

A Theological Analysis of the Leadership Praxis of the Rural Context
Madzimoyo Congregation of the Reformed Church in Zambia from a
Missional Perspective: Enhancing Gender-Inclusive Leadership.

A
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Abbreviation

DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
NGO	None Government Organisation
RCZ	Reformed Church in Zambia
WCRC	World Communion of Reformed Churches
WWC	World Council of Churches

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Abstract

This study investigates gender-inclusive leadership praxis in the rural Madzimoyo Congregation of the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ) through the lens of *missio Dei* theology. Drawing on the missional frameworks of David Bosch and Michael Goheen, and enriched by African women theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musa Dube, the research explores how inclusive leadership reflects God's redemptive mission in the world. Despite Zambia's strong Christian presence, church leadership remains heavily shaped by patriarchal culture and theology.

Using Osmer's four-task practical theological model and qualitative methods, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews and analyzed it thematically. Findings reveal deeply rooted cultural and theological barriers to women's leadership, yet also point to signs of transformation—especially among youth and theologically informed members. Participants identified spiritual gifting, biblical examples, and justice-oriented theology as grounds for inclusion.

The research concludes that gender-based exclusion contradicts the nature of the *missio Dei* and undermines the church's witness. A shift toward inclusive leadership is not only desirable but essential for the church's faithfulness to God's mission. The study offers a contextual, theological basis for reimagining leadership in the RCZ.

Key Terms: Missional Perspective, *Missio Dei* (Mission of God), Leadership Praxis, Gender-Inclusive Leadership, Rural Church Context, Theology of Mission.

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The question of gender-inclusive leadership in the church remains a critical theological and social concern, especially in rural contexts where cultural traditions and religious practices are deeply intertwined. Chitando and Chirongoma (2012, p. 87) define gender-inclusive leadership as a model promoting equal participation of men and women in decision-making and governance, ensuring roles are not restricted based on gender. The RCZ, like many Protestant denominations, has discussed gender equality in leadership, yet practical implementation—particularly in rural congregations—remains difficult due to entrenched patriarchal structures. The Madzimoyo Congregation, located in a male-dominated region of eastern Zambia, exemplifies these challenges.

Historically, the RCZ has upheld male leadership as the norm, shaped by biblical interpretations and socio-cultural expectations. Although some efforts have been made to include women in leadership, these are often limited to subordinate roles, such as women’s fellowship leadership—rather than positions of decision-making.

Research within the Zambian church context highlights how theology, culture, and institutional policy intersect. Mwila (2021) and Jini (2021) show that gender inequality is reinforced by cultural beliefs portraying male leadership as divinely ordained. Ilubala-Ziwa and Hachintu (2021) note slow progress in denominations with conservative theology, while Njobvu (2021) observes that although RCZ gender equality policies exist, they are inconsistently applied where cultural resistance is strong.

Madzimoyo’s leadership reflects these realities, while women play vital spiritual and social roles, they remain largely excluded from formal leadership, undermining the church’s call to embody the gospel’s inclusive nature.

From a missional perspective, the exclusion of women from leadership in Madzimoyo raises critical theological and ethical concerns. Theology of mission, inspired by the notion of *missio Dei*, emphasizes God’s redemptive work in the world through the church’s active participation in justice, reconciliation, and inclusivity (Bosch, 1991). This theological perspective provides a crucial lens for addressing leadership inequalities within the church, particularly in contexts where

cultural and theological barriers limit women's participation. Despite the growing body of scholarship on gender-inclusive leadership in African churches, significant gaps remain at the intersection of theology of mission, practical theology, and leadership praxis within rural congregations. Much of the existing literature—such as that of Phiri (1997), Oduyoye (1995), and Dube (2003)—focuses on feminist and gender justice perspectives, highlighting patriarchal barriers to women's leadership. However, these studies primarily critique African ecclesial structures without engaging deeply with missional ecclesiology as a transformative framework for leadership renewal.

Additionally, while scholars like Kim (2009) and Bosch (1991) discuss missional theology, they do not specifically explore how mission can serve as a catalyst for gender-inclusive leadership in rural African church contexts. The study bridges this gap by applying theology of mission as a lens for reimagining leadership praxis, particularly within the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. In this setting, deeply embedded cultural traditions and theological interpretations continue to restrict women's roles in decision-making. By grounding leadership transformation in the church's missional calling to justice, reconciliation, and inclusivity, this study offers a contextually relevant and theologically grounded approach to gender-inclusivity in church leadership.

This study seeks to critically analyze the leadership praxis of the Madzimoyo Congregation through a missional theological lens, identifying both the barriers to and opportunities for gender-inclusive leadership. Missional Perspective in this context refers to a theological perspective that understands the church as actively participating in God's mission (*missio Dei*). It emphasizes that leadership and church structures should be shaped by God's redemptive work in the world (Guder, 1998, p. 11). Drawing from the perspectives of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kirsteen Kim, and David Bosch, the study highlights justice-oriented theology of mission, emphasizing women's empowerment and structural transformation.

By engaging with existing literature, empirical insights, and theological reflection, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender and church leadership within the RCZ. Ultimately, the study seeks to propose ways in which the Madzimoyo Congregation can enhance gender-inclusive leadership while remaining faithful to its missional identity and theological heritage.

1.2 Problem Statement/problem definition

The leadership structures within the RCZ have historically been shaped by patriarchal cultural norms, particularly in rural congregations such as the Madzimoyo Congregation. Despite theological affirmations of equality in Christ and the RCZ's broader commitment to gender justice, women in rural congregations continue to face barriers to leadership roles. While significant research has been conducted on gender and church leadership in Zambia, existing studies have primarily focused on urban contexts or denominational policies without adequately addressing the specific challenges faced by women in rural congregations (Njobvu, 2021; Ilubala-Ziwa & Hachintu, 2021). This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining the leadership praxis of the Madzimoyo Congregation from a missional theological perspective, exploring how gender-inclusive leadership can be enhanced in a way that aligns with the church's mission and theological identity.

The problem at the heart of this research lies in the tension between the RCZ's theological commitment to gender equality and the continued exclusion of women from leadership in rural congregations. According to Mwila (2021), many Christian communities in Zambia continue to operate under deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that limit women's leadership roles despite formal policies advocating for gender equality. Similarly, Chileshe (2023) argues that cultural traditions have a profound influence on women's self-perception and willingness to pursue leadership positions, particularly in rural settings. The current leadership praxis in Madzimoyo reflects a persistent gender imbalance that raises theological, ethical, and missional concerns. While some women participate in church activities, their roles are often limited to non-decision-making functions (Jini, 2021). This study critically examines the underlying cultural, theological, and structural factors that hinder gender-inclusive leadership and explores how the congregation can embody a more inclusive missional identity.

1.3 Justification and Objective

This study is significant for the academic community, the church, and society as it addresses a critical gap in theological and missional studies regarding gender-inclusive leadership in rural church contexts. The Madzimoyo Congregation, like many rural churches in Zambia, operates within deeply patriarchal structures that often marginalize women from leadership roles. This

research contributes to ongoing discussions on theology of mission, gender justice, and church leadership transformation.

From a societal perspective, this research addresses broader gender justice concerns in Zambia, where cultural and ecclesial norms often intersect to limit women's leadership opportunities (Chileshe, 2019; Pesa, 2023). It contributes to ongoing conversations on power, agency, and the role of women in the mission of God (Maros, 2024; Phiri, Oduyoye), offering practical recommendations for leadership transformation in male-dominated church contexts.

This study aims to explore how the *missio Dei* theory as developed by David Bosch and Michael Goheen can inform and promote gender-inclusive leadership within the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. Specifically, it seeks to understand the foundational elements of Bosch's and Goheen's theology of mission, assess its relevance to fostering inclusive leadership in Christian communities, and examine the social, cultural, and ecclesial context of the Madzimoyo Congregation. By analyzing current leadership practices and the theological and missiological convictions that shape them, the research will identify principles that can guide the development of a more inclusive leadership model that reflects God's mission in the world.

1.4 Research Questions

1.4.1 Main Research Question

How can the *missio Dei* theory of David Bosch and Michael Goheen, enriched by African women's perspectives, contribute to gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the Reformed Church in Zambia?

1.4.2 Sub-questions

1. What is Bosch's and Goheen's *missio Dei* theory?
2. How do African women theologians enrich their theory and how does *missio Dei* theory promote gender-inclusive leadership in Christian communities?
3. What is the context of the Madzimoyo Congregation Reformed Church in Zambia?
4. What are the current leadership practices of the Madzimoyo Congregation Reformed Church in Zambia?

5. What theological and missiological principles can inform and guide a more gender-inclusive leadership practice within the Madzimoyo Congregation Reformed Church in Zambia?

1.5 Research Context: The Madzimoyo Congregation and RCZ

The RCZ, particularly through congregations such as Madzimoyo, represents a significant chapter in the Christianization of Eastern Zambia. The church's origins lie in the missionary activities of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) of South Africa, whose theological, ecclesiological, and cultural paradigms heavily influenced the shaping of the RCZ. These paradigms were deeply patriarchal, shaped by both Victorian-era values and a selective reading of Scripture. The transplantation of Reformed theology into Zambia happened in a colonial context, and this context invariably shaped the gender dynamics within the church. Patriarchal leadership structures became normative and were further reinforced by interpretations of Scripture and by prevailing African cultural norms.

Understanding the history and development of the RCZ, especially in Madzimoyo is crucial for discerning how gendered leadership emerged and was legitimized in this ecclesial tradition. It also provides a foundation for evaluating pathways toward gender-inclusive leadership grounded in both theological reform and cultural renewal.

1.5.1 Geographical and Demographic Context

Madzimoyo Congregation is situated in the Eastern Province of Zambia, specifically within Chipata District, which serves as the provincial capital and a major cultural and economic hub. The congregation is located in a rural area approximately 15 kilometers from Chipata town center, nestled within the jurisdiction of Chief Madzimawe's traditional territory. The region is characterized by gently undulating terrain, small hills, and open plains, with a subtropical climate that supports both crop farming and animal husbandry. Rainfall is seasonal, typically falling between November and April, followed by a long dry season, which profoundly shapes the agricultural cycles and, by extension, the daily lives of the local people.

The broader Chipata District is home to a diverse population, but the dominant ethnic groups in and around Madzimoyo are the Chewa and Ngoni peoples. The Chewa, who are primarily matrilineal in lineage, have historically emphasized strong kinship bonds through the mother's

line, although patriarchal authority remains dominant in leadership structures. The Ngoni, on the other hand, have a patrilineal and warrior-based heritage, historically influenced by Zulu traditions brought northward during the Mfecane (social upheavals) of the 19th century (Phiri, 2000, p.37). These two ethnic narratives converge in Madzimoyo to create a vibrant but complex cultural landscape.

Language use in Madzimoyo reflects this cultural blend. Chichewa (also known as Nyanja) is the most widely spoken language in the community and is used in homes, markets, and informal settings. In official domains such as schools, government offices English is used, particularly in written communication and higher-level discourse. Bemba, another major Zambian language, is sometimes heard among traders and migrant workers, but it is less dominant in the immediate Madzimoyo area.

The community structure in Madzimoyo is largely rural and agrarian. Subsistence farming is the backbone of the local economy, with maize serving as the staple crop, alongside groundnuts, sweet potatoes, cassava, cotton, and some tobacco farming for cash income. Livestock farming, though secondary, is also important, with cattle, goats, and chickens commonly kept. Economic activities are heavily influenced by the agricultural calendar, with peak seasons for planting and harvest bringing intense labor demands that involve both men and women, albeit in gender-specific roles.

Population dynamics in the area reflect broader national trends. According to the Zambia Statistics Agency (2022), rural areas in Eastern Province, including Madzimoyo, experience higher fertility rates and larger household sizes compared to urban centers. The majority of the population is young, with a significant percentage under the age of 25, posing both opportunities and challenges for leadership development within the church and community. Access to education has improved, with many children attending primary school; however, dropout rates remain high, especially for girls, due to factors such as early marriage, economic hardship, and cultural expectations regarding gender roles (Phiri, 2016, p.32).

Religiously, the population is predominantly Christian, with the RCZ being one of the influential denominations in the area. However, syncretism remains prevalent, with many people maintaining traditional religious beliefs and practices alongside their Christian faith. Beliefs in ancestral spirits, witchcraft, and the power of traditional healers coexist with Christian teachings, influencing how health, leadership, and social issues are understood.

Thus, the geographical and demographic context of Madzimoyo is a tapestry woven from rural livelihoods, strong kinship ties, youthful populations, syncretic religious practices, and enduring cultural traditions. This context shapes not only everyday life but also deeply influences how leadership, especially gender-inclusive leadership is envisioned, resisted, or embraced within the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ.

1.5.2 The Early Missionary Presence in Eastern Zambia

The RCZ's foundations were laid by the DRC missionaries who, from the 1890s onward, expanded their mission efforts into Zambia's Eastern Province. These missionaries established mission stations that combined evangelism with education, healthcare, and agriculture. As Verstraelen-Gilhuis observes, "the DRC missionaries were not just interested in planting churches but in establishing whole communities of Christian civilization" (Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1982, p. 40).

This civilizing mission was deeply paternalistic. It was not only theological but also cultural and political, reinforcing European ideas of family, leadership, and gender roles. Missionaries introduced a model of male-dominated leadership based on a Western understanding of the church hierarchy, often at odds with traditional African systems, particularly those where women held positions of spiritual or social authority (Njobvu 2020, p. 23).

1.5.3 Engagement with Ngoni and Chewa Communities

The missionaries' engagement with Ngoni and Chewa communities shaped the early RCZ significantly. The Ngoni, descendants of Zulu migrants, possessed a strongly centralized and militaristic structure. This appealed to the missionaries, who saw in it a mirror of their own church polity. As Verstraelen-Gilhuis notes, "the centralized authority of the Ngoni chiefs was exploited to spread the gospel more efficiently, with missionaries aligning themselves with traditional leadership" (1982, p. 93).

However, this alignment came at a theological cost: while Ngoni society was patriarchal, women still played significant roles in spirituality and family life. Older women were respected as custodians of tradition and leaders in initiation rites. Yet, as the missionaries constructed churches and schools, these traditional roles were displaced or ignored. "The missionaries refused to recognize the spiritual roles that women played in traditional Ngoni society and instead modeled female participation after Victorian domestic ideals" (Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1982, pp. 115–116).

The encounter with the Chewa posed even greater cultural tension. The Chewa practiced matrilineality, where inheritance and household power flowed through the maternal line. Women held considerable authority in land distribution, household leadership, and ritual life. This system clashed with the missionary emphasis on male headship. As Phiri (1997, p.25) argues, the missionaries “saw Chewa traditions as incompatible with Christian family values and sought to dismantle matrilineal structures through both theology and institutional practice.”

While both the Ngoni and Chewa contexts presented distinct cultural frameworks, the result was largely the same: the missionary model displaced women’s leadership and introduced a rigid, male-centered ecclesiology.

1.5.4 Theological and Ecclesial Legacy of Patriarchy

The DRC missionaries brought with them a deeply patriarchal theology rooted in Calvinist tradition and Victorian morality. This theological stance was reflected in their church polity, which exclusively reserved offices such as pastor, elder, and deacon for men. The missionaries based these exclusions on certain New Testament passages, including 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, interpreted as timeless prohibitions against women’s leadership in the church (Phiri, 2016, p.71).

As Pauw (1980) explains, the missionaries transplanted “a South African church order into Zambia, with little reflection on its cultural appropriateness or theological justice” (p. 68). This kerkorde maintained ecclesiastical hierarchies that mirrored colonial power dynamics, and its structure was resistant to the inclusion of women in leadership, despite their active roles in the life of the church.

This legacy remains evident in many RCZ congregations today, including Madzimoyo, where leadership remains largely male even though women form the majority of congregants. The deep-seated theological assumptions of the past continue to influence present practice and must be critically examined in light of biblical theology and contemporary cultural awareness.

1.5.5 Historical Context and Founding

Madzimoyo Congregation emerged in the early 20th century as part of the RCZ’s expansion in Eastern Province. Strategically located 15 kilometers from Chipata, the congregation became a

central hub for mission activities, evangelism, and social service, it was established in 1903. The name “Madzimoyo,” which means “Living Water” in Chichewa, echoes the Gospel promise in John 4:10 and John 7:38— “Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” (Van den Bosch, 2003)

Verstraelen-Gilhuis (1982) emphasizes that Madzimoyo was “not merely a worship center but a nucleus of educational and medical outreach, typical of the missionary method of holistic development” (p. 147). The school and clinic established at Madzimoyo remain enduring symbols of this vision. Yet, despite such progressive engagement, the leadership model remained staunchly patriarchal.

