

Widowhood rituals, African Lutherans and HIV prevention:

A gendered study of the experiences of widows in the

Kamwala Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia.

By

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A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Masters in Theology, Gender and Theology Program in the School of Religion and
Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

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Pietermaritzburg

2007

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to: my mother who was widowed at the age of 49 and later died after 28 years of struggling with multi-faceted problems of widowhood; my two sisters who also got widowed at the ages of 31 and 48 respectively and one of whom later remarried; and all the widows in world.

Declaration

This dissertation, unless specifically indicated in the text, is my original work. I therefore declare that I have not submitted this work to any other institution for examination apart from this university.

LMoyo

Lois Rudo Moyo

27/11/2007

Date

As the supervisor, I have agreed to the submission of this dissertation.

Phiri

Professor Isabel A. Phiri

27/11/2007

Date

Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to thank the Almighty God for making this research possible by granting me a long held desire of my heart to study at university; for providing me with funds and with people who made it possible for me to study. I am grateful to my donors, the Lutheran World Federation, for awarding me with a scholarship to study.

My sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor, Professor Isabel A. Phiri for her untiring guidance and patience throughout the period of my study. I am particularly thankful for her prompt reading of my work, her constructive comments, support and encouragement.

I am also grateful to my family; Enos my husband and the children Arifani, Aluwani Awelani, and Andani for enduring my long absences during the research and for their support throughout my studies.

I realize that this research is not solely my own effort but also the effort of others. Therefore my appreciation goes to Annalise Kockott and Thomas Cannell who proofread my dissertation. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia for creating the opportunity for me to minister and research among the parishioners, for raising my awareness to the problems which I never realized while my widowed mother and sisters were battling in widowhood for many years.

Abstract

African widows experience physical, emotional and spiritual traumas induced by cultural/psycho-social factors, which are further exacerbated by environmental and socio-economic determinants. These circumstances make both the mourning process and its aftermath - coping with life after the death of their spouses - extremely difficult. Oppressive cultural practices and perceptions can aggravate or intensify the suffering for many of these women. Certain rituals expose women to possible HIV infection, and in the case of Christian widows, are also incompatible with their faith. Compounding this is the cultural stigma attached to widowhood, and the added possibility of the AIDS stigma whether or not her husband did indeed die of HIV and AIDS.

This dissertation examines the experiences of Christian widows from multicultural and multi ethnic backgrounds and proposes the way in which the Church can respond, given a context of African cultural practices and HIV prevention initiatives. It responds to the question of the implications of the transition into and the state of widowhood in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia. This is a church operating in an environment where African cultural practices are esteemed, and some widowhood cultural practices have turned out to be risky in a context of HIV and AIDS.

Chapter 1 introduces the study giving the background to and motivation for the study. It discusses the feminization of HIV and AIDS in Zambia, and that situation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia which gave the impetus to undertake the study. It also elaborates on the methodology used to conduct this research. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on related research that has already been done on widowhood, showing the reason to study a subject that has received so much attention. It also shows how strands of African Christianity have contextualized the gospel in Africa. Chapter 3 describes Lutheran theology on widowhood and the theology that Lutheranism has developed from Luther's views on widowhood. Chapter 4 describes the methods used in collecting data from the sampled interviewees and informants. Chapter 5 presents the results of the research and these are interpreted in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 presents a proposed Christianized cleansing ritual, giving justification and the procedure for the ritual.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIC	African Indigenous Churches
AIDS	Acquired Immune deficiency Syndrome
ECLOF	Ecumenical Church Loan Fund
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran church in America
ELCZa	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LCCA	Lutheran Church in Central Africa
LUCSA	Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa
VSU	Victims Support Unit

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The loss of a spouse is a traumatizing event that affects the physical, psychosomatic, emotional and spiritual disposition of a person. African widows experience multifaceted traumas induced by cultural/psycho-social factors and further exacerbated by environmental and socio-economic determinants. These circumstances make both the mourning process and its aftermath, coping with life after the death of their spouses, extremely difficult. In many African ethnicities widowhood/ widowerhood is associated with inauspiciousness and the oppressive cultural practices prescribed can aggravate the suffering for many widows. Certain rituals expose them to possible HIV infection, and for Christian widows, may also negate their faith. Compounding this is the cultural stigma attached to widowhood, and the added possibility of the AIDS stigma, whether or not the husband died of AIDS. Widows also experience much trauma because, besides losing an intimate partner, they lose the (sometimes) sole breadwinner, and the head of the family - an important gendered figure in patriarchal societies. These factors make the death of a spouse a horrifying experience for most women.

This research sets out to discover the varied experiences of widows in a specific multicultural African context and to examine the initiatives of the church in a cultural environment that is also affected by HIV and AIDS. This chapter provides the background of and explains the drive for conducting this research.

1.2 Background to and motivation for the research

1.2.1 The feminization of HIV and AIDS in Zambia

1.2.1.1 Historical evidence of the feminization of HIV and AIDS

This study was conducted in Lusaka in a parish of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia (ELCZa). Zambia is exhibiting a phenomenon called the feminization of HIV and AIDS, which forms the background to this research. This trend indicates the

increasing impact that the HIV epidemic has on women and is linked to the idea that the number of women infected has equaled or surpassed the figure for men.¹ Confirming this trend, Noble wrote that Zambia's problems have, since the mid 1980s, been compounded by HIV and AIDS, which has taken on a gendered disposition. He added that by the end of 2004 over half of the people on ARV treatment in Zambia were female.² At the end of 2005, UNAIDS/WHO estimated that 57% of all people aged 15-49 years living with HIV or AIDS were women.³ UNAIDS also reported that, in 2006, one million adults aged 15 and over were living with HIV in Zambia. Of these 570 000 are women.⁴

1.2.1.2 Causes of the feminization of the pandemic

To begin with, there are more females than males in Zambia. In July 2006 the total population was 11,502,010. Of these 5,784,268 were females while 5,717,678 were males, making for 72,654 more females than males.⁵ Moreover, physiological differences between men and women make women more vulnerable to HIV infection. Phiri explains:

Research has revealed that women are at a higher risk for being infected with the HIV through unprotected sex. First women have a large area in the vagina through which the virus may pass. ..Secondly, semen stays longer in the vagina...thereby increasing the period in which the virus has contact with the women's mucous membrane.⁶

The inevitable vulnerability caused by women's biological make-up is compounded by human-made processes. Among some ethnic groups in Zambia traditional norms of socialization, contribute to the feminization of HIV.⁷ Chitomfwa's article stated that traditional counselors (*Alangizi*) advise young girls, at the onset of puberty, that women are meant to be sex tools and that they have no control over their sexual activities.

¹ UNAIDS Editors' Notes for authors, May 2006.

² Rob Noble, 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia: prevention and care' at <http://www.avert.org/aids-zambia.htm>. Accessed on 5 September, 2006.

³ UNAIDS/WHO 2006 Report on the global AIDS epidemic in Rob Noble 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia: the epidemic and its impact' at <http://www.avert.org/aids-zambia.htm>

⁴ 2006 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic: Annex 1: Country Profiles, Zambia.

⁵ The World Factbook: Zambia at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html. Accessed on 31 October, 2006.

⁶ Isabel A. Phiri, 'African Women of Faith Speak Out in an HIV and AIDS Era' in Phiri A, Haddad B, Masenya M (eds), *African Women, HIV and AIDS and Faith Communities*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003:9.

⁷ The traditional norms in many Zambian communities are set by men, who have given themselves that prerogative, as in they do in many patriarchal societies.

Alangizi counsel young women getting married that they should not starve husbands sexually and that there can be no negotiations for safer sex.⁸ By the time they lose husbands many women have undergone such initiation and have internalized the ideas. Furthermore, a survey on gender violence by PeaceWomen revealed that:

61% of the women interviewees said a beating was acceptable if they denied their husbands sex. Most women surveyed did not believe they had sexual or reproductive rights. 88% of the women felt their husbands could have sex with them just after giving birth while 67% said they would have sex even though they did not want it.⁹

The submissive attitudes show women's general framework among many ethnic groups within the country, and are partly responsible for the defeatist stance by women on sexual matters, leading to the feminization of the HIV epidemic. Compounding the submissiveness is the silence about domestic violence. Harmful cultural practices have continued among women because the society either denies the practices, or silences women or both. The widow is highly vulnerable to this silencing because of the traumatizing circumstances she finds herself in, the inability to resist caused by meager psychosomatic resources due to bereavement and the socio-cultural environment within which she has and will continue to live in.

Related to silencing in feminizing HIV is the practice of denial. Traditional counselors (*Alangizi*) denied that they are institutionalizing rape and endorsing domestic and gender violence through teaching women to submit to their husband's sexual desires at all times. PeaceWomen said that Gertrude Mulande, a traditional marriage counselor, believes that wife beating is a "natural consequence" of the male-female relationship and that 'chastisement' and 'violence' are two separate issues. She claimed that her organization, *Alangizi*, sensitizes women on domestic violence "within the confines of cultural values." She accepts that they teach young girls to expect to be slapped or hit lightly when they err as a form of chastisement. She added:

⁸ Prisca Barbara Chitomfwa, 'Empowering young girls with psychosocial life skills that promote safer sexual lifestyles.' Family Health Trust Anti-AIDS Project 2004.

⁹ IRIN 'Zambia: Culture of Silence over Gender Violence', PeaceWomen December 2003.

...we also tell them to keep their marital problems within the family circles...an older man had the right to act as 'chastiser'...The extended family has become extinct, causing women to air dirty linen in public and chastisement has turned to brutality. That is not our fault.¹⁰

The state's denial in the past has contributed to the present feminization situation. Noble reported that in 1988 the Chairman of the National AIDS Surveillance Committee said "if you compare AIDS to other health problems we have in Zambia, AIDS won't even appear on the scale." Knowledge about HIV prevalence was kept secret by authorities under an unwritten rule intended to avoid discouraging tourists. This meant ignorance and stigma (which are both gendered) went unchallenged while the virus silently spread in the country.¹¹ Chitomfwa confirmed that in Zambia the gendered cultural practices increase women's chances of infection.¹²

Phiri explained these practices:

In most parts of Africa there is a belief that men prefer dry sex, so women go out of their way to use herbs that cause the vagina to be dry, tight, and warm. This dryness increases small tearings around the entrance and removes the natural protection of the walls. This opens space for the virus to enter into the woman's blood stream.¹³

Phiri observed that most rituals seem to favour men and place women, whose position is made worse by cultural practices of widow inheritance after the death of the husband, in oppressive positions.¹⁴ Cultural norms are highly upheld in Zambia and sexual widowhood rituals are practiced. This hinders HIV prevention and contributes to the feminization of HIV. Dube urged:

The context of the HIV epidemic particularly underlines the need to grant justice to all people rather than relying on widow inheritance, for it hinders prevention, care and continues injustice...a widow whose partner died of AIDS could pass the HIV to her new

¹⁰ PeaceWomen Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 'Zambia: Culture of Silence over Gender Violence' from www.peacewomen.org/news/honduras/International/dec03/silence.html Accessed on 24 October 2006

¹¹ Rob Noble 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia: the epidemic and its impact.' <http://www.avert.org/aids-zambia.htm>. Accessed on 5 September 2006.

¹² Chitomfwa, 'Empowering young girls with psychosocial life skills that promote safer sexual lifestyles.' Family Health Trust Anti AIDS Project 2004.

¹³ Phiri, 'African Women of Faith Speak Out in an HIV and AIDS Era' 2003:10.

¹⁴ Isabel Phiri, 'African Women's theologies in the new millennium', in *Agenda Empowering women for gender equity*, No.61, 2004:21 and African Women of Faith Speak Out in an HIV and AIDS Era', 2003:11.

husband...an HIV negative widow can be assigned to an HIV positive partner.¹⁵

Some Christian denominational tenets also cause the feminization of HIV. 26% of the Zambians are Catholic¹⁶ and the Vatican is opposed to condoms. After assuming the papacy on April 19, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI told bishops that abstinence and the traditional teaching of the church are the “fail safe” ways to prevent the spread of HIV.¹⁷ The question is whether there is a fail-safe way for widows in the context of cultural practices like sexual cleansing, and whether the option to abstain is available to them.

The feminization of HIV in Zambia is also due to the lower educational gradient for women. This results from what Mark Butler described as the common hunger and poverty coping strategies adopted in many homes. Medical costs (both care and drugs) and children’s education are typically targeted for reduced spending when there is a need to free up cash for food by reducing non-food expenses.¹⁸ Usually, it is the girls’ education that is sacrificed since poor families prefer to educate boys rather than girls. The resultant lower education compels females into situations or activities that put them at risk of HIV infection. Widows with low education usually possess few marketable skills to earn decent wages. Some may be forced into levirate marriages, occasional paid sex or commercial sex as survival strategies for themselves and their dependents.

Females in Zambia have less access to educational and mass media. A challenge for the ministry of education is to translate HIV and AIDS related material into the 72 Zambian languages. Even if they are translated, a good percentage of women will not be able to

¹⁵ Musa Dube, ‘Grant Me Justice: Towards Gender Sensitive Multi-sectoral HIV/AIDS Readings of the Bible’ in MW Dube and M Kanyoro (eds) *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible* Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2004:7.

¹⁶ www.religionstatistics.net/afrelen.htm. Accessed on 15 December, 2006.

¹⁷ Press Association, ‘Abstinence the way to fight AIDS’. St Barth’s Chronicle, Grahamstown: August 2005.

¹⁸ Mark Butler, ‘From Hunger to Justice: Food Security and the Churches in Southern Africa’, *Isabuya iAfrika: Securing land for the poor*, Occasional Paper No. 2 August Church Land Programme, 2005:8.

read them as they continue to be sidelined in educational opportunities. UNAIDS reported that only 31% of women aged 15-24 could identify ways to prevent HIV.¹⁹

The lower standard of education for women feeds into the poverty that also causes the feminization of HIV in Zambia. Noble stated that Zambia has been one of the world's poorest countries since the late 1970s.²⁰ UNAIDS 2006 report declared that 87.4% of the Zambians live on less than US\$1 a day.²¹ When people are poorer they are more likely to turn to risky occupations. Simbaya confirmed this and said:

In Zambia poverty levels are high. This is usually coupled with low social and economic status of women. This results in women exchanging sex for money or gifts to cope...and sometimes results in high risk sexual activity. The economic situation in Zambia is so bad that women exchange sex for less than US\$3 per night.²²

Poor fathers may also marry their young daughters off to economically stable men, hoping to alleviate poverty. Usually such men have had more sexual exposure, increasing the women's chances of HIV infection. Some widows, foreseeing abject poverty may agree to levirate marriages to retain the family property. Noble quoted some desperate women in Zambia: "AIDS may kill me in months or years but hunger will kill me and my family tomorrow."²³ Many poor widows may experience that kind of despondency.

Zambian society pressurizes women to bear children. Generally married women are at high risk of HIV infection, but, in particular, those of child-bearing ages cannot even begin to think of condom use even if they know their husbands are promiscuous. Furthermore, the underlying principle behind the levirate marriages is procreative. Many widows who get into these marriages may be forced to have children in the new marriage, whether or not they had children in the previous marriage.

¹⁹ 2006 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic: Annex 1: Country Profiles.

²⁰ Rob Noble, 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia-the epidemic and its impact' accessed on 5 September, 2006.

²¹ 2006 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic: Annex 1: Country Profiles.

²² Joseph Simbaya, *Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia: Women's Department/PACWA Evaluation of the HIV and AIDS Programs-Envisioning and Direct Support to OVC and Chronically Ill*, May 2005.

²³ Rob Noble, 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia-the epidemic and its impact' accessed on 5 September, 2006.

Condom use has previously sparked moral arguments because HIV can be transmitted sexually. Noble reported that, near the end of his presidency in 2001, Frederick Chiluba, who had declared Zambia a Christian nation, said, “I don’t believe in condoms myself because it is a sign of weak morals on the part of the user” and “the only answer is abstinence”.²⁴ Noble continued:

The government of his (Chiluba’s) successor Levy Mwanawasa has been swayed by the same moral arguments not least when deciding to ban the distribution of condoms in schools. That particular decision was endorsed by the head of the National AIDS Council, Rosemary Musonda who...said, ‘it is not right to allow condoms in schools...it is going against the teaching of good morals’.²⁵

This was the attitude of the leaders after twenty years of recording the progress of AIDS and it reveals their lack of insight and sensitivity to the gendered nature of the pandemic. Moreover, these statements resonated with teachings in many churches. Zambia was declared a Christian nation on December 30, 1991.²⁶ Christian morality teaches that sex outside marriage is sinful. Nevertheless, the connection between condoms and morality could have been avoided. Condoms are a safe way in sex when abstinence is not an option (as in sex work, marriage, sexual cleansing or even the youthful passion). State officials could have taken a gendered outlook before making pronouncements.

In an HIV environment the experiences of widows could mean unconsciously, inescapably and undesirably initiating or/and participating in the feminization of the virus whose effects will affect them. The effects are outlined in the section that follows.

1.2.1.3 The effects of the feminization of HIV and AIDS

Cohen wrote that one outcome of the feminization of HIV is the increasing number of children with HIV (through perinatal transmission).²⁷ Although this is preventable through AZT, UNAIDS statistics announced in 2006 showed that in Zambia 12% of the

²⁴Rob Noble, ‘HIV and AIDS in Zambia: prevention and care’ accessed on 5 Sept. 2006.

²⁵ Rob Noble, ‘HIV and AIDS in Zambia: prevention and care’ accessed on 5 Sept. 2006.

²⁶ Venkatesh Seshamani ‘A Hindu View of the Declaration of Zambia as a Christian Nation’, *Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection* No 46, 4th Quarter 2000.

²⁷ Desmond Cohen, ‘Poverty and HIV and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa’, Issues Paper No 27 at www.undp.org/hiv/publications/issues/english accessed on 28 July 2005.

people living with HIV are children aged 0-14.²⁸ This outcome feeds into intergenerational poverty because it gives rise to a generation with poor health, low literacy levels, few functional skills and social strangeness.²⁹ Manasseh Phiri wrote that since the majority of the population in Zambia is female and more females are getting infected, poverty will continue to haunt households over generations. This is because many infected females are also breadwinners in their households.³⁰ Many widows are likely to fall into the group of infected (from husbands, care giving, unprotected ritual or remunerated sex, rape) heads of poor households. This means their circumstances are likely to contribute further to the perpetuation of intergenerational poverty. Clift noticed that many orphans from poor households who beg for food and sleep in the streets grow up to commit crimes and become sex workers and become infected with HIV.³¹ The intergenerational poverty process may accelerate if widows' property is confiscated, again feeding into the feminization of HIV.

This phenomenon has led to an increased population of female sex workers, to whom some men pay a premium to engage in unprotected sex. About two thirds of the female sex workers are HIV positive.³² If widows become impoverished by their changed socio-economic circumstances, they may be forced into sex work and may even agree to unprotected sex for more money.³³ By so doing they risk getting infected with HIV.

The feminization of AIDS has also resulted in grandmothers, some of whom are widows, doing home-care. Clift noted three Zambian grandmothers at the Grandmothers'

²⁸ 2006 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic: Annex 1: Country Profiles.

²⁹ Cohen, 'Poverty and HIV and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa', Issues Paper No 27.

³⁰ Elayne Clift, 'Caring grannies get together', at www.surinenglish.com/noticias.php accessed on August 10, 2006.

³¹ Manasseh Phiri, 'Can Women Free Themselves From HIV and AIDS?', The Post, October 2006.

³² UNAIDS/WHO Epidemiological Fact Sheet-2004 Update Zambia in Rob Noble 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia: the epidemic and its impact' at <http://www.avert.org/aids-zambia.htm> accessed on 1 September 2006 and Catherine Sozi, 'Uniting the world against AIDS: Zambia', UNAIDS at www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Countries/zambia accessed on 5 Sept. 2006.

³³ Isabel A. Phiri, 'Caring During Burial and Bereavement in Traditional Society and the Church' in H O Mwakabana (ed) *Crises of Life in African Religion and Christianity*, Geneva, LWF Department for Theology and Studies, 2002:57-68 and 'HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission', *The Ecumenical Review* (The Quarterly of the World Council of Churches) Vol 56 No. 4, October 2004:425.

Gathering in Toronto organized by the Stephen Lewis Foundation in August 2006.³⁴ One of them was a widow whose husband died of AIDS. She is HIV positive and cares for three grandchildren in addition to her own children. The gendered nature of care giving means that many widows bear the pain of others plus their own and may receive little or no care themselves and risk HIV infection. Describing a similar situation Phiri wrote:

The AIDS epidemic has increased women's home workload as AIDS patients require home based care for a long time. Due to lack of knowledge on how to protect themselves from the virus some African women and girls are being infected with HIV through the process of care giving for AIDS patients. While wives take care of their sick husbands until they die, they are most unlikely to get quality care themselves when they get sick, due to poverty.³⁵

Another effect of the feminization of HIV is the descending educational gradient for women in Zambia. More female students are likely to get infected with HIV. When this happens they under-perform and eventually stop school. If their mothers or female guardians are widowed, the care giving responsibility falls on the shoulders of a high risk group of usually underprivileged adults. The feminization of HIV affects widows intensely and requires responses from all sectors of the country and these responses are the subject of discussion in the next section.

1.2.1.4 Responses to the feminization of HIV and AIDS epidemic

The government's early insistence that condoms are for promiscuous people was not an appropriate response.³⁶ However, subsequent responses have aimed at prevention, caring for the infected and affected and reducing personal, social and economic impact of AIDS.

Another response to the feminization of HIV has been a call for the reformation of some cultural practices. Peacewomen International quoted the Zambian president Mwanawasa stating that the country needed to examine its cultural values that legitimize violence

³⁴ Elayne Clift, 'Caring grannies get together', at www.surinenglish.com/noticias.php accessed on 30 September 2006.

³⁵ Phiri, 'African Women of Faith Speak Out in an HIV and AIDS Era' 2003:15.

³⁶ Rob Noble, 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia: prevention and care', accessed on 05/092006.

against women, and do away with outdated cultural norms.³⁷ This echoed Machel's statement that traditions in the sub-region have to be reinvented or else females will continue to bear the brunt of the disease.³⁸ Noble believes alternative risk-free widowhood rituals are becoming popular.³⁹ However, it is difficult to verify and quantify that claim as many widows are embarrassed to talk about sexual cleansing.

Re-examining and reinventing cultural values and traditions resonates with the cultural hermeneutics promoted by African women's theologies aimed at achieving liberation for women. One role player in this process is the church, and its umbrella body, the Christian Council of Zambia (CCZ) which advised (*Alangizi*) to observe human rights and adjust their teachings to conform to today's modern life.⁴⁰ To examine how much the Church has responded to the call to minimize the feminization of HIV, the next section outlines the history and operations of the ELCZa which provided the motivation for this research.

1.2.2 Motivation from history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia⁴¹

1.2.2.1 The impetus from pastoral observations

In the presence of the feminization of HIV, the encounters I had while working as assistant pastor in an urban multicultural parish of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia (ELCZa)⁴² motivated me to find out more about the widowhood experience. I witnessed women of various ages becoming widowed. Sometimes I had the responsibility of breaking the bad news to the women, and the initial responses of the women to the news of their husbands' death were quite heart-rending. I was disturbed further by some of the rituals some widows had to go through during that trauma. Moreover, the lives of some of the widows after the burial of their husbands were pitiful. As a Christian, I was

³⁷ PeaceWomen Int. 'Zambia: Culture of silence over gender violence', 01/10/ 2006.

³⁸ M. Phiri 'Can Women Free Themselves From HIV and AIDS?' *The Post*, 10/10/2006.

³⁹ Rob Noble 'HIV and AIDS in Zambia: the epidemic and its impact' at <http://www.avert.org/aids-zambia.htm> accessed on 5 September 2006.

⁴⁰ *Times Reporter* 'Alangizi challenged to observe human rights' *The Times of Zambia* at www.times.co.zm/news/viewnews.cgi?category=6&id accessed on 1 October, 2006.

⁴¹ The researcher is aware that in a historical report dates and names are important. However, in some cases the informants opted to remain anonymous and due to the University research ethics code such names will not appear in this dissertation. Furthermore, due to the historical circumstances of this Church some information cannot be dated as some of the written records or minutes could not be located.

⁴² Where Church is used with a capital the word refers to the ELCZa .

saddened to see that those aspects of the gospel which can liberate and lighten burdens were withheld from grief-stricken widows.

As a pastor, I believed it was one of my duties to empathize with the vulnerable, especially widows, as additional suffering is imposed on them at their greatest point of susceptibility. I sensed ineffectiveness in my ministry as I powerlessly watched the widows being subjected to harsh cultural practices. The parameters of the Church thwarted any institutionally-based initiatives I wanted to embark on in journeying with the widows. However, I kept thinking that there must be avenues through which the Church could be involved to protect and support widows.

Widows and non-widows who had witnessed the abuse expressed similar apprehension and concern about the plight of widows when we were planning the Women's Union (Chigwilizano or *Umoja Waakinamama*) programme. The Union discussed possible solutions and showed the possibility of making inroads into the compact grounds of Church practice to present a case for and with the widows. The Church has tended to distance itself from widowhood issues, arguing that they are family matters. Since African life pivots around the family, to disregard injustices done to widows with that argument is committing a sin of omission, according to Lutheran theology. Muraguri reported a similar attitude when elders in his church said widow's issues were societal and not ecclesiastical problems.⁴³ Kanyoro said this is the privatization of domestic violence, which should be vehemently rejected.⁴⁴

1.2.2.2 The handling of women's and cultural issues in the ELCZa

Within the context of increasing HIV among women, and having witnessed the suffering of widows, I was compelled to investigate the operations of the ELCZa in relation to widows and in the wake of HIV prevention messages. Accordingly, this section examines

⁴³ Humphrey Muraguri, 'Motivation and Strategies for a holistic ministry to widows: The Role of the Anglican Church in Nairobi, Kenya, in *Advocacy, Counselling, Empowerment and Job Creation*'. University of Natal Pietermaritzburg 2001: 27.

⁴⁴ Musimbi Kanyoro, 'Preface: "Reading the Bible" in the Face of HIV and AIDS' in Musa W Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds) *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004: ix.

how the Church has handled women's and cultural issues since its inception and how it has applied the gospel to culture. The beginning and operations of the Church are contained in a narrative report compiled by the Senior Pastor, Rev. Heita, in 2006.⁴⁵ The report recounted that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia (ELCZA) was not born via missionary activities as were most of the churches in Africa. It broke away from the Lutheran Church in Central Africa-Wisconsin Synod, which arrived in Zambia from the USA in 1949. The offshoot was initially called the National Lutheran Church in Zambia. The Church was started in 1983 and the key founder was a layperson, partly explaining the difficult enculturation process. This also hindered the Church from defining its stance about culture in general and widowhood in particular. The church, as Bediako laments, was trying to exist without a theology and without theological consciousness and concern.⁴⁶ Concerning the breakaway, Rev. Heita Senior Pastor wrote:

The two Synods of 1981 and 1982 of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa, prepared the birth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia firstly known as the National Evangelical Church in Zambia. L C C A is the product of the missionaries Rev. Wacker and Rev. Heenecke of Wisconsin Synod Mission...The same Synods took place again in 1983 at Lilongwe and led to the breakaway of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia and Malawi respectively...On 12 February 1983 the breakaway was declared official and the letter of resignation was written. The Church was registered on 25th March 1983.⁴⁷

A reason for the breakaway, according to an oral version, was that one of the founding members inherited his brother's widow, and this was not acceptable practice within the church. He influenced others to protest and leave the church.⁴⁸ He then became a polygamist. The protest against the levirate marriage prohibition was undertaken not so much to serve the widow's interests as those of the inheritor.

Lay people led the Church from her inception until the first General Assembly in 1992. The head of the Church was first given the title of National Chairman, later Chairman and

⁴⁵ Senior Pastor is the name given to the head of the Church.

⁴⁶ Kwame Bediako, 'Guest Editorial: Lived Christology', *Journal of African Christian Thought: Christ in African Experience-Reflections from Homeland and Diaspora* Vol 8, No. 1, June 2005:1.

⁴⁷ Heita. 'The narrative report of the work in the ELCZA from May 2003 to 15 July 2006'

⁴⁸ Oral interview which I had with one of the founders who now goes to a different church done in July 2006 at Roma in Lusaka.

still later President. According to Rev. Heita, the second General Secretary of the Church was a woman, the late Matilda Banda. She was dismissed while attending a church meeting in Kenya.⁴⁹ The reasons for her dismissal are not clear. This first assembly elected a man, Rev. Kanjimba (late), as the General Secretary to replace Ms. Banda.

The General Assembly of 1997 deliberated on the issue of women ordination and voted against the idea. By then only one woman, Doreen Mwanza, had attended a theological seminary. It is ironic that the issue had to be deliberated and yet one of the supposed reasons for breaking away from the missionary church was the oppression of women.⁵⁰

The General Assembly of 1999 again deliberated on women ordination due to the need to conform to the general philosophy among some of the Church's global partners. In principle women ordination was accepted, but the only female candidate who was then eligible was not ordained until March 2005. In the same year (1999) another woman, Matilda Banda (different from the dismissed General Secretary) was sent to a theological seminary in Tanzania to train as a parish worker. She completed her training in 2001 and was not ordained until March 2005.

In March 2005 the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA), a key partner of the Church, facilitated a workshop of church leaders to devise a Five-Year Strategic Plan for the Church (2005-2009). The Plan tried to include and encourage maximum participation by women and the issue of gender sensitivity, a key concern during the workshop was reflected in the newly envisaged mission and vision statements.⁵¹ In accordance with the gender sensitivity goal, March 2005 saw the historic ordination of the first women pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia. They had finished training in 1992 and 2001 respectively. The event was prominent in the life of the Church as, besides the membership of the Church, it was graced with the presence of

⁴⁹ Heita 'The narrative report of the work in the ELCZa, May 2003 to 15 July 2006'.

⁵⁰ A. Chana 'The History Of The Evangelical Lutheran Church In Zambia' unpublished manuscript.

⁵¹ Strategic gospel Plan, 2005-2009. Vision: A spiritually vibrant self propagating and self reliant church which is dedicated to serving God and humanityof compassion, humility, justice, unity, honesty, transparency, gender sensitivity and accountability with principled policies, manifest growth and contextualisation of the gospel.

representatives from key partners including the Executive Director of the LUCSA, Bishop A. Moyo, who ordained the candidates. The ordination fulfilled one of the supposed reasons for breaking away from the Lutheran Church in Central Africa - the recognition of women in the church.⁵²

By that time there were signs that the Church was wobbling towards motion and vitality. In the midst of this encouraging phenomenon, in December 2005, an anonymous letter was received addressed to key officials in the Church. The letter was ordering them to hand over the funds which had been received from LUCSA, earmarked for the diaconal ministry to those infected and affected by the HIV pandemic. The letter threatened that failure to hand over the money meant facing the wrath of witchcraft or death. The impact of the letter could not be trivialized, as the writers claimed responsibility for a series of disturbing occurrences which had bedeviled senior Church officers throughout the history of the Church. This religio-cultural issue was not addressed theologically.

In January 2006, the Assistant to the Bishop in the Upstate New York Synod (USNYS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Rev Edward Sproul visited the ELCZa. Sproul had occasion to meet and listen to the women. They complained that they were still not allowed to participate in the church fully in a way commensurate with their calling and their capabilities. They said that while women did most of the church diaconal work, especially in home-based care and at funerals, decisions were made by men, and lucrative opportunities in the Church were only open to men. Of interest to the women was Sproul's position as assistant to a woman bishop in the USA. The women asked questions about the status of women in the Lutheran Church in America.⁵³

Sproul recommended three options on how the Church could proceed.⁵⁴ One option involved combining some key positions to reduce the executive central staff to three. He

⁵² Mapulanga BK Executive Council Minutes, Matero Parish, 16-17 March 2006.

⁵³ The meeting was held in January 2006. The researcher had opportunity to attend.

⁵⁴ One of the options was to form a new interim church with restructured organization. The Executive Council chose option quoted above with reason. He recommended that the church combines positions to reduce executive office staff so that: the senior pastor would also become the mission/evangelism director; the administrative secretary and assistant senior pastor be one person; there would be a director for lay leadership development to combine departments of women, youth and education.

recommended that at least one of the three should be a woman.⁵⁵ To me this recommendation sounded logical and practical given the facts that women are more numerous in the Church than men; that there is a global shift towards the empowerment of women and that there was already a vicaress awaiting ordination who had just completed a diploma in theology in Botswana. However, the Church authorities disregarded the recommendation in the restructuring operations and all the positions were given to men.

In March 2006 an Executive Council meeting deliberated on mail written by a previous Senior Pastor to a Lutheran organization, where he labeled the Church's key partners as 'heretics' who were imposing the 'unbiblical' ordination of women on the Church.⁵⁶ The same person had held key Church positions as General Secretary and Senior Pastor before. He had endorsed scholarship applications for three women to go for theological training. The Council could only speculate on the motives for such pronouncements. Apparently, notions of women emancipation had been used to gain sympathies from prospective sponsors. The Council also learnt of widows of Church workers who had not received bereavement remuneration since the deaths of their husbands. That meeting made no concrete plans on paying these dependants of the deceased Church employees.

1.2.2.3 Gender-related accomplishments

The occurrences narrated above, especially the Church's supposed preservation of the society's ethos on gender,⁵⁷ could be viewed as evidence of a church treading softly in a cultural environment where gender was taken as both a social construction and a biological given. Radicalism could have tampered with community norms, sparked opposition, disturbed patriarchal family structures and shaken the positions and security of individuals in the various socio-cultural systems. The effects of radicalism could worsen the environment within which Christian widows would live and operate.

⁵⁵ Edward W. Sproul. Advisor's report on the Recent Consultation Visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia January 2006:4.

⁵⁶ Mapulanga BK Executive Council Minutes, Matero Parish 16-17 March 2006.

⁵⁷ Though some Zambian ethnic groups have women chiefs, church leaders who voted in the Assemblies argued that no congregations would accept women pastors due to patriarchy.

The Church endorsed the theological training of three women, speculatively in anticipation of a future paradigm shift in its socio-religious milieu and membership. The 1999 acceptance of women ordination, a shift to suit the trend in the general global philosophy, was a prudent move. Also the Church helped its underprivileged members, without gender discrimination, by securing micro-development loans from the Ecumenical Church Loan Facility (ECLOF) to start income generating projects.

1.2.2.4 Inadequacies in responses to gender and widowhood issues

Despite the accomplishments described above, the Church underperformed in its response to gender and widowhood issues. To start with, the Constitution (in 2006) still contained sexist language. For example, sections discussing the ordained ministry used 'he' to refer to pastors.⁵⁸ These sections were used in the successive assemblies that deliberated on women ordination.⁵⁹ There was a lack of foresight in connection with the founder who entered into a levirate marriage. This could have been used as an opportunity to formulate a theological stance and to come up with a policy or guidelines concerning that and other cultural matters.

There was inconsistency in dealing with widowhood issues. A case arose where an widowed evangelist refused to marry his deceased wife's young sister.⁶⁰ The chief insisted that he be cleansed or else leave the locale. The then Senior Pastor wrote a letter asking that the evangelist be spared of the practice as he was a Christian who must not be compelled to regress in faith or be forced into bondages he had renounced. The chief allowed him to stay and continue his ministry. The Church intervened authoritatively and from an institutional level for the evangelist, who at least had leeway to refuse cultural subjugation by virtue of his masculinity. Over the years many women were widowed but no intervention on the sexual ritual is known to have happened, except to encourage

⁵⁸ Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia Article 4 : The Office of the Ordained Minister 4.2.

⁵⁹ The researcher attended some pre-Assembly Executive Council meetings where some members argued that until the Constitution was amended to put him /her for a pastor, women ordination was forbidden because it was unconstitutional.

⁶⁰ The evangelist himself narrated the story to the researcher in July 2006 after learning the researcher was studying about widowhood practices.

people to follow isolated and localized sets of oral guidelines.⁶¹ The Church failed to intervene for women who had no such leeway by virtue of their subordinate status, were often subjected to harsh rituals and who needed the Church's intervention more.

The Church's attitude to the diaconal ministry to widows ranged from indifference to meanness and even greediness about the help received for widows. The families of many deceased church workers did not receive bereavement assistance.⁶² The sourcing of loans from ECLOF was good but inadequate and unrealistic for most widows. The Church could have availed some assets for the collateral, required by the micro-finance company, for widows to access the loans. Furthermore, the Church exhibited what Nurnberger called a 'lack of entrepreneurial spirit, versatility and goal orientation.'⁶³ The Church received funds from LUCSA for running batik, brick-making, carpentry, food gardening, goats, piggery, tile-making and weaving projects. In 2006 none of these projects was running and no one could account for the capital donated to start them. These projects could have been taken up as a viable and sustainable way of diaconal ministry to widows.

The Church understudy was initiated in 1983 and five years later the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) began. Kanyoro explains that during this decade the global church was reminded of the need for democratic expression of women's voices.⁶⁴ However, in the ELCZA nothing was done in the way of initiating programs of empowerment for women and no attention was paid to gender issues. Instead, towards the end of the decade, in 1997, the Church Assembly voted no to women ordination. Voting about ordination was odd since men's ordination was never voted on. In addition, the Senior Pastor's 2006 report still stated that ordination of women seemed to cause division in the Church and the General Assembly needed to speak out about the true position of the Church.⁶⁵

⁶¹ A founder member said they used to encourage Christians to associate with widows before cleansing, and a local pastor said he encouraged Church women to act as the widows' aides.

⁶² July 2006 Senior Pastors report section 3: The workers who went into eternity. This is the same person in section 13 whose family did not receive bereavement assistance.

⁶³ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:177.

⁶⁴ Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002:81.

⁶⁵ Heita 'The narrative report of the work in the ELCZA, from May 2003 to 15 July 2006'.

The inconsistency shown in the rule implementation of the church reeked of chauvinism. One supposed reason for breaking away was the oppression of women. Nevertheless, the Church fired the woman General Secretary and we do not hear of any efforts to assess if she had learnt from her mistakes or to give her a second chance. Males got leadership positions, made mistakes, were expelled and were reinstated.

The ELCZA originated in a hierarchical and patriarchal administration of the mission church, embedded in a similar system, the indigenous community. Consequently, faced by the general challenges of governance, women's cultural and theological issues and widows' problems were not immediately addressed. Gender issues have either been callously exploited or belittled, women have been clandestinely and hypocritically silenced and widows reduced to nonentities. This state of affairs motivated me to undertake the research, the procedure of which is outlined in the following sections.

1.3 The Research Problem

In a context of the feminization of HIV, and having witnessed the history of and operations in the Church in relation to women, I set out to investigate the problem: "What are the experiences of Christian widows in the Kamwala parish of the ELCZA and what initiatives has the Church taken in the context of cultural practices and HIV prevention messages?" To answer this question the study tackled these sub-questions:

- What diverse innate grief responses do women in a multicultural society exhibit from the moment of loss of their spouses?
- What myths are connected to widowhood and the basis for the related stigma?
- What cultural rituals, practices and traditions are widows from various cultural backgrounds forced to undergo?
- What is the purpose of and how necessary are widowhood rituals and practices?
- How do the rituals alleviate or aggravate the widow's suffering?
- What consequences do widowhood rituals have in an HIV and AIDS milieu?
- Do any widowhood rituals conflict with the Christian faith and if so which ones?

- On what theological basis should widowhood rituals be Christianized?
- How can the Church develop a widowhood mourning ritual which amalgamates various religio-cultural symbols while having the Christian faith as its basis?

1.4 Theoretical framework

The study used Kanyoro's feminist cultural hermeneutics. This is a process of scrutinizing and analyzing religion and culture to sift out usable and liberating aspects and discard the oppressive elements in pursuit of liberation for African women.⁶⁶ It challenges the African belief system by analyzing and questioning those religio-cultural practices and rituals focused on women. The hermeneutics enables the review of some cultural practices formerly perceived to be positively valuable, now a liability in the context of HIV and AIDS. It allows one to challenge religion and culture that leads to the oppression of women. It then calls for the translation of knowledge into transformative programmes and projects that promote gender justice. Feminist women's cultural hermeneutics can help transform attitudes and structures and generate new concepts and models that are congenial to expressing peoples' religious vision.⁶⁷

The gospel is being witnessed in multicultural, multiregional, multiethnic and multilingual communities. This cultural hermeneutics is suitable for research in such contexts, as it necessarily entails people affirming and celebrating difference in the pursuit of God's justice for all, while examining the points of meeting and tension. It is a hermeneutics of inclusiveness and can awaken sensitivity to the experiences of others that may be different from one's own. The framework will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

1.5 Research Design and Research Methodology

This was an empirical study conducted by collecting primary data from individual in-depth interviews based on semi-structured questions, self-administered questionnaires and participant observation occasions which the researcher engaged in. The researcher listened and noted women's views on and responses to cultural issues during women's

⁶⁶ Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2002: 18, 61.

⁶⁷ Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2002:78.

weekly meetings. The research used and analyzed written sources on African widowhood and gender justice from a theological perspective. It also invited narratives of experience using the storytelling method. This involved semi-structured interviews with predetermined, open-ended questions administered to ten widows recounting their experiences to the researcher. There were interviews using preformulated questions to fifteen non-widows or witnesses, about the experiences of widows they know. Two Church leaders responded to predetermined, open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews to provide information on Church policy on and interactions with widows, and theological resources for diaconal ministry.

An official from the Victims Support Unit updated the researcher on the legal and other problems experienced by and imposed on widows. The informants answered the four categories of semi-structured questions during private, individual and in-depth interviews with the researcher and translator where necessary.

There were also informal discussions with unstructured questions to allow free and unmediated discussions. Semi-structured observation schedules and listening were used during Women's Union (*Umoja Waakinamama* or *Chigwilizano Chaazimai*) group meetings to observe attitudes about and responses to cultural issues. The more informal instruments enabled the extraction of information that would otherwise be withheld in more formal interviews. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

1.6 Sampling Procedure

Various types of sampling were used because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the position of the researcher and the general response after the preliminary contacts with the parish. Nonprobability or nonrandom sampling as described by Neuman, was used as this was a qualitative research where the sampled group's relevance to the topic was more important than their representativeness.⁶⁸ The sample size was determined in advance.

⁶⁸ W. L. Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* 6th Edition Boston Pearson 2006:220.

The sampling also used the quota system because the researcher had a preset number of cases in predetermined categories. Due to the expectations raised among the widows, the process developed into snowball/network/referral sampling as widows and witnesses informed one another about the research. The purposive method was used due to the need to select unique informants like Church leaders and VSU officials.

1.7 Limitations

My research was limited to the Kamwala Parish of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia in Lusaka. However to get a broader outlook on the widowhood problem, founders of the Church who were available, the then Senior Pastor, an evangelist, LUCSA workshop participants and a police official were also involved. A further limitation was that some informants did not understand questions asked in English. Translators conversant in English and Nyanja, Bemba, Luvale, Lunda, Tonga, Swahili and Nyakyusa were asked to help translate the dialogues with the interviewees.

The interviews raised hopes (of material assistance) among widows, resulting in informants giving conflicting and/or inflated responses. This hope also led to the unplanned snowball sample with widows from other churches presenting themselves as informants. They were advised to go to their church leaders for clarification about the research. Though it would have been reasonable to give grocery packs to widows, financial constraints prevented such a move. Another limitation concerned my pastoral position in relation to the topic. Widows hesitated giving information on cultural practices for fear of Church discipline. They were assured of protection and confidentiality. I also highlighted the importance of gender solidarity and the need to break silences to achieve liberation and empowerment.

1.8 Research Ethics

I earnestly declare this research an original copy of my findings. I acknowledged all published or unpublished work which I used. I obtained informed consent from the participants. I was aware that convenient sampling should be avoided in social science

research.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, because of the small size of the secondary population pool (the Church), widows were convenience-sampled. I appreciated the fears of some of the informants who refused to be named, especially in view of the happenings in the Church and the resultant fear of victimization. Some widows were reluctant to recount painful experiences. I acknowledged their unease, counseled, gave spiritual support and paid tribute to their participation in the research.

1.9 Outline of Chapters

Chapter one is the introduction to the study presenting the background and motivation to the study. The chapter also states the research problem, outlines the theoretical framework, and describes the research design and methodology, sampling procedure, limitations and research ethics. Chapter two reviews the literature produced on research done on widowhood. It also examines the concepts of the contextualization of the gospel in Africa. Chapter three examines Lutheran theology concerning widowhood and Luther's views on cultural practices. Chapter four describes the methods which were used in the research. Chapter five presents the results from field work. Chapter six interprets the results to draw out what needs to be done and how the research can contribute in the light of the findings. Chapter seven presents the proposed cultural ritual. It justifies the ritual from various perspectives. It describes the structure of the ritual as in rites of passage. The chapter then presents the liturgy to be followed in the cleansing ritual.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the dissertation by giving the background of the feminization of HIV in Zambia; giving historical evidence and outlining the possible causes of the phenomenon. It has been observed that besides physiological constructions, culture-related practices play a significant role in the feminization of HIV. A look at the effects

⁶⁹ Douglas Wassaner 'Ethical issues in social science research,' in M Terre Blanche & K Durrheim and D Painter (eds). *Research in Practice. Applied Methods for Social Sciences* 2nd ed. Cape Town: UCT Press, 2006:71.

of feminization showed that some of them recycle and become causes, making a vicious circle. This requires responses to aim at breaking the cycle by empowering women so that they might avoid being forced into risky situations. The chapter explained the Church situation as motivation for the research, observing that the Church has been detached on gender issues. For widows, membership in the Church has meant abandonment and to be torn between traditional culture and the Christian faith, as the Church had (at the time of writing) not established a standpoint regarding cultural practices and widowhood in particular. The omissions of the Church are mirrored in other institutions, as revealed by research conducted previously on widowhood. This is proven in the literature that is reviewed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter described the HIV and AIDS situation in Zambia as the background to this research. It also narrated the past operations of the ELCZA in relation to widows as providing the motivation for the study. In the search for more information on widowhood, I realized that numerous books, articles and essays have been written about widows. To verify this, this chapter will review some comprehensive studies that have been undertaken on widowhood.

There are as many different experiences of widowhood as there are widows, and neither the research already done nor this present research can provide a complete textbook understanding and solution to the problems facing widows. There are areas that require more research, and this section will show the focuses of the different works written on widowhood with the aim of illuminating the gaps at hand. The discussion will show how the present research is an effort towards filling some of those gaps. The chapter will also discuss the contextualization of the gospel as the conceptual framework for assessing religion and culture in general and the widowhood experience in particular.

2.2 Related research on widowhood in African Christianity

Theologians and scholars have conducted numerous studies on widowhood in the Bible and in African Christianity. This extensive subject has components as varied as the ethnic groups from which the widows come. These widows experience problems resulting from personal loss and from issues that are externally imposed through culture, economic difficulties and societal factors. The variety in the factors causing widows' problems can be seen in the variety of literature, approaches and emphases shown in the following works.

Kirwen's (1979) study among four traditional societies in North West Tanzania showed that the levirate marriage is not really incompatible with Christian theology but, rather, is at variance with Western Christian marriage custom. He narrated the story of Victoria Akech, a widow from Tanzania, who chose to cohabit with her brother-in-law and was refused communion and judged by the Church to be immoral and incompatible with Christian marital and moral behaviour. She eventually disappeared from the Christian community she had founded and led.⁷⁰ Kirwen's research showed how the Roman Catholic Church tried to come up with ecclesiastically acceptable alternatives to the custom of levirate marriages for widows. The missionaries' alternatives show that they believed the widow always had to be under the protection of some kind of male-controlled institution or be signed up as a permanent welfare recipient. They also saw it as their prerogative to prescribe what to do for the widows. All the missionaries' options were not feasible and were against the widows' social and cultural welfare.⁷¹

Writing in 1979, Kirwen's overall assessment was that the levirate marriage was good as it ensured the widow of a protection partner. His concern was to show the missionaries' mistake in condemning African cultural practices. He overlooked the gender bias and the oppressive nature of the practice. Kirwen seems to have fallen into the dilemma of failing to distinguish essentially liberating cultural elements from oppressive ones. Furthermore, he wrote about five years before the first case of AIDS in Zambia was reported in 1984.⁷² Today, with HIV, his praise of the levirate marriage would have to be reconsidered.

Phiri conducted research in which she interviewed four widows. In her 1992 thesis she showed that the Nkoma Synod of the Central Africa Presbyterian Church had made a significant contribution to the widows but had fallen short due to financial and other

⁷⁰ Kirwen, *African Widows*, 1979:145.

⁷¹ Michael Kirwen *African Widows: an empirical study of the problems of adapting Western Christian teachings on marriage to the leviratic custom for the care of widows in four rural African societies*.

Maryknoll Orbis Michael C. Kirwen, 1979:9-15.

⁷² www.avert.org/zambia-aids-history.htm

difficulties.⁷³ Of interest is the mention of the lack of concern among the male decision makers for the property of the widows. Similar insensitivity to widows has been evident in many churches as will be demonstrated in the works by many researchers.

Daisy Nwachuku's (1992) study examined the Northern Nigerian traditional concept of widowhood. She queried the culturally prescribed burial and mourning rituals, demonstrated how some norms conflict with Christian faith and practice scrutinized the contemporary Church's response to the prescribed widowhood norms and pointed out possible areas of improvement. She grappled with the question of how an African Christian widow could practice her faith in the presence of cultural mourning rituals.

Nwachuku emphasized that the widowhood ritual retrogressively forces the African woman who first observed the traditional religion, but later chose Christianity, into bondages she had renounced. She insisted that a religious custom that jeopardises the full human development of a total person and impedes progress, as in ritual prescriptions for widows, should not be continued in these modern times. Her overall assessment was that though many churches resisted the performance of widowhood rituals, they had remained uncomfortably ambivalent and abandoned the widow to be torn apart between traditionalists and Christianity.⁷⁴ Nwachuku advocated for further study into the biblical basis for widowhood rituals, which is what this research partly tries to investigate.

Rosemary Edet (1992) observed that among the Efiks of Nigeria, the death of a husband heralds a period of imprisonment and hostility to the wife or wives and in all cases women suffer and are subjected to rituals that are both health hazards and heart-rending. Edet pointed at positive aspects of the ritual---the transition or effective separation of the living from the dead, the termination of the socially and self destructive period of mourning, the incorporation of the dead into the proper place in the hereafter and the

⁷³ Isabel Phiri. 'African Women in Religion and Culture: Chewa Women in the Nkoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian: A critical study from women's perspective'. University of Cape Town, 1992:237.

⁷⁴ Nwachuku, 'The Christian Widow in African Culture', 1991:54-73.

uniting of mourners with the community. She also highlighted the negative aspects--- reinforcement of despair, breaking the family into warring factions, endangering health, disturbing the children's psychological growth and dividing women.⁷⁵ Edet referred to isolated incidents where Christian women in Nigeria had organized seminars on widowhood rituals in an effort to improve the life of women in rural areas. She also referred to a 1989 seminar organized by the Catholic Women in Calabar Diocese in which widowhood rituals were discussed in the context of women's ritual and Christian liturgy.⁷⁶ Edet indicated that Christianity had not directly addressed the effects of the widowhood ritual on women, which is what this study attempts to do.

Oduyoye showed that losing one's husband is viewed as extremely inauspicious and writes that the disturbingly sexist and demeaning widowhood rites have been opposed by several groups over the years. A dead wife's spirit is to be chased away through speedy marriage by the widower, while a dead husband's spirit is to be appeased, conciliated and pacified through painstaking rites.⁷⁷ Oduyoye added that, although the rituals have been modified, the fundamental religious belief of inauspiciousness still remains. She wrote about the modifications of widowhood rites in 1992 but since then theologians have continued to write about the same problem. This shows that cultural dynamism happens at different paces in different ethnic groupings, and we must not take the changes for granted as they are not universal. It also implies that cultural practices can disappear among some groups and persist for years in others, requiring on-going studies of various practices in various environments.

In 1993 Constance Shisanya observed that many widows among the Abaluhia of Kenya complained that their brothers-in-law were grabbing their most valuable assets, such as cars and land, leaving the widows financially handicapped and bereft. Some brothers-in-law strived to inherit the widow for economic benefits. She added that it is wrong for

⁷⁵ Rosemary Edet, 'Christianity and African Women's rituals' in M A Oduyoye & M Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise Women, tradition and the Church in Africa*. Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1991:35.

⁷⁶ Edet, 'Christianity and African Women's Rituals', 1991: 25-38.

⁷⁷ Oduyoye, 'Women and Ritual in Africa', 1992: 9-24.

widows to be married in this way and that the ritual embarrasses them especially if they have grown-up children. Shisanya advised that women should reject the ritual of wife inheritance as a way of gaining their own freedom, preventing men from becoming rich at their expense and protecting themselves from health risks such as AIDS. She added that the demise of hostile husbands releases the widows from marital problems and they need to be given the opportunity to decide whether or not they need to remarry. She lamented that the Church had done little to alleviate the suffering of Abaluhya women.⁷⁸

Writing about the effects of the widowhood ritual on women in Zambia in 1996, Peggy Mulambya Kabonde highlighted the level of suffering widows were undergoing and stated that the plight of women posed the most serious single social and moral problem in Zambia. She noted that it was difficult for the church to challenge the myths, symbols and rituals because of the negative attitude adopted by many missionaries to local culture and religion. She said the church had neither focused on the problems faced by widows, nor harnessed all its resources in a concentrated effort to bring transformation. She added that if the church were to focus on this problem the situation would improve.⁷⁹

In an article in 1997 Nyambura Njoroge stated that the social reality of the African widow demanded urgent action by the church and the ecumenical movement, for the religious, social, economic and cultural dynamics which dehumanize the widow are a disgrace to the gospel.⁸⁰ This shows a legacy of the detached approach of the missionary operations of the church in Africa, bearing in mind that this was after nearly a century of their preaching and using the liberating gospel in cultural contexts.

A 2000 journal article by Kenaleone Ketsabile told the story of a Methodist preacher whose request to resume preaching nine months after her husband's death was denied.

⁷⁸ Constance R. Shisanya 'Death Rituals: The case of the Abaluhya of Western Kenya' in Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (eds) *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers 1996, 186-194.

⁷⁹ Mulambya P. Kabonde 'Widowhood in Zambia; The Effects of Ritual' in M A Kanyoro and NJ Njoroge (eds) *Groaning in Faith; African Women in the Household of God*. Nairobi, Acton Publishers 1996:195-203.

⁸⁰ Usue, E O 2004 'Pentateuch and TIV-African Perspectives on Widowhood' in *Theologia Viatorum: Journal of Theology and Religion in Africa* 28/1 :163-182.

The reason given was that she had not finished the twelve months mourning period and it was deemed improper to stand before the congregation in the black mourning scarf.⁸¹ It was remarkable that the widow herself had indicated the need to move from cultural bondages she had renounced and wanted to practise her Christian faith. Instead of supporting the emancipation process which the widow herself had spearheaded, and showing the community that the gospel is liberating, the church acted retrogressively. Ketsabile showed the widows' spiritual needs to fellowship with other Christians and to exercise her spirituality, and the church's indifference to the widow's request.

In 2001 Muraguri studied the experiences of widows in the Anglican Church in Nairobi. He submitted a dissertation on motivation and strategies for a holistic ministry to widows, focusing on the role of the church in advocacy, counseling, empowerment and job creation. His thesis showed that the mission church had not successfully addressed the problems of widows. Muraguri questioned Kirwen's claim that the levirate marriage was intended to support the widow. Muraguri believed the intention was actually to avoid losing the dowry and the deceased's property if any.⁸² He added that the church would not successfully address widow's issues unless it is also willing to deal with AIDS.⁸³

In 2002 Isabel Phiri wrote about the issue of providing care during funerals in the contemporary African society. The essay described the case of a woman named Lindiwe, who lost a husband through murder, went through the burial and mourning processes, and the rites and rituals which were performed during the mourning. The descriptions of the processes involved in the funeral threw light on the similarities and differences between two cultures and two religions. Writing about the Church as a provider of care in 2002 Phiri explained:

In the case of Malawi the Presbyterian churches want to see a church membership card to confirm that the person was a member of the church before authorization is given for Christian songs to be sung at a funeral. The church authorities also take seriously the

⁸¹ Kenaleone Ketsabile, 'Inculturation Revisited: Its Religious, Social and Cultural Dynamics,' in *Journal of Constructive theology*, Vol. 6 no. 1 (July 2000), p56.

⁸² Muraguri, 'Motivation and Strategies for a holistic ministry to widows', 2001.

⁸³ Muraguri, 'Motivation and Strategies for a holistic ministry to widows', 2001.

situation in which a Christian dies...The type of a disease that a person died of is sometimes taken into account.⁸⁴

This report indicates that the AIDS pandemic seems to have caused the self-appointment of ecclesiastical street-diagnostics. Phiri also described research done in the Anglican Church of Uganda which revealed that widows are denied membership in the women's guild once their husbands die. She cautioned about judgmental and segregatory attitudes by saying that Jesus invites everyone to the table. A woman's marital state is not a criterion for Holy Communion or Christian Baptism.⁸⁵ Phiri's descriptions of widows' experiences and circumstances, and the statement that funerals provide an opportunity for African Religion and Christianity to enter into fruitful dialogue formed part of the inspiration for this research. It attempts to advance the study of widows' experiences by including innate grief responses and demonstrates how Christianity, through a church widowhood ritual, can embrace African culture in a gender-sensitive way.

Writing in 2002 from her own experience of widowhood, Fulata Moyo described how she was asked to drink strange concoctions of herbs, to stop wearing spectacles, and how arrangements were being made to distribute their household property. She refused to put up a show when asked to wail three times a day, retorting that her implorers were absent when she had spent five weeks caring for her husband. She expressed that she feels sorry for those women who lose husbands while not earning their own money, because if they happen to get widowed and encounter greedy relatives they may end up in abject poverty.⁸⁶ In another article in 2005 she mentioned that Ngoni widowhood rites and customs sometimes override the Christian mission to liberate and bring fullness of life.⁸⁷

In a 2004 article Musa Dube said widowhood in patriarchal cultures that forbid women to own property or live independently is automatically a class issue. The circumstances of widows in the HIV and AIDS era highlight the need for justice to, for and by all. She

⁸⁴ Phiri, 'Caring During Burial and Bereavement', 2002: 62.

⁸⁵ Phiri 'The Church as a Healing Community', 2005:39-40. The Uganda case was an oral discussion with Phiri in September 2006.

⁸⁶ Fulata L Moyo, 'Singing and Dancing Women's Liberation: My Story of Faith' in Isabel A Phiri Devakarsham B. Govinden & Sarojini Nadar *Her Stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002:389-408.

⁸⁷ Moyo 'Sex, Gender, Power and HIV and AIDS in Malawi: Threats and Challenges to Women Being Church.' *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*, World Council of Churches 2005:127.

stressed the need to approach widowhood within a paradigm of justice and that the context of HIV particularly underlines the need to grant justice to all, rather than relying on widow inheritance which hinders prevention and care and continues injustice.⁸⁸

Oyaro (2004) wrote a thesis on holistic church intervention to AIDS widows. His thesis focused on one ethnic group, the Lou widows in Kisumu, Kenya. He focused on widows already infected with HIV and put less emphasis on cultural and preventive issues.

In 2005 Constance Shisanya reported on an extensive study she made on the response of the Quaker Church in Nairobi, Kenya to the cultural and socio-economic conditions of its Abalogoli widows. The study examined whether or not the Quakers adhere to the Biblical exhortation to "...take care of orphans and widows in their suffering..." (James 1:27. It concentrated on the response to widows' sexual needs. Shisanya concluded that the current trend in the Quaker Church of unsexing widows who were once sexual beings deprives them of fulfilled lives. She questioned the justification the church makes for encouraging widowers to remarry and widows to remain celibate and single. She proposed that the Quaker Church should change its perception about the sexuality of widows and emulate the founder, George Fox who married an elderly widow. Those widows who are sexually active and in need of marital partners should take initiative to get married, but with the moral support of the Quaker Church rather than the insincerity that puts many cultural barriers in the way of young widows who seek re-marriage.⁸⁹

In 2006, Shisanya investigated the reasons for the continuity and the implications of widowhood rites, and the consequences of the cleansing ritual on the socio-economic development of Siaya District, Kenya. She reminded that in the past Luo widows could decide with whom to have sex. Nevertheless, the emergence of HIV and AIDS has denied most widows opportunities to select handsome sexual partners. The deceased's relatives

⁸⁸ Musa Dube, 'Grant Me Justice: Towards Gender-Sensitive Multi-sectoral HIV/AIDS Readings of the Bible' 2004: 3-24.

⁸⁹ Constance Shisanya 'Unsexing the sexualized: Implications of celibate Quaker widows on the HIV and AIDS transmission in Nairobi' unpublished paper, Kenyatta University, Kenya, 2005.

or the widows opt for cleansing by professional cleansers who are mostly ugly, dirty, drunken and poor sexual partners of widows who may spread HIV. She recommended reverting to the symbolism used to cleanse elderly widows in indigenous settings, since cleansed widows are guarded over by brothers-in-law. Shisanya also urged girls and women to avoid engaging in sex with ugly professional cleansers as a survival strategy, but that there should be increased opportunities for widows to choose sex partners.⁹⁰

E. O. Usue's 2005 article discussed the handling of widowhood issues in two cultures, the Tiv of Nigeria and Israelites in the Pentateuch, noting strengths and weaknesses in both. He made the crucial point that the experiences of widows are more complex than society seems to presuppose. He also shows that from Old Testament times up to his time of writing the church has been ineffective in addressing the issues related to widows. Usue proposed a holistic perspective for addressing the problems affecting widows.⁹¹

These studies highlight the problems of widows and show the church's potential to redress them. The long history of writing means that one cannot assume things are well with widows. New situations arise (HIV and AIDS for one), demanding a continuous cultural hermeneutics in indigenous and Christian contexts. Cultural dynamism happens at different paces in different ethnicities, necessitating continuous revisiting. This research will confirm the experiences of widows cited in previous studies whose limitations have been noted as: focusing on single cultures and underestimating or focusing less on the widows' innate grief responses. This study will center in a multicultural parish and assemble and underline the grief responses of widows. Highlighting these intrinsic experiences could show the brutality of aggravating their suffering through inhuman socio-cultural constructions. The ignorance of and resultant insensitivity to this grief is partly responsible for the prescription and enforcement of harsh rituals and the deficient pastoral care for widows in some churches.

⁹⁰Shisanya, 'Sex with an ugly man: Cleansing widows in the era of HIV/AIDS in Siaya District', Kenyatta University, Kenya, 2006.

⁹¹ Usue, E O 'Pentateuch and TIV-African Perspectives on Widowhood', 2005:163-182.

2.3 Conceptual and theoretical framework

This study used the concepts and theories related to the contextualization of the gospel in Africa. These ideas and assumptions concern coming of the gospel to Africa, producing the duo-religious notion of African Christianity.⁹² This is the religious tradition within which most Africans function.

2.3.1 Contextualization of the gospel in African Christianity

This section will discuss African Christianity, which is the preaching and practice of the monotheistic religion centered on the life and teachings Jesus Christ in Africa and influenced by the African worldview. It is the attempt to understand the Gospel in the African context. The section will discuss the missionary and indigenous strains of Christianity and their outlook on cultural issues in general and on widowhood in particular. African Christian widows are adherents of missionary or African indigenous Christianity. They are indigenous people whose beliefs, worldview and paradigms interacted with and were impacted by Christianity as the heralds tried to contextualize the message. This 'new' religion introduced to an already religious indigenous people resulted in a blend of beliefs and convictions in the members. Within this membership, categories vary according to cultural/psychosocial and destiny-related factors. It includes widows who are affected by the dual-religious belief system because their changed circumstances usually necessarily signify a reorientation or even retrogression into doubting the convictions previously held. Their experiences are more complex than normally assumed because, among other things, they belong to different strains of African Christianity.

2.3.1.1 The strands of African Christianity

Ngada and Mofokeng acknowledged that Christian missionaries canvassed sea and land to make proselytes or converts among the indigenous black people of South Africa.⁹³

⁹² It is a dual religious tradition because, like Christianity, 'African' connotes religiosity due to the nature of the worldview under reflection.

⁹³ Ndumiso Ngada and Kenosi Mofokeng, *African Christian Witness: The movement of the Spirit in African Indigenous Churches*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2001:1.

They did the same in other countries of Africa, partly obeying the biblical command to go into the entire world and preach (Matthew 28). The result was the establishment of mission churches between the 18th and 20th centuries, the consequent interaction of the indigenous beliefs and Christianity and the subsequent creation of various brands of African Christianity.

Phiri explains that the churches in Africa are divided into two types: the Mission Churches and the African Initiated Churches (AICs) (also commonly known as African Independent Churches).⁹⁴ Elaborating on African Christianity, Ezeogu explains that there is an African Christianity that was and there is the present day African Christianity which is geographically prominent within the southern two thirds of the continent. He distinguishes 4 different strands of African Christianity as:

- Ancient Christianity dating back to the earliest era of Christianity represented today by the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches in Egypt and Ethiopia;
- Missionary Christianity founded between the 18th and 20th centuries by missionaries, now largely indigenous and comprising Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical confessions;
- Independent Christianity founded by Africans who had benefited from but were unsatisfied by the practices of missionary Christianity with no allegiance to any Christian churches outside Africa;
- Immigrant Christianity interested in sustaining the interests of European immigrants exemplified by the Dutch Reformed Church that sustained the apartheid policy in South Africa.⁹⁵

When Christianity was introduced to Africa there was the unpremeditated dialoguing of religions, worldviews, belief systems and cultures. A new blend resulted, and because of the dynamic nature of cultures this combination which was formed, reformed and transformed, ended up as different strands. The core beliefs, facts, dominant features and theology of these strands have targeted, included and impacted Africans, including

⁹⁴ Isabel A Phiri, 'The Church as a Healing Community: Voices and Visions from Chilobwe Healing Centre', *On Being Church: African Women's Voices and Visions*, World Council of Churches, 2005: 45.

⁹⁵ Ernest Ezeogu, 'Bible and Culture in African Theology', extracted from www.munachi.com/t/bibleculture accessed on 14 August 2006.

women and widows. Through either active involvement with, or a detached stance about widows, the various brands of African Christianity influence widows' experiences. One brand produced by the coming of the gospel to Africa is missionary Christianity which established mission churches in Africa.

2.3.1.2. Mission Churches

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia within which this study was conducted can be viewed as a mission church. Phiri has described mission churches as those churches that have their origins in Europe or America and were established in Africa through missionary work.⁹⁶ Even though this description does not quite fit the ELCZa, as it broke away from the Lutheran Church in Central Africa, the Church can still be viewed as a mission church. The ELCZa is a part of a global denomination and is heavily supported by the Lutheran World Federation based in Geneva. Being an offshoot from a mission church, the ELCZa continued to exhibit some features and operation modes of mission churches. It confirms Phiri's observation that mission churches in Sub-Saharan Africa still resemble their European and American counterparts.⁹⁷ Describing the mission churches in colonial Africa Nurnberger wrote:

...mission societies were embedded in an authoritarian social structure. They planted a church...constructed along patriarchal and hierarchical lines...subservient to the colonial state. The missionary became the new patriarch. The emerging indigenous pastor, dean or bishop resembled a clan head, chief or king. Women were subordinate to men...Lines of authority moved from the top downwards. Hymns, liturgies and doctrines, imported from Western sources, gained the status of holy and immutable traditions...Not freedom and responsibility but respect and obedience characterized the typical believer.⁹⁸

Administratively, the missionaries emanated from and used authoritarian systems, and patriarchy was exercised. This resonated with the already authoritarian, patriarchal, traditional and indigenous society which assigned a lower status to women. Therefore membership in most mission churches meant continued subordination.

⁹⁶ Phiri, 'The Church as a Healing Community' 2005:45, 31.

⁹⁷ Phiri 'The Church as a Healing Community' 2005: 31.

⁹⁸ Nurnberger, Martin Luther's Message for us today, 2006:176-177.

Widows in the ELCZA, also experienced such subordination. However, the patriarchal ecclesiastical hierarchy abandoned rather than assumed responsibility over them. They experienced patriarchy differently from other missionary establishment. For instance in Kirwen's research the Roman Catholic Church assumed patriarchal responsibility over the widows, prescribing options they thought were ecclesiastically acceptable and compatible with what they perceived as Christian values. They tried to come up with alternatives to the custom of levirate marriages because they believed it was their prerogative to prescribe what should be done about widows.⁹⁹ Similarly the Nkoma synod, which Phiri wrote about, showed concern for widows' welfare by making favorable rulings about wills, forbidding the demeaning of widows because of property and forbidding forced levirate marriages.¹⁰⁰ These examples show practical patriarchy.

The ELCZA exhibited a passive kind of patriarchy in terms of responsibility to widows. Membership in the Church, for widows, meant abandonment to the traditional patriarchal systems with the accompanying silencing of females and deficiency of options for widows. Widows were left to their own devices about cultural practices, with no ecclesiastical standpoint.

Attitudinally, the characteristics of mission churches encouraged and justified indifference towards the underprivileged, as social positions were believed to be divinely ordained. This led to a detached or even negative attitude in dealing with cultural issues in general and widowhood in particular. The rituals and liturgies have not been adapted to suit the African context and customs because indigenous practices were thought to be inferior.

Nurnberger's general assessment was that most mission churches, which are traditional and conservative in nature, have taken a long time to change from the original mode of operation, and remnants of the detached outlook are still evident in today's missionary churches.¹⁰¹ Most mainline churches are not in touch with the accelerating change that

⁹⁹ Michael C. Kirwen, *African Widows*, 1979:9-15.

¹⁰⁰ Phiri. 'African Women in Religion and Culture: University of Cape Town, 1992:237.

¹⁰¹ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's Message for us today*. 2005:176.

occurs in modernizing societies so they lose their missionary fervor and stagnate.¹⁰² Modernizing influences have engendered the AIDS epidemic, which has not been dealt with sufficiently by the churches, and many mission churches did not concern themselves much with cultural issues. When churches abandon widows to be subjected to cultural practices like sexual cleansing under the pretext of granting freedom to inculcate they contribute to putting the widows at risk of HIV infection. Using feminist cultural hermeneutics, it is possible and imperative to find a way to replace that religio-cultural symbol with something compatible to Christian beliefs, yet minimizing the confusion and apprehension usually accompanying paradigm shifts.

For some Christian widows, membership in mission churches meant subordination to the dominating patriarchal church and obediently swallowing their prescriptions. For widows in the ELCZa this has meant abandonment to be split between traditional practices and ecclesiastical piety. The operations of most mission churches caused discontent among converts. Some left to establish indigenous churches, whose operations are discussed in the section that follows.

2.3.1.3 African (Independent; Indigenous; Initiated; Instituted) Churches

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia (ELCZa), within which this study was undertaken, broke away from a missionary church. It maintained a mission church *modus operandi* but it can arguably be categorized with indigenous churches established by disgruntled Christians. These churches are generally abbreviated AICs. This section will examine some characteristics of AICs to demonstrate the AIC ethos of the ELCZa and its effect on the experiences of the widows within the Church's membership.

The ELCZa retained the ethos of a mission church but incorporated some elements of AICs, and adopted a *modus operandi* which kept changing along the way. Subsequently, the Church's theology, teachings, practices and activities exhibit indigenous and missionary characteristics which have had varied effects on the experiences of its

¹⁰² Numberger, *Martin Luther's Message for us today*. 2005:176.

members. Widows were mostly affected by the changes as African widows' changed circumstances usually entail social, economic, cultural and religious paradigm shifts.

Stephen Hayes explained that AICs are Christian bodies in Africa established as a result of African rather than foreign missionary initiatives.¹⁰³ The initials AIC stand for; African Independent Churches, African Indigenous Churches, African Initiated Churches or African Instituted Churches. Hayes stated that African Independent Churches originated in Africa, and are not dependent on any religious groups outside Africa for funding, leadership or control. 'Indigenous' indicates that they retain an African ethos and their theology has developed a distinctive local flavor. 'Initiated' refers to churches started through African initiative in African countries, but affiliated to wider bodies including non-African members. 'Instituted' means that those churches were established and grew on African soil.¹⁰⁴ These categories may overlap but not completely. Phiri, describing the case of Malawi enlightened further on these churches, stating:

Scholars have classified African Initiated churches differently. They can be divided into two types: The Ethiopian Churches and the Spirit type Churches. The AICS are further divided into the classical AICS of Pentecostal type who were established before the 1970s and the Charismatic type that came after the 1970s. Africans both female and male, for one reason or another, founded the AICS.¹⁰⁵

Many AICs were started because many Africans were discriminated and excluded from positions of leadership and authority. For example, Ngada and Mofokeng told about Rev Mangena Mokone who broke away from the Methodist Church in Pretoria in 1892 because church conferences were segregated.¹⁰⁶ In Zambia the ELCZa gave segregation as a reason for breaking away.¹⁰⁷ Chana reported that when Philip Haabowa (a pastor in the Church) was interviewed he contended that the white missionaries practiced racial discrimination.¹⁰⁸ The Church tried to pursue this non-segregating notion and today the ELCZa Constitution reads 'The mission of the Church is realized by working towards the

¹⁰³ Stephen Hayes 'African Initiated Churches' at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/8409/aic.htm>

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Hayes 'African Initiated Churches'.

¹⁰⁵ Phiri, 'The Church as a Healing Community' 2005:43.

¹⁰⁶ Ngada and Mofokeng, *African Christian Witness*, 2001:17.

¹⁰⁷ Heita 'The narrative report of the work in the ELCZa, May 2003 to 15 July 2006'.

¹⁰⁸ A. Chana, 'The History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia', unpublished manuscript.

realization of the oneness of the body of Christ amongst all tribes in Zambia.¹⁰⁹ The church only fell short of applying the rule across the board, as seen in the persistent refusal to ordain women. Sometimes rejecting the segregation practiced by missionaries did not translate into abolishing segregation practiced by the advocates themselves.

In most AICs, African worldview and beliefs persist. Phiri confirmed this by saying that African Christians are still influenced by the beliefs and practices of African religion, especially in times of crisis, even though they may not acknowledge it publicly.¹¹⁰ AIC adherents believe that African life is influenced by spirits which can reward or punish corporeal beings according to their deeds. This bears similarities to the gospel concepts of the spiritual God, the Holy Spirit and angels.

Such a traditional religious belief in spirits exists in the ELCZa as shown in Heita's report that during the early 1990s a certain kind of syncretism between the fundamental doctrines and traditional practices including witchcraft, magic and the belief in the ancestral spirits was brought into the Church. Later, in 2005, there were threats that evil forces, which had left some women Church members widowed, would cause calamities to key Church officials.¹¹¹ This means widows may find it difficult to discard the notions related to their husbands' spirits. They need a model which acknowledges the existence of their husbands' and other spirits, but which also helps them order the spirits in a way that eliminates fear, and that is compatible to the gospel.

Another feature of AICs is their readiness to deal with cultural issues, either esteeming or eschewing aspects of it. Adamo said in Nigeria the Yoruba converts were recapturing their cultural ways of healing and protection from evil powers.¹¹² Ayegboyin stated that the Christology of the Aladura movement in Ghana is a product of the Christians'

¹⁰⁹ Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia Article 3.3.

¹¹⁰ Isabel A. Phiri, 'Dealing with the Trauma of Sexual Abuse: A Gender-based Analysis of the Testimonies of Female Traditional Healers in KwaZulu-Natal' in Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2006: 116.

¹¹¹ The narrative report of the work in the ELCZa from May 2003 to July 15 2006.

¹¹² Adamo 'The use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria' 2000:336-349.

adaptation of the faith to their milieu. It is articulated by employing the easily understandable indigenous and cultural concepts, symbols and idioms.¹¹³

However, some AIC founders were critical of culture. In Zaire, Simon Kimbangu started a healing ministry in 1921 and attacked traditional religion and customs, fetishes and spiritual cults. In Zambia, the prophetess Alice Lenshina founded a powerful Independent Church which grappled with witchcraft.¹¹⁴ Phiri wrote that although indigenous churches are seen by some scholars as the vanguard of African culture, Mayi NyaJere the founder of Chilobwe Healing Centre in Malawi, interpreted spiritual freedom to extend to cultural taboos.¹¹⁵ Espousing or eschewing culture are appropriate processes in bringing the gospel to indigenous people. This is seen in Jesus' operation model. He was raised and dressed like a Jew; he held cultural beliefs and participated in cultural activities of his milieu, yet he attacked some Pharisaic cultural doctrines and broke some cultural laws.

The ELCZa has also shown parallel differing approaches to culture. Hypothetically, the Church espoused culture by opting out of the missionary church with a cultural issue of widow inheritance at hand.¹¹⁶ Yet, in the congregations, Christians were instructed to greet, hug, share and associate with widows before ritual cleansing, contrary to some ethnic cultures.¹¹⁷ On another level the Church showed sexism in its treatment of culture. It avoided scrutinizing and opposing demeaning widowhood rituals, yet it intervened authoritatively to stop a widower from undergoing cleansing.¹¹⁸ Varying approaches to culture mean AICs and their half cousins like the ELCZa have the leeway to do cultural hermeneutics and operate in a way that is helpful to widows.

¹¹³ Deji Ayegboyin 'Li Oruko: Aladura Grass-roots Christology' in *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 8 No. Christ in African Experience-Reflections from Homeland and Diaspora, 1 June 2005:12.

¹¹⁴ www.dacb.org/stories/zambia.lenshina_alice.html

¹¹⁵ Phiri 'The Church as a Healing Community' 2005:38.

¹¹⁶ The researcher collected the story from one of the founders in July 2006 and it is on the section about the history of the Church. A founder member inherited a brother's widow and the custom was not acceptable in the LCCA. He convinced others to join in protest and they left the church. He thus entered into a polygamous marriage.

¹¹⁷ Interview with one of the founders Mr Johann Mwanza in July 2006.

¹¹⁸ The story appears in Chapter 1 section 1.2.2.4. The researcher heard the story from an interview with the evangelist in July 2006.

AICs emerged within the pervasively communal African society and adopted the community-centeredness of the cultural milieu. According to Phiri, African theologians agree that it is within the African Initiated Churches where the African communal nature of the church is most clearly displayed.¹¹⁹ This traditional feature demonstrated the gospel's commandment to love the neighbor. The ELCZa espoused this feature and stated in the Constitution, that 'Members...are to bear one another's burdens and be prepared to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of the community.'¹²⁰ While it is virtuous to be community-centered, feminist cultural hermeneutics compels us to carefully check what it means to women and especially to widows. Oduyoye had difficulty in understanding why it is the prerogative of only one sex to sacrifice for the well being of the community.¹²¹ For the sake of community esteem, some widows have consented to demeaning cleansing rituals to rid the community of the spirit of death; surrendering property to grabbing and impoverishing themselves and their children to maintain family ties, or undergoing rites that negate one's faith to save the family from tragedies.

Some rites aim at healing defective situations and healing is a prominent feature in AICs. Ngada and Mofokeng declared that healing is central to AICs because it is central to the ministry of Jesus Christ himself.¹²² Ayegboyin wrote that the image of Jesus as the healer was central in the Aladura churches which began in response to the world-wide life-consuming influenza epidemic after World War II.¹²³ Similarly Phiri stated that healing is important in the African worldview, which explains why the indigenous churches that have taken physical healing seriously are very popular.¹²⁴ AICs contextualize the gospel by esteeming healing to achieve the abundant life Christ came to give.

However, Phiri observed that most AICs concentrate on divine healing to the exclusion of other forms of healing.¹²⁵ Spiritual healing cannot be an alternative to medical healing but could provide a way out of misery in a world in which AIDS has no cure, and in which

¹¹⁹ Phiri 'The Church as a Healing Community', 2005:30.

¹²⁰ Constitution of the ELCZa Article 6: The Members of the Church 6.2.2.4, 3.

¹²¹ Nwachuku, 'The Christian Widow in African Culture' 1991:65.

¹²² Ngada and Mofokeng, *African Christian Witness* 2001:26, 32.

¹²³ Dej Ayegboyin 'Li Oruko, 2005:12.

¹²⁴ Phiri 'HIV/AIDS: An African Theological Response in Mission', October 2004.

¹²⁵ Phiri, 'The Church as a Healing Community' 2005:39- 41.

the cost of medical care proves prohibitive to the masses. The experiences of widows in the Church indicate the need for a holistic ministry of healing. Spiritual healing could be done through a ritual to heal, cleanse and restore, while supporting HIV prevention messages, for prevention is better than cure.

The ELCZa has put little emphasis on healing and cleansing, yet some members hold strong beliefs in the existence of evil and benevolent spiritual forces. The evil forces can be eliminated through ritual cleansing, a form of spiritual healing. Shishanya's research data revealed that widows who were members of African Instituted Churches supported cleansing rituals.¹²⁶ Ngada and Mofokeng endorse it as a form of healing and restoration. After the cultural cleansing of a spouse, the church comes in to cleanse the whole family.¹²⁷ Though this is a form of contextualization, for the church to simply endorse what the culture has prescribed without questioning it or the ideological premise of the ritual is apathetic. Ritual cleansing is crucial for widows but can put them at risk of HIV infection. They can also be subjected to practices that negate their confessed faith.

Theological education is needed in the contextualization of the gospel. Probably because of the importance attached to personal encounters with the sacred, AICs tend to discount this. Rajuili observed that AICs have progressed in contextualizing the gospel but still lack trained literary theologians.¹²⁸ Phiri lamented that African Initiated Churches do not consider theological education necessary for their ministry, yet it is needed to help get rid of literal interpretations of the Bible that lead to the oppression of women. Theological education needs to be combined with listening to the Holy Spirit for people to experience genuine liberation from all that oppresses humanity.¹²⁹ Though the ELCZa founders did not hold the belief in guidance by the Holy Spirit as in some AICs, they didn't see theological education as necessary for the ministry. In breaking away, their concerns were more administrative than religious. The Church did not define its theological stance

¹²⁶ Shisanya, 'Sex with an ugly man: Cleansing widows in the era of HIV/AIDS in Siaya District', Kenyatta University, Kenya, 2006:28.

¹²⁷ Ngada and Mofokeng, *African Christian Witness* 2001: 45-46.

¹²⁸ M.B. Rajuili A theology of the beast: a critical examination of the pastoral and missiological implications of ilobolo in the contemporary South African Church-an evangelical perspective. Pietermaritzburg, 2003:225.

¹²⁹ Phiri 'The Church as a Healing Community' 2005:40, 41.

with regard to culture and the gospel and the culture remained separate. For widows this has meant an unending tearing between traditional culture and Christianity.

AICs place much importance on symbolism as a part of African religiosity. According to Mbiti, rituals fall under symbolic theology, expressed through art, sculptor, drama, dance, colors and numbers, enabling people to express acts of worship.¹³⁰ To Cox, a ritual is a repeated dramatization directing attention to where the sacred enters life, identifying and transforming participants.¹³¹ Nurnberger added that in Africa symbols demonstrate that the spoken word alone is an impoverishment and must be augmented by other forms of communication.¹³² Symbols enhance faith and Jesus used symbols in his ministry.¹³³ Even in the last supper Jesus symbolized his death in the ritual of the Eucharist. AICs emphasis on symbols proved the relevance of the gospel to Africa.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed some of the studies which have been undertaken regarding widowhood, and showed how this research attempts to filling the gaps. It discussed the contextualization of the gospel and showed how different strands of African Christianity have handled the gospel and culture discourse. The ELCZa falls in between missionary and African indigenous churches. These were discussed showing how the ELCZa as either, dealt with culture and widows issues. The chapter highlighted how some features of AICs have been employed by the ELCZa to address widows' issues. AICs did much in contextualizing the gospel but disregard theological education which is necessary for such an endeavourer. Some AICs wholly celebrate that traditional beliefs are confirmed in the Bible. This could lead to apathy, as it can denote continued oppression for widows. Cultural hermeneutics should still be applied to scrutinize religion and culture. This process continues in the next chapter which analyses Lutheran theology on widows.

¹³⁰ Mbiti, J. 'The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology' in Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (eds) *African Theology en Route*, New York:Orbis Books 1979:83-94.

¹³¹ James Cox 'Introduction: Ritual, rites of Passage and the Interaction between Christian and Traditional Religion,' in Cox (ed) *Rites of passage in Contemporary Africa*, Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press 1998:x

¹³² Nurnberger, *Marin Luther's message for us today* 2005:183-191.

¹³³ Examples are the healing with mud and spittle, the showing of leprous skin to the priests and the touching of a brier with a dead man.

CHAPTER THREE

LUTHERAN THEOLOGY ABOUT WIDOWHOOD

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed some of the literature that has been produced in connection with widowhood, showing the different areas of focus. It also identified some gaps in order to locate the present research. Next was a discussion on the contextualization of the gospel in Africa. The two dominant strands of African Christianity were examined and the Church under study located in both of them, for it falls in between mission and indigenous churches.

This chapter examines the theology of Luther and Lutheranism about widows. These two are slightly different. Luther's theology can be inferred from the pronouncements he made about widows, based on his understanding of certain biblical passages, on his notion that he was correcting Catholic misinterpretations of the Bible passages on celibacy and on the events of his time. Lutheranism, as explained by Nummerger, is the prototype of a denomination based on a definite set of confessional writings which have been closed since the 16th century.¹³⁴ As this denomination operated in changing circumstances and faced new challenges, it adapted Luther's pronouncements to new contexts. The adaptation process resulted in contradictions between Luther's and Lutheranism's notions on widows which appear in this section.

The chapter first describes Luther's views about God as the Creator, and outlines his theology on creation as perfect. Then it describes the fall as a corruption of God's original plan, and God's efforts in designing the restoration. Next are Luther's perceptions about widowhood followed by a description of his views on widowhood and cultural practices. Every section will examine the teachings of Lutheranism. A critical reflection will show the strengths and weaknesses of Luther's theology to illustrate how

¹³⁴ Nummerger, Martin *Luther's message for us today*, 2005:278.

Lutheranism had, as Nurnberger says, to apply the normal hermeneutical, theological and social tools of interpretation and critique see what was valid and meaningful, translate and apply it to new situations.¹³⁵ 'Lutheran' will be used to refer to both Luther's views and the theology that developed from them as propounded by adherents to his teachings.

3.2 Lutheran theology about God

According to Luther, Christians undergo a twofold experience of God which he called the 'hidden' God (*Deus absconditus*) and the 'revealed' God (*Deus revelatus*). The hidden God is the ambiguous experience of God's power in everyday life; the devil that pesters us with God's permission. This 'God's own devil' is the mask of the Almighty God in his dreadful hiddenness as we experience it from day to day.¹³⁶ In view of that, the experience of widowhood can be seen as an experience of the hidden God, or a tool of the devil. Luther believed that when we experience pain and suffering it is the hidden God.¹³⁷ Essmann wrote that Lutherans teach that God is spirit and can't be seen or confined to one place and one of the Trinity (God Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit).¹³⁸ The notion of God as spirit taught in Lutheranism can be well understood by Africans in Christianity, as lives in African religious belief are connected with spirits. This indicates why it is important to understand widows' belief that their husbands' spirits influence their lives, and that such spirits need to be placated through various rituals.

3.3 Lutheran theology on creation

Luther believed that God is the creator of everything that exists and happens and is busy creating reality as it unfolds (*creation continua*).¹³⁹ This indicates that the creation was a continuous progression. Luther thought Moses repeated the phrase 'God saw that it was good' (in Gen1:10) five times after the creation of dry land to show that God was concerned about our dwelling place than about God's own, and thus arouse our gratitude.

¹³⁵ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:7-8.

¹³⁶ Nurnberger *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:17-20.

¹³⁷ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 15-16.

¹³⁸ Harold Essmann, 'What the Bible and Lutherans teach' USA WELS-BWM 2001.

¹³⁹ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*: pp16

To Moses and subsequently to Luther, this shows God's care for humanity.¹⁴⁰ The created order was perfect. After the creation of Adam the statement is given an adjective "it was very good". In Genesis 2 the creation narrative introduces an imperfection in the overall divine project, as "...it was not good for the man to be alone....for Adam no suitable helper was found." Luther believed the creation was good but solitude was not good. Luther thought

When God says it is not good that man should be alone, of what good could he be speaking since Adam was righteous and had no need of a woman as we have...God is speaking of the common good or that of the species, not of personal good. ...he was not yet in possession of the common good which the rest of the living beings who propagated their kind through procreation had.¹⁴¹

Luther thought that, although Adam was innocent and righteous, he did not yet have immortality into which he would have been translated if he had remained in innocence.¹⁴² However, Luther and later subscribers to the reformation emphasized the procreativity of women in order to stress women's procreation, deny their worth in other aspects of life and subordinate them. True companionship for the human Adam could only be found, in another human. Luther stated:

...there is indicated here an outstanding difference between man and all the other creatures. The beasts greatly resemble man...their way of life, their food, and their support, the similarity is great. But here Moses points out an outstanding difference between these living beings and man...This indicates that man is a creature far superior to the rest of the living beings that live a physical life, especially since as yet human nature had not become depraved.¹⁴³

The world was created in perfection and the man-woman relationship was a faultless, ideal and fulfilling continuation of the perfection. Complete perfection in creation was achieved after the creation of Eve. Hence, the *creation continua* crystallized into a make-perfect process resulting in a creature (and a relationship) far superior to the rest of the created beings.

¹⁴⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan (ed) 'Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5' Vol.1 Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1958:35.

¹⁴¹ Pelikan (ed) 'Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5' Vol.1 p 115-116.

¹⁴² Pelikan (ed) 'Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5' Vol.1 p116.

¹⁴³ Pelikan (ed) 'Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5' Vol.1 p 56.

Lutherans believe that marriage, though it is not a sacrament, was instituted by God the Creator, who also blessed it.¹⁴⁴ Once created, the couple's bonding was perfect, their love and happiness fulfilling, the honeymoon perpetual, the sexual pleasure wonderful and the companionship pleasant.¹⁴⁵ According to Wood the first marriage was instituted because Adam had no one like himself and could have no human relationship. It was established in creation's state of perfection, when God transformed Adam's situation of solitude to that of companionship. That solitude was not nearly as awful as widowhood/widowerhood because he was still ignorant of human companionship. Despite the fact that in abusive and traumatizing marriages the death of a spouse can be a relief, the state of widowhood is seen as retrogression and a digression from the original plan of creation, perfection and divinity. Therefore, the state of widowhood is a concern for the church. Secular institutions and welfare organizations have arrangements to care for widows, and the Church should establish and execute a stand on the welfare of widows.

3.4 The fall from glory

Luther believed that God intended for Adam and Eve to remain together and in the perfect state for eternity. Once created, Adam and Eve were given a law which was a formulation of the basic prerequisites of healthy communal life and its function is to expose and prevent evil.¹⁴⁶ Luther declared:

Man was created on the sixth day according to the image and similitude of God...these words show how horrible the fall of Adam and Eve was...we lost a most beautifully enlightened reason and a will in agreement with the Word and will of God...The most serious loss consists in...man's will turned away from God...man wants and does none of the things that God wants and commands.¹⁴⁷

According to Luther, the fall brought imperfections and a corruption of the created order including death. So, if God's bonding of man and woman was part of the state of perfection, then the separation by death is a corruption of the perfect order. Even if

¹⁴⁴ Luther's small catechism. Sacraments have been instituted by Christ to communicate the message of the gospel (forgiveness of sin and participation in Christ's new life) through the medium of a concrete element.

¹⁴⁵ Larry Wood, 'Marriage grace-Divine Viewpoint of Marriage' at www.biblenews1.com/marriage/marriage.htm accessed on 8 November 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Numberger *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:297.

¹⁴⁷ Pelikan (ed) '*Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*' Vol.1 p 141.

change and decay was inevitable because of the nature of the created being, the separation of the segments (man and woman) of the whole (marriage union) by death is a deformation of the created excellence. To Luther, if human beings had maintained themselves in the state of innocence in which they were created, no hardships or diseases would have come.¹⁴⁸ Due to the fall, death separates spouses and this brings feelings of insecurity, anxiety and frustration.

3.5 Restoration

Luther believed that the restoration represents God's desire for created order to (originally) remain perfect and (later) strive towards perfection. God designed a plan to restore the order of things. In old Israel it was through prescribed rituals and sacrifices. Later the gospel was availed to proclaim God's unconditional suffering and acceptance of the unacceptable into God's fellowship.¹⁴⁹

To Numberger, the law was meant to serve life and to expose and prevent evil. But once it was broken and the harm was done, the law became powerless as it could not redeem.¹⁵⁰ God desires to restore the created order and does it through the gospel, which restores the person to wholeness of life and proclaims God's unconditional anguish and salvation.

Luther's and Lutheranism's theology of restoration denotes that God desires to restore the widow to fullness of life from her brokenness. It also means that when misfortunes befall widows they will not interpret them as curses from a dead husband or his relatives, but will inquire from God what God wants to do with what has happened. The Church is to participate in restoration of the goodness of life for widows through the Holy Spirit. This means alleviating the suffering by reinventing the customs and removing the oppressive and fatal aspects like sexual cleansing which can put widows at risk of HIV infection.

¹⁴⁸ Pelikan (ed) *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5* Vol.1 p 77,141.

¹⁴⁹ Numberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:298

¹⁵⁰ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:298.

3.6 Luther's views regarding widows

Luther's position on widowhood stems mainly from Paul's injunctions in 1 Timothy 5:3-16. However, in a volume about the ministry, Luther associates the spiritual women who served God in the tabernacle in Eli's time with widows who, after the death of their husbands, dedicated themselves to the service of the temple like the holy Anna.¹⁵¹ He alleges that these were the women Eli's scoundrel sons were sleeping with. His belief that the widows were both spiritual women serving God but also sleeping with Eli's sons shows that he assumed that widows were low and unstable and could accept anything, ranging from offering spiritual service to God to offering sexual services to priests.

Luther identified three kinds of widows in 1 Timothy 5:3-16, true widows, not true widows - those who have homes to take care of and (the worst kind), young widows.¹⁵² This classification influenced the way he expected the Church to minister to widows. While the classification (with better names) could be a beneficial approach to the diaconal ministry in that it would enable the church to meet varying needs of widows, Luther used that classification to insult and marginalize some groups of widows. Luther taught discriminatory Christian responsibility towards widows. Commenting on 1 Timothy 5:3 Luther wrote:

This is to be done not only with the respect with which you greet them or with bare head, but this denotes concern, food, provisions... See to it that you take care of widows because they have been commended in general."...They lack wealth and honor. To provide for them means to see that they are fed and taken care of, yet in such a way that they are truly widows.¹⁵³

Luther described perceivably three kinds of widows in Paul: true widows; not true widows-who have homes to take care of; and the worst kind, young widows. He thought the first type of widow is the one who has children, grandchildren or parents. (1 Tim 5:4). He wrote:

¹⁵¹ Eric W. Gritch (ed) *Luther's Works Vol 41 Church and Ministry III*, Philadelphia Fortress Press, 286.

¹⁵² Hilton C. Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7; 1Cor 15 and Lectures on 1 Timothy* Vol 28, St Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1973:334

¹⁵³ Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7; 1Cor 15 and Lectures on 1 Timothy* p334

Even if they should not have grandchildren or children they still do have parents...Don't count those which have sons, daughters or parents.....Paul simply does not want us to include widows who serve God day and night, even if they are like Hannah...let her take care of that for which she was ordained. She has children and grandchildren... She ought to be concerned that she educates their souls in piety and feed their bodies...If a widow does not have children she might have a parent and say "I ought to serve my mother, aunt or uncle."¹⁵⁴

Luther thought that Paul rebuked this kind of widow, alleging that she sinned by neglecting her parents and children under the pretext of religious scruples to serve God. If, under such pretext she wanted to become an eremite nun, she was refusing to serve Christ and denying her faith and was deemed to be worse than an unbeliever.¹⁵⁵

To Luther, 1Timothy 5:5 describes the second type, the one who is a real widow and is left all alone. Luther wrote:

He is distinguishing this one from the widow who is not alone because she has parents and children. This widow has no kin for whom she can care... she has set her hope on God and continues ... Such women have been so abandoned that they have nothing left except to hope in God. They should be called into this company and nurtured there....She cannot pray day and night in such a way that she never stops....rather she should look up with brief prayers day and night.¹⁵⁶

Luther thought this widow's virtue lies in the fact that she has no one to care for, even if she would like to. To him, this widow's faith is not a matter of choice but a necessity brought by her circumstances. In 1Tim 5:6 Luther saw the third type of widow whom he called the young, self-indulgent and the worst. He describes this widow:

She who is self-indulgent...the third type, the young widow...the worst. The other kinds are good: the first because she cares for her own family; the second because others care for her. This third kind cares for nothing but looks for idle life. She lives in her self-indulgences, seeks her own pleasures. This is the worst kind. She is even "dead"- dead not in this life but in the sight of God.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7; 1Cor 15 and Lectures on 1Timothy* p335

¹⁵⁵ Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7 & 15 and Lectures on 1Tim*, 335.

¹⁵⁶ Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7&15* 335-336.

¹⁵⁷ Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7& 15 and Lectures on 1Timothy* Vol 28, 336.

Luther instructed that young widows should not be enrolled because he assumed they are free to move around, have no worries about their next meal, and have no anxieties to bother them, as they are not subject to husbands. He thought they grow wanton while being supported by the congregation, go wild, break the restraints, and become intractable, ungovernable and dissolute. Luther felt the congregation had a right to reject those whom it chose to reject.¹⁵⁸ He thought younger widows should not be taken into the charitable support of the church, although one could provide for exceptions and limit this ruling. To him Paul was saying the congregation should not be burdened with young widows. He declared that to feed a young widow is to nourish a serpent in your bosom. Luther thought young widows may lose faith in Christ and start looking for a pretext to get husbands, marry and cause a disgrace. Luther thought Paul condemned younger widows who did not want to marry at first and later broke their pledge.

Luther said older widows lack wealth and honor, and to provide for them meant to see that they were fed and taken care of. He claimed there was an arrangement to provide for widows, but many were abusing it because some widows wanted to be catered for even though they were not in need. Luther emphasized that only genuine widows were to be cared for, and that there was a difference between a congregation supporting a widow whose husband had died and whose other friends had abandoned her.

Luther held conflicting views about widows. He thought the text was a general exhortation to all young women to marry, and not specifically to widows. He insisted that 1Timothy 5:3-16 is about the support of the widows of the church and not about celibacy as other theologians were claiming. Because he was refuting and trying to correct what he saw as misinterpretations, his pronouncements in connection with widows ended up sounding unfeeling and insensitive, considering that he was referring to persons in distressing circumstances. Furthermore, his views on widows seemed to reflect his usual condescending attitude to women. He wrote:

They should marry lest they become examples of very bad widows and gad about. Rather they should have a responsibility, so that they do not become idlers, gossips and busybodies. One cannot do better

¹⁵⁸ Gottfried, Krodel. *Luther's Works: Letters I* Vol. 48 Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963:285.

by a young woman than to let her have a child. ...After all this sex is frivolous, unstable...upset by worry and concern for offspring.¹⁵⁹

Finally he said that we must feed widows out of the common funds of the church, but it would be wrong to pour out funds given by God in worthless and unnecessary uses and believe God would supply enough. Public funds for the needy were not established for the privileged.¹⁶⁰ Luther also uses other passages of Scripture to construct his theology on widows. Luther commented on Psalm 68:5 saying:

The father of orphans and the judge of the widow...He admonishes tyrants...so that they fear to harm widows and orphans...because whether widows and orphans believe or not he still executes judgment for them... although the unbelief of widows and orphans does not deserve that in this life or while their unbelief lasts. The promise goes on...even if no one here believes...it is fulfilled more powerfully and quickly if the widows and orphans do believe.¹⁶¹

The indication is that God is merciful and faithful but the widows and other marginalized people do not believe enough. Their unbelief is not deserving of God's justice executed on their behalf. God would be more faithful if these people were more faithful. God isn't doing his best for them and his level of support for them is dependent on their faith. Luther seemed to say widows could get grace through serious prayer. This sounded like a contradiction of his doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.

3.7 Luther's views on cultural practices

Writing to explain the circumstances surrounding various cases of polygamy as practiced by the patriarchs, Luther stated that he did not approve of taking a historical account as an exemplar as it had its own particular circumstances. He opposed the Jews for practicing the Levirate marriage, querying why the Jews were using Abraham's example to justify polygamy. He argued that the widow of a brother who died without children had to become the wife of her deceased husband's brother, in order that the later might

¹⁵⁹ Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7& 15 and Lectures on 1Timothy Vol 28* p 345.

¹⁶⁰ Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7& 15 and Lectures on 1Timothy Vol 28* p347.

¹⁶¹ Pelikan (ed), *Luther's Works Vol 9 Lectures on Deuteronomy* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1960: 112.

bring forth offspring for him who had died.¹⁶² Luther said it was a serious matter to marry the wife of a deceased brother, for the law did not give license for lust; but it did license trouble, toil and worries. He supported levirate marriages for the sake of having offspring. When he disapproved of levirate marriages, it was not for the women's interest but because he opposed polygamy which he thought increased trouble by increasing the number of one's wives. Pointing to Luther's emphasis of the public responsibility of the church, Nurnberger wrote:

The idea (that we are entitled to immediate satisfaction of all our desires regardless of the consequences)...undermines the family as a protective nest in which the young can develop, and as a safety net for the widowed and the orphaned; it marginalizes the poor...Public responsibility requires us to attack harmful cultural traditions, for instance, those connected with male virility, female subjugation, belief in witchcraft and magical cures, secrecy and taboos regarding sex education, etc¹⁶³

Luther's views in a disastrous situation similar to the HIV pandemic can be gleaned from the advice he gave during the contagious bubonic plague or "black death". The plague killed millions of people in Europe from the middle of the 14th to the middle of the 17th century.¹⁶⁴ According to Nurnberger Luther gave this advice in this predicament:

The overriding principle was that Christians should never abandon those entrusted to their care...Anybody who abandons those entrusted to his/her care is in effect guilty of murder. ...where no emergency exists...one is free either to stay or to leave with a good conscience....those who decided to stay and stick it out...are strong in faith...Luther has a soft spot for those who are weak in faith and anxious about their safety...they should not be condemned.¹⁶⁵

Luther emphasized both the freedom of a Christian and the public responsibility of the church in making decisions in crises. This means neither Church nor cultural traditions should bind us in our responses to situations. Widows do not have to submit to harmful and humiliating cultural rituals. It also gives responsibility to the Church to intervene and be practically involved with Christian widows; and not surrender them to cultural environments under the pretext of respecting people's culture.

¹⁶² Pelikan (ed), *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15-20* Vol.3 1958: 47.

¹⁶³ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*: 2005:298-299.

¹⁶⁴ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:290.

¹⁶⁵ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:291.

Nurnberger explains Luther's notions that humans need transcendence, something that transcends our system of meaning and the reality we experience, but something that is not part of the world we experience. He goes on:

Transcendence is necessary for human freedom...Human lives are embedded in a network of relationships on which their survival health and prosperity depend...To attain a sense of mastery, we have to move beyond this prison and participate in the power and authority of one who can genuinely claim to be the Owner and Master of the world...Only those who can transcend the promises and pressures of the world towards the freedom and authority of God can become masters of their lives and their worlds.¹⁶⁶

Lutheranism puts Luther's theology into practice by generally discouraging fear of evil forces and attaching meanings to events.¹⁶⁷ This means widows do not have to be slaves of spiritual or natural forces, social structures, cultural imperatives or communal expectations. They can live a life of transcending the pressures, fears and anxieties towards the freedom and authority of God and become masters of their lives. They can move beyond the complex network of antagonistic spiritual forces and attain a mastery of their own lives to participate in the power and authority of the Creator of the world.

Luther did not approve of taking a historical account, which had its own particular circumstances, as a pattern. Accordingly, the Lutheran church, and all churches for that matter, should be cautious about approving levirate marriages particularly in this context of HIV prevention messages, and avoid endorsing this custom just because it was practiced in traditional societies or in biblical history.

3.8 Critical reflections on Luther's theology

As a religious tradition, Luther's theology will provide the raw material for cultural hermeneutics (other traditions being the Bible and culture). The theology of Lutheranism will provide a way for appropriate responses to widows which recaptures the spirit of the reformation while keeping watch on denominational narrow-mindedness. Nurnberger

¹⁶⁶ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today* 2005:38.

¹⁶⁷ An example is in the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe page 1. Article 3: The General Aim of the Church: (B) To overcome ignorance and superstition through sound education.

says we cannot treat Luther's insights as a body of eternal truths valid for all times and situations. We should apply normal hermeneutical, theological and social tools of interpretation and critique to his theology to see what is valid and meaningful for us, translate it into our own idiom and apply it to our own situations.¹⁶⁸ This corresponds with cultural hermeneutics, which Kanyoro describes as a key to African women's liberation and a method of scrutinizing culture and religion and of sifting the usable aspects to keep the grain and discard the chaff.¹⁶⁹ Anchoring the notion biblically, Nurnberger gives his version of 1Thess 5:21-“Scrutinize everything and keep the best.”¹⁷⁰

3.8.1 Strengths of Luther's Theology

Nurnberger stated that Luther's experiential approach is more amenable to modern patterns of thought and more applicable to modern problems than many of its counterparts.¹⁷¹ Luther's experiential theology analyzes what happens when we encounter the living God in his living Word through the power of the Spirit. Notwithstanding the fact that experience can be highly subjective, it validates one's views and grounds for taking a certain course of action.¹⁷² Luther's theology is similar to African women's theologies, which, Phiri explains, take experiences as the starting point of theologising.¹⁷³ Experience is an important starting point for protest theology.

Luther's flexible approach to Scriptures opened the way for a responsible reading of the Bible, a critical reading that tries to capture the redemptive meaning of the Word of God and not fettered by culturally conditioned forms, not shying away from exposing contradictions, inconsistencies, untenable worldview assumptions, ethically questionable demands and self-interested arguments. This is a key concern of African women theologians and an approach of feminist cultural hermeneutics, expressed by Phiri, who argues that the major problem of African Christians is their uncritical reading of the

¹⁶⁸ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:7-8.

¹⁶⁹ Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2002:59-67.

¹⁷⁰ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005: 9.

¹⁷¹ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:7-8.

¹⁷² Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005: 20.

¹⁷³ Phiri, 'African Women's theologies in the new millennium', in *Agenda* 61, 2004:20.

Bible.¹⁷⁴ To be responsible conveyors of the Word of God we must subject the human forms of the Word to critique, whether in the Bible, in doctrinal statements, in leadership structures of the church, in sermons, liturgies, theological textbooks or in personal spiritualities.

Luther's flexible approach to tradition enabled him to initiate the emancipation that is necessary for society's transition from traditionalism. Though he lived before the Enlightenment, his theology proved adaptable and paved a way for progressive thinking about God. This was vital in that it showed that God, through the Holy Spirit, still breathes fresh insights into human minds and souls to teach relevant truths concerning God's creation. Luther's theology was critical of the traditions from which it derives its subject matter and methodology.¹⁷⁵ Taking a cue from him we can also critique the traditions and culture within which we live and operate.

Luther was the first theologian to admit with a biting sharpness that many things we experience in the world contradict the loving presence and providence of God. His concept of God was empirical rather than idealistic. This is helpful for examining and especially empathizing with the experiences of widows, and for engaging and participating in appropriate ecclesiastical initiatives for widows. Luther's legacy is prototype of an existential and contextual theology. From Luther we can learn that God's Word is the proclaimed Word in all its forms, it is God's redemptive response to actual human needs-whether the need caused by guilt, rejection, oppression, poverty, meaninglessness, disease or death.

Luther's theology was a protest theology of its time, protesting against the power of traditionalism and seeking to reform stagnant or evidently corrupt systems and practices. This resonates with African women's theologies which, as Phiri explains, emerged as a protest theology.¹⁷⁶ This can blend well with aspects of Luther's theology to forge a formidable front of theologies working towards freeing the human mind, body and soul

¹⁷⁴ Phiri 'HIV/AIDS: An African Response' in *The Ecumenical Review* 56, 2004:427.

¹⁷⁵ Numberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:9.

¹⁷⁶ Phiri 'African Women's theologies in the new millennium', in *Agenda*, 2004: 16-24.

from any fettering powers and ideologies. Protest theologies also take the marginalized (many widows belong to this group) into account, providing space for them to speak out of their choked silence. This is similar to how Christ ministered, so protest theologies are closer to the gospel of liberation as Christ would like it to be preached. The fact that Luther hosted some widows in his homestead shows that his theology had a practical side to it. The fact that Lutheranism conceived God as spirit resonates with the African religious belief in spirits. This means it is possible to conceive a hierarchical order with a higher spirit. This is helpful because it will foster faith in the higher spirit thereby assuring some widows who may want to concede to sexual cleansing for fear of their deceased husbands' spirits.

3.8.2 Shortcomings of Luther's theology

One negative point about Luther's theology was that, according to Nummerger, Luther's experiential approach is not always consistent.¹⁷⁷ His high regard for experience necessarily suggests that he should have taken widows' experiences more seriously. However, instead of considering widows' experiences he busied himself with categorization and judgment pronouncements. He ignored the fact that separation of divinely united spouses by death is a corruption of the original created order, and God's people have a responsibility to participate in God's restoration work. His theology does not call people to empathetic and caring ministry to the widows. The theology incites people to look too critically at the widows instead of starting with the widows' experiences and focusing, as Phiri proposes, on the oppressive areas of their lives like patriarchy, sexism and women subordination.¹⁷⁸

Another drawback is that Luther advised the use of coarse language in the treating of and dealing with the pestering devil as an appropriate way of showing contempt for doubt and despair.¹⁷⁹ However, Luther characteristically used rude language even in circumstances where language might reflect on one's level of empathy and compassion for others' situation. For instance, if Luther really believed women are the weaker vessels then he

¹⁷⁷ Nummerger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005: 8.

¹⁷⁸ Phiri, 'African Women's theologies in the new millennium', in *Agenda* 61, 2004: 20.

¹⁷⁹ Nummerger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:9.

had more reason to be empathetic, as this “weakness” is not a deliberate choice. Yet he hurled verbal abuse at them instead of showing compassion for their “weakness”.

Similarly Luther used typically harsh language in describing the situation of widows and prescribing how they should be treated. Nurnberger thought that Luther’s theology was meant to focus on the task of reassuring afflicted believers of God’s power and benevolence.¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the unsympathetic words and judgmental statements were more disturbing than comforting. There is an element of double talk in trying to prescribe empathetic responses to widows while hurling verbal abuse at their condition. Moreover, such language about a disadvantaged sector of society was likely to cool down rather than arouse people’s love, compassion and empathy for widows.

The double talk also appears where he claims to be interpreting Paul but makes biting attacks on some groups of widows. He uses offensive language in long explanatory notes purporting to be deducing meaning in Paul’s passages on widows, to which he appends passing mild statements on a supposed empathetic theological stance for widows.

The overemphasis on the categorization of widows would have been beneficial to their wellbeing if it had been done with a view to rendering the appropriate assistance. In Luther’s theological pronouncements the categorization was more to put judgment tags on the perceivably better widows. Luther concentrates on moralistic issues rather than on diaconal or charitable ministry to the widows. Luther’s pronouncements show much more concern with the statuses of widows in the church, according to what he understood to be Paul’s categorization, than with the widows’ welfare as such.

There is a tendency to overlook certain aspects in which the widow is affected by the state of widowhood. It was important to differentiate widows according to needs but there was no point if the system was not willing to address those needs. For instance, the assumption that if a widow has children and parents she is not in need is inaccurate. She may have company and not have a companionship need, but that company could actually

¹⁸⁰ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther’s message for us today*, 2005: 30.

be burdensome especially if parents are old, children young and these people dependent on her. So she may actually have a lot of material need. Luther held that by looking after the parents and children she would be fulfilling the only calling God requires of her. To him, God created women for no other functions except nurturing others.

The widow who is left alone may have a lighter financial burden than the one with dependants, but will have a companionship need. Luther thought the lonesome state of this widow made her commit herself more to God. While this can be true in a number of cases, it cannot be generalized. Moreover, it is as if their commitment is circumstantial.

Luther's views on widowhood are inconsistent with the rest of his theology. His famous doctrine of justification by grace means everyone is a target of God's love regardless of race, gender, class or social standing. But he appears judgmental especially with young widows; just as he was with Jews and with people who had been absenting from church but wanted to utilize the church's services during the bubonic plague.¹⁸¹ Luther said young widows have free time and freedom to move around, and his declaration that to feed a widow was to nourish a serpent in one's bosom was very harsh, to say the least.

During the bubonic plague that killed millions of people in Europe from the middle of the 14th to the middle of the 17th century, Luther gave advice which showed his theological views in a shattering situation. Advising on whether to flee the city or stay before the advancing "black death", Luther counseled the need for boldness in faith when obliged to perform duties in the face of danger. This was a powerful antidote against fatalism. When Satan tempts people to abandon their obligations, to cool down their love, to be filled with horror and repugnance, to despair, forget, and lose Christ and to desert their neighbors in their troubles under the stormy and dark sky of fear and anxiety, they should hurl words of defiance into the devil's face. For him treating the devil with coarse language was an appropriate way of showing contempt for doubt and despair. This emphasized a personification of the devil which could decrease faith in Jesus, or lead to an exaltation of the same devil one is trying to repudiate.

¹⁸¹ Nurnberger, *Martin Luther's message for us today*, 2005:294.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter examined both Luther's and Lutheran theology about widowhood. First it showed the differences between the two Luther's theology, inferred from his pronouncements about widows and the theology of Lutheranism, the prototype of a denomination based on confessions of the 16th century. The chapter outlined Luther's perceptions of God as the Creator and his notions about the Christian experience of God as 'hidden' (*Deus absconditus*) and as 'revealed' (*Deus revelatus*). It interpreted pain and suffering in widowhood, as the hidden God or tools of the devil. Next the chapter dealt with Luther's theology on creation, emphasizing the concept of continuity as reality unfolds (*creation continua*). The chapter showed that Luther believed, and Lutherans teach that creation was perfect, humans were sinless but lonesome and God rectified that by creating a human partner for the man. The chapter showed how humans had a free will, exercised that freedom and fell from grace. It explained that God's desire was for the created order to (originally) remain perfect and (later) strive towards perfection, so God devised plans for the restoration and/or renovation of the created order.

The chapter showed separation by death as a corruption of God's order, and the obligation of the Church to participate in restoration of the goodness of life for widows by preaching and practicing that gospel which discourages death-promoting practices. The recall of Luther's views about widows established that he taught categorization of widows and how Lutherans adapted and contextualized both the biblical message and Luther's views about widows. The chapter recalled Luther's disapproval of taking historical accounts as patterns in dealing with cultural practices. It showed that Lutheranism applies Luther's views on culture by generally discouraging fear of evil forces and attaching meanings to events. Critical reflections on Luther's theology about widows illustrated its strengths and shortcomings. This showed the need to use hermeneutical tools in pursuit of such responses to widows, in order to recapture the spirit of the reformation while checking on denominational narrow-mindedness. The applicability of the Lutheran theology in the Church, and the Church's contribution to HIV prevention messages for widows, can be assessed through such empirical studies as was conducted in the ELCZA using methods outlined in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed Luther's views about widows and his notions concerning widowhood. It also showed Lutheranism's adaptation of the reformer's teachings in an effort to make them compatible with the set of confessional writings which define the Lutheran denomination.

This dissertation is about what it means to be a widow in a specific Lutheran church. To find out how the Church's initiatives excavated aspects of Lutheran theology, and how helpful such initiatives were to widows, fieldwork in the form of an empirical study was done. It was conducted using the appropriate methods of research. Subsequently, this section discusses in detail, the methods used in the fieldwork. It will describe the different data collection methods, and the sampling procedures used. It explains the individual in-depth interviews, the self-administered questionnaires and the various participant observation occasions in which the researcher was involved.

4.2 In-depth interviews

An in-depth interview is a usually unstructured dialogue, conducted in an unconstrained environment, which encourages the respondent to talk extensively and to share as much information as possible.¹⁸² There were individual in-depth interviews with interview schedules based on four categories of semi-structured questions.¹⁸³ These interviews were conducted with 10 widows and 15 non-widows, who will be called witnesses, who had had the opportunity to observe what goes on in the lives of widows. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 3 Church leaders including one of the founder members of the ELCZa. Another interview was conducted with an official from the police Victims Support Unit on their work in connection with widows.

¹⁸² Donald S Cooper and Pamela Schindler '*Business Research Methods*' Singapore: McGraw-Hill 2001,764.

¹⁸³ See Appendices A- D on pages 138-141.

4.3 Self-administered questionnaires

Two widows asked to complete self-administered questionnaires. These were surveys delivered via personal or non-personal means and completed by the respondents without additional contact with the researcher.¹⁸⁴ Five of the witnesses also indicated that they were busy at work and opted to respond to the self-administered questionnaires which they could do in their own time. Three witnesses had contact with the interviewer, but still wanted to write answers on the interview schedule in addition to the in-depth oral interview. Using both self-administered questionnaires and individual in-depth interviews proved advantageous for the research. For those respondents who did not want to be identified, it provided safe way to give information as names were not required on the questionnaire. Oral in-depth interviews yielded more detail but also tended to wander away from the focus. Some of the witnesses who wrote answers to the questionnaires expressed satisfaction that the information they gave in written was kept in concrete form. The official from the police Victims Support Unit also responded to the self-administered questionnaire.

4.4 Participant observation

Participant observation is when the observer acts as both the observer and participant with the subject; the observer can be known or concealed.¹⁸⁵ This was more or less inevitable as the researcher has been a part of the parish, was an executive council member and had a special interest in the operations of the Church. The effort to be objective during the research was complemented by the use of many methods and varied sources of data collection.

4.4.1 Working rapport

Before the research interviews, I had the opportunity to be in close contact with some of the widows. As assistant to the parish pastor, I had encounters with some of the widows, and the experiences I had to empathize with them became part of the driving force in

¹⁸⁴ Donald S Cooper and Pamela Schindler '*Business Research Methods*' Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 2001:772.

¹⁸⁵ Cooper and Schindler, '*Business Research Methods*', 2001:768.

choosing widowhood as an area of study. Informal discussions with unstructured questions allowed free and more or less unmediated dialogues, and the opportunity to observe attitudes about and responses to cultural issues. The informal instruments enabled the acquisition of information that would otherwise be withheld in more formal interviews. The researcher's position and rapport has the potential to lead to subjectivity in the study. However, subjectivity is inevitable where experience, which Phiri describes as a starting point for women's theologizing, and storytelling which she expresses as a powerful methodology of African women theologians, are employed.¹⁸⁶

4.4.2 Women's Union Meetings

In addition, the researcher attended women's meetings, which were held every Thursday, called Women's Union (*Umoja Waakinamama* or *Chigwilizano Chaazimai*). The researcher is a member of this Union so attendance was imperative, and once one attends with a concern in one's heart, discussions touching that concern are bound to register in one's mind. Moreover, as a pastor in the Church the researcher was expected to listen to the women's concerns, and sometimes was asked to give teachings and talks on topics of interest and facilitate Bible studies. This provided insight into some of the women's experiences in their various capacities.

The women's programs were made in a cycle format with spiritual, educational, service and handcraft items rotating per month. These were varied in order to produce a balanced program which catered for various aspects of the women's lives. The educational programs included talks from expert facilitators on culture (*Alangizi*) health personnel, social workers, the Zambian Police Victims Support Unit staff and representatives from the Non-Governmental Organization Coordinating Council (NGOCC), an umbrella of various organizations working with the community in Zambia.

Attendance at the women's meetings enabled the researcher to listen, observe, note and familiarize herself with the issues of interest to, the views of and responses of the women.

¹⁸⁶ Phiri, 'African women's theologies in the new millennium', *Agenda* No. 61, 2004:20.

Attendance at the meetings was also essential in order to journey with the women in general and with the widows in particular throughout, and not just associate with them for self-interest and to push one's own agenda. This concurs with Kanyoro who says:

The importance of the Circle theology is that we want to contribute something new to theology by bringing in the voices of women in Africa...We do not stop at simply asking for some questions from our communities for research...We stay with the issues, slowly discovering with the communities what the word of God is sending us to do. We examine that with feminist hermeneutical keys and then we engage ourselves practically in some form of change.¹⁸⁷

4.4.3 Workshop

There was an opportunity to attend and participate in an HIV and AIDS workshop funded, organized and facilitated by one of the key partners of ELCZA, Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA). It was held in Lusaka at Masiye Lodge in March 2005. The participants were women, men and youth delegates selected by their congregations to attend the meeting. At this workshop no formal research instrument was used, but the discussions on cultural practices and HIV and AIDS among the women's group caught interest. There were discussions on peer education and behavior change.

4.5 Conclusion

The methods used to collect data were varied. The sources were also broad spectrum in view of the fact that both the researcher's and the respondent's experiences can be highly subjective. Nevertheless the researcher agrees with Circle theologians who have decided to take experiences as a starting point in theologizing. So narratives of experience were used, involving semi-structured interviews with predetermined, open-ended questions administered to widows and witnesses. Unreserved information that would otherwise be withheld in more formal interviews was obtained in the workshop and women meetings. This proved to be beneficial as the results reveal that what respondents perceived as safe spaces enabled them to be more openness to tell their stores. The desire for safe spaces was also demonstrated in the preference for self-administered questionnaires. The results in the following section demonstrate this need for protected participation.

¹⁸⁷ Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2002, 90.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS FROM FIELD RESEARCH

5.1 Introduction

Using the methods described in the previous chapter, fieldwork was done from March 2005 to July 2006 to explore the experiences of widows in Kamwala multicultural parish. The intention was to come up with an inclusive initiative to be used for and with widows in the context of HIV prevention messages. The methods were diverse in order to corroborate the information gleaned from such a research. In the present chapter the results are presented as they emerged in in-depth interviews, self-administered questionnaires, participant observation opportunities and related literature. The presentation of the results is divided into six subsections based on categories of the interviewees, informant and respondents.

5.2 Findings from the individual interviews

5.2.1 Widows' initial responses upon the death of their husbands

5.2.1.1 Physical responses

The individual interview schedule was administered to 10 widows and 15 witnesses. Four of the widows interviewed experienced inundated menstruation and profuse bleeding which lasted several days. This seemed to occur more among the younger widows. Five widows said they had immediate diarrhea while seven said they felt severe abdominal cramps. Many experienced loss of appetite and others had wide-ranging bodily aches. Eight of the widows had headaches and for some blood pressure escalated. Three had heart malfunction and one witness told of a widow whose heart failed and, before the husband was buried, she had died.

10 out of 15 of the witnesses had observed widows fainting recurrently while 4 observed widows having convulsions. 5 of the witnesses interviewed observed that other widows sweated profusely. Some of the witnesses observed heavy nose-bleeding starting at the

breaking of the tragic news. A number of the witnesses interviewed had observed widows sobbing and muttering continuously. 18 out of 25 interviewees confirmed that widows shivered continuously while 13 interviewees confirmed that there can be frequent vomiting in the early stages of grief. Some widows actually experienced a combination of any of these reactions.

One young widow started bleeding profusely as soon as she heard that her husband had passed away and the bleeding did not stop until well after the funeral. This widow was asked to wear a pad made from the traditional fabric (*chitenge*). According to the practice the widow should get such a pad from the sister-in-law, wear it and wait for only the sister in-law to remove it. She must not bath for some days but keep the pad on. The mother of the widow interviewed refused to have her daughter wear the *chitenge* pad because she had bought pads for her as she was bleeding. Wearing it would mean waiting for the ceremonial removal. The mother made her daughter bath three times a day.¹⁸⁸

5.2.1.2 Psychosomatic responses

Out of the 10 widows interviewed, 9 said they were shocked at their husbands' death and this included those whose husbands had been sick for some time. Eight said they experienced heartaches and heart tremors. All of them felt distressed or depressed. Some widows experienced severe panic, and were gripped with fear of the unknown. There was worry and anxiety as reported by all of those interviewed. Others said they felt angry at some point but were not sure who the anger was directed at. Seven had nightmares when they went to sleep. One widow said she experienced a nervous breakdown. Others felt miserable, self-piteous and disappointed.

Of the 15 witnesses interviewed, nine said the widows they were talking about lost consciousness at the news of the death of their husbands. Other witnesses noticed frenzied depression. 12 of the witnesses interviewed observed that widows tended to get confused, could not always give appropriate answers to questions, looked dazed or went into daydreaming. Six of the witnesses observed delirium spasms and panic attacks in

¹⁸⁸ Widow interviewed on 15 July 2006.

some widows and five of the witnesses had observed insomnia. Other witnesses said women who lost husbands in elderly ages became prone to soliloquizing.

One witness thought a widow she observed must have gone brain numb because the widow failed to shed a single tear for some hours after hearing about the death of her husband. Initially, she could not believe that her husband had died. Another witness described a widow who fell into an unusually long and deep sleep after sobbing bitterly for a long time. A witness who was the one who actually delivered the news about the death of the husband said the widow fainted and later regained consciousness. Afterwards she kept asking why people were gathered and whose funeral it was. She took a long time to accept that her husband was dead.

More than half of all the interviewees described that some kind of comatose stupor was one of the initial responses to grief exhibited by widows. They also agreed that some widows expressed that they wanted to die with their husbands as they had nothing more to live for. Suicidal tendencies were a common experience among widows who knew or suspected their husbands had died of AIDS.

5.2.1.3 Spiritual responses

Three widows felt that they got spiritually stronger than they were before the death of the husbands. The near nervous breakdowns kept them praying for strength from the Lord and a number said they needed the strength for the sake of the children. Some felt what they believed to be a sense of God's engulfing presence and the assurance of the Holy Spirit, somewhat similar to Fulata Moyo's experience.¹⁸⁹ They felt strengthened by the Holy Spirit as the one who gave them hope that life was still livable even in the midst of grief. Eight out of the fifteen witnesses thought the widows they knew started participating more actively in Church activities after the passing of their husbands and some became absolute about the importance of faith.

¹⁸⁹ Fulata Moyo. 'Singing and Dancing Women's Liberation: My Story of Faith' in Isabel Phiri, Govinden Devakarsham and S Nadar, *Her Stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002:399.

Seven of the widows felt spiritually hollow and judged. Others felt condemned; they felt as if God was punishing them. Still others were angry and asked what they had done to deserve the kind of anguish they were going through. Seven out of the fifteen witnesses said widows they were acquainted with had fallen low spiritually and were questioning whether God loved them.

One widow asked if she could wear her church uniform at her husband's funeral. She felt that she needed it to remind herself of the vows she had made years earlier, at the uniforming ceremony, to hold on to faith in the midst of crises and calamities. However, the elders prohibited the wearing of the uniform, giving the reason that she had not attended Church for a long time (during which she had to take care of her husband who was sick and her very young children). The widow said she felt that she had already been condemned and was unworthy of God's forgiveness. At the same time she kept asking what she should have done given the situation of caring for the ailing husband. She thought God (represented by the church officials) had acted and judged her unfairly.¹⁹⁰

Another widow told the story of the head of another church who went ahead to bury a husband of a church member whose in-laws had boycotted the burial service. The dead man's relatives shunned the service because the widow had declined to undergo some of the cultural rites. To my interviewee this was a source of strength because she saw God (represented by the church head) siding with the marginalized and the oppressed. From this she concluded that the devil, which had brought the death of her husband, was against her but God was for her.¹⁹¹

5.2.2 Diverse cultural rituals

The study was conducted in a multicultural congregation, and the findings yielded an assortment of rituals and customs. Even within the same ethnic group, variations were evident, showing the dynamic nature of culture, and what Nwachuku describes as

¹⁹⁰ Widow interviewed on 6th July 2006.

¹⁹¹ Widow interviewed on 6th July 2006.

grappling with the social changes of intruding foreign cultures.¹⁹² All the interviewees (widows and witnesses) admitted that some ritual or another related to widowhood had been performed on themselves or on widows they knew. Some of them consisted of jumping over fire, eating half-cooked thick porridge *nshima*, abstaining from bathing, wearing pads made from the deceased's clothing, wailing and periodic muttering of sorrowful monologues.

The researcher sampled the informants in such a way that there were at least three interviewees in each ethnic group represented in the parish. That way the researcher was able to get an array of some of the cultural practices widows were made to go through. The findings may not necessarily reflect accurately the customs, traditions and beliefs of the named cultures, but they indicate what the widows actually experienced in their journey in widowhood. These experiences are taken seriously as experience is a starting point in feminist cultural hermeneutics which forms the theoretical framework of this study. The ethnicities have been presented alphabetically, and not by any other ranking.

A Bemba widow said that when her husband died she was expected to be heard wailing, to wear a black dress and to sit on the floor during the mourning period. As a sign of mourning she was not expected to bath, change clothes, wear shoes, talk loudly or eat much food. She was constantly wearing a black dress and tying a black scarf on her head. After burial, all the family members, including the widow and orphans had to shave their heads and bath together. The widow could wear different dresses but they had to be black to show that she is a widow.

Some months after the burial, the beer for the cleansing ceremony was brewed. At this occasion drums were played and there was singing, dancing and drinking. The widow was also expected to dance throughout the day. A week later, the relatives of the deceased and a few of the widow's relatives were called. Male relatives who could inherit the widow assembled. The widow was expected to choose the one she wanted to

¹⁹² Daisy Nwachuku, 'The Christian Widow in African Culture', 1991:55.

marry her. One of the candidates was the widow's young son. She was told she could choose anyone but choosing her son meant she did not want to be inherited, but she still had to be cleansed. If she chose any of the men it would mean she had agreed to be inherited. She chose her son and was told to wait for the cleansing ceremony. It delayed and she was told (secretly) that the men were not keen to cleanse her as she had chosen to keep her property to herself. She was told she was not to see any man because she had indicated she wanted to remain single.

A Kaonde widow narrated that when her husband was in hospital she had a strange dream. In the dream, there was heavy rain outside her house. She tried to open the door but failed. Water began to flow into the house. She took a broom and tried to shove out the water and the broom got washed away by the flood. The following morning she felt uneasy about the dream and went to tell an elderly woman. The elderly woman said the dream was a prediction that something dreadful was about to happen in her life.

The following morning her husband died. At the news of her husband's death she felt cold and powerless. She fainted and was taken to her parents place unconscious. When she awakened she started bleeding profusely. Her father bought a pack of pads for her. Later the husband's relatives brought a piece of her deceased husband's shirt to use as a pad. She was told it was to show that her conjugal fluids had been blocked until the appropriate rituals had been done. The widow's mother refused to have the widow use the cultural pad and argued that she already had enough pads. One of the relatives warned that if the widow did not use the pad she would get mentally deranged, and when that happened they should not seek help from the in-laws. The widow's mother said she was prepared to deal with any outcome of her actions.

Next the widow was given a piece of extinguished fire-wood and told that that was her husband. On the day of the burial the widow was not allowed to see the dead husband, to look at the coffin nor to go to the grave for the burial. After the burial she was given half cooked thick porridge (*nshima or pap*), cooked using a piece of firewood. She was instructed to cut it into four pieces, and throw a piece to the east, west and north. She had

to swallow the fourth piece. The widow was not supposed to bath or change clothes for three days even though she was bleeding continuously. She was supposed to sob continuously throughout the mourning period.

There were some arrangements made for her to have sexual intercourse with an arranged male relative for ritual cleansing (regardless of the fact that she was bleeding heavily, perhaps unknown to the arrangers). Her parents resisted the custom again amid threats that should problems arise in the widow's life later the parents should not consult the in-laws. The widow's five year old son was allowed to witness every part of the funeral process, and kept making an effort to narrate the whole story to his mother, asking why she had stayed away from the burial and let people cover his father with soil. The widow felt it was good that the son witnessed the burial as she would have a problem explaining to him what happened.

The widow lost a plot, a house, a car and household furniture to the relatives. She tried to appeal to the law but the case dragged very long and she believes the husband's relatives had connections with some court officials. Her parents ended up conceding because there had been too many threats already.

A Kasai widow from the Democratic Republic of Congo was asked to sit in a corner when her husband died. She was prohibited from scratching, shaking or making any form of movement. The morning after the burial, around four o'clock in the morning she was asked to carry a heavy load on her head and move around begging her husband to forgive her. She thought that this was meant to remove any guilt she had about any misunderstandings they may have had. Later the relatives slaughtered a chicken and poured the blood in the fire. The widow was asked to jump over the fire three times and asked to eat half-cooked *nshima/pap*. During the day she was asked to dance to rumba music for a long time because her husband used to like that kind of music. She pointed out that if a husband was known for any particular hobby or activity, the widow would be required to act that out in order to give people a performance that will offer the mourners a last live experience of his life. She thought this also helped her to give a closure to the

bereavement experience. In the evening she was asked to have sexual intercourse with a man, a cleanser who was appointed by the husband's relatives. At this she protested as she thought she had been cleansed already from the day's performances which had begun at 4 in the morning. She was told if she refused she would have hallucinations and may go mad. She did not elucidate whether her protest was accepted or she submitted to the sexual cleansing ritual.

A witness to a Lunda (from the Northwestern Province) friend's mourning process said that when the friend's husband died, the widow's sister and a close friend took care of her and attended to her needs. It was only through these people that she could speak, they became the widow's mouthpiece. Before the burial the widow was supposed to sit near the corpse with her aides nearby. She was not allowed to eat anything before the burial, she could only drink water. She was not to say anything to contribute to decision making or discussions unless when asked specific questions, which she replied using her spokespersons.

The widow was required to dress shabbily to show that she had lost a husband and was mourning. She was given a piece of extinguished fire wood and told that that represented her husband. Some relatives made suggestions that the widow may have bewitched her husband and caused his death. They threatened that if this turned out to be true her cleansing process may be uncertain.

When the body was being taken for burial the widow was taken to a flowing stream for cleansing. The aides were not allowed, only two of the deceased's male relatives, who took a white chicken with them. The aide was told the white chicken was for the cleansing. Later, the aide was told that one male relative and the widow proceeded to the forest. The aide learnt that the belief surrounding the cleansing process was that the dead man's spirit may haunt the widow all her life. The cleansing was believed to give the widow good luck, and authorize her to remarry if she so wishes. If cleansing is not done the spirit of the deceased husband may appear to the widow at night. The first cleansing, so the witness was told, was organized by the husband's relatives. Afterwards, one of the

elders in the family of the deceased took the widow to her relatives. On reaching the homestead, she stood under a tree and the elder accompanying her blew some white powder on her. This was supposed to be wishing her good luck and prosperity in her life and declare her free from the husband's relatives. Later the widow was supposed to take her own cleansing, called *chikula*. She was to have sex with someone in whom she was to leave the spirit of her deceased husband.

A Luvale widow from the North-western province related that she was asked to remain in the same clothes that she was wearing at the time of the death of her husband. She was not allowed to bathe and was to stay away from the house through the mourning period. She was washed with herbs after the burial of the husband. She was told she could remarry after two years if she wanted.

A witness at the funeral of a Nyakusa man (from Mbeya in southern Tanzania) recounted the cultural rituals her sister, who was also Nyakusa, went through when the husband died. Relatives were hurling mud at the widow and smudging her face with dirt. This was supposed to symbolize endurance and to show that she loved her husband. The witness said Christians also participated in this mud smudging, under the pretext that the suffering of the widow was similar to that of Christ on the cross. Suffering shows love for the husband as Christ suffered for the world. After the funeral, the widow was given three months to decide if she wanted to remarry. On the day the question was posed the widow was supposed to take her clothes and run away if she didn't want to be married, to show that she was not interested. Two relatives, one each from the widow's and husband's families were to run after her, catch her and bring her back. If she wanted to be married she was supposed to just concur. She agreed to be married and was immediately given a room together with a male relative for the night. She wore black clothes for three months.

One Tonga widow (from the southern part of the country) narrated that when her husband died she was made to lie beside the coffin with her back toward the coffin to show that they as a couple were now separated. After the burial ceremony the nephews were assembled and one was chosen to take the place of the deceased. He was supposed to be

her new husband. As she did not want to remarry, the mother of the deceased had to slide over the lap of the widow as a sign that she was now free from the spirit of the deceased.

A male observer who attended the funeral of a man in the Tonga tribe from a different part of the country described that after the burial the widow was made to lie on top of the tomb as a way of bidding farewell to the late husband. Yet another Tonga family sprinkled mealie-meal over the widow as a way of cleansing her.

A witness to a Ngoni funeral said when the man died the widow was asked to explain the cause of death. She was given two pieces of cloth torn from the deceased man's shirt to tie on the head and to use as a pad. She had to sit behind the house. The relatives took his everyday belongings and moved to a distance from the house. The widow was asked to visit his favorite places, crawling in some places and walking with elbows on the ground in others. Before the burial, a special medicinal preparation was placed on the coffin and some was smeared on the widow's body. She had to pass by the coffin with two escorts but was not to touch or look at the coffin.

After the burial she was given a hoe and was supposed to give it to the man she wanted to marry. The widow begged to be excused and was told to leave, leaving everything behind. She was asked to sit long legged with arms stretched and was smeared with mealie-meal on the arms and legs. The next day she decided she would get married and was given the hoe again. She handed it to one of the male relatives who took her to his home. The man introduced the widow to his wife and told her the widow had come for ritual cleansing. The widow spent some days in the same clothes she had when her husband died. Later, some relatives came to announce that she could now bath and change her clothes.

5.2.3 Silenced cleansing

The part of the interviews concerning sexual cleansing was complicated as it was enclosed by many silences. Seven out of the ten widows interviewed chose not to answer the question to do with sexual cleansing. Two were in levirate marriages and even those

do not talk openly about it to church members. One admitted that she agreed to undergo sexual cleansing after she had been experiencing nightmares.

Witnesses interviewed were more at ease talking about sexual cleansing and other rituals which the widows they witnessed had gone through. 10 out of 15 witnesses said they were sure the widows they talked about had undergone sexual cleansing. Three said they were not sure and two said they were sure the widows were not cleansed sexually. Most of the women did not perceive the ritual as rape as they perceive that such rites are done to widows in most cultures in southern Africa.

5.2.4. Relationships with relatives

For most widows, relationships with the in-laws changed after the death of their husbands. Three out of ten widows indicated that relationships with their in-laws remained the same or improved after the death of the husbands. Seven said relations between themselves and the in-laws deteriorated. Three out of the fifteen witnesses said there were better relationships between the widows they knew and the in-laws. Three said that there was no noticeable change in the interactions between the widows and the husband's relatives. Nine out of fifteen witnesses indicated that relations got strained after the death of the husbands. Some strained relations were due to accusations that the widows had bewitched the husbands. In cases where the community and/or relatives had street-diagnosed a man and decided he had AIDS the relatives usually blamed the wife for having brought AIDS into the home. Widows were disturbed by strained relationships with the husbands' relatives and they expressed discontent about:

5.2.4.1 Non-involvement in decision making

Nine of the informants revealed that widows were not involved in decisions, especially those concerning where to bury their husbands. In one case the widow wanted the husband to be buried in an expensive and prestigious cemetery, but the in-laws preferred the cheaper cemetery under the pretext that they wanted to save the money for the children. The widow said she knew well that the money saved by going to the cheaper cemetery would never help the children, it was for the in-laws.

Another widow said she preferred the husband to be buried in town rather than in the rural home because it was very far and there wasn't enough money to cover the transport and other costs that would be compounded by a delayed burial and two gatherings. She also hoped if he was buried in town it would be easier for her and the children to visit the grave frequently and keep the place neat. It would also be easier to get her acquaintances, mainly in town, to help finance and attend the memorial or tombstone unveiling service. The in-laws did not pay attention to her ideas and inflexibly arranged that the body should be transported to the rural area. They borrowed some money to cover the costs, and the widow had to repay all the debts on her own later.

5.2.4.2 Property grabbing

There was evidence that property grabbing is a common problem being experienced by the widows, besides there being specific laws forbidding the practice. Seven out of ten widows indicated that widows' relatives had grabbed property from them after funerals. Widows had been dispossessed of household furniture and appliances, money, clothing, gardening tools, etc. A number of widows got evicted from the houses they were occupying. In one case the deceased husband's grown up and married children moved in to occupy two bedrooms of the three bed-roomed house, leaving the widow to use one bedroom with six children who include four adolescent girls and boys aged 19, 17, 14, and 12. Eight out of fifteen witnesses mentioned cases of property grabbing from widows they knew and they say they knew of widows who had recovered property after police intervention. The police's Victims Support Unit confirmed the fact that property grabbing was a major problem and pointed out that many widows are afraid to report offenders for fear of fiddling with religio-cultural agencies.

5.2.4.3 Malicious behavior and envious assets administration

There were some reports of wicked behavior and plotting against widows and their children or dependents. This was mainly connected to dissatisfaction with property sharing. One widow got her house burnt down by the husband's relatives because she refused to go to her parents' home with her children and leave all other property behind.

The informants indicated that widows were experiencing problems with asset administrators who were unconcerned, slow or plainly jealous of the widows' inheriting the property. One widow said an administrator dragged her feet and delayed the collection of money from the relevant authorities until the children stopped going to school because they had no uniforms and no shoes and the widow had no money for food. She had resorted to begging and selling charcoal to feed the six children and dependents. Some of the older children had to stop school to engage in crushing stones to earn a living for their mother and younger siblings.

5.2.4.4 Legal issues

Out of 25 informants, 16 said widows had used legal structures at one time or another by consulting the courts for various issues and cases involving property, eviction from matrimonial homes, cleansing, widows' bride price (*lobola*), debts incurred by deceased husbands or claims by previously unknown co-wives and children. One widow's children were taken by a brother-in-law who said he did not want to inherit the widow because he had his own wife. He said his wife could look after his dead brother's children. He went to court to contest for the guardianship of the children, aged 6 and 3. The widow believed he had connections with some court officials and played backhand. In the end he got custody of the children. The widow was a vendor selling second hand clothes.

Another widow appealed to the court to intervene for her cleansing. There had been a disagreement between her grown up children and their paternal relatives. The relatives wanted the mourning to take place at their homestead, while the dead man's children wanted the mourning at their home where they stayed with their father and mother. The husband's family refused to come to the funeral. After the funeral and mourning period the widow begged the in-laws to arrange for her cleansing. She said she felt as if she was now like the grass between two fighting elephants. The relatives refused to perform ritual and she reported to the court. The brother-in-law was asked to perform some gestures with the widow before court officials to symbolize that the widow had been cleansed. The widow said she needed the cleansing because without the practice she could not leave the house or function normally. She could not go to church, attend community

meetings, meet friends, go to the clinic, travel, go the market to sell her wares and get money to buy food. If she flouted the traditional rules, she had grown to understand, she could become very sick or mad or her children could die.

Another widow said her property was taken. She went to report to the victims support unit. The husband's relatives were summoned and asked to return the goods they had taken. They did, but left with a threat '...when you start seeing apparitions you must run to state house, they will know what to do.' The widow was afraid of the possible curses from the spirits on her and her family, went back to the Victims Support Unit and asked them to make amends. She thought a strained relationship with the in-laws would jeopardize the future of her children. The widow was a cross border trader. She indicated she needed assistance from the relatives but was not hopeful she would get any. She was particularly scared of curses as she often left her children to go on business trips.

5.3 Findings from the Victims Support Unit

Responding to the interview schedule and self administered questionnaire, an official at the Victims Support Unit at the Police General Head Quarters in Lusaka said problems brought to their unit which widows experienced concerned cleansing, sharing of property, access to children and widows being chased from the matrimonial homes. The problems of widows from Christian backgrounds are similar to those from non-Christian backgrounds. The officer said people made their way to the unit by reporting to the nearest police station and are then directed to the Victims Support Unit.

Legal issues which are brought to the Victims Support Unit concerned who is supposed to be the administrator and for how long and whether the administrator should get a share of the assets. Sometimes they have to deal with questions of defining who a widow and/or who an orphan is.

The official said the government law concerning the rights of widows is that widows are to inherit 20% of the estate of the late husband. This does not include customary land held by the chief. The official said their interventions were helpful to widows. They had

managed to intervene before property was wrongly shared. They had managed to recover property. They had given advice to people on what is supposed to be done in connection with the property distribution to avoid squabbles. They had arrested and prosecuted offenders. In most cases they managed to restore order in the homes of widows.

To make people comply with the law, the Victims Support Unit has an enforcement agency. They arrest offenders and at times engage in sensitisation. The official admitted that they do encounter resistance in their interventions as some people did not want to comply with the provisions of the law. Sometimes people threatened to bewitch the widows. Sometimes the widows were hesitant to report offences and some were reluctant to have the offenders arrested.

He also admitted that they had certain limitations on intervening. One limitation was late reporting of cases to the police. Another limitation was the length of time cases took to be deposited off in court. A further limitation concerned the adjournments in court. Another problem was that people wanted to maintain family ties, resulting in the widows' unwillingness to report or testify. The distance from some people's homes to the police station was another limitation faced by the Victims Support Unit.

Asked what word of counsel he could give, the VSU official mentioned that widows have the right to look after the children in the event of the death of their husbands. He stated that widows had the right to the property of their late husbands. He declared (according to him) that widows also have the right to be chosen as administrators to their husbands' property. He warned the public that property grabbers would be arrested and prosecuted.

5.4 Pastoral issues

Before the interviews, the researcher had been in contact with the widows and witnesses, and some widows had been consulting her for advice. Through ordinary interactions and informal discussions the researcher sensed pertinent issues to do with widowhood. A few widows had come asking for advice concerning rituals and what the position of the church was. A question that came up in a Bible study was whether a Christian widow

should wear the black mourning dress. In addition, Christians who had attended funerals also brought 'is it Christian' questions for clarification after witnessing funeral rites performed on, for or by widows. A church elder wanted to know what the church would do to reconsecrate her for her duties as elder. She had been in a mourning period and had undergone what she perceived to be "pagan" (her word) rites. Another widow thought she was unworthy to receive Holy Communion while in the black mourning attire.

5.5 Findings emanating from Women's Union Meetings

The Women's Union is a group of women in the Church, who meet weekly to pray, discuss, plan and action various programs. They thought a committee member should step down after her husband died because she had gone through, to use their phrase, 'many things.' Others thought the uniform should not be worn until after the mourning period because one can't wear the uniform on one day and the black dress on the other. They were unsure whether they could wear the uniforms for the funeral of a member's husband if he was not a Christian. There was a concern that the church should establish a fund to assist widows. This was brought by Christians originating from the bigger church in Tanzania. From these questions and issues, the researcher was able to grasp a hint of the dilemmas facing Christian widows in the parish.

During a talk given by *alangizi* on the training they give to young women, there was a discussion on how women can have good relationships with their in-laws. A good number of women thought that if one treats one's in-laws well they would not grab property should the husband die. The discussion ended up serving the interests of only one group in the Union, married women, while ignoring the interests of single women, divorcees and widows. It seemed insensitive to those who were widows already and more so those who had been dispossessed of their property. The assumption was that if one has a good relationship with in-laws no property will be grabbed, but others pointed out that this was a naive generalization. Those widows who had managed to retain their property, not because they related well, but because they sought the help of the courts also felt ill at ease. These issues brought out the nature of experiences widows in this parish go through. It showed that widows get sidelined, labeled and even judged in the church.

5.6 Findings from the Workshop

The participants at the LUCSA HIV and AIDS workshop were women, men and youth delegates selected by their congregations to attend the meeting. The researcher did not use a formal research instrument, but listened with interest to the discussions on cultural practices and HIV and AIDS among the women in the women's group sessions. The researcher noticed that, generally, women in this church are hesitant to assess or express disapproval of any socio-cultural or ecclesiastical structures, practices and operations for fear of victimization. They seem to confirm Nwachuku's notion that:

Since social cohesiveness is maintained by strict adherence to social roles, appropriate role performance usually earns approval while inappropriate performance brings disapproval, rejection, role sanction, and in extreme cases, social ostracism.¹⁹³

Therefore, open discussions as availed by the workshop program proved to be safe spaces for the women to express themselves, and to describe and narrate stories of what happens in their communities and society. Women described sexual and cultural practices and rituals in a freer atmosphere where no one was identified with any statements, pronouncements or controversial issues. The workshop was also a good place to hear some things never mentioned in face to face interviews. For instance some women described incidents of sexual cleansing.

One of the widows telling her story said when her husband died she was asked to sit outside behind the house. She was not to greet or talk to people, and if she needed to scratch she was not supposed to use fingers but a maize cob. She was to be escorted by two people to the toilet and was to eat alone with separate utensils. When the coffin was brought home a day before the burial, the widow had to lie next to it, with her back to it for that whole night, touching it. She was not allowed to view the face as others did during the viewing session. After the burial she spent some minutes lying on top of the grave then she was taken away. She was not to look back. She could not put flowers on the grave. The following day some men went to the bush to look for traditional herbs to

¹⁹³ Nwachuku, 'The Christian Widow in African Culture', 1991:54.

wash the widow. After her hair was removed she was asked to hang a piece of cloth around her hip. Mud from anthill soil was hurled at her. It was let to dry then she was walked home with dried mud around the body.

As she approached the home drums were beaten. She went into the doorway and returned outside to remove the shadow. She went in again and sat in a corner while her bedroom was being prepared by a close male relative of the husband. The relative took the widow by the hand and led her outside behind the house. He washed her with medicinally treated water. He then took her to the bedroom and waited for people to come into the sitting room. The man initiated the rape. If the widow wanted to marry him she was supposed to keep quiet. If she did not want she was supposed to cry out loud so that people could hear that she didn't want the marriage. Either way she was supposed to be raped. Afterwards the man left the bedroom and the following morning the widow was made to sit in the open on a reed mat, now free to greet people.¹⁹⁴ The woman who shared this story was not from Lusaka and she was not among the sampled group of widows.

Therefore, the workshop proved a prudent and practical place where one could access information without stirring antagonism, inciting radicalism and jeopardizing peoples' positions in the families, the church, the community, and society at large. By seeking information from the workshop to minimize possible adverse outcomes, the researcher took caution from Phiri and Nadar who advised that treading softly but firmly is often more appropriate and effective, and that the hammer and axe theology is not always the most fitting tool when pursuing the cause of gender justice and liberation for women.¹⁹⁵

It became clear that there is fear of victimization among the women. This fear leads to a choked silence and the silence encourages gender subordination. This has been a domino process in the church for the past 20 or so years. This process has been responsible for the continued oppression of women, regardless of the fact that the church broke away from

¹⁹⁴ Widow attending workshop. She narrated the story on 19 July 2006.

¹⁹⁵ Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, 'Introduction: "Treading Softly but Firmly": African Women Religion and Health' in Isabel A. Phiri and S. Nadar, *African Women Religion and Health*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2006:1-16.

the missionary church giving the subordination of women as one of its reasons. It has also been responsible for widows' endurance of brutal, humiliating and demeaning rituals.

It also became clear that cultural norms are entrenched in the Christians. They value anything labeled culture, especially with present day trends in the academia and high-ranking social circles to recover culture that was lost with the advent of modernization, colonization, urbanization and globalization.

5.7 Findings specific to Church involvement with widows

According to the interviews with widows, two widows out of the 10 interviewed found the Church helpful during the mourning period and had assisted with food, the coffin and transport. However, they were concerned that they were not given a clarification on what benefits church members were entitled to when they died or lost close relatives as was the case with workers in other companies and organizations. This uncommunicativeness had created mistrust in the widows and the families concerned. 8 out of the 10 widows thought the Church was not helpful to their situation. Nine of the 15 witnesses said the Church was not very forthcoming during the widows' time of grief.

Both widows and witnesses did acknowledge that the peer or associate Christians would attend the funeral and cook, sing, preach, keep the night vigil with relatives, carry the coffin and come to hold consoling prayers some days later. Nevertheless, they expressed that on a structural level the Church was less helpful. There were no terms of reference to guide the church authorities in helping bereaved widows. There was no fund set aside as condolences to church members in general and to widows in particular. There was not even an arrangement for members to make subscriptions to an association where they would be assured of assistance. They complained that it was discomfoting to see the funerals of Christians being subsidized and administered by neighborhood funeral associations while the Church played a (according to the interviewees) passive role.

5.8 Conclusion

The research findings were gleaned using various methods. The results show that generally widows in the Church have had dismal experiences in the home, in the church and in the community. They were unlike the Chewa Nkoma Synod widows who were cushioned by their families, and received some favorable options from the synod.¹⁹⁶ Widows in the ELCZA have suffered segregation, stigmatization, religious dilemmas, harsh cultural practices, some of which put them at risk of HIV infection. Effort was made to make the experiences revealed in the research representative of the ethnicities in the parish, and as impartial as could possibly be achieved. Nevertheless, every experience was valued for its worth and interpreted for what it was. The interpretation of these varied experiences follows in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁶ Isabel Phiri, 'African Women in Religion and Culture', 1992:235-242.

CHAPTER SIX

INTERPRETATION OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the findings gleaned from the instruments used in the research. It revealed a wide range of results connected to the experiences, perceptions and notions about widowhood. There is meaning in all the goings-on related to the research, whether it is silence, passive resistance, unquestioning submission or reluctance to be interviewed personally. The interpretations given to these findings are given in this chapter.

It will begin with an analysis of the grief responses of the widows to the news of the death of their husbands in view of the cultural practices widows are made to go through. Next will be an analysis of the responses based on participant observation. Meaning is attached to the various silences of the respondents and there will be an interpretation of the interviewees' expectations. Various responses in the research denote possible initiatives the Church could take in order to journey with widows.

6.2 A traumatizing experience

The range of physical responses to grief described by the widows who were interviewed show that the loss of a spouse is a traumatizing experience. The severity of the bodily reactions shows that women were traumatized by the death of husbands. Headaches, fainting, convulsions, inundated bleeding, profuse nose-bleeding, stomach cramps, diarrhea, bodily aches, loss of appetite, insomnia, heart tremors, heartache or escalated blood pressure were bodily reactions to the trauma caused by the death of the spouses. Feelings of extreme vulnerability and of being exploited, a refusal to talk, insecurity and helplessness indicated traumatic reactions to the event. The trauma was also evident in social withdrawal, flashbacks and tearfulness. This grief is harmful enough without the added hurt from rituals as harsh as those widows in the study had to undergo. Little

wonder that some ethnicities have begun to consider modifications which alleviate the risk of HIV infection.

6.3 Exacerbating the widows' suffering

While some widowhood practices experienced by the widows interviewed were meant to be, or are actually, cathartic, many of the rituals exacerbate and perpetuate the suffering of a person who is already grief-stricken by the passing of the spouse. The physical, psychosomatic and spiritual responses experienced by the widows are more likely exacerbated rather than relieved by, for instance, dancing or crawling on elbows while bleeding profusely, having stomach cramps or diarrhea. Expecting a widow who is having wide-ranging bodily aches to dance to her husband's favorite music or hurling mud at her is not very empathetic. A widow who has lost appetite needs to be encouraged to eat to regain strength, maybe more than to be forced to guzzle down ritual medications meant to chase away evil powers. Giving such concoctions to a widow experiencing diarrhea, severe abdominal cramps or vomiting may be detrimental to her bodily health. A widow having suicidal tendencies would rather be kept in the company of others than be left to sit alone. Where street diagnosis has attributed the death to AIDS this symbolizes the related stigmatization.

Sexual intercourse with a widow who has been fainting recurrently or having convulsions; inundated menstruation or profuse nose-bleeding, for that matter, is not helpful to her physical and/or emotional condition. Even if it is meant to protect her from an antagonizing spirit in the long run, it is actually harmful. Widows commonly experience headaches and escalated blood pressure and need to be treated for these wide-ranging responses to grief rather than to be forced to perform certain rituals which are harmful to health. Sex with a widow who is distressed, worried or anxious, suffering from heartache, heart tremors or delirium spasms is likely to aggravate her condition and can be interpreted as rape. Worse still, such sex, whose effectiveness depends on exchange of sexual fluids, is likely to be unprotected, putting the widow at risk of HIV infection.

6.4 Grief responses taken for granted

Considering the physical, psychosomatic, emotional and spiritual responses to grief, experienced by widows, one can infer that architects of culture took widows' experiences for granted or ignored their suffering, and laid down customs that exacerbated the innate pain experienced by widows. Notwithstanding the fact that many widowhood practices are implemented by women on other women, it is evident from the contexts of the widows that those who took it as their prerogative to prescribe societal norms and practices and sex role functions were male. The result was that women's suffering caused by the bereavement escaped notice and that their experiences were ignored, their voices silenced, their stories throttled and their pain aggravated. The authors of widow rituals took grief experiences for granted.

6.5 Women as decision - implementers than decision - makers

6.5.1 During the mourning period

The interviews showed that widows were not consulted in making decisions about burial places, children, property, matrimonial homes and rituals. While one appreciates that to exclude a widow from decisions is to acknowledge that her mental condition is unsteady, the underlying notion is that women are not decision makers, but implementers. This is evident in that for many of the interrogated ethnicities no time span is allowed to enable the widows' minds to stabilize before requiring them to make key decisions affecting their lives. Within that period of susceptibility, key decisions are made for them and often these decisions are not in the widows' favor.

There was an expectation by the widows that the Church should act as big sister/brother in certain crucial issues. The expectation is understandable, given the fact that in most cases the widows are not consulted in decision making. Moreover, usually the widow's emotional and mental disposition at this time is least able to make key decisions or put up a level-headed objection to any disagreeable decisions. But this only confirms the fact that widows have internalized patriarchy as a norm of life. It suggests the need to instill assertiveness and let women to take control of their own lives. Of course, they may not be able to do this during mourning, but if the Church affirms them in the tradition of the

gospel, they will come to assume full control of their own lives. It is strange that women have internalized patriarchy so much as to believe it can work to their advantage. Phiri recognized a flaw in a similar system and wrote that (in the Nkoma Synod) patriarchy and matriliney shortchanged widows.¹⁹⁷

6.5.2 In socio - cultural life

The very institution of widow inheritance, or levirate marriage, means society, through the dominant prescribers of cultural norms, has already decided that women are not decision-makers but executors. Holding women to be merely implementers puts them at the mercy of men and of society. For widows this can mean losing everything from children to property to identity to personal freedom. Moreover, such a mindset can be a recipe for obstructing HIV prevention messages, as sexual cleansing is decided for and required of them. While inquiring whether a widow wants to remarry shows acknowledgement of her sexuality, the underlying framework is the patriarchal notion that maintains that a woman should always be headed by a man who possesses the decision-making sanction.

6.5.3 Property ownership by the decision – makers

The occurrences of property-grabbing, envious asset administration and malicious behavior can be interpreted to mean these families or even the ethnicities assume that all property is for males. This idea is probably engendered by the notion that property belongs to the heads, who are also the decision makers, since lobola has been paid for the wife. In a patriarchy, the assumption is that family possessions belong to the man because he is the head, so if he dies his relatives should get the property.

6.6 Death contaminates

The interviews revealed that, among the ethnicities studied, some ritual or another must be performed before widows could resume a normal life. The death of a spouse puts a halt to usual life for the widow. One can infer that to mean death brings contamination and the bereaved needs cleansing and purification from spirit of death. The rituals

¹⁹⁷ Isabel Phiri. 'African Women in Religion and Culture' 1992:235.

described, together with the questions asked at Church concerning mourning attire, uniforms, Holy Communion, leadership roles after bereavement, and believers' participation in cultural rites reveal an upheld belief that widowhood brings impurity to sacrosanct conditions and items. This makes cleansing from the impurity indispensable. This perceived contamination permeates from the African religio-culture to the Christian faith.

6.7 Reverence of the secular-spiritual relationship

Informants described practices meant to cleanse the home, the family and mourners after a funeral to decontaminate them of the shadow of the deceased. Widows and their children also underwent various rituals. From this it can be inferred that the belief is that the spirits can influence lives and are to be revered. On another level the rituals are to keep the relationship with the departed harmonious. Traditional religion acknowledges the existence of spirits and their communication with corporeal beings. For that reason, the idea of conducting, undergoing or performing mourning rituals is strong among Church members. It was observed that widows have internalized the idea that the separation with the dead man is crucial. They believed that sexual cleansing sets widows free from bondage and protects widows and their children from the impurity that brings death. This indicates that it may not be realistic to try to discard the ritual altogether. The fact that while rituals have been modified but rarely abandoned shows the value attached to them. Therefore to expect Christians to discard these religious symbols would not only cause disputes but would also create uncertainty or even double standards. Nevertheless, there is need for clarity in distinguishing what is at the core and what is manipulative in the religio-cultural beliefs and symbols.

6.8 A nuptial bond with a spiritual dimension

Sexual intercourse, lying with the back to the coffin, lying on the grave, medicines, prohibitions not to look at or touch the coffin, spending time away from the matrimonial home, or sitting behind the house were prescribed for the widows in the various ethnicities studied. The underlying principle was that the conjugal bond is very strong

and needs to be severed. This showed that it is regarded as a special bond whose worth cannot be trifled with.

In addition, African life is bound up with and influenced by spirits, and a marriage bond is not only physical and social but also spiritual. This belief was also evident in the informants, who indicated that in the cultures under study, when husbands died, the nuptial bond still existed. Therefore severing of the conjugal bond by separating the partners' spirits becomes imperative.

Sex is an important part of the marriage and perceivably completes the marriage bond. So a marriage is a spiritual-sexual contract and the bond remains even after a spouse is deceased. Due to this conviction widows in the ethnicities studied are likely to agree to rituals that sever the spiritual bond between them and their deceased husbands. Sexual cleansing therefore is an acknowledgement of the nature and the strength of the nuptial bond. This means that, to the widows, ritual cleansing is necessary and should include a sexual component. The question is whether widows believe a modification of that sexual component, to exclude mutual exchange of sexual fluids could still allow for a genuine separation. In the context of HIV prevention messages complications arise because widows may wish to undergo practices they believe to be effective and in the process negate HIV prevention messages. This scenario is worsened by the fact that lack of decision-making power means that it is difficult for them to refuse the sexual cleansing ritual.

6.9 Messages from silence about the sexual cleansing ritual

There was silence surrounding sexual cleansing in the interviews which communicated different messages. Nearly three quarters of the widows interviewed chose not to answer the question about sexual cleansing. Even those in levirate marriages did not talk openly about it to church members. The one who admitted that she had undergone sexual cleansing said she did so after she had been experiencing nightmares. Various messages could be heard in this reticence.

6.9.1 Protection for sacrosanct values and traditions

Women were generally reluctant to talk about sexual cleansing. This is of interest because it has the most to do with HIV prevention, and yet it was the most shielded. In some cases, exact words were not to be pronounced and idioms were used in referring to the practice that made it unknown for one who did not know the language. At church, women used expressions like 'many things' in referring to rituals. A possible reason for the secrecy could be the concern that religio-cultural symbols and objects should be protected otherwise they lose their potency, for with many sacrosanct effects disclosure means powerlessness. The silence about cultural practices also had to do with reverence of sacrosanct values and traditions. Protecting them arouses respect for culture but can also instill reluctance to change harmful ones. The fact that women did not see sexual cleansing as rape is probably because of the religious nature of the ritual.

6.9.2 The perceived necessity of sexual cleansing

Generally widows could describe other cleansing practices in some detail and with ease. In contrast, most were very reticent about sexual cleansing. Those who did spoke with restlessness, including those in levirate marriages. If the need was merely to protect cultural values, then the silence would extend to all cultural practices and not only to sexual cleansing. However, one wonders why there was no silence about other practices and why people would be keen to protect only sexual cleansing.

The elucidation could be that widows strongly believe that sexual cleansing is helpful as a means of purification from the contamination of death but were also guilty about it. This could imply that unprotected sexual cleansing, which relies on the flow and/or mixing of nuptial fluids, is still going on behind cosmetic modifications. In that case sex is taken as a duty and the assumption is that it is not pleasurable. The silence about sexual cleansing also indicates that widows accept that since dowry has been paid for the widow, the ritual is appropriate. It could be that the widows felt their dead husband still had a claim on them and so they should not only comply, but avoid exposing a 'legitimate' arrangement. This means some cultures may take a long time to accept

modifications to harmful practice like sexual cleansing, allowing a potentially dangerous practice to expose widows to HIV.

6.9.3 A humiliating practice

The fact that widows could describe other cleansing practices in a fair amount of detail but could not delve into sexual cleansing could mean sexual cleansing was embarrassing and humiliating. If this is that case the silence is understandable but the concern is that harmful practices have been known to thrive under such reticence. A potentially lethal custom could continue unchecked under silence or cosmetic modifications. If widows underwent sexual cleansing, but were too hurt and embarrassed to talk about it, then there is a need to examine the necessity of continuing it and the possibility of negotiating with cultural systems for a discontinuation of the practice, at least for Christian widows. This is no mean task, but tackling any form of oppression is never simple, especially if the authors of the oppression benefit from the oppression or are unaffected by it. One can trust only what Phiri and Nadar call the “soft but firm” theology¹⁹⁸ in this endeavor.

6.9.4. Fear of hostile spiritual forces

While people practice the rituals because they value the relationship with the spiritual world, there is a strong fear of the spirits. The deceased spirit is believed to bring mishaps if not well appeased. Widows agreed to some practices after threats of misfortunes, made pleas for forgiveness from the deceased husbands, accompanied such pleas with self-torture and took care to follow all specifications understood as involving the spirits. Some who had experienced misfortunes in their lives attributed them to failure to observe some or another funeral rite, improper cleansing or the wrath of the dead husband. These findings show fear of misfortunes caused by spiritual forces. This fear made widows open to abuse, more so because of their level of vulnerability during the mourning period.

In the case of some widows, attempts to resist some customs, sexual cleansing or property grabbing were retorted with threats of misfortune from displeased spirits. The

¹⁹⁸ Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, ‘Introduction: “Treading Softly but Firmly”, 2006:2.

idea that a husband's spirit can influence a widow's life is still strong and highly upheld. Many informants expressed the belief that the deceased need appeasement and that husbands' spirits need to be cleansed away. From this it can be inferred that some widowhood rituals thrive on fear of the wrath of spiritual forces. Compliance also represented desire to maintain ties with the deceased's relatives.

6.9.5 Fear of Church discipline

In interactions with the widows, the researcher realized that the fear of Church discipline silenced widows. This was deduced from the fact that in private interviews, widows opted not to answer the questions on sexual cleansing. Yet in more open forums widows could talk freely to the point of almost revealing that they had been sexually cleansed. Also, informants who had witnessed widows undergoing cultural rituals were more at ease in talking about sexual cleansing than those who had actually been sexually cleansed. The silence suggested fear of Church discipline.

It is known that sex outside marriage by any member is clearly punishable in the church. There is also an unspoken rule that women in the Church are not to have sexual relations outside marriage. ELCZA Christian widows know that women get disciplined (once they are known, e.g. through pregnancy) for having sex outside marriages. Sexual cleansing would be regarded as one such punishable encounter. At the same time, the Church is neutral and has no clear stance on culture. To the Christians it offers no protection from possible calamities if the widows don't do sexual cleansing. So it is possible that they do it, and keep quiet about it, to be safe. If this is the case, then the maintenance of a gendered sexual disciplinary code, combined with an unclear stance on cultural rituals, imply the sad possibility that the Church is participating in the spread of HIV.

6.9.6 The need for safe spaces

The findings from the Workshop show that widows were hesitant to assess or express disapproval of any socio-cultural or ecclesiastical structures and practices. Passing comments, gestures and whispered words of caution to one another also indicated that informants could not point at oppressive practices in their cultural contexts. The fact that

women shared stories in the group discussion that normally would be concealed shows the need for safe spaces to speak without the possibility of unpleasant consequences. It also means the Church should facilitate and make available platforms which allow and encourage self-directed decisions, about the state of widowhood, which are not influenced by or connected with a form of pressure. It can also be inferred that platforms like workshops can actually be used as arenas to examine and scrutinize cultural practices, commend the helpful ones, disclose the oppressive ones and conscientise on the demerits of those which are dangerous. This will also provide an opportunity to examine Church traditions and practices with the same hermeneutical tools.

6.10 Unawareness of the harm of silence

The Zambian traditional marriage counselors (*Alangizi*) teach young women when they get married that the virtuous traditional woman is one who does not wash dirty linen in public. This silence was viewed as a cultural virtue. Generally there was silence about sexual cleansing. Even women in levirate marriages were unwilling to say much about their situations. This showed lack of awareness that certain silences which may be perceived as a way to treasure cultural norms and beliefs may be harmful. Silence in the interviews about sexual rituals could mean ignorance of the fact that silence engenders chains and cycles of occurrences that hamper HIV prevention messages.

Levirate marriages also carry the risk of HIV infection and they thrive on silence. This means widows cannot protest when asked to enter levirate marriages and usually this gets necessitated by their deficient economic situations. They also lack the assertiveness to negotiate safe sex in the marriage because they have learnt to be silent. Due to silence, the public uncompromisingly endorses levirate marriages and sexual cleansing while it is the widows who face the risks involved. These silences generally denote that widows continue to suffer in silence while the Church also remains helplessly silent about the risky rituals which put widows at risk of HIV infection. There is a possibility to reinvent the ritual in line with Lutheran theology and in tune with the African worldview. For this reason the next chapter proposes and gives justification for a faith-based cleansing ritual.

6.11 Limited knowledge of the Church's theological stance

There were questions and queries in the church concerning widowhood rites and rituals; a Bible study question about the black mourning dress and receiving Holy Communion in such an attire; the 'is it Christian' questions coming after attending funerals, the need to reconsecrate an elder, the suggestion that a committee member should step down after the undergoing rituals; and the issue about the uniform and the black dress. In addition the Women's Committee had their own self-proclaimed and assumed disciplinary code about widowhood rituals. This was evidence that there was little knowledge of the Church's theological stance on cultural issues in general and widowhood in particular.

For the ELCZa Christians the endorsement of levirate marriage sounded logical, and was strengthened by the fact that such unions are present in the Bible. Yet, as Lutheran Christians this means disregarding Luther's teaching based on Paul's and Jesus' in Matthew 22:30; Mk 12:18-27 and I Corinth 15:24, 35-38. In these texts Luther taught:

The life to come will not be regulated as this temporal life is, requiring man and woman, children, house, field, menservants and maidservants, and whatever else pertains to the married estates and offices there may be on earth. ...man and woman will remain with regard to the nature and person of each but not for the purpose of begetting children, establishing a home, or providing daily bread...Every purpose for which God instituted marriage ...is left behind in this life. ...But since the married estate will no longer exist all the rest will necessarily also terminate.¹⁹⁹

In the Lutheran doctrinal perspective levirate marriages are indefensible. If this is not known, it means the Church has a duty to teach Lutheran doctrine on levirate marriages. The idea of conducting, undergoing or performing rituals is strong among ELCZa Christians. Though there are modifications in certain ethnic groups and families, these cannot be verified or quantified. So there is a need for the Church to formulate a policy, guidelines and rules concerning widowhood.

¹⁹⁹ Hilton C. Oswald, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1Cor 7; 1Cor 15 and Lectures on 1Timothy* Vol. 28, St Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1973, p 124.

6.12 Addressing deficient economic situations

According to the findings some widows found the Church helpful during the mourning period and had assisted with food, the coffin and transport. But many research informants complained that the Church gave little assistance to widows and was not very forthcoming during the widows' time of grief. Informants voiced concern that they did not know the bereavement benefits due to widows of Church workers. This uncommunicativeness had created mistrust in the widows and the families concerned. Both widows and witnesses acknowledged that the peer or associate Christians would attend the funeral and fully support widows but on the structural level the Church was less helpful. There were complaints about the lack of a guide for the Church authorities to help bereaved widows, a condolences fund for Church members in general and for widows in particular or an arrangement for members to subscribe to an association where they would be assured of assistance. They voiced unease at witnessing funerals of Church members being subsidized and administered by neighborhood funeral associations while the Church played a (according to the interviewees) passive role.

It is possible that widows were unwilling to disclose sexual encounters to the Church because they thought they would discredit themselves before a system which had the potential to provide them with some economic support. If this is the case, it shows the serious need to address this scarcity which causes people to be muted before oppression. Subsequently, it is proposed that a Church-based widows' support group be established to pool resources and alleviate the effects of scarcity among widows.

The support group can help the Church put its house in order, e.g. cases like that of a widow whose condolence money could not be accounted for have slight chances of repeating in the presence of the support group. Members will conscientise each other of their rights; and censure the operations of an institution in which they are stakeholders. Such a group can ease the burden and expectation on the Church by soliciting support from various sectors, instead of anticipating support from a Church that is incapable of providing it and dependent on the very people who are economically deprived. A group established within an institution like the Church stands a good chance of negotiating for

help from influential organizations such as World Vision. The Church can use its social goodwill to help the group access resources, and can identify micro-development finance organizations to assist the Widows Support Group with capital for small business enterprises.

6.13 Conclusion

This chapter gave interpretations to the findings of the research recorded in the previous chapter. It demonstrated that the initial reactions to the death of spouses showed the occurrence is a shocking unexpected experience, characterized by physical and psychosomatic reactions. It holds that, while certain cultural prescriptions are meant to be cathartic, some widowhood rituals and practices actually aggravate widows' suffering. Grief responses shown in the interviews require a changed approach to cultural practices to avoid aggravating the hurt. One deduces that the authors of widowhood rituals took grief experiences for granted, probably because, as males, they held the prerogative to stipulate cultural norms. The chapter deduced the idea that women are taken as decision – implementers rather than decision-makers. Though this is recognition of the widows' susceptibility during mourning, this attitude also permeates to all sociocultural life. It became clear that the societies from which the informants came are patriarchal, upholding men as decision makers and women as implementers. Thus, only decision – makers can own property, an idea which puts many widows at risk of losing the means of sustenance left for them and their children.

There was a demonstration that the secular-spiritual relationship is revered and that the nuptial bond is spiritual, necessitating sexual cleansing to sever the conjugal bond. The ritual is shrouded in silence, indicating the need for protection. Though humiliating, the ritual is deemed indispensable and thrives on fear of those spiritual forces which cause misfortunes. The chapter interpreted some silences to be connected to fear of Church discipline and lack, thereby indicating a need to address the scarce economic situations which the Church members find themselves in. The chapter construed ignorance of the danger of silence about oppressive practices and showed the need for safe spaces for gendered cultural and/or ecclesiastical hermeneutics.

An inference was made that there is limited knowledge of the Church's theological stance on cultural issues, necessitating that the Church should come up with clear policy, rules and guidelines about cultural issues in general and widowhood in particular. The issue of sexual cleansing was shrouded in mystery and fear, and became a cause for concern as the practice carries the potential of HIV transmission. A combination of the strong beliefs related to sexual cleansing, the silence about it and the inferred fear made it necessary to engage with the issue, more so because of the HIV prevalence in the country and the feminization of HIV. The discourse pointed towards the reconstructing of a relevant tradition in a way that contributes and complements HIV prevention messages while maintaining an African Christian ethos.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS OF RITUAL CLEANSING

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have described various aspects of the widowhood experience in African Christianity. Chapter one introduced the dissertation by describing the context of the research and explaining the motivation for conducting the study. It also sketched out the methodology used in the research. Chapter two reviewed literature on research that has been done on widowhood in African Christianity. The chapter outlined the theories and concept about the contextualization of the gospel in African Christianity. It defined African Christianity and distinguished between the strands and how they have impacted the ELCZa. Chapter three discussed Lutheran theology concerning widowhood. It also evaluated Luther's stance on widows from a gendered perspective.

Chapter four described the data-gathering methods used in the research. It also described the sample of participants who gave the information. Chapter five analyzed the findings produced by the research on the experiences of widows in the multicultural Lutheran parish of Kamwala. It analyzed the data collected using the various methods detailed in chapter four. Chapter six interpreted the research findings, focusing on the innate grief responses, cultural beliefs and practices and the operations of the Church. From the study results it was evident that the mourning rituals and practices tend to aggravate rather than alleviate the suffering of widows.

This chapter brings the whole study together by pointing towards a practical response to the issues that have been revealed by the research around the cleansing ritual. It is a suggestion for the Church to mediate, on behalf of widows, from a multi-ethnic and a dual faith perspective. The chapter first explains the rationale for reconstructing rather than discarding the widowhood mourning ritual and anchoring it within the Christian faith. It justifies the ritual from various angles. Next the chapter describes the three-phased structure explaining the reasons for the various stages i.e. the pre-liminal stage

meant for severing the coital union, the liminal stage when the actual cleansing takes place and the post-liminal stage meant for incorporating the widow back into the community. The ritual is in the form of a liturgy with these various stages as in rites of passage.

The chapter proposes the ritual as it should be conducted by the Church and based on the prevailing notions of widowhood in the ethnic groups represented in the study findings. It is a merger of some culture-based beliefs (e.g. rite to dissolve the nuptial union) with Lutheran Christian teachings into a ritual that retains the core concepts of the traditional rite while discarding those elements that are oppressive (e.g. ritual rape), or that negate the Christian conviction (e.g. by elevating the Holy Spirit above ancestral or cosmic spirits). It is a ritual to separate, cleanse and incorporate that is theologically compatible with the Church doctrine, biblically-oriented and rooted in culture.

Besides the ritual itself being a symbol, the stages are also symbolized with specific words, actions and concrete objects incorporated from the cultural ritual and from the Lutheran liturgy and fundamental beliefs. This enhances the conviction that the cleansing has actually happened, for there is meaning beyond these elements and components. The ritual is constructed in such a way that it harmonizes with indigenous socio-cultural practices, with Lutheran theology, with the Christian faith and with the gender sensitivity that substantiates the message of the gospel.

7.2. The justification for the ritual

7.2.1 Cultural justification

Oduyoye says that the death of a spouse marks another stage in the life of the individual, and separation rites are performed to terminate the coital rights of the deceased partner.²⁰⁰ Therefore a ritual to this effect is imperative and has been seen as essential among most African ethnic cultures. The same opinion was depicted by the study findings as most

²⁰⁰ Mercy Oduyoye 'Women and Ritual in Africa' in Oduyoye M. and Kanyoro M. (eds) *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books 1992:14.

interviewees indicated that the marriage is a special relationship that needs severing after the death of one spouse.

Another rationalization for the ritual is that it is a public enactment of the separation that has been effected by death. The study found that there was much secrecy around the mourning rituals in general and sexual cleansing in particular. One appreciates that in African culture sexuality is generally expressed in private. However, where this privacy is connected with oppressive customs, and where it has the potential to put women at risk of HIV infection, a public enactment seems to be the life enhancing option. The separation should necessarily be sexual as the union of the couple was sexual. Therefore, to an extent, a public ritual ensures that there are no cosmetic 'modifications' while real sexual cleansing is happening to widows who are silenced by culture or fear of the wrath of the spirits. There will be a public cutting of the emblematic conjugal towel, with its sexual connotations, replaces the actual sexual intercourse, which has become risky.

The church ritual attaches significance to African cultural practices. It does not deny the existence of spiritual forces, but acknowledges them and assigns them to a position in cosmology. The ritual can instill the notion that the husband's spirit is now under the guardianship of the powers in the spiritual world, and that he is not discarded but has been transferred to a different organization and to the mode of existence of those beings who have left the corporal medium. The proposed widowhood service puts the Spirit of God above other spirits, including the spirit of a deceased husband and those of the ancestors. Subsequently, the ritual invokes offers and assures protection by the Holy Spirit, the superior one of the spirits. The towel is used because it symbolizes shared bed linen and conjugal intimacy.²⁰¹ Alternatively a calabash could be used which will be broken to symbolize the separation.²⁰²

²⁰¹ In Manyika culture an aunt gives a bride a special piece of linen to wipe her and the husband after sex. Using it in the ritual can be controversial as it seems to endorse cultural gendered wifely duties.

²⁰² The idea came from Esther Lubunga who said in her culture they break a calabash after burying the husband. The calabash represents nurturing. Nevertheless, this is controversial as the use of the calabash endorses the nurturing role of a woman. Breaking it could also be interpreted as killing the husband.

7.2.2 Theological justification

The proposed ritual can be justified theologically as it is a religious symbol and symbolism is an important aspect of African religiosity. The ritual symbolizes the separation, by death, of the widow and her deceased husband. According to the traditional way of thinking, the spirit of the deceased husband stays with the widow until rites are performed to separate them. Accordingly, the ritual perpetuates the religious mindset of ethnic people while accomplishing the psycho-religious purpose of pacifying the minds and souls of the widow and other mourners. In that sense, the ritual is cathartic.

The Lutheran Church has Liturgy for various rite of passage or entry into different phases of life. There are liturgies for baptism (even of infants), confirmation, marriage ceremony, and ordination, induction of leaders, funerals and memorial services. Idowu defines a liturgy as:

...a people's way of approaching God in worship; a means of expressing themselves, especially in a congregational setting, before God and of assuring themselves of communion with God. It is a means by which human souls find a link with the living spirit who is God.²⁰³

Idowu was writing about indigenization in Nigeria. He said there was frustrating inadequacy in the existing liturgies because they did not spring originally from the cultic needs and spiritual temperament of the indigenous people. He showed that rituals form an important part in the African world view and Christianity, as Christianity also originated in a setting with the primal worldview. Accordingly, a good reason for the ritual is that it resonates with the primal beliefs of the African worldview in the indigenous religion and with basics of faith in Christianity.

Another reason for the ritual is that it deemphasizes those traditional religious beliefs that are not compatible with Christianity (e.g. that punitive works by the widow can please and give rest to the husband's spirit; or that his spirit permeates all his possessions and if they are used without ancestral sanction there are risks of misfortunes of the worst kind);

²⁰³ Bolaji Idowu 'Towards an Indigenous Church' Oxford University Press, 1965: 26.

while highlighting the pillars of the Christian faith, (God's omnipotence, Jesus, the Cross, the Holy Spirit). Rather than trying to discard the ritual and teach that the originating beliefs are unfounded, the Church can transform it to purge it of the oppressive, humiliating and torturous elements. Furthermore, the idea that misfortunes can be driven away by venerating dead people sounds similar to the concept of justification by works, a contradiction of Lutheran theology. Lutheran theology holds that salvation and good life are given because of grace not because of 'works' such as dejectedness, submission to sadism, or self-punishment.

The rationale behind sexual cleansing is that, traditionally, sex is a compelling force that creates a bond that can't be broken easily. That bond has to be broken by someone else to free the widow of that bond. In the church ritual we acknowledge that fact, but also invoke a power stronger than 'someone else' and stronger than death, to put the final seal to that severance, and to endorse the widow's freedom from that marriage bond. Unlike the cultural widowhood ritual, which assumes that the severing of the marriage bond of the couple happens during the sexual intercourse, the church ritual is a recognition and ratification of the separation that has already occurred through the death of one spouse. According to Bible teaching, death, which is stronger than the 'someone else' has already broken the bond.

According to Biyela the bureaucracy idea means Jesus replaces ancestors who can be manipulated and set at war with other members of the clan, in giving us access to God.²⁰⁴ The Christian ritual is based on, and highlights, faith by inducing trust in a superior transcendent spirit, the Holy Spirit. This conviction is essential for a church operating in a belief system that acknowledges the presence of and the influence of the spiritual on the material beings. The church ritual is based on the fact that a religious symbol must not thrive on negative emotions, but must exhibit its own non-threatening and life-enhancing worth to the adherents. In the proposed ritual this is done in a way that does not antagonize, but that is compatible to the two faiths within which the ritual is grounded.

²⁰⁴ Musa Biyela 'Christianity and African Religion: The Question of Continuity' in GK Bauer et al *Handbook for the Lay Ministry*. Christian Literature Publishers: 1994, 14.

Another justification for the church-based mourning ritual is the need to address the belief that failure to perform the mourning ritual brings calamities to the widow and her children or dependants as shown in this study. Available literature and oral traditions also confirm the existence of the belief. For instance, Edet writes that, according to the Yoruba, the departed and the survivors must be released from each other; otherwise the living will remain miserable in their frustrated devotion and the departed soul will be unhappy.²⁰⁵ Oduyoye also writes that, according to the beliefs of the Akan, a husband's soul will not rest until the widow has completed elaborate mourning rites and has been purified. She adds that losing one's husband is viewed as extremely inauspicious and surviving a husband attaches negative influences to the widow.²⁰⁶ The findings in this study have shown that this belief is strong among Christians in Zambia. Interviewees indicated that they, or widows they knew, tolerated harsh ritual for fear of misfortunes. The proposed ritual points out that those calamities come because of the nature of the fallen creation. It points to the existence of misconceptions about fate, the need to repent from them and the need to seek true wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The ritual reinforces Christ's and biblical teachings on death and the after life. It clarifies the position of the Church regarding death in general and the relationship of the living living to the living dead. This is necessary to avoid clashes and confusion between venerating the dead and worshipping and fearing God

An additional motive for the proposed church-based mourning ritual is that it is a way of bringing the journey of the couple to a closure. Lutheran theology of marriage holds that a couple's journey was initiated and instituted by God, and so its closure should take place in a church context. One can draw an analogy between the marriage ceremony and the ritual. The marriage ceremony celebrates a union initiated by God (what God has put

²⁰⁵ Rosemary Edet 'Christianity and African Women's Rituals' in Mercy A Oduyoye and Musimbi R A Kanyoro (eds) *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books 1992) p 31.

²⁰⁶ Mercy A Oduyoye 'Women and Ritual in Africa' in Mercy A Oduyoye and Musimbi RA Kanyoro (eds) *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books 1992) p15.

together). The mourning ritual commemorates a separation instigated by death (a tool of the devil and an expression of the hidden God, in Luther's theology). As much as the marriage union is celebrated publicly, the separation ritual should also be commemorated publicly as reticence in this case is likely to enhance oppression. Since marriage requires authenticated and sanctioning witnesses, it is consistent to have the separation happening in the full view of authenticated gathering of witnesses as in the proposed ritual.

7.2.3 A gender-analytical justification

Phiri observes that most widowhood rituals seem to favor men, are biased against women and place women in oppressive positions.²⁰⁷ As shown in chapter 2, this happened in the ELCZA where the Church helped the male evangelist not to go through the ritual but did not do the same for the widows in the study. The Church ritual is an attempt to be unbiased and shows no differentiation in the rituals undergone by women and men. Moreover, the ritual calls for the widow's participation. Things are not just done for and to her. There is need for her affirmation in the vows, pledges and enactments. An argument could be that the liturgy spells out what she should say and gives no leeway for negative response. nevertheless this is meant to be practiced with Christian widows who, it is assumed, are already familiar with such procedures as baptisms, confirmations, inductions and installations and know the practice of vow-making in the Church, and the options available. The ritual also publicly emphasizes and reinforces the widow's freedom as a human being and as a Christian and supports her freedom of choice. The ritual is suitable for both widows and widowers.

