



ROLE OF AFRICAN GOSPEL CHURCH IN ENHANCING ACCESS TO EDUCATION OF VISUALLY CHALLENGED PERSONS

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ABSTRACT

Access to education remains a critical pathway to the social and economic development of persons with visual impairments, yet faith-based institutions' contributions to inclusive education remain underexplored. This study examined the role of the Africa Gospel Church (AGC) in enhancing access to education for visually challenged persons in Bureti Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya. Anchored on liberal education and social inclusion perspectives, the study adopted a descriptive research design and employed a mixed-methods approach. The target population comprised 1,610 church members drawn from 23 AGC churches. Stratified, simple random, and purposive sampling techniques were used to select respondents, including church leaders, members, and visually challenged persons. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis, with qualitative data thematically analyzed. Findings revealed that the AGC provides limited and largely non-targeted educational support to visually challenged persons. A majority of respondents disagreed that the church pays school fees, offers scholarships, or provides braille and assistive learning resources for visually impaired learners. Correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant positive relationship between construction of educational facilities and the development of visually challenged persons, while other forms of educational support showed weak or insignificant relationships. The study concludes that AGC's educational interventions are insufficiently disability-responsive, thereby limiting meaningful educational access and development outcomes for visually challenged persons. It recommends adoption of deliberate inclusive education strategies, investment in assistive learning resources, expansion of inclusive educational infrastructure, and strengthened partnerships with government and disability-focused organizations to enhance sustainable educational inclusion.

KEY WORDS: Access to Education, Visually Challenged Persons, African Gospel Church, Descriptive Research Design, Mixed-Method Approach, Bureti Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, faith-based organizations have historically played a critical role in advancing social welfare, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable populations such as persons with disabilities. Across both developed and developing contexts, churches have complemented government interventions by providing education, health care, and social protection services to groups that are often excluded from mainstream development initiatives (Gray & Levitt, 2022). This contribution aligns with international human rights instruments, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which underscores inclusive education as a fundamental human right for persons living with disabilities (Biermann, 2022).

In the African context, the church occupies a central position in community life and development, especially in areas characterized by limited public resources and high poverty levels. Religious institutions serve not only as spiritual centers but also as platforms for social mobilization, advocacy, and service delivery. According to Khalil (2024), religion is deeply embedded in African value systems and has the capacity to shape attitudes, behaviors, and collective responses to social challenges in Egypt. Churches have therefore been instrumental in addressing disability-related exclusion by establishing

special learning institutions, offering scholarships, and advocating for social inclusion. However, disability in many African societies like Ghana continues to be associated with stigma, cultural misconceptions, and discrimination, which significantly limit access to education for visually challenged persons (Ocran, 2022).

In Kenya, the role of the church in social and community development has been particularly pronounced since independence. However, poverty remains a major constraint, particularly in rural and arid regions, exacerbating inequalities in access to educational opportunities for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities (Karuga, *et al.*, 2023). As Karicha (2023) observes, poverty has historically shaped the nature and scope of church involvement in social service provision, compelling religious institutions to respond to both spiritual and material needs. Disability is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing both functional limitations and socially constructed barriers. According to Daehnhardt *et al.*, (2024) disability refers to difficulties experienced in performing daily activities, while the social model emphasizes the role of environmental and attitudinal barriers in limiting participation. Visual disability, in particular, presents significant educational challenges due to limited access to



learning materials, assistive technologies, and supportive infrastructure (Gikandi, *et al.*, 2025).

In Kenya, disability prevalence remains higher in rural areas than in urban settings, reflecting broader socio-economic disparities (KNBS, 2018). Visual impairment accounts for a notable proportion of disability cases, with evidence indicating gender variations in prevalence (Kenya Society for the Blind, 2018). County-level data further reveal that visual impairment constitutes the most prevalent form of disability in Kericho County, surpassing physical, mental, and hearing impairments (County Government of Kericho, 2018). Despite this reality, there is limited empirical evidence on how the educational needs of visually challenged persons are addressed by key stakeholders, particularly faith-based organizations.

