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The Efficiency-Relationality Paradox: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Ubuntu Disability Theology in the African Church

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Abstract

Across sub-Saharan Africa, Deaf congregants often remain excluded from worship, leadership, and theological formation because church practices privilege spoken communication and underinvest in sign-language access. This article develops a hearing-mediated, contextual artificial intelligence (AI) theology of disability for the African church through qualitative document analysis of the published literature on disability, Ubuntu, African ecclesiology, and emerging AI accessibility tools. This article does not report primary empirical data, but offers a conceptual synthesis requiring Deaf-led validation. Using the Contextual Disability Paradigm and Ubuntu philosophy as interpretive lenses, the article argues that AI can expand access through offline-first translation and captioning tools, but it can also weaken embodied, cross-ability relationship if technology becomes a substitute for relational labour, sign-language learning, and Deaf leadership. The article's central contribution is the concept of the efficiency-relationality paradox: the more efficiently AI removes communicative barriers, the less incentive may remain for embodied mutuality. Because the analysis is based entirely on secondary sources and includes no Deaf-produced materials, the findings are provisional and structurally limited. The article concludes that any credible AI theology of disability in Africa must be offline-first, data-just, denominationally adaptable, and directed toward Deaf-led co-research and co-theology.

Keywords: Africa; artificial intelligence; disability theology; Deaf theology; Ubuntu; church; accessibility

1. Introduction

Religious institutions across sub-Saharan Africa function as critical sites of moral formation, social belonging, and communal identity, yet they also reproduce exclusion when they assume hearing as the default mode of participation. For Deaf congregants, the church has several meanings. It can be a place of hope and a site of marginalisation. Deaf congregants are physically and symbolically excluded when sermons, prayers, church announcements and leadership prioritise spoken communication. There is no sign language to help Deaf congregants. This exclusion is not only systemic but an inconvenience. The challenge of this approach is that it shapes who is recognised as a full participant in worship. Systemic exclusions based on spoken communication chooses who is permitted to lead and whose theological voice is taken seriously.

The burgeoning development of digital technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) brings hope for addressing some of the plight of persons with disabilities. According to Mokoena (2024, 2025), the contemporary technological era is the "new normal." AI has created new possibilities for accessibility in religious life. The church in Africa is recognising

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the importance of AI (Tagwirei 2025). These developments raise an important theological question: can AI help repair communicative exclusion without weakening the embodied relations that make Christian community meaningful? That question is especially urgent in African contexts where religious life is deeply communal and where access gaps intersect with limited infrastructure, poverty, and uneven digital connectivity.

This article argues that African theology needs a disability-sensitive AI framework that treats accessibility as a theological and ethical obligation rather than a technical add-on. It develops this framework through qualitative document analysis of the published literature and public documents, using Ubuntu and the Contextual Disability Paradigm as guiding lenses. The paper's central claim is that AI can improve access while simultaneously weakening relational inclusion unless it is governed by Deaf-led, offline-first, and church-specific practices. The article therefore makes a provisional theoretical contribution rather than a final account of Deaf experience, and it explicitly treats Deaf-led research as the next necessary step. While this article focuses on Deaf congregates as a paradigmatic case of communicative exclusion, the efficiency-relationality paradox may apply to other forms disabilities; however, for deeper analysis, each category of disabilities requires separate contextual analysis.

The paper proceeds in six parts. The next section develops the conceptual framework by explaining the Contextual Disability Paradigm, Ubuntu, denominational variation, and the relationship between these lenses and Deaf theology. The following section sets out the qualitative document analysis methodology, including corpus boundaries, inclusion criteria, coding procedure, and epistemic limits. The findings section presents five themes: theological dignity, missional inclusion, linguistic justice, the efficiency-relationality paradox, and offline-first pathways. The discussion section then draws out the implications for church practice and data justice. The conclusion summarises the article's contribution and identifies directions for participatory Deaf-led research.

2. Conceptual Framework

The article uses two concepts as its main interpretive framework: the Contextual Disability Paradigm and Ubuntu philosophy. These concepts are complementary rather than interchangeable. The former helps identify the social, ecclesial, and technological conditions that produce exclusion, while the latter provides a normative account of relational personhood and moral obligation.

2.1. The Contextual Disability Paradigm

The Contextual Disability is defined as an approach that examines environmental and institutional factors that excludes persons with disabilities. According to Amenyedzi (2024) the environment and institutional factors generates exclusions that limits the participation of persons with disabilities. This approach moves the challenges of persons with disabilities from individual deficit towards the limitations of the social, technological and religious activities that makes participation difficult or impossible. In this sense, disability is not only a matter of impairment but also a matter of context: communication systems, institutional norms, built environments, and theological assumptions can all disable people even when no bodily damage is involved.

