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A congregational view on church and community development in South Africa: An empirical study

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Community development is defined differently depending on the perspective of those defining it. There is a chasm between how academics define community development and how the general public views it. This results in some confusion, particularly regarding the role of churches in addressing community challenges. Fundamentally, community development is a human endeavor. Therefore, churches must have a clear understanding of community development in order for their participation in community transformation to be effective. This requires a comprehension of what community development is at the grassroots level. This article sheds light on the comprehension of community development at the grassroots level.

This article will provide answers to two fundamental concerns. What is grassroots community development in the first place? Second, why is church participation in community development necessary?

Two methods will be used to respond to the queries provided. This article utilises empirical data collected from Weltevreden Chapel Family Bible Church in Weltevreden Park and Christ Revival Centre Church in Lenasia, Johannesburg.

The article compares the literature's comprehension of community development to the grassroots perspective.

Contribution: This article examines the literature and empirical data collected from two congregations in Johannesburg to better comprehend grassroots community development. The article will emphasise the significance of grasping what community development is so that churches can engage in the transformation of communities strategically.

Keywords: church; church and community; development; community development; grassroot perspective; church-driven development; community transformation.

Introduction

There are many challenges that people face, which hamper their enjoyment of being a human (Magezi 2022). These challenges are not unsurmountable. With the right intervention to addressing people's challenges in communities, there is a greater chance that peoples' situation change. For the change to happen, there is a need for the communities to participate to bring about the desired change. Churches are part of civil society that people in communities depend on to address social issues (Magezi 2017a:7). The fact that churches in communities are accessible in the spirit of their proximity and connection with community people, make them a suitable force to deal with peoples' challenges. Churches in communities can inspire, build, and promote long-term sustainable relationships and structures between church and community members (Magezi 2017a:8). Despite the fundamental influence that churches have in their communities, there is a staggering reality of their passiveness in addressing social issues (Michael 2020:369). Furthermore, most of the churches do not understand the dimension to which they are to be involved with social issues.

One of the reasons that has contributed to the passiveness of churches to participate in community transformation is the misunderstanding of what community development is. This comes particularly in failing to comprehend the distinction between community service and community development. According to Slack (2014), there is a difference between community development and community service. He explains that in community service churches are merely involved in helping with community needs. For example, Slack (2014) mentions that churches participating in

volunteering work, giving food to the hungry, helping with shelter for the homeless and many other things, are part of community service. Another concept that needs to be taken into consideration is that of charity or relief. Corbett and Fikkert (2012:99–108) called this kind of involvement as charitable work or relief efforts. In a relief situation, urgent and temporary supply of emergency aid to lessen immediate suffering from a natural or man-made disaster is provided. Charity and relief are necessary for certain situations, yet they do not bring about the desired transformation necessary for the people who are assisted to be able to stand on their own two feet and support themselves and their families. According to the findings of a study that was carried out by Ferreira and Groenewald (2010), mainline churches in Africa, South Africa in particular, are actively involved in the provision of immediate relief in a variety of forms, including the operation of soup kitchens, the distribution of clothing and blankets to the needy, and many other activities. How could such kind of interventions be a solution to the challenges people face and transform their lives? The mainline churches in Africa are the churches that were founded by missionaries. Examples of these in South Africa include the Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists etc. These churches have contributed a lot in the liberation of South Africa and their involvement in the public (Dube & Molise 2018; Hofmeyr 2004). However, while they have been involved in community engagement to transform peoples' lives, their involvement has not been effective in many cases (Magezi & Nanthambwe 2022).

The situation that necessitates the importance of grassroot understanding of development is alluded by Cooper (2022) in his article 'Christianity threatens, promises, and challenges development practice: Analyses from the global south'. Cooper mentions that the world's Christian population resides in the so-called 'developing countries' (Global South). However, North America and Europe (Global North) are frequently viewed as the source of the influence on the Christian heritage. Similarly, countries in the Global South are the focus of development policies and practices, despite the fact that the North has traditionally dominated discussions about the appropriate forms of development. In the Global South, the Global North has established the policies, defined the budget allocations, and selected the parties with which to engage. In addition, conventional development programmes have been perceived as secular, focusing on economics and politics while excluding religion. In recent decades, however, there has been a shift towards recognising religion as fundamental to the lives of individuals in the Global South. However, the Global North retains the authority to assess if Christian and development activities in countries in the Global South are beneficial or destructive. Instead, both within the Christian tradition and in the field of development, decision-making should be located in the Global South, among the most affected populations (Cooper 2022:58). This is so because the people themselves are the ones who know better regarding how their problems can be solved than anyone else.

It is in the situation described by Cooper (2022) that this article sheds light on how community development, which is an aspect of development, is viewed among people in communities themselves.

Additional interventions are needed to support the government's efforts to address societal concerns in order to address the problems that Africa is experiencing. Magezi (2020:61) highlights the significance of churches being involved with pressing social issues. Churches have a public component because they are called and sent out into the world to be change agents. Churches have a favourable influence on community development through their dedication to the common good. This occurs not only through their actions and words within the church but also by their involvement outside of its boundaries (Nanthambwe & Magezi 2022:2). The age, gender, education level, social status, race, caste, sexual preference, and ethnicity of churchgoers vary greatly. Churchgoers nevertheless find a vital platform to discuss issues that affect their community as a whole within the church, despite such incredible diversity (Lutheran World Federation 2016:16).

The central question that this study answers is how does the grassroot understanding of community development helps the church to come up with effective interventions to address people's challenges? The article uses empirical information obtained from the Weltevreden Chapel Family Church in Weltevreden, Roodepoort and Christ Revival Church in Lenasia South Johannesburg, respectively. The findings of this study should help churches in South Africa to come up with proper interventions in the effort to transform their communities.

