate what is most central to Christian theology—the triune God—while

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focusing on some aspects of that theology which resonate with African thought.

The work contributes significantly to debates about African identity. Rather than grounding identity exclusively in cultural heritage, Ukwuije argues for understanding humanity through God's self-revelation in Christ. This approach provides a theological basis for human dignity, social responsibility, and intercultural dialogue. Despite its academic nature, the book addresses several critical issues that remain highly relevant in contemporary Africa such as religious pluralism, Christian-Muslim relations, the use of religion for politics, the persistence of traditional religious worldviews, and questions of cultural identity in a globalised world. Ukwuije's concern that religion can be manipulated for violence, political domination, or cultural exclusion resonates strongly with contemporary African realities, especially in Nigeria, the author's particular context. The book encourages Christians to engage other religions without abandoning the distinctiveness of Christian faith.

The book offers a valuable resource for seminaries, universities, and theological institutions as it challenges both lecturers and students to move beyond simplistic contextualisation and to wrestle seriously with doctrinal questions. Its emphasis on the Trinity, Christology, and theological method will help strengthen the academic rigour in African theological scholarship. Ukuije's argument that Christian mission must combine cultural sensitivity with faithfulness to the uniqueness of Christ is particularly important in view of the tendency toward universality. *Trinity and Inculturation* also provides theological resources for addressing the challenges of secularisation, prosperity theology, religious competition, and globalisation, which confront the African church today.

Ukuije's work demonstrates impressive historical and theological depth as the author traces debates about African identity, religion, and the naming of God from Enlightenment philosophy through modern African theology. The book also successfully engages African theology in dialogue with global theological scholarship and courageously critiques some long-standing assumptions within African inculturation theology while remaining committed to the African theological project.

Unfortunately, the book's critique of earlier African theologians is stronger than its engagement with present pastoral realities. Greater engagement with issues such as corruption, youth unemployment, migration, digital culture, and gender considers would strengthen the books practical impact.

The book is also intellectually demanding and is intended primarily for advanced theological readers. Some readers may find its technical language challenging. Its sustained engagement with German theology, especially Jüngel, may be difficult for readers without prior exposure to systematic theology. Readers may also question whether Jüngel's framework, developed in a European context, can adequately address all dimensions of African religious experience. More could be said about Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, which currently shape so much of the contemporary African religious landscape.

Even so, *Trinity and Inculturation* is a major contribution to contemporary African theology. It is rigorous, original, and thought-provoking. While some arguments invite debate, the book successfully stimulates fresh reflection on God, culture, mission, and Christian identity in Africa. It is recommended to scholars, pastors, seminarians, and advanced theology students as a valuable framework for reconsidering the future direction of African theology.

Faber, R 2026, Review of *African Pedagogy: A Fusion of Orality, Higher Education, and Pastoral Formation*, EW Mburu & ST Yoakum, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 286-288

Review

Mburu, Elizabeth W. & S. Trevor Yoakum, *African Pedagogy: A Fusion of Orality, Higher Education, and Pastoral Formation*. Carlisle: Hippo Books, 2026. ISBN 9781786412232, 216 pp.

Reviewed by Dr Ryan Faber[1]

European missionaries brought not only Western theology to Africa, but also Western theological education. Their pedagogies are not always relevant or helpful in the African context. That makes Elizabeth Mburu and Trevor Yoakum's *African Pedagogy* a welcome publication. Mburu, a Kenyan New Testament scholar, and Yoakum, an American theological educator with over twenty years' experience in West Africa, do not propose a completely new pedagogy, but 'an already existing pedagogy that is adapted in such a way as to be better suited for African learners' (3).