This is particularly so in the context of the church in Africa where disability tends to be expressed more in terms of morality or spirituality than in terms of access and participation. Amenyedzi (2021) notes that the African discourse on disability has largely been framed in moral terms that connect disability to sin, curse or ancestral causation. Such explanations can increase stigma and hide the practical institutional barriers that prevent Deaf and other disabled people from participating fully in church life. The Contextual Disability

Paradigm is therefore useful because it directs analysis toward the practices, spaces, and power structures through which exclusion is maintained.

The paradigm also fits African ecclesial realities because many churches operate within conditions of scarcity. Accessibility infrastructure, assistive technology, interpreter training, and inclusive liturgical design often receive little institutional investment. A contextual approach therefore does not ask only whether inclusion is desirable; it asks what specific barriers exist, who benefits from them, and what forms of institutional change are required to dismantle them.

2.2. Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu provides the article's normative frame. In its broadest form, Ubuntu is a relational philosophy of personhood that understands human beings as constituted through mutual dependence and ethical belonging (Mbiti 1990; Ramose 2002; Metz 2011; Letseka 2012). The full phrase "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am," articulated by Mbiti (1990, p. 106) captures the intuition that personhood is not achieved in isolation but in relation to others. Deeper analysis of this expression captures both the ontological claim (persons are constituted relationally) and the ethical claim (one ought to honour that relationality through mature care. According to Metz (2011, p. 535) Ubuntu means that "one's humanity is bounded up with others". Thus, Ubuntu implies that a person becomes a person through other persons. Chataika (2019) extends this tradition by showing how Ubuntu can function as a disability ethic that resists exclusion and affirms the moral standing of persons whose bodies or communication practices are treated as marginal.

For this article, Ubuntu matters for two reasons. First, it provides a culturally resonant vocabulary for thinking about communal responsibility in African church life. Second, it sharpens the theological stakes of accessibility. If personhood is relational, then excluding Deaf congregants from the communicative life of the church is not merely inefficient; it disrupts the ethical conditions through which community itself is formed. Ubuntu therefore offers more than a general appeal to inclusion. It provides a normative test: does a practice deepen mutual belonging, or does it reduce persons to recipients of technical accommodation?

This perspective is particularly useful in relation to AI. AI tools may increase access quickly and at scale, but they may also make relational labour less visible. If hearing congregants no longer feel the need to learn sign language because a machine can translate sermons, accessibility may become technically effective but relationally thin. Ubuntu therefore helps the article evaluate not only whether AI works, but what kind of community it produces.

2.3. Denominational Variation

This study does not treat "the African church" as homogeneous. African Christianity contains Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, independent, and ecumenical traditions, each with different liturgical rhythms, authority structures, and attitudes toward technology (Bompani 2019; Gifford 2015). Those differences matter. A fixed liturgy in a Catholic diocese raises different accessibility questions from a spontaneous Pentecostal service in Lagos or a revival meeting in rural Zimbabwe. The same AI tool may therefore carry distinct theological and practical implications across traditions.

Recent ecclesial statements also show uneven theological emphasis. Catholic debates on artificial intelligence (AI) often place a focus on prudence, sacramentality, and the maintenance of embodied fellowship. On the other hand, Protestant and Pentecostal projects frequently place an emphasis on evangelistic speed, Bible translation, and digital outreach (AMECEA 2025; AACC 2025; Tagwirei 2025). These are not simply doctrinal differences; they reflect different views of how technology should relate to church life.

For this reason, the article argues for denominationally adaptive principles rather than a one-size-fits-all policy. Offline-first access, Deaf co-leadership, and relational safeguards are transferable, but their implementation must be contextualised.

2.4. Deaf Theology and Liturgical Embodiment

The conceptual framework also draws on Deaf theology and disability theology. McDonald (2007) argues that Deaf theology must treat sign language as a theological language rather than a mere translational aid. In a similar vein, Ghosh (2018) maintains that worship cannot be reduced to the transmission of an information. These claims matter because they challenge any model of inclusion that assumes translation alone is sufficient. If the church treats sign language merely as a way to convert speech into another medium, it fails to recognise the embodied, cultural, and spiritual texture of Deaf religious life.

