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Forging Life-Giving Manhood: Reconstructing Masculinity in the United Church of Zambia's Men's Christian Fellowship

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Abstract:*This paper examines the transformation of masculinity within the Men's Christian Fellowship (MCF) of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ), an organization modeled on both the traditional African understanding of the ideal man and the manhood exemplified by Jesus Christ. Drawing on the cultural context of the Bemba-speaking people of Zambia, the study explores how the MCF uses a dual-layered training process – rooted in African cultural norms and Christian values – to shape its members into "real men" who embody positive, life-giving masculinities. The paper analyzes the concept of liminality within the six-month training process, during which male candidates are taught ideals such as communal responsibility, industriousness, and respect for others, alongside biblical teachings. Central to the MCF's approach is the presentation of Jesus Christ as the paragon of transformed masculinity – one who embodies courage, sacrificial love, inclusivity, and resistance to life-denying patriarchal norms. The study highlights how the MCF rejects toxic expressions of masculinity – such as dominance, violence, and emotional repression – in favour of practices that promote dignity, compassion, and community cohesion. Through this framework, the paper argues that the MCF provides a platform for reconstructing masculine identity in ways that address contemporary challenges, including gender-based violence (GBV), while fostering gender equality and holistic social well-being.*

Keywords:*Masculinity, Men's Christian Fellowship, Insaka, Bemba culture, Zambia, African culture, Christian values, Liminality, Jesus Christ, Patriarchy, United Church of Zambia*

1. INTRODUCTION

The construction and performance of masculinity remain pressing issues for faith communities in contemporary Africa, especially as they navigate the complexities of gender relations and societal transformation. In Zambia, these dynamics are acutely evident within the Men's Christian Fellowship (MCF) of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ), an organization that stands at the intersection of African traditional values and Christian belief systems. The MCF's unique synthesis of indigenous practices and Christian teachings provides fertile ground for examining the reconstruction of masculinity in African Christianity. This paper investigates the evolving concept of manhood within the MCF, illuminating how it draws upon the Bemba institution of the Insaka – a traditional communal space for male socialization – while simultaneously embodying the transformative vision of masculinity modeled by Jesus Christ.

The origins of the UCZ itself are rooted in a rich ecumenical history, formed in 1965 through the union of several Protestant denominations, including the United Church of Central Africa in Rhodesia (UCCAR), the Copperbelt Free Church Council, the Church of Barotseland and the Methodist Church in Northern Rhodesia (UCZ Constitution 2014:1).Within this context, the MCF has grounded its objectives in the Great Commission (Mt. 28:16-20) and drawn its motto from Jesus's sending out of the disciples (Mk. 16:15). This is powerfully captured in the group's rallying slogan: "*Ndeyandeyandeyashimika*"—"I will go and proclaim the gospel" (SMCF 1991, MCF 1975:1). This commitment is both spiritual and performative, expressed in ritualized chants and gestures that symbolize the fellowship's vision of empowered, responsible Christian manhood.

Methodologically, this study employs archival research and document analysis to trace the historical development and conceptual evolution of the MCF. Archival research involves the systematic examination of historical records and documents (Hill 1993, McKoy 2023,Ventresca& Mohr 2002). This research method offers essential context and depth for understanding the MCF's trajectory. Document analysis is the interpretation and construction of meaning from textual materials (Bowen

2009, O'Leary 2010). This provides insight into how the MCF's ideals have been articulated and enacted over time. The triangulation of these qualitative methods enhances the credibility of findings (Bowen 2009,Corti, Foster & Thompson 1995).

The theoretical framework guiding this inquiry draws on African Gendered Theology and African Masculinity Theory. African Gendered Theology interrogates the intersections of culture, gender and religion and seeks to reconstruct gender relations in ways that are liberative and rooted in African realities (Oduyoye 1995, Kanyoro 2002,Phiri&Nadar 2006, Dube&Kanyoro 2004, Dube 2001, Kanyoro 2001). It critically examines both oppressive and emancipatory elements within African cultural and Christian traditions. African Masculinity Theory, meanwhile, explores how notions of manhood are constructed, negotiated and transformed within diverse African contexts (Ammann&Straudacher 2021, Ratele 2016, Morrell &Jewkes 2011,Luyt 2003, Luyt 2005). This lens foregrounds the fluidity of masculine identities and examines the impact of colonialism, globalization and Christianity on contemporary masculinities (Ammann&Straudacher 2021, Luyt 2005, Luyt 2003). By integrating these frameworks, this study situates the MCF's six-month initiation process within the broader concept of liminality. It argues that this process fosters communal responsibility, industriousness and respect, while also promoting biblical ideals of compassion, justice and self-sacrifice.This emphasis on shared values and collective responsibility is deeply rooted in the organization's history. Turning to the origins of the MCF, we see how these principles have shaped its development from as early as 1912.

