

A theological reflection on garden weddings: Interrogating the Reformed liturgy within the African context

**Author:**Ndidzulafhi Mudau¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Human Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Ndidzulafhi Mudau,
ndidzulafhi.mudau@univen.ac.za

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This study analyses the tension between the Reformed churches' traditional emphasis on formal liturgical worship in church buildings and the increasing inclination towards outdoor or garden weddings in African Reformed contexts. The central question is whether outdoor settings may uphold Reformed theological tenets while authentically incorporating African cultural expressions. A contextual theological framework was developed to evaluate garden marriages in Reformed churches, analyse the suitability of outdoor environments with Reformed liturgical norms and provide guidelines that honour both traditions. The employed methodology, hermeneutical analysis, integrates Reformed interpretative traditions with African perspectives. Research was conducted using resources such as Journal Storage (JSTOR), EBSCOhost, Google Scholar and American Theological Library Association Serials (ATLAS), incorporating search terms relevant to Reformed liturgy, African worship, garden weddings, contextual theology and related subjects. Of the 47 identified sources, 38 met the inclusion criteria, prioritising peer-reviewed articles and academic monographs published between 2010 and 2025, with pre-2010 sources included only when foundational. The findings indicate that outdoor settings are not inherently theologically problematic when appropriate procedures enable genuine worship expression. Garden environments can elevate traditional African communal celebrations while preserving essential elements of Reformed covenant theology.

Contribution: The study recommends that African Reformed churches establish denominational standards for evaluating garden wedding venues, develop minimum liturgical prerequisites for outdoor ceremonies and engage in ongoing contextual theological exploration. This ensures that venue choices honour both Reformed confessional principles and authentic African cultural expressions, thereby enriching discussions on liturgical inculturation and postcolonial African Christianity.

Keywords: Reformed liturgy; garden weddings; African context; liturgical integrity; contextual theology; cultural adaptation; post-colonial theology.

Introduction

The rising prevalence of garden marriages in African black Reformed churches has engendered a substantial theological and pastoral quandary that necessitates immediate scholarly investigation. This friction operates at multiple interrelated levels, posing significant challenges for church leadership, congregational identity and doctrinal integrity. The primary problem arises from a direct clash between established Reformed liturgical traditions and modern African cultural expressions (Galbreath 2019; Toliver 2020:iv). Smit (2017:34) underscores that the Reformed tradition has traditionally emphasised structured liturgical activities, which maintain the solemnity and social affirmation essential for marriage as a holy covenant before God. The increasing popularity of outdoor weddings disrupts the customary framework, raising theological identity issues for African Reformed congregations. Farmer (2025:147) contends that Calvin's theological framework, which explicitly rejects medieval concepts of consecrated spaces, paradoxically supports outdoor worship, while Reformed liturgical practice has established specific criteria for worship environments that promote reverence, order and congregational participation. This apparent discord presents difficulties for the ecclesiastical authority tasked with reconciling Calvin's theological tenets with contemporary liturgical practices. The lack of denominational direction has resulted in pastoral confusion and theological uncertainty. Church leaders are compelled to make impromptu choices regarding venue permissions without clear criteria to assess whether outdoor locations adhere to the liturgical standards mandated by Reformed covenant theology (Dowson 2021:49). The absence of theological reflection endangers either rigid conformity to traditional European frameworks, perhaps suppressing authentic

African cultural expression, or uncritical acceptance of local practices, which may undermine essential Reformed liturgical principles. The friction is particularly pronounced as pastors and church councils face critical decisions about aligning outdoor weddings with the fundamental tenets of Reformed covenant theology and the authentic representation of African Christian identity, in the absence of explicit directives from their denominations (Packiam 2022). This imposes an inequitable load on local church leadership and engenders inequities among congregations. A notable tension arises from the conflict between cultural authenticity and confessional integrity (Warfield 2020). Yirenkyi (2019:29) states that traditional African marriage ceremonies typically occurred in communal outdoor settings, such as beneath ancestral trees, within family compounds, or at village meeting places, emphasising the social celebration of covenant bonds and community involvement. The growing prevalence of garden weddings among African Reformed Christians may signify both adherence to contemporary trends and a revival of old cultural practices that embody Christian values. This cultural resurgence conflicts with colonial religious organisations that, as Harries (2018) observes, either disregarded or repressed traditional African marital customs. Colonial missionary endeavours sometimes perceived traditional African marital practices as 'pagan' or 'uncivilised', compelling converts to renounce cultural behaviours that might have been theologically congruent with Reformed principles. Modern African Reformed churches are striving to contest conventional colonial ecclesiastical practices while pursuing authentic manifestations of Christian faith that respect both Reformed theological principles and legitimate African cultural representations (Bainbridge 2015:23). The discord escalates while addressing practical liturgical issues. Peil (2024:9) demonstrates that Reformed liturgical practice has established certain standards for worship settings that promote reverence, order and congregational participation. Garden weddings pose numerous practical challenges with theological ramifications: (1) weather variability can interrupt liturgical events, threatening the solemnity and continuity essential for successful covenant-making ceremonies; (2) insufficient acoustic conditions may impede congregational engagement, undermining the communal testimony integral to Reformed marriage theology; and (3) commercial pressures on garden venues may prioritise aesthetic factors over spiritual significance (De Lacy & Shackleton 2017). These pragmatic impediments transform into theological concerns when they threaten fundamental elements of the marriage rite, as Reformed theology underscores that marriage is a covenant established before God and acknowledged by the religious community. The conflict is exacerbated by substantial postcolonial theological issues. Iheanacho (2021:7) asserts that authentic African Christianity requires a deliberate amalgamation of indigenous cultural traditions with Christian beliefs, rather than mere imitation of Western ecclesiastical frameworks. This integration process generates conflict between advocates of classic European Reformed traditions and supporters of genuine African Christian manifestations. The difficulty lies in distinguishing between

essential Christian theological principles and cultural manifestations that may vary across contexts, as observed by Sarkodie (2023). This paradigm necessitates evaluating traditional African marriage ceremonies according to their capacity to uphold, rather than contradict, Christian theological principles of covenant relationships. The various layers of friction highlight the pressing necessity for a cohesive theological framework capable of properly addressing these discrepancies. Mbiti's (2015:20) notion of 'true African Christianity' advocates for manifestations of the Christian faith that are distinctly African and authentically Christian, offering possible criteria for assessing garden weddings. The lack of a framework in denominational guidance engenders persistent tension and ambiguity. The research is crucial for delineating explicit theological boundaries that help African Reformed churches address these intricate issues while preserving theological integrity and cultural authenticity. In the absence of such instruction, friction will persist, resulting in discord, inconsistency and doctrinal ambiguity within African Reformed communities. This notable tension in theological, pastoral, cultural, liturgical and postcolonial dimensions necessitate urgent systematic research that can offer practical advice while honouring both Reformed confessional beliefs and authentic African cultural expressions.

Literature review

This section analyses the existing scholarly literature on the theological and liturgical issues surrounding garden weddings in Reformed churches, with particular emphasis on the African context. The review is methodically organised by theme and employs Reformed liturgical theology, biblical studies, African theology and architectural theology to establish the theoretical framework for this study. The examined literature includes peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs and confessional texts, emphasising sources published from 2015 forward, while integrating essential previous works where necessary. The analysis reveals that, despite growing scholarly interest in the convergence of Reformed liturgy with African cultural practices, a systematic theological framework for evaluating outdoor wedding settings within this tradition remains underdeveloped in the existing literature.

The dynamic nature of Reformed liturgical tradition

The Reformed liturgical tradition signifies the worship patterns, beliefs and practices that emerged from the 16th century Protestant Reformation, particularly shaped by the theological perspectives of John Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger and their successors. Reformed liturgy essentially follows the regulative principle of worship, positing that communal worship should be predominantly guided by Scripture rather than by human innovation or ecclesiastical tradition (Weaver & Witvliet 2023:3). However, viewing Reformed liturgy solely through this doctrinal lens may reduce it to a rigid set of prescriptions. Reformed liturgical practice has never been uniform or unchanging.

