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Bringing faith to the public: Positioning church communities for social good in sub-Saharan Africa

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The Christian faith must move beyond private belief and engage more actively in public issues to promote societal well-being. Churches, as key actors in the public sphere alongside for-profit institutions and political bodies, have the potential to contribute to the common good. This involves contestation, dialogue, and collaboration with other sectors to develop approaches that enhance human welfare. While the term 'public good' originates in economics, its association with social good aligns it with the mission of faith communities, which focus on community well-being. The pressing question is how church communities in sub-Saharan Africa can interact with businesses and governments to advance social good. This requires churches to engage in advocacy, provide direct services, and collaborate with secular organizations while ensuring their actions promote equity and justice. Through thoughtful engagement in the public sphere, churches can influence societal structures by upholding values such as compassion, justice, and mutual respect. By doing so, they can play a significant role in addressing challenges within their local contexts.

Contribution: The article contributes to the discussions of how churches can move from private concerns to actively engaging with public issues, collaborating with various societal actors to promote social good and enhance community well-being.

Keywords: faith; church communities; public; social good; sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

In contemporary society, the role of the Christian faith is often perceived as a private matter, confined to individual belief and practice (Manikam 2019:199; Sweetman 2015). However, a compelling argument exists for transitioning the Christian faith from this private sphere into a more active engagement with public issues (Dreyer 2004; Dreyer & Pieterse 2010; Magezi 2018; Osmer & Schweitzer 2003). By doing so, churches and their confessions can significantly contribute to the public good.

The public sphere is dynamic in which various actors interact and influence societal developments, including profit-driven institutions, political governing bodies and faith communities. Within this context, churches have the potential to engage meaningfully, leveraging their moral and ethical perspectives to address societal challenges (Nanthambwe 2022). By actively participating in public discourse, churches can explore and implement ways in which the Christian faith can foster societal well-being and contribute to the common good (Agbiji & Swart 2015).

This pursuit of social good is not without its complexities. It involves contestation, including debates and exploring collaborative approaches that can create synergies to enhance human well-being (Magezi 2019). The interaction between sectors – profit-driven organisations, public governing bodies and church communities – can lead to innovative solutions addressing social issues. For instance, churches can partner with businesses and governments to tackle poverty, improve education, and promote health and wellness (Nanthambwe 2022).

Therefore, it is essential to examine the integrated role of these sectors in contributing to the social or public good. While the concept of the public good is primarily rooted in economic discourse, its link to social good extends its relevance to the domain of community and social well-being. Faith communities, particularly churches, can make significant contributions in this area.

At the heart of this discussion is the crucial question: what role can church communities play within their local contexts, at the intersection of for-profit institutions and political governing bodies, to promote social good? Addressing this question requires thoughtful consideration of how churches, in collaboration with business and government, can leverage their unique position and resources to effectively engage with and influence public issues. By forming strategic partnerships with businesses and governmental entities, churches can help address societal challenges and drive initiatives that foster social justice and equity. This collaborative effort enables them to harness diverse perspectives and resources, creating synergies that enhance human well-being and contribute to a more just and equitable society. