

## **The role of the church during flood disasters: A case of Kenyan Christian women**

**Alphine C. Ojiambo**

Protestant Theological University, Netherlands  
[caojiambo@student.pthu.nl](mailto:caojiambo@student.pthu.nl)  
OrCID number: 0009-0009-0477-6483

### **Abstract**

This study explores how the flood experiences of selected Kenyan Christian women demonstrate the church's role and the extent to which the Accra Confession could facilitate this flood-related discussion. The findings suggest that churches in Kenya provide possible "theological explanations" for the causes of floods, offer spaces for prayer, and provide relief aid primarily to their congregants, though rarely. Also, denominationalism often inhibits pastoral care, impacting women's survival during floods. As such, revisiting the Accra Confession provides a vital framework for the church, as a healing vessel, to reflect on its mandate to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable and to implement meaningful social transformation. Arguably, the Accra Confession challenges the church to the need for all Christians to follow Jesus' public (holistic) mission, acknowledge the interconnectedness of Creation, help all regardless of denomination, and actively adopt a stance on environmental issues, thus emphasising God's justice and care for creation.

### **Keywords**

*church; Accra Confession; Christian women; floods; Kenya*

## **Introduction**

Floods are natural hazards that affect several people worldwide. In Kenya, floods submerge several urban and rural areas, often leading to the death of people and livestock as well as the displacement of people from their homes (Juma et al. 2022:1; Weesie et al. 2025:1). The case of Budalangi in western Kenya requires a dire response as floods occur in this region twice each year (Huho and Kosonei 2014:20–21). Such observations led me to conduct research among Christian women in Budalangi in 2023. I focused

on women because they usually formed most of the membership. Also, within patriarchal cultures supported by androcentric reasoning within the church, women have limited access to positions of power, an aspect that may imply overlooking their voices. Therefore, this study aimed to bring their voices to the fore. The study used semi-structured interviews to explore how women's spirituality helps them cope with flood experiences. Herein, I present participants by fictitious names: Anyango, Awino, and Apondi.

Church service seems to be a restorative source of support in times of adversity (Podnieks and Wilson 2003:133). Or, like Ranty Islam (2012:209) puts it, "When the dust settles over a ruined landscape, for survivors it is religion and the sacred that become exceptionally important as a first resort". Specifically in addressing the ecological crisis, the role of the church is to recognise environmental care as its divine mandate and core mission, to be involved in both spiritual and material needs of people, guided by the declaration that God and humanity are linked because of the cross and a motivation that God cares for humanity and all creation (Magezi 2024:2; Magezi and Nanthambwe 2022:4–5). For instance, religious institutions provide material and financial resources, personnel, and support for the emotional and spiritual needs of their communities, thereby contributing to the response and recovery phases of disasters (Atkinson 2014; Sheikhi et al. 2021). However, little has been done to map the role of churches in disaster management from survivors' perspectives in Africa, especially in Kenya.

In this study, I analyse the views of three Christian women who experienced floods in Kenya. I specifically focus on how their views highlight the church's role in responding to floods and survivors in Budalangi. Drawing from *Sankofa* philosophy, I delve into the Accra Confession, adopted by the World Council of Churches in 2004, to explore the church's role in disaster management. *Sankofa* is a "Twi word from the Akan Tribe of Ghana that loosely translates to, 'go back and get it'. [It originates from the Akan proverb that translates to] 'It is not taboo to go back for what you forgot (or left behind)'. *Sankofa* is a phrase that encourages learning from the past to inform the future, reaching back to move forward, and lifting as we climb" (Stockton University, n.d.). For instance, this philosophy has been used by African scholars to urge Africans to return to their traditional

past, including the African beliefs, rituals, ideologies, and concepts, and borrow those that are liberating to respond to contemporary instabilities (Oduyoye 1995, 86). In a similar vein, *Sankofa* in this context is used to urge the church to look back into its mandate to respond to the very concerns of Mother-Earth and women with flood-related experiences. In turn, I seek to answer the question: To what extent do flood narratives of Kenyan Christian women demonstrate the role of the church, and how can the Accra Confession serve as a framework in this flood-related discussion?