Contrary to prevalent notions about the constancy of ecclesiastical custom, the Reformed tradition has consistently demonstrated considerable diversity in its liturgical expression across many historical epochs, geographical locales and cultural settings. German, Barton and Macinnes (eds. 2021) demonstrate that significant variations existed within 16th-century Reformed groups, specifically between Genevan, Zwinglian and Scottish worship practices, each shaped by distinct political, cultural and theological influences. These initial divergences established a benchmark for contextual flexibility that has endured within the tradition over the centuries.

Gibson and Earngey (2018) assert that Reformed worship has continually evolved in response to its cultural context, functioning not as a fixed liturgical framework but as a theologically guided, culturally shaped interaction with the living God. This understanding challenges the idea that Reformed liturgy is a consistent, unchanging framework. It represents a tradition dedicated to continuous theological contemplation concerning the essence of authentic worship in certain locations and periods. Kaemingk and Willson (2020:4) contend that Reformed communities globally have consistently reinterpreted essential liturgical elements, including the gathering, the Word, the Table and the sending, via culturally appropriate lenses while preserving their theological purity.

The geographical expansion of Reformed Christianity throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America through missionary efforts further influenced the tradition's liturgical identity. Burnett-Cole (2023:176) observes that the exportation of European Reformed worship practices to the Global South was rarely a neutral theological initiative; it was deeply interwoven with colonial power dynamics that prioritised Western liturgical aesthetics over indigenous traditions. The imposition of European ecclesiastical building, formal liturgical language and structured ceremonies significantly suppressed indigenous cultural expressions, presenting a culturally unique way of worship as the norm. This colonial dynamic has led several postcolonial liturgical historians to challenge the concept of Reformed liturgy as a static construct, arguing that its apparent uniformity was an ideological imposition rather than a theological necessity (Maluleke 2020:7).

Breytenbach (2025:40) supports this perspective from a South African viewpoint, noting that the Dutch Reformed Church's liturgical uniformity during apartheid was upheld not only by theological convictions, but also by political and racial ideologies that utilised liturgical conformity as a means of social control. The dismantling of apartheid necessitated both political transformation and liturgical decolonisation, aiming for a reimagined Reformed worship liberated from colonial constraints. This has generated significant potential for contextual liturgical innovation within African Reformed congregations, including the growing use of activities such as outdoor worship, communal celebration and the integration of African musical and ceremonial traditions.

Moll (2025:80) similarly underscores that post-apartheid South African liturgical scholarship has increasingly embraced the concept of liturgical inculturation, the process through which the gospel and its worship forms are authentically expressed within a particular cultural context, regarded as both theologically sound and pastorally vital. This concept, derived from Catholic missiology and gradually adopted by Protestant groups, posits that no single cultural expression of worship possesses ultimate theological superiority. Authentic Reformed worship, from this perspective, is defined not by adherence to European liturgical customs but by fidelity to essential theological ideas expressed in contextually appropriate ways.

Iheanacho (2021) elaborates on this argument concerning the African diaspora, demonstrating that Reformed communities in sub-Saharan Africa are creatively redefining liturgical acceptability by integrating African communal values, oral traditions and celebratory practices into Reformed worship, all while upholding their confessional commitments. This revision reflects the tradition's essential dedication to contextual authenticity over rigid adherence, a concept arguably more congruent with the Reformation's hermeneutical perspective than the liturgical conservatism that has often dominated Reformed church culture.

Therefore, the notion of 'Reformed liturgy' as a static, immutable construct must be recognised as historically inaccurate and theologically untenable. The history of the tradition illustrates a dynamic, adaptive liturgical identity that has continually engaged with its cultural and religious contexts. Nyawuza (2019) asserts that the challenge for contemporary African Reformed churches is not the choice to engage in contextual liturgical adaptation, but rather in identifying approaches that maintain theological accountability to Reformed confessional principles while genuinely honouring the cultural heritage and communal identity of African worshippers. The tension between theological integrity and cultural authenticity is the core issue to be examined in the study of garden marriages within African Reformed contexts.

Historical development of Reformed wedding practices

Calvin's philosophical framework significantly contested medieval Catholic notions of hallowed space and clerical authority (Holder 2022). His reforms were theological and pragmatic, designed to eradicate superstitious connections with sacred edifices while underscoring devotion 'in spirit and truth' (Jn 4:23–24). Crawford (2021:55) asserted that God's presence transcends spatial constraints, manifesting among assembled believers rather than being confined to specific edifices.

The incremental standardisation of church edifices for Reformed nuptials emerged from historical influences, including governmental legitimacy, liturgical evolution and

societal acceptance, rather than doctrinal stipulations (Gibson & Earngey 2018). As Reformed churches acquired social legitimacy, formal church edifices emerged as emblems of respectability and legal authority. This development signifies cultural progress rather than a prescriptive philosophy.

Historical precedents for outdoor Reformed worship are apparent in several areas. In the 17th century, despite the Scottish persecution, Reformed churches conducted full worship services, including marriages, in secluded areas while preserving liturgical integrity (Old 2023:88). Early Reformed settlers in North America often performed wedding ceremonies outside for practical reasons, so establishing precedents for outdoor Reformed worship while maintaining theological integrity (Mayhew-Smith 2021).

Research methods and design

Theological foundations of sacred space in Reformed thought

Modern Reformed theologians have elaborated on Calvin's perspectives on worship settings, offering theological underpinnings for examining current liturgical practices. Tsatalbasidis (2019:23) contends that although certain locations lack intrinsic sanctity, physical settings substantially influence the quality and integrity of liturgy. Venue selection should prioritise actual capability to facilitate genuine worship rather than superficial spatial sanctity.

Jones (2025:183) contends that a suitable liturgical environment facilitates true worship rather than generates it. Churches facilitate worship through practical design features, such as acoustic properties, seating configurations and visual focal points, rather than through intrinsic purity. This insight suggests that garden spaces may enhance Reformed worship by providing suitable practical conditions for liturgical expression.

Von Allmen (2023) asserts that liturgical alterations are theologically valid when they augment rather than diminish fundamental elements of worship. This principle asserts that garden marriages are permissible for outdoor ceremonies if they foster genuine Reformed liturgical expression while fulfilling practical needs for community involvement and respectful worship.

Liturgical centres and spatial theology in Reformed worship

Protestant worship and church architecture offer essential insights that substantially reinforce the theological framework for evaluating garden weddings in Reformed traditions (Bains 2022:448). The notion of liturgical centres provides a refined theological framework for assessing worship places according to their ability to facilitate fundamental liturgical actions, rather than their aesthetic or

conventional designs (Baldovin 2025). This method is especially pertinent for assessing outdoor wedding settings in the context of Reformed ecclesiology.

Three essential liturgical focal points in the Reformed tradition must be preserved in any worship setting: (1) the altar-table (symbolising the community's sacramental life), (2) the pulpit or ambo (signifying the supremacy of God's Word) and (3) the font (representing initiation into the covenant community) (Nguyen 2020). His focus on the font, altar and pulpit in diverse interpretations of worship space illustrates that theological integrity relies not on physical architecture but on the functional configuration and symbolic significance of these liturgical focal points (Nguyen 2020). This framework outlines specific criteria for evaluating garden wedding venues' capacity to uphold Reformed liturgical purity.

The liturgical centre technique employed in African Reformed church weddings posits that outdoor locations are theologically suitable if they facilitate the clear delineation and proper execution of fundamental worship elements (Van Eeden 2018:57). Essential matters regarding the nature and function of the Church in worship must be addressed prior to any congregation's preparation to construct or arrange worship facilities, which is directly relevant to the choice of locations for wedding ceremonies. The theological inquiry emphasises not the venue's location, whether indoors or outdoors, but rather the site's capacity to facilitate the genuine proclamation of God's Word, a suitable sacramental celebration and significant community involvement (Rempel 2020).