Visually challenged persons encounter numerous barriers that undermine their access to education, including mobility constraints, social exclusion, stigma, and limited access to information and learning institutions (Pitcher, 2013; WHO, 2015). While the Kenyan government has enacted progressive legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, these efforts remain insufficient without the active involvement of non-state actors such as churches and other faith-based organizations. The church plays a vital role in shaping societal perceptions of disability and influencing how

visually challenged persons are treated within communities. Biblical teachings further reinforce the church's responsibility toward persons with disabilities. Accounts of Jesus' interactions with the visually impaired, such as the healing of Bartimaeus and the man born blind, emphasize compassion, dignity, and inclusion rather than blame or condemnation (Mark 10:46–52; John 9:1–38). These teachings provide a theological foundation for church engagement in disability-inclusive education and social development. However, despite this moral imperative, visually challenged persons often continue to face exclusion even within religious spaces, suggesting a gap between theological ideals and practical interventions.

Several Christian denominations in Kenya have responded to disability-related educational needs by establishing special schools and targeted support programs, including institutions for the deaf and visually impaired. The Africa Gospel Church (AGC), one of the largest evangelical denominations in the South Rift region, has an extensive presence in Kericho, Bomet, and Narok counties and operates multiple outreach programs through its Compassion Ministries Department (AGC, 2018). This department emphasizes a holistic approach to ministry by integrating spiritual care with social and developmental interventions such as health, relief, rehabilitation, and development. Although AGC has demonstrated commitment to alleviating human suffering, there is limited documented evidence on how its development programs specifically enhance access to education for visually challenged persons (AGC, 2018).

Given the high prevalence of visual impairment in Kericho County and the strategic positioning of AGC within the region, there is a compelling need to examine the church's role in

promoting educational access for visually challenged persons. Understanding AGC's contribution is essential for strengthening faith-based development programming and advancing inclusive education. It is against this backdrop that the present study seeks to investigate the role of the Africa Gospel Church in enhancing access to education for visually challenged persons.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the existence of international, regional, and national legal frameworks designed to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, visually challenged persons in Kenya continue to face persistent barriers to education and social inclusion. The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey estimates that approximately 10 percent of the population lives with some form of disability, with visual impairment constituting the largest proportion (GoK, 2018). Kericho County records an even higher prevalence of visual impairment, underscoring the magnitude of the challenge at the local level (County Government of Kericho, 2018).

Although policies such as the Persons with Disabilities Act (2004) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities advocate for inclusive education and equal participation, implementation gaps remain evident. Visually challenged persons continue to experience discrimination, limited access to learning institutions, inadequate assistive resources, and social exclusion (WHO, 2015; Eide & Ingstad, 2013). While churches in Kericho County have initiated various development interventions for vulnerable populations, empirical evidence on the specific role of the Africa Gospel Church in enhancing access to education for visually challenged persons remains scanty. This knowledge gap limits effective planning, coordination, and strengthening of faith-based educational interventions. Consequently, there was a need to investigate how AGC responds to the educational needs of visually challenged persons in order to inform policy, practice, and holistic ministry programming.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to examine the extent to which the Africa Gospel Church provides and enhances access to education for visually challenged persons in Bureti Sub-County, Kericho County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Review

Religion has remained a critical avenue for social participation and inclusion for persons with special needs, particularly in contexts where state-led welfare systems are limited (Claassens, Shaikh, & Swartz, 2019). As influential social institutions, churches significantly shape community attitudes toward disability and determine the extent to which visually challenged persons (VCPs) are included or excluded from social and educational opportunities. Empirical evidence suggests that while churches espouse doctrines of compassion and equality, practical inclusion of persons with disabilities within church structures and programs remains inconsistent.



Brett (2010) examined disability inclusion in church settings and found that in some congregations, persons with disabilities were marginalized through segregationist practices. Instead of being fully integrated into mainstream worship services, individuals with disabilities were placed in separate “special” classes or worship sessions, often held outside normal church schedules. Such practices, although sometimes well-intentioned, reinforced exclusion and limited meaningful participation. However, Brett’s study did not comprehensively address visual disability specifically, nor did it examine how such exclusionary practices influence access to education facilitated by churches, thereby leaving an important empirical gap.