This insight is crucial for the present article. AI may be able to generate captions, translate sermons, or support sign-language recognition. But the question is not only whether content is transferred; it is whether worship remains embodied, reciprocal, and communal. The article therefore asks not simply "does AI provide access?" but "what kind of access does AI create, and what forms of relation does it encourage or weaken?"

3. Methodology

In this article, I employed qualitative document analysis (QDA), also called documentary research or secondary analysis of existing texts (Bowen 2009). QDA is appropriate when the research question concerns how concepts, practices, and normative claims are represented across documents and when the aim is to synthesise existing evidence into a conceptual framework. It is especially useful for studies that seek to map an emerging field, identify gaps in the literature, and build theoretical propositions from published materials.

The decision to use QDA in this case is deliberate. First, the topic cuts across theology, disability studies, African studies, and AI ethics, and there is no single empirical archive that could capture all of these dimensions. Second, a desktop method makes it possible to review ecclesial statements, scholarly monographs, articles, reports, and technical documents from multiple African contexts without pretending to have access to all local Deaf experiences. Third, the method aligns with the paper's ethical stance: rather than speaking as if it directly represents Deaf congregants, the article works with publicly available texts and openly names the limits of that corpus.

3.1. Corpus and Inclusion Criteria

The documentary corpus was assembled from scholarly works, ecclesial statements, and publicly available reports that addressed at least one of the following: disability and church life in Africa; Deaf inclusion or sign-language access; African theological anthropology; Ubuntu ethics; or AI accessibility tools relevant to worship and religious communication. Priority was given to sources that spoke directly to African contexts, even when the texts came from broader global discussions of disability or theology.

Documents were excluded if they were solely focused on Western contexts without clear African application, if they discussed AI or disability separately without relation to church life, or if they were technical descriptions with no relevance to accessibility in religious settings. This produced a corpus broad enough to identify patterns but narrow enough to remain relevant to the article's specific question. The corpus is not presented as exhaustive. It is instead treated as a purposive set of documents suitable for conceptual synthesis.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The texts were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006). The first stage involved repeated close reading to identify recurring motifs, claims, and tensions. These

were then coded around a set of analytically useful categories: exclusion as afterthought, Ubuntu as relational norm, AI as accessibility tool, offline necessity, technological dependency risk, hearing mediation of Deaf voice, sacramental embodiment, and denominational variation. The coding was iterative rather than mechanical, allowing themes to be refined as the analysis moved between theological, ethical, and practical considerations.

From this process, five dominant themes emerged. The first concerns the theological foundation of dignity, especially the Imago Dei. The second concerns the missional claim that inclusion belongs within the church's understanding of mission. The third concerns linguistic justice and the difference between mere translation and meaningful participation. The fourth concerns the risk that efficient technology may reduce relational labour, which is formulated here as the efficiency-relationality paradox. The fifth concerns offline-first access, digital inequality and data justice. Accordingly, this is a new consideration for Deaf literacy. These themes structure the findings section below.

3.3. Epistemic Limits

This article is explicitly hearing-mediated. No Deaf congregants participated as interviewees, co-authors, or co-analysts. No Deaf-produced videos, oral histories, or community newsletters were included in the final documentary corpus. This is not a minor limitation but a structural feature of the study design. It means that the article can speak only provisionally about Deaf experience and must avoid claiming direct access to Deaf theological self-understanding.

The author is not Deaf and has no formal training in computer science or assistive-technology design. These positionalities affect the interpretation of both theological and technical sources. Rather than pretending that such limitations can be eliminated, the article treats them as reasons for caution. The findings are therefore presented as a theoretical precursor: useful for mapping the problem, but not sufficient as a final account of Deaf church life in Africa. The point of the paper is to establish conceptual guardrails for future participatory work, not to replace that work.

While I acknowledge that some readers may argue that this study should have empirical Deaf participants experience, the approach of this article is to provide self- awareness and create hearing-mediated analysis as a legitimate function to map conceptual terrain. I further use this article as a means to identify risks (such as the efficiency- relationality paradox. Such an approach helps to set out ethical guardrails before embarking on a Deaf-led participatory study. Waiting for a Deaf-led study is likely to leave African churches without any theological guidance while AI tools are swiftly adopted. As a limitation, I reiterate that this article makes no claim to represent Deaf self-understanding, but act as a preparatory framework for co-research, not as a substitute for it.