2. Historical Roots of the MCF, 1912 To 1975

The MCF of the UCZ finds its historical origins in the Young Men's Guild (YMG) of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, established around 1912 in the Transvaal district (Madise 2013, Zvobgo 1973). The YMG, also known as Amadodana ("men" in Zulu and Xhosa), drew inspiration from the local tradition of a "real man" (indoda) which emphasized not only male gender but also social maturity and initiation within the community (Dictionary of South African English 2023,Madise 2013, Zvobgo 1973). The Young Men's Guild (YMG) was modeled after the successful Women's Guild (Manyano). Its purpose was to offer young men a structured environment for fellowship, Bible study and prayer. In addition, the YMG sought to address key issues affecting its members such as economic, health and family concerns (Madise 2013, Zvobgo 1973).

The YMG's objectives included weekly gatherings for worship, encouraging Christian conduct, evangelizing and expanding the Kingdom of God. The context of industrialization and hardship in mining towns made the guild a crucial support system. Its members' transformation and evangelistic zeal contributed to its rapid spread, despite initial resistance from church authorities (Madise 2013, Madise 2000, Zvobgo 1973). By 1932, the YMG was officially recognized, and by 1938, it had adopted a symbolic uniform and a six-month training period for new members (Kemp 1898, Madise 2000).

The YMG's influence transcended South African borders, especially as mine workers and church members migrated. By the late 1920s, Amadodana groups had been established in Southern Rhodesia. In 1928, inspired by the Young Men's Guild (YMG) and Manyano, Methodist men began gathering for Bible study and fellowship. These meetings were later formalized as the Men's Christian Union (MCU) (Zvobgo 1973, MCR Rules and Regulations 1924).

The MCU retained the organizational and symbolic structures of the YMG, placing strong emphasis on preaching, holiness, unity and spiritual discipline. To become a member, individuals underwent rigorous training and were required to strictly adhere to codes of conduct (Zvobgo 1973, MCR Rules and Regulations 1924).

The MCU was introduced to Northern Rhodesia in 1957 by Christian migrants from Southern Rhodesia. The first congregation gathered in Lusaka's Matero compound, led by Rev. LevisonMuchunga and supported by prominent figures such as Daniel Ilunga, Thom Chituka and Peter Nyirongo (Muwowo 2022, Abraham 2024).

Following its inception, the MCU experienced rapid growth, establishing branches throughout Lusaka and Central Province by the early 1960s. Significant political changes, including Zambia's independence and the establishment of the UCZ in 1965, led to shifts in denominational structures.

Despite these developments, the MCU remained active, continually adapting its practices to new contexts – particularly within Lusaka province, mining communities and mission stations.

By the early 1970s, the UCZ recognized the need for a men's fellowship that truly reflected its unique identity. In response, the Synod resolved in 1975 to rebrand the MCU as the "Men's Christian Fellowship" (MCF). This transition marked a deliberate shift away from inherited organizational models and toward a fellowship rooted in the local context (MCF 2007, UCZSE/75 1975, MCF 1975,UCZS 1976).

The newly formed MCF introduced not only a new name but also a revised constitution and a distinctive badge. The badge featured a white cross on a red background, placed over a blue map of Zambia, accompanied by the motto from Mark 16:15: "Go to the whole world and preach the gospel to all mankind" (UCZSE/75 1975, MCF 1975,UCZS 1976). The MCF's constitution and rules were distributed to all UCZ congregations, firmly establishing 1975 as the official founding year of the organization.

