Volume 3, Issue 2 (Nov 2026)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion and Public Life

OCRPL
Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Maternal Agency and Care in the Missio Dei: A Practical-Theological Synthesis for Global Mission

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Abstract: Mission theology often names the maternal while overlooking maternal agency and care. The article offers a practical-theological synthesis, bringing together my published work on maternal-thinking and motherlessness, a bounded case study of a Colombian congregation, and selected historical examples. Drawing on Sara Ruddick's maternal-thinking, extended by a fourfold practice of preservation, growth, acceptance, and release, and on the idea of a maternal commons, it asks what these sources reveal about mothers and mothering in the *missio Dei*. The Colombian case shows how one US-based mission organisation's assumptions about family, gender, and church belonging, treated as universal, marginalised local women's maternal agency, while the congregation's mothers and grandmothers helped sustain its communal life during crisis. Historical and textual examples suggest that this agency is a recurring, though often unrecognised, source of Christian faith, including under persecution. The case is bounded and does not represent all mission contexts, but it raises questions for mission agencies as mission initiatives increasingly emerge from the Global South. The article closes with four practical implications, for theological education, the recognition of maternal care, mission methods and policies, and reciprocal learning, and invites mission practice and policy to recognise maternal agency as one of the places from which Christians learn to discern and practise the *missio Dei*.

Keywords: *missio Dei*; maternal agency; maternal-thinking; mutuality; practical theology; Global South mission

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Although the maternal is implicit in mission, as in the well-known missiological dictum that "mission is the mother of theology" (Kähler, cited in Bosch 1991:16; see also Bosch 1991:521), my experience, beginning in my own missionary family and then as an adult mission practitioner, is that maternal agency and care are downplayed. For more than twenty years, I have heard stories of missionary mothers and families negotiating the demands of ministry and care for their children. These stories motivated my master's thesis on missionary mothers across the ages, developed with empirical and qualitative data (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2015).

Recent conversations with a woman serving in ministry alongside her husband in Ghana and the son of ministers in Nigeria are the latest examples, following earlier historical ones such as the families of Black and Coloured Dutch Reformed ministers and missionaries sent within South Africa (Jonas 2022). These examples are not systematic evidence and cannot tell us how widespread this practice is, but I find them alarming. As Global South churches and practitioners spearhead a new wave of mission initiatives, I fear that families may inherit structures in which ministry demands again come at the expense of children's wellbeing and maternal care.

I suspect that, in some mission contexts, motherless assumptions, urgency to "evangelise the world in this generation," results-oriented priorities, and expectations of Christ's imminent return can converge as a broader theology and orientation to mission, diminishing attention to local realities, long-term consequences, and institutional responsibility, Samuel Escobar's term, *managerial missiology* describes the epoch (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2024a). At stake is whether maternal agency and care are recognised and resourced in mission theology and practice. How might *maternal-thinking* help mission communities recognise and support the embodied and relational work of mothering?[2]

About two-thirds of the world's Christians live in the Global South (Johnson and Zurlo 2019), a shift that F. Lionel Young III traces in his forthcoming history of the Christian faith, *The Surprising Work of God: A New History of World Christianity* (Young forthcoming). Brazil and South Korea are now among the largest sending countries after the United States (Johnson and Zurlo 2019). Sending within the Global South

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[2] My theological perspective draws especially on Juliana Claassens's *Mourner, mother, midwife* (2012) and Amy Peeler's *Women and the gender of God* (2022). My historical perspective on women and mothers in mission draws especially on Dana Robert's *American women in mission* (1997).

also has its own history, including the families of Black and Coloured Dutch Reformed ministers and missionaries sent within South Africa (Jonas 2022).