Architectural theology and cultural context

The theological framework acknowledges the interconnectedness of architecture, art and theology, with each component shaping and influencing the others (Adashinskaya 2022:31). This understanding affirms the apprehensions expressed by African Reformed churches in their pursuit of spaces that respect both Reformed theological tenets and genuine cultural manifestations. This study indicates that liturgical validity arises from theological intent rather than compliance with specific architectural traditions rooted in European contexts (Hackett 2025:169).

The amalgamation of White's architectural theology with the South African Reformed setting demonstrates how garden weddings might exemplify what scholars in the South African Reformed tradition may refer to as 'liturgical contextualisation' (Baron & Letšosa 2021). The revised study underscores that 'liturgy within the church service context, particularly regarding external life, is crucial' for genuine Christian expression (Baron & Letšosa 2021).

Integration with African Reformed liturgical development

The use of the liturgical centre technique in the African Reformed context necessitates a thorough examination of how indigenous cultural features might augment rather than

undermine fundamental liturgical functions (Sikorska 2021). Current South African Reformed liturgical studies increasingly acknowledge that 'liturgical inculturation' necessitates 'a more comprehensive understanding' to enable 'the liturgy to reclaim its prophetic voice' within cultural contexts (Wepener 2014:5).

This integration strategy entails a methodical evaluation of liturgical alterations (Te Velde 2022). His paradigm offers objective standards for differentiating cultural components that enhance authentic Reformed worship from those that may undermine doctrinal purity. This paradigm allows African Reformed churches to conduct outdoor garden weddings that embody Reformed theological principles and valid cultural manifestations, while preserving a distinct liturgical emphasis and fostering community involvement (Irwin 2018).

The integration of White's architectural theology with contemporary African Reformed liturgical studies indicates that garden weddings constitute a valid manifestation of contextual Reformed worship when meticulously planned and theologically substantiated (Baron & Letšosa 2021). This methodology respects the Reformed tradition's dedication to genuine worship and the African church's endeavour to maintain indigenous Christian expression with legitimate Reformed theological integrity.

Biblical foundations for worship and covenant-making

Scripture offers substantial precedent for comprehending divine presence and covenant formation beyond architectural limitations. Genesis 2:18–25 delineates the archetypal marriage ceremony within a garden context, indicating theological precedence and divine inclination for natural settings in covenantal relationships. The Hebrew language indicates that God deliberately created a garden as the setting for human covenant partnership, with the initial marriage proclamation taking place in this natural environment.

Jesus' discourse in John 4:19–24 is the most explicit New Testament instruction regarding the connection between the location of worship and genuine spiritual activity. His assertion that worship transpires 'in spirit and truth' rather than at designated sites radically alters the comprehension of sacred space. This instruction pertains directly to marriage rites, signifying that divine blessing and presence are accessible wherever authentic covenant commitment is made before God and community witnesses.

These biblical foundations closely correspond with fundamental Reformed theology ideas. From the Garden of Eden to Jesus' teachings on spiritual worship, Scripture continually depicts God's presence as surpassing architectural constraints. This comprehension underpins Calvin's dismissal of spatial holiness while offering scriptural justification for outdoor covenant rituals that prioritise people and commitment above ceremonial contexts.

Contemporary cultural contexts and garden weddings

The occurrence of garden marriages transcends various cultural and demographic borders among Reformed groups. Current trends reveal an increasing preference for outdoor wedding venues among Afrikaans-speaking, English-speaking and African Reformed-speaking churches, indicating broader cultural transformations rather than distinct ethnic inclinations. This cross-cultural phenomenon demonstrates that garden weddings embody modern ideas concerning natural beauty, intimate celebration and personal expression, rather than specific cultural traditions.

