

A Speck in the Brother's (Sister's) Eye? An Ethical Analysis of Church Discipline as Practiced in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT)

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Abstract

Being motivated by the enduring practice of church discipline in the ELCT, albeit critique, this article analyses some aspects of church discipline from an ethical stand point. The article is informed by a descriptive analysis of previous research on church discipline in the ELCT. Scrutiny of parts related to church discipline in the ELCT hymnal - *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu*, the church constitutions, and some interviews were carried out. The analysis shows that church discipline as practiced in the ELCT is imbued with flaws among which are failure to address issues contextually, gender bias and contradiction with the ELCT liturgy, especially concerning absolution and benediction. Such flaws mask and even contradict with the Lutheran identity as reflected in tenets of justification by grace, priesthood of believers and freedom. The study reveals that the enduring practice of church discipline in the ELCT is attributed to the need of differentiating and correcting wrong doings in various contexts. From this perspective, church discipline is considered ethical as to its intention. However, the bias

and contradictions manifest in the practice of church discipline, render church discipline as practiced in the ELCT unethical. It is recommended that the ELCT could review the practice in efforts to align it with the mission of the church and the fast-changing context.

Key Words

Church Discipline, Grace, Ethics, ELCT, ELCT Constitution, ELCT liturgy, African theology, gender bias

Introduction

Church discipline, which constitutes manifold and ramified ways of correcting and even castigating backslidden Christians, is still practiced in some Lutheran churches¹ not least in the ELCT. The fact that church discipline is ingrained in the tradition of the ELCT is attested to in a number of the church's documents – the chief ones being the ELCT constitution,² the constitutions of the constituent dioceses³ and the ELCT hymnal

¹ See Peter M. Mnene, *Use of Sacraments in Church Discipline as a Challenge to Missional Transformation in Kenya's Mainstream Churches: A Case Study of Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Master Thesis (St. Paul, Minn.: Luther Seminary, 2013); Thomas M. Winger, "Ruminations on Church Discipline," *Lutheran Theological Review* 19 (2007): 107–23.

² Kanisa la Kiinjili la Kilutheri Tanzania (ELCT), "Katiba ya KKKT (Constitution of the ELCT)" (Arusha: ELCT, 2015), 3.

³ E.g., Dayosisi ya Kaskazini (ELCT – Northern Diocese), "Kanisa La Kiinjili La Kilutheri Tanzania – Dayosisi Ya Kaskazini (ELCT – Northern Diocese), Katiba (Constitution)," 2006.

Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu.⁴ The enduring presence of church discipline as a constituting element in the constitutions and hymnal of the ELCT points to the fact that the practice was and is aimed at serving important functions in the ministry and life of this church. Among these functions are correcting the backsliders, and maintaining Christian morals.

Interest on the functioning, and impact of church discipline in the ELCT is reflected in many previous researches. The Tumauni University Makumira (TUMA) main campus library – alone has more than twenty research reports, documenting matters directly or closely related to church discipline in the ELCT. These works constitute researches done and presented in partial or full fulfilment of the requirements for graduation. In addition to researches culminating to academic awards, TUMA library also contains a number of articles related to the topic.⁵

As we shall note in the respective section below, the analysis of researches on church discipline in the ELCT provides a rich source of valuable information on the practice. Among the aspects of church discipline addressed in these researches are its relationship with

⁴ Kanisa la Kiinjili la Kilutheri Tanzania (ELCT), *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu (Let Us Worship Our God)* (Arusha: ELCT, 2017), 429.

⁵ E.g., Andrew Kyomo, “Disciplinary Teamwork for Evangelism in the Parish,” *Africa Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (2004): 70–87; Mika Vähäkangas, “Ecclesial Self Discipline Based on Christian Growth in Conformity with Christ,” *Africa Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (2004): 3–33.

Lutheran ecclesiology⁶, biblical basis⁷, and influence on mission.⁸ Findings from these researches point to some weaknesses in the practice church discipline in the ELCT among which are its deviation from the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith.⁹

Despite the considerable number of researches done on church discipline in the ELCT in the past, a number of factors tend to dictate a fresh look into the practice. Apart from the fact that many of the reports from previous researches on church discipline have not been published, most of these researches have addressed issues at the level of individual constituent dioceses of the ELCT. Considering that the different dioceses of the ELCT emanate from different backgrounds¹⁰, one feels a need to paint a unified picture of the practice for the whole of the ELCT. Although attempts have been made in some

⁶Alex Mkumbo, "The Practice of Church Discipline in the ELCT-CD in Light of the Ecclesiology of Martin Luther" (Ph.D. thesis, Usa River, Tanzania, Makumira University College, 2008).