The organisations at the centre of my critique are what I call Religious Branded Organisations (RBOs): independent, often nondenominational mission organisations, especially US-based, whose policies and structures reflect US legal and cultural assumptions, including an understanding of equality as sameness that leaves little room for the maternal body (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2023).[3]

The Christian West has tended to approach mission from a monocultural point of view and then to apply its concepts and practices in a universalising fashion, as a dominant culture view. As mission initiatives increasingly emerge from the Global South in an era of mission "from everywhere to everyone," the legacy of Western mission, and especially of the current US-based RBOs, may persist in assumptions about mission, family, gender, and care (on Western missionary families, see Baker and Priest 2014); I therefore raise a red flag: unless these assumptions are critically examined, mothers and those who undertake mothering may continue to be marginalised and to bear disproportionate practical, financial, spiritual, and emotional costs.

My aim is less to criticise mission than to describe the structures and systems of which it is part, often without awareness, and I do not reject its complex legacy. I do not endorse replacing family ties with church ties, but I read the emphasis as a feature of the mission model rather than of individual intent. The article addresses mission agencies, especially US-based agencies whose templates have shaped mission elsewhere, as well as churches, educators, and practitioners in both the Global North and the Global South.

Western-led mission movements contributed significantly to the worldwide spread of Christianity and carried ideals such as literacy and education, the belief that all people are created in the image of God, and human equality, even as they were often entangled with colonial and imperial projects. The presence of these ideals does not erase the harms of mission history, nor does their uneven realisation negate their significance. Rather than assigning blame, the article examines one place where these structures show: the treatment of maternal agency and care. We cannot modify what we cannot see. That is the logic for using scholars outside of the Christian faith, who aid in identifying structures and systems in which Christian missions are embedded.

The article offers a practical-theological synthesis that brings together my published work on *maternal-thinking* and *motherlessness*, a bounded Colombian case study, and

[3] RBO is a category I develop in 'World Christianity needs new tools' (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2026d).

selected historical examples.[4] As practical theology, the article moves between lived experience, theological interpretation, and practice. It is not a new empirical study or a comprehensive literature review. The article asks what these sources together reveal about maternal agency in the *missio Dei* and what they may mean for global mission practice and policy.[5]

After setting out its theological grounding and key terms, the article proceeds in four movements: it first examines Western mission assumptions that can marginalise maternal agency; then considers how this logic appears in a Colombian congregation; next, it highlights the contribution of mothers and mothering to the preservation of Christian faith; and finally, it lists practical implications for mission practice, family care, and resourcing.

Theological Grounding and Key Terms

If God is described in maternal as well as paternal terms, then maternal agency belongs among the places where the missio Dei can be discerned, not at its margins. Christian theology speaks of God with both paternal and maternal imagery. Alongside the language of God as Father, Scripture portrays God in maternal terms, as in the image of God comforting people as a mother comforts her child (Isa. 66:13; Claassens 2012; Rheinbolt-Uribe 2017; Peeler 2022). A motherly Father could be an acceptable way to understand the Godhead across Christian traditions.

These theological foundations ground my use of *maternal-thinking* as a lens for considering the *missio Dei* in light of both biblical imagery of God's maternal character and the lives and practices of mothers and other maternal figures. Here, *missio Dei* refers to God's work beyond human institutions, reaching humans and nonhuman creation.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase, "[a] natural power we carry within ourselves" (2003:386), captures the embodied dimension of maternal agency. Here, "mothers"

[4] As I have argued in my dissertation, *Transforming mutuality in a theology of mission* (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2023), and in 'Maternal-thinking, missio Dei, and managerial missiology' (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2024a) and 'Maternal-thinking and Ubuntu' (Freeks and Rheinbolt-Uribe 2025), *maternal-thinking* helps bring these dynamics into view.

[5] My standpoint is informed by research with women in Global South contexts. Drawing on my case study of ICI-Colombia, I examine how one US-based mission organisation's assumptions about maternity and mothering were treated as universal and shaped understandings and practices in this particular Colombian context. The case is bounded to this congregation and organisation and does not represent all mission organisations or all Global South contexts. I discuss Colombia's matricentric context in 'Mapping the matricentric' (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2025d) and in 'Maternal-thinking, missio Dei, and managerial missiology' (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2024a). The issue, however, extends beyond this case.

refers to biological and adoptive mothers, while "mothering" refers more broadly to the practices of people who undertake mothering or parenting (Freeks and Rheinbolt-Uribe 2026). Sara Ruddick's framework of *maternal-thinking* identifies three concerns of maternal work: "preservation, growth, and social acceptance" (1995:17). Building on Ruddick, I use a fourfold maternal practice that adds "release," or letting go, to complete the arc from preservation and nurture to release (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2024b:7, 13–14).

The *maternal commons* names communal life grounded in embodied, relational care and mutual aid, enacted in these four maternal practices, as I develop in 'Contested bodies and imperial logics' (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2026b). It is not an institution, doctrine, or programme but a relational practice that precedes and exceeds imperial management. Theologically, it rests on the *imago Dei* understood as relational and kenotic; socio-politically, it appears in vernacular, face-to-face spaces where these practices persist outside institutional management.[6]

The maternal terminology used here is not biologically reductionist. Maternal imagery for God is theological language, not a claim that God is biologically female (or male) (Peeler 2022). Nor is maternal practice confined to biological maternity or to women: it names relational practices of care that may be undertaken by adoptive mothers and other committed caregivers (O'Reilly 2024). Many practices central to Christian life, such as tending the sick, feeding the hungry, accompanying the dying, and sharing with those experiencing poverty, resonate with practices of mothering, without implying that such care belongs exclusively to women or mothers. I also recognise the significance of maternal agency without idealising motherhood or assuming that mothers' influence is inherently benign. The point is that maternal care and agency have often been overlooked in accounts of Christian mission and the formation of faith.

Although *maternal-thinking* overlaps with some feminist concerns, I approach it from a womanist, community-centred perspective attentive to women, families, and communities (Kanyoro 2002; Chilisa 2020; Crowder 2016). The perspective is in conversation with Kiboko's (2001:213) account of *thinking-with-the-womb* as expressed in Sanga women's biblical interpretation. I bring these African and Black women's perspectives into conversation without treating them as interchangeable.

Based on the above, I believe that Christians of all traditions can unite under the affirmation that the Godhead is understood as a Motherly Father.

[6] I apply the idea to a Colombian congregation in 'Beyond the walls' (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2026a; Rheinbolt-Uribe and Freeks 2026).

First: Western Motherlessness

Roles based on the male body have often been treated as the "ideal" in Western society. At this point in history women are expected to function as "alternate males" or "genderless men" within what Ivan Illich calls the "regime of economic sex," in which industrial society rests on "unisex assumptions" (Illich 1983:10–13). I use *unisex regime* as shorthand for the institutional logic I read in that critique: a supposedly universal norm that obscures embodied difference.

A specific example of the unisex regime is the legal treatment of maternity in the United States. Men and women are formally equal under the law, so federal law gives maternity little specific support, and employers and individual states largely set their own policies. The Family and Medical Leave Act provides eligible employees with up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave, and only where the employer has at least 50 employees and the worker has been employed for at least 12 months and 1,250 hours (US Department of Labor 2025). There is no federal paid maternity leave. The approach differs from that of many other countries; Colombia, for example, provides 18 weeks of paid maternity leave, the first 12 reserved for the mother and the final six shareable between parents (Angulo, Webster and Rosseau 2021). A model that treats women and men as the same can leave little room for the maternal body, and organisations that take such a model as their template may carry that gap into other contexts.

Forced feminism, which I coined*,* names a model that empowers women structurally while expecting them to conform to norms modelled on men's lives, without adequately attending to how maternal embodiment and mothering shape women's agency (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2025c). I do not mean to criticise women's leadership or empowerment; it points to something more profound, the ideal of *motherlessness*. Literary and psychoanalytic work on motherless creation (Nielsen 2022) and *womb envy* (Easlea 1983) points in the same direction, toward ways of imagining creation apart from women's reproductive bodies.

In 'I was trained to be a man' (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2025c), I trace my own formation within masculine norms in Christian mission and my efforts to unlearn them with maternal perspectives. Together, these ideas frame the Colombian case, which illustrates how related assumptions appeared in one mission setting, without suggesting that all Western or Global South mission organisations operate in the same way.

Second: Mission Methods and Maternal Agency in a Colombian Congregation

The section revisits findings from my case study of ICI-Colombia, a single congregation planted in 1992 by a US-based mission organisation (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2023). It considers the congregation's experience of the denomination's mission methods, based on the ideals of the church growth movement, and the consequences of the international collapse of its mission agency in 2003. I reread this bounded case with a *maternal-thinking* lens, asking what the methods recognised, and what they failed to recognise, about maternal agency and care. It is a reconsideration of a previously published case study, not a new empirical study.

The denomination's mission theology and methods were developed in the United States and understood to be universal. Research into local cultures, including anthropology, sociology, and history, was not encouraged. Although missiology recognises the importance of such research, this principle was not followed in the denomination's practice.

The case study of ICI-Colombia found that the prescribed mission method discouraged young converts from remaining close to their parents, drawing on a literal interpretation of Jesus' words in Luke 14:26: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple" (NIV). Such readings of scripture, taken out of context, show how the image of family can be turned against actual families (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2023:233). The denomination's US-based mission theology and methods prioritised kinship with the denominational "church family" over biological kinship. Such an emphasis contrasted with the Colombian cultural context examined in the study, where family life was generally centred on mothers (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2025c).

I read this emphasis critically. The tension between denominational allegiance and family ties matters here less for its own sake than for what it shows: a mission model can prioritise institutional belonging without adequately recognising maternal agency and care. Applying *maternal-thinking* helped me recognise that the congregation had been built on what I call "sacred ground": the role and place of mothers in Colombian life (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2023).

Although women and men held leadership roles, the method could redirect members' allegiance from their mothers to church leaders. Women were encouraged to place their confidence and allegiance in a female leader, while men were encouraged to do so in a male leader. In this case study, I was the female leader, a 25-year-old single woman when the congregation was planted in 1992. I have described this church-

planting approach as forced feminism in a unisex regime (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2024a). It empowered women within the church structure but did not adequately recognise or accommodate maternal agency, including how women's embodied lives and relationships with children, whether biological, adopted, or otherwise mothered, shaped their lives and commitments (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2024a).

In this congregation, however, many mothers joined their children. Rather than opposing their children's involvement in the denomination, they "leaned in" and became part of the congregation. I see a parallel in the life of Mary, Jesus' mother. Mark's Gospel depicts her concern about Jesus' actions and ministry (Mark 3:21, 31), while the book of Acts shows her joining his followers (Acts 1:14) (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2024b).

Maternal presence was also nurtured in *Nohemi*, a group formed for mothers and grandmothers and named after Ruth's mother-in-law. The women gathered for mutual support, shared teaching, and discipleship, including discussion of concerns such as menopause, relationship with adult children, to name a few.

During the crisis, the *Nohemi* group's significance became especially visible (further research would be important to provide more detailed data). Some family units centred around mothers remained active in the congregation, where mothers continued to open their homes, cook, teach, and offer counselling. Other households left together, either joining another congregation or meeting as a house church. The pattern merits further study and should not be treated as generalisable. The case nevertheless suggests that mothers' hospitality, teaching, and care helped sustain communal life.

In parallel, I see the *missio Dei* in practices that recall the contributions of mothers in the Jesus movement described in Acts. These include opening homes and sharing food for daily fellowship (Acts 2:42–47), hosting prayer meetings during a crisis (Acts 12:12, where many people had gathered to pray at the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark), and sharing the risks of belonging to the movement. Acts 8:3 describes Saul dragging both men and women from their homes and putting them in prison. I read these and other examples in the book of Acts from a woman's point of view (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2014).

The Colombian case shows how methods developed in the US and assumed to be universal, without the local research that missiology itself recommends, overlooked the maternal agency imbedded in the culture. When the mission agency collapsed in 2003, that agency did not disappear. Mothers and grandmothers kept homes open,

contributed to sustaining communal life. The case raises a wider question: how have maternal forms of care and agency contributed to the preservation and transmission of Christian faith in other times and places? The next section turns to selected historical and textual examples, including Philip Jenkins's account of women's role in preserving Christian communities under persecution.