4. Findings

4.1. Theological Dignity

A recurring theme in the documentary record is that any serious account of disability and church life must begin with the affirmation that persons with disabilities bear the image of God (Amenyedzi 2021; Swinton 2011; Shiriko 2011). This claim matters because it counters forms of religious discourse that interpret disability through moral blame, supernatural punishment, or deficit. When the Imago Dei is taken seriously, exclusion from worship becomes not simply an administrative failure but a theological contradiction.

Within the literature reviewed, this claim is often used to justify inclusion in a broad sense: persons with disabilities should be welcomed, accommodated, and recognised as full members of the Christian community. That is an important starting point. But the analysis also shows that the Imago Dei can be interpreted too thinly if it is reduced to

generic dignity without attention to language, embodiment, and access. Deaf theology presses this point further by arguing that sign language is not merely a practical support but part of the theological life of the church (McDonald 2007).

The implication is that dignity cannot be abstract. It must be enacted through communicative conditions that allow persons to participate as speakers, listeners, interpreters, witnesses, and leaders. In other words, the Imago Dei requires not only the right to be present but the right to be communicatively and spiritually present.

4.2. Missional Inclusion

A second theme concerns mission. The literature frequently frames accessibility as part of the church's missional calling. The mission Dei emphasises that God's mission encompasses all individuals, including those with impairments, necessitating that churches create worship, discipleship, and evangelistic practices that are accessible to Deaf congregants (AACC 2025; Tagwirei 2025). This logic is persuasive because it connects inclusion to the church's central identity rather than treating it as an optional social service.

Yet mission can be understood in different ways. In some ecclesial contexts, mission is primarily associated with outreach, numerical growth, and digital evangelism. It is related to liturgical formation, sacramental life and embodied fellowship in some cases. These discrepancies are reflected in the documentary corpus. Some hail AI for its ability to expand Bible translation, boost digital discipleship and accelerate communication. Some critics express concern that online faith may become disembodied and shallow if it is separated from sacramental and community activity (AMECEA 2025).

This conflict matters because AI can be driven towards the logic of efficiency. If a church values speed and reach above embodied formation, then AI will likely be treated as a tool for expansion. If it values mutuality and communion, then AI will be treated as one element within a wider ecology of relationship. The article does not argue against mission. It argues that mission in a disability-sensitive African theology must include the labour of building relations, not only the delivery of content.

4.3. Linguistic Justice

The third theme is linguistic justice. A consistent pattern in the literature is that Deaf exclusion in church life arises above all through communication norms. Sermons, prayers, announcements, and theological teaching typically assume hearing participation. Deaf congregants are therefore often present physically but absent communicatively, which makes them visible yet excluded.

Various sources (Adebayo et al. 2025; Opperman and Botha 2025) imply that sign-language access or captioning/translation technologies can lessen this barrier. These tools remain experimental and are cited here to illustrate potential, not to endorse specific products. They matter because they suggest that AI is not some hypothetical possibility of the future. There are already technical attempts to address access needs in African sign-language contexts. The article treats these tools as potential assets, especially where churches have limited access to trained interpreters.

However, the analysis also shows that translation is not equivalent to participation. Sign language is not just a coded version of speech. It has its own grammar, embodied expressiveness, spatial organisation, and emotional force (McDonald 2007; Kusters 2017). AI systems that produce captions or lexical equivalences may improve access to message content, but they can still fail to communicate liturgical nuance, affect, and communal rhythm. Linguistic justice therefore requires more than output accuracy. It requires attention to the quality of access and to who controls the communicative process.

In addition, the complication is that there is not much acknowledgement in the AI-accessibility literature about the distinction between sign language fluency and written-language literacy. The provision of captioning and projection tools has one challenge that it assumes that Deaf users can read the language in which the captions are written. According to Kusters (2017) most Deaf congregates across the sub-Saharan Africa have limited access to formal education. A Deaf person who is fluent in a particular language may not be able to read the language. This also applies to the challenge of sufficient reading speed or comprehension to follow real time captions. More is needed when dealing with linguistic justice. For instance, there is need to translate between speech and sign and also pay attention to literacy as a separate barrier. The Offline-first AI tools that exclusively rely on text are not universally accessible.

4.4. The Efficiency-Relationality Paradox

The article's central theoretical contribution is the efficiency-relationality paradox. The paradox is simple to state but substantial in implication: the more efficiently AI removes communicative barriers, the less incentive may remain for embodied, cross-ability relationship. That is, technological success may unintentionally weaken the human effort, humility, and mutual learning that underpin communal belonging.