Mburu and Yoakum describe Africans' dominant learning style as concrete and relational. Traditional methods of instruction include songs, proverbs, and stories. These

> reflect a style of learning that is global rather than sequential, that considers the whole more than the collection of parts, and that is generally more concrete than abstract. (21)

It is markedly different from Western teaching and learning methods that tend

> to favor abstract reasoning over more concrete expressions of thought […] [examine] subjects by dividing them into their

[1] Ryan Faber is a theological education developer with Theological Education by Extension Zambia, and a research fellow in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University

> constituent parts […] [and follow] a linear sequential process of reasoning. (21)

After surveying five 'classic pedagogies' – constructivist, collaborative, integrative, reflective, and inquiry-based – Mburu and Yoakum propose an alternative for African theological education: a concrete relational pedagogy. This pedagogy 'prefers learning that is concrete instead of abstract' and considers the relationships of the learner to the teacher, to fellow learners, and to all of life (65). As the book's subtitle suggests, its pedagogy relies on N'Dri Assié-Lumumba's concept of fusion – 'a creative blend of African traditional educational practices with those that are generally understood to be from Western education' (98). The traditional education methods that Mburu and Yoakum integrate into their pedagogy relate to orality. They highlight three specific practices: narrative, role playing, and proverbs.

Mburu and Yoakum note that Western pedagogy often relies on Bloom's taxonomy of learning, which categorised learning in 'the ascending categories of remembering, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creativity' (90). The hierarchy reflects an inherent Western bias or assumption of Western normativity that privileges abstract thinking. It is not readily applicable to concrete relational learners. Mburu and Yoakum observe that the way in which Africans do analysis, evaluation, and creativity – the higher levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy – are not readily recognised by Western pedagogies. Mburu and Yoakum note that

> whereas Western civilization advances propositions in the form of logical abstractions, Africans use the traditional proverb as the means of conveying the abstraction in a concrete form. (156)

'Indeed, use of traditional proverbs can operate along the levels of analysis, evaluation, and creativity' (159).

Mburu and Yoakum argue that their diverse backgrounds enrich the book. In anthropological terms, Mburu, an African, offers an emic (insider) perspective, while Yoakum, an non-African, offers an etic (outsider) perspective. Unfortunately, the book draws its practical examples from only Yoakum's

experience. While his experience is diverse in terms of educational setting, including a formal institution offering graduate degrees, a Bible institute training at a secondary level, and an oral Bible school whose students are non-literate, it is limited to West Africa and to Yoakum's academic discipline, practical theology.

More examples from Mburu and Yoakum's differing academic specialisations would have enriched the book, especially given their stated goal of not only explaining but also demonstrating their ideas (1). The book's most detailed examples are drawn from a single course, 'Great Religions and Cults', that Yoakum teaches. Readers are left wondering how Mburu and Yoakum's proposed pedagogy, especially its fusion with orality, can be applied in other disciplines, such as biblical studies or courses in the biblical languages, Mburu's specialisation. Examples from a wider variety of theological disciplines would strengthen the volume.

Greater clarity about the book's intended audience would also strengthen it. Mburu and Yoakum describe the book as

> a university textbook primarily for education majors who wish to expand their understanding of pedagogy and how to improve education quality in Africa (1)

but their intended audience seems to be theological educators. For that audience, the volume's lengthy, complex, and, at times, confusing philosophical section on theodramatic critical realism and speech-act theory, and its lengthy overview of orality, which includes numerous non-African examples, will be a distraction. A shorter, more focused, more accessible handbook on African pedagogy, with practical examples from a wider range of theological disciplines, would serve Mburu and Yoakum's intended audience better. One hopes a revision will be forthcoming, because the fusion of orality into an African pedagogy has great potential for the future of theological education in Africa.

Chirchir, CC 2026, Review of *Missional Cohesion of African Diaspora in the West: An Afrocentric Model for Black American and Nigerian Immigrant Church Collaboration*, LS Chinn, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 289-291

Review

Chinn, Lloyd S., *Missional Cohesion of African Diaspora in the West: An Afrocentric Model for Black American and Nigerian Immigrant Church Collaboration.* Carlisle: Langham Academic, 2026, ISBN 9781786412751, 268pp.

Reviewed by Christine Chemutai Chirchir[1]

Lloyd Chinn introduces *Missional Cohesion of African Diaspora in the West* with observations concerning the relationship between African immigrants in the United States and Black Americans, related to mission and ministry. Chinn's vision is a collaborative spirit among African diaspora faith communities in the United States. He wants to see African immigrants and Black American churches collaborate in God's mission purposes. Chinn has served as a missionary in Ghana and as global director for Africa and diaspora coordinator for the Movement of African National Initiative. He uses his experience as a cross-cultural worker to explore how people of African descent can unite and carry out the Great Commission in the United States. Chinn knows that collaboration is not easy. His concerns about 'underlying and unspoken relational tension between Black Americans and Africans in diaspora' (3) led Chinn to Chinn embark on his research.