### **Women's views on the role of the “church(es)” during floods**

The data from the aforementioned study, among other things, suggested the following. Firstly, the findings suggested that the church was a place where women participated in individual and communal prayers. Anyango, after the collapse of her house, said, “I just keep praying ... that I can have even a small house so I can live with my kids. I keep praying, and whenever I go to church, I pray to God, my father.” Religious leaders in the church were also helpful to participants during floods by offering prayers. “When you go to church, priests also pray to God. God, reduce your water. The water eventually reduces when the rains stop. ... When the priests realise that there are heavy rains, they pray that God can reduce the rains so that people will not suffer losses”, Awino explained. Participants' views resonate with findings from several empirical studies suggesting that, when faced with disasters, survivors often turn to prayer to cope with their realities (Chowdhury et al. 2022; Bentzen 2021). Besides, within religious communities united by the same belief systems, prayers as a religious ritual or behaviour, especially when offered by respected leaders, arguably offer mutual support, thereby contributing to the psychosocial well-being of survivors during disasters (Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Ager 2015:11).

Secondly, women reported that during floods, churches offered relief aid primarily to their congregants, although rarely. For instance, Anyango stated, “I would be lying if I told you that the churches would help when it floods. If they help, they normally help their members ... But since I am a member of another church, I am discriminated against.” Awino also asserted, “Last time it flooded, we did not receive any help from the church.” The findings of this study seem to contradict the assertion that

during disasters, the ability of all churches to work together remains essential to ensure the success of recovery efforts (Atkinson 2014:172–73). Arguably, religious traditions often view humanitarian assistance as a reflection of ethical values and ritual obligations. Various religious doctrines advocate compassion and generosity, with liturgical guidelines for offering or donating resources, thereby motivating people to care for others in need. In Christianity, the Bible encourages Christians to help those in need (Kitula and Mhando 2024:1–2). Moreover, Bird (1982, as quoted in Kitula and Mhando 2024:12), argued that offering humanitarian aid can be traced back to early Christian churches, where Christians, afraid of the Judgement Day and God’s Kingdom, engaged in humanitarian aid like feeding the hungry and helping strangers as a way to prepare for these eventualities. Therefore, it can be deduced that humanitarian aid extends to those in need and is not tied to congregationalism, thus explaining why, for instance, a church in Nigeria offered humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic (Falaye 2024:188) and why people belonging to different churches in Tanzania engaged in humanitarian aid to those affected by floods (Kitula and Mhando 2024:12). Also, congregations have difficulties raising funds to support organizational objectives, which significantly impacts congregational activities. Since they are not geared towards a specific cause that relative strangers can support, congregations often depend on the contributions of active participants, leading to a limited budget size (Ammerman 2006:355). This reality could also explain why congregations in Budalangi restrict their aid to their congregants.

Also, the findings revealed that participants’ displacement due to floods restricted the pastoral care. According to Awino, “When it flooded, everyone in the church went to a different location. No one visits you since you stay with people of different denominations. No one visits you since they are not of your denomination”. One possible way to understand this finding is to argue that floods affected local churches, leading to the relocation of all members, including ministers and pastors, which strained their pastoral work. Alternatively, I argue that pastoral care is not limited to members of the same denomination or done by the selected few, including ministers and pastors. Rather, pastoral care aims to benefit both in-group members and the larger community through formal programs such as visiting the sick and providing counselling services. For instance, Wimberly (1979,

quoted in Rivera and Nickels 2014:182) postulates that “pastoral care is the all-encompassing notion that incorporates and expresses the supportive features of the church.” Pastoral care helps mobilise church resources to aid individuals and families during a crisis. It can be provided by lay church members or ministers, and involves the exchange of material, emotional, and spiritual assistance, as well as information and advice, among congregation members and non-congregants, possibly belonging to other denominations (Rivera and Nickels 2014:182). Also, by inviting lay church members to participate in these programs, pastoral care “establishes normative expectations of assistance and reciprocity among church and community members (Rivera and Nickels 2014:182). Evidently, when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, dispersing the Vietnamese community in New Orleans, a Catholic priest resorted to not only reestablish the community by visiting and attempting to bring back the Vietnamese evacuees, he also held a mass for the returned evacuees, inviting the black residents whose churches had been destroyed making the Catholic church a temporary religious home for black parishioners (Rivera and Nickels 2014:192).