1.5.6 Missionary Structures and Institutional Growth

The early missionary structures at Madzimoyo reflected the broader pattern of integrating religious, educational, and health services under one institutional roof. These services were critical in attracting new converts and enhancing the church’s reputation. Yet, missionary control of leadership training meant that only men were considered for roles such as catechists and evangelists. Women, while vital in support roles, were excluded from formal leadership.

Chiseni (2024, p.18) observes that Christian missionary efforts in colonial Zambia often prioritized male literacy and leadership training, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchies. Although mission education laid the groundwork for long-term educational development, its unequal access and implicit gender biases limited women’s participation in both ecclesiastical and civic leadership roles. Leadership thus became an institutional preserve of men, with theological justification grounded more in tradition than in the liberating message of the Gospel.

1.5.7 Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms

Madzimoyo Congregation grew into one of the most influential RCZ congregations in Eastern Zambia, but it also inherited and perpetuated the patriarchal framework established by the missionaries. The influence of the male-dominated kerkorde was deeply entrenched (Pauw (1980, p.68).

Even in recent decades, as societal norms around gender have shifted, the congregation has struggled to fully embrace gender-inclusive leadership. “Women’s exclusion from decision-

making bodies is not merely a relic of the past; it is an active tradition justified by theological inertia and cultural resistance,” wrote Verstraelen-Gilhuis in 1982 (p. 168).

The persistence of these norms suggests that institutional change must be accompanied by theological renewal. Without critical reflection on the history of Madzimoyo and its foundations in missionary patriarchy, genuine progress toward gender equity will remain elusive.

In conclusion, the historical development of the RCZ, particularly through congregations like Madzimoyo, reveals how missionary theology and colonial paradigms shaped a church deeply committed to male leadership. While the RCZ contributed significantly to education, healthcare, and community development, it also imposed a patriarchal ecclesiology that suppressed women’s traditional roles in both Ngoni and Chewa cultures.

1.6 State of the Research

Theological and sociological studies on gender and leadership within the church have been growing in Zambia, reflecting broader concerns about gender equality in religious and cultural settings. This section provides an overview of the current state of research on gender-inclusive leadership in the Zambian church context. The academic discourse on gender and leadership in religious communities has primarily addressed the impact of patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and theological interpretations on women’s participation in leadership roles.

Victor Mwila’s study, *Gender Inequality in Relation to Religious Practices and Culture: A Study of Zambia* (2021), examines the intersection of gender inequality, religious practices, and cultural norms. Mwila highlights how deeply embedded patriarchal structures in Zambian Christianity hinder women’s leadership opportunities. This study provides a foundational understanding of how religious and cultural frameworks reinforce male dominance within church leadership structures.

Patrick Phumelele Jini’s research, *Challenges Faced by Women in Church Leadership: A Multifaceted and Intersectional Map* (on churches in South-Africa), offers a detailed exploration of the structural and social barriers that impede women’s advancement in church leadership. Jini’s work is particularly relevant for analyzing the intersectionality of gender discrimination, considering factors such as education, social class, and theological interpretations that collectively shape women’s experiences within church hierarchies.

Judith Lubasi Ilubala-Ziwa's contributions, particularly *The Role of Church and Ecumenical Mission in Gender Emancipation and Equality in Lusaka District, Zambia*, provide insight into the theological and missional dimensions of gender justice such as Equipping leaders for transformational ministry, Witnessing to the gospel through community transformation, and Proclaiming a liberating gospel that confronts injustice. Ilubala-Ziwa, along with Joseph Kayuni Hachintu, further examines the *Leadership Role of Women in Selected Church Denominations of Kabwe District, Zambia*, identifying key denominational variations in gender inclusion within church leadership. Their findings demonstrate that while some churches have made strides in embracing women's leadership, others remain bound by conservative theological interpretations that reinforce gender exclusion.

Dickson Njobvu's study, *The Role of the Reformed Church in Zambia in Promoting Gender Equality: A Case of Lilanda and Garden House Congregations in Lusaka District*, presents an institutional analysis of the RCZ's approach to gender equality. Njobvu examines how theological frameworks, church policies, and grassroots advocacy efforts interact to create spaces for women in leadership. His findings indicate that while progress has been made, resistance persists at various levels, especially in rural congregations where cultural conservatism is stronger.

Further expanding the sociocultural dimension, Kasonde Kristina Chileshe's undergraduate thesis, *Effects of a Patriarchal Society on a Zambian Woman's Mindset: A Case Study of Lusaka Central*, explores how deeply ingrained patriarchal norms shape women's perceptions of their own leadership capabilities. This psychological and sociological perspective is crucial for understanding why women in rural areas may be less likely to pursue leadership roles even when opportunities exist.

Iva Pesa's article, *Women in Zambia* (2023), situates the discussion within a broader historical and socio-political context, tracing the evolution of women's roles in Zambian society, including their participation in religious leadership. Pesa's work provides comparative insights that contextualize the RCZ's gender dynamics within national and global movements for gender justice.

Finally, Misozi Lwatula's dissertation, *Gender-Based Violence in Zambia: A Post-Colonial Feminist Critique* (2019), highlights the role of the church in either perpetuating or resisting gender-based violence. This study is particularly relevant for understanding the implications of exclusionary leadership practices on women's broader social and spiritual well-being.

The cumulative insights from these studies illustrate that gender-inclusive leadership remains a contested issue in Zambian church communities, particularly in rural contexts.

However, while these studies offer a strong sociological foundation, a theological-missiological perspective is necessary to fully understand the implications of gender-inclusive leadership in the Zambian church context. David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (1991) and Michael Goheen's *Introducing Christian Mission Today* (2014) provide essential frameworks for analyzing how the Madzimoyo congregation engages in leadership transformation. Bosch's emphasis on mission as a contextual and dynamic practice underscores the need for gender justice as part of the church's missional identity. Goheen builds on Bosch's work by emphasizing the integral role of *Missio Dei* in shaping church leadership, arguing that mission is not merely an activity of the church but its very essence. This reinforces the idea that gender-inclusive leadership is an extension of the church's participation in God's mission.

Similarly, Darrell Guder et al.'s *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (1998) introduces the concept of the "missional church," which emphasizes that leadership structures should reflect the church's calling to be a sent community. Though written in a North American context, this work provides a theological basis for questioning gender-exclusionary leadership in Madzimoyo.

John N. J. Kritzinger's *Mission in Prophetic Dialogue* (2011) also offers a useful framework for engaging with patriarchal leadership models. His argument that mission involves dialogue that both respects cultural contexts and prophetically challenges injustices aligns with the approach this research takes in exploring gender inclusivity.

African feminist theologians, such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye (*Daughters of Anowa*, 1995) and Isabel Apawo Phiri (*Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*, 1997), further contribute to this discussion by critiquing theological interpretations that justify women's subordination. Oduyoye's exploration of African women's experiences in patriarchal church settings parallels the leadership struggles faced by women in the RCZ. Phiri's work on Chewa women's religious experiences offers comparative insights that help frame the research's focus on Madzimoyo's context.

The integration of a missional theological framework is further supported by Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (2006), which presents a

biblical theology of mission emphasizing justice and inclusion. Wright's argument that mission involves the transformation of oppressive structures supports the thesis that gender-inclusive leadership is part of the church's divine calling. Similarly, Kirsteen Kim's *Joining in with the Spirit* (2009) discusses how churches can balance cultural sensitivity with transformative mission, which is directly relevant for leadership renewal in Madzimoyo.

Keletso Yende's *An Exploratory Study of Women Leadership in the South African Charismatic Church Through an African Women Practical Theology Lens* (2022) contributes to this discussion by providing an African women practical theology perspective on leadership challenges. Yende's work highlights how African women navigate theological and cultural constraints in church leadership and offers a methodological lens that is particularly useful for this research. By examining how women in South African charismatic churches exercise leadership despite patriarchal opposition, Yende's insights enrich the study by demonstrating alternative leadership models that could be applicable within the RCZ.

Cruz, Gemma Tulud. "Women in Mission," In *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies* (2022) further enhances this research by framing women's leadership within a global mission context. Cruz explores how women have historically played pivotal roles in mission despite systemic barriers, providing comparative insights that help situate the Madzimoyo congregation's leadership struggles within broader missional movements. Her discussion on mission as an inclusive and transformative space aligns with the research's argument that gender-inclusive leadership is essential for a holistic missional theology.

Building on these theological-missiological insights, this research extends the conversation by applying a missional theology lens to the leadership structures of the Madzimoyo congregation. While previous studies have identified barriers to women's leadership, this study uniquely contributes by exploring how the *Missio Dei* framework, as developed by Bosch and Goheen, can bridge this gap. By situating the Madzimoyo congregation within the broader missional church discourse, the research demonstrates how theological frameworks can be applied to practical church leadership renewal, thus bridging the gap between theological reflection and on-the-ground practice.

1.7 Methodology

Methodologically, Richard Osmer's *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (2008) provides a structured approach for integrating theology and practice. His fourfold model—descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic—guides this research in analyzing gender dynamics in Madzimoyo and proposing pathways for leadership transformation.

This study employs a qualitative research method with a case study approach, focusing on the leadership praxis of the Madzimoyo Congregation within the RCZ. The research is structured to answer the central question: How can the missio Dei theory of David Bosch and Michael Goheen, enriched by African women's perspectives, contribute to gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ?

To achieve this, the study integrates multiple data gained by theoretical desk study, semi-structured interviews with RCZ clergy and leaders, both male and female, and document analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of both theological foundations and leadership realities in the RCZ.

1.7.1 Desk Study

A desk study was conducted to examine:

- David Bosch's missio Dei theory (*Transforming Mission*)—emphasizing the Church's participation in God's mission rather than institutional expansion.
- Michael Goheen's developments of Bosch's ideas—focusing on the Church's biblical identity and cultural engagement.
- Missio Dei and gender justice—reviewing literature integrating feminist theology and missional ecclesiology.

This desk study constructs the theoretical framework and inform the interpretation of empirical findings.

1.7.2 Data Collection Methods

a. Key Informant Interviews

- Participants: 15 RCZ clergy and leadership figures (8 women, 7 men).

- Purpose: To understand theological perspectives, leadership experiences, and gender-inclusivity barriers.
- Format: Virtual interviews (Zoom/WhatsApp) and email-based questionnaires.
- Data Management: Interviews were recorded (where permitted) and transcribed for analysis.

b. Document Analysis

- Documents: RCZ synod reports, policy manuals, gender resolutions, Madzimoyo congregation records.
- Objective: To assess historical and contemporary framing of gender-inclusive leadership.

1.7.3 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis and theological reflection guided by Osmer's four-task model:

- Descriptive-Empirical: What is happening? (interview findings, document insights)
- Interpretive: Why is it happening? (cultural and theological analysis)
- Normative: What should be happening? (insights from Bosch and Goheen's theology, enriched by African women theologians, in dialogue with the normative discourse in the interviews)
- Pragmatic: How might leadership change toward gender inclusivity?

1.8 Structure of the research

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Research Introduction. This chapter introduces the research context, outlines the problem, states the objectives, and presents the research questions. It also explains the significance of the study and its structure.

Chapter 2: *Missio Dei* and Gender-Inclusive Leadership. This chapter builds the theoretical foundation by exploring the *missio Dei* theology of Bosch and Goheen. It is enriched with African contextual insights, especially from women theologians, to frame leadership as a missional and inclusive practice.

Chapter 3: Methodology. Chapter 3 explains the research design, based on Osmer's four-task model of practical theology. It details data collection, thematic analysis, participant selection, ethical considerations, and how the research was conducted in context.

Chapter 4: Presentation and Analysis of Findings. This chapter presents the qualitative findings from interviews in the Madzimoyo Congregation. Ten major themes are identified, showing the tension between patriarchal barriers and signs of missional transformation.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Theological Implications and Recommendations. The findings are interpreted through theological reflection, connecting them to the *missio Dei* and African women's theology. It explores how leadership transformation aligns with God's justice and offers practical recommendations for the RCZ.

Chapter 6: Conclusion. The final chapter summarizes the key insights and theological reflections. It discusses research limitations, proposes practical recommendations and areas for future study, and reaffirms the call for gender-inclusive leadership as essential to the church's missional identity.

CHAPTER TWO: MISSIO DEI AND GENDER-INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

2.1 Introduction:

In recent decades, the concept of *missio Dei*—Latin for “the mission of God”—has become a cornerstone of contemporary missiology. It represents a theological paradigm shift away from viewing mission as primarily a church-initiated activity toward understanding it as the very nature and purpose of God. Rather than originating with human strategy or ecclesial authority, mission begins with God’s self-sending in love to redeem and restore creation. As Bosch (1991, p. 390) asserts, mission is not merely one function of the church, but an attribute of God, in whose mission the church is invited to participate.

This shift toward a theocentric understanding of mission emerged most notably in the mid-20th century but continues to shape theological reflection and ecclesial praxis globally. It has deep implications for how the church understands itself, not as a self-preserving institution, but as a dynamic, sent community rooted in the life of the Triune God. As Goheen (2011, pp. 15–22) emphasizes, the biblical narrative itself, from creation to new creation, is best understood as the unfolding story of God’s mission in the world.

The implications of *missio Dei* reach beyond ecclesiology into areas of social ethics, public witness, and leadership. In contexts like sub-Saharan Africa, including Zambia, where Christianity is vibrant yet often entangled with patriarchal cultural patterns and postcolonial legacies, this theology offers critical tools for reimagining leadership. The African church, if it is to remain faithful to God’s mission, must grapple with the injustices embedded in both society and church structures especially those that exclude women from full participation in leadership and ministry.

As scholars like Kirsteen Kim and Namsoon Kang have argued, theological frameworks such as *missio Dei* must be interpreted through diverse cultural lenses and feminist critiques to avoid reproducing Western or patriarchal biases (2010; Kang, 2005, 2006). Their insights affirm that God’s mission includes the empowerment of all people and the dismantling of gender-based exclusion.

This chapter seeks to explore the theological foundations of *missio Dei*, drawing primarily on the work of David Bosch and Michael Goheen. Bosch’s influential volume *Transforming Mission*

(1991) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding mission as holistic, justice-oriented, and deeply contextual. Goheen extends this vision by rooting the church's identity in the biblical drama of redemption and emphasizing that the church is not just an agent of mission but the very embodiment of mission in the world. Both theologians provide critical insights into what it means for the church to be a participant in God's reconciling work.

However, the chapter also goes beyond traditional missiology to engage with feminist and African contextual voices. Scholars such as the British missiologist Kirsteen Kim and the South-Korean theologian Namsoon Kang reinforce an intercultural and gender justice orientation within *missio Dei* theory. Perspectives of African women theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Isabel Apawo Phiri reveal how mission has too often been shaped by colonial and patriarchal frameworks that silence women's contributions and experiences. A truly holistic theology of *missio Dei* must therefore take seriously the call for gender justice, recognizing women as full co-bearers of God's mission.

The chapter proceeds in five major sections. First, it examines the theological foundations of *missio Dei*, exploring its historical origins, Trinitarian basis, and development through Bosch and Goheen. Second, it considers the contextual relevance of *missio Dei* within African cosmologies, social structures, and missional needs. Third, it explores how this theology challenges patriarchal leadership models in the church and calls for gender-inclusive leadership. Fourth, it engages feminist theological perspectives to deepen the understanding of liberation and inclusion as essential to God's mission. Finally, the chapter concludes with a call to reimagine church leadership through the lens of *missio Dei*, affirming the need for structural and spiritual transformation within African Christian communities.

In sum, *missio Dei* is not a static doctrine but a dynamic, transformative vision of God's redemptive love for the world a vision that demands justice, participation, and inclusion at every level of church life.

2.2 Origins and Historical Development

The concept of *missio Dei* emerged as a corrective to ecclesiocentric mission paradigms that often aligned with colonial and expansionist agendas. Prior to the mid-20th century, mission was largely understood as a function of the church, focused on proselytism, territorial expansion, and the

establishment of ecclesiastical authority (Bosch, 1991, p. 389). However, the 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council marked a paradigm shift by emphasizing that mission flows from the nature of the Triune God.

The theological influence of Karl Barth was central to this transition. Barth had argued that mission was not primarily a human activity but a divine initiative, an act of God's self-revelation and reconciliation with the world (Bosch, 1991, p. 389). Consequently, mission began to be redefined not as an enterprise of the church but as *missio Dei*—God's mission, into which the church is graciously invited to participate.

At Willingen, theologians such as Georg Vicedom and Johannes Hoekendijk helped formalize this shift. Vicedom later articulated *missio Dei* as a Trinitarian movement: the Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, and the Spirit sends the church (Vicedom, 1965, p. 5). Hoekendijk emphasized that the world, not the church, is the primary context for God's mission, urging the church to serve the world rather than preserve itself (Bosch, 1991, pp. 391–392).

This theological reframing was subsequently embraced by the World Council of Churches and echoed in Roman Catholic missiology, notably in *Ad Gentes* from Vatican II, which declared that the church “is missionary by its very nature” (*Ad Gentes*, 1965, para. 2). The convergence of these ecumenical insights laid the groundwork for the more holistic, justice-oriented theology of mission developed by later theologians like Bosch and Goheen.

2.3 Bosch's Theology of Missio Dei

David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* (1991) represents a seminal synthesis of missiological developments and offers a comprehensive theological vision of *missio Dei*. For Bosch, mission is rooted in the dynamic, Trinitarian nature of God and encompasses the full breadth of God's redemptive activity in history. He writes, “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God” (Bosch, 1991, p. 390). The church, therefore, is not the sender but the one sent, not the proprietor of mission but its servant.

Bosch's vision of mission is both holistic and contextual. He challenges the sacred-secular divide and rejects mission models that isolate evangelism from social transformation. Instead, he proposes that mission includes proclamation, healing, justice, peacemaking, and ecological concern (Bosch, 1991, pp. 373–378, 400). In African contexts, where social and political

challenges are deeply intertwined with spiritual realities, Bosch's insistence on integrated mission is especially resonant.

Importantly, Bosch is attuned to the postcolonial critique of mission. He acknowledges that earlier missionary movements often colluded with colonial powers, resulting in cultural domination and exclusion (Bosch, 1991, pp. 302–306). In response, he advocates for an incarnational and dialogical mission that respects local cultures and promotes dignity and justice for the oppressed.

Bosch also outlines six “emerging missionary paradigms,” with (in his times, the early 1990s) the most recent emphasizing mission as “participation in the *missio Dei*.” This model integrates key elements such as contextualization, ecumenical engagement, liberation theology, and ecological awareness (Bosch, 1991, pp. 368–510). His emphasis on justice, peace, and reconciliation aligns with African theological priorities, particularly in contexts marked by gender inequality, poverty, and systemic marginalization.

2.4 Goheen's Narrative Approach to *Missio Dei*

Goheen builds on Bosch's foundations by embedding *missio Dei* within the grand biblical narrative. In *A Light to the Nations* (2011), he argues that the Bible tells the unified story of God's redemptive mission—from creation to new creation—within which the church is called to play a missional role. “The whole Bible,” Goheen writes, “is a missional book, and its purpose is to form a missional people” (Goheen, 2011, p. 12).

Goheen identifies six acts in the biblical drama: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, the church, and the final consummation. Within this framework, the church does not merely support God's mission but embodies it by living out the gospel in word and deed (Goheen, 2011, pp. 17–22). He emphasizes the continuity of Israel and the church as communities chosen not for privilege but for the sake of the world's salvation.

His concept of the church as a “contrast community” is particularly important. Goheen challenges the church to reflect the values of the coming kingdom rather than conforming to societal norms. adding that in the Kingdom, Jesus welcomes sinners, outcast, the poor, and the marginalize (Goheen, 2011, p. 58).

. In African contexts where gender-based exclusion persists, this means challenging patriarchal structures and embodying an inclusive witness to God's justice and hospitality

Goheen also rejects the compartmentalization of mission. He argues that mission includes every domain of life, culture, politics, economics, and ecology—not just evangelism (Goheen, 2011, pp. 92–93). This aligns with the widely acknowledged holistic or integral approach to mission, as affirmed by both the World Council of Churches (WCC, 2013b, p. 13). Also aligns with the holistic spirituality common in African theology and challenges churches to address real-life issues affecting their members.

In summary, Goheen's narrative theology of mission offers African churches a biblically grounded framework for integrating social transformation with spiritual formation. It calls for ecclesial models that are not only faithful to Scripture but also responsive to the complex realities of African societies.

2.5 Trinitarian and Communal Nature of Mission

At the heart of *missio Dei* lies a Trinitarian vision of God's redemptive activity. The Father sends the Son (John 3:16), the Son sends the Spirit (John 14:26), and the Spirit empowers the church (Acts 1:8). This divine sending reflects the inner life of God—a life characterized by relationality, mutuality, and love. Mission, therefore, is not only an external activity but an extension of the Triune God's very being (Bosch, 1991, pp. 389–390).

This Trinitarian foundation has profound implications for leadership, community, and inclusion. In African contexts, where communal identity and relational ethics are central, the Trinity provides a theological anchor for participatory and inclusive ecclesiology. African traditional values such as *ubuntu*—"I am because we are"—resonate with the relational life of the Trinity and can be harnessed to foster inclusive church practices (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 19; Banda, 2020, p. 74).

Moreover, Trinitarian theology critiques authoritarian leadership models that dominate many African churches. Just as the Father, Son, and Spirit exist in mutual submission and love, church leadership should reflect shared authority, collaboration, and servant leadership. This challenges patriarchal structures that exclude women from decision-making and ministry roles.

According to Wright (2006, p. 63), the Trinitarian mission of God invites the church into a holistic ministry of love, justice, and transformation. It is not sufficient to affirm the Trinity doctrinally; the church must embody its relational and inclusive ethos in all aspects of life, including leadership. This includes affirming the gifts and callings of women and recognizing their participation as essential to the church's witness.

Kim (2010, p. 68) adds a critical intercultural and pneumatological dimension to this discussion by emphasizing that the Holy Spirit, as the divine agent of *missio Dei*, is actively present across cultures and communities, confronting injustices such as patriarchy that hinder women's leadership. For Kim, the Spirit does not merely indwell the church but transforms it, empowering marginalized voices to participate fully in God's mission.

Kang (2006, p. 188) reinforces this perspective by critiquing dominant models of mission that perpetuate patriarchal and colonial power structures in the guise of universality. She argues that *missio Dei* must be reimagined through the lens of justice and liberation—insisting that any theological framework that excludes women from leadership fails to reflect the life-giving work of the Triune God. Within a theoretical and practical framework of gender justice, she argues, the church could recover its prophetic voice and become a site of emancipatory struggles for transforming societal and religious institutions (Kang, 2005, 289).

Finally, the communal dimension of *missio Dei* calls the church to mirror the unity-in-diversity of the Godhead. The church is to be a reconciled and reconciling community, marked by mutuality rather than hierarchy. This is especially urgent in Africa, where social divisions based on gender, class, and ethnicity often threaten the church's unity and mission.

2.6 Missio Dei and Holistic Mission in African Contexts

A robust theology of *missio Dei* must engage the social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics of specific contexts. In Africa, and particularly in Zambia, the holistic understanding of life where the physical, spiritual, and communal are interconnected resonates deeply with the comprehensive nature of God's mission. The worldview of African cosmology, with its emphasis on relationality, dignity, and balance, can be seen in line with the Trinitarian and justice-oriented vision of *missio Dei* articulated by theologians such as Bosch and Goheen. This section explores how African theological perspectives especially those of Kwame Bediako, Oduyoye, and other contextual

voices enrich our understanding of holistic mission and illuminate the need for gender-inclusive leadership within the church.

2.6.1 African Worldviews and the Integration of Life

African theology recognizes that the sacred and the secular are not separated but deeply intertwined. As Bediako (1995, p. 116) argues, African religious thought maintains a strong sense of the sacred in all aspects of life, which contrasts with the Western dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. This worldview offers fertile ground for holistic mission, which attends not only to spiritual salvation but to economic, social, and political liberation as well.

This understanding aligns well with Bosch's emphasis on mission as social transformation. He writes that mission must be "a matter of the church being involved in the ongoing struggle for liberation and humanization" (Bosch, 1991, p. 432). Such involvement is not secondary to preaching but an essential aspect of witnessing to God's reign. In many African communities, the gospel that does not touch daily struggles such as poverty, gender-based violence, and systemic inequality is often perceived as incomplete.

Goheen (2011, p. 55) similarly affirms that God's mission includes transforming every aspect of life. The church, he argues, must challenge the spiritual forces and social systems that degrade human dignity. In African contexts, where structures of patriarchy, economic injustice, and colonial residues continue to shape communities, this implies that holistic mission must be both prophetic and restorative.

2.6.2 Gender Justice and the Missional Imperative

The integration of justice within mission is a recurring theme in African theology. Oduyoye (2001, p. 12) emphasizes that gender justice is central to God's vision for humanity. Her concept of the "household of God" envisions the church as a space of radical inclusion and mutual care, where hierarchical divisions are dismantled in favor of shared responsibility. In this household, women are not guests but co-builders.

Oduyoye insists that any mission theology that ignores the lived experiences of African women is both theologically and ethically deficient. She critiques both Western missionary legacies and traditional African cultural practices that reinforce exclusion and submission (Oduyoye, 1995, pp.

87–89). In response, she calls for a mission practice rooted in justice, love, and full participation of all God’s children.

Phiri (1997, p. 111) echoes this vision by arguing that the marginalization of women in the church undermines the integrity of the gospel. She insists that African theology must address gender inequality as a missional concern. Drawing on Acts 2 and the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit on “all flesh,” Phiri contends that gendered exclusion is a contradiction of the Spirit’s egalitarian work.

This theological insight links directly to Bosch and Goheen’s emphasis on the Spirit’s role in mission. Bosch highlights that the Spirit empowers all believers, without distinction, to participate in God’s mission (Bosch, 1991, p. 115). Goheen extends this by arguing that the Spirit calls the church to be a foretaste of the coming kingdom as a community of justice, peace, and mutual respect (Goheen, 2014, p. 213).

Kim (2010, p. 69) underscores that the Spirit’s mission must dismantle exclusionary structures, including those based on gender, and actively empower those who have been marginalized. Kang (2006, p. 188) similarly argues that unless the church confronts its complicity in systems of injustice, including patriarchy, it cannot authentically participate in the liberating mission of God.

2.6.3 Postcolonial and Prophetic Engagement

Two missiologists Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls have highlighted the need for a postcolonial reimagining of mission, this is to challenge the traditional narrative of Christian mission, which often presented it as a benevolent force bringing civilization and Christianity to the colonized. Walls (2002, p. 77) notes that the gospel must be both translatable and transformative, capable of entering diverse cultures while also challenging their injustices, this means not only translating the Bible into local languages but also reinterpreting Scripture in ways that affirm women’s dignity and leadership.

A truly holistic mission in Africa must therefore be prophetic. It must speak truth to power, challenge cultural norms that devalue women, and resist the temptation to prioritize church growth over human flourishing. As Goheen (2011, p. 139) argues, the church must embrace a public witness that addresses the structural roots of injustice. This includes confronting issues such as

child marriage, domestic abuse, lack of education for girls, and gender-based discrimination within the church itself.

Moreover, prophetic mission calls the church to model the kingdom of God in its own life. Bosch (1991, p. 375) reminds us that the church must not replicate the world's power structures but rather mirror the upside-down values of God's reign. In doing so, it becomes a sign and foretaste of the eschatological community of mutual service and equality.

2.6.4 Postcolonial, Prophetic and Embodied Mission and Embodied Mission

Holistic mission must be embodied and contextual. Theologians like Tinyiko Maluleke and Musa Dube stress that African theology must arise from African realities and speak with African voices. Dube (2003, p. 107) calls for a "hermeneutics of liberation" that takes seriously the suffering of African women and challenges interpretations of Scripture that legitimize domination.

Such contextual theologies contribute to a broader understanding of *missio Dei* as dynamic, localized, and justice-oriented. They emphasize that mission is not about bringing God to Africa but about recognizing and participating in what God is already doing among African people. This approach affirms the agency, dignity, and creativity of African communities and challenges Western paternalism.

In this regard, holistic mission in African contexts is not just about theological discourse it is about action, advocacy, and solidarity. It includes supporting women's education, challenging harmful cultural practices, promoting health and well-being, and fostering leadership that reflects the diversity of the body of Christ.

2.7 Bridging Theology and Gender Justice

The preceding theological reflections form a bridge to the next major concern of this chapter: gender-inclusive leadership. If the church is to be faithful to the *missio Dei*, it must ensure that women are not mere recipients of mission but active co-participants in God's redemptive work. This requires both theological renewal and practical transformation.

As Bosch and Goheen argue, and as African theologians emphasize, the church's mission cannot be separated from its internal practices. Leadership structures that exclude women contradict the

very message the church proclaims. Holistic mission thus compels the church to reflect the justice, mercy, and inclusion that characterize the God whose mission it serves.

In what follows, the chapter will explore how the missional theology of Bosch and Goheen, when read alongside feminist and African contextual theologies, offers a compelling case for gender-inclusive leadership as a core expression of *missio Dei*.

2.7.1 Missio Dei and Gender-Inclusive Leadership

A faithful response to the *missio Dei* demands that the church confront structures of exclusion and embody the justice and inclusivity at the heart of God’s mission. One of the most pressing issues facing many African churches is the exclusion of women from leadership roles, often justified through selective theological interpretations and entrenched patriarchal cultural norms. This section explores how the theology of *missio Dei*, as articulated by Bosch and Goheen, and fine-tuned by Kim and Kang from intercultural and feminist perspectives, supports a vision of leadership rooted in justice, mutuality, and Spirit-empowered participation. By engaging African women theologians such as Oduyoye, Phiri, Dube, and others, the section affirms gender-inclusive leadership as a theological imperative and a missional necessity.

2.7.2 Bosch’s Vision of Mission and Leadership

Bosch’s theology of mission is fundamentally Trinitarian, holistic, and justice-oriented. He rejects any reduction of mission to a single function such as evangelism, insisting instead that mission is multidimensional, encompassing proclamation, social action, reconciliation, and community formation (Bosch, 1991, pp. 373–378). Leadership, within this framework, is not a matter of institutional control but a form of service rooted in the missional identity of the church.

Bosch critiques Christendom-era models of leadership that institutionalized hierarchy and excluded laity—particularly women—from full participation. He emphasizes the Spirit’s role in empowering all believers for ministry, stating that “the Spirit bestows gifts on all members of the community, regardless of status or gender” (Bosch, 1991, p. 115). This has profound implications for leadership in the African church, where traditional hierarchies and male dominance often prevent women from exercising their gifts.

Bosch also draws on eschatology to frame mission as anticipatory of the coming reign of God. In this vision, the church serves as a sign and foretaste of God's kingdom, which is characterized by justice, peace, and reconciliation (Bosch, 1991, p. 498). A church that excludes women from leadership contradicts this kingdom vision and undermines its missional witness.

2.7.3 Goheen's Missional Ecclesiology and Justice

Goheen's contribution lies in grounding the church's missional identity in the narrative of Scripture. He asserts that the church does not merely have a mission; it is a missional people, called to live out God's purposes in every area of life (Goheen, 2011, p. 12). This includes embodying justice and mutuality in its structures and relationships.

Goheen critiques models of leadership that mirror worldly power dynamics, urging the church to become a "contrast community" that reflects the values of the kingdom of God (Goheen, 2011, p. 132). He warns against the church being conformed to cultural patterns that reinforce inequality and exclusion, arguing instead for communities where leadership is collaborative, inclusive, and Spirit-led.

Justice, in Goheen's framework, is not an add-on to mission but its core expression. He writes that "justice is what God's reign looks like in public life" and challenges churches to ensure that their internal structures reflect the justice they proclaim (Goheen, 2014, p. 213). In African contexts, where women are often denied leadership due to cultural or theological biases, Goheen's vision compels a reexamination of ecclesial structures through the lens of *missio Dei*.

2.7.4 *Missio Dei* as a Liberating Framework for Women

The theology of *missio Dei* has significant liberating potential when applied to the realities of African women. It frames leadership not as a privilege conferred by tradition or gender, but as a calling rooted in God's inclusive mission. The Spirit, who empowers the church for mission, is poured out on "all flesh" (Acts 2:17) a passage that Peter explicitly interprets as inclusive of women and men, young and old. In addition, Sarojini Nadar (2009) emphasizes the liberative function of Scripture when interpreted contextually and ethically.

African women theologians affirm that this Pentecostal vision is central to missional theology. Phiri (1997, p. 113) argues that denying women leadership is a theological betrayal of the Spirit's

outpouring. She contends that African churches must create space for women to exercise their spiritual gifts fully, both in the congregation and in society.

Oduyoye adds a relational and communal dimension to this vision. Her notion of the “household of God” calls for a church where power is shared, voices are heard, and everyone contributes to the flourishing of the community (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 32). For Oduyoye, leadership is not domination but *diakonia* a ministry of care, mutuality, and accountability.

This theological perspective challenges both Western theological frameworks that universalize male leadership and African cultural norms that restrict women’s participation. It insists that the exclusion of women is not merely a social issue but a spiritual distortion of God’s mission.

Global feminist theologians like Kim and Kang complement African perspectives by exposing how universalizing theology has often ignored women’s voices. Kim (2010), who defines with Rowan Williams mission as “finding out where the Spirit is at work and joining in” (p. 21) emphasizes that the Spirit’s empowerment extends across all cultural and gender boundaries, and that mission must include the recognition and affirmation of women’s agency. Kang (2006, p. 188) insists that mission theology must confront and resist gender oppression within both local cultures and global theological discourse. This includes that the church must become a prophetic site of emancipatory struggles for transforming institutional structures both internal and external (Kang, 2005, p. 189).

Asian-American theologian Kwok Pui-lan also contributes to this conversation, asserting that mission theology must challenge gender oppression both within and beyond the church (Kwok, 2005, p. 87). Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung similarly frames the Holy Spirit as a source of resistance and empowerment for marginalized people, including women (Chung, 1990, p. 42).

2.8 African Women’s Theological Contributions

African women theologians have made significant contributions to reshaping theology and missiology from the margins. Their work is rooted in lived experience and offers a contextual critique of both colonial missionary legacies and indigenous patriarchal systems. For these theologians, as for other feminist Christian voices, the struggle for gender-inclusive leadership is not just about equity but about faithfulness to the God who liberates.

Oduyoye (1995, pp. 87–89) critiques mission practices that have silenced women’s voices and perpetuated dependency. She argues that women’s leadership must be grounded in community-based wisdom and spiritual discernment. Phiri, meanwhile, calls for theological education that includes and affirms women’s perspectives, warning that the absence of women in theological discourse leads to distorted ecclesiologies resulting in the church missing out on their unique perspectives, gifts, and abilities, hindering its mission and outreach (Phiri, 1997, p. 109).

Dube, a Botswanan theologian, develops a “gender-sensitive missiology” that critiques the ways in which both Western and African mission traditions have perpetuated gender-based exclusion. She proposes a liberative biblical hermeneutic that empowers women to read Scripture from their contexts of struggle and resistance (Dube, 2003, pp. 102–104).

Together, these theologians enrich *missio Dei* by integrating concerns of gender, justice, and contextual theology. They assert that the Spirit’s mission is not merely to save souls but to challenge and dismantle systems of exclusion, including women’s banning from church leadership, and affirm the full humanity of all people.

2.8.1 Empowering Women as Co-Bearers of Mission

The theology of *missio Dei* offers not only a critique of patriarchal ecclesiology but also a transformative vision in which women are recognized and empowered as full co-bearers of God’s mission. While theologians like Bosch (1991) and Goheen (2014) affirm the inclusive nature of the Spirit’s call, it is African women theologians such as Oduyoye and Phiri who most directly articulate the theological imperative of women’s empowerment within African Christianity. Their contributions shift the conversation from abstract inclusion to concrete transformation of church structures and cultural norms.

Oduyoye (1995) critiques both colonial legacies such as marginalization of African women, westernization of theology, colonial impact on cultural values, coloniality and the church and indigenous patriarchal systems that deny women agency in church and society,

She argues that women are already active bearers of mission through caregiving, teaching, organizing, and peacemaking, and the failure to recognize this represents a theological and ecclesial deficiency. For her, empowering women is not merely about leadership titles but about affirming their full humanity and capacity as agents of God’s liberating work. Similarly, Phiri

(1997, 2000) insists that African churches must move from tokenism (a symbolic effort to have women represented in church leadership) to structural transformation. She envisions empowerment as a process that includes theological reinterpretation, leadership training, and the dismantling of discriminatory systems within the church. She further argues that curriculum reform of theological seminaries is necessary to ensure theology reflects both women's experiences and biblical visions of justice (Phiri, 2000, p. 238).

This theological foundation is especially pertinent in Southern Africa, where women often bear the brunt of socio-cultural and ecclesial exclusion. Keletso Yende (2022) and Njobvu (2020) highlight that in both Zambian and South African church contexts, barriers to women's leadership include deeply embedded patriarchal theologies, lack of institutional support, and resistance from male leadership. These and other scholars identify, based on their research, key areas of reform necessary for meaningful change:

Theological Education: Women must be encouraged and supported in theological studies, pastoral training, and spiritual formation. Institutions should revise curricula to include women's perspectives and liberationist readings of scripture. This prepares women for leadership while challenging male-centric theological norms (see also Phiri, 2000, p.154).

Leadership Development and Mentorship: Churches must implement deliberate leadership development strategies for women. This includes mentorship programs, leadership workshops, and affirmative action in leadership appointments (Yende, 2022, p. 102). Male allies are also needed to use their influence to challenge sexism and promote inclusive leadership.

Liturgical and Sacramental Inclusion: According to Njobvu (2020, p.51), women must be seen leading in worship, preaching, and administering sacraments. This not only disrupts the norm of male-exclusive spiritual authority but also reshapes theological imaginations around women's roles. Liturgical participation affirms their presence as normative rather than exceptional.

Policy and Institutional Reform: Churches must back these cultural and educational shifts with policy changes. This includes revising constitutions, leadership policies, ordination requirements, and governance structures to affirm women's eligibility for all roles. Without such institutional changes, empowerment efforts remain symbolic rather than systemic (Pesa, 2023, p.9).

Cultural Transformation: Churches must critically engage cultural norms, affirming those that promote life and dignity while challenging those that perpetuate harm. Contextual Bible study, public theology, and community dialogue can foster such transformation (Dube, 2003, p. 107).

In our case study in Madzimoyo congregation of the RCZ, we will examine the cultural and religious factors (practices, patterns or beliefs) at work in women's exclusion from leadership in the church and which factors might promote and support gender-inclusive leadership in this church context. From the case study we will again critically look at the proposed key areas of change. It is clear that the proposed reforms are not peripheral to the church's mission; they aim at essential expressions of the church's faithfulness to the *missio Dei*. The church cannot credibly witness to God's justice while replicating injustice within its own walls.

The vision of *missio Dei* invites all members of the church—men and women, young and old, rich and poor—to participate in God's redemptive work. Women are not merely recipients of mission; they are co-bearers, leaders, and witnesses of the gospel. Their exclusion weakens the church's witness, while their empowerment enriches its vitality and faithfulness.

African churches have already seen powerful examples of women leading in mission—through community health initiatives, grassroots theological education, peacebuilding, and pastoral ministry. In many rural communities, women sustain the life of the church through prayer, service, and teaching. Yet their leadership often remains unrecognized or unofficial.

Missional theology calls the church to formalize, affirm, and expand this leadership. As Goheen (2011, p. 211) writes, the church must “name and resist the cultural forces that oppose the full participation of women in the life of God's people.”

Scripturally, the church can draw on numerous examples of women leaders—Deborah, Huldah, Mary Magdalene, Lydia, Priscilla, Phoebe, and others—who participated in God's mission in both Old and New Testament contexts. These women were prophets, teachers, apostles, and patrons—models of Spirit-empowered leadership.

In light of these theological, biblical, and contextual insights, gender-inclusive leadership is not an optional innovation but a return to the missional identity of the church. It affirms that God's Spirit is poured out on all people and that all are called to proclaim, embody, and lead in the mission of God.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter we developed the theoretical framework for the case study research on inclusive leadership in Madzimoyo congregation using the theology of *missio Dei* by Bosch and Goheen enriched by feminist and African reflections. The theology of *missio Dei* reorients the church's understanding of mission from a human-centered endeavor to a divine initiative rooted in the life of the Triune God. As demonstrated through the work of Bosch and Goheen, this theology calls the church to participate in God's redemptive work in the world by embodying justice, inclusion, and holistic transformation.

In the African context particularly in Zambia, where Christianity is thriving but often entangled with patriarchal structures and cultural norms, *missio Dei* provides a compelling theological foundation for challenging gender-based exclusion. It affirms that leadership in the church is not determined by gender, tradition, or hierarchy, but by the Spirit's empowerment and the church's identity as a missional people.

African women theologians such as Oduyoye, Phiri, Dube, and others have enriched this theology by rooting it in the lived experiences and spiritual resilience of African women. Their work affirms that gender justice is not only a social concern but a theological imperative within God's mission. To exclude women from leadership is to contradict the inclusive, liberating mission of the Triune God.

Empowering women as co-bearers of God's mission not only honors their dignity and gifts but also strengthens the witness of the church to the world. In our case study in Madzimoyo congregation we will explore which factors are at work in gender-based exclusion from church leadership, and which transformations will be needed.

As the church in Africa seeks to remain faithful to its calling, it must reflect critically on its leadership practices and theological assumptions. The journey toward gender-inclusive leadership is not merely a matter of institutional reform but a faithful embodiment of the gospel itself. In becoming a community that reflects the justice, mutuality, and relationality of the Triune God, the church fulfills its calling as a participant in the *missio Dei* a mission of love, liberation, and new creation for all.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to explore gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. The study seeks to understand the theological, cultural, and ecclesial factors shaping gender roles within church leadership, using both empirical and theological tools.

A practical theological methodology is adopted, rooted in the conviction that theology must engage the lived realities of faith communities in context. Practical theology, especially when integrated with missional theology, provides a holistic approach that connects Scripture, tradition, culture, and contemporary experience. This chapter presents the research design, data collection methods, and analytical approaches used in this study, grounded in Osmer's four-task model of practical theology (2008, pp. 4–11).

The chapter is organized into several sections. Section 3.3 presents Osmer's four-task model of practical theology as the core methodological guide. Subsequent sections explain the research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations. Together, these methodological components provide a comprehensive and contextually grounded foundation for the study.

3.2. Contextual Theology and Cultural Sensitivity

Theological reflection must take place within the specific cultural, historical, and social contexts in which faith communities live. As Stephen Bevans (2002) rightly asserts, "There is no such thing as theology that is not contextual" (p. 3). All theology arises from particular situations and must engage them meaningfully. This study is set within the specific context of the Madzimoyo Congregation in eastern Zambia, a setting shaped by Ngoni and Chewa cultural norms, missionary legacies of the DRC, and socio-economic realities.

A contextual theological approach acknowledges that culture is both a gift and a challenge. While some cultural values promote communal belonging and spiritual solidarity, others may hinder the full participation of women in leadership. Thus, the task of contextual theology is to discern, critique, and affirm cultural elements through the lens of the gospel (Bevans, 2002, p.4). This

research seeks to affirm cultural identity while critically evaluating practices that obstruct gender justice, using both *missio Dei* theology and African women's theology as interpretive tools.

3.3 The Four-Task Model of Practical Theology (Osmer)

Richard R. Osmer's (2008) four-task model of practical theology provides a structured and dynamic framework for theological reflection that moves deliberately from empirical observation to theological interpretation and practical transformation. This model enables researchers and church leaders to address complex ecclesial and societal issues by integrating descriptive analysis with theological evaluation and pragmatic action. It is particularly well-suited to research that seeks to address issues of justice and leadership within the lived experience of the church.

In this study, Osmer's model is employed as a guiding methodological framework to analyze leadership patterns and gender dynamics within the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ, aiming to explore the theological, cultural, and missional implications of gender-exclusive leadership practices.

3.3.1 Descriptive-Empirical Task: What is going on?

The descriptive-empirical task aims to gather and describe information about the current situation under investigation. Osmer (2008, p. 4) emphasizes that this task involves listening carefully to the experiences of individuals and communities to uncover patterns, values, practices, and underlying assumptions.

In this study, this task is implemented through semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected participants representing various roles within the congregation, both genders. The aim was to uncover:

- Existing leadership structures and roles,
- Gender participation in leadership,
- The theological and cultural assumptions that inform leadership practices, and
- The lived experiences of women and men within the ecclesial space.

This empirical work is detailed in Chapter 4, which presents the voices of the participants and the analysis, providing a foundation for further theological interpretation.

3.3.2 Interpretive Task: Why is this going on?

The interpretive task moves beyond description to ask why certain practices, patterns, or beliefs are present. Osmer (2008, p. 83) encourages researchers to draw upon interdisciplinary tools—such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and theology—to interpret the meanings embedded in the data.

In the context of this research, the interpretive task explores why gender-exclusive leadership continues to persist in the Madzimoyo Congregation despite broader ecclesial commitments to justice, equity, and mission. This analysis engages with:

- Cultural norms and patriarchal structures inherited from Ngoni and Chewa traditions,
- Biblical interpretations that are often used to justify male-only leadership,
- The internalization of traditional gender roles by both men and women,
- The legacy of missionary ecclesiology, which often modeled patriarchal forms of leadership.

Theologically, this interpretation is informed by *missio Dei* theology, particularly as developed by Bosch (1991) and Goheen (2014), and enriched by feminist and African perspectives, which frames the church's identity and mission as participatory in God's redemptive purposes, including the liberation of marginalized groups.

3.3.3 Normative Task: What ought to be going on?

The normative task asks: What should be happening in this situation in light of Scripture, Christian tradition, and theological reflection? According to Osmer (2008), this task invites theological and ethical discernment that is both contextually aware and biblically grounded.

In this study, the normative task challenges existing leadership paradigms by engaging Bosch's vision of the missional church, Goheen's call to holistic ecclesial transformation, and the voices of African women and feminist theologians advocating for the dismantling of patriarchal structures. At the same time, normativity is also present within the congregation itself—both in the theological convictions of participants and in the current practices of leadership. These diverse normative voices must be held in tension and carefully weighed in light of *missio Dei* theology. These theologians emphasize that the church, as a sign and instrument of God's reign, must embody

justice, reconciliation, and inclusion. This theological lens assumes that the persistence of gender-exclusive leadership contradicts the church's calling to embody the inclusive, reconciling mission of God.

3.3.4 Pragmatic Task: How might we respond?

The final task is pragmatic, concerned with how theological insights can shape concrete action. Osmer (2008) frames this as the move from reflection to response, designing strategies for transformation based on theological and empirical insights.

In the context of the Madzimoyo Congregation, this task involves proposing practical steps that the church can take to move toward gender-inclusive leadership in ways that are theologically sound, culturally sensitive, and pastorally appropriate

Osmer's model is particularly valuable for this research because it enables a practical theology/missiology that is both reflective and transformative. It links empirical research with theological vision and pastoral responsiveness, making it possible to critically assess the present while imagining a more faithful future. In this way, the model supports the research's core goal: to explore how gender-inclusive leadership can be theologically justified and practically realized within the missional identity of the RCZ in Zambia.

3.4 Research Participants and Data Collection

3.4.1 Sampling and Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select fifteen participants from the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. The sampling strategy aimed to capture a diverse range of voices and experiences related to leadership and gender roles within the church. The participants prior to the online interviews were prepared by the local research assistant to make sure they understood the context of the interviews and the aim of the research, the semi structured interviews were conducted online due to geographical constraint between the researcher and the participants. The participant pool included:

- Elders (male and female),
- Members of the Women's Fellowship,

- Youth leaders (both male and female), and
- Congregational pastors.

This intentional diversity was designed to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives, from both genders and across age categories, thereby enriching the data with generational and positional variety. Participants' ages ranged from early twenties to late sixties, enabling the research to consider intergenerational differences in attitudes toward leadership, gender, and ecclesial authority.

In selecting participants, emphasis was placed on those with experience in church leadership, active ministry roles like womens ministry and youth ministry, or long-standing engagement in the life of the congregation. Female voices were prioritized, within ethical and cultural constraints, to ensure their inclusion in the conversation about gender-inclusive leadership.

3.4.2 Data Collection Methods

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, online interviews, which provided a flexible yet focused format for exploring participants' experiences, theological interpretations, and reflections on gender and leadership within the congregation.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, depending on the participant's availability and engagement. Interviews were conducted in either English or Chichewa, based on the participant's linguistic preference, ensuring linguistic accessibility and contextual relevance.

The interview guide was structured around Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology (Osmer, 2008):

- Descriptive-empirical: What is going on in leadership in this congregation?
- Interpretive: Why is this happening?
- Normative: What ought to be happening?
- Pragmatic: What could be done differently?

These questions allowed for a theologically guided conversation, rooted in lived ecclesial realities but directed toward transformation and missional engagement. The semi-structured nature also

allowed for emergent themes to arise organically during dialogue, a hallmark of qualitative theological inquiry.

Although participants did not sign formal written consent forms or review their interview transcripts for member checking, ethical integrity was maintained through verbal informed consent. Before each interview, participants were clearly informed about the research purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Consent for audio recording was explicitly obtained. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and where necessary, translated from Chichewa to English with careful attention to preserving theological and cultural nuance. To protect participants' identities, transcriptions were anonymized and stored securely in encrypted digital files. While the absence of transcript review by participants limited opportunities for correction or elaboration, the researcher prioritized confidentiality and respect, especially in light of the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential risks within a patriarchal church context.

3.5 Data Analysis: Thematic Coding

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative interview data, following the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is particularly suitable for theological and social research where patterns of meaning must be identified and interpreted in context.

The analysis process involved six key steps:

1. Familiarization with the data: Reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse the researcher in the content.
2. Generating initial codes: Coding segments of data that appeared significant or repeated across interviews. The researcher manually and used Atlas.ti.
3. Searching for themes: Grouping similar codes to identify potential themes.
4. Reviewing themes: Refining and validating themes against the entire data set.
5. Defining and naming themes: Clarifying the essence of each theme and its relevance to the research question.

6. Interpreting theologically: interpreting the themes through the lens of the theoretical framework of missio Dei theology.

Ten major themes emerged from this process, which are elaborated in Chapter 4. These included:

- Cultural patriarchy and traditional norms
- Role division and leadership barriers
- Use of the bible to resist inclusive leadership
- Female leadership potential
- Resistance to change
- Emerging openness among youth
- Spiritual gifts and leadership callings
- Theological and biblical justification for inclusion
- Silence and fear among women
- Hope for missional transformation

Each theme was examined not only as a social or cultural pattern but as a site of theological meaning, engaging deeply with Scripture, congregational practices, and doctrinal assumptions. The combination of Osmer's pastoral-theological methodology and the missional ecclesiology based on Bosch, Goheen, African women theologians and others enabled a critical yet constructive theological interpretation of the empirical findings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity is vital in theological and social research, particularly when dealing with vulnerable populations and sensitive subjects like gender-inclusive leadership. This study adheres to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, as outlined in established ethical guidelines such as the Belmont Report (1979).

Informed consent was a core requirement for all research participants. Each participant received detailed information from the local research assistant about the study's purpose, procedures,

potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent forms were prepared and distributed in both English and the local language (Chichewa) to ensure understanding, especially for those not fluent in English.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in transcripts and data presentations. The participants' identities and the specific details of their affiliations were not disclosed unless express permission was granted. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in encrypted digital folders accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisors.

Additionally, given the gender-sensitive nature of the research and the patriarchal cultural context of the Madzimoyo Congregation, care was taken to ensure that female participants were not exposed to risks such as stigmatization, social backlash, or emotional discomfort. Questions were phrased respectfully and sensitively to avoid reinforcing gender hierarchies or trauma. This approach reflects the ethical imperative of nonmaleficence—to do no harm—within theological inquiry.

As an ordained minister of the RCZ, the researcher adhered not only to academic ethical standards but also to the pastoral codes of conduct that govern ministerial life. This dual commitment ensured that theological reflection remained sensitive to participants' spiritual and emotional well-being. However, the researcher's pastoral identity introduced power dynamics that could affect participants' openness, particularly in a patriarchal context where clergy are held in high esteem. Female participants, in particular, may have felt constrained in expressing critical views on gender and leadership (Swinton & Mowat, 2016, p. 62).

This positionality also raised the risk of insider bias, where the researcher's embeddedness in the RCZ could unintentionally obscure or normalize patriarchal assumptions. Reflexivity was therefore essential throughout the research process, and deliberate efforts were made to create a respectful and non-threatening environment. Clear communication distinguished the roles of pastor and researcher, and feminist and African women's theologies were employed to counterbalance the researcher's male and clerical perspective (Chilisa, 2012, pp. 171–172). These measures helped mitigate ethical risks while promoting a more inclusive and theologically grounded inquiry.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological foundations of the study on gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. It argued that Osmer's four-task methodological model, offers a structured and context-sensitive approach for investigating and addressing issues within the church. The descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks provide a pathway from contextual inquiry to theological interpretation and actionable transformation.

Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study seeks to uncover the beliefs, assumptions, and practices that shape leadership dynamics in Madzimoyo. The chapter has also detailed the sampling strategy, data collection methods, analytical processes, and ethical considerations, including the positionality of the researcher.

Ultimately, this integrated methodological approach together with the developed theoretical framework of mission Dei equips the study to address the core research question: How can the missio Dei theory of David Bosch and Michael Goheen enriched by African woman theologians contribute to gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the Reformed Church in Zambia?

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and interprets the data collected from fifteen semi-structured interviews conducted within the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. The overarching aim of this chapter is to explore how gender-inclusive leadership is practiced, resisted, or envisioned within this local church. The study is situated in a rural Zambian context, where cultural traditions and patriarchal norms significantly shape gender roles within both society and the church.

To analyse the data, this chapter employs Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The approach offers a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) across the dataset. Braun and Clarke's six phases include: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. These stages were carefully followed to produce the findings presented here.

4.2 Overview of Participants and Context

The sample of fifteen participants was purposively selected to reflect diverse perspectives within the Madzimoyo Congregation. It includes male and female pastors, elders, youth leaders, women's fellowship leaders, and lay preachers, aged between 21 and 67. Interviews were conducted in Chichewa or English, depending on each participant's comfort and fluency.

The Madzimoyo Congregation is located in Madzimawe Chiefdom, a rural area of Eastern Zambia marked by strong traditional cultural values. The RCZ's presbyterian polity means governance is shared between ordained pastors and elected elders. However, in practice, leadership is heavily male-dominated. Women are visible in the church but largely confined to roles associated with caregiving, teaching children, singing, or hospitality. The exclusion of women from decision-making bodies such as the church council reflects broader social norms that restrict female leadership.

4.3 Thematic Analysis Process

Following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach, the thematic analysis proceeded as follows:

4.3.1 Phase One: Familiarisation with the Data

Each interview transcript was read and re-read while making notes about initial ideas. Immersing in the data allowed for recognition of repeated patterns and emotionally significant expressions. Particular attention was given to the language participants used to describe gender roles, leadership experiences, theological views, and cultural expectations.

4.3.2 Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes

Using both inductive and deductive coding strategies, the researcher systematically coded features of interest across the entire dataset. Codes such as “men lead,” “women support,” “fear of speaking,” “Bible says no,” “youth ready for change,” and “no mentorship” were applied to meaningful data segments. The process was iterative and open to emerging insights.

4.3.3 Phase Three: Searching for Themes

The codes were then collated into potential themes. For instance, the codes “men lead” and “leadership from home” were grouped under the theme of “Cultural Patriarchy and traditional norms.” Similarly, “fear of speaking” and “judged for leading” became part of the “silence and Fear among women” theme. Initial themes were reviewed for coherence and distinctiveness.

4.3.4 Phase Four: Reviewing Themes

Themes were refined through repeated examination of the data extracts and their alignment with the broader dataset. At this stage, themes that overlapped too heavily were merged (e.g., internalised norms and fear were closely linked but maintained as distinct), while some codes were reassigned to better-fitting themes. The thematic map was validated to ensure each theme reflected a central organising idea (see figure).

4.3.5 Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was carefully defined and named to capture its essence. The ten themes were finalised as follows: (1) Cultural patriarchy and traditional norms, (2) Role Division and Leadership Barriers, (3) Use of the Bible to Resist Inclusive Leadership, (4) Female Leadership Potential, (5) Resistance to Change, (6) Emerging Openness Among Youth, (7) Spiritual Gifts and Leadership Callings, (8) Theological Justification for Inclusion, (9) Silence and Fear Among Women, (10) Hope for Missional Transformation

4.3.6 Phase Six: Producing the Report

Each theme is now discussed in detail below in 4.5 with illustrative quotes.

4.4 Presentation of Quantitative (Descriptive) Data

Although the core of this research is qualitative, basic descriptive statistics from the demographic profile of participants help to situate the findings. This section presents information on gender, age, education, and church roles of the interviewees. These statistics provide an overview of the backgrounds and perspectives included in the study and help contextualize the thematic analysis presented in the subsequent sections.

- **Gender Distribution:** Participants included both male and female informants, reflecting varying perspectives on leadership and gender roles. Out of the fifteen participants, seven were male and eight were female. This intentional inclusion of female voices was crucial for capturing the lived experiences of those often marginalized in leadership spaces. The slight majority of female participants reflected a deliberate effort to foreground perspectives that are frequently overlooked, especially in discussions on gender-inclusive leadership. All participants offered significant insights into their lived experiences and perceptions of leadership within the church.
- **Age Range:** Participants' ages ranged from their 20s to late 60s. This wide range ensured representation from both younger, potentially reform-minded individuals and older members with deep-rooted experiences in church traditions. The presence of younger participants was especially important in revealing emerging perspectives on gender inclusion, while older participants provided a window into the persistence of cultural and ecclesiastical norms.
- **Educational Background:** The educational backgrounds of participants varied from those with primary education to those with tertiary qualifications. This range allowed for a multiplicity of interpretive frameworks. More educated participants often engaged with theological and biblical arguments in more nuanced ways, whereas others drew on experiential and cultural understandings. The diversity in education levels reflects the balanced representation of the congregation and provided a rich foundation for the thematic insights explored in Section 4.5.

- Church Roles: Participants included a mix of Elders, Deacons, Women's Fellowship leaders, and Pastors. This variety ensured that the findings reflected both formal and informal leadership roles within the congregation. The inclusion of women in specific roles such as the Women's Fellowship also highlighted the ways in which gendered divisions of leadership are institutionalized, while also pointing to spaces where women exercise significant influence, although often behind the scenes.

These demographic insights are summarized in Table 1 below, which presents key information about the fifteen participants interviewed for this study. The group comprised eight females (F) and seven males (M), offering a balanced representation of perspectives on gender and leadership within the Madzimoyo Congregation. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, coded identifiers such as F1, F2, M1, M2, etc., are used throughout the study. These codes were randomly assigned and are not reflected in the demographic table below.

Table 1. Participant Demographics Table

Gender	Age Group	Role in Church	Education Level	Years in RCZ
Female	31–40	Women's Fellowship Leader	Secondary	10+
Male	51–60	Elder	Primary	20+
Female	41–50	Pastor	Tertiary	15
Male	61–70	Resting Elder	Primary	30+
Female	21–30	Youth/ Sunday School Teacher	Tertiary	8
Male	31–40	Youth Advisor	Secondary	12
Female	51–60	Choir Leader	Primary	25
Male	41–50	Church Council Leader	Tertiary	18
Female	61–70	Evangelism Committee	Secondary	40
Male	21–30	Church Member	Tertiary	5
Female	41–50	Deaconess	Secondary	20
Male	31–40	Student Pastor	Tertiary	6
Female	51–60	Mothers' Union Leader	Primary	22
Male	41–50	Pastor	Tertiary	10

Female	31–40	Sunday School Teacher	Tertiary	6
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Figure 2: Participant Demographics Table – This table shows the distribution of interviewees by gender, age group, church role, education, and experience.

In summary, the demographic data provide a backdrop that enhances the credibility and contextual richness of the thematic analysis. The diversity of voices across gender, age, education, and role, offers a multifaceted understanding of the perceptions, challenges, and opportunities related to gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation. This diversity supports a more robust interpretation of the themes, particularly in demonstrating how different social locations influence participants’ theological reflections and attitudes toward change.

4.5 Presentation of Themes

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework, resulting in ten key themes that emerged from the qualitative data. These themes encapsulate the perceptions, experiences, and theological insights of participants concerning gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. Each theme is discussed below, supported by quotes from interviewees, interpretive commentary, and reflection in light of the study’s theological framework. The table below presents an overview of the ten major themes identified.

Table 2. Overview of Themes

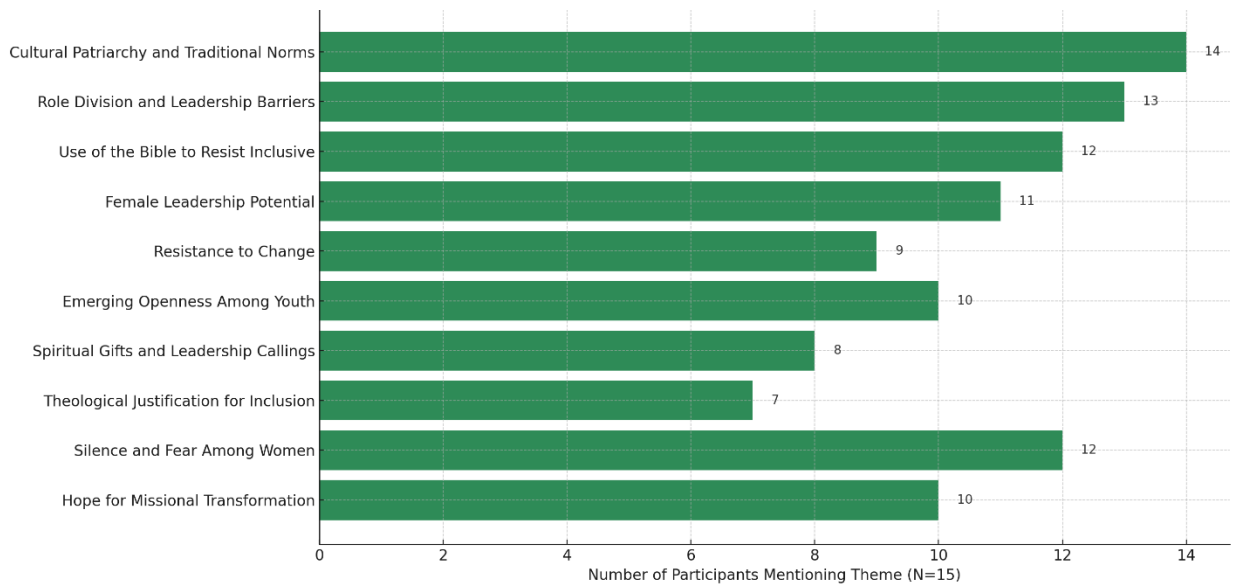
Theme No.	Theme Title	Brief Description
1	Cultural patriarchy and traditional norms	Patriarchal culture limits women’s roles and reinforces male dominance.
2	Role division and leadership barriers	Clear divisions of labour hinder women’s access to leadership roles.
3	Use of the Bible to resist inclusion	Scripture is selectively used to justify excluding women from leadership.
4	Female leadership potential	Despite barriers, women show strong capabilities for leadership.

5	Resistance to change	Male leaders and older members often resist gender-inclusive reforms.
6	Emerging openness among youth	Younger members express readiness to support women in leadership.
7	Spiritual gifts and leadership callings	Some women feel called to lead, backed by spiritual convictions.
8	Theological justification for inclusion	Participants affirm that inclusion aligns with biblical justice and mission.
9	Silence and fear among women	Many women remain silent due to fear of judgment or cultural backlash.
10	Hope for missional transformation	Participants envision a church where inclusive leadership fulfills the missio Dei.

Table 2. Each theme is supported by participant narratives and contextualized within broader patterns of ecclesial and cultural dynamics influencing gender and leadership in church spaces.

To proceed with a thematic analysis a visual data representation of the coded frequency analysis was performed to quantify the prevalence of themes across interviews. The most cited barriers included: Cultural patriarchy and traditional norms (14 participants), Role division and leadership barriers (13) as seen in the figure below

Figure. 1. Frequency of themes



This figure illustrates how frequently each of the ten core themes emerged across the fifteen participant interviews. Themes such as *Cultural and Traditional Norms*, *Role Division in Ministry and Leadership Barriers*, and *Use of the Bible to Resist Inclusive Leadership and Silence and Fear among Women* were among the most commonly referenced, indicating their central role in shaping participants’ experiences. The prominence of these themes underscores the persistent structural and theological barriers to female leadership, while themes like *Emerging Openness among Youth*, *Female Leadership Potential*, and *Hope for Missional Transformation* signal emerging avenues for change.

4.5.1 Cultural Patriarchy and Traditional Norms

Participants repeatedly pointed to entrenched cultural expectations that reinforce male authority and female subordination. Patriarchal customs rooted in Ngoni and Chewa traditions were identified as significant barriers to the acceptance of women in leadership. As one elderly male participant remarked, “In our culture, a woman is always under the man; even if she knows something, she should not lead.” (M1). This cultural framing continues to influence church life, leading to the internalization of male dominance as divinely ordained.

In many cases, these cultural beliefs were seen as inseparable from Christian doctrine. For instance, some participants conflated traditional authority structures with biblical models of leadership, interpreting Scripture through a cultural lens rather than a critical theological one. One older female participant shared, “We were raised to believe that men are the head, in the home and in

the church. Challenging this is like challenging our identity.” (F1). The deep-rooted nature of these patriarchal norms has created a church culture where questioning male leadership is equated with rebellion or disrespect.

Moreover, participants noted that cultural rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies, reinforce gender hierarchies early in life. Boys are taught to lead, while girls are taught to serve. This social conditioning affects how both genders view leadership roles in adulthood. Several male leaders acknowledged that even when women are educated and spiritually gifted, they are still expected to defer to male authority out of respect for cultural traditions.

Nevertheless, some participants recognized the tension between cultural norms and the demands of a just and inclusive Gospel. A middle-aged pastor reflected, “We are caught between our culture and the message of Christ. If we don’t challenge the culture, the church will remain behind in mission.” (M2)

4.5.2 Role Division and Leadership Barriers

The separation of leadership roles based on gender was a prominent theme. Women were often relegated to roles in the Women’s Fellowship, hospitality, and Sunday school, while men occupied positions of doctrinal authority and decision-making. A female deacon explained, “We do everything behind the scenes, but decisions are made by men.” (F2)

This structural segregation not only limits women’s participation in governance but also reinforces the perception that women are incapable of or unworthy of holding higher office. Many women reported feeling invisible in the decision-making processes of the church, despite their substantial contributions to congregational life. As another female leader noted, “We work more than men in many cases, but we are never asked to lead prayers during main services.” (F3)

The gendered division of labor also reflects broader theological assumptions. Leadership in preaching, sacraments, and church governance is seen as a male domain, while nurturing and support roles are considered inherently female. These divisions are often justified by appeals to both Scripture and tradition. One male elder stated, “Men are the ones who were appointed in the Bible to teach and rule. That’s why we follow the same model.” (M3)

However, this model was not uncontested. A few participants, particularly among the younger cohort, critiqued the church for failing to tap into the leadership potential of women. They emphasized that the Holy Spirit equips all believers for ministry, regardless of gender. As one young female participant put it, “Leadership should be based on calling and gifts, not on whether you are male or female.” (F4)

Furthermore, institutional practices such as excluding women from council meetings or preventing them from normally serving communion were cited as examples of embedded barriers. These practices not only limit women’s influence but also affect their spiritual confidence and participation. A woman in her 40s expressed, “Sometimes I feel like I am just here to support, not to serve God fully with my gifts.” (F5)

Overall, the theme reveals a complex web of theological, cultural, and institutional barriers that maintain the status quo, while also pointing to areas where reform is both needed and possible.

4.5.3 Use of the Bible to Resist Inclusive Leadership

Several male participants cited biblical texts such as 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 to justify excluding women from pastoral or eldership roles. These verses were often interpreted literally and applied prescriptively, without engaging in deeper exegetical or contextual analysis. For example, one elder argued, “The Bible says women must keep silent in church. That is God’s word, and we cannot change it.” (M4)

This approach to Scripture reflects a traditional hermeneutic that tends to prioritize hierarchical interpretations over inclusive readings. In most cases, these verses were quoted in isolation, with little attention to their historical context, cultural setting, or the broader biblical witness, which includes women like Deborah, Phoebe, and Priscilla in leadership roles. M2 explained, “I was taught that women should not preach, so that is what I have always believed.”

Yet, amidst this resistance, there were signs of theological curiosity and a willingness to re-examine long-held beliefs. A male participant shared, “I don’t understand everything in the Bible, but I think maybe we need to look again at what it really says about women.” (M5)

This theme underscores the importance of biblical literacy and theological education in fostering inclusive leadership. Without proper tools for interpretation, Scripture can be weaponized to

maintain exclusionary practices. As one educated female participant observed, “The same Bible that they use to silence us also contains stories of women who led with courage and wisdom.” (F6)

4.5.4 Female Leadership Potential

Despite prevailing barriers and resistance, there was a strong acknowledgment among many participants of the untapped leadership potential among women. Both male and female informants recognized that women contribute significantly to the spiritual and practical life of the church. Amale pastor M6 stated, “Some of the most committed people in our church are women. They visit the sick, they counsel others, they teach Sunday School, but we rarely call them leaders.”

Participants noted that women often exhibit qualities associated with effective leadership, such as compassion, wisdom, dedication, and strong communication skills. Several stories were shared about women who have stepped into informal leadership roles during times of crisis or when male leaders were absent. These examples demonstrate the natural leadership abilities of women, even within restrictive structures.

F5 said, “Even if we are not given titles, we are already leading. We just need the church to see it and bless it.”

The recognition of women’s leadership potential also came with a critique of current practices. Participants questioned why spiritually gifted women are not given equal opportunities to serve in formal leadership. A middle aged male participant admitted, “Sometimes we don’t allow women to lead, not because they can’t, but because we are afraid of change or being judged.” (M7)

This theme highlights the tension between capability and institutional recognition. Women’s potential is evident and often appreciated in private or informal settings, but it is seldom affirmed publicly or institutionally. Nonetheless, the awareness of this dynamic points to an emerging readiness for transformation. A young female participant concluded, “God does not call only men. He calls whoever is willing. We must be ready to listen.” (F7)

By bringing these capabilities into the center of church life, the congregation could move toward a model of leadership that is more gifts-oriented and faithful to the Spirit’s inclusive work and the missional calling of the church.

4.5.5 Resistance to Change

One of the dominant patterns that emerged from the interviews was the presence of both overt and subtle resistance to changing traditional leadership structures. Many participants expressed concern that gender-inclusive leadership could undermine the spiritual and social stability of the congregation. This resistance was often grounded in fears of doctrinal compromise, social backlash, and a perceived threat to male authority.

M4 explained, “If we start allowing women to lead in the pulpit or elders’ council, where will it stop? Next, they will want to become pastors, and that can divide the church.” This kind of slippery-slope reasoning revealed a deep-seated apprehension that gender-inclusive leadership might lead to theological confusion or conflict within the congregation.

Some resistance was more passive in nature, manifested through apathy or reluctance to engage in the topic altogether. F6 noted, “Some men pretend not to hear when we talk about these things. They don’t say no, but they never take steps forward either.” This passive resistance creates a slow-moving atmosphere that stifles reform even when there is no outright opposition.

Resistance was not limited to men. A few female participants also expressed skepticism about women stepping into leadership traditionally held by men. “We are not meant for those things,” (F8) said, F1 added “Our job is to support, not to lead in front of the congregation.” These comments reflect how patriarchal norms have been internalized over generations, making the case for change more complex and multi-layered.

Despite these obstacles, some participants acknowledged that change is both necessary and inevitable. M7 stated “The church cannot continue to ignore the gifts of women. If we want to grow, we must start thinking differently. The tension between those who resist change and those who advocate for transformation underscores the urgent need for deliberate theological reflection, dialogue, and leadership development programs that address fears while promoting missional renewal.

This theme illustrates how resistance is not simply a matter of opposition but often emerges from fear of the unknown, theological uncertainty, and cultural attachment. For change to occur, these emotional and cognitive barriers must be addressed through pastoral care, theological education, and contextual reflection.

4.5.6 Emerging Openness Among Youth

In contrast to the resistance observed among older members, younger participants displayed a greater openness to rethinking gender roles in leadership. This generational divergence suggests a potential shift in congregational attitudes as younger voices become more influential in church life. The youth's openness was rooted in both theological curiosity and social exposure to more egalitarian frameworks through education, media, and interaction with other Christian traditions, likes of the Baptists through musical concerts.

M7 said, "When I read the Bible, I see many women who did great things for God. I think it's time we stop limiting leadership to men only." Similarly, F6 shared, "We are in a new time. Even in school and at work, we are taught that men and women are equal. The church must also catch up."

Participants in this demographic frequently referenced women in leadership roles within nearby Pentecostal churches and international para-church organizations, such as faith-based NGOs and women's fellowship networks, as evidence that gender-inclusive leadership is both possible and beneficial.

However, for others within the RCZ, these external models were also viewed with suspicion. They represented a departure from the Reformed tradition and were sometimes perceived as a threat to established theological norms and male-dominated leadership structures. This ambivalence contributes to the resistance toward change, as embracing gender-inclusive leadership is sometimes seen as aligning with "foreign" or "competing" ecclesial identities.

Education played a significant role in shaping these progressive views. Youth with access to theological training or biblical studies were more likely to challenge traditional interpretations and call for inclusive readings of Scripture. M3 remarked, "When you study theology seriously, you see that the Bible is not as clear-cut on this issue as we were taught. There's room for a more inclusive understanding."

The openness among youth was also reflected in their willingness to collaborate with women in church programs, leadership teams, and outreach activities. Rather than seeing leadership as a hierarchical domain reserved for men, they viewed it as a shared responsibility rooted in spiritual gifting and servanthood. M3 continued to say, "For us, leadership is about serving others and using your gifts, not about being a man or woman."

However, this generational openness was tempered by an awareness of institutional inertia. Many young participants felt that their views were not taken seriously by senior leaders. F4 lamented, “We try to speak, but the older leaders don’t listen. They think we are too young to understand the Bible properly.”

Despite these frustrations, the youth demonstrated a strong sense of hope and readiness for change. They saw gender inclusivity not as a threat to church order, but as a step toward fuller faithfulness to the Gospel. This theme reveals a significant opportunity for congregational renewal, as youth may become catalysts for a more inclusive, Spirit-led leadership model in the future.

4.5.7 Spiritual Gifts and Leadership Callings

A significant theme across interviews was the recognition of spiritual gifts and divine calling as foundational to leadership. Many participants both male and female emphasized that leadership should not be determined by gender but by spiritual qualification and divine vocation. M5 observed, “Leadership is not about being a man or woman. It’s about being called and anointed by God.”

Women, in particular, shared stories of experiencing strong spiritual callings, often confirmed through prayer, visions, or affirmation by others. F4 shared, “I felt God calling me to teach the Word. When I prayed about it, I saw myself leading women and children to Christ.” Despite such callings, institutional barriers often prevented these women from pursuing formal leadership roles.

Participants expressed frustration at the gap between spiritual calling and institutional validation. Several women recounted how their attempts to serve in leadership were either dismissed or redirected into women-only ministries. F3 explained, “They said I can teach women but not the whole church. But the message God gave me was for everyone.”

Some male participants acknowledged this tension. M2 remarked, “We sometimes ignore the Spirit’s work in women because of our rules. But if the Spirit has gifted them, who are we to stop them?”

This theme strongly challenges institutional assumptions about leadership qualifications. It re-centers leadership around the Spirit’s initiative rather than human-imposed criteria. It also

resonates with the Reformed emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, suggesting a theological basis for affirming diverse leadership callings.

Participants called for the church to develop discernment processes that recognize spiritual gifts across gender lines. Mentorship, spiritual formation, and the testing of callings were suggested as practical ways to support those feeling called, regardless of gender. M2 continued “If someone is called by God, we should support them—man or woman.”

4.5.8 Theological Justification for Inclusion

A significant number of participants, especially among the younger and more theologically trained cohort, expressed the need for a theological foundation to support gender-inclusive leadership. While some participants remained hesitant or unsure, others articulated a vision of church leadership rooted in the inclusive mission of God (*missio Dei*) and the spiritual equality of all believers.

M7 reflected, “When we understand that the mission of God is for all people, then we cannot keep excluding women from leadership. God calls whom He wills.” This comment illustrates a growing awareness that gender-exclusive leadership models may contradict the broader narrative of Scripture, particularly the New Testament’s emphasis on spiritual gifts, mutual submission (Eph. 5:21), all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28) and the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9).

Participants who supported inclusive leadership often pointed to the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of women in the Bible and in the present church. F6 explained, “God has used women like Deborah, Mary Magdalene, and Phoebe. If He used them then, why not now?”

Moreover, the theological shift was often linked to missional urgency. Several participants recognized that excluding women from leadership weakens the church’s capacity to respond to community needs. M7 commented, “In our community, women are the ones reaching the sick, the children, the homes. If we block their leadership, we block the mission.”

Some also raised the argument of *imago Dei*—the belief that all humans are created in the image of God—as a foundation for equality and shared responsibility. M2 stated, “When we teach that both men and women are made in God’s image, it should follow that both can lead according to their gifts.”

This theme reveals that theological justifications for inclusive leadership are present and growing, particularly among those exposed to more holistic interpretations of Scripture and missional theology. However, these arguments still face resistance from traditional readings, biased by cultural attitudes, and require broader congregational engagement to shift normative practices.

4.5.9 Silence and Fear Among Women

Despite the presence of spiritually gifted and committed women in the congregation, many female participants reported feeling silenced and marginalized. The theme of silence emerged both in terms of literal silence in church proceedings and symbolic silence—where women’s voices, experiences, and insights are routinely overlooked or dismissed.

F3 shared, “Even when we know something is not right, we are afraid to speak. If we challenge the men, we will be labelled disrespectful or rebellious.” This fear of reprisal whether social, relational, or theological keeps many women from voicing their concerns or advocating for their own leadership callings.

Cultural expectations and ecclesial structures reinforce this silence. F4 observed, “Our church teaches us to be humble and submissive. So even when we have ideas, we wait for the men to say them first.”

Furthermore, some women expressed internalized doubt about their own abilities due to years of exclusion. One noted, “Sometimes I feel that I am not qualified because I am a woman. We were never told that we can be leaders too.” (F1)

The emotional toll of such silence is significant. Participants described feelings of frustration, invisibility, and spiritual stagnation. F6 explained, “We pray, we serve, we give—but we are not seen. It’s like we are always supporting from the back.”

Yet, despite this imposed silence, signs of awakening are visible. Some women expressed a growing sense of empowerment through education, exchange of hand craft knowledge during women’s fellowship, and exposure to other churches with inclusive practices. F5 reflected, “When I saw women preaching in another church, I started to ask, ‘Why not here?’ It opened my eyes.”

This theme suggests that addressing gender-inclusive leadership requires not only policy or theological shifts but also creating safe spaces for women to speak, testify, and discern their callings without fear.

4.5.10 Hope for Missional Transformation

Amidst the barriers, resistance, and struggles voiced by participants, a strong undercurrent of hope emerged, hope that the Madzimoyo Congregation can move toward a more inclusive and Spirit-led model of leadership. This hope was especially pronounced among youth, theologically trained leaders, and women active in fellowship ministries.

F4 stated, “Our church is slowly waking up. Some leaders are beginning to listen. If we continue to pray and speak with love, we can see change.” Her optimism reflects a growing belief that transformation is not only possible but already underway in small ways.

Participants pointed to signs of progress: women are occasionally invited to preach and pray in public, informal mentorships with female leaders through unstructured conversations with some council elders, and discussions among church council members about leadership reform. M2 commented, “Ten years ago, this conversation was impossible. Now at least we are talking.”

Many linked this hopeful outlook to the mission of God, emphasizing that the church must reflect the justice, equality, and love proclaimed in the Gospel if it is to be a credible witness in the community. M2 continued by putting it plainly: “If we want to reach our people with the message of Christ, we must lead like Christ. He included everyone.”

Others drew inspiration from broader church movements, particularly shifts within the RCZ that suggest growing openness to affirming the leadership gifts of women. Although participants did not express direct awareness of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) or its Gender Justice Programme, the RCZ’s membership in the WCRC potentially situates it within a wider global Reformed discourse on gender justice. F3 observed, “We are not alone. Other congregations are ordaining women. That gives us courage to keep hoping.”

Hope was also expressed in educational terms. Participants emphasized the need for Bible study, theological training, spiritual community, and open dialogue as tools for change. M6 concluded,

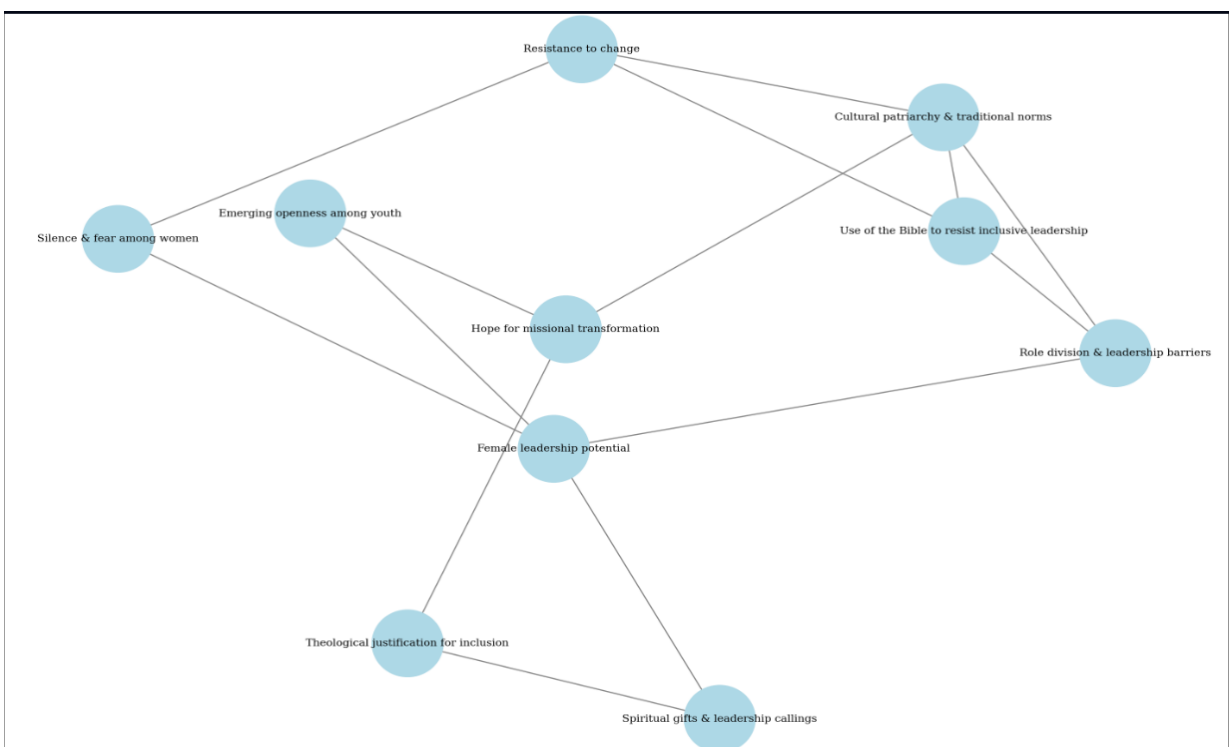
“Transformation will not happen through force, but through learning, praying, and walking together.”

Ultimately, this theme reflects the resilience and faith of those who believe that the church can live into a fuller expression of the body of Christ. It calls for patience, courage, and missional imagination in discerning how the Spirit is leading the congregation toward justice and inclusion.

4.6 Summary of Findings

This study used Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis method to explore how gender-inclusive leadership is experienced, contested, and envisioned within the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. The summary of the findings is illustrated in the thematic map below;

Figure. 2. Thematic Map



The thematic map above visually represents the relationships between the ten themes. It shows how foundational challenges like *Cultural and Traditional Norms Patriarchy* and *Biblical resistance* are linked to barriers, fear, and resistance, while themes like *Spiritual Gifts*, *Youth Openness*, and *Theological Justification* contribute toward *Hope for Missional Transformation*.

The findings of this study paint a picture of a congregation navigating between entrenched traditions and emerging possibilities. The ten themes uncovered through interviews reveal both the weight of patriarchal structures and the stirrings of Spirit-led transformation. At the center of this tension is the lived experience of women, whose roles in church leadership are often constrained, yet whose gifts and callings continue to push boundaries.

Cultural Patriarchy and Traditional Norms emerged as the most foundational barrier. Male authority is viewed as a cultural default, shaping both household and ecclesial structures. Leadership is often seen not as a function of calling or competence but of gender, and this assumption is so normalized that it often goes unchallenged.

This cultural norm is institutionally reinforced through *Role Division and Leadership Barriers*, where ministry functions are allocated along gender lines. Women are encouraged to serve in supportive, often invisible capacities, while positions of decision-making and authority remain male-dominated. These restrictions are not rooted in ability but in longstanding assumptions about gender roles.

The *Use of the Bible to Resist Inclusion* was a deeply felt concern among participants who supported gender inclusive leadership. Scripture is often cited selectively, especially Pauline texts, to silence or marginalize women.

Despite these limitations, *Female Leadership Potential* was clear throughout the data as women were organizing, mentoring, and leading informally in ways that displayed spiritual maturity, wisdom, and resilience. Their contributions, while often unrecognized, reveal a deep reservoir of leadership capacity already active within the church.

However, *Resistance to Change* particularly from older male leaders continues to stall progress. This resistance is rooted in fear, theological rigidity, and a desire to preserve tradition, even when such tradition undermines justice and missional vitality.

Against this backdrop, *Emerging Openness Among Youth* offers a compelling counter-narrative. Younger members of the congregation, often more educated and exposed to wider theological perspectives, articulated a strong desire for more inclusive and participatory leadership models.

In this space of shifting convictions, *Spiritual Gifts and Leadership Callings* emerged as a theological challenge to gender-based exclusion. Many women shared a deep sense of divine calling to lead, teach, and serve beyond the boundaries traditionally allowed. These testimonies affirmed that God's call is not confined to one gender.

Supporting this shift is the theme of *Theological Justification for Inclusion*, where participants pointed to Scripture and theological tradition that support the full participation of women in leadership. Biblical figures like Deborah, Priscilla, and Phoebe were named as role models, and concepts such as the imago Dei and spiritual gifting were cited as theological anchors for reform.

Yet the impact of patriarchy is not only structural, it is also psychological. *Silence and Fear Among Women* revealed how deeply internalized messages about obedience and submission have shaped women's identities. Some expressed fear of being judged, labeled, or misunderstood, reinforcing a cycle of silence and underrepresentation.

Finally, *Hope for Missional Transformation* runs like a thread through these findings. Despite structural resistance, there is a shared yearning for a church that reflects the justice, inclusivity, and freedom of the gospel. Small but significant signs, youth advocacy, and proposed reforms—point to the Spirit's movement among the people of God.

In sum, we might conclude that the Madzimoyo congregation stands at a critical juncture. The challenges are deeply rooted, but the potential for transformation is equally profound. Grounded in a theology of missio Dei, which calls the church to embody God's justice and renewal in the world, The data affirm that there are people in the church, mainly women and young men, who see this as essential to the church's identity and mission

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings presented in Chapter 4 in light of the theological frameworks explored in the literature review and the methodology employed. The aim is to evaluate how the themes identified through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis respond to the research question: How can the *missio Dei* theory of David Bosch and Michael Goheen, enriched by African women's perspectives, contribute to gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the Reformed Church in Zambia?

Drawing on the missional theology of David Bosch (1991) and Michael Goheen (2011), African women's theology (Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2002; Phiri, 1997; Nadar, 2009), and Osmer's (2008) practical theological model, this chapter offers a theological and contextual interpretation of the findings using the normative task and a pragmatic task for the recommendations.

5.2 Cultural and Theological Roots of Patriarchy

The findings confirmed that cultural patriarchy remains a dominant force in the Madzimoyo Congregation, shaping both theological reflection and leadership practice. Participants frequently described male leadership in the church as a natural extension of traditional household structures. In Ngoni and Chewa cultures, which are predominant in the area, men are regarded as heads of households and community decision-makers. This cultural framework is then projected onto ecclesial structures, creating a symbiotic relationship between tradition and theology.

David Bosch (1991, p. 385) warns against such cultural accommodation, emphasizing that the church must function as a countercultural community that participates in God's mission to transform unjust structures. Rather than affirming societal hierarchies, the church is called to model the values of God's kingdom, where power is shared and mutuality is practiced. In Madzimoyo, however, the church appears to mirror patriarchal traditions more than it critiques or reforms them.

This entanglement between cultural norms and ecclesial practice results in what Oduyoye (2001, p. 52) describes as the "baptism of patriarchy", where male dominance is spiritualized and seen as divinely ordained. Participants indicated that women were often excluded from decision-making not only because of traditional norms but also due to theological teachings that reinforced those

norms. This fusion creates a powerful barrier to change, as resistance to male leadership is framed not just as cultural rebellion, but as disobedience to God.

The effects of this patriarchal theology are far-reaching. Women are discouraged from aspiring to leadership positions, even when they possess spiritual maturity, formal theological education, or community respect. As the data revealed, their contributions are largely restricted to caregiving, hospitality, and music ministries roles that, while important, are not typically associated with ecclesial authority or decision-making.

This structural exclusion contradicts the inclusive nature of the *missio Dei*. Goheen (2011, p. 37) stresses that the mission of God invites the participation of all people regardless of gender in the work of reconciliation, justice, and community transformation. A church that limits participation based on gender undermines its own mission and fails to embody the gospel's liberating message.

Furthermore, patriarchal leadership structures create theological dissonance. The same church that preaches about the priesthood of all believers often restricts leadership to men. This inconsistency weakens the credibility of the church's teaching and creates confusion among congregants, especially among youth and those exposed to more egalitarian models of church leadership through theological training.

To move toward a more faithful witness, the Madzimoyo Congregation must engage in critical theological reflection that separates cultural inheritance from biblical truth. It must re-examine the scriptural foundations for leadership and ask whether current practices reflect the radical inclusivity of the kingdom of God. This reflection must be communal, intentional, and rooted in the conviction that the Gospel calls all people male and female to share in the life, ministry, and leadership of the church.

5.3 Scriptural Misinterpretation and Theological Bias

A significant barrier to gender-inclusive leadership identified in the Madzimoyo Congregation is the selective and often literalistic use of Scripture to justify the exclusion of women from leadership. Many participants referenced passages such as 1 Timothy 2:11–12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 as authoritative mandates for women's silence and subordination within the church. These interpretations were frequently presented without critical engagement with their historical,

cultural, or literary contexts, reflecting a static hermeneutic that prioritizes institutional control over missional openness.

David Bosch (1991, p. 427) critiques this static, proof-texting approach to Scripture, arguing that it limits the church's capacity to discern and embody the dynamic mission of God. Rather than reading the Bible as a narrative of God's liberative activity, such approaches often result in a theology of exclusion that contradicts the overarching trajectory of redemption and justice. Michael Goheen (2011, p. 92) supports this view, asserting that Scripture must be interpreted within the framework of the *missio Dei* that is, God's ongoing activity in reconciling and renewing the world through the church.

The findings of this study revealed a widespread lack of engagement with empowering biblical texts that affirm women in leadership. For example, Romans 16:1–7 commends Phoebe as a deacon and Junia as “outstanding among the apostles”; Acts 18:24–26 highlights Priscilla's theological leadership alongside Aquila; and Judges 4 presents Deborah as a prophet and judge leading Israel. However, beyond these individual examples, the broader biblical vision also supports inclusive leadership. The metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–27) emphasizes the value and necessity of all members, regardless of gender, functioning according to their spiritual gifts. This image affirms diversity, mutuality, and interdependence as essential for the Church's health and mission. Such a framework challenges any exclusion of women from leadership as contrary to the Spirit's gifting and the unity of the body. Therefore, a missional and theological reading of Scripture affirms gender-inclusive leadership not only through specific figures, but through the very nature of the Church as a diverse, Spirit-empowered community. As Kanyoro (2002, p. 33) argues, the issue is not Scripture itself, but how it is interpreted. A contextual hermeneutic that considers the socio-historical background of Pauline texts would reveal that Paul's instructions were often situational, responding to particular church contexts rather than laying down universal mandates. Paul's directives for women to be silent reveal how the practices were different and that the early Jesus movement was a fellowship of equals, adds Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza (1983, pp. 232-233). Furthermore, the broader witness of Scripture points to a God who raises up women and men alike for leadership and mission, as we hear in Joel 2:28 quoted by the apostle Peter in his Pentecostal sermon (Acts 2:17): “I will pour out my Spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophesy.”

Theological education becomes a vital tool in addressing this bias. By equipping congregants and leaders with the skills to interpret Scripture contextually and theologically, the church can move beyond restrictive readings and toward a vision of shared leadership. Workshops, preaching series, and Bible studies focused on the role of women in Scripture could help the Madzimoyo Congregation recover a fuller picture of God's inclusive purposes.

Moreover, engaging in communal scriptural reflection can open space for dialogue and mutual learning. When believers read Scripture together through the lens of mission and justice, they are more likely to arrive at interpretations that reflect the kingdom values of inclusion, participation, and reconciliation. This was affirmed by several interview participants in this study, particularly those influenced by theological training, who pointed to texts like Acts 2 and Galatians 3:28 as supporting gender inclusion. Their readings resonate with the insights of Bosch (1991) and Oduyoye (2001), who argue that mission-centered hermeneutics naturally challenge structures of exclusion and promote justice. In this way, Scripture becomes not a barrier to women's leadership but a catalyst for transformation and renewal.

Ultimately, the misinterpretation of Scripture in Madzimoyo Congregation does not merely reflect theological error, it reveals a deeper ecclesial crisis about the nature of authority, tradition, and mission. Addressing this requires courage, education, and a missional commitment to truth that liberates rather than subjugates.

5.4 Internalised Oppression and Ecclesial Silence

The internalisation of gendered theology emerged strongly in the data and represents a deep-seated issue within the Madzimoyo Congregation. Women often accepted their exclusion from leadership roles as spiritually appropriate and even divinely sanctioned. This aligns with what Oduyoye (2001, p. 68) calls the "theological domestication" of women where faith and culture work together to convince women that subservience is godly. Instead of questioning their exclusion, many internalise it as an act of obedience, resulting in a form of spiritual silence.

The data revealed that this silence is not always imposed directly by male leaders but is often a result of long-term, transgenerational, social and theological conditioning. Women are taught, both explicitly and implicitly, that speaking in public, leading men, or making decisions in church contexts is inappropriate. One female participant remarked that she feared being called

“disrespectful” if she voiced her opinions during church meetings. This fear, often reinforced by interpretations of texts like 1 Timothy 2:12, creates a spiritual environment in which women self-censor.

Such internalised oppression contradicts the Spirit-led vision of the church presented in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, where spiritual gifts are not gendered. Paul affirms that the Spirit distributes gifts to each one individually as God wills, meaning leadership, teaching, and prophecy are not reserved for men. Bosch (1991, p. 375) affirms that the church is a community of freedom, participation, and service. When women are silent not because they lack gifts, but because they have been taught not to use them the church loses part of its prophetic voice.

Theological silence is also institutional. In the Madzimoyo Congregation, women’s contributions are often restricted to support roles such as hospitality, choir leadership, and children’s ministry. While these ministries are vital, they are not seen as leadership. This limited framework ignores the full participation of women in the early church. As Kanyoro (2002, p. 41) argues, women in the Bible were prophets, apostles, deacons, and evangelists. Their erasure from contemporary theological education and practice signals a loss of memory and imagination within the church.

Addressing internalised oppression requires more than theological assertion; it demands spiritual accompaniment and community transformation. Spaces must be created where women can tell their stories, discern their callings, and receive affirmation from the broader church body. Such spaces can include women’s theological workshops, storytelling forums, or testimonies during worship. Encouraging women to speak out, preach, or lead in public roles especially during youth or women’s Sundays can begin to normalize inclusive leadership.

Moreover, the church must challenge the theological narratives that equate submission with holiness and silence with spiritual maturity. The Gospel liberates all people from fear and calls them into bold witness. As Goheen (2011, p. 142) notes, the mission of God is not only about proclamation but about the embodiment of justice and participation. When women are excluded from leadership, the church’s embodiment of the Gospel becomes partial and compromised.

A missional church must therefore prioritise gender justice as part of its witness. Reclaiming the voice of women is not a cultural concession but a theological necessity. It enables the church to reflect the inclusive nature of God’s kingdom, where every believer is called, gifted, and sent. In

Madzimoyo, this begins with listening to women, affirming their experiences, and equipping them to lead as co-heirs in the mission of God.

5.5 Youth Openness and the Potential for Change

One of the most striking insights from the data is the openness of youth to gender-inclusive leadership, positioning them as potential agents of transformative change within the Madzimoyo Congregation. This generational readiness for reform challenges the dominant narratives shaped by patriarchal traditions and theological conservatism, which have long governed leadership practices in the RCZ.

Youth participants, particularly those exposed to formal theological education or broader social discourses on justice, demonstrated a willingness to critique the status quo. Their responses reflected a deep dissatisfaction with exclusionary norms and a theological vision rooted in the values of equality, justice, and participation. This aligns with Osmer's (2008, p. 135) interpretive task, which urges the church to read the "signs of the times" to listen attentively to contextual shifts and respond in a manner faithful to the Gospel.

Theologically, the openness of youth to gender inclusion echoes Goheen's (2011, p. 144) emphasis on the role of emerging generations in renewing the church's missional imagination. Youth do not merely replicate inherited patterns; rather, they reinterpret tradition in light of their context. In Madzimoyo, this reinterpretation involves questioning cultural practices that subordinate women and envisioning a church where all are equally empowered for leadership. Such vision reflects the spirit of Joel 2:28, where sons and daughters alike are filled with the Spirit and enabled to prophesy.