In Kenya, structural barriers within public and social institutions further constrain participation by persons with disabilities. A report by Sida (2014) on the situation of persons with special needs revealed widespread inaccessibility of public buildings, limited availability of assistive services such as sign language interpretation, and inadequate disability-sensitive infrastructure. Although some progress was noted in hospitals and special schools, churches—classified as public social spaces—were found to lag behind in providing basic accommodations such as braille worship materials, orientation guides, and accessible learning spaces. These inadequacies hinder visually challenged persons from fully participating in church activities, including education-oriented programs such as Sunday schools, catechism classes, and vocational training initiatives.

Religion and culture have also been identified as key determinants of societal attitudes toward disability. Islam (2016), in a study conducted in Malaysia, found that disability was often interpreted as a divine punishment or curse, a perception influenced by religious misinterpretations, cultural beliefs, and social stigma. These beliefs contributed to segregation, low self-esteem, and reduced social participation among persons with disabilities. Similar perceptions have been documented in parts of Africa, where disability is sometimes associated with sin, ancestral curses, or moral failure (Eskay et al., 2012). Such interpretations negatively affect educational access by discouraging investment in the education of visually challenged persons and limiting community support.

At the community level, empirical studies indicate that visually challenged persons face compounded barriers to education due to the absence of assistive devices, lack of trained personnel, and minimal institutional support. The absence of braille machines, white canes, and guide assistants significantly restricts participation in learning activities (Pitcher, 2013). While some churches have initiated educational sponsorships and special schools, evidence on the effectiveness, scope, and inclusivity of such interventions—particularly within evangelical churches such as the Africa Gospel Church—remains limited. This lack of context-specific empirical evidence underscores the need for localized studies examining how churches operationalize their theological commitment to inclusion through concrete educational interventions for visually challenged persons.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on the Social Model of Disability and the Community-Sensitive Church Model, which together provide a robust framework for understanding disability inclusion from both social and theological perspectives.

Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability emerged from the British disability rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the limitations of the medical model of disability (D’Alessio, 2011). Unlike the medical model, which locates disability within the individual as a physical or mental impairment requiring treatment or rehabilitation, the social model argues that disability is primarily created by societal barriers. According to Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare (2010), disability arises from environmental, institutional, and attitudinal constraints that restrict the participation of persons with impairments in social life.

Fundamental to the social model is the notion that exclusion from education, employment, and social institutions is not an inevitable consequence of impairment but rather a product of inaccessible systems and discriminatory practices. In the context of this study, the social model provides a lens for examining how church structures, attitudes, and programs either facilitate or hinder access to education for visually challenged persons. Lack of braille materials, inaccessible learning environments, and exclusionary worship practices are understood not as failures of the individual but as societal and institutional shortcomings.

The relevance of the social model to this study lies in its emphasis on structural change. It suggests that meaningful inclusion of visually challenged persons requires deliberate transformation of church policies, educational programs, and physical environments. By adopting this model, the study situates the Africa Gospel Church as a potential agent of social change capable of dismantling barriers to educational access for visually challenged persons.

Community-Sensitive Church Model

The Community-Sensitive Church Model, advanced by Emedi (2010), emphasizes the church’s responsibility to respond adaptively to emerging social challenges in the contemporary world, including disability, poverty, and exclusion. The model is grounded in biblical theology, asserting that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) and are therefore entitled to dignity, inclusion, and opportunities for holistic development.

This model conceptualizes the church as a transformative agent within the community, tasked with restoring broken relationships and promoting human flourishing. It advocates for a holistic ministry that integrates spiritual formation with social action, including education, healing, compassion, and advocacy (Matthew 4:23–24; Acts 10:38). A community-sensitive church is one that actively engages with societal realities and seeks to empower marginalized groups to reach their full potential.

In relation to visually challenged persons, the Community-Sensitive Church Model calls upon Christian institutions to



emulate Christ’s compassionate engagement with persons with disabilities. Biblical narratives illustrate Jesus’ deliberate inclusion of the blind, not only through healing but also through affirming their dignity and social worth (Mark 10:46–52; John 9:1–38). This theological foundation challenges churches to move beyond charity-based approaches toward sustainable empowerment strategies, including access to education.