The background context of the study

South African communities face numerous challenges (World Bank 2018). While community challenges are numerous and acute, there are five challenges that have been at the top of the list: the triple challenge of inequality, poverty, and unemployment; gender-based violence (GBV), and racism (South African Government 2017).

These five challenges have recently devastated South African communities to such an extent that the government has recognised them and initiated programmes and various plans to combat them (Shava & Thakhathi 2016:363; South African Government 2017, 2022). As a result of their connection, South Africa refers to the socio-economic problems of inequality, poverty, and unemployment as the 'triple challenge'. Triple dilemma requires immediate attention from decision-makers and authorities throughout South African society, according to all parties involved (South African Government 2017:5). Van der Westhuizen and Swart (2015:732) described South Africa's struggle with poverty, inequality, unemployment, and hunger, and the urgency with which these issues must be addressed. Gender-

based violence and racism have also become more severe obstacles for South Africans. The President of South Africa has identified GBV as one of the greatest concerns facing South African communities and he has signed legislation to strengthen efforts to combat it (South African Government 2022). Racism has also persistently demanded South Africans' attention despite the end of apartheid, as evidenced through social media and community experiences. It is imperative to address the growing escalation of racial conflict in the country.

Despite the end of apartheid and the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, extreme inequality persists (Kganyago 2018:5; Makgetla 2020:4; Nqwane et al. 2021:79; Stats SA 2019:2). In fact, South Africa is regarded as one of the world's most unequal nations (Francis & Webster 2019:788; Galal 2021; Khan & Pillay 2019:1206; Leibbrandt et al. 2010; Nqwane et al. 2021:79).

A total of 10% of the population has 90% of all wealth and generates 60% of the nation's revenue (Webster, Valodia & Francis 2017). Statistic South Africa (2019) issued a frightening report indicating:

> In addition to being extremely high, South African inequality appears to be remarkably persistent. Despite many efforts by government to reduce inequality since our democratic transition in 1994, progress has been limited (p. 2).

According to Ndebele (2022), in a recent African Union Summit that took place in Ethiopia, South Africa has been urged to deal with the issues paralysing the country and one of them being inequality. The co-existence of extreme poverty and extreme wealth is starkly visible in the country (Chatterjee 2019:839; Nqwane et al. 2021). This was also pinpointed by Prof Adam Habib in his interview with Radio 702.[1] Speaking to Clement Manyathela, Habib pointed out the recent worsening of inequality in South Africa compared with the time democracy came into the country in 1994. He accentuated on the failure of the African National Congress (ANC) government to address issues linked with inequality. The World Bank (2018:xiv) identifies the tripartite of high poverty, inequality, and unemployment as major challenges that South Africa is facing as a country.

Poverty is another severe problem for South African communities (Eloff 2017:6; Francis & Webster 2019:788; Leibbrandt et al. 2010). When the upper-bound national poverty standard of R992 per person per month was applied to 2015 prices, nearly half the population of South Africa was categorised as chronically poor (World Bank 2018:xviii). According to the most recent information released by Statistics South Africa in 2021, this has not altered (Borgen Project 2022; Stats SA 2021a). While there has been progress in lowering the incidence of poverty in South Africa, it has been slow and the poverty rate has increased, according to the National Development Agency (2019:8) (World Bank

1. The interview of Prof Adam Habib with Radio 702 is available on: https://www.702.co.za/articles/438082/inequality-in-sa-now-is-worse-than-it-was-in-1994-adam-habib

2018:10–11; Zizzamia, Schotte & Leibbrandt 2019:2–3). Francis and Webster (2019:788) describe South Africa as 'something of paradox'. This is owing to the complexity of the relationship between the rich and the poor. According to the most recent data from Statistics South Africa (2017), poverty in the country has increased dramatically since 2011. The country's economic growth has stalled and inflation remains high in comparison to the industrialised nations (Francis & Webster 2019:788). South Africa has worked to combat poverty and inequality through a variety of measures for over two decades (World Bank 2018:xiv). The statement made in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in 1994 and reiterated in the National Development Plan (2012), stated that:

> No political democracy can survive and flourish if the mass of our people remain in poverty, without land, without tangible prospects for a better life … attacking poverty and deprivation must therefore be the first priority of a democratic government. (p. 14)

As poverty in the country continues to be the greatest problem of all challenges, there is no indication of when the aforementioned statement will be realised. In fact, Zizzamia et al. (2019:1) showed that it is difficult to escape poverty in South Africa because of the fact that it is a persistent rather than transient condition.

The problem of unemployment is a big challenge in South Africa (World Bank 2018:3). The most recent official unemployment data for South Africa, which were collected in 2021, indicate that unemployment has grown to 34.9%, the highest rate reported since the beginning of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey in 2008. (Stats SA 2021b:2). Compared with 2020, the number of unemployed increased by 17.0% or by 1.1 million individuals (Stats SA 2021b:2). These statistics indicate that the rate of unemployment in South Africa is a cause for concern. According to the World Bank (2018:3), South Africa's high unemployment rate is the primary issue that the government must investigate. The World Bank (2018:3) questioned the feasibility of the National Development Plan 2030, which projects the creation of 11m jobs by 2030. For the employment goal to be met, the economy must generate 600 000 jobs every year. However, the South African economy is so sluggish that it provides less than half of the necessary employment possibilities (World Bank 2018:3).