This paradox emerged from several recurring concerns in the corpus. Initially, there exists apprehension that churches could prioritise technological investments above the enhancement of human capabilities, like sign-language education, interpretation training, or the cultivation of Deaf leadership. Secondly, there is apprehension that hearing congregants may depend on AI as a replacement for interpersonal engagement. Third, there is anxiety that the church may become satisfied with technical inclusion even when relational exclusion persists. These concerns are not anti-technology. They are a warning that accessibility can be reduced to a transaction.

From an Ubuntu perspective, that reduction is problematic because relational labour is not an optional extra. Learning another person's language, making room for their presence, and reconfiguring worship around shared participation are all forms of ethical becoming. If AI removes the friction that motivates these practices, then it may make participation easier while making community shallower. In that sense, the paradox does not oppose efficiency and relation as absolute opposites; it shows that efficiency can have hidden costs when it displaces the very practices that form people into a "we".

This is where the article's conceptual contribution becomes most visible. The paradox is not merely a complaint that technology can be impersonal. It is a theological claim about how access, embodiment, and community interact. A tool that translates every sermon perfectly may still fail if it leaves hearing Christians unchallenged, uneducated, and uncommitted to cross-ability relationship. Conversely, a less technically perfect arrangement that keeps the church learning sign language, sharing presence, and valuing Deaf leadership may be more faithful to Ubuntu and Christian community.

4.5. Offline-First Access and the Digital Divide

A fifth theme concerns infrastructure and inequality. The literature repeatedly shows that AI systems assume stable connectivity, device access, and energy reliability. These assumptions do not hold across much of rural and low-resource Africa. Any theology of AI disability access that ignores this reality would be contextually naïve.

The documentary corpus points toward offline-first design as the most ethically appropriate model for church settings. Offline technologies can diminish reliance on costly data connections and operate in locations where internet connectivity is sporadic or non-existent. The paper regards offline capabilities not only as a convenience but as an ethical need. If

an AI tool only works in well-connected urban settings, then it reproduces geographic inequality and leaves rural Deaf congregants behind.

The analysis also suggests that offline-first access must be combined with data justice. Sign-language datasets, worship recordings, and related linguistic material should not be treated as raw material for extraction by external firms. Churches and denominations should think carefully about ownership, consent, transparency, and auditing. A tool that improves access while exploiting Deaf language data would reproduce injustice in a different form. Accessibility and data sovereignty must therefore be addressed together.

5. Discussion

5.1. What the Findings Mean

The findings indicate that AI should be judged not only by whether it increases communicative access, but also by whether it deepens or weakens cross-ability relationship. That distinction is important because accessibility is often treated as a technical achievement. In this article, however, accessibility is also a moral and ecclesial question. If a church installs an AI system but abandons human learning, relational adaptation, and Deaf leadership, then it may have improved access without improving community.

Ubuntu helps sharpen this point. Because Ubuntu emphasises relational personhood, the ethical goal is not simply to remove obstacles as quickly as possible. It is to create conditions in which persons can meet one another in mutual obligation and shared life (Ramose 2002; Metz 2011; Chataika 2019). Technology can support that goal, but it cannot replace it. The most desirable form of accessibility is therefore not frictionless convenience but meaningful belonging.

5.2. Denominationally Adaptive Principles

The discourse further substantiates the necessity for denominationally adaptable principles. Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and independent churches will not use AI uniformly due to differing interpretations of worship, authority, and embodiment (AMECEA 2025; AACC 2025). A fixed liturgy may be better suited to sustained captioning or sign-language projection, while a spontaneous service may require more flexible and rapidly deployable tools. A sacramental tradition may insist on stronger safeguards against disembodied worship, while a revivalist tradition may prioritise rapid evangelistic reach.

These differences should not be collapsed into a single ecclesial model. Instead, the paper argues that each tradition should adopt the same baseline ethical principles while translating them into its own liturgical grammar. Those principles are offline-first access, Deaf participation in design and evaluation, transparent data governance, and a refusal to treat AI as a substitute for embodied ministry. The goal is not uniformity but contextual faithfulness.

5.3. Data Justice and Decolonial Responsibility

The documentary corpus also makes clear that AI in Africa cannot be separated from wider questions of data coloniality and digital extraction. Adam and Gwagwa (2021) and Odumosu (2020) both stress that African data frequently flows within asymmetrical power structures, in which local people create value but outsider actors grab it. Deaf language data is particularly susceptible since it is rare, socially valued, and frequently collected without robust community control.