The ritual compels the families to take responsibility in ensuring that the widow is not humiliated because of gender or ethnicity or marital status. It deemphasizes the need for torturous practices on the widow by rebuffing the widow's assumed inauspiciousness, the need to appease the spirit by punitive acts and the whole idea that calamities follow the self assured widow.

²⁰⁷ Phiri, 'African women's theologies in the new millennium', 2004 p.20-21

7.2.4 Psychosomatic justification

One motive for considering a Christian faith-based mourning ritual is to help mourners, especially the widow, to deal with fear. In most ethnic groups, the widowhood rituals thrive on the fear of being haunted by antagonizing spirits. The study findings reveal that fear of mishaps; at times increased by threats, compel the widows to conform to the rituals, no matter how humiliating and brutal they may be. This fear promotes injustice and sometimes prevents widows from asserting their rights. Due to fear, widows have watched helplessly while relatives dispossess them of property and of any source of livelihood available for them to continue life after the death of the spouse. So by deemphasizing fear and stressing faith the ritual helps the widow deal with fear.

A good reason for the ritual, also applicable to the traditional one, is that performing the ritual is cathartic. Various studies have shown that widows have gone to the extent of pestering their in-laws to perform the mourning rituals because they were psychologically ill at ease without it. So, undergoing ritual is therapeutic for some widows. The church-based ritual is likely to achieve this end, while discouraging ruthless rites.

Oduyoye says that, according to the Akan, a man's soul can rest peacefully only when his spouse has meticulously observed all the rites of widowhood. She goes on to say that before a husband's spirit can rest in peace, a deceased man requires not only proper burial but also a thoroughly dejected widow who, at times, is thoroughly humiliated by her in laws.²⁰⁸ If what Oduyoye describes is the general notion in that cultural context, then the widow is faced with a complex situation. This is also confirmed in other cultures where people think a widow can show she has truly mourned by wearing the mourning attire and avoiding social gatherings for a long time. The problem is that a widow can never know if she has been dejected enough to satisfy her husband's spirit so she may experience guilt for a long time.²⁰⁹ The church ritual takes guilt off the widow by deemphasizing the need for dejectedness. An argument might be that remorse is necessary in Lutheran confession. One would counter this by saying that in Lutheran

²⁰⁸ Mercy A Oduyoye 'Women and Ritual in Africa' 1992: 15.

²⁰⁹ The example is when a widow should not do her hair or apply lotion to her body to show dejectedness

theology remorse is not what earns forgiveness and acceptance. These have already been earned by Christ through death and resurrection. The church ritual also removes the guilt brought by doing the cultural practices in secret, a common phenomenon among the study interviewees and African Christians in general.

A further rationalization to do with guilt is that the church ritual will not make Christians feel guilty. Ngada and Mofokeng say that other people who belong to churches that reject the veneration of ancestors often perform these rites in secret.²¹⁰ Once they suspect that their secrets have become public knowledge, some are filled with guilt and end up leaving the church. A church-based widowhood ritual minimizes the possibility of guilt feelings among the participants. This is beneficial for the widow, who usually has a whole lot of other issues she may be made to feel guilty about, like heartless care-giving, killing the husband, insincere mourning or bringing HIV home.

7.2.5 Social justification

From the pastoral care perspective, a church-based mourning ritual is essential as it is bound to be empathetic to the widow and her children/dependents. The cultural rituals usually demand that the widow decide immediately about her future at a time when she is too physically and emotionally drained to put up a level-headed resistance to anything that might be demeaning, let alone to make rational life decisions. The Church ritual respects the widow's choices, removes the need to pressurize her into decision-making and insists on a commitment to empathetic treatment. It allows the full humanity of the widow as she is allowed to make her own decision without pressure in a composed frame of mind.

The church ritual enables the widow to function among other Christians and in the community without feeling judged or marginalized due to inauspiciousness. The Christianized ritual replaces the cultural ritual which can and has been open to abuse and

²¹⁰ NH Ngada and KE Mofokeng. *African Christian Witness The Movement of the Spirit in African Indigenous Churches*. Pietermaritzburg Cluster Publications 2001:31.

used to punish or revenge or intimidate the widow. It guards against people who may want to cling tenaciously to traditional rites and chastise the widow.

7.2.6 Economic justification

Literature has shown that the phenomenon of the impoverishment of widows through property grabbing is very common in Africa. Constance Shisanya, Musa Dube, Musimbi Kanyoro and Isabel Phiri,²¹¹ (to mention a few) wrote that many widows lost property to their husbands' relatives who grabbed the most valuable assets such as furniture, cars and land. The findings from the research also confirm this fact. Nearly 70% of the interviewees said they or the widows they know had experienced impoverishment through property-grabbing. The Victims Support Unit Official also mentioned that many cases of property-grabbing are reported. The ritual shows the church's concern for the welfare of the widow which may deter potential property-grabbers from executing the act, knowing that the eye of God is watching. The ritual also contains a pledge by relatives to leave the widow's property to her and her children and dependents.

7.3 The structure of the ritual

Denis M'Passou observes that traditional initiation rites, known as rites of passage, mark the recognized milestones in a person's journey in life.²¹² To Turner, a rite of passage celebrates the movement of a member of a society from one state or condition to another while Wasike sees a rite as changing an individual's status in life. She says the rites of passage all have three main phases: separation (pre-liminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (post liminal).²¹³ Accordingly, the proposed ritual is structured to conform roughly to these phases. Nevertheless, it will be noted that there is no cut and dry contour and procession from one phase to another, but one phase fuses into the next, which may even repeat some parts of a preceding phase. This is necessitated by the attempt to merge

²¹¹ Isabel Phiri 'Caring During Burial and Bereavement', 2002:64.

²¹² Denis M'Passou 'The Continuing Tension between Christianity and Rites of Passage in Swaziland' in J Cox (ed) *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction between Christian and African Traditional Religions*. Cardiff Academic Press 1998:15.

²¹³ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike 'Christianity and the African Rituals of Birth and Naming' in Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds) *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1992:40.

key traditional religio-cultural elements and beliefs with Christian ones in such a way that they become companionable to each other.

Oduyoye says that the death of a spouse requires that separation rites are performed to terminate the coital rites of the deceased partner.²¹⁴ The proposed church ritual has a preliminal phase where rites are performed to separate the widow and her deceased husband. The ritual is simply recognition and ratification, and has a public enactment of the separation that has already been effected or occurred through the death of one spouse. In Lutheran theology, marriage is instituted by God, is celebrated publicly and requires authenticated and sanctioning witnesses. Analogous to marriage, the separation ritual is instigated by death (a tool of the devil and an expression of the hidden God in Lutheran theology), should be celebrated publicly, and happens in the full view of an authenticated gathering of witnesses, in the presence of God and God's people. There is no need for the separation to be torturous for the surviving spouse. The towel, which symbolizes the shared bedlinen and the sexual union between the couple, is cut into two to show the severing of the conjugal union.

The liminal phase consists of confession, cleansing and absolution. The confession in general is done to acknowledge that human beings are unworthy to come before the presence of God. But the ritual emphasizes confession of misconceptions regarding death and failure to acknowledge and tap into God's wisdom for illumination. Confession also recognizes the possibility that any misconceptions about death might have led to oppression and humiliation of others, hence the need for forgiveness. The cultural cleansing is understood as a purging of the deceased husband's spirits from the widow. In the Christian ritual, the cleansing is taken to be purification of contaminated thoughts, words and deeds by the Word of God, the blood of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The word 'cleansing' is emphasized and used to show that the ritual is complete and no other sexual or additional cleansing needs to be performed on the widow. The liminal stage fuses into the postliminal as all people involved need confession and absolution, in order to partake

²¹⁴ Mercy A Oduyoye 'Women and Ritual in Africa' in Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds) *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1992:14.

in the elements of the postliminal stage, and unite with the widow as she gets incorporated back into the community.

The postliminal phase involves unction, healing and Holy Communion which incorporate the widow back into the community. Oduyoye explains that surviving a husband attaches negative influences to the widow who may then contaminate others. This necessitates the purification of the woman.²¹⁵ This view is strong in the parish under study as some widows even accused their husbands' relatives of victimisation and sabotage when they did not perform the ritual. The idea that a widow may contaminate others is also present in the Bible, e.g. in Genesis 38. By participating in the Christian purification ritual, a Christian widow is vindicated from the idea that she is contaminated with death (whether or not she was actually contaminated). Others are also set at liberty to relate normally to the widow. Apart from that vindication, Lutherans believe that a Christian needs daily repentance and purification. So the ritual will serve to purify not only the widow but also everyone else who believes and participates, from pollution. This phase also reinforces the idea that we all are contaminated by one or another impurity and we all need cleansing, which we receive by grace. The pronouncement of absolution and the unction seal the purification. These actions are done to all because all have sinned and deserve the wages of sin. This phase reinstates the widow in the community of believers so that there is no cloud of mystery surrounding her.

7.4 The ritual

7.4.1 Psycho-spiritual ministry

On the first day of the funeral the pastor prays for and anoints the pillows or/and blankets, to be used by the widow/widower and the children/dependents, with oil. This is to symbolize that God has the power to remove fears, weird and dreadful mental images, nightmares and spiritual forces that may cause any mental restlessness. The pastor may use the prayer below:

²¹⁵ Mercy Oduyoye. 'Women and Ritual in Africa' 1992 p 15.

P Lord God who created the human body, mind and soul, we commend Ms/Mr... (*widow/widower*) and his/her children/dependents into your hands as they sleep in the night and as they remain awake in the day. We pray for protection from fears, nightmares, weird and dreadful mental images. By your great mercy defend them from all the perils and dangers of this night, from hostile spiritual forces and from evil principalities that may want to visit, scare, disturb them or cause mental restlessness. Let you holy angels have charge of them, that the wicked one will have no power over them. In the mighty name of Jesus we pray.

7.4.2 Procedure on the cleansing day

1. *The assemblage/gathering will be seated in the church while the procession forms, which comprises a cross bearer with anointing oil, the pastor(s), the widow, the children, four appointed relatives from the widow's and from the husband's families, male and female from each side, a church elder and the church women's leader or her representative.*

2. *As the procession starts moving towards the altar or a designated and prepared focal point a hymn will be sung. The gathering stands.*

3. *Those in the procession standing in front of the altar facing, the altar and say short silent prayers.*

4. *When the last verse is sung the solemnizing pastor turns and faces the gathering. The gathering sits while the procession members remain standing.*

The widow can be in her Church uniform if she so wishes. She should have a towel for the conjugal bond cutting rite.

One of the deceased relatives should have a pair of scissors.

One of the church elders should have a necklace with a cross.

A = All, the whole Assemblage or gathering.

HR = spouse's relatives

P = Pastor

WC/D = Widow/widower's children/dependants

WR = Widow/widower's relatives

P We are gathered in this place to acknowledge, symbolize, participate and witness the cleansing process of ... (*widow's name*) in the name of God our Creator, Jesus our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit our Comforter.

All Amen.

Procession party take their seats.

P We are gathered here, saddened that death has separated ... and We are thankful that in the beginning God made them one flesh. Our Lord Jesus Christ said what God has joined together, let nobody separate. But death has separated them and now none of them is under the law of the other. Let us hear what the Bible says concerning the status of the dead.

Reading of Texts

Reader 1 Eccles 9:5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.

Reader 2 Ps 146:4 When their spirits depart, they return to the ground, on that very day their plans come to nothing

Song accompanied by instruments and dancing..

P The Bible instructs us about our relationship with the spirits.

Reader 1 2Tim 1:7 For God did not give us a spirit of fear but a spirit of power, of love and of a sound mind.

Reader 2 John 8:36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Reader 3 Ps 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Short homily based on the meaning of the ritual. Possible themes: fear, grief, freedom, hope.

Prayers by volunteers.

Song accompanied by instruments and dancing.

7.4.3 Separation (Preliminal stage)

P If with our hearts we believe the message that has been preached, we ought to declare it with our mouths. I now call upon Mrs. /Ms ... to acknowledge and affirm her separation from her husband and assert her freedom in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

(W steps forward)

P I now ask you to affirm, before God to whom all hearts are open, and before this gathering of witnesses. Do you believe that death has separated you from your husband in body and also in spirit, and that by your spouse's death the marriage bond between you two has been broken and that all his desires and wishes are gone with him? If so, answer 'I believe, God help me stay with this conviction'.

W I believe, God help me stay with this conviction.

P Do you believe that because of his/her death you have been set free from the law of marriage to him/her? If so, you may answer 'I believe, God help me stay with this conviction'.

W I believe, God help me stay with this conviction.

P Do you trust that God can protect you from any danger and that the Holy Spirit can fill you and give you strength to struggle against principalities, powers and other forces of the spiritual world, and strengthen you for the rest of your life without your husband/wife? If so, you may answer 'I believe, God help me stay with this conviction.'

W I believe, God help me stay with this conviction.

Chorus.

P I now ask the relatives of the late ... to come forward.

Husband / wife's relatives step forward.

P Dear friends, you have been chosen to represent the ... family in this service of cleansing and freeing the widow/widower... as she/he has been separated from him/her by death.

Romans 7:2, 3 says by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband/his wife dies she is released from that law of marriage.

Do you consent to the freeing of ... (*widow*) and accept that the bond between her and ... is dissolved? If so, you may reply with the words written.

[HR] We believe that she has been freed, by the death of her husband, from the marriage bond that united them. We give full consent to her cleansing and freedom from the marriage bond. God help us remain faithful to this pledge.

[P] Do you agree that she is now free to live as she sees fit, that you will continue to respect her decisions and to let her live the abundant life Christ came to give her. If so, you may answer with the pledge that follows.

[HR] Yes, we as a family agree. We will fear, love and trust God, and not hurt ... in any way. We will not take property that belongs to her or claim rights to her possessions but let her improve and protect her property and live the abundant life that Jesus came to give her together with her children and dependents. God help us to remain faithful to this pledge.

[P] Do you agree that through blood you still have an interconnected relationship to their children, and that you will be helpful to them materially, morally and spiritually, to guide them and help in training them in an honest and decent way for their own benefit. If so, you may answer with the words written.

[HR] Yes, we as a family agree. May God continue to give us love, wisdom and courage to perform this task, and to remain faithful to this pledge.

Chorus accompanied by instruments and dancing.

[P] I now ask the relatives of the widow ... to come forward.

The widow's /widower's relatives step forward.

[P] Dear friends, you have been chosen to represent the ... family in this service of cleansing and freeing the widow... as she has been separated from her husband by death. Romans 7:2, 3 says by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies she is released from that law of marriage.

Do you agree that your daughter and sister... has been freed from the law of her marriage to ... through his death, and that their marriage bond is dissolved. If so you may reply with the words written.

WR: We believe that she has been released from that law of marriage and we endorse her separation from her husband. God help us stay with her in this conviction.

P: Do you agree that she is now free to live as she sees fit, and that you will continue to love her and respect her decisions. If so you may reply with the words that follow.

WR: Yes we agree, and we will continue to love her and respect her decisions. May God help us to stay with this conviction.

P: Do you promise to journey with her in her new situation, to help her and her children in every possible way you can? If so, you may answer 'Yes, we as a family agree. God help us remain faithful to this pledge'.

WR: Yes, we as a family agree. God help us remain faithful to this pledge.

P to All: All of us gathered here have heard the widow Ms... the relatives of the late... and the relatives of the widow... declare that they believe the marriage bond which was between ... and ... is no more. We trust that what they declared with their mouths is what they believe with their hearts. Therefore, by the authority vested in me I pronounce the disconnection of ... from her husband ... who has been separated from her by death, and declare her a single woman in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

(P receives the towel from the widow and the scissors from the husband's relative)

P: We thank God for the life of ...and his/her contribution to his her family. Death has removed him/her from this life. Memories of his/her life will always stay with us. This towel is a symbol of the conjugal union that was between ... and ... By the authority vested in me I cut this towel as a sign that the conjugal bond between ... and ... has been broken because he/she is no more. I perform this conjugal dissolving ritual in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Pastor cuts the towel with scissors, holds up the pieces and says:

P: God connected them as conjugal partners, death has separated them. As we remember their lives together let us give thanks to the Lord.

All: God put them together. Death has broken only the conjugal union. God's name be glorified. Amen.

P: Gives a piece of the towel to each of the families.

Song accompanied by instruments and dancing.

7.4.4 Confession, Cleansing and Absolution (Liminal stage)

Reader I John 1:8-10 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.²¹⁶

P We have acknowledged, witnessed and endorsed the separation of the couple, which was instigated by the death of ... We acknowledge that our own knowledge of death is incomplete. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.²¹⁷ We will now confess that we sometimes use this partial knowledge to punish ourselves and others instead of seeking wisdom from the God of all knowledge and truth. Our bodies, minds and souls do get contaminated in different ways.

Widow steps forward. If she is not strong enough to stand for long she remains seated but prepares to make her confession.

P to W Ms ... Do you agree that your own knowledge of life and of death is incomplete and that you have sometimes used that incomplete knowledge to unfairly condemn yourself and others instead of leaving judgment to the all knowing God? If so answer with the words written.

W I agree. Lord God of wisdom and mercy, cleanse the thoughts of my mind, the desires of my heart and the words of my mouth through the blood of Jesus.

P to W Do you confess that you have sometimes surrendered to fatalistic powers and fear instead of trusting in the mighty name of Jesus and the comforting power of the Holy Spirit.

W I confess. Lord God of mercy, cleanse my soul and my spirit, cast out the fear in me, and increase my faith in you.

²¹⁶ 1John 1:8-10

²¹⁷ Daniel 2:28

P to W Do you believe God is able to cleanse us of all imperfections, protect us from evil, and grant us abundant life and set us free through Christ Jesus? If you believe you may reply with the words written.

W I believe. Lord God of mercy, cleanse me with your Word, which is a light on my path,²¹⁸ and with the blood of Jesus Christ. Protect me from evil that comes from inside and from outside me. Fill me with your Spirit which guides into all truth,²¹⁹ in the name of Jesus.

All Amen.

P By the authority vested in me I declare you cleansed and freed in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Church steward hands the necklace with a cross to the Pastor, who then says to the widow.

P Jesus invites you saying ‘Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and you will find rest for your souls because my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’²²⁰

Now receive this cross, a symbol of the yoke of Christ, placed around your neck. Lean on and learn from Christ who is gentle and humble in heart and find rest for your soul.

P *Hangs a necklace with a cross around the widow’s neck. The gathering applauds by clapping and ululating.*

P Receive the cross as a token of your freedom and protection in Christ Jesus.

W Christ suffered and died on the cross for my salvation and freedom. May his name be glorified. Amen.

P to All The Bible says we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The wages of our sin is death. We have earned death for our sinful labors. Now let us all join ...*(widow)* in confessing our faults and declaring our freedom in Christ.

All We humble sinners confess before God that we are by nature sinful, unclean and inadequate in perceiving God’s majesty.

²¹⁸ Ps 119:105

²¹⁹ John 16:13

²²⁰ Matthew 11:28

We repent that when we encounter injustice, disease, death or misery we experience you as a hidden God, whose face is turned away from us.

Remind us always that only you, the God of heaven and earth, can reveal the mysteries of our life

Remind us always that only you Lord can give us strength to cope with the problems that we face in our lives.

Cleanse and purify us from the contamination of death brought by our sinfulness.

Cleanse and purify us, for we are all contaminated with death because of our physical being, our mechanized lifestyle and the possibility of natural disasters.

Cleanse us through the blood of Jesus and through the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, who can counsel us and guide us into all truth.²²¹

Lord, have mercy upon us.

P By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ vested in me I pronounce the forgiveness of your sins. I pronounce that you have been cleansed from everything that contaminates the body and spirit from inside and from outside yourselves.

I invoke the indwelling of Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth²²² in you; who creates and maintains faith and who can show the truth. The Holy Spirit will sanctify you by his truth and by God's Word which is truth.²²³

I proclaim your freedom which comes from the Spirit of truth as the Bible promises that the truth shall make you free.²²⁴ God is Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom.²²⁵

All Praise the Lord, we are forgiven and we are cleansed by the living Word that comes from God, by the saving blood of Jesus Christ and by the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Because the Lord makes us free, we shall be free indeed.²²⁶ Amen.

Song accompanied by instruments and dancing).

²²¹ John 14:26; 16:13

²²² John 14:26; 16:13

²²³ John 17:17

²²⁴ John 8:32

²²⁵ 2Corinth 3:17

²²⁶ John 8:36

7.4.5 Unction, Healing and Eucharist (Incorporation or Postliminal stage).

☐ Jesus sent out the twelve and they anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.²²⁷ In obedience to the command to do the same in the book of James,²²⁸ I anoint you ... (*widow*) with this oil to heal you from the brokenness brought by the death of your husband.

The widow comes forward for the anointing. She kneels if she is fit enough.

☐ By the authority vested in me I anoint you with this holy oil as a sign of the dissolution of the bond that was between you and your husband, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I anoint you as a prayer for your cleansing from all imperfections and for your protection from all forms of evil. I anoint you with the assurance that God has set you free and is able to grant you abundant life through Jesus Christ.

☐ *Draws a sign of the cross on the forehead of the widow using the oil.*

☐ Be healed in the name of Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

☐ The Lord is my healer and my protector. May his name be glorified.

Widow returns to her seat.

☐**toAll** Christ invites us all, if anyone needs prayer for sickness, for healing from grief or sorrow or for protection, come and receive an anointing of oil as commanded by the Word of God.

☐ *Anoints people with oil making a cross with the finger on their foreheads, and saying:*

☐ Be healed in the name of Jesus.

Each person who is anointed responds with the words:

With His stripes we are healed.²²⁹

Song, accompanied by instruments and dancing.

The Pastor proceeds with shortened version of the Holy Communion service for members confirmed according to the church doctrine.

²²⁷ Mark 6:13

²²⁸ James 5:13-15

²²⁹ Isaiah 53:5

7.5 Conclusion

The experiences of widows highlighted in the previous chapter have indicated the need for church involvement in the alleviation of the suffering brought by the death of the spouse and also by some of the oppressive cultural practices widows are made to undergo. These experiences highlight the need for Christianity, which has tended to downplay women's concerns, to address gender issues and work towards the emancipation of women. The church needs to embrace valuable cultural norms and practices and sift out those which are oppressive to women.

The sifting of culture to discard the repressive element has turned out to be crucial in the context of HIV and AIDS and in the interest of gender justice. Subsequently this chapter proposed a church based mourning ritual which not only discards dangerous and brutal rites, but also reinforces biblical teachings and the theology of the church in connection with the passage into and journey in widowhood. It is hoped that as the Church takes the initial stride of the journey with the widow it will also bear in mind the obligation to minister to the widow's socio-economic needs. Though the Church is not affluent it is well-positioned and can utilize its well-disposed influence to provide an enabling environment for the operation of a widow support group, thereby making use of the talents vested in itself through its membership.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT FOR A STUDY PROJECT ON WIDOWHOOD.

**Study title: Widowhood rituals, African Lutherans and HIV prevention:
A gendered study of the experiences of widows in the Kamwala Evangelical
Lutheran Church in Zambia.**

Category A: Widow

1. Background Information

Age

Type of residence

Educational level

Occupation

Children/Dependents: number and ages

2. When was the death of your husband?

3. Describe how you felt

4. What was your relationship with your family, relatives, and in-laws?

4.1 Before the death?

4.2 After the death?

5. What cultural practices or rituals were you made to go through?

6. Which practices were helpful?

7. Which practices were hurtful?

8. How did the death of your husband affect your children/dependents?

9. Describe your economic status since your husband's death.

10. What is your present source of livelihood?

11. How did the Church participate throughout the mourning period?

12. What sort of counseling did you get from the pastor?

13. What would you have wished the Church to do -your expectations?

14. What do you suggest the Church's role should be?

15. How are you coping with life after his death?

16. How would you help a woman who gets widowed today?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING TIME TO RESPOND TO THESE QUESTIONS.

APPENDIX B

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT FOR A STUDY PROJECT ON WIDOWHOOD.

Study title: Widowhood rituals, African Lutherans and HIV prevention:

A gendered study of the experiences of widows in the Kamwala Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia.

Category B: Witness

Please answer the following questions about a widow you know.

1. Background of a widow you know

Age:

Educational level:

Occupation:

Relationship to you

Type of residence:

2. When did her spouse die?

3. How did she respond to the death?

3.1 Physically, any unusual symptom or illness

3.2 Socially i.e. her interaction with other people

3.3 Spiritually i.e. her response to religious affairs

4. What was her relationship with her family, relatives, and in-laws?

4.1 Before the death?

4.2 After the death?

5. What cultural practices or rituals was she made to go through?

6. Which practices helped her?

7. Which ones harmed or hurt her?

9. How did the death of her husband affect her children/dependents?

10. Describe her economic lifestyle since her husband's death.

11. What is her present source of livelihood?

12. How is her social interaction after the death of her husband?

13. Describe the sort of counseling the widow got from the pastor.

14. How did the church participate throughout the mourning period?

15. What do you suggest the church's role to widows should be?

16. Explain any taboos or myths you have heard about widows.

17. How would you help a woman who loses her spouse today?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING TIME TO RESPOND TO THESE QUESTIONS.

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT FOR A STUDY PROJECT ON WIDOWHOOD.

Study title: Widowhood rituals, African Lutherans and HIV prevention:

A gendered study of the experiences of widows in the Kamwala Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia.

Category C: Church leadership

1. When was the Church started?
2. Who were the first leaders?
3. What is the highest decision making body of the Church?
4. How many women are in this body?
5. How does it come up with issues for its agenda?
6. What is the church's understanding of its mission?
7. Who makes and implements policy?
8. What is the church's outlook on cultural issues?
9. What is the church's policy on widowhood rituals and widowhood in general?
10. How does the church view widowhood rituals? Give examples
11. What are the church rituals on widowhood?
12. What problems do Christian widows face?
13. What help does the church give?
14. What motivates the church to give help?
15. What more can be done?
16. In the case of disputes between the widow and her relatives what role does the church play?
17. How relevant are women's programs to issues affecting widows?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING TIME TO RESPOND TO THESE QUESTIONS.

APPENDIX D

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT FOR A STUDY PROJECT ON WIDOWHOOD.

Study title: Widowhood rituals, African Lutherans and HIV prevention:

A gendered study of the experiences of widows in the Kamwala Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia.

Category D: Victims support unit staff

1. What is the government law concerning the rights of widows?
2. What problems, which widows face, are brought to your unit?
3. What channels do people use to make their way to you?
4. What legal issues are brought to your organization?
5. How helpful are your interventions to widows?
6. What kind of resistance do you meet in your interventions? What are your limitations on intervening?
7. What enforcement agency do you employ to make people comply?
8. Describe the backgrounds from which the widows you have helped come.
9. What word of counsel/caution/advice would you give to the public about widows?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING TIME TO RESPOND TO THESE QUESTIONS.