⁷George Fihavango, "Church Discipline in the First Century: A Study of 1 Cor. 5: 1-13 and Mt. 18 15-20 with Its Relevance to the Southern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania" (Bachelor of Divinity thesis, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1994).

⁸Jackson J. Lugayana, "The Practice of Church Discipline and Its Challenges to Mission in the ELCT – North Western Diocese". (MTh Thesis Makumira, 2006) (Master of Theology thesis, Usa River, Tanzania, Tumaini University Makumira, 2006); Joyce Mhache, "The Understanding of Missio Dei in Church Discipline Practices in the Eastern District of the ELCT-ND" (Master of Theology thesis, Usa River, Tanzania, Tumaini University Makumira, 2019).

⁹Mkumbo, *The practice of Church discipline*.

¹⁰Mkumbo, e.g., notes the differences of tone in the application of church discipline between the Leipzig Mission society and the Augustana Mission (Mkumbo, *The Practice of Church Discipline*).

previous researches to reflect generally on the whole of the ELCT¹¹ such reflection remain limited in scope in addressing the ethical implications. Worth noting in this connection is the observation that some of the elements in the practice of church discipline decried in the past e.g., outright denial of Christian burial to those who die under church discipline, have been revisited.¹² Beforehand families of people who died in situations prone to church discipline, for example those who committed suicide, were denied of any official consolation service by the church. Beginning 2012, the church introduced a special order of service to such families.¹³ Researches in the past had decried the absence of officially documented church involvement in such burials. The introduction of this special order in ELCT hymnal following critique, therefore, points to the responsiveness of the ELCT and need for continued reflection on church discipline. While the ELCT should be hailed for the introducing this special order, it is clear that some elements in the practice of church discipline still need to be revisited.

Apart from the above reasons, challenges emanating from globalization, with its accompanying shifts in the understanding of what is ethical, and the swift communication that renders what was previously 'private' public, calls for an analysis of the relevancy of church

¹¹ See Ronilick Mchami, "The Practice of Church Discipline in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania in the Light of Pauline Theology," *Africa Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (2004): 34–52.

¹² ELCT, *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu*, 644.

¹³ ELCT, *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu*, 644.

discipline in addressing what it was and is still meant to effect. In other words, the changing context of ministry calls for an accompanying theological reflection, and in turn revisiting church discipline as a ministerial tool. In his article Mika Vähäkangas challenged the church – the practitioner of discipline – to exercise self-discipline.¹⁴ Reflection on this challenge, which has ethical implications, has so far not been carried out. As such the ethics of the practice of church discipline in the ELCT remain unexplored.

This article analyses church discipline as practiced in the ELCT with the aim of assessing the ethics of this phenomenon. The article is based on analysis of findings, and conclusions drawn from previous researches on church discipline, examination of statements and phrases from the ELCT hymnal and constitutions as well as interviews. In the course of doing so, the article documents parts of previous research on church discipline in the ELCT.

The research reports analyzed are catalogued under ‘church discipline’ in the library at TUMA. The analysis of the documents was therefore based on the potentiality of the documents to yield relevant data on the topic. The analysis was descriptive in nature. In this line, the researches were scrutinized and summarized in the light of four thematic areas, namely; the foundation and history of the practice, cases leading to placement under church discipline, the practice itself and critique.

¹⁴ Mika Vähäkangas, “Ecclesial Self Discipline Based on Christian Growth in Conformity with Christ,” *Africa Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (2004): 3–33.

The article begins by an analysis of findings and conclusions from previous researches on church discipline. It then proceeds to examining the documentation of church discipline in the ELCT, followed by a general discussion of the analyses. The article then embarks on an analysis of the ethics of church discipline as practiced in the ELCT and culminates in a conclusion.