By integrating the Social Model of Disability and the Community-Sensitive Church Model, this study theorizes that while disability-related barriers are socially constructed, the church—guided by Christian ethics—has both the moral obligation and practical capacity to dismantle these barriers. The Africa Gospel Church, as a faith-based institution with a mandate for holistic ministry, is therefore positioned to play a transformative role in enhancing access to education for visually challenged persons by addressing discrimination, reshaping attitudes, and providing inclusive educational opportunities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain comprehensive data on the role of the Africa Gospel Church (AGC) in enhancing access to education for visually challenged persons. A descriptive research design was employed to examine existing practices, perceptions, and experiences related to educational inclusion within AGC congregations. The study was conducted in Bureti Sub-County, Kericho County, an area with a strong AGC presence, comprising 23 churches with an average membership of 70 congregants, yielding a total target population of 1,610 respondents.

A combination of stratified, simple random, and purposive sampling techniques was used. Stratification was based on the five AGC administrative districts in Bureti Sub-County: Ngoina, Roret, Kelunet, Tebesonik, and Kapkisiara. Two churches were randomly selected from each district, resulting

in ten participating churches. Visually challenged persons were purposively selected, and due to their small number, all identified individuals were included in the study. Key church leaders were also purposively selected, including area, district, and local church leadership directly involved in compassionate and development ministries.

Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Questionnaires containing both closed-ended and open-ended items were administered to church leaders and members to capture demographic information, perceptions of visually challenged persons, and strategies employed by AGC to enhance educational access. Interviews were conducted with visually challenged persons to capture their lived experiences and educational challenges, while FGDs provided collective insights into social inclusion and church support mechanisms.

A pilot study was conducted in one AGC church outside the main sample to test the reliability and clarity of research instruments, after which necessary adjustments were made. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, with results presented in tables and charts. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analyzed thematically, and findings were triangulated with quantitative results to enhance the validity and depth of interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Role of the Africa Gospel Church in Enhancing Access to Education for Visually Challenged Persons

The study sought to determine the extent to which the Africa Gospel Church (AGC) enhances access to education for visually challenged persons (VCPs) as a basis for their development. Respondents rated statements on AGC’s educational support using a Likert scale. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: AGC Educational Support for Visually Challenged Persons (n = 172)

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
AGC pays school fees for visually challenged persons	15	14	0	28	43
AGC offers scholarships and bursaries to VCPs	18	12	0	26	44
AGC supports VCPs with books and learning resources	22	13	1	25	39
AGC provides braille and assistive learning facilities	21	27	0	36	16
AGC has constructed schools for vulnerable/VCP learners	11	9	3	40	37

The findings indicate that AGC’s direct financial support for education of visually challenged persons is limited. A majority of respondents (71%) disagreed that AGC pays school fees for VCPs, while 60% disagreed that the church offers scholarships and bursaries specifically targeting this group. Interview responses revealed that although AGC occasionally supports needy learners, such assistance is not disability-specific. This

finding corroborates Brett (2010), who observed that churches often support vulnerable populations generally but fail to institutionalize targeted interventions for persons with disabilities.

Regarding learning materials, 45% of respondents agreed that AGC supports vulnerable learners by providing books and



other educational resources. However, nearly half (48%) disagreed that braille materials or assistive learning devices are provided. Qualitative findings confirmed that resources distributed by the church largely cater for learners without visual impairments. This supports Sida (2014), which reported that lack of disability-sensitive infrastructure and assistive devices remains a major barrier to participation of persons with disabilities in public and religious institutions. From the Social Model of Disability, this demonstrates that exclusion arises from institutional limitations rather than individual impairments.

Only 20% of respondents agreed that AGC has constructed schools for vulnerable groups, including visually challenged

persons. Interviews revealed that while AGC sponsors some schools through material support, it has not established specialized or inclusive schools for VCPs. This aligns with Claassens, Shaikh, and Swartz (2019), who noted that churches often engage in welfare-oriented support but invest minimally in long-term disability-inclusive educational infrastructure.