Finally, the participants interpreted floods either as a hand of God or the work of Satan. For instance, Anyango lamented, “Even now that I see it raining, ... God, are you bringing the rain so that we end up leaving our homes? I wish it would not rain today. This is the hand of God; we cannot deny it ... But God wants to pour out God’s water. Can you stand against God?” Also, Awino explained, “I just cry to God to stop God’s water. This water is the rain, please God ... do not bring a lot of water ... drizzles.” Referring to floods, Apondi said, “When you look at it, you think that it is God’s miracles and sometimes that of demons. So, I do not understand ... is it of God or Satan?” She concludes that “... God does things when humans are not seeing. So, God brings water at night when we cannot see. So, when we wake up dead, having drowned, God would have taken us without seeing”. I argue that survivors of disasters such as floods tend to turn to spirituality to understand and make sense of their experiences. Often, they adopt environmental worldviews and interpretations of life’s challenges as influenced by the clergy and religious leaders (Ager, Fiddian-Qasimiyeh, and Ager 2015:11; Nche 2020, 150). For example, a qualitative study conducted in Ladakh, Northwest India, reported that survivors

found comfort in understanding flash floods as karmic consequences against them, as interpreted by their religious leaders (Butcher 2013:106). Besides, theological interpretations may vary from one denomination to another. For example, in qualitative research conducted in Nigeria, church leaders' views on climate change were shaped by their respective church denominations. Concerning the church's role in mitigating climate change, while Catholics, borrowing from *Laudato Si*, argued for raising awareness and adopting environmentally friendly actions, Pentecostal church leaders viewed climate change as a sign of the end times. As such, the participants' views on the causes of floods may seem to largely reflect theological explanations within their respective church denominations (Nche 2020:156–57).

From the above discussion, it can be deduced that church(es) in Kenya played different roles in responding to floods. For example, they offered possible 'theological explanations' to the causes of floods, which informed participants' worldviews. Also, churches offered spaces for Christian women to pray, and church leaders participated in communal prayers, vital for survivors to cope with the flood. However, the findings of this study also suggest that churches offered relief aid primarily to their congregants, although rarely, and denominationalism inhibited pastoral care. But what is the 'church' and what ought to be the role of the church, especially during disasters?

### **Accra Confession: Calling the church to account**

The term "church" as used by Christians has diverse meanings. Several people describe a church as a building, an organisation, a denomination, or a body of people (Magezi and Nanthambwe 2022:5–6; Kelley 2011:1). For instance, in the findings above, Christian women in Budalangi understood a church as a place where they engaged in individual and communal prayers. Also, hinting at the church as an organisation and a denomination, participants in this study suggested that the church(es) offered material and spiritual aid to congregants and denominational members. Besides, within academia, there exists no singular acceptable definition. There exist different views on the etymology of the word 'church'. On the one hand, it has been suggested that the term "church" is derived from the Old

English and German word “circe”, a term in Greek mythology referring to the goddess of magic and all that pertains to the round. On the other hand, the term ‘church’ is arguably derived from the Greek word *kuriakon*, which translates to “the lord’s”. When linked to the Greek word *oikia*, which means house, the term church can be viewed as the “lord’s house”. However, the Greek term associated with the church is *ekklesia*, which is a combination of two words, “*ek*” and “*kaleo*”, meaning “called out” (Kelley 2011:2). The term *ekklesia*, commonly used in Greek literature and the Septuagint, refers to an assembly of people, not necessarily for religious purposes (Kelley 2011:2; Peterson 1998:199–201; Nyarko 2023:2). Linking the terms church and *ekklesia* is not without opposition. The translation has an incorrect connotation, as the church is strongly inclined to a specific place, whereas *ekklesia* refers to a group of people gathered (Hughes and Bennett 1998:72). Also, linking the term “church” and *ekklesia* is considered a mistranslation, as there is no connection between the Greek word *ekklesia* and the Greek words *kuriakon* and *circe* (Kelley 2011:2).

Several writers define the term ‘church’ either as God’s people chosen from the rest, an assembly of the people in a city, a community of Christians in fellowship with each other organized on a local and not on a worldwide basis, or a new community bringing healing to the division of humankind (Magezi and Nanthambwe 2022:5–6; Florovsky 1972:58). Although Christianity means a “life in common” where Christians ought to regard themselves as members of one community united in Christ – the church, denominationalism seeks to stress that one particular denomination represents the true Christian faith (Florovsky 1972, 60; Kelley 2011, 1). The term denomination is “... often used to denote particular theological traditions or the clusters of practices and people who identify with those traditions ... a translocal cluster of mutually identified religious organizations that are relatively comprehensive in their scope of functions. They are chosen and developed by their members and exist alongside other, similarly constructed, more-or-less-distinct religious clusters” (Ammerman 2006:362). Denominational divisions stem from belief in the revelation of God’s divine law, which forms the doctrines, with each group advocating for its interpretation and forming churches to propagate it (Mabborang 2022:29). Despite denominations’ propagation of their respective beliefs, due to the Spirit of Christ, which is graciously present

and active, the church could be considered as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; simply a body of believers (Kelley 2011:1; Healy 2020:391). Thus, I define the church as God's people, specifically Christians who are called to bring holistic healing to the world. Put differently, the church is a group of Christians, members of the body of Christ, who are called to serve just as Jesus served. Doing so thus bears witness to God's reconciliation, healing, and transformation of the world (Dietrich 2019:21–24; Ådna 2019:64).

The concepts of healing, reconciliation, and transformation embedded in my definition of church find resonance with feminist theology. Within African women's theologies, Oduyoye (2019, 24) writes that healing "... is an energy associated with the activity of restoration towards [the] highest perfection of a person or thing. When people or the environment are injured, disordered, traumatised... healing operates to right them, that is, to steer them back to positivity". According to her, healing is often linked to the concept of liberation since both concepts are related to restoring well-being (Oduyoye 2019, 105). Liberation is said to be that which "... presupposes the existence of an unjustifiable situation that has to be eliminated. All limitations to the fullness of life envisaged in the Christ-event ought to be completely uprooted" (Oduyoye 2004, 68–69). Or put differently, liberation is "purposeful social change aiming at the creation of a more humane, egalitarian, and just society where human beings can find their true selves. Its goal is to "... build a world in which all beings can live a fully human life free from any servitude imposed by others or even by nature" (Hinga 2017:42). Besides, healing is also linked to reconciliation. For instance, Phiri (2016:281–82), with a colleague, argues that healing should not be understood narrowly as a physical cure. Rather, healing should be viewed within cosmic reconciliation (re)established at Jesus' resurrection, which healed the broken human-divine relationship, to recognise God's vision for universal wholeness and justice, especially for the exploited and the marginalised. Together, they view healing as centred on God's promise of abundant life (Jn 10:10) covering all spheres of well-being. Hence, I use the concepts of healing, liberation, and reconciliation interchangeably.

What role can the (contemporary) church in Budalangi play in bringing healing, especially to women affected by floods and Mother Earth? To answer this question, I delve into the Accra Confession. The formal journey towards the Accra Confession began in 1995 with the Southern

African Alliance of Reformed Churches’ organizing of a consultation on Reformed faith and economic justice in Kitwe, Zambia. They listened to testimonies and laments of suffering and despair from various African communities, and how many hardships resulted from the continuing abuse of African peoples as cheap labour and African resources as cheap resources. Considering making a declaration of economic injustice a confessional matter at the General Council in 1997 in Debrecen, Hungary, several presentations by local churches viewed injustice also in relation to environmental destruction (Kuo 2020:6–7). At the 24th General Council in Ghana from 30 July to 12 August 2004, over 400 delegates gathered to worship, study the Bible, discuss pressing global issues, and engage with local churches. They visited the Elmina and Cape Coast Castles, sites of historical slavery, which confronted them with human injustice, leading the delegates to recognise the stakes of their Christian faith, urging opposition to injustices that deny life’s fullness, culminating in the adoption of the Accra Confession (Opuni-Frimpong 2023:399–400). The Confession consists of four sections: an introduction outlining the history leading to its formulation, a section on “Reading the Signs of the Times,” the core confessing section, and a concluding exhortation for local churches to apply the Confession contextually in collaboration with other communities of faith (Kuo 2020:7–9). Despite criticisms of the Accra Confession for lacking clarity and practical proposals, and for presenting a simplistic view of African realities, it has gained acceptance at a general council meeting, having been promoted among 230 churches with approximately 80 million Reformed Christians. While it cannot provide a detailed vision for a just economic order, it serves as a foundational framework for discussion, marking the first Reformed confessional statement to address economic justice and ecological issues (Kuo 2020:9; Lam 2013:221). Of its 42 objectives, I focus on three, specifically, the interconnected suffering and liberation of creation, and the inclusion of the poor and creation care.

Firstly, the delegates acknowledged a dramatic convergence between people’s suffering and the damage done to the rest of creation (World Communion of Reformed Churches 2024). I argue that the concept of healing best captures the interconnectedness of creation, because it is a comprehensive term entailing personal, interpersonal, and global health. It also covers both Mother Nature and humanity, showing the interconnectedness of

creation. For instance, Oduyoye (2019:23–24) writes that “unless we heal our planet, our mother earth will be endangered, and the human race will be threatened with extinction”. Likewise, ecofeminism “points to the need to see a multiplicity of intersections between gender, women and nature...” (Eaton 2021, 211). Concerning this, Ruether (1995:204, quoted in Eaton 2021:211) writes, “... there can be no liberation for [women] and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination”. Besides, African indigenous spirituality suggests that women interact more with Mother Earth because they share commonalities with her, including birthing and nurturing. Therefore, it is arguably true that violence against women could lead to, or warrant the neglect of Mother Earth. Also, although floods can be viewed as a punishment from God or as a calamity sent by God limiting human beings to act because of God’s omnipotence, floods may also be caused by Mother Earth’s protesting against the brutality inflicted upon her body. Regardless of its cause, floods significantly affect women (Chirinda 2021:82; Dube 2024:6–8; Molato 2024:191–192; Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah 2021:55). Hence, by acknowledging the interconnectedness of Mother Earth and human beings, especially women, the Accra Confession invites the church as Christians in Budalangi to stand against injustices meted out to both the environment and women, ensuring that women are not oppressed and that the environment is conserved.

The Accra confession also stressed that the creation continued to groan, in bondage, awaiting liberation, and that they (member churches), including men, women, rich or poor, had been called by God to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ to ensure that all may have life and have it in fullness, as recorded in John’s gospel (World Communion of Reformed Churches 2024). This confession highlights a key aspect: the liberation of creation, which is not alien to Christianity. African women theologians argue that liberation has a sound biblical and theological basis. For instance, Hinga (2017:42–44) underscores that creation is an ongoing process, with hopes to be perfected in the future. Likewise, Christianity is characterised by hope and a desire for social transformation. As a saviour, Jesus also sought transformation for those in the margins. God sides with the oppressed; likewise, it is the church’s nature to stand for and with those facing oppression (Phiri 2004:428–29; Kaunda, Owino, and Phiri 2015:226).