Throughout its history, the MCF has demonstrated remarkable adaptability by consistently addressing the spiritual, social and economic needs of men across diverse contexts. From the industrializing cities of South Africa to the communities in Southern Rhodesia and the mining towns of Zambia, the Fellowship has responded to the unique challenges faced by men in each setting.

The organization's evolution – from the YMG to the MCU and eventually to the MCF –illustrates a dynamic process of contextualization and organizational innovation. This ongoing journey highlights a deep commitment to holistic Christian living. The MCF embraces the life-giving aspects of masculinity rooted in local African culture while intentionally discarding harmful elements, reflecting its dedication to positive transformation and relevance within its communities.

Building on this foundation of intentional change, the MCF's approach to masculinity undergoes further exploration in the following section.

3. Transforming Masculinity in the MCF

Masculinity refers to the culturally and socially constructed norms that define what it means to be a man (Ratele 2016,Deepan 2017:10, Ammann&Staudacher 2021:760). These norms dictate what society expects of men: how they should behave, what they should do or avoid, and the standards they are supposed to uphold. Within the context of the MCF, these ideas of masculinity are modeled on traditional African community life and embodied in the concept of the Insaka – a village common place for men.

Insaka is a term originating from the Bemba language, though it is widely used across Zambia. It refers to a communal gathering place for men. In many African communities, the Insaka serves as a space where men come together to share food, engage in fellowship, train young men, and discuss issues important to the community (Kangwa 2017, White Fathers 1954, Kapwepwe 1967).

The MCF acts as a modern analogue to the Insaka. It functions as a source of wisdom, unity, training and the transmission of customs and cultural values. Within the context of the Insaka, every man in the village is expected to participate in these gatherings. Those who do not take part are often labeled as uncultured (*Ifutu*), as they are perceived to have failed to meet the societal standard of a 'real man.'

The concept of Amadodana among Zulu- or Xhosa-speaking people and Abaume among Bemba-speaking people represents more than just a gathering of men. It refers to a fellowship of 'real men' – those who embody the ideals and values defined by their respective cultures. Specifically, the Bemba term Abaume denotes men who are regarded as well-cultured and who fulfil these cultural expectations (White Fathers 1954:511).

In many African societies, the transition to manhood is signified by initiation rites such as circumcision, or, where circumcision is not practised, through structured teaching and mentorship. This process establishes a clear distinction between cultured (real) men and uncultured (unreal) men. Such a division shapes both the training provided and the admission criteria for the MCF.

4. Training as LiminalityIN THE MCF

Membership in the MCF is open to men in the UCZ who are eighteen years of age and above. The training process, lasting six months, marks a period of liminality – a transformative phase in which candidates move from uninitiated 'men' to initiated 'men.' During this period, trainees –referred to as 'bridegrooms' (Bashibwinga) – are instructed in the Rules and Regulations, aims and objectives, faith

and doctrines, roles and duties, and the general administration of the MCF (MCF 2007:3-4, MCF Manual n.d.:1). The training is designed to ensure that each bridegroom fully understands both the foundational beliefs and practical responsibilities within the organization. By the end of this period, trainees are expected to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of the MCF's principles and operational structure. Those who complete the training and are commissioned become 'badged members,' while those still in training remain 'trainee members.'

The curriculum for MCF candidates is structured in two distinct layers. The first layer explores African cultural wisdom, providing a foundation rooted in local traditions and values. The second layer centers on Christian teachings, incorporating contextual Bible studies and lessons drawn from key scriptural passages. These include the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17), the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), as well as texts on evangelism (Jn. 3:1-21, Acts 8:26-40), prayer and Christian living (Phil. 2:1-18).

In addition to scriptural studies, trainees engage in discussions on critical issues impacting both the church and society. Topics include disease, politics, farming, hunger, property disputes, widow inheritance, gender-based violence, climate change and ethnic conflict.

Through this comprehensive program, MCF aims to transform and uphold standards of masculinity that are both culturally authentic and spiritually grounded, equipping candidates to address contemporary challenges with integrity and wisdom.

The three pillars of training – the African ideal man, Jesus as the paragon of the ideal man, and MCF members as soldiers of Jesus Christ – play a pivotal role in shaping a life-giving masculinity among MCF members.

4.1. An African Ideal Man

The process of becoming an ideal man in African culture begins with nurturing candidates to embody the community's cultural ideals of masculinity. This training emphasizes responsibility, respect for elders, communal solidarity and moral uprightness. Through mentorship and traditional rites of passage, individuals learn to balance personal ambition with collective wellbeing. They uphold family honor and serve as role models within their communities.

Culture consists of the ideas, beliefs and norms that shape social relations and ways of life (Kangwa 2017:46, Kangwa-Wilkie&Kapwepwe 2014:15). Across African societies, specific cultural notions of masculinity have been constructed to define what it means to be an ideal man. These definitions specify what society expects men to do, say and avoid, as well as the qualities and behaviors required to be considered a true man. Among the Bamba-speaking people, being a man (umwaume) is not solely about being male or a husband (*umwaumewa pa nganda*). Rather, it is about embodying the qualities set forth by society. This is expressed through the saying, "*Abaumeninyanjetashipwaukubuta*" (Men are as plentiful as maize; there is no shortage of them) (White Fathers 1954:511). This implies that society should always have men of good character. It emphasizes that simply being a man is insufficient; what truly matters are the personal qualities one possesses. Women are encouraged to seek partners who demonstrate communal virtues such as courage, diligence and strength. Because men are abundant, women should not feel compelled to settle for less. Instead, they should choose those who contribute positively to the community. This reinforces the expectation that good character is essential for fostering social harmony.

In the training of MCF candidates, the focus is on cultivating positive, life-affirming aspects of dominant masculinities while explicitly rejecting harmful or negative elements. This approach draws upon prevailing ideals of the African man, which prioritize headship of the family and protection of one's wife and children. However, male headship is framed not as domination over women, but as an expression of love, responsibility, and care.

Among the Bemba-speaking people of Zambia, for example, male headship is characterized by providing food for the family (*ukulishaulupwa*), protecting the wife (*ukuchingililaumukashi*), and meeting all family needs (ukusungaulupwa) (Kangwa 2017:189-190, Kapwepwe 1967). A man who fails in these responsibilities – particularly one who is lazy or does not provide – is ridiculed and seen as falling short of the ideal. Essential masculine virtues include bravery (ukushipa) and resilience in adversity, as captured by the proverb "umulumewambwatafwakukulu" (A bulldog cannot be killed by

trapping its leg), which underscores the expectation of courage and steadfastness. In contrast, cowardice or laziness is viewed as a mark of inadequacy.

MCF training also emphasizes the African principle of communalism (buumo), a central tenet of African culture (Mbiti 1990:2, Mbiti1994:36, Mbiti1986:171, Mbiti1986b:59, Healey &Sybertz 1996:254).As Ignatius Zvarevashe observes, this worldview stands in contrast to the European philosophy of "I think, therefore I am," which promotes individualism (Zvarevashe 2005:16). Instead, it embraces the African philosophy of "I relate to others, so I am," or "I participate in the community, therefore I am," which fosters community cohesion (Zvarevashe 2005:16). Community interests are prioritized over individual interests (Mbiti 1990:2,106, Mbiti 1986b), and the proverb "*umunweumotausalainda*" (one finger cannot pick a louse) illustrates the value placed on collective action.

According to John Mbiti, African life integrates the sacred and the secular, the natural and the supernatural, and the spiritual and the material (Mbiti 1990:2). People exist as part of a broader community, including ancestors, the living dead, and nonhuman life forms. Kinship, totems, rites of passage, and festivals connect individuals to this broader network (Mbiti 1994:36, Mbiti1986b:59). Within this framework, MCF members are taught that community wellbeing takes precedence over individual interests. Shared experiences – mourning at funerals, celebrating at weddings and births, and supporting one another in adversity – reinforce social cohesion. To foster this cohesion, MCF members are expected to attend funerals, help the sick, share food, participate in community work, and maintain harmonious relationships with neighbors and in-laws. Leadership in family and community, along with active participation in communal life, are highly valued.

The tradition of eating together further reinforces communal bonds, as sharing food and drink is a fundamental social practice (Healy &Sybertz 1996:254). MCF members are expected to embody two dimensions of sociality: individual sociality, by being receptive to help from others, and personal sociality, by communicating openly and sharing themselves with the community (Zvarevashe 2005:115).

Industriousness and innovation are also emphasized. In village settings, men learn skills such as basket-making, axe-forging, and farming through apprenticeship. The ability to produce sufficient food for one's family is seen as a key marker of manhood, and MCF members are encouraged to acquire practical skills to ensure economic productivity and avoid idleness.

Training in marriage and sexual matters is another essential component. While discussions about sex are private, elders guide boys and young men on these topics. Discreet conversations led by well-cultured men (*Ifimbusa*) address issues of marital relations and sexual health. Sexual prowess is valued, and men are taught about traditional herbs and medicines to enhance virility and fertility. MCF provides a safe space for men to discuss concerns related to marriage and sexuality.

These teachings reveal that African masculinity – especially among the Bemba – is fluid and adaptable rather than staticfamily. Masculinity is defined by embodying virtues such as bravery, kindness, and hard work rather than by physical appearance or age.A man who cares for his family and acts bravely is respected, regardless of his stature or seniority. In contrast, a physically imposing or elderly man who behaves cowardly or neglects his responsibilities is considered *ifutu* – a sub-standard man. This highlights that the true measure of masculinity lies in one's ability to protect, provide for and uphold the dignity of the family, rather than in external attributes such as age or physical strength.

Importantly, the flexible understanding of masculinity is not confined to a single African society. Research by Ammann&Staudacher (2021:764-765) demonstrates that across various African contexts, definitions of masculinity are fluid and change with social and cultural circumstances. Their findings emphasize that masculinity is shaped by local needs and values, rather than by fixed or universal traits. Thus, the qualities that define a respected man are dynamic, reflecting the priorities of specific communities.

The construction of masculinity in African culture is not about establishing male dominance, but about responsible leadership, provision, protection, and respect for all members of the community. A

true man promotes community harmony and does not oppress others, including women. By integrating these foundational African values, MCF members are encouraged to develop a form of masculinity that is both life-giving and deeply rooted in their cultural heritage.

4.2. Jesus as a Paragon of the Ideal Man

The second layer of the training presents Jesus as the ideal man. During the period of liminality –a six-month training – the MCF initiates are introduced to Jesus as man par excellence (*Umwaume wine wine*), embodying ideal masculinity. Jesus is depicted as one who fulfills the requirements of the ideal man in African society – a supermodel of transformed masculinity for MCF members.

The masculinity of Jesus Christ has been explored by theologians in the context of the incarnation and God's initiative to save humanity (Rakoczy 2004: 98-102, Dudley-Smith 2008:19, Partridge 2022). Jesus Christ was both God and, through his birth in a Jewish community, fully human – the son of Joseph the carpenter and Mary of Nazareth (Jn. 1:1, Lk. 2:41-52, Heb. 4:4-5). As a Jewish man, Jesus was expected to conform to the prevailing norms of manhood, such as refraining from crying in public or cooking for his disciples – tasks traditionally assigned to women. As a prophet, he was not expected to speak with women in public or dine with tax collectors (Rakoczy 2004: 98-102,Dudley-Smith 2008:19). Nevertheless, Jesus challenged and transcended these restrictive, life-denying forms of masculinity in his community, emerging as a champion of transformed masculinities (Rakoczy 2004: 98-102).

African theologians such as John Mbiti, BenezetBujo and Mercy AmbaOduyoye present Jesus not as a domineering, life-denying figure defined by rigid masculinity, but as a profoundly relational person whose identity is rooted in connection, community, and mutuality. Drawing on African worldviews, they emphasize that Jesus embodies the values of interdependence and harmonious relationships that are central to African cosmology and communal life (Bujo 2003: 13-34, Oduyoye 2001: 35, Mbiti 1990: 2, cf. Mbiti 1986b).

Oduyoye highlights that, in African thought, "God, the Source Being, other spirit-beings (such as the ancestors), and human beings are in constant communication and inter-relationship" (Oduyoye 2001: 35). This interconnectedness shapes the African understanding of Jesus, who is seen as one who enters into the web of relationships, mediates reconciliation, and affirms life. Rather than asserting authority through domination, Jesus's life and ministry are presented as an invitation to participate in the divine community, to practice hospitality, and to honor the dignity of every person.