Third: Maternal Commons and the Preservation of Christian Faith

The accusation that Christianity suppressed women should be taken seriously, but it does not capture the full complexity of Christian history. The historical record also includes evidence of women's agency and maternal care in the preservation and transmission of Christian faith. These contributions may be less visible in academic mission history as ordinary or taken for granted (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2015; Robert 2019:190). I read these forms of care and influence as expressions of the *missio Dei*.

Recognising maternal agency requires asking not only who carry children in their bodies and give birth, but who undertakes the time, effort, love, and creativity involved in raising children. Truly the mother–child bond is real, profound, and in some ways mysterious (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2025a). Because children shape the future, Christian communities should recognise the importance of this work and the shared responsibility for nurturing the next generation, not just in Sunday school or orphanages but at the centre of Christian families, and especially the families of mission practitioners.

Missio Dei can be observed across Christian history particularly during times of persecution and crisis, when mothers sustained and nurtured their communities. These roles have been recorded in different ways. Jenkins (2008) revisits the "lost history" of Christianity in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. He describes the "destruction of churches and Christian communities" (Jenkins 2008:28) and notes that "women were a critical factor in preserving underground faith" (Jenkins 2008:176). Through a *maternal-thinking* lens, Jenkins's discussion points to biological mothers (Jenkins 2008:63, 176) and spiritual mothers (Jenkins 2008:73) as contributing to the continuation of the Christian faith, even amid extreme persecution.

In my empirical research with Colombian Christians in the Colombian case study, most participants identified their mothers and grandmothers as the first people who taught them about faith in God (Rheinbolt-Uribe and Freeks 2026). Their accounts also conveyed the profound spiritual influence of their mothers and grandmothers and the communal character of their upbringing, which often involved extended family. The *Nohemi* group offers one example of maternal agency taking communal form in the formation of faith.

Kat Armas (2021:12*)* answers the question: "What if the world's greatest theologians are those whom the world wouldn't consider theologians at all?" presenting *abuela theology* or grandmother theology. Her account of *abuela theology* draws on the kitchen theology she experienced from her own grandmother. Her account resonates with the results of my research in the Colombia case study and the possibility that we miss important theological insight when we do not listen closely to the maternal figures in our communities.

Not to be naive, throughout history (including biblical history) mothers have also been the power behind the power; not only power for the spiritual but also for worldly and evil pursuits. All mothers, as all people, experience brokenness and are in need of continual transformation. If their empowerment in a community is not acknowledged or recognised, a large part of the puzzle will be missing for comprehension.

In the case study, despite the mission methods, a special focus was given to the *Nohemi group.* Many of these women not only sustained the congregation in crisis but also were pivotal for planting and sustaining congregations in their hometowns and cities.

Fourth: Implications for Global Mission and Missionary Families

The preceding sections point to practical implications for mission practitioners, leaders, agencies, churches, theological educators, and researchers. They are not universal prescriptions; they require discernment in light of local laws, cultural practices, and the needs of particular families. Responsibility does not rest with institutions alone: each person must consider the assumptions and choices they participate in, and the consequences these may have for others.

1. Include the maternal in theological education. The opening discussion of paternal and maternal imagery for God suggests a need to study biblical and theological accounts of God's maternal aspects, and the knowledge that emerges from mothering and communal care. Such study can help broaden mission theology beyond assumptions that make male experience the unmarked norm.

2. Recognise maternal care and the *maternal commons* as part of mission. The *Nohemi* group illustrates how mothers' and grandmothers' teaching, hospitality, companionship, and discipleship can sustain a congregation and contribute to mission. Agencies and churches should recognise and resource this work rather than treating it as informal support that women will provide

without recognition, and should make room for the full maternal arc, including "release."

3. Develop mission methods and policies with local communities and families. The Colombian case shows how methods presented as universal can overlook local family relationships and maternal agency. Agencies should consult local women and families, draw on cultural and historical research, and avoid asking women to fit their embodied maternal lives into structures not designed with those lives in view. The image of family itself calls for caution: the term is complex, can easily be manipulated, and may mean different things to different cultural groups (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2023:233). Policies should also be clear and responsive to context. Agencies should understand the labour and parental-leave protections in each country and clarify in writing how they apply to personnel. In a case I analysed, a practitioner and her husband were dismissed a month before the birth of their child (Rheinbolt-Uribe 2018).