Analysis of Previous Researches on Church Discipline in the ELCT from TUMA Library

Research reports on church discipline as documented in TUMA Library span a period of about fifty years.¹⁵ These works constitute researches done and presented for graduation at certificate, diploma, bachelor, master and PhD levels. The researches are supervised by at least one member of staff, and examined internally, and especially for master and PhD externally also. Sources for these researches include interviews, questionnaire, observation, archival material, and published works. Therefore, although the certificate, diploma and bachelor degree researches are of relatively lower level of analysis, they are significant in terms of content. Some of those interviewed for these researches in this period were of the age that allowed for considerable interaction with the missionary practice. Evidence given by some of these

¹⁵ A search in the library of Tumaini University Makumira shows that the earliest research entries in the library catalogue are in the mid-1970s. See Sylvester Kafunzile, "Church Discipline in Karambi Parish in Kamera District North Western Diocese" (Diploma Paper, Kampala, Uganda, Makerere University College, 1976).

interviewees is therefore significant. The author of this article knows three pastors in the ELCT, one a centenarian and two above ninety-five, who contribute valuable information today (2024). One need to think of these people and their peers three or four decades ago, i.e., in the time during which some of these researches were conducted.

The number of research reports reviewed in the TUMA library was twenty-five (25), including 5 researches at certificate level. The rest were; 3 diploma, 12 bachelor, 3 master and 2 at PhD level. The research reports used in this article are of varied nature. While many of them addressed church discipline directly, some did it indirectly. The level of analysis pertaining to the reports that addressed discipline indirectly was just on their having sided with the concept, and the need of some kind of discipline (strictures) in the society.

As already mentioned, this analysis on previous researches is guided by four thematic areas, namely; 1. the foundation and history of the practice, 2. cases leading to placement under church discipline, 3. the practice itself and 4. critique. Despite the fact that the author attempted to separate the treatment of these issues, a significant overlap is evident.

Concerning the first theme (1), the author found that the practice of church discipline in the ELCT is often traced back to the missionaries and African cultures.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Aneth Munga, "The Understanding and Practice of Church Discipline in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania North Eastern Diocese" (Bachelor of Divinity Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran

With the missionaries, Church discipline is traced even far more back, i.e., to Christ¹⁷ and his apostles. The practice, therefore, is considered resonating with the Bible by many researches. The texts in Matthew 16:18-15; 18:15-17 and John 20:23 are regularly referred to in support of the practice.¹⁸ Jesus, according to Matthew 18:15-17, prescribes a three-stage procedure before the 'excommunication' of an erring brother. The use of this text is even criticized among the research reports. Fihavango, in his Bachelor of Divinity research paper, considers the use of this text in support of church discipline to be a misinterpretation. According to him, rather than taking this text as a ground for disciplining, one should put the search of the erring brother into the centre of attention.¹⁹ Regarding the African basis of Church discipline, previous research points to the existence of pre-missionary era norms from African

Theological College Makumira, 1989); Martha Massawe, "Church Discipline, Pastoral Care and Counselling of Girls with Premarital Pregnancies in the ELCT - Mbulu Diocese" (Master of Theology thesis, Usa River, Tanzania, Makumira University College, 2004).

¹⁷ Ezekieli Mwangosi, "The Understanding of the Holiness of the Church and the Question of Excommunication: A Case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania Konde Diocese" (Master of Theology thesis, Usa River, Tanzania, Makumira University College, 2002).

¹⁸ David Munisi, "Marudi Ya Kanisa Katika Kanisa La Kiinjili La Kilutheri Tanzania - Sinodi Ya Mashariki Na Pwani" (Certificate Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1979); Jackson M. Karoti, "Marudi Ya Kanisa Na Athari Zake Katika Usharika Wa Kashumbiliro. Dayosisi Ya Kaskazini Mashariki - Jimbo La Kati" (Certificate in Theology Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1993).

¹⁹ Fihavango, *Church Discipline in the First Century*.

Religion that are to govern society.²⁰ These would, expectedly, find way in the practices of the indigenous Church. Providential as the pre-missionary practice of morality may have been, as Massawe points out, it also had significant elements of cruelty and sadism.²¹ Nevertheless, despite profound criticism, the legitimacy of the practice of church discipline as such was never questioned.

Concerning the second theme, cases leading to placement under church discipline. Issues that lead one to be under church discipline as shown in previous research are many, and varied. These include – but are not limited to – drunkenness, selling alcohol, theft, adultery, and premarital pregnancy.²² Suggesting the missionary misunderstanding or disregard of African cultures, incidences of disciplining those participating in dancing and drumming are also reported. Of interest among issues precipitating church discipline is the ‘disciplining’ of polygamists. During the beginning of mission work, and even later in the established local church polygamists were expected to conform to the dictates of Christianity as understood by that time.²³ One should note that the

²⁰ Mkumbo, *The Practice of Church Discipline*.

²¹ Massawe, *Church Discipline*; Munga, *The Understanding of Church Discipline*.