This generational shift also reflects the Spirit's dynamic movement within the body of Christ. As Bosch (1991, p. 390) states, the church must be constantly reforming, *ecclesia 'semper reformanda'* in response to God's ongoing mission. The Madzimoyo youth embody this reforming impulse. Their readiness to include women in leadership roles, to advocate for mentorship and theological education, and to foster mutual respect in ministry demonstrates an emerging ecclesiology of participation.

However, this openness is not without challenges. Youth in Madzimoyo often lack institutional power or access to decision-making structures. Their reform-mindedness risks being dismissed by older leaders as immaturity or rebellion. As one participant noted in Chapter 4, youth are often

“ready, but not trusted.” This distrust is a significant barrier that must be addressed if the church is to benefit from the insights and passion of its younger members.

To empower youth as catalysts for inclusive leadership, several actions are necessary. First, intergenerational dialogues should be facilitated, allowing youth to share their perspectives in respectful and structured forums. Second, youth ministries must become platforms for leadership training and biblical literacy that affirm gender equality. Third, church leaders should intentionally mentor youth, valuing their contributions as co-participants in God’s mission.

By engaging youth in theological reflection and leadership praxis, the Madzimoyo Congregation can cultivate a new generation of leaders who model the church of the future, one that is faithful to Scripture, responsive to context, and committed to the full inclusion of all believers. In doing so, the church does not merely accommodate change; it participates in the transformative movement of the Spirit, advancing the liberative mission of God.

5.6 Missio Dei and the Vision of Inclusive Leadership

The exclusion of women from leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation significantly undermines the church’s participation in the *missio Dei*. As Bosch (1991, p. 390) defines it, mission is not merely the activity of the church but the participation of the church in the liberating work of the Triune God. This understanding shifts the focus from institutional preservation to the redemptive transformation of society. Within this framework, leadership is not about maintaining tradition for its own sake but about embodying God’s justice, reconciliation, and the restoration of all relationships—including those distorted by gender-based exclusion.

The findings of this research demonstrate that the current leadership praxis in Madzimoyo is shaped by cultural patriarchy and theological interpretations that restrict women from formal leadership roles. This stands in tension with Goheen’s (2011, p. 37) assertion that the church is called to embody the character of the Kingdom of God, where all are welcomed, gifted, and sent, regardless of gender. If the church is to serve as a sign and foretaste of this Kingdom, it must manifest relationships of equality, mutual responsibility, and shared empowerment.

A missional ecclesiology reimagines leadership not as a privilege based on gender or social status, but as a Spirit-given gift for the edification of the church. Ephesians 4:11–13 affirms that leadership functions—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—are given for equipping the

body of Christ without gender distinction. Therefore, any theological rationale that restricts women from these roles must be examined in light of the broader biblical narrative and the inclusive impulse of the *missio Dei*.

Yet, this study also revealed conflicting normative voices within the congregation. While some participants—particularly women and younger members—called for greater inclusion based on their spiritual gifts and sense of calling, others—mostly older male leaders—upheld existing structures as divinely ordained. These opposing views are not merely descriptive but normative; they reflect differing theological convictions about the nature of leadership, authority, and gender.

As the researcher, I recognize that normativity does not reside only in theological texts or external authorities, but also in the lived theology and practices of the local congregation. The Madzimoyo community carries its own theological voice—one that both resists and reflects elements of the *missio Dei*. A responsible normative task must therefore hold these tensions honestly, listening carefully to the voices within the congregation, even as it engages critically with them.

In weighing these conflicting positions, my own normative stance is grounded in a theology of *missio Dei*—a vision of the church as a community sent by God to embody reconciliation, liberation, and justice. This theological lens leads me to affirm gender-inclusive leadership not as a concession to modernity, but as an expression of the Gospel. The Spirit of God is at work in Madzimoyo, stirring change from within, especially through the testimonies of women and the openness of youth. Their voices represent not only a social yearning for equity, but a theological cry for recognition, inclusion, and partnership in God’s mission.

Furthermore, excluding women from leadership compromises the credibility of the church’s witness. In a global context increasingly attuned to gender justice, the church risks irrelevance if it clings to exclusionary practices. As Oduyoye (2001, p. 48) rightly argues, a church that marginalizes women contradicts the very Gospel it seeks to proclaim. The church must therefore offer a prophetic alternative to societal patriarchy—not replicate its structures.

Theologically, gender-inclusive leadership affirms the *imago Dei* in all persons and reflects the mutuality of the Triune God. Practically, it enables the church to fully mobilize the spiritual gifts and callings of all its members. In Madzimoyo, this means creating space for women’s

leadership—not simply to satisfy institutional requirements, but to participate more faithfully in God’s mission.

Ultimately, the normative direction of this study points toward a vision of leadership that is inclusive, Spirit-led, and missional. This direction acknowledges the congregation’s own theological convictions while also challenging it to deeper faithfulness to the Gospel. Living out the *missio Dei* means embodying justice, mutuality, and liberation—not only in word, but in leadership structures that reflect the Kingdom of God.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the empirical data concerning the challenges and opportunities for gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation. The findings reveal entrenched cultural traditions, patriarchal interpretations of Scripture, and structural limitations that hinder women’s participation in leadership. However, the data also indicate emerging openness, especially among younger members and theologically informed participants, who express a desire for more inclusive and participatory leadership practices. By bringing these findings into dialogue with the missional theology of Bosch and Goheen and the liberative insights of African women’s theology, it becomes clear that current practices of exclusion are not only socially constructed but also theologically inconsistent with the inclusive and liberating message of the Gospel. This dialogue between empirical realities and theological vision highlights both the urgency and possibility of transformation, suggesting that a contextual and theologically grounded shift toward gender-inclusive leadership is not only desirable but missiologically necessary. The next chapter will summarise the findings, offer final conclusions, and propose recommendations for further research and ecclesial practice.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter provides a summary of the major findings of the research on gender-inclusive leadership in the Madzimoyo Congregation of the RCZ. It reflects on the theological and practical implications of these findings and offers contextually grounded recommendations for further research. The goal is to bring the research full circle by revisiting the original research question and highlighting how the study contributes to theological knowledge and congregational transformation. It also emphasizes how the theological frameworks—especially Bosch’s missio Dei theology, and African women’s theology, and the methodology of Osmer’s four tasks—illuminate the path forward for a more inclusive and justice-oriented church.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The study explored how gender roles in the church are constructed, maintained, and challenged within the Madzimoyo Congregation. Through thematic analysis of interview data, ten key themes emerged:

1. Cultural Patriarchy and Traditional Norms – revealing the deep entrenchment of male dominance as a cultural norm.
2. Role Division and Leadership Barriers – demonstrating how gender dictates ministry roles, limiting women’s leadership.
3. Use of the Bible to Resist Inclusion – highlighting how selective and literalist interpretations of Scripture are used to exclude women.
4. Female Leadership Potential – showing that women already exhibit strong leadership qualities, often informally.
5. Resistance to Change – particularly from older male leaders, reflects fear and discomfort with altering church tradition.
6. Emerging Openness Among Youth – suggesting that younger generations are more receptive to inclusive models of leadership.

7. Spiritual Gifts and Leadership Callings – affirming that God’s calling is not gender-bound, and many women feel led to lead.
8. Theological Justification for Inclusion – pointing to both Scripture and theological tradition as support for gender equality.
9. Silence and Fear Among Women – reflecting internalized oppression and the fear of judgment or being perceived as disobedient.
10. Hope for Missional Transformation – revealing a shared desire for a more just, Spirit-led, and mission-oriented church.

These findings suggest that while cultural and theological resistance remains strong, there is a significant and growing potential upon which to build a gender-inclusive ecclesiology. The lived experiences of women, coupled with youth advocacy and scriptural insight, point to the possibility of a renewed missional identity for the Madzimoyo Congregation.

6.3 Theological Reflection and Final Interpretation

Theologically, the exclusion of women from leadership contradicts the core of the *missio Dei*. As Bosch (1991, p. 390) notes, mission is not merely an activity of the church but the very essence of its being—a participation in God’s redemptive work in history. When the church replicates social hierarchies that subjugate women, it loses its prophetic and transformative character.

African women theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001), Musimbi Kanyoro (2002), Isabel Apawo Phiri (1997), and Sarojini Nadar (2009) have long challenged the theological domestication of women. Oduyoye argues that African churches often baptize cultural patriarchy rather than critique it, while Kanyoro advocates for cultural hermeneutics that unmask the oppression veiled in religious traditions. Phiri insists on the importance of women’s lived experiences in theological reflection, and Nadar emphasizes the liberative function of Scripture when interpreted contextually and ethically.

Goheen (2011) reinforces the biblical basis for inclusive mission, arguing that the church is meant to embody the reconciliatory power of the Gospel. The liberative mission of God demands the full participation of all believers. In this regard, Osmer’s four-task model of practical theology has provided a framework to move from descriptive observations (the reality of exclusion) to

normative theological insights (God's desire for mutuality and justice), and ultimately to pragmatic strategies for transformation.

The intersection of theology and lived experience, mediated by interviews, in this study reveals that gender-inclusive leadership is not merely about roles or rights but also about people who want to be faithful to God's redemptive mission in the world.

6.4 Practical Recommendations

To address the challenge of gender exclusivity Madzimoyo congregation, given the specific obstacles and opportunities found in our empirical research, we may have to consider the following practical recommendations as proposed below:

1. **Mentorship Programmes for Women:** Develop structured mentorship programs that pair experienced male or female leaders with younger women aspiring to lead. Oduyoye (2001, p. 55) underscores the importance of relational mentoring in enabling women to claim their space in leadership. Mentorship should include spiritual direction, leadership skills, and theological reflection to prepare women for formal roles while building supportive networks.
2. **Contextual Bible Interpretation Workshops:** Facilitate accessible Bible study programs that emphasize a holistic, contextual, and liberative reading of Scripture. Highlight stories of biblical women in leadership (e.g., Deborah, Junia, Priscilla, Phoebe) and reinterpret restrictive passages in their historical contexts. West (1993, p. 91) and Dube (2000, p. 14) advocate for community-based Bible reading methods that engage ordinary believers in theological dialogue.
3. **Policy Review and Reform:** Advocate for the revision of the church constitutions and leadership policies to allow more women to serve as elders, deacons, or preachers based on calling and gifting. Nadar (2009, p. 392) insists that ecclesial documents should reflect the justice of the Gospel, not the prejudices of patriarchal tradition. Legal recognition of women's leadership is essential for sustainable transformation.

4. Intergenerational Dialogues: Organize regular forums and storytelling spaces where older and younger generations engage in theological dialogue around gender and mission. According to Osmer (2008, p. 129), such forums support the church's task of theological interpretation and norm construction. Sharing testimonies and leadership experiences across age groups can foster mutual understanding and gradual cultural shifts.
5. Theological Education: Promote access to inclusive and contextual theological education for both men and women. As Phiri (1997) and Kanyoro (2002) argue, theological education must engage with cultural and gendered realities. Incorporating African women's theology into theological institutions and lay training can empower both women and men to reflect critically on their faith and practice. Initiatives like Timothy Leadership Training can be expanded to include modules on gender justice, scriptural interpretation, and participatory leadership.

These actions are not exhaustive but form a foundation for ecclesial transformation. They provide a bridge between theological insight and practical mission. Through these interventions, the Madzimoyo Congregation can begin to reflect the inclusive, liberating nature of the church envisioned in the *missio Dei* and witnessed throughout Scripture. Leadership becomes not a function of gendered power but of Spirit-led calling.

6.5 Limitations of the Study

This research encountered several methodological and contextual limitations which must be acknowledged for transparency and scholarly rigour.

Firstly, the researcher's positionality as a male pastor within the RCZ inevitably influenced both the research design and data collection. While efforts were made to listen empathetically and interpret responses fairly, power dynamics may have shaped the extent to which female participants felt free to express dissenting or critical views on gender and leadership. Although the researcher maintained a posture of humility and pastoral sensitivity, total neutrality was not possible, and reflexivity was necessary throughout the research process.

Secondly, the research was conducted remotely from the Madzimoyo Congregation, which posed several methodological limitations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online due to the

physical distance between the researcher and the field site. This remote approach limited opportunities for observation and direct, in-person engagement with congregants. Consequently, the study relied heavily on secondary sources, key informant interviews, and existing congregational documents rather than immersive interactions with ordinary members of the community. While this strategy provided valuable insights, it may have reduced the depth of lived experience typically captured in qualitative theological inquiry, particularly regarding the nuanced dynamics of gender and leadership as experienced on the ground. However, the distance may not have only created challenges; it may also have fostered a more conducive environment for participants to speak freely, as the physical separation may have reduced power dynamics between the researcher and participants.

Another limitation is the relatively small sample size of key informants, which may not represent the full diversity of views within the congregation. Due to time constraints and ethical sensitivities, particularly concerning interviewing women on potentially traumatic issues (such as exclusion or violence), the research may have unintentionally underrepresented more marginalized voices.

Additionally, translation challenges arose in the process of rendering interview data between English and Chichewa. Some theological or cultural nuances may have been lost or altered in translation, despite efforts to preserve meaning faithfully.

Lastly, while this study employed a robust theological and missiological framework (drawing on Bosch, Goheen, and African women theologians), it is limited in its ecumenical scope. The findings, while relevant to broader Christian communities in Zambia and Africa, are grounded primarily in the Reformed tradition and may not be directly transferable to other ecclesial contexts without adaptation.

Despite these limitations, the research offers valuable insights into the potential for *missio Dei* theology to reshape gender relations and leadership structures within African congregations. Future studies could extend this work through more comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork and greater engagement with women theologians and lay voices across denominations.

6.6 Suggestions for Further Research

Further research could deepen and broaden the insights of this study:

- Comparative studies between rural and urban congregations on gender inclusion.
- Ethnographic studies on the impact of female theological educators in southern Africa.
- Studies exploring the intersection of youth ministry and gender transformation across denominational lines.
- Longitudinal research tracking the implementation and outcomes of inclusive leadership policies.
- Theological inquiry into the role of African cultural rituals in reinforcing or resisting patriarchy.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

The study affirms that there are significant challenges and profound opportunities for transformation towards a gender-inclusive leadership.

The Madzimoyo Congregation stands at a crossroads: to remain tethered to inherited hierarchies or to embrace a Spirit-led journey toward justice and inclusion.

The insights of African women theologians, the prophetic voices of youth, and the lived faith of committed women all point toward a renewed vision of leadership—one that mirrors the inclusivity of the kingdom of God. By listening to marginalized voices, reading Scripture missionally, and acting with courage and love, the church can become what it was meant to be: a community of liberation, mutuality, and hope.

This journey will not be without resistance. Yet, as Christ modeled, transformation often begins with a challenge to the status quo. The call to gender-inclusive leadership in the church is not, as the opponents might think, about conforming to secular trends, but about conforming to the justice and love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. In this calling, the Madzimoyo Congregation can rediscover its missional identity and become a beacon of light, justice, and healing in the church and the world.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Title: A Theological Analysis of the Leadership Praxis of the Rural Context Madzimoyo Congregation of the Reformed Church in Zambia from a Missional Perspective: Enhancing Gender-Inclusive Leadership.

Introduction

Thanked the participant for their time.

Explained the purpose of the study:

“This interview is part of a research study on congregational leadership in the Reformed Church in Zambia, particularly how cultural norms influence women’s leadership. The goal is to explore how missional theology can provide a theoretical framework to address these challenges.”

I assured assure confidentiality and obtained informed consent.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Understanding the Congregational Context

1. Can you describe the social and cultural environment of the Madzimoyo Congregation?
2. What are some beliefs or practices in the community that influence gender roles in church leadership?
3. How are men and women generally involved in church life and decision-making?
4. Have there been any significant changes in the congregation's attitudes toward gender roles over time?

2. Exploring Current Leadership Practices

1. What does the current leadership structure of the congregation look like?
2. Are women involved in leadership? If yes, in what roles?
3. What are the main challenges women face when aspiring to leadership positions?
4. How are leaders chosen in this congregation, and what qualities are considered important?
5. How do members of the congregation respond to women in leadership positions?

3. Identifying Theological and Missiological Principles for Inclusive Leadership

1. How does the congregation understand the mission of the church in the community?
2. What do you believe the Bible says about women in leadership?
3. What do church leaders or preachers teach about gender and leadership roles?
4. Do you think the church should have more inclusive leadership? Why or why not?
5. What changes could help the church become more welcoming to both women and men in leadership?