Modern African theological reflection offers significant insights for evaluating the proper integration of cultural practices with Christian theological concepts. Oduyoye (2009:73) contends that genuine African Christianity requires a deliberate amalgamation of indigenous cultural practices with Christian doctrine rather than mere imitation of Western ecclesiastical frameworks. This principle is widely applicable to all cultural circumstances, pursuing an authentic expression of Reformed religion, rather than being exclusively 'African'.

Mbiti's (2015:20) notion of 'true African Christianity' advocates for manifestations of Christian religion that are both contextually relevant and distinctly Christian. This framework establishes criteria for assessing liturgical modifications as either authentic cultural expressions that enrich Christian theological comprehension or as superficial adjustments that undermine doctrinal integrity. These ideas are universally applicable to all cultural circumstances, pursuing genuine Reformed expression.

This study employs a literary research methodology grounded in hermeneutical analysis to examine the theological compatibility of garden marriages across Reformed church traditions. The study utilises a comprehensive textual analysis approach that incorporates historical, theological and cultural literary sources to provide an in-depth understanding of the research topic.

The methodology relies on contextual theological hermeneutics, employing Reformed interpretative traditions and integrating diverse cultural perspectives. This approach recognises that Reformed theology has consistently been contextual rather than abstract, requiring careful analysis of the application of theological conceptions within specific cultural and historical settings.

Literature was obtained with the subsequent subject keywords and search terms: Revised liturgy, garden weddings, outdoor worship, African Christianity, liturgical inculturation, contextual theology, covenant theology, sacred space, postcolonial theology and African Reformed churches. The inquiries were conducted in the subsequent academic databases and repositories: (1) Journal Storage (JSTOR),

(2) EBSCOhost Academic Search Premier, (3) Google Scholar, (4) American Theological Library Association Serials (ATLAS) and (5) the South African Theological Bibliography (SATB). The periodicals consulted were *In die Skriflig*, *Hervormde Teologiese Studies (HTS) Theological Studies*, *The Ecumenical Review*, *Studia Liturgica* and *Verbum et Ecclesia*, among others. Sources were assessed for inclusion based on a publication period from 2010 to 2025 for journal articles and book chapters. Sources predating 2010 were included exclusively if they were essential, seminal or doctrinal texts for which no adequate contemporary equivalent exists (for example, Calvin's Institutes and the Westminster Confession of Faith). A total of 62 sources were acquired from all databases. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 38 sources were selected for this investigation. The inclusion criteria specified that sources must be: (1) directly relevant to Reformed liturgy, African theology, contextual worship or sacred space theology; (2) peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs or recognised theological works; and (3) available in full text. The exclusion criteria eliminated sources that were: (1) not peer-reviewed or without academic accreditation; (2) generated outside the specified time frame without seminal importance; or (3) solely focused on non-Reformed or non-African theological traditions without broader relevance. Both journal articles and book chapters were assessed. Non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded unless they were official confessional or denominational documents of recognised authority.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

Theological analysis of garden weddings

Liturgical integrity and environmental considerations

The primary theological inquiry regarding garden weddings is whether outdoor settings may maintain the liturgical integrity mandated by Reformed worship theology. Ahn (2022:28) delineates four essential conditions for integrity: (1) the unequivocal declaration of God's Word, (2) active involvement of the congregation, (3) a reverent environment appropriate to worship and (4) a persistent dedication to covenant fidelity. These requirements are equally applicable across all venues, and outdoor environments must be assessed against them rather than any assumed architectural standard.

Garden weddings can fulfil these criteria when intentional liturgical planning considers the environmental factors intrinsic to outdoor ceremonies. Proper sound amplification ensures the Word is articulated clearly to the gathered community; intentional seating arrangements promote congregational involvement, as essential to Reformed ecclesiology; and meticulous site selection reduces sensory distractions that could undermine reverence. Nixon (2019:14) accurately notes that the theological issue is not the physical

environment itself, but rather whether that environment facilitates or hinders genuine worship. In this context, the outside environment is theologically neutral; the decisive factor is the intentionality behind the pursuit of liturgical objectives within it.