For Bujo(2003) and Oduyoye (2001), Jesus's incarnation is interpreted as a profound act of solidarity with humanity and with all of creation. They argue that Jesus's presence among people affirms the African sense of belonging and unity, where to be human is to be in relation with others. In this context, Jesus's masculinity is not about power over others but about nurturing life, fostering communion, and embodying relational leadership. Thus, African theologians reframe Jesus as a model of relationality, challenging portrayals that emphasize domination or deny the fullness of life.

The gospel writers present Jesus as embodying a transformed form of masculinity, one that retains the life-giving qualities of dominant Jewish masculinities while rejecting those that are life-denying. Jesus's positive masculine traits – boldness, sacrificial love, agape (parental) love, and firmness – were expressed for the benefit of others (Partridge 2022).

First, Jesus demonstrated boldness in both his teachings and actions. Boldness, defined as the willingness to take risks and act with courage and confidence (Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2024), characterized Jesus's fearless approach to religious authorities. He rebuked leaders who oppressed others (Mt. 23:13, 23-24), refusing to be intimidated by power and prioritizing the well-being of the marginalized. The MCF encourages its members to emulate this boldness.

Second, Jesus showed sacrificial love for all people, regardless of race, culture, or gender. His shepherd-like love compelled him to lay down his life for humanity (Jn. 10:1, Jn. 13:34-35). This self-sacrifice mirrors expectations found in many African societies, where the ideal man is one who endures hardship for the sake of his family.

Third, Jesus exhibited agape, or parental, love. Among the Bemba-speaking people of Zambia, the saying "*Nang'ombe pa banataya*" (The breastfeeding cow does not abandon the calf) reflects a

parental willingness to suffer for the good of children. Similarly, Jesus ensured his followers would have abundant life (Jn. 10:10, Jn. 21:10-14).

Although Jesus is historically and theologically understood as a man, his acts of love and care consistently embodied the nurturing, self-giving qualities often associated with the feminine especially that of a breastfeeding mother or cow. The image of the breastfeeding mother is one of the most evocative symbols of unconditional, sacrificial care – a mother gives of her own body, her own strength, so that her child might flourish. In many cultures, including the Bemba, the image of the cow nourishing her calf is equally powerful: the cow, like the mother, does not withhold what is needed but provides sustenance freely, remaining close and attentive to the needs of the young.

Jesus, in his ministry, mirrored this maternal generosity and attentiveness. He fed the hungry, not only in a literal sense – such as when he multiplied bread and fish to satisfy the crowds (Mk. 6:30-44, Mt. 15:32-39) – but in a deeper, spiritual sense as well. He declared himself to be the "bread of life," inviting all who were hungry and thirsty to come to him and never hunger or thirst again (Jn. 6:35). This is the language of nourishment, echoing the act of breastfeeding, where the mother becomes the very means of life and growth for her children. Just as the breastfeeding mother anticipates and fulfills the needs of her child, so too did Jesus anticipate the needs of his followers and meet them in abundance.

In the ancient world, masculine and feminine virtues were often sharply distinguished, with nurturing, feeding, and caring roles ascribed primarily to women. Yet in Jesus, these boundaries are blurred. He gathered children into his arms, blessed them, and insisted that the kingdom of God belonged to such as these (Mk. 10:13-16). He washed his disciples' feet, an act of humble service reminiscent of the daily, embodied care a mother gives. He wept at the tomb of Lazarus, and he lamented over Jerusalem "as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (Mt. 23:37), drawing on explicitly maternal imagery.

Thus, the love Jesus demonstrated was not limited by gendered expectations. He embodied the fierce, protective, nurturing love of a breastfeeding mother or cow, offering his very self as sustenance and security for his followers. In doing so, he revealed that true agape love transcends all boundaries, inviting us to recognize and embrace the fullness of God's parental care – a care that feeds, comforts, and never abandons its own.

Fourth, Jesus showed firmness and resolve in his ministry. He remained steadfast in his mission to liberate humanity (Lk. 4:18-19), resisting temptations to deviate from his purpose. Although crowds sought him for miracles, healing or political liberation, he stayed focused on his ultimate goal: saving humanity through his death on the cross.