Gender-based violence is one of South Africa's worst concerns. Despite the country's reputation for having one of the most progressive constitutions, the rise in GBV contradicts the perception that South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions. (Sanni & Ofana 2021:387). Numerous cases of GBV in 2019 prompted women and girls to organise demonstrations, and there were protests against GBV in Johannesburg and Cape Town. While 2019 was thought to be a bad year for GBV in South Africa, 2020 was dubbed 'another pandemic' for GBV in South Africa during the lockdown (Sanni & Ofana 2021). The lockdown resulted in the escalation of GBV, notably in South Africa's rural communities.

Racism has also been endemic throughout the nation. Since the end of apartheid and the formation of democratic governance in 1994, the ANC government has established concrete measures to ensure that all South Africans live in a democratic and free nation. While it cannot be denied that there have been some improvements in racial relations, the bitter reality is that 'race' remains a persistent problem in South Africa (Phiri & Matambo 2018:73; Pillay 2017:4,6; Vorster 2017:39). For instance, Lujabe (2017) in her article said: *2017 started just like 2016, with racist rants on social media,* mentions some hot racist comments that took place in the years 2016 and 2017.

Regarding South Africa's progress, the effects of HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 cannot be neglected. South Africa has the world's greatest HIV epidemic to date (Nuh 2021). According to Stats SA (2021c:15), the estimated HIV prevalence rate among the population of South Africa is approximately 13.7%. The predicted number of persons living with HIV in 2021 is 8.2 m out of a total population of 60.14 m. A total of 19.5% of adults aged 15 to 49 years are estimated to be HIV-positive (Stats SA 2021c). Despite a drop in AIDS-related mortality in South Africa since 2007 because of the availability of antiretroviral therapy, AIDS remains a problem in the country. In 2007, there were 274 501 AIDS-related deaths registered. In 2020, there were 79,420 fewer AIDS-related fatalities. In 2021, there were 85,154 AIDS-related fatalities in the South Africa (Stats SA 2021c:14).

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is a problem not only in South Africa but globally. The COVID-19 epidemic has far-reaching effects not only on human health but also on the economy and labour market, which has exacerbated South Africa's socioeconomic predicament (Naidu 2020:559; Sekyere et al. 2020:1; Stats SA 2020:9). The pandemic has devastating health and economic effects on African nations. In an economically unequal society, the majority of South Africans reside in overcrowded multigenerational households below the poverty line. During the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of depression, anxiety, GBV, and child abuse and neglect were elevated (Naidu 2020:559). As a result of the difficulty of finding employment in South Africa, the epidemic had a profound impact on the unemployed (Stats SA 2020:11). While millions of individuals in South Africa will be more impoverished as a result of COVID-19, it should be underlined that COVID-19 is not the reason of the country's greater poverty rate (Buffel 2021:178). The pandemic just aggravated the existing poverty (Buffel 2021).

It is in the context presented here that the intervention of churches is needed in order to help in addressing the issues faced by communities. The given challenges have affected South Africans on one way or another. It is through community development that these issues can be effectively addressed, but how do churches understand community development? The empirical study presented here answers that question.

Methodology

Empirical research was conducted in Weltevreden Chapel Family Church in Roodepoort and Christ Revival Church in Lenasia between 01 February and 10 April 2022 to understand how people in communities understand community development and to assess whether churches understand why they should be involved in community development. There are two reasons behind the selection of these churches. Firstly, given that the purpose of this research was to determine what church leaders think about community development and why churches should be involved, it was necessary to obtain diverse opinions from churches that represent two contrasting South African lifestyles. Secondly, these churches were selected based on their participation in community development programmes that they administer in their respective localities.

For data collection, a qualitative approach employing structured interviews with 15 (male and female) participants from the aforementioned selected evangelical congregations in Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa was adopted. Richards (2021:17) highlights the value of qualitative research by stating that it is the most effective approach for researching people and their social worlds, in which people's perceptions of their circumstances and explanations for their behaviour are thoroughly investigated. Five male church officials from Weltevreden Chapel Family Bible Church, including the pastor, and 10 church leaders including the pastor from Christian Revival Centre and one female leader make up the group of 15. As a result of the size of their congregations and the number of their leaders, the number of participants were proportional. Weltevreden Chapel Family Bible Church has a smaller congregation of 88 members and fewer leaders compared with Christ Revival Centre Church, which has a larger congregation of 200 members and more leaders. Based on their religious background and leadership experience, these individuals were chosen to participate in the study. All the leaders chosen to participate were mature Christians who have been in leadership for more than 5 years. Secondly, because of their awareness and experience in holistic ministry. In a holistic ministry, people are viewed as full beings created by God to live in harmonious society. As a result, the church seeks to bring about wholeness at every level of society, including that of people, families, communities, nations, and the entire human family. Thirdly, their interaction with or exposure to development specialists. This means that the participants either have participated in development programmes themselves or they have a wider knowledge concerning development.

The researcher transcribed the responses of each participant to the planned interview questions. The transcription was performed through careful observation to the responses to the interview question that were written down in order to ensure that what the respondents presented was actually there rather than what was expected. To assure the analysis of the interview data, general qualitative data analysis

principles, including coding and interpretation, were applied (Richards 2021:121; Thomas 2013:109, 239–242). The coding and interpretation were carried out manually. Richards (2021:119) notes that coding in qualitative research accomplishes more than the classification of topics. It accumulates information for inquiry and strongly encourages the production of new ideas (Richards 2021). Constant comparison method-based data interpretation resulted in network analysis of themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke 2006:92; Thomas 2013:235–236). Subthemes are, according to Braun and Clarke (2006:92), simply themes within a theme. 'They can be beneficial for providing structure to a huge and complex topic, as well as for illustrating the hierarchy of meaning within the data' (Braun & Clarke 2006). There is no name that is used for participant in this research for the purpose of ensuring privacy and confidentiality. This was done to establish trust between the researcher and the participants. This includes the preservation of their dignity, which promotes full participation as it reduces worry of being publicly known on the part of the participants.

