An Emerging Framework of Inclusion: Listening to the Voices of Non-Ordained Anglican Women[1]

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

The article outlines a grounded framework for considering and working towards inclusion in ecclesial contexts in and beyond South Africa. This framework is based on stories gathered through a qualitative study among non-ordained women in two parishes of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa in the Diocese of Johannesburg. Five elements of inclusion that make up the framework emerged in the analysis of the data: acceptance, community, choice, voice, and support. As these elements are discussed using an intersectional lens, attention is drawn to factors that strengthen or weaken the sense of inclusion in this particular context. The use of this lens further highlights the need to read the framework in context, focusing on factors that are important to the people themselves but also those factors that, for some reason, are not engaged by the community in question.

KEYWORDS: Anglican church, COVID-19, inclusion, intersectionality, lay women, non-ordained women

Introduction

Churches, while collectively referred to as the body of Christ, are human institutions and often complicit in upholding dominant paradigms that hinder the opportunities of less socially privileged groups of people.[2] From a gender perspective, an androcentric worldview has centred men as bearers of power while women's experience have been informed by invisibility.[3] Within many denominations, women's position has improved over the last few

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[1] This article is an adaptation of parts of Saldanha's MA dissertation (see Saldanha 2021). Hankela served as Saldanha's MA supervisor. The article includes sections from the dissertation but these are not cited in text, nor are quotation marks used for direct quotations from the dissertation, as the article as a whole is an adaptation of the dissertation.

[2] Denise Ackermann, "Meaning and power: some key terms in feminist liberation theology," *Scriptura* 44 (1993): 19–33.

[3] Fran Porter, *It will not be taken away from her: a feminist engagement with women's Christian experience* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 7–8.

decades, in particular when it comes to ordination. Consequently, issues related to ordination and experiences of ordained women have dominated the academic debate on women and inclusion in churches.[4] In this context, the Anglican Church in Southern Africa (henceforth, ACSA) provides an interesting case study. The Anglican communion intends to be inclusive[5] and in ACSA women have been part of the ordained leadership for three decades. Yet, the majority of women members of the ACSA are not in the ordained ministry. While experiences of ordained and non-ordained women overlap, they also differ. To date, research into the experiences of non-ordained women's sense of inclusion in the Anglican church is limited overall, even more so in South Africa.[6]

This article explores what inclusion looks like from the standpoint of non-ordained Anglican women and, more specifically, how these non-ordained women in the Johannesburg Diocese of the ACSA can contribute to the conceptualisation of inclusion so that the emerging framework may assist churches in embracing diversity, specifically as it relates to women. By examining the thinking, experiences, and perceptions shared by eighteen non-ordained Anglican women who participated in this study, the article presents a framework of inclusion that consists of five notions: acceptance, community, choice, voice, and support. When brought together, these

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[4]   See e.g. Emma Percy, "Women, ordination and the Church of England: An ambiguous welcome," *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 26, no. 1 (2017): 90–100; Ursula Froschauer, "South African Women Ministers' Experiences of Gender Discrimination in the Lutheran Church: A Discourse Analysis," *Feminist Theology* 22, no.2 (2014): 133–43; Ian Jones, "Earrings behind the altar? Anglican expectations of the ordination of women as priests," *Dutch review of church history/Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 83, no.1 (2003): 462–47; Paul Sullins, "The stained glass ceiling: Career attainment for women clerg*y," Sociology of Religion* 61, no.3 (2000): 243.

[5]   Altagracia Perez, "Living into multicultural inclusive ministry," *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no.4 (2011): 659–667.

[6]   Gabrielle Tucker, *"*Power dynamics within the Anglican Mothers Union in the Diocese of Johannesburg*"* (MA diss., University of Johannesburg, 2018); Peter Sherlock, "Leave it to the women: The exclusion of women from Anglican Church government in Australia," *Australian Historical Studies* 39, no. 3 (2008): 288–304; Isabel Sparrow, "Fighting male supremacy in a church context," *Agenda* 27, no. 71 (2007): 131–37; Deborah Gaitskell, "Crossing boundaries and building bridges: The Anglican Women's Fellowship in Post-apartheid South Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, no. 3 (2004): 266–297.

notions provide a tool for thinking about the demands for and implications of being an inclusive church. Since this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research participants' perceptions on the impact of the pandemic on their respective parishes provide further insight into the grounded meanings of inclusion presented in the article.

The choice of constructing a framework based on what non-ordained women in the Johannesburg Diocese of the ACSA shared is motivated by the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth, the Circle). The Circle is known for creating a platform for the voices of women in various African contexts[7] and has emphasized, since its inception in the late 1980s, that African women should own their "histories, lives and stories".[8]

Unless scholars and churches listen to diverse voices, a supposedly universal definition of inclusion will be described by the most outspoken group or those who hold most power within church hierarchies. In line with this, we do not use inclusion as a term that calls for minorities to be included in the majority world, or marginalized groups into the world of the dominant culture, but rather seek an understanding of inclusion that is defined by all included and in particular by those who find themselves excluded in different ways. To this end, we turn to non-ordained women while acknowledging that there are many other groups who also deserve a place at the common table.

Locating the argument

The history of Christianity reveals contradictory behaviors towards women, where women feel "included, called, graced, inspired and canonised" but also "patronised, undervalued and trivialised by church leaders".[9] On the one hand, the Bible has been interpreted as advocating for equality between men

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[7]   Hazel Ayanga, "Voice of the voiceless: The legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 2, a1580. doi:10.4102/ve.v37i2.1580:1.

[8]   Helen Labeodan, "Revisiting the legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians today: A lesson in strength and perseverance," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 2 (2016): 1–2.

[9]   Mary Malone, *Women & Christianity – volume 1: The first thousand year*s (New York: Orbis Books, 2001).

and women.[10] On the other hand, lived experiences attest to women having been excluded in the church context in relation to both living out their calling to serve the church, in general, and entering ordained ministry, in particular.[11]

As noted above, the ordination of women has been a key area of scholarly interest in academic debates regarding the inclusion of women in Christian communities. Scholars have highlighted that even if the ordination of women takes place, it does not necessarily mean that women and men clergy are treated equally, which, indeed, has not been the case in many instances.[12] For example, the ACSA celebrated the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women in 2017. However, in that same year it was highlighted during the Provincial Standing Committee meeting that very few women were represented in the leadership and decision-making structures at provincial or diocese levels.[13]

Compared to scholarship on women's ordination, non-ordained women's sense of inclusion is less studied, also within the Anglican church.[14]

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[10] Richard Burridge, "Imitating Mark's Jesus: Imagination, scripture, and inclusion in Biblical ethics today," *Sewanee Theological Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 29; Florence Matsveru and Simon Gillham, "In God's image: A Biblical theological survey of the dignity of women and men," In *Living with dignity: African perspectives on gender equality,* ed. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, and Thomas Togom (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015).

[11] Susan Rakoczy, *In her name: Women doing theology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004).

[12] Miranda Pillay, "Women, priests and patriarchal ecclesial spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On 'interruption' as a transformative rhetorical strategy," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no.1: a5820 (2020); Pheobe Chifungo, "Women and the church: A case study of the CCAP, Nkhoma Synod, Malawi," In *Living with dignity: African perspectives on gender equality,* ed. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, and Thomas Togom (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), 147-58; Jones, "Earrings behind the altar?", 463; Sullins, "The stained glass ceiling", 244.

[13] ACSA, "25th anniversary conference of Anglican women's ordination to the priesthood," accessed July 31, 2020, https://anglicanchurchsa.org/mission/women-and-gender/25th-anniversary/.

[14] Justice R.K.O. Kyei, Elizabeth N.M.K. Yalley, and Emmanuel K.E. Antwi, "Negotiating Gendered Leadership Positions within African Initiated Christian Churches in Amsterdam," *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 27 (2018): 22-44; Tucker, *"*Power dynamics*"*; Sherlock, "Leave it to the women"; Sparrow, "Fighting male supremacy"; Gaitskell, "Crossing boundaries"; Onnicah Selokela, "African women overcoming

Interestingly, the overarching finding in Sparrow's research conducted in a parish in the Anglican Diocese of Cape Town with eight non-ordained women from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds was that being part of the community had little to do with the leadership of said community and was, instead, due to a divine calling.[15] In addition, the research participants felt that they played a key role in managing the church despite their non-ordained status.[16] In the context of women's organizations within the ACSA, namely the Mothers' Union and the Anglican Women's Fellowship, experiences of exclusion have been argued to not only be related to male domination over women but also relationships among women.[17] These studies suggest that continuing to learn about and from non-ordained women's perspectives is crucial to gain a holistic picture of women's experiences in the ACSA.

While the focus is on women's first-hand experiences, the broader context should also be acknowledged with specific reference to recent official responses to women's status in the ACSA. The ACSA has explicitly addressed the issue of patriarchy, clearly acknowledging the influence of patriarchal traditions within its structures. In his opening speech at the 2019 Provincial Synod, the Archbishop of the ACSA, Thabo Makgoba, addressed the exclusion of women highlighting the need to see family as "neither male-headed nor patriarchal" and pointing out the tendency within churches to not recognize "the other", encouraging exclusion.[18] At this same Provincial Synod, the Safe and Inclusive Church Commission was formalized as a space where those who have experienced any form of abuse in the ACSA,

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patriarchy: a study of women in Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) Church in Rustenburg, South Africa" (MA diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005).

15   Isabel Sparrow, *"*An exploratory study of women's experiences and place in the church: A case study of a parish in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa (CPSA), Diocese of Cape Town" (MA diss., University of the Western Cape, 2006); Sparrow, "Fighting male supremacy".

16   Sparrow, *"*An exploratory study", iv, 99.

17   Tucker, *"*Power dynamics*"*; Gaitskell, "Crossing boundaries".

18   Thabo Makgoba, *"*Review, renew and restore: Reconnecting faith to daily life inside and outside the stained glass windows.*"* Charge of the Archbishop and Metropolitan, the Most Revd Dr Thabo Makgoba to Provincial Synod 2019, https://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2019/09/archbishops-charge-to-provincial-synod.html:3.

including gender-based violence, can be heard.[19] On an official level, these measures suggest that the ACSA is interested in addressing issues related to women's exclusion and inclusion. Thus, we anticipate that this study will not only be of interest to academics, but also useful for the ACSA as it navigates its way towards being a more inclusive community and institution.

On methodological and conceptual choices

Faith in the power of a story to produce "data with soul"[20] underpins the methodological choices in this article. Sarojini Nadar uses the word "story" as an acronym that refers to: "Suspicion of master narratives of knowledge; Tool of knowledge gathering as well as knowledge sharing; Objecting to objectivity by privileging subjectivity; Reflexive of our positioning as researchers; Yearning for and working for change."[21] These emphases inform the design of this qualitative study that listen to and engage with the stories of non-ordained women, a group of people that do not have formal power in the ACSA, as opposed to approaching the question of inclusion of women through church policy or the views of the leadership. We did not aim to portray the truth about the matter, but consciously opted for a subjective perspective that in its subjectivity could add to the collective conversation and inspire change.

Data was collected by Saldanha in 2019 and 2020, mainly through qualitative interviews and, to a lesser extent, participant observation. A total of 18 interviewees were selected from two parishes in the Johannesburg Diocese of the ACSA using purposive sampling. Several participants were interviewed twice, with a total of 32 interviews conducted. The follow-up interviews helped both to clarify the emerging themes and explore additional dimensions that surfaced in the interviews, such as the impact of spoken language on inclusion. The two parishes were chosen based on their location in areas with different socioeconomic status, one being in an affluent residential suburb and the other representing a middle-income, relatively new, residential area. A third parish in a township was originally part of the

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19 ACSA. "Safe church guide," accessed October 20, 2020, https://anglicanchurchsa.org/safe-church-guide/

20 Sarojini Nadar, "Stories are data with soul – lessons from black feminist epistemology," *Agenda* 28, no. 1 (2014).

21 Nadar, "Stories are data with soul", 18.

study but could not be included due to challenges related to securing access. To maintain confidentiality and protect the identity of the participants, the names of the parishes and participants have been replaced by pseudonyms. The selected research participants played different roles in the church at the time of the fieldwork, from being members of the parish leadership (Parish Council) to simply attending Sunday services. Initially, potential research participants were identified by Saldanha at parish events. However, snowballing had to be introduced as the main sampling method due to the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown that interrupted the fieldwork. The move to snowballing during the early stages of data collection affected the sample. Specifically, the recruitment of younger women and women from racial backgrounds other than Black African became challenging. This is reflected in the makeup of the final sample (see Table 1). Moreover, most of the interviews had to be conducted online. The combination of the move to interviewing online and the use of snowball sampling likely led to the sample including more people from a somewhat higher socioeconomic bracket (people who had easy access to either WiFi or mobile data) than what may have otherwise been the case.

Table 1: Participant summary

Racial background	Black African: 16 White: 2
Age	30–39 years olds: 4 40–55 years olds: 8 Above the age of 55: 6
First language	Sesotho: 6 Xhosa: 5 Setswana: 3 English: 2 Zulu: 1 Shangaan: 1

The notion of intersectionality forms the conceptual framework used in the data analysis and discussion. While first conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s in relation to the experience of African-American women that differed starkly from that of White women due to their racial location in the American society, the notion of intersectionality has also been central to the work of the Circle for quite some time; the idea that we cannot speak of women in Africa as a homogenous group underpins the scholarship of many Circle theologians.[22] Intersectionality challenges us to look beyond gender in understanding women's experiences of inclusion, taking into consideration the manner in which race, class, gender, and other social categories interconnect and shape people's experiences of inclusion or lack thereof.[23] It proved to be a fruitful tool with the research participants, many of whom highlighted barriers formed by issues other than gender. Notably, the findings of this study highlight the importance of spoken language when considering the inclusion of women in the research churches and, thus, tentatively more broadly, in South Africa.

Inclusion through the eyes and experiences of research participants

The next five sections introduce five broad categories that emerged in the analysis of the research participants' narratives: inclusion as acceptance, community, support, voice, and choice. Each participant's personal and religious experiences and context clearly impacted how they described and discussed inclusion, something the study hopes to do justice to. While the study mainly focused on the similarities in the narratives that allowed for the construction of a conceptual framework, it is important to acknowledge this variance. Hence, instead of attempting to present the views of these women

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[22] See e.g. Mercy Oduyoye, *African women's theologies, spirituality, and healing: theological perspectives from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019); Isabel Phiri et al. (eds.), *Her-stories: hidden histories of women of faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).

[23] Namita Goswami, Maeve O'Donovan, and Lisa Yount (eds.), *Why race and gender still matter: An intersectional approach* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 2; Helma Lutz, Maria Vivar and Linda Supik (eds), *Framing intersectionality – debates on a multi-faceted concept in gender studies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 8.

in 'one voice', this section aims to celebrate different voices to make sense of inclusion at the level of the local church that is often beautifully messy.

It is noteworthy that, in the interviews, participants presented an overwhelmingly positive experience of inclusion in their current parishes. This could be partly affected by Saldanha's positionality as an Anglican priest (though not in either of the study parishes), even if the general sense she had was that the women appeared to be free to share their views with her. Importantly, that the interviewed women primarily spoke of experiences of feeling included and not excluded in their current parishes does not take away from the understanding of inclusion that emerges in the analysis. Moreover, some women recounted experiences of exclusion in churches they attended or belonged to in the past, which contributed to a better understanding of inclusion.

Lastly, as noted in the introduction, a major part of the data gathering period coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in a national lockdown and church closures in 2020. The interviewees' reflection regarding these exceptional circumstances adds an additional layer in the analysis and sheds light on how inclusion was viewed and understood under the COVID-19 regulations. More importantly, this pandemic layer helps us bring the different facets of inclusion into clearer focus.

Inclusion as acceptance

Acceptance was a widely shared and central component to how the research participants understood inclusion. The idea of acceptance was reflected in how the women spoke of the importance of being free to come as one is and not being discriminated against based on social location or social norms. Being accepted means that "anyone can be included, there are no barriers", Judith explained. Echoing this, Charity indicated that inclusion meant "not looking at race, not looking at ability or disability; respecting the human dignity". Lerato spoke of being "inclusive of any person from all walks of life" – which she experiences at her current parish – and being free to "come to Jesus as you are", irrespective of what is going on in one's life.

The importance of feeling comfortable, recognized, valued, and welcome, irrespective of they are was a central notion in the interviews. In line with existing scholarship, inclusion then becomes a locus to acknowledge that

labels may exist but instead of using these to build barriers they should rather be used to build bridges.[24] Being accepted as one is resonates, in particular, with theologies that center on the inclusive and welcoming love of God, such as Desmond Tutu's ubuntu theology: "It is marvelous when you come to understand that you are accepted for who you are, apart from any achievements".[25]

Interviewees did not aim to describe women's universal church experience. Instead, the idea of full acceptance in a church community was addressed through their own life experiences. For example, Judith returned to the Anglican church after being a member of a church that belonged to a different denomination, which clearly informed her views on what being accepted looks like as she juxtaposed her current and past experiences. Speaking of her former church, she identified issues such as homosexuality, alcoholism, female ordination, lack of marital status, and lack of children as social barriers that excluded people from being able to fully participate in that church community. Considering this contextual nature of the narratives, it is important to remember that the data we use is one with soul, to use Nadar's metaphor. Hence, as we construct a normative, even if fluid, framework based on these stories, it should be understood as a flexible tool, not as the last word.

Relating to Judith's experience, some interviewees reflected explicitly on how culture, religion, race, or other learned ways of being were used to deny women the right to "come as they are" in both the workplace and churches. Dineo opined that "sometimes religion is used to justify cultural garbage, particularly the bits of culture that don't serve women". This comment acknowledges the different ways in which culture impacts women and men. As such, Dineo would likely agree with Mercy Amba Oduyoye that there is a need to explore "'woman's culture' within the general cultural experience of Africans".[26] Dineo continued to argue that, at times, people choose not to take context into consideration "in order to suit their narrative". She asserted

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24   Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 66.

25   Desmond Tutu, *God has a dream* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 31-32.

26   Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African women's theology* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 24.

that culture and religion compounded to define women instead of women being allowed to define themselves in the church environment.

While socioeconomic status was not a central feature in the interviews, some women did associate socioeconomic status with the level of feeling accepted in their church communities. They assumed that their fellow parishioners from low-income contexts might feel less accepted in a parish they perceived to be of a middle to high socioeconomic status. This was apparent particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic when online platforms became the main form of contact for parishioners. In this context, Joyce stressed how bridging the socioeconomic gap was an enormous challenge for those who do not have phones, let alone *smart* phones, or the required finances to buy mobile data that would allow them to remain connected with their parishes. They simply could not come as they were – or at all.

Inclusion as community

The second lens to thinking of inclusion provided by the data was that of community, reflected in ideas such as togetherness and connectedness. Togetherness related to a sense of belonging and featured particularly in relation to small groups, such as Bible study groups. Connectedness referred to a feeling of being connected to the church community and was spoken of in relation to how languages were used in the parishes. The way women spoke of community (and acceptance) as central to inclusion finds strong resonance in the academic discourse on inclusion. Frederick Miller and Judith Katz, for instance, define inclusion as creating a sense of belonging for people in which their differences are embraced so that they experience a feeling of being respected and valued.[27]

Unsurprisingly, the meaning of togetherness was well illustrated in the context of small group settings within the parish.[28] For some, relationships built through small groups enhanced the sense of belonging to the parish

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[27] Frederick Miller and Judith Katz, *Inclusion breakthrough: Unleashing the real power of diversity* (California: Berrett-Koehler, 2002), 8, 17.

[28] Also see e.g. Mia Lövheim, "The religious lives of older laywomen. The last active Anglican generation," *Nordic Journal of Religion & Society* 31, no.1 (2018): 81; Perez, "Living into multicultural inclusive ministry," 5; Denise Ackermann, "Living with difference and otherness: A response to the stories from Canada, Spain and Italy," *Regreso y Encuentro – Reflexiones teológicas* (2007): 4.

community. Palesa, who had been at her parish of Holy Family for nearly 30 years, spoke of a Bible challenge initiative as a lifeline. It allowed her to connect with other parishioners, creating a greater sense of belonging. Likewise, for Boitumelo, her small Bible study group at Christ the Redeemer parish allowed her to build social connections. As a self-confessed "notorious introvert", connecting with people was not easy, but her small group provided a comfortable space to do so.

Yet, small groups do not exclusively promote inclusion. Joyce, a member of the Mothers' Union (MU), mentioned language differences as a contributing factor to some not experiencing a sense of belonging within church groupings. Indeed, while the idea that we cannot speak of women's experience in general is often discussed primarily in relation to race and class differences,[29] this study recalls the importance of taking spoken language into consideration as well, at least in the South African context.[30] Joyce commented that "If you are not Zulu or Xhosa or Pedi and cannot speak the language, then you also feel excluded because you cannot fully participate", despite Xhosa being her first language and also one of the commonly spoken languages among the mainly Black membership of the MU. If a sense of community is enhanced by connectedness, then not understanding or speaking the language forms an obstacle to this.

The COVID-19 pandemic both weakened and strengthened the sense of community. In relation to small groups, Palesa's comparison of the coronavirus to apartheid makes sense as it interrupted the life of these groups:

And you know that apartheid system if I can go back there, they had a policy that said divide and rule and this is what this coronavirus is basically doing to us, it is dividing us into bits and pieces and then rules us.

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[29]   Oduyoye, *African women's theologies*; Lutz et al. (eds.), *Framing intersectionality*; Phiri et al., *Her-stories*; Ackermann, "Meaning and power".

[30]   Elina Hankela, "Towards liberationist engagement with ethnicity: A case study of the politics of ethnicity in a Methodist church," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016): a3475.

However, some informal small groups, or cliques, seemed to work against inclusion. The upside of the COVID-19 lockdown was that it created an "opportunity for some of those cliques to break away before we come back", Dineo argued. Additionally, from the perspective of the power of spoken language to create connection, the use of technology in churches during the lockdown provided a way for Boitumelo to reconnect with her old parish outside South Africa and worship in her first language:

It has uplifted me and it is of value that I could not articulate before [the lockdown]. I realised that I wanted to get a Bible in my language since attending these services. I am only realising now in the COVID crisis period that my own language is valued.

Yet, while the pandemic nurtured a sense of belonging for Boitumelo, albeit outside her current parish, Kgomotso felt that "options of worship have closed in some way" in the Holy Family parish due to the hard COVID-19 lockdown when the online service was conducted in English only.

While interviewees recognised that gender difference also affected inclusivity, there were no stories like those relating to language that implied personal feelings or experiences of exclusion based on gender in the interviewees' current parishes. Nevertheless, some interviewees felt deeply moved by the stories of exclusion shared by female priests elsewhere. This silence, coupled with the hurt and empathy expressed on behalf of other women, raises the possibility of women not being able or willing to recognize or verbalize their own discrimination if there has been limited conscientization to it.

Inclusion as choice

In the narratives of some women, personal choice comprised of inclusion, something that does not appear central to the academic discourse on inclusion. While the first two categories of acceptance and community were clearly informed by structural obstacles to inclusion, the category of choice centers on the individual. The way the women spoke of choosing to be included, or excluded, can be seen as empowering for women who have previously been bound by social norms or exclusionary biblical interpretation. Yet, this kind of talk about choice could also further exclude women who, for any given reason, do not or cannot make such a choice.

As some of the participants indicated, making the choice to be included could be thought of as one's personal responsibility. Lerato posed a rhetorical question to emphasize this: "How are you going to feel like you belong when you do not participate?". Additionally, Joyce was clear about participation being voluntary and not necessarily requiring others to initiate it. She reflected on her own decision to participate as a volunteer providing counselling to the Christ the Redeemer parish long ago. This took her from being a "benchwarmer" to an active participant. She also mentioned her choice to not engage in negative group dynamics in the parish. Similarly, in the parish of Holy Family, Palesa identified the need for a choir and then made a decision to start one.

The choice to be included could also be an ambiguous one. Boitumelo pointed out that sometimes one needs to make compromises to manage one's own sense of inclusion: "I am not Anglican – I go to an Anglican church". She wanted to participate in the church in which she grew up but could not because it is located outside of South Africa. The denomination that closely resembled her "home" denomination in South Africa did not offer services in a language she could understand. Thus, her choice to join the Anglican church was based on a need to feel connected in the area where she lived.

Inasmuch as inclusion is portrayed as a choice, so is exclusion in both its negative and positive forms. Some spoke of the choice to exclude themselves as a negative act, linking it to people who constantly complain about the way things are done, but when given the opportunity to participate do not make the effort to do so. Others focused on exclusion as a positive act of self-empowerment. To this end, Palesa and Lily, both professional women from different age groups and racial backgrounds, described exclusion or withdrawal from a specific situation or group as their personal choice and stated that in this way they never allowed themselves to feel excluded. Likewise, at the age of eleven, Kgomotso left the church she attended with her family. She did not feel excluded by others but rather left because she felt restricted. For her, leaving was a form of freedom to experience church and spiritualty in a way that did not hold her captive.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, an information overload on virtual platforms occasionally led to technology fatigue where people became overwhelmed

and withdrew from any form of communication. This acted as is a form of positive self-exclusion to retreat and recharge. Kgomotso felt that the lockdown was testing on many levels and the church had not been immune to this. She realized that churches were trying to be inclusive through the use of online platforms but felt that "it gets too much…Feeling too much love…Inclusion is becoming overwhelming". While her remark was specifically about the pandemic context, it speaks to church life more broadly as well.

Inclusion as a voice

The idea of having a voice is linked both to the need to have an audible voice and the confidence to contribute and not feel silenced. Feeling that one's voice is heard and that others listen to what one has to say seems to strengthen a sense of inclusion. This fourth facet of inclusion is in line with the Circle theologians' emphasis on the need to listen to the voices of women and, in doing so, provide a safe space for each person to feel that their opinion is valued.[31]

Several women felt that within their current parish they were at liberty to contribute ideas and this in turn gave them a feeling of being included and appreciated. "I feel included and I feel that my ideas are appreciated, whether they agree with them or not but I feel that I am being listened to, I am heard", says Bongi. Kgomotso illustrated how her voice was heard in her parish when she was given an opportunity to explore her suggestion of providing space for teenagers to learn and grow in the parish. Despite the anxiety she experienced in making this a workable project, she gained confidence knowing that the parish was open to different voices. The idea of a voice contributing to a sense of inclusion was also highlighted by Judith's description of exclusion in her former church. She spoke of women having been silenced in church gatherings when a man was present and only having had a voice with other women. She revealed, "You could have a prayer group or a Bible study as long as there was [*sic*] no men present".

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[31]   Anastasie Maponda, "The impact of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: French zone on church and African theology issues," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 2 (2016): a1597: 1; Labeodan, "Revisiting the legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians today", 3.

As already evident in Judith's account, societal and communal structures can form powerful barriers to an individual's voice. The courage to speak up does not always result in feeling valued but can also exclude people if the response prevents people from expressing themselves fully, as Lindiwe cautioned. A male priest's response to a suggestion she made in the parish she attended in the past kept her from attending services for two years. She shared that she was able to overcome this experience by separating the person causing the hurt from her relationship with God and found a different parish to worship in. However, the kind of experience Lindiwe described, especially at a structural level, can contribute to a sense of inclusion in the long run if read in light of Nyambura Njoroge's emphasis on the need for women to assert their voices to restore wholeness.[32] There is no guarantee that hurt will not be part of the process. Yet, Njoroge reveals that "In my quest for self-affirmation and wholeness the language of lamentation has led me to hear my inner voice when I wrestle with God, which has become the wellspring of my theological voice".[33]

Resonating with Njoroge, inclusion as a voice is one of the more challenging forms of inclusion due to the level of discomfort and anxiety it presents to the person raising his or her voice. Nonetheless, the stories of the respondents reveal a freedom that comes from being courageous enough to speak up, irrespective of the outcome.

Inclusion as support

Even though support as an aspect of inclusion was not a central theme in the interview conversations, we included it based on a few interviews. In these interviews, support provided to others within the parish was considered a means to partner with individuals and help them feel less alone. Including this category in the framework ensures that the category of choice is not stretched too far when it comes to personal responsibility of one's inclusion.

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[32] Nyambura Njoroge, "Reclaiming our heritage of power: Discovering our theological voices," in *Her-stories: hidden histories of women of faith in Africa,* eds. Isabel Phiri, Devarakshanam Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), 49.

[33] Njoroge, "Reclaiming our heritage of power," 51.

Another facet of support is the person receiving it, who also needs to make the choice to take on the journey to inclusion. The interviewees spoke of support as guiding someone to act. In this regard, Charity recalled that being present for people means "doing things with the people and not doing it for the people". Similarly, Palesa mentioned walking alongside someone and, in some cases, even "dragging them along" when they chose not to see their worth. This speaks to Palesa's strength of supporting others in their spiritual and academic journeys, as an academic herself, so that they could feel included. She realized that a sense of not being supported can lead to a perception of being unintentionally excluded. Consequently, it was suggested that being supportive of others who are willing to learn and grow is one way of developing a more inclusive space.

Notably, the interviewees further established that while support is important in the context of these Anglican parishes, the low numbers of young people in the church indicated that they needed special attention. According to Mpho, young people seem to "get lost in the whole process" in the Anglican church. In the same vein, Lerato and Palesa referred to a special need for the parish leadership (non-ordained and ordained) to find ways to encourage the involvement of young people in the parishes.

Conclusion: towards an ecclesial framework of inclusion

Based on the views and experiences of the research participants, a framework of inclusion is proposed thinking of inclusion in ecclesial contexts. The framework comprises five elements: acceptance, community, choice, voice, and support.

Acceptance was summed up as feeling welcomed as one is, and in the stories relating to acceptance, the interviewees referred to various social identities, from race and gender to sexuality and ability, from the perspective of ensuring that these identities are not frowned upon and used as tools of exclusion. Likewise, culture and religion were considered social constructs that should not be turned against people, particularly women. In the COVID-19 context, socioeconomic status emerged as a social marker with regard to acceptance, though here we rely on the assumptions of relatively privileged members of the community to determine how lacking resources can become a barrier to feeling accepted.

The notion of community focuses on relationships within the parish and the effect on inclusion. Much of the narratives relevant to making sense of inclusion as community stemmed from the context of small groups within the church. It is noteworthy that in contrast to what the literature reveals regarding inclusion of ordained women discrimination based on gender was hardly mentioned in interviewees' responses in the context of their parishes. Thinking with an intersectional lens, spoken language instead emerged as a strong factor of belonging. This cautions us, at least in South Africa, to actively involve language in our reflection of and work towards inclusion. Interestingly, it was in relation to language that interviewees also reflected on the positive impact of the pandemic on their sense of belonging, with technology allowing them to connect in multiple languages and, importantly, their own first language. This underscores the importance of reading this framework of inclusion in context, interrogating the social layers most important to the process of inclusion in any given space.

The next two elements, choice and support, comprise two sides of one coin. Choice highlights one's responsibility to choose inclusion for oneself, while support cautions members of the church to support others, especially those who might not feel included, and encourage them to choose inclusion. Regarding choice, the analysis points to the impact of one's social status on inclusion. Making a choice for inclusion might be easier for professional women, like some of the research participants cited above. With respect to support, research participants drew attention to age in the church context, indicating that the youth, in particular, needed the support of other members.

Finally, voice as the fifth element of the framework speaks to the need for the church to be a safe space for people to raise their voices. It should be a space where people are heard, regardless of whether others agree or disagree with the speaker. Similar to the other four elements, the personal and structural levels of existence also interact here in the construction of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on the discussion above, the audibility of an individual's voice is influenced by the structures. Simultaneously, however, voice is a tool that the individual can use to push back at an exclusionary system. When it comes to voice, interviewees from different backgrounds spoke first and foremost as women, which suggests that women having a voice in the church is not a given.

Inclusion in the church, when imagined with a group of non-ordained South Africa Anglican women, entails feeling accepted and having a sense of belonging to the community, feeling heard and valued and practicing their agency in the community while also supporting others in doing so. As the framework is formed on the basis of selected participants' experiences in particular contexts, this research only offers a limited perspective on the matter of inclusion in the church. Future research in diverse ecclesial spaces could help further evaluate and define the framework. The work on inclusion is a process, one that requires continuous self-reflection, conscientization and, perhaps most importantly, action to move from a theoretical ideal to a lived reality. Despite its limitations, the emerging framework described and discussed in this article is intended as a tool to assist churches in imagining and becoming inclusive communities.

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