Although the church in Budalangi seems unbothered by the cries of women during floods, only helping denominational members or not helping at all, the Accra confession challenges the church, men and women, poor and rich, to work together beyond denominational differences, thus ensuring the liberation of all creation.

In the face of floods, I posit that liberation should not be limited to women: it should include the rest of creation. Or as the Confession puts it, churches are to include care creation in their mission, adopt an active stance on environmental issues, and emphasise God's justice and care for creation (World Communion of Reformed Churches 2024). While several studies stress the Great Commission, that is, to win people to Christ and build them up in Christ, as the primary mission of the church, the concept of holistic mission within the church continues to find relevance. Holistic mission denotes that ministry in the Church is not solely focused on evangelism, but also on helping the whole person, communities, and the neglected physical aspects of human interaction with nature. This concept stresses that God's command to the church pertains to all aspects of life: the material, the emotional, the environmental, and the spiritual aspects (Magezi and Nanthambwe 2022:3–4; Mpofu 2021:1). In other words, the church's holistic mission ought to include a theology of creation. Firstly, this is because disasters highlight the relationship between the creator God, creation, and human beings. Scholars suggest that the Bible as a whole portrays the relationship among God, humanity, and the rest of creation as a triangle, with God, human beings, and non-human creation at each corner. Secondly, disasters such as floods lead to climate change, which significantly increases human suffering and, as such, cannot be overlooked (Thinane, Masuku, and Baloyi 2023:10). Thirdly, on the Great Commission, Thinane and colleagues (2023:10) argue that there is no point in making disciples and teaching them to obey commands while ignoring their environment, since the art of discipleship seeks to transform people, communities, and entire nations. Thus, the church is responsible for spreading a theology of environmental care, making the masses aware of the reality of climate change. Lastly, ecotheology acknowledges the preservation of nature as an essential component of human life, with human beings having the moral responsibility to act in consideration of the environment, not just themselves (Maksum et al. 2023:24; Masoga 2024:5). Specifically, the

reading of Genesis positions human beings as entrusted stewards of God's creation, to serve and keep the earth (Magezi 2024:7; Mpofu 2021:5). The church should insist that domination over nature recorded in Genesis does not imply destruction of creation but care and preservation of creation in the state God wanted it, "good" (Thinane, Masuku, and Baloyi 2023:10). To achieve this, the church in Budalangi should declare that violence against nature is a sin, especially against God, because the Earth and Heaven are twin creations of God, representing the Creator God (Oduyoye 2019:34; Chirinda 2021:83-84). Oduyoye (2004:97) is right, "A church that consistently ignores the implications of the gospel for the lives of women [and Mother Earth] cannot continue to be an authentic voice for salvation. Not until we can say that what hurts women [and Mother Earth] also hurts the entire Body of Christ, will we in truth be able to speak of 'one Body'."

## **Conclusion**

This study explores how the flood experiences of selected Kenyan Christian women demonstrate the church's role and the extent to which the Accra Confession could facilitate this flood-related discussion. This study mapped views of three women, which cannot be generalised to Budalangi, necessitating quantitative research in future studies. In shedding light on the views of women with flood-related experiences, the findings suggest a significant gap between the church's expected role and the realities of women during floods. For instance, while churches in Kenya helped offer possible 'theological explanations' to the causes of floods, and spaces for individual and communal prayers, they offered relief aid primarily to their congregants, although rarely. Also, denominationalism inhibited pastoral care. The Accra Confession offers a vital framework for the church as a vessel for healing to reflect on its solidarity with the vulnerable and to enact meaningful social change. Specifically, Accra Confession challenges the church to the need for all Christians to follow the public (holistic) mission of Jesus, thereby acknowledging the interconnectedness of Creation, helping all regardless of denomination, and actively adopting a stance on environmental issues, emphasising God's justice and care for creation. It is only through engaging in a public (holistic) mission that a church, as Christians called to bring healing to the world, can fulfil its mission, especially during disasters.

### Data availability statement

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

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