Results presentation

The purpose of the interviews was to determine whether or not church leaders understood what community development is and why churches should participate in community development. The following are the questions and the topics that arose from the questionnaire replies of the participants.

What is your understanding of community development?

There were various themes that arose from the church leaders' responses on their understanding of community development. The questions, answers, and the major themes that emerged from the results of the interviews are as follows:

Community development as upliftment of community members

Forty per cent of the participants mentioned that community development, entails the betterment of people's lives and their living conditions. This upliftment involves improved education, skills, health (mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually), jobs, infrastructures, and the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes. One leader explained community development in the following manner:

> Community development involves improving of the standards of living of the community in the form of housing, electricity supply, infrastructure, schools, healthcare, safety or personal circumstances. Upgrading the communities if form of giving training for skills, promoting good health (emotional as well as physical support from the members of the community, creating jobs to alleviate poverty (Participant 1, male, Christ Revival Church, 10 February 2022).

A female participant from Christ Revival Church further clarified that the upliftment might also be in the shape of the growth and progress of the people living in the same region, so that they are unified in addressing the issues they face as individuals and as a community. Respondents emphasised that all of these should be the result of community members' efforts and support.

Community development as relief

Twenty per cent of the participants elucidated that community development is providing aid to those in severe circumstances so they can escape them. This aid may be provided in the form of monetary assistance or material commodities such as food, clothing, etc. According to the interviewees, the South African poverty condition is ubiquitous. People are searching for methods to put food on the table for their families. Community members have less opportunities to escape their dreadful circumstances. Community development in South African communities would be greatly facilitated by providing aid to community members. Nonetheless, this conception of community development creates a number of questions, such as how to approach places with low rates of poverty, such as Sandton? Do such communities still need community development?

Community development as poverty alleviation

Thirteen per cent of the respondents stated that community development comprises providing community people with a better education so they can escape poverty. This includes the creation of jobs, the finest education for children, business assistance, etc. One of the participants expressed regret that:

> '[…D]ue to the severity of problems like poverty and unemployment in South Africa, many people are poor. As a result of this, any form of community development should prioritise poverty alleviation. If community development is concerned with other things than helping people to come out of poverty, then it becomes irrelevant.' (Participant 2, male, Weltevreden Chapel Family Church, 02 April 2022)

Community development as growth and progress in life

According to 20% of the participants, community development entails overcoming the obstacles to human advancement for the residents of the same community. The leaders reported that:

> 'Progress of community members come about when people in the community come together (public, local business people, religious and other community-based organisations) to identify and address issues that are plaguing their communities. Community members realise that they cannot be independent in dealing with challenges. So, they come together to address issues in their lives so that their lives may improve not as individuals but a community as a whole.' (Participant 3, female, from Christ Revival Church, 10 February 2022; Participant 4, male, from Weltevreden Chapel Family Church, 02 April 2022)

The responders also highlighted the importance of spiritual health in the context of this growth and development.

Community development should centre on whether or not the community has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The state of people's souls in the community should be the development's primary priority. Where a person will spend eternity is far more significant than their present circumstances.

Community development as empowerment

Twenty per cent of the respondents indicated that community development involves empowering community members to tackle their own problems. According to one participant, this empowerment should take the shape of forming communities together, motivating, and empowering individuals to work towards a common objective of resolving their problems and addressing their bodily and spiritual needs. The leaders also emphasised that community development should entail community members solving their own problems, rather than relying solely on outside assistance. This was echoed by participant 5, who added:

> '[…*B*]ecause community development is a process the community members need to be part of the process and this can only happen when they are empowered to see their worthiness to deal with their own challenges.' (Participant 5, male, from Christ Revival Church, 02 April 2022).

Community development as being relevant in addressing people's challenges

Seven per cent participants mentioned that community development is relevant in the lives of community members. They remarked that the manner in which churches assist their communities is irrelevant. Therefore, according to the participants, community development from the standpoint of the church would entail identifying the issues communities face and addressing them properly. One participant provided an example of a community with a high unemployment rate. In this context, community development would entail finding ways for community members to find income-generating activities, thereby making them relevant. Ignoring the needs of people and emphasising on peripheral things is unbecoming to community development.

The study of the data indicates that community development is primarily viewed as the improvement of the lives of community members through the provision of necessities. Community development is viewed as an improvement of people's lives in alleviation, growth, and advancement. Community development as poverty reduction and relevance in meeting people's needs are the least understood aspects of community development. This investigation demonstrates the difficulty of defining the idea of development, as several conceptions of community development were offered by community leaders.

What is the biblical and any other reasons for churches' involvement in community development?

To determine whether church leaders comprehend the mandate that churches have towards the development of their communities from a biblical and other perspectives, the following themes and responses emerged from the participants' comments:

The teachings and ministry of Jesus

Sixty per cent of the participants indicated that churches should be involved in the development of their communities based on what Jesus taught and did regarding the church. Participants pointed to Matthew 5:13–16, in which believers are described to being salt and light of the world. This indicates that churches are to assist their communities in becoming the communities God wishes them to be. Jesus was associated with people in his ministry through offering healing, food, and compassion, among other things. In other words, during His ministry, Jesus carried the burdens of humanity. Therefore, the church is commanded to imitate their Lord through imitating Jesus in their respective communities. If the church is a steward of Jesus' teachings, then it must participate in comprehensive service in the same way that Jesus did.