For this reason, any church-based AI project should include explicit governance mechanisms. These should cover ownership of datasets, informed and ongoing consent, bias auditing, community benefit, and the right to refuse extraction. Churches should avoid situations in which accessibility is achieved by handing Deaf linguistic data over to

external companies that have little accountability to local communities. A theologically serious response to AI must therefore be also a political and economic response.

5.4. The Pastoral Meaning of Friction

One of the most important implications of the analysis is that not all friction is bad. In many technological settings, friction is treated as a problem to be eliminated. In this article, however, some friction is ethically formative. The effort required for hearing congregants to learn sign language, adapt liturgy, or share communicative space is part of the relational discipline of Christian community. If AI removes all such friction, it may reduce inconvenience while also reducing the moral practices through which church becomes communal.

This does not mean churches should avoid AI. It means they should design for relational preservation. For example, a church might use AI-generated captions while still requiring leaders to learn basic sign language. It might deploy translation tools while also appointing Deaf leaders and interpreters. It might use offline AI to support access while preserving liturgical moments in which human communication remains central. These counter-practices are essential because inclusion without relational transformation is only partial inclusion.

5.5. Interfaith and Civic Possibilities

Although this article focuses on the church, the implications are broader. Accessibility tools developed for Christian worship could also support mosques, schools, and community centres. In contexts where religion has sometimes fuelled division, shared commitment to Deaf inclusion may create space for practical cooperation. This is not the central argument of the article, but it is an important extension: if AI accessibility is designed well, it can serve the common good beyond ecclesial boundaries.

5.6. Therapeutic AI and the Question of Cure

Possible questions are whether AI-driven medical solutions are pathways for inclusion by curing deafness itself. Without giving in-depth medical details, medical practitioners are now using gene editing or neutral interfaces to assist Deaf patients. This medical approach views cure as elimination of disability and thus provides the access problem. However, from a disability theology standpoint, the medical perspective only views disability as a deficit requiring elimination. According to Swinton (2011) more is needed than the medical perspective such as embodying differences and accommodating it with respect. Looking at the proposed efficiency-relationality paradox, proffering AI technological cure for deafness makes the church fail to learn sign language or redesign liturgies to appropriately embody diversity. While this article accepts diverse therapeutic interventions chosen by different individuals, it argues that cure-oriented AI cannot replace inclusion-oriented AI. Also, from the Ubuntu perspective—which focuses on relationality—making Deaf personhood conditional on medical solution normalises the challenge.

6. Implications for Church Practice

The findings suggest four practical priorities.

First, churches should view accessibility as part of the liturgy, not as an optional accommodation. Worship planning should be designed from the outset to include Deaf participation, not added at the end for the sake of accessibility.

Second, churches should utilise offline-first AI solutions whenever suitable, particularly in rural or low-resource environments. Systems that demand continual communication may worsen current exclusions. Likewise, text-based tools should be supplemented with visual-sign alternative for Deaf users with limited literacy.

Third, churches should combine technology with human formation. AI should not replace sign-language learning, interpreter development, or Deaf leadership. It should support them.

Fourth, churches should establish data justice protocols. If sign-language datasets are being generated, stored, or shared, the church should know who owns them, who can access them, and how consent is maintained over time.

These recommendations are modest but important. They do not solve the problem of exclusion. They do, however, move churches toward a more ethical and theologically coherent response.

7. Conclusions

This article has developed a hearing-mediated AI theology of disability for the African church through qualitative document analysis of the literature on disability, Ubuntu, ecclesiology, and AI access tools. Its central claim is that AI can expand access while also weakening embodied relationship if it is treated as a substitute for relational labour. The concept of the efficiency-relationality paradox captures this tension and offers a framework for judging whether AI supports or undermines the communal life of the church.

The article has also shown that Ubuntu and the Contextual Disability Paradigm together provide a useful framework for thinking about disability, access, and church life in Africa. Ubuntu supplies a normative account of relational personhood, while the Contextual Disability Paradigm directs attention to the concrete structures that produce exclusion. Read together, they suggest that technological inclusion must be assessed not only by function but by formation.

Because this study is based entirely on secondary sources and does not include Deaf-produced materials, its conclusions remain provisional. The article therefore ends not with closure but with a research agenda: future work must be Deaf-led, participatory, and grounded in community-based co-theology. Future Deaf-led studies should be able to test this framework. To be effective, these studies should focus on specific denominations such as Roman Catholic, Pentecostals and African Independent Churches. Only then can African theology move from hearing-mediated analysis toward genuinely shared understanding. In that sense, the task is not simply to build better tools. It is to build a better church.

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