This role aligns with the notion articulated by Hughes Oliphant Old, who asserts that liturgical modifications are theologically justifiable when they enhance rather than undermine the fundamental components of worship. This concept, when applied to garden weddings, asserts that outdoor venues are theologically valid if they actively promote, rather than merely accept, the declaration of God's covenant faithfulness and the communal testimony to the marriage bond. The theological inquiry is not whether a garden can accommodate a Reformed ceremony, but rather if each specific ceremony is conducted with the theological gravity that covenant-making before God necessitates.

Practical challenges and theological implications

Garden weddings pose several practical issues that hold significant theological implications, necessitating thorough ecclesiastical consideration. Unpredictable weather can interrupt liturgical ceremonies, undermining the solemnity essential for covenant-making rituals. Subpar acoustic settings jeopardise the clarity of the proclaimed Word and exchanged vows, so undermining the communal testimony central to Reformed marriage doctrine. Moreover, the economic focus of several garden venues often prioritises aesthetic spectacle over spiritual significance, a concern corroborated by De Lacy and Shackleton's (2017) examination of the growing monetisation of hallowed outdoor places.

The logistical challenges are theologically pertinent because they immediately impact the integrity of the marriage vow. Reformed theology asserts that marriage is a sacred bond established before God and observed by the assembled faith community. When venue constraints hinder significant congregational engagement, amplify distractions, or diminish the ceremony to a mere visual spectacle, the theological essence of the event is genuinely jeopardised. The transition from covenant-centred worship to artistically driven spectacle represents not only a practical deficiency, but also a doctrinal one, as it undermines the theological intent of the ceremony.

These issues, however, are not theologically disqualifying. These are contingent challenges that can be significantly mitigated through deliberate, systematic planning. Thorough weather contingency plans, expertly placed audio systems and continuous liturgical supervision prioritising doctrinal goals over aesthetic choices can maintain the theological integrity of an outdoor service. The critical factor is not the existence of practical challenges, such as those that accompany any act of worship, but rather whether those overseeing the ceremony exhibit the theological gravity necessary to prioritise all practical arrangements in accordance with the fundamental objectives of covenant worship.

Integration of cultural elements

The integration of cultural practices into garden wedding ceremonies necessitates meticulous and ongoing theological discernment, especially within the African Reformed context, where issues of liturgical inculturation converge with the remnants of colonial oppression and the demands of postcolonial restoration. The primary objective is to differentiate between cultural expressions that genuinely enhance the theological essence of the marriage bond and those that may undermine or dilute its doctrinal foundation. Utilising Oduyoye's (1995) framework, components that bolster communal covenant-witness, such as ancestral blessing prayers reinterpreted through a Trinitarian lens, music that culturally articulates the sovereignty of God and the deliberate inclusion of extended family participation as a manifestation of the covenantal community can serve as authentic enhancements to Reformed liturgical practice rather than deviations from it.

Cultural integration necessitates theological discernment rather than unexamined acceptance. Cultural elements that undermine the exclusivity of monotheistic worship, incorporate practices of ancestor veneration or supplant the christological focus of the marriage covenant with communal or ethnic allegiances cannot be integrated into a confessionally Reformed framework, regardless of their cultural importance. According to Anderson (2016:38), the aim is not to accommodate culture as an end in itself, but to contextually articulate Reformed theological convictions in ways that are authentically comprehensible and expressively authentic within a specific community. Culture functions as a conduit for religious discourse; it does not establish a theological standard.

This principle is applicable to all cultural groups within the Reformed tradition. Afrikaans-speaking, English-speaking and other Reformed groups each grapple with the inherent contradiction between genuine contextual expression and adherence to confessional principles. The theological framework is coherent: Cultural aspects are theologically valid if they support, rather than undermine, the covenantal and doxological objectives of the marriage ritual. Preserving this uniformity protects against the cultural imperialism of enforcing a uniform liturgical aesthetic and the doctrinal leniency of uncritically embracing all cultural expressions.

Validity

The study's validity was guaranteed by implementing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, conducting triangulated searches across five academic databases, prioritising peer-reviewed and recognised sources, and maintaining transparency about the contextual hermeneutical framework utilised.