The teachings of the Old Testament

Twenty-seven per cent of the participants also identified the teachings of the Old Testament as a basis for the church's involvement in the development of their communities. As examples, passages from Jeremiah 29:7, Psalms 89:14, Leviticus 19:18, and Deuteronomy 15:11 were used to encourage churches to participate in the lives of the people in their communities. Participants observed that the church serves as a beacon for the lost and guides individuals as they live on earth. Mr. Reuben, referring to the Old Testament, observed that churches are obligated to bring about the transformation of communities, just as God expected the Jews in the Old Testament to bring about the transformation of the nations (Is 49:6).

The teachings of the New Testament

Sixty per cent of the participants stated that the teachings of the New Testament inspire the church to be involved not only in the lives of its members but also in the larger community. Most participants identified the emphasis on love for one another in the teachings of the New Testament as the reason for church involvement in the lives of their communities. The following are some of the New Testament texts that were mentioned by the participants, which churches can use as a direction for their community involvement:

- Galatians 6:2 'Carry each other's burdens so that you will fulfil the law of Christ'.
- Hebrews 13:16 'Don't forget to do good and to share what you have because God is pleased with these kinds of sacrifices'.
- John 15:2 'This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you'. Romans 12:13 'Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home'.

Participants were essentially unanimous regarding the teachings of the Bible, emphasising that both the Old and New Testaments encourage the church to participate in the lives of their societies. The participants made the following interesting observation:

'The Bible is clear that we are to be involved and impact the world by being the salt and light. We don't have access to the world, but we can impact our immediate surroundings which are our communities with the love of God. Galatians 6:2 says, 'Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ'. As Christ is our burden bearer, we are blessed to be a blessing to others. In this way we fulfil the law of Christ and become more like Him… The church should be the light of the community, help with the struggles of others and love every person as God did.' (Participant 3, female, from Christ Revival Church, 10 February 2022; Participant 6, male, from Weltevreden Chapel Family Bible Church, 02 April 2022)

The participants identified love of one's neighbour as the central theme of both the Old and New Testaments. The Bible emphasises on 'love your neighbour as you love yourself'. God's Word makes it very plain that his people must live in fellowship and encourage one another in every way. One participant pointed out that what the early church did by selling their possessions and helping the poor in their town is not merely a story, but rather a lesson for churches on how to love those who are incapable of achieving success in life. While the story does not teach that church members must sell their things to help the less fortunate in their communities, the moral remains that churches should not shirk their responsibilities to help improve the lives of their neighbours.

Discussion of the findings – What is community development and why should churches be involved?

The study had two objectives: firstly, to determine whether church leaders comprehend community development, and secondly, to determine whether church leaders comprehend the biblical mandate for church involvement in community development.

Participants' definition of community development

The results demonstrated that community development is considered by participants to mean different things. While the results demonstrated that participants had some awareness of what community development entails, the results also indicate that there are significant gaps in their comprehension. This is evidenced by the fact that only 40% of respondents understood community development to be the improvement of community members' lives. This improved existence includes obtaining a better education, developing diverse talents, and enjoying good health (mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually). While some participants' understandings of community development contain certain parts of development principles, they lack a comprehensive component of what community development entails.

According to Phillips and Pittman (2009:3), community development has become a field of interest to both practitioners and academics over the past several decades. Despite the evolution of community development, Phillips and Pittman (2009:3) observed that community development is characterised in numerous ways. For instance, the majority of practitioners view community development as the betterment of the community's physical, social, and economic conditions. Academics consider community development as a process characterised by the ability of communities to act constructively and its improvement.

Understanding the concept of community development is essential to the conception of community development (Mattessich & Monsey 2004:56; Sapkota & Tharu 2015:67; Vidal 2001:2). While community may also relate to other things (Mattessich & Monsey 2004), in the context of development, it simply refers to a specific group of people residing in a given locality with strong social-cultural ties and a sense of belonging (Sapkota & Tharu 2015:67). Development, on the other hand, encompasses a comprehensive process of gradual alteration of human life and its other ambitions, such as environmental sustainability and security (Sapkota & Tharu 2015). Community development can be regarded as a two-way interaction between people or community and development when the two terms are combined. In community development, individuals are equipped with the skills necessary to be change agents within their communities. Therefore, in order for community growth to be feasible, broad social groupings with a shared agenda must be formed (Sapkota & Tharu 2015). In this context of development comprehension, Magezi (2017b:9) claimed that 'development is achieved by people and is for people'.

Understanding what community development comprises is crucial to the implementation of projects by churches to address people's challenges. The manner in which churches connect with their communities throughout community development depends on how they interpret community development. In the case of leaders who perceive community development as relief, their community development programmes will be centred on giving humanitarian aid to their communities. It is hardly surprising that these leaders emphasised that their churches lacked the financial resources to support community development. As a result, community development becomes a one-sided activity. This is because, in their view, churches must provide community development to the community. This view of community development is consistent with the definitions provided by Vidal (2001:2) and Ferguson and Dickinson (1999:1), who described community development as 'asset building that improves the quality of life among residents of low to moderate income communities'. There are two crucial elements that must be avoided in the manner that community development is perceived.

Firstly, the assumption that community development is primarily a matter of economics. In this conception,

development is limited to poor communities. While economic growth cannot be completely ruled out as a component of development, development is more multidimensional than just economic growth (Todaro & Smith 2012:16). When economic growth is emphasised as a component of community development, other concerns that are crucial to improving people's lives are disregarded (Anderson 2014:64; Elliot 2014:68; Klaasen 2019:1). Instances include GBV and racism. People who engage in GBV and prejudice do not necessarily come from impoverished communities. If community development merely focuses on economic growth, GBV and racism are likely to go unrecognised in communities. Todaro and Smith (2012) provide an interesting perspective on what community development requires by stating:

> Development must therefore be conceived of as a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, popular attitudes, and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and eradication of poverty. Development, in its essence must represent the whole gamut of change by which an entire social system, tuned to the diverse basic needs and evolving aspirations of individuals and social groups within that system, moves away from a condition of life widely perceived as unsatisfactory toward a situation or condition of life regarded as materially and spiritually better (p. 16).