At the same time, the gospels portray Jesus acting contrary to dominant, life-denying forms of masculinity.Connell (1995:77) defines hegemonic masculinity as "a configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." Building on this, Ammann&Staudacher (2021:760) explain that masculinities encompass "norms and expectations related to what men say and do to be men." Together, these definitions highlight how hegemonic masculinity is not only about individual behavior but also about broader social norms that privilege men. As a result, such forms of masculinity reinforce male dominance and contribute to the subordination of women and other marginalized groups.

Jesus challenged these norms in several ways. He wept openly at Lazarus's funeral (Jn. 11:17-43), defying cultural expectations that men – especially prophets – should not display emotion. Rather than seeing tears as weakness, Jesus demonstrated that vulnerability is part of being human and a valid means to express grief and seek healing. He also broke social conventions by interacting with women, dining with tax collectors, and even cooking for his disciples (Jn. 21:10-14, Mk. 7:24-29, Jn. 4:1-42,Lk. 19:1-10). Examples include speaking with the Samaritan woman in public, allowing a woman with a flow of blood to touch him (Mk. 5:25-34), healing the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk. 7:24-29), and raising Jairus's daughter (Mt. 9:18-26).

In crossing these boundaries, Jesus affirmed the dignity and value of women and girls, demonstrating that masculinity is a social construct that can – and should – be transformed if it denies people the fullness of life (Cf. Harris 2005, Partridge 2022). By embracing life-giving aspects of masculinity and rejecting those that are life-denying, Jesus offers a model of transformed masculinities.

Building on its reimagining of masculinity in the figure of Jesus, the MCF integrates these ideals into its community life and outreach. This approach is most visible in how MCF encourages its members to see themselves as "soldiers of Christ," grounding their evangelism and fellowship in the masculinity modeled by Jesus.

4.3. Members of MCF as Soldiers of Christ

The MCF deliberately constructs a model of masculinity that draws its inspiration from the person and example of Jesus Christ. Central to MCF's evangelism and fellowship strategies is the portrayal of Jesus not only as a savior, but as the ultimate masculine archetype – courageous, compassionate, disciplined and self-sacrificing (MCF 2007:6-7). By framing their identity as 'soldiers of Christ,' MCF members commit to embodying these Christ-like masculine virtues in every aspect of their lives.

MCF gatherings consistently invoke the militaristic, yet redemptive, imagery of Christian discipleship (MCF 2007:6-7). Members rally around the hymn, "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus," by George Duffield, with lyrics that call men to serve courageously and steadfastly: "Ye that are men now serve him against unnumbered foes; let courage rise with danger, and strength to strength oppose" (Duffield 1858, UCZ Bemba Hymnal 1975:152). This anthem, paired with the group's slogan, anchors the connection between masculinity and spiritual warfare – urging men to confront the world's evils by drawing on Jesus' example of moral and spiritual bravery (cf. Mt. 28:19-20).

Within MCF, the construction of masculinity is not simply about outward strength or authority, but about embracing the life-giving and radical compassion exemplified by Jesus. Members are expected to demonstrate compassion through visiting the sick, caring for the suffering, and praying for those in need – an ethic that redefines manhood as active service rather than domination (MCF 2007:6-7). Compassion becomes a defining, non-negotiable feature of Christian manhood in the fellowship.

Discipline and self-restraint, also modeled on Jesus' life, form another pillar of MCF masculinity (MCF 2007:6-7). Members are required to abstain from intoxicants, drugs and smoking, and to avoid behaviors such as quarrelling, strife and any form of sexual or gender-based violence. Scriptural mandates (Num. 5:1-4, Rom. 13:13, 1 Cor. 3:16, Gal. 5:19, 1 Cor. 13:4-6) are invoked to underscore that true manhood involves mastery over self and the creation of safe, supportive environments for all, especially the vulnerable.

This Christ-centered masculinity is also outwardly focused: MCF men are challenged to be responsible leaders within their families and communities. They lead daily home prayers, support evangelistic outreach in diverse settings (from townships to prisons and villages), and raise funds to support mission work and the growth of young people in the faith. In this model, headship is reimagined as responsibility, nurture and service, rather than entitlement or control.