Relationship Between Access to Education and Development of Visually Challenged Persons

To establish the relationship between access to education and development of visually challenged persons, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Between Access to Education and Development of Visually Challenged Persons (n = 172)

Variable	Fee Payment	Scholarships & Bursaries	Learning Facilities	School Construction	Development of VCPs
Fee Payment	1				
Scholarships & Bursaries	-0.121	1			
Learning Facilities	0.113	0.349*	1		
School Construction	0.365*	0.118	0.317*	1	
Development of VCPs	0.253	-0.007	0.046	0.172**	1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results indicate a statistically significant positive relationship between school construction and the development of visually challenged persons (r = 0.172, p = 0.004). This suggests that availability of appropriate educational infrastructure enhances learning opportunities and overall development outcomes for VCPs. This finding is consistent with Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare (2010), who argue that accessible environments are essential for enabling participation of persons with disabilities.

Scholarships and bursaries demonstrated a positive relationship with learning facilities (r = 0.349, p = 0.022), implying that financial support improves access to learning resources. However, the weak and negative correlation between learning facilities and development of VCPs highlights that provision of general learning materials without disability-specific adaptations does not significantly enhance development outcomes. This supports Pitcher (2013), who emphasized that access to education for visually challenged persons requires specialized resources such as braille materials and assistive technologies, in addition to financial support.

Overall, the findings reveal that AGC's interventions in education are largely generalized rather than inclusive, with limited focus on the specific needs of visually challenged persons. In line with the Community-Sensitive Church Model, the church is called upon to move beyond charity-based assistance and adopt deliberate, inclusive strategies that address structural and attitudinal barriers to education. Strengthening disability-sensitive educational programs would enable AGC to fulfill its holistic ministry mandate and contribute meaningfully to the empowerment and development of visually challenged persons.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based on the study findings, it is concluded that the Africa Gospel Church (AGC) has made limited and largely non-targeted contributions toward enhancing access to education for visually challenged persons. While the church supports vulnerable learners in general, its interventions are not sufficiently disability-responsive, particularly in relation to school fee payment, provision of scholarships and bursaries, acquisition of braille and assistive learning facilities, and establishment of inclusive or specialized educational infrastructure. This limitation constrains meaningful educational participation and development outcomes for visually challenged persons.

The correlation analysis further confirms that construction of educational facilities has a statistically significant positive relationship with the development of visually challenged persons. This finding underscores the critical role of physical and institutional infrastructure in enabling access to education for persons with visual impairments. Conversely, the weak and insignificant relationship between general learning facilities and development outcomes suggests that non-specialized resources alone are inadequate in addressing the educational needs of visually challenged learners. Overall, the study concludes that without deliberate investment in inclusive infrastructure and disability-specific support mechanisms, the church's efforts remain insufficient to promote sustainable development of visually challenged persons.

Recommendations

Drawing from the study findings, the following recommendations are made:



First, the Africa Gospel Church should adopt a deliberate disability-inclusive education strategy that prioritizes visually challenged persons. This should include structured programs for school fee support, scholarships, and bursaries specifically earmarked for learners with visual impairments to enhance equitable access to education.

Second, the church should invest in disability-specific learning resources, including braille materials, assistive technologies, and adaptive learning devices, in schools it sponsors. Such targeted interventions are necessary to translate access to education into meaningful learning and development outcomes.

Third, given the significant relationship between school construction and development of visually challenged persons, AGC should mobilize resources to support construction or upgrading of inclusive educational facilities. This includes ensuring accessibility standards, adequate learning spaces, and supportive infrastructure that accommodates learners with visual impairments.

Fourth, AGC should strengthen partnerships with government agencies, disability advocacy organizations, and development partners to enhance technical capacity and resource mobilization for inclusive education initiatives. Collaborative approaches would enable the church to move beyond charitable support toward sustainable, rights-based interventions.

Finally, future programs by the church should be guided by continuous monitoring and evaluation frameworks that assess the effectiveness of disability-inclusive interventions. Such evidence-based planning would enhance accountability and ensure that educational support initiatives meaningfully contribute to the holistic development of visually challenged persons.

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