Discussion

Practical guidelines for theological integrity

Pre-ceremony planning

Ensuring theological integrity in garden weddings necessitates thorough pre-planning that addresses both liturgical

considerations and practical arrangements (Moll 2025:14). Couples and church leaders must formulate comprehensive contingency plans for weather-related disruptions, implement suitable sound systems for clear communication and organise seating to promote congregational engagement rather than solely for aesthetic purposes.

Garden locations ought to be assessed based on their ability to facilitate worship rather than their aesthetic qualities (Aderonmu & Gbotosho 2020:2). Venue selection must account for accessibility for elderly or disabled individuals, mitigation of environmental distractions and spatial configurations that visually highlight the covenant ceremony. These pragmatic factors embody profound religious commitments to inclusive community engagement and a reverent emphasis on worship.

Liturgical adaptations

A garden wedding liturgy may require modifications while maintaining fundamental Reformed components. The traditional Reformed wedding liturgy, typically extensive and tailored for church acoustics, may require adaptation for outdoor environments without sacrificing doctrinal integrity (White 2003). The essential liturgical components, scriptural readings, congregational singing, pastoral address, exchange of vows and benediction, must be preserved while modifying their presentation for outdoor settings.

The selection of music is especially significant in garden environments. Musical selections ought to enhance the event's theological emphasis rather than serve solely as cultural or aesthetic embellishments. The use of culturally appropriate musical elements should augment, not supplant, congregational singing, so as to reinforce the liturgical objective of fostering genuine worship expression in the outdoor setting.

Community participation

Reformed theology underscores the communal aspect of the marriage bond, requiring active participation by the community rather than mere observation. Garden wedding preparations ought to foster significant community involvement via responsive liturgical components, congregational singing and spatial configurations that incorporate rather than exclude the bridal party from the wider community (Leene 2017:266).

Preserving community emphasis in aesthetically orientated environments necessitates meticulous liturgical guidance that continually highlights the theological importance of the covenant being observed. This focus on community involvement illustrates Reformed theological principles on the priesthood of all Christians and the collective essence of covenant testimony.

Conclusion

Garden marriages in Reformed churches can be theologically valid when undertaken with rigorous

theological contemplation and deliberate liturgical design. The outdoor setting presents no intrinsic theological issues for genuine Reformed worship, provided practical arrangements facilitate rather than obstruct the fundamental liturgical components. The fundamental theological concept is that places of worship must be assessed according to their ability to facilitate the faithful preaching of God's Word, foster meaningful community engagement and ensure reverent focus on the holy covenant being established.

Garden venues that meet these liturgical criteria while genuinely integrating appropriate cultural elements might serve as effective venues for Reformed marriage ceremonies. Garden weddings should be selected not based on aesthetic tastes or economic influences, but through theological contemplation regarding how venue selections might most effectively fulfil the sacred goal of covenant-making before God and the faith community.

This theological framework holds that Reformed churches may accept garden weddings as valid expressions of Christian marriage, while upholding Reformed liturgical standards and doctrinal integrity. When executed correctly, the outdoor setting can significantly augment specific facets of communal celebration while maintaining fundamental principles of Reformed covenant theology.

The discourse around garden wedding customs prompts significant inquiries over genuine Christian expression, transcending mere venue choice to encompass essential matters of cultural identity and theological integrity within modern Reformed Christianity. This tendency compels all Reformed communities, irrespective of cultural background, to critically address issues of liturgical adaptation, cultural authenticity and doctrinal fidelity in swiftly evolving social situations.

Future research ought to investigate case studies of effective garden wedding liturgies, formulate comprehensive practical guidelines for multiple cultural situations and analyse overarching issues of liturgical inculturation within modern Reformed churches across varied cultural environments. The objective remains unchanged: a genuine articulation of Reformed theological principles through liturgical practices that respect both confessional integrity and authentic cultural diversity.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Ndidzulafhi Mudau: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project

administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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