In a context where patriarchal norms, sexual abuse and gender-based violence are often misused as measures of manhood, MCF's Christocentric masculinity offers a transformative alternative. The group actively resists harmful social norms by teaching that real men imitate Jesus –protecting the vulnerable, promoting dignity and fostering peace. Recent statistics from Zambia's Victim Support Unit – which reported a 29% increase in GBV cases in late 2022 – underscore the urgency of this work (Chibwili 2023). MCF's approach directly addresses the root causes of violence which include poverty, power imbalances and the social acceptance of abuse.

By rooting masculinity in the example of Jesus, MCF challenges the traditional African view of men as mere authority figures. Masculinity is reconstructed around the values of compassion, discipline, family care and community service. Recognizing that masculinities are socially constructed and context-dependent (Connell 1995,Deepan 2017,Ammann&Staudacher2021:760), MCF's model seeks not only to inform and form its members, but to transform broader cultural expectations – affirming the dignity of all people and offering a gospel-centered vision of what it means to be a man.

Despite the transformative vision of the (MCF), recent years have seen a marked decline in membership among young men under the age of 45, particularly in Central Province and other regions (UCZCP 2022:5). This worrying trend can be traced to several interrelated factors, chief among them the (UCZ) lack of a strategic plan for mobilizing resources and energizing the MCF's mission. Without clear direction and intentional programming, the church has struggled to communicate the

purpose and objectives of the MCF to its broader membership, thereby failing to attract and inspire the next generation of men to participate in the guild's activities.

This lack of engagement is symptomatic of deeper cultural shifts. The reluctance of young men to join the MCF may reflect a broader erosion of traditional African values and norms Chuba 2011:204. Historically, ideals such as oneness (buumo), sharing (ukwakana), justice (umulinganya), self-reliance (ukuiteka), responsibility (ukuisunga), and bravery (ukushipa) have defined masculinity and communal life in Zambia. However, today's youth are increasingly influenced by Western and technology-driven cultures that prioritize individualism and capitalist pursuits. As a result, they often seek personal prosperity and self-advancement, at times neglecting the communal ethos and the imperative to uphold the dignity and intrinsic worth of others, as well as stewardship of the natural world.

Addressing these challenges requires deliberate and sustained efforts by the UCZ to reinvigorate the MCF's mission. The church must develop and implement strategic programs aimed at educating members about the value of the MCF and the significance of its vision for transformed, Christ-like masculinity. By integrating these ideals more fully into church life, the UCZ can foster a community that heals cultural wounds and promotes holistic human flourishing (Cf. Harris 2005). Ultimately, the future vitality of the MCF – and its capacity to shape both personal and communal transformation – depends on the church's ability to adapt its message and methods to resonate with younger generations while remaining rooted in its foundational values.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the interplay between African cultural traditions and Christian values in reconstructing masculinity within the MCF of the UCZ. By synthesizing the communal ethos of the Insaka with the Christocentric model of manhood, the MCF has constructed a dynamic and contextually relevant model for masculine identity. This dual approach not only interrogates and redefines inherited gender norms but also cultivates virtues that are both culturally resonant and theologically profound – dignity, compassion, communal responsibility and a commitment to justice.

The findings reveal that the MCF's six-month initiation process serves as a transformative rite of passage, equipping men to embody forms of masculinity that reject hegemonic and toxic patterns – such as dominance, emotional repression, and violence – in favor of life-giving alternatives rooted in service, inclusivity and relational leadership. The deliberate integration of African and biblical models enables the MCF to offer a holistic response to contemporary challenges, including GBV and the erosion of communal values among younger generations.

Nevertheless, the study also identifies significant challenges, including a decline in participation among younger men and shifting cultural landscapes influenced by globalization and technological change. These developments underscore the necessity for the UCZ and the MCF to adopt innovative, contextually grounded strategies that will re-engage youth and sustain the transformative vision of Christian manhood.

In the final analysis, the MCF stands as a compelling case study in the potential of Christian and faith-based organizations to reconstruct masculinities in ways that foster gender justice, social cohesion and holistic well-being. By drawing on both African heritage and Christian theology, the MCF offers a model of manhood that is adaptive, liberative and deeply relevant for contemporary African societies. This research thus contributes to broader academic conversations on gender, religion and cultural transformation in Africa, highlighting the indispensable role of religious institutions in shaping more just and equitable communities.

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