²² Munisi, *Marudi ya Kanisa*; Faith Lugazia, “The Practice of Church Discipline: Its Effects on Haya Women of ELCT – North Western Diocese” (Bachelor of Divinity Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Makumira University College, 1998).

²³ See Isakwisa Mwakalambo, “Church Discipline and the Nyakyusa Culture in Konde Diocese” (Diploma Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1978).

handling of polygamists has been more or less the same, the exception being that today people are more aware of the norms of Christianity than during the early missionary era. Other issues precipitating placement under church discipline include quarrelling, superstition, and not attending church services.²⁴

When it comes to the practice of church discipline as the third thematic area, the actual disciplining in these matters include exclusion from church services like God parenting, Holy Communion, guarantor of marriage, and even Christian burial. This practice shows a continuation of earlier practices of an even stricter stance. In her research Overa Matta reports that beforehand in the Northern Diocese, those under church discipline sat on special seats behind the congregation, and in some congregations the benches were painted black.²⁵ A similar situation is reflected by Munga who reports that those under church discipline stood at the back of the church.²⁶ Matta also reports that in the past those under church discipline did not begin the service with the rest of the congregation.²⁷ In this case, they did not receive the absolution. They also had to leave before the benediction.

²⁴ Adams Mwanjokolo, "Excommunication as Understood by Students at Lutheran Theological College Makumira" (Bachelor of Divinity Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1995).

²⁵ Overa Matta, "Church Discipline: Its Bases and Practice in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania Northern Diocese" (Bachelor of Divinity Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1989).

²⁶ Munga, *The Understanding and Practice of Church Discipline*.

²⁷ Munga, *The Understanding and Practice of Church Discipline*.

The contradiction born in the practice of church discipline today where neither of the above is done is addressed in the discussion below. Those under church discipline were sometimes even likened to the dead. There is usually a characteristic ringing of the bell for the burial of the dead among some ELCT dioceses. This was rung for those under church discipline to signify their spiritual death.²⁸ Interestingly, if they happened to die under church discipline the bells meant for a Christian burial were not rung. Suggesting the continuation of disciplining even close to absolution, in some cases, pastors demanded that the one under church discipline narrated the actual deed that led to his/her placement under church discipline.²⁹

Finally, the critique of the practice of church discipline as analysed from the research report range from audible support of properly mediated discipline³⁰ to an almost utter attack.³¹ Support for church discipline as recorded in the reports has been due to its envisaged ability to maintain order.³² The attack has been on among other things its lack of uniformity, and bias against gender

²⁸ Munga, *The Understanding and Practice of Church Discipline*.

²⁹ Munisi, *Marudi ya Kanisa*.

³⁰ See Nnko Sarikiaeli, "Eucharist and Church Discipline Within the Meru District of the Evangelical Church in Tanzania, Northern Diocese" (Bachelor of Divinity Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1990).

³¹ See Mwakalambo, *Church Discipline and the Nyakyusa Culture*.

³² See Mpembela Adimini, "The Theological Topics of Martin Luther's *Invocavit Sermons and Their Importance to the Church Today*" (Bachelor of Divinity Research Paper, Usa River, Tanzania, Lutheran Theological College Makumira, 1994).

and status.³³ The practice of church discipline has, for instance, been found to depend on the background of the parish and the opinion of the pastor. Regarding bias along gender and status, Martha Massawe in her research noted that women impregnated out of wedlock have more easily been put under church discipline than the men who impregnated them. In what appears to be the effect of a combination of fame, economic status, and friendship, leaders who execute church discipline have tended to shy off from identifying men who have impregnated the women who have been put under church discipline.³⁴ In her research area, Faith Lugazia observed that divorce, which has been associated with cases of church discipline, has been by and large triggered by men living outside their families for jobs. Surprisingly, Lugazia notes three issues in her analysis of the records of committee meetings dealing with the cases. In the first place, all cases were reported by men. In addition, the committees deliberating on the cases were skewed – having a clear majority of men, and all decisions favoured men.³⁵ As it shall be noted below, the general appraisal of the practice of church discipline has leaned more on its negative attributes. Even those who have supported the practice have given critical remarks to its practice on the soil.

³³ Mwanjokolo, *Excommunication as Understood by Students; Massawe, Church Discipline, Pastoral Care and Counselling of Girls.*

³⁴ Massawe, *Church Discipline, Pastoral Care and Counselling of Girls.* One should note in addition that the physical manifestation of the pregnancy tends to 'discipline' the woman even before the search for the impregnator starts.

³⁵ Lugazia, *The Practice of Church Discipline*, 1998.

The ELCT's Official Documentation

As noted in the introduction, the existence of church discipline in the ELCT is evidenced in its mention and explication in a number of ELCT documents i.e., the ELCT Constitution, the constitutions of the constituent dioceses of the ELCT, and the hymnal of the ELCT *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu*.

The Constitution of the ELCT alludes to church discipline in giving two scenarios through which a Christian can lose his/her membership namely 1. either if he/she refuses to follow the teachings of the church or joins a religion that is contrary to the Christian faith or 2. leads a rebellious life, and or refuses to heed to warning.³⁶ This clarification may be deemed to lean more on excommunication i.e., indifferent exclusion from the church. However, the phrasing of the second part of the second scenario of losing membership i.e., 'refusal to heed to warning', strongly suggests 'discipline' in the sense of some kind of castigation. It can be argued that the warning referred to here, i.e., in the ELCT Constitution, is meant to correct the wayward Christian. This is in line with some of descriptions which Church discipline affords among which is 'correcting sin in the church'.³⁷ According to Leeman 'a Christian life is a church life'.³⁸ Those who fall short of church life standards must, therefore, not only be

³⁶ ELCT, *Katiba ya KKKT*, 3.

³⁷ Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding Church Discipline*, Church Basics (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2016), 4.

³⁸ Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding Church Discipline*, Church Basics (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2016), 4.

differentiated but corrected. Church discipline then constitutes procedure, actions, and practices aimed at effecting this differentiation, and correction.

While church discipline is called for in the ELCT Constitution there is no liturgy or order for ousting one from the flock. The question is how does one find him/herself under church discipline. According to some of the diocesan constitutions, “The church (diocese) does not suspend anyone (put one under church discipline). One places him/herself under church discipline through his/her deeds.”³⁹ Although the fact of one placing himself/herself under church discipline has been criticized, this wording helps to differentiate the practice from excommunication – *kutengwa* which is the jurisdiction of the executive council of the Church (diocese).⁴⁰ We now turn to the readmission of those under church discipline.

Although a liturgy for ousting or suspending the backsliders is lacking, an elaborate order for reinstatement of those under church discipline is there. This order is in the hymnal of the ELCT. As we noted earlier, the hymnal of the ELCT is among the documents that bear witness to the practice of church discipline in the church. The order of readmission makes the hymnal a key document attesting to the unified theological stand of the church on the exercise of church discipline. This is so considering that the constitution of the ELCT gives only a

³⁹ ELCT – Northern Diocese, *Katiba*, 130 (my translation; N.M.)

⁴⁰ See *Kanisa la Kiinjili la Kilutheri Tanzania – Dayosisi ya Kaskazini Magharibi* (ELCT – North-Eastern Diocese), “*Katiba* (Constitution),” n.d.

general statement on church discipline or excommunication while the constitutions of the constituent dioceses give statements that, although of somewhat general acceptance by other dioceses, are specific to the diocese in question. The hymnal remains the only common document attesting to the dynamics of church discipline accessible to the grassroots. The widespread use of the hymnal in matters of church discipline is suggested in the observation that while many are placed under church discipline, in most cases only statistics of those readmitted (using this liturgy) are available.⁴¹

The position of the ELCT in the order of readmission is clear; those who for a reason or another find themselves under church discipline have a clear way back to the flock. Remorse and confession paves way to being right with God and the church. The order is meant for public confession. This should however, not mask the private confession provided for in the constitutions of the individual dioceses.⁴²

The order of service for the readmission of those under church discipline consists of an introduction made by the leader⁴³ of the service, questions and response between the leader and the readmitted, interjections by the congregation, reading of extracts from the Bible and prayer. For example, the introduction to the order reads;

⁴¹ See Matta, *Church Discipline*, 2.

⁴² ELCT - Northern Diocese, *Katiba*, 75.

⁴³ In most cases, this is an ordained pastor.

“Before you is your fellow Christian who rebelled against God’s commandments. S/he has realized his/her wrong doing and has regretted and want to be received back to the flock. Let us hear how s/he expresses by himself/herself this intention.”⁴⁴

Part of the congregation’s response to the readmission of one under church discipline reads; “we together also receive him/her back in order to serve You together.”⁴⁵

The liturgy for readmission involves the congregation, scriptures and God, through prayer, in a way that is meant to assure the readmitted of his/her acceptance. However, one wonders whether the placement under church discipline prepares one to cherish all that he/she is expected to receive from the liturgy.

Summary of Findings from the Analysis of Previous Research and the ELCT Constitution and Documents

In general, the necessity of practising church discipline is never questioned by previous researches from TUMA library. There were historical links identified, like African cultures and Western missionaries. However, there were questionable references to its foundations, for example, Mt 18:15–17 that is often interpreted as supporting strict church disciplinary measures, rather than the search for the one who has fallen astray. As

⁴⁴ ELCT, *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu*, 429 (my translation; N.M.).

⁴⁵ ELCT, *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu*, 430 (my translation; N.M.).

typical cases of church discipline various moral misbehaviours were mentioned, but also African cultural practices like polygamy, dancing, and drumming were often condemned, and sanctioned. The practice of church discipline itself involves a variety of measures, for example., exclusion from certain parts of the worship service, e.g., blessing, and the denial of certain rights of Christians, e.g., being a God parent. Criticism of church discipline does not reject the practice entirely; it rather identifies shortcomings like bias influenced by gender and status. Especially male and wealthy people are hardly put under church discipline, for instance, in the case of pregnancy outside the wedlock, in many cases only the female part of the illegitimate relation is sanctioned.

In the ELCT official documentation church discipline is a way of sanctioning members who do not conform to the expectations of a Christian life in a less radical way than excommunication. However, there is no liturgy for putting somebody under church discipline. Just the unclear statement that a person displaying immoral behaviour puts her/himself in the position of needing correction, and sanctioning by the church. For readmitting somebody, there is a well elaborated order with wrongdoers and the remaining church community being both involved in reinstalling the relationship between those under church discipline, and the rest of the church.

General Appraisal of the Research Reports and Documentation on Church Discipline

This discussion on the research findings and documentation of church discipline in the ELCT concentrates on the logic of the practice. The discussion employs ideas from interviews, and literature related to the topic. The foregoing presentation tends to take church discipline for granted. The analysis of the findings and conclusions from these researches suggest that some kind of discipline, whether self or mediated by outside authority, has existed in the history of the church, and has become part and parcel of Christian ministry. Therefore, the official documents on church discipline can be conceived as channels or tools in managing something of assumed existence. Thus, even where critical voices are raised against the practice in the researches, the critique tends to have sprung from an assessment of a practice that is ingrained in this church. The existence of moral strictures is justified by Scriptural evidence among which are Matthew 18. Reference is also made to Jesus. The gist of church discipline then is that of differentiation, and correction.

The differentiation referred to here echoes an experience shared in an interview by Gabriel Kimirei.⁴⁶ In this interview Kimirei narrated the story of his own

⁴⁶ Interview with Gabriel Kimirei, 13.08.2024. Kimirei, aged 84, is the former Assistant to the Bishop of the North-Central Diocese of the ELCT. He has also worked as a part time lecturer at Makumira and chaplain of Arusha Lutheran Medical Centre.

baptism which also included the baptism of his entire family. Those to be baptized were seated at the rear seats of the church. The baptizer would then call out loudly the name of the one to be baptized and ask 'do you want to be baptized'? The catechumen would respond, while running toward the altar; 'yes, otherwise what brought me here'. The catechumen would then give a declaration of denouncing Satan, and all his works. In this story the physical movement from behind the church to the altar reflects a deeper spiritual reality. It is more of an enactment of 2 Corinthians 6 'come out from them . . .' – a situation of being called from darkness to light (1Pet 2:9). Historically then, those who confessed Christ were set at a stark difference from those who had not. A return to 'darkness' would thus invoke placement under church discipline. The logic is clear; one who was called from darkness to light but returned to darkness again, has chosen his/her own fate. Placement under church discipline in this case is more or less automatic. The question is whether the Christians are equipped with the understanding of what church discipline at its core entails, and whether it has been practiced the way it should.

Even though church discipline has been taken for granted, the researches have generally raised critical voices against its practice. The researches identify flaws in the practice in a number of places. Among the faulty areas in the practice of church discipline is its gender

bias.⁴⁷ Since church discipline has tended to deal more with the ‘outer man/woman’ than the ‘inner’; any outside manifestations of what is considered immoral has attracted disciplining. In this case the ‘baby bump’ – outside wedlock – which of course marks women only, has resulted in women being under church discipline much more than men. This trend connects with the observation that church discipline is an almost wholesale adoption of a foreign missionary practice. The missionaries tended to be, by and large, revivalist.⁴⁸ Andrew Walls contends that “the modern missionary movement is an autumnal child of the Evangelical Revival.”⁴⁹ Revivalism rebuked laxity in Christian Europe and America and called for renewed life. When missionaries having this inclination came to Africa, they tended to handle the missionized the same way they handled Europe and America. As such their practice of discipline lacked the necessary contextual handling of the lives of Christians or would be Christians in Africa as manifested in the handling of polygamy.⁵⁰