Chinn is concerned with the lack of ministry models that foster collaborative ministry relationships between Black Churches and African diaspora congregations in United States. His research focuses on the religious Nigerian immigrant community in Houston, not the African diaspora generally, for the following reasons: Nigerian are the largest nationality in the African diaspora, Nigeria is a leading mission-sending nation, and Houston is home to the largest population of Nigerian immigrants in the United States. Chinn's goal is to

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propose a model of mission integration by exploring the behaviours and motivations that influence collaborative ministry relationships among select Black American and Nigerian immigrant churches. The book is divided into three parts, each covering a different perspective that contributes to the understanding and development of a collaborative model of missions.

In the first part, Exploring African Identity Dynamics, Chinn reviews literature on different aspects of identity formation in the African diaspora context. Chapter one explores identity development among diaspora communities through the lenses of transnationalism, hybridity, and collective identity. Chapter two focuses on mission motivation in the religious African immigrant context. Chapter three, surveys literature on collaboration theory and outlines four factors that shape mission-oriented collaboration constructs: reconciled relationships, the consensus in a common call, leadership integration, and interdependent humility.

Part two, Discovering the Collaborative Potential, explains Chinn's research components and corresponding findings. Chapter four describes his methodology, detailing the research rationale, outlining the interviews and focus groups and explaining his analysis of the relevant data. Chapter five presents Chinn's findings that show shared features in the social experiences of Black Americans and Nigerian immigrants and factors that can hinder their collaboration in missions. Chapter six proposes eight courses of action to stimulate missional convergence: navigating authenticity of relationship, creating platforms of understanding, reliance on a spiritual orientation, participating in conjoint mission, surrendering ministry agendas, instilling missional discipleship, onboarding catalytic leadership, and defining strategic parameters.

The book's final four chapters—part three: Conclusions, Organisational Analysis, and Implementation—integrate the results of Chinn's research. Chapter seven draws ten conclusions based on the findings that comprises the framework of Chinn's collaborative missional model. Chapter eight compares a Black Church and a Nigerian immigrant church to determine factors that create an environment that fosters missional collaboration. Chapter nine proposes a five-phase missional integration model that outlines a clear, practical, and contextualised plan for mission-oriented collaboration. Chapter ten suggests

missiological implications of Chinn's research for the African diaspora and offers recommendations for further research.

Chinn has written an excellent and timely book that reflects the growing field of diaspora missiology. Drawing on his own cross-cultural experience, Chinn describes the complex relationship between Black American and Nigerian immigrant churches in the United States. The entire book is interested in presenting a model that fosters missional collaboration among all people of African descent – both Black Americans and members of the African diaspora in the United States.

Chinn's opening discussion about the search for identity among Africans in diaspora is provocative. Before one can talk about collaboration, one must understand the who and the where: Who is supposed to be part of the collaboration? Where are they? Chinn's exploration of three general types of identity development among diaspora communities reveals how complex identity formation is. Religion is a powerful tool in one's identity wherever one goes. To cope with the pressures of adjusting, immigrants form dual identities: they keep the identity of their country of origin while adopting a new identity in their country of residence. To assimilate into their new environment, a hybrid identity is formed. 'The new morphed identities of African immigrants create a means of adjustment and successful assimilation into the new cultures.' (20)

Chinn offers a clear description of these identities, painting a picture of the immigrant's struggle to feel that he or she belongs. Until immigrants have a sense of belonging, they are not able to collaborate. And collaboration is key to mission. Chinn closes his book with a beautiful five phase missional integration model to foster mission-oriented collaboration between Black American and Nigerian immigrant churches. Chinn's volume is a welcomed contribution to the literature on missional collaboration. Its model is appropriate for African immigrant churches and the Black American communities that are interested in collaboration in mission. It is not only beneficial to the Nigerian immigrant churches and Black Americans but also for other diaspora communities that are struggling to find a model for doing missions in the United States.

Faber, R 2026, Review of *Decolonizing Mission*, HC Kwiyani, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 292-295

Review

Kwiyani, Harvey C., *Decolonizing Mission*. London: SCM Press, 2025, ISBN 978033406319, 240pp.

Reviewed by Dr Ryan Faber[1]

In *Decolonizing Mission*, Harvey C. Kwiyani makes a compelling argument that Christian mission has long been attached to empire: the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and Western Empires, including the British Empire and the contemporary US empire. He describes the attachment as 'unnecessary'[2], though one wonders if that word is too weak. Not only can mission happen without an empire, Kwiyani contends that 'mission *ought* to happen without the help of emperors, governments and their armies' (emphasis added): 'One can only preach the gospel of the kingdom of God or that of the empires of the word but not both'. The church needs is a decolonising mission. As Kwiyani explains, the word 'decolonizing' in his title is not only a verb (he wants to decolonize missions); it is also an adjective. The church needs a decolonising mission, or, perhaps put better, a non-colonising mission, a mission that does not colonise.

Kwiyani claims that his book is 'not an attempt to convince [the reader] that every Christian missionary from the West was a colonialist'. He acknowledges that 'history proves that many missionaries were good people'. But the claim and acknowledgement are quickly overshadowed by the book's main narrative: Missions and colonialism grew, often together, from the same roots of cultural, racial, and religious superiority. The complex, perhaps inseparable, relationship between missions and colonialism is evident in the story of Magomero, which Kwiyani retells in chapter 1. Magomero, a mission station

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[2] The review copy provided by the publisher via Glassboxx did not include pagination. Direct quotations from *Decolonizing Mission* are marked, but page references are not given.

inspired by David Livingstone and connected to his descendants, became a colonial estate. The painful story, which effected Kwiyani's own family and village, is 'the backdrop against which this book makes its argument':'What happened at Magomero was not a coincidence. It was rather an outcome of what missions was expected to do at the time'—expectations rooted in fifteen century papal bulls.

Decolonizing Mission is essentially a history of missions. Kwiyani is critical of other history of missions because they are often written 'according to empire', from a missionary (or colonialist?) perspective. They do not 'do justice to the stories of local … Christians in the same way those local people would tell it'. Kwiyani, appealing to his Malawian identity, presents his book as 'without doubt, an *African* reading of the story', 'a mission history according to the colonized' (emphasis added). Curiously, however, when referring to Western Christians, Kwiyani also claims to 'write as one of them, having lived and been educated in the West for many years'. One wonders: Which is it? Does Kwiyani writes as an African or does he write as a Western Christian? Is it possible for him to write as both?

For Kwiyani, the history of missions begins with Jesus. He argues that one cannot 'think of Jesus without attending to the pervasive dominance of the Roman Empire in his world and day'. As Kwiyani rightly notes, Jesus did not align himself with empire. Instead, 'the entire ministry of Jesus took place that margins of the Roman Empire, without ever needing to befriend the empire to use its power to his advantage'. Herein lies the central argument of Kwiyani's book: Missions does not need empire! Jesus' strategy was 'to make disciples among the colonized … [and] trust them to continue to make disciples who would continue to make disciples until the whole earth would be filled with his followers'.

Implicit in Kwiyani's history is a critique of the Apostle Paul's missionary strategy. Paul had 'a fixation to get to Rome', which caused him to ignore prophetic warnings and take matters into his own hands. The Apostle's story, as Kwiyani tells it, is markedly different from the story of Jesus. Kwiyani also contrasts the Apostle Paul's story with the story of Paul of Thebes (227-341), an important desert father. The Apostle Paul went to the heart of the empire; Paul of Thebes went to the margins. Though Kwiyani acknowledges that 'God

used both', he suggests that 'the movement that Paul of Thebes started served the wider Christian community beyond the empire better'.

Such comments raise intriguing questions: Should the Apostle Paul not have gone to Rome? Kwiyani presents Paul's fixation with Rome, not as an act of obedience to the Spirit's leading, but as defiance to prophetic warnings and an act of human initiative. What if the Apostle Paul had adopted a decolonising mission strategy? What would have have looked like? What might its effects have been? Similarly, acknowledging that the African church has grown fastest since political independence, largely through the work of African evangelists, Kwiyani asks how the gospel might have spread in Africa had it not come yoked to colonialism. This reader was disappointed the Kwiyani does not suggest any answers to these important questions.

Despite Kwiyani's claim the missions has been wed to empire since the time of Constantine, his history of missions says little about the Christianisation of Europe. Instead, he moves quickly to the fifteenth century and the papal bulls that asserted European supremacy over the world, established the doctrine of discovery, and clearly united missions and colonialism. The historical case is well-researched and well-argued. The common roots of missions and colonialism in ideas of cultural, racial, and religious superiority are evident.

Kwiyani's perceptive analysis of the philosophical bases for colonialism and missions explain some of our contemporary challenges in missions. It explains why Western churches struggle to do spread the gospel in their own contexts—missions is something done elsewhere with non-white populations—and why Western churches struggle to accept brown and black missionaries. But that is the future of the church and of Christianity. Missions must be decolonized: We must 'decentre whiteness to make space for all followers of Christ—the whole body of Christ—to engage in the whole of God's mission in the whole of God's world'.

Kwiyani seems optimistic about the possibility of missions after colonialism. Not only is a decolonising mission possible, it was the mission model of Jesus himself when he sent out colonised Galileans to make disciples of all nations. Kwiyani concludes with an assessment of mission language that needs to be decolonised, a description of mission according to the colonised, and a plea for

a new missiology. The greatest strength of Kwiyani's book is its compelling plea for decolonising missions. Its cogent argument about the regrettable coupling of missions and colonialism will challenge Western missionaries. Its optimism about missions after colonialism will inspire the non-Western church. But the volume is primarily deconstructive of colonising missions. Though highly recommended, one hopes that Kwiyani will produce a second volume that is more constructive, articulating more fully a decolonising (or non-colonising) mission and missiology.

Turner, TA 2026, Review of *Church Administration: Towards the Mission of God*, R Davis & G Harold, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 296-299

Review

Davis, Ronnie and Godfrey Harold, *Church Administration: Towards the Mission of God.* Niamey: AXIS Resources, 2026. ISBN 9798996454013, 253 pp.

Reviewed by Timothy A. Turner[1]

Ronnie Davis and Godfrey Harold argue that church administration belongs to theology before it belongs to management (9-10). Writing for pastors and church leaders in sub-Saharan Africa, Davis and Harold define the task of church administration as 'stewardship of God's resources for the faithful service of God's people rendered unto God and others on God's behalf to bring Him glory, build up His church, and reach the world in fulfillment of God's mission' (18). The volume joins the Africa Theology Series, which promises movement from doctrine through cultural implication to practical application (1-2).

The volume's first part builds a theology of church administration in three moves. First, a survey from creation to consummation presents administration as part of God's design, distorted by sin, and restored in Christ (25-35). Second, the authors argue that Paul's word for the Spirit-given gift of administration, *kubernesis*, compares an administrator to a ship's helmsman, who steers by Scripture's charts a ship that God owns and the Spirit powers (40-41). The church is then presented as an organised organism living by the Spirit yet structured by God (36-39). Finally, the authors argue that Jesus' servant leadership, driven by agape love, humility, and sacrificial action, surpasses

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Greenleaf's model[2], which the authors credit as a 'great secular companion to biblical servant leadership' (61).

The volume's second part attends to the practice of church administration. Chapter 5 recasts five management functions (planning, staffing, organising, leading, controlling), preferring management by mission to management by objectives (66, 73). Chapter 6, largely adapted from Sande[3] and Poirier[4], teaches peacemaking through four Gs, the PAUSE negotiation method, and a GOSPEL mediation model (103-128). Chapter 7 pairs African communal leadership, built on Ubuntu ('I am because we are'), with Christ's servanthood (131-140).

The volume also includes three appendices. The first compares leadership structures in African Traditional Religion, neo-Pentecostalism, Roman Catholicism, and Islam with Baptist practice (147-212). The second provides guidance for conducting a church business meeting (213-242), and the third outlines church budgeting processes (243-254).

The volume's scholarly foundation could engage organisational leadership literature more deeply. The eight characteristics of administration listed in chapter 1 rely on a single page of a single source (9-11). Additionally, though Davis and Harold articulate a sound theology of steward leadership a fuller engagement with stewardship theory would strengthen the volume. Interaction with Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson's work on steward motivations[5] and Hernandez's work on stewardship as a leadership outcome[6]

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[2] Robert K. Greenleaf, 1970, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ.
[3] Sande, K., 2004, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (3rd ed), Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI.
[4] Poirier, A., 2006, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI.
[5] Davis, J. H., Schoorman, F. D., & Donaldson, L 1997, 'Toward a Stewardship Theory of Management', *The Academy of Management Review* 22(1), 20-47. https://doi.org/10.2307/259223
[6] Hernandez, M., 2008, 'Promoting Stewardship Behavior in Organizations: A leadership model', *Journal of Business Ethics* 80(1), 121–128. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9440-2

and the foundations of psychological ownership in stewardship[7] could provide empirical evidence for the book's assertions.

The volume pays disproportionate attention to conflict mediation (99-130). Five key management functions (planning, staffing, organising, leading, controlling) are covered in chapter 5, while an entire chapter of similar length, chapter 6, is devoted to conflict mediation. The chapter's examples, drawn from marriage, friendships (99), and questions about family estates (103), are not immediately relevant to issues of church administration. Guidance for budget disputes, leadership successions, and committee quarrels would be more relevant in a volume on church administration. Furthermore, the importance of peacemaking in and for other administrative functions, such as planning, staffing and evaluation, is not explained.

The volume promises application to the African context. Chapter 7 offers the book's most thoughtful engagement with the African context and acknowledges Africa's diversity (131-133). The chapter pictures village assemblies where anyone could speak up and feel heard (133) and calls African communal values the 'perfect soil' for biblical servant leadership (137). However, Appendix A notes that elder authority may limit young members' participation in traditional communities (159). The book does not reconcile these disparate pictures, although chapter 2 articulates helping every believer deploy gifts a key task of administration (38). Additional contextualisation challenges occur in chapter 5, which offers limited African applications of the book's five management functions. The chapter's illustrations come from an urban Nairobi church (92) and a Cape Town seminary course (95). While these examples offer an African perspective, the volume would benefit from additional application into rural or refugee contexts across sub-Saharan Africa.

A similar issue with contextualisation repeats in the appendices. Appendix B suggests announcing meetings through email and social media (216), displaying financial reports through visual PowerPoint software (229), and operating meetings by Robert's Rules of Order (235). Appendix C calls for one to three years of formal financial records, bank statements, accounting

[7] Hernandez, M., 2012, 'Toward an Understanding of the Psychology of Stewardship', *Academy of Management Review* 37(2), 172–193. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2010.0363

software, percentage allocations, and reserves of three to six months (244-250). However, considering a refugee-formed congregation in northern Zambia, a poor church in rural Tanzania, or a village church plant in a remote region of sub-Saharan Africa reveals contexts in Africa that may lack electricity, internet connectivity, a formal bank account, salaried staff, surplus for reserves, and a formally trained treasurer. Many pastors in Africa will need to translate the advice of the book into their context unaided.

These limits qualify the book without cancelling its value. Its first part argues that administration serves God's mission, depends on the Spirit's gifts, and counts success in disciples made instead of efficiency achieved. Many pastors need that conviction before technique. The appendices show care for pastors who need practical help. Their gaps mark where other African scholarship can extend the book. *Church Administration* can be helpful textbook if teachers adopt part one as a theological foundation and pair part two with African studies of poor and displaced churches, such as Tagwirei on pastors sustained by congregational gifts, donors, and tent-making[8] and Nzayabino on refugee-established churches built on shared language and mutual aid.[9]

[8] Tagwirei, K., 2022, 'Sustaining pastoral work and welfare in Zimbabwe: Case study of pastors in Masvingo urban', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1). https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2359

[9] Nzayabino, V., 2010, 'The role of refugee-established churches in integrating forced migrants: A case study of Word of Life Assembly in Yeoville, Johannesburg', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 66(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.290

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