This statement encompasses the entire components of development, demonstrating that all areas of the human environment are to be improved. If the given definition of development is understood, it may imply that not only disadvantaged areas, but even wealthy communities require development. Inadequate income and wealth are not the primary causes of underdevelopment in communities; a number of other factors also contribute. Sen (1999:14) emphasised that economic expansion cannot be viewed as an end in and of itself. Development must be more concerned with enhancing the quality of our lives and our freedom. Magezi (2017b:9) echoed Sen's assertion that development is people-centred and the responsibility of the community as a whole. It is about growing people's lives so that they can have a quality of life according to their own standards.

Secondly, the assumption that communities in need of development have no ability to contribute to their own development. This is subtle, yet a large number of development practitioners hold this attitude of superiority. When this happens, it makes development a one-sided transaction. The practitioners act as if they are the only ones with solutions to the community's problems. In this strategy, individuals of the community are not consulted prior to the implementation of programmes. There is no contact between practitioners and community members. The disrespectful treatment of community members hampers their participation in the answers to their problems (Fields 2014:1). When individuals are only beneficiaries of development and not participants, they are rendered helpless. The belief that individuals are worthwhile and able to contribute to the society and control their own futures, regardless of their socioeconomic level, is fostered when community members assume responsibility for their own problems (Voorhies 2009:605; Yoms 2015:52).

However, there were a few interviewees who correctly interpreted community development as the empowerment of community members. Community empowerment, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2009), is the process of granting communities greater control over their lives. The WHO (2009) argues that communities may or may not be spatially connected, but consist of individuals who share shared interests, concerns, or identities. The WHO (2009) adds that the process of empowering entails the enhancement of assets and traits and the development of the capacity to gain access, partners, networks, and/or a voice in order to assume control. While there is some external influence on empowerment, Labonte and Laverack (2008:30) noticed that people are their own assets and that the purpose of the external force is to catalyse, facilitate, or 'accompany' the community in the process of attaining power. This indicates that the most valuable assets in community development are the community members themselves.

An interesting discussion on the link between relief and development has been presented by Larry Minear and Thomas Weiss (1993) in the book titled *Humanitarian action in times of war: A handbook for practitioners*. Traditionally, as presented by Corbett and Fikkert (2012:99), relief is defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering. For example, if there is a drought in Malawi and people did not have enough harvest to sustain their lives. In such situation, people are nearly or completely helpless and experience tumbling economic conditions. It is in this kind of situation where relief comes to stop people's suffering. Corbett and Fikkert (2012:100) stated that the key feature of relief is a provider–receiver dynamic in which the provider gives assistance – often material – to the receiver, who is largely incapable of helping himself at that time.

However, according to Minear and Weiss (1993), humanitarian aid encompasses a broader meaning than its usual definition. Relief also requires a long-term commitment to certain projects that promote the humanity and self-respect of individuals. Using Afghanistan as an example, Minear and Weiss (1993) highlighted that humanitarian aid would not be limited to the provision of food and medicine. Nonetheless, in this situation, relief would require restoring infrastructures and psychologically assisting individuals wounded by the violence, such as rape victims. In this conception of relief, participation in relief programmes is intended not only to alleviate the suffering of people but also to repair the destruction in their lives and environments. In this sense, alleviation is applicable to the growth of communities.

While the survey indicates that some church leaders understand what community development entails, there is a need to educate these leaders on community development's expansive meaning. How would this education be beneficial? Firstly, this education will enable church leaders to view community development as part of their churches' communal

obligations, rather than as a peculiar phenomenon. Secondly, assisting church leaders in comprehending what community development entails will aid their churches in developing pertinent initiatives to address community issues. Thirdly, understanding community development will help churches recognise the need of collaborating with other churches and non-religious organisations, as they will realise that serving communities requires several participants, including non-religious organisations. The proper understanding of community development is essential for churches to effectively handle community concerns.

Participants' understanding of biblical rationale or justification and other reasons for churches involvement in community development

From the results of the study, three reasons from the Bible that are the teachings of Jesus and His ministry, the teachings of the Old and New Testaments were submitted by church leaders as the reasons for churches intervention in the development of communities.

The participants observed that churches intervene in the development of communities in accordance with Jesus' teachings and ministry. What did Jesus teach regarding social change? Mathews and Raymond (2020:1) argue that Jesus is a 'social activist' and bemoan the fact that this is often overlooked because of the popularity of the divine traits that the gospel authors give to Him. But a careful examination of His life and teachings reveals that Jesus was a radical social activist who battled for justice and challenged the prevailing social institutions (Mathews & Raymond 2020). There are a variety of topics that can be linked to Jesus' teaching on social reform, however the participants mentioned just the following four.

Firstly, the participants mentioned Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God as a basis for social intervention. Jesus' public proclamation was centred on the central theme of the Kingdom of God. Mark 1:15 summarises very well Jesus' teaching saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news'. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God was the development of an alternative consciousness to the one presently offered by the imperial forces of Roman government. Contrary to the Kingdom of Roman Empire who was incapable of solving people's challenges, the one that Jesus was presenting was to make sense to the Israel context by solving local problems (Malina 2001:40–57; Mathews & Raymond 2020:2). Churches as representatives of Jesus and the Kingdom of God have a role to play in bringing the transformation in communities. And this was emphasised by Jesus' teaching on prayer where His followers are to petition God for His Kingdom to be a reality in communities of people.