In an interview, Gabriel Kimirei narrates his step mother’s rating of Christianity. To her Christianity was a ‘Satanic’ religion. This was so since Kimirei’s polygamous father was required to choose one wife if he was to be baptized. He chose Kimirei’s mother, and left his first

⁴⁷ Mhache, *The Understanding of Missio Dei in Church Discipline Practices*; Lugazia, *The Practice of Church Discipline*.

⁴⁸ Matta, *Church Discipline*; Lugayana, *The Practice of Church Discipline*; Mkumbo, *The Practice of Church Discipline*.

⁴⁹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 79.

⁵⁰ Mwakalambo, *Church Discipline and the Nyakyusa Culture*.

wife.⁵¹ The missionary insistence on monogamy and their revivalist tendency of rating adultery as the greater sin have affected girls and women more than men. Theresa Hinga addressing the general handling of polygamy in Africa writes,

*“Often, the polygamist would be asked to abandon all but one of his wives as a condition for baptism. The policy of ‘disciplining’ polygamists in this way undoubtedly brought untold pain to women, and children thus discarded.”*⁵²

As noted above in the analysis of the official documents on church discipline, there is no liturgy for suspending or placing a backslidden Christian under church discipline. The absence of such a liturgy raises questions regarding the manner through which one is officially pronounced to be under church discipline. The absence finds some support in the expectation that the respective Christians know the criteria for being under church discipline. Mchami holds that,

*“church discipline is as old as the church itself and has always been either self-imposed by the failing Christian or imposed by the Church on the fallen Christian.”*⁵³

⁵¹ Interview with retired pastor Kimirei 13.08.2024.

⁵² Theresa Hinga, “Jesus and the Liberation of Women in Africa,” in *The Will to Arise Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Rachel Angogo Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 188.

⁵³ Mchami, *The Practice of Church Discipline*.

As such, finding oneself under church discipline can be automatic, as suggested in one of the diocesan constitutions above. The lack of a special liturgy can also, in a way, be justified in the expectation that, in case one does not impose discipline by his/herself an executing official, among whom could be a church elder, pastor or bishop⁵⁴, will declare that church discipline must be in place. One could also add, as alluded to above, that the lack of a suspending liturgy makes the practice less conspicuous and temporary, thus differentiating church discipline from excommunication which is more remarkable. Notwithstanding the foregoing arguments, this lack may create the feeling that the practice lacks clear boundaries or definition.

The Ethics of Church Discipline: A Speck in the Brother's Eye

With the foregoing discussion on church discipline as regards issues, practices and flaws one is prone to ask is not church discipline against Christian ethics? And considering the fallen state of man as manifest in Luther's discussion of the seventh commandment, should the practice of church discipline not be likened to a man with a log in his eye finding fault with a speck in a brother's eye?

Ethics is part of Christian theology.⁵⁵ As such ethics calls for reflection on Christian conduct. According to

⁵⁴ See Mchami, *The Practice of Church Discipline*.

⁵⁵ See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell, 2017), 435-436.

Nessan, the heart of Lutheran ethics involves serving neighbours.⁵⁶ Such an ethic is thus one of love, and *imitation Christi*.

The discussion on the ethics of church discipline in the ELCT focuses on – two positions namely; 1. the nature or essence of church discipline *per se* and 2. the practice of church discipline. Beginning with the first position it is clear that a life lived in a community needs strictures. Although Christians and Lutherans in particular are called unto freedom, this freedom is not absolute. The Lutheran understanding of freedom is freedom *from* to freedom *to*. In order to make a difference Christians need some kind of differentiation, and this is what is noticeable in the essence of church discipline *per se*. As such church discipline in itself is inherently good and ethical. It can, therefore, be argued that the problem, as noted in the discussion of the researches above, lies in the second position i.e., is the practice of church discipline, to which we now turn.