   Agencies should also take local postpartum practices seriously. In Colombia, *cuarentena* is a 40-day period of rest and care for a new mother, ideally supported by her mother or another close female relative. I did not understand this practice in my early experience in Colombia, but when I had twins, I finally understood. Related questions, such as ties to extended family across borders and the effect of funding interruptions on family support, are best settled in writing before relocation, not left to families to solve during childbirth, illness, or crisis.

   Women's accounts in Terence Mupangwa's (2026) conference paper describe families left without stable housing during denominational conflict, which shows why appeals to "trust God" must not replace clear communication and practical support. Much more specific research of this kind is needed on the crises and challenges facing mission initiatives spearheaded from the Global South.

4. Commit to reciprocal learning and mutuality. As Bosch describes in 'Towards true mutuality: exchanging the same commodities or supplementing each others' needs?' (1978), mutuality involves learning from one another (see also Rheinbolt-Uribe 2026c). Western Christians and mission practitioners need to learn from the experience and wisdom of the Global South, while Global South practitioners can also learn from Western histories, mistakes, and critiques. Such learning should continue in conferences, books, historical accounts, and attention to lived experience, and should include children and adults raised in

missionary families whose perspectives affirm, complicate, or critique the institutions and forms of faith that shaped them. The 2026 Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship, *Children in Missionary Families: Stories of Pain, Hope, and Resilience*, is one example of a conference addressing these experiences.

Taken together, these recommendations call for more than recognising maternal agency; they ask mission agencies and churches to shape their practices and policies around the realities of family life, embodied difference, and the care that sustains communities. It is vital that the growing Global South mission movements not repeat these mistakes. Who will rise to this task?

Conclusion

The practical-theological synthesis has brought theological reflection on maternal imagery and agency into conversation with a Colombian case study and selected historical and current examples. Together, these show that maternal practices of teaching, care, hospitality, discipleship, and release can help sustain Christian faith, while mission methods may overlook or diminish those forms of agency when they impose universal assumptions about family, gender, and church belonging. The Colombian case is bounded and cannot stand for all mission contexts, but it makes visible questions that merit wider attention.

The article does not reject the complex legacy of Western mission, which has contributed to the worldwide spread of Christianity and carried ideals such as education, the *imago Dei*, and human equality, even as it has been entangled with colonial and imperial projects. It calls instead for honest, mutual learning about both contributions and failures, with particular attention to the treatment of maternal agency. If we care about the future of Christian faith, we must hold two truths together: local communities can sustain faith beyond the presence of a mission agency or transnational practitioner, and those practitioners and their families still deserve responsible, transparent care. Local resilience must not become an excuse for institutional neglect.

The question is both theological and practical. In the spirit of 1 Peter 3:15, “in your hearts set Christ apart [as holy—acknowledging Him, giving Him first place in your lives] as Lord. Always be ready to give a [logical] defence to anyone who asks you to account for the hope and confident assurance [elicited by faith] that is within you, yet [do it] with gentleness and respect” (AMP), individuals and institutions alike should be ready to give an account of the hope that shapes their mission decisions, including to those who will live with their consequences. What might change if maternal agency

were recognised not as peripheral to the *missio Dei*, but as one of the places from which Christians learn to discern and practise it?

If mission is indeed the "mother of theology," then mission itself is called to mother well: to preserve, nurture, and prepare others for acceptance and release rather than control. I hope and pray that mission practice and policy will grow in that direction. The God whom mission serves is described in Scripture as one who comforts as a mother comforts: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (Isa. 66:13). Every corner of our world, in the West and the Global South alike, yearns for that comfort.

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To cite (Harvard):

Rheinbolt-Uribe, R. (2026) 'Maternal agency and care in the *missio Dei*: a practical-theological synthesis for global mission, part 1', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(2), pp. 28-45. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i2.006

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has used AI for grammar correction and paraphrasing.

This research received no specific funding.