Secondly, the participants mentioned about Jesus' teaching on love as a motivation to intervene in addressing community issues. Jesus emphasised that love should be paramount virtue

of every person in the Kingdom of God. This special significance of love is shown in the double commandment to love the Lord God with one's whole being and the neighbour as oneself. Jesus taught that love is the greatest of all commandments and where all the law and prophets are centred upon (Mt 22:37–40). Jesus taught categorically that love towards God should always being accompanied by love towards fellow human beings. Jesus substantiated this teaching with a parable of the Good Samaritan where He challenged His followers to employ the love that generates compassion to a neighbour. The participant remarked that the church is called to demonstrate this kind of love to the world, hence its involvement in the development of communities.

Thirdly, Jesus' teaching on righteousness and justice. In Matthews 6:33, Jesus taught that His followers must strive first for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the material blessing (food, shelter, and clothing) shall be given to them as well. The word righteousness is a translation of Hebrew root ṣdq or the Greek dikaioun, and can be rendered as (1) a quality or state of being righteous, upright, in the right, or just; or (2) that which is in conformity with a standard or in a state of acceptability to God (Mathews & Raymond 2020:4). Jesus was critical of unjust social structures. He attacked the very circumstances that led to economic disadvantage, political domination, and cultural, religious, ideological oppression. This is demonstrated by his attack on the temple as the economic, political and religious centre of Palestinian society (Mk 11:15–19, Jn 2:1316). Jesus expressed his disapproval for religious systems that accepted the abandonment of the aged [such as through Korban[2] (Mk 7:11)] and oppressing the unfortunate. Jesus was captious of the neglect of weightier matter of law-justice, faithfulness and mercy (Mt 23:23). Participants reported that it is by following the teaching of Jesus on righteousness and justice that churches are required to be agents of community development.

Lastly, Jesus' teaching on the poor. At the beginning of His public life while in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus summarises His primary concern when he applies to himself the words, which he has read from the Book of Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Lk 4:18f)

The words for poor in the New Testament designate persons and groups lacking [totally or in some degree] the basic necessities of life such as food, drink, clothing, shelter, health, land, employment, freedom, dignity and honour, etc. (Kunhiyop 2008:146; Magezi 2007:47; Scheffler 2013:3). Poverty may be concretely indicated by these specific manifestations (hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, unemployed, despised). Jesus was therefore putting himself on the side of the poor,

2.According to Mark 7:11, Korban was a gift that the Jews offered to God especially in fulfillment of a vow. By not honouring their parents and using the gift to give to God as an excuse, Jews were dishonouring God with their practices.

prisoners and the blind, and teaching His followers to do the same. It is by the inspiration of Jesus' teaching on the poor that the participants mentioned churches follow suit taking care of people who are marginalised in society and help them to overcome their shame and disgrace.

Participants also mentioned that churches' intervention in the development of communities is based on the ministry of Jesus. How did Jesus conduct His ministry? Jesus' ministry was holistic, in the sense that He ministered to the whole person in their contexts and refuses to isolate proclamation from social involvement. In His ministry, Jesus both preached the gospel and reached out to the needs of the people. All these things were central to His ministry (Ac 10:38). Churches' intervention in social issues is motivated by the ministry of Jesus who was also concerned not only with spiritual issues but also social issues.

It was also hinted by the participants that both the Old and New Testaments have passages that encourage God's people to be active in their communities. Different passages were quoted by the participants in order to show that churches have responsibilities for the development of their communities. For example, some of the passages from the Bible that were quoted were:

- **Jeremiah 29:7:** God's people were told to pray for the peace of the places where God brought them into, as these places prosper, they will also prosper. This passage shows that God's people prosper together with their communities.
- **Exodus 21–23:** This passage shows a strong concern for social justice. It has laws regulating property, the use of land, and the treatment of other people, hence controlling violations of human dignity and ensure justice.
- **John 15:2:** Jesus in John command His followers to love one another. This love is meant to be extended to outside the walls of the building. Jesus loved all people and churches are to love all people the same way Jesus did.
- **Galatians 6:2:** This passage echoes the command to love where God's people are commanded to carry one another's burden so that they can fulfil the commandment to love one another. The burden in this passage comprises physical, spiritual, and emotional burden, hence the New Testament encourages the holistic approach to care.

Principally, the study revealed that church leaders are familiar with the biblical mandate for churches to engage in community development. The Old and New Testaments, as well as the teachings and ministry of Jesus, motivate churches to engage in community development. While all of them are accurate, the descriptions of the causes lack certain details. No one stated that the engagement of churches in community development is founded on creation stories. Wright (2006:398) observed that Genesis 1–2 declares God's labour to be excellent, which includes all He created, including man, animals, nature, birds, and everything we observe in the splendour of creation. Because of this, God values His creation. After creating man, God placed him in command of

all He had made (Gn 1:28). The creation narratives show God's plan for His creation, which is a world teeming with healthy, vibrant creatures living in secure, just, participatory, welcoming, and egalitarian communities while being lovingly engaged with God (Baptist World Aid n.d.:1). Sadly, when man failed to live as God commanded, relationships with God, among communities, and with the world broke down. Violence, injustice, poverty, exclusion, oppression, avarice, and false worship have become part of the human condition. However, God did not abandon His creation but sets about redeeming and restoring it. The whole Bible is about the story of God redeeming and restoring His creation and it is climaxed definitively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through Jesus, God has set about overturning injustice, violence, poverty and exclusion and creates communities of faith, justice inclusion, hope and peace. In another way, God has re-established *shalom* in communities of people and this work begins now on this earth. Scripture calls churches to be agents of *shalom* that God is bringing to all creation, which includes bringing human beings into right relationship with God, one another, and the creation. While the restoration of right relationship between God and humankind is achieved through the life, death and resurrection of Christ to which the church bears witness, God's wider mission to communities and creation is accomplished through a variety of agents, such as the earth itself, government, households, individuals, and the church (see Gn 8:21–22; Ps 104; Mt 5:45; Rm 13; Pr 31:1–9). It is in this calling of bringing shalom in communities that require churches to be agents of community development. The Baptist World Aid (n.d.) usefully elucidated that:

> In promoting development, the church should never surrender its unique role as witness to Christ and the centrality of this role in the restoration of right relationship between God and human beings. No other agent can fulfil this role. Nor should the church forget that when pursuing the wider developmental vision of Scripture (right relationships within communities and with the creation) the church is but one of many agents God uses. The church's knowledge of God allows it to champion a vision of an inclusive, equitable, just and peaceful world, while the reality that it is one of many agents for bringing such a world into being should see it partnering with individuals, households, communities and governments to realise that vision (p. 3).

The concept of churches being one of the agents of bringing *shalom* in communities is further expounded by Magezi (2017b) in his article 'Making community development at grassroots a reality: Church-driven development approach in Zimbabwe's context of severe poverty'. Magezi (2017b:9) submitted that churches are a subsystem of a community and society that people live in. While Magezi (2017b) is not concerned with discussing why churches are required to be agents of community development, it emerges from this article that as part of a community, churches have a role to play in society. The way how communities are designed, each organisation within a community has a role to play. For example, police are called to offer protection to the citizens. Likewise, in their calling, as part of community, churches have been called to contribute to the well-being of the

community members. As discussed earlier, this well-being involves being sure that people's spiritual, physical and emotional life are taken care of. This is the responsibility of the church in communities. From this discussion, two reasons for churches to be participating in development of their communities are given. Firstly, the Bible is clear that churches need to intervene in things happening in society. Secondly, churches are part of communities and by the virtue of being part of communities, they have a role to play for the well-being of communities.

The crucial question to explore is what role do churches play in the transformation of communities? In response, the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted the resolution 'Transforming our world: The 2013 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (UN 2015). Achievement of the agenda represents a fundamental shift and demands new ways of thinking about development issues. In essence, this implies a reconfiguration not only of who or what development applies to and how it might be executed but also of what development entails (Öhlmann et al. 2022:4). This process, according to Parry (2007), involves not only proper policies but also dramatic paradigm shifts and profoundly altered perspectives. As religion has the capacity to impact social and cultural norms and alter worldviews, churches that serve as stewards of religion have a key role in paradigm shifts of this nature. Churches play a crucial role in the transformation of communities because of their transformative power and the establishment of new motives (Bowers Du Toit 2019; Öhlmann et al. 2022; Öhlmann, Gräb & Frost 2020), hence, they are crucial to community development (Clarke 2011).

Implications of proper understanding of community development by churches

Churches' relevance in their involvement with public issues, and in this regard, community development, depends significantly on their understanding of what constitutes community development. There are three major implications that this study suggests concerning the understanding of community development.

Firstly, proper understanding of community development leads to effective involvement of churches in their communities. A study conducted by Ferreira and Groenewald (2010) pointed out the weaknesses that churches have in reaching out to communities in South Africa. The authors found out that most churches in South Africa are involved in relief projects than in community development that result in transformation of people's lives. Why is this the case? It is because churches are not involved in meaningful approaches because of not having a comprehensive understanding of what community development necessitates. Therefore, if churches are to be relevant in their approaches for community transformation, proper education of what community development demands is a must (Nanthambwe 2020:82; Nanthambwe 2022:138; Magezi 2017b:10).

Secondly, understanding what community development is necessitates churches to prioritise it in their efforts of transforming communities. The misunderstanding of community development may lead to churches excluding this vital ministry in reaching out to communities. Sider (2010) alluded to this pointing out that churches lose their value in communities when they exclude social involvement in sharing of the Gospel. The same concern is shared by Chester (2013:67–80) and Stearns (2009:181–189). They both bemoaned the tendency of making the Gospel irrelevant when one aspect of it is much emphasised than the other. It is in this kind of misunderstanding that Yamamori (1996:1) advised that both evangelism and community involvement should be the priority of churches in reaching out to communities. He argues for a holistic ministry as the best approach in serving communities. It is in the understanding of community development that churches begin to see it not as a strange thing but as part of the Gospel mandate.

Lastly, understanding what community development is will lead churches to combine their effort in reaching out to communities. Being involved in community development, moves churches to realise that it is a combined effort, and it is not about making a name for their denominations. Magezi (2017b:10) noticed the tendency of churches to use community development as an avenue to acquire more members. This leads to congregations not to collaborate in their efforts to reaching communities as the focus is not people per se but their denominations. Once churches understand that community development is about making people's lives and their environment better, the issue of denominationalism vanishes. This leads to churches working together and even join their efforts with government and other non-religious development organisations (Magezi & Nanthambwe 2022:7, 8).

Conclusion

The understanding of what community development entails is essential to churches' involvement in the transformation of communities. Do churches know what community development is? This article has shown how community development is perceived at the grassroot based on the findings of research that was conducted at two churches in Johannesburg. The article has shown some deficiencies in the understanding of community development by leaders and suggested education about community development in churches as a practical way of dealing with the problem. Biblical and other reasons for churches participating in community development have also been discussed in this article. Churches as agents for transformation have a huge role to play in their communities. The article closes with a discussion on the implications of proper understanding of community development.

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