It can be argued that church discipline is practiced in order to enhance ethical living among church members. In turn, how church discipline is carried out determines the ethics of the practice itself. Expectations as to how people should orient their lives, and thus be considered ethical varies. A brief discussion of ethical theories or systems is thus pertinent here. According to Norlen, Christian ethics being not an exclusive system, stands in a

⁵⁶ *Free in Deed: The Heart of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 1.

broader context of other systems.⁵⁷ Ethical theories are classically grouped into three systems, namely *deontological* – which is duty oriented, *teleological* – which is goal oriented⁵⁸ and *areteological* – which is oriented toward development of character.⁵⁹ While adopting the *deontological* stance as evidenced in attending to duty or following the rule (exemplified in keeping the Ten Commandments), or employing the *teleological* position in calculating the benefits and losses of a course of action are important; the *areteological* position has been considered more in line with Lutheranism.⁶⁰ In other words, while it is important to keep the commandments and avoid doing harm to the neighbour and environment, character development is even more important. This informs the inner person, and equips a Christian with readiness important in handling challenges born of fast changing contexts.

Church discipline as practiced in the ELCT has tended to dwell more on the outer person i.e., being more *deontological*. This radical ethical approach is often combined with a deep sense of authoritarianism. The Lutheran tenets of freedom, justification by faith, and priesthood of all believers are thus undermined, resulting in the masking of and contradicting with Lutheran identity. Church discipline has also tended to be more

⁵⁷ Gunnar Norlén, *The Christian and the Ethical Life: On Being a Christian in Multicultural World*, Makumira Text Book Series (Usa River, Tanzania: Research Institute of Makumira University College, 2003), 39.

⁵⁸ Norlén, *The Christian and the Ethical Life*, 45.

⁵⁹ Nesson, *Free in Deed*, 5.

⁶⁰ See Nesson, *Free in Deed*, 5.

individualistic in casting the blame more on the ‘offender’ rather than the community. As such the practice misses the communitarian spirit characteristic of traditional Africa. The communitarian spirit enabled an ‘offender’ to be reconciled with the ‘offended’ through mediatory efforts of relatives, friends or neighbours. In addition, some objects such as plants⁶¹ could be used in traditional Africa as signs of remorse by the ‘offender’ when presented to the ‘offended’. As such efforts were made to inculcate a penitent spirit in the ‘offender’. The manner in which church discipline is practiced among African Lutherans can and has thus, understandably, made people come up with negative conclusions against it. The question as to whether church discipline is about a man with a log in the eye finding fault with a brother with a speck in the eye, therefore, finds answers on the basis of which position one is considering. In the advent of fast and wide communication as evidenced in the world today, a ‘lay’ Christian, pastor or bishop who forcibly, unlovingly, and indiscreetly enforces church discipline, while s/he is, unlike in the old times, ‘screened’ by multiple eyes, is looking for a speck in the brother’s eye.

Conclusion

The paradoxical practice of church discipline in today’s enlightened church calls for concern. The history of church discipline paints a picture of a community

⁶¹ E.g., *isale* (*dracaena species*) were used among the Chagga people in Northern Tanzania for this purpose.

attempting to make stark differentiation in behaviour between members of the faith community, and the rest of the society. Those who deviated from the norm were reverting to darkness. They were treated in a manner that made them feel the chills of being under discipline. They were black sheep in a flock of white sheep. The practice then was a teaching device. It may also be argued that the practice of sharp differentiation works better in a context of the 'new born' who need pressure from outside i.e., those who can afford only milk not solid food. Church discipline that is strictly enforced signifies immaturity.

Questions linger regarding the validity of church discipline in view of the transparency brought by the communication media today. For example, who should be under church discipline a young woman impregnated out of wedlock or a pastor or government who has embezzled public money meant for a dispensary. What precipitates the young woman's problem is the visible baby bump. But that belongs to the past! Today people can tell with fair accuracy that what the pastor owns was gotten through illegal means. And more so, the probability that there are thieves in our congregations who are swindling public money that was meant for social services including health and precipitating deaths of innocent people is high.

In view of the weaknesses observed in the practice of church discipline questions as to whether it should continue being practiced or not, and if practiced what should be the issues and extent of the practice, linger? Contrary to those who consider it obsolete, church

discipline should be upheld. Much like we would shy off from letting go of the law in the Bible, let's uphold the essence of church discipline.

But this should go together with teaching and empowerment of those who have been the most vulnerable to the practice of church discipline. The wording of the different constitutions of the dioceses is clear regarding the avenues for confessing. The Bible and the Lutheran doctrine are clear on how we are justified. Self-discipline as suggested in some of the previous researched, should be emphasized. Church discipline in the understanding of suspension should never be equated to excommunication which can be only be justified in matters of informed denial of one's faith. Even with this, the seeking of the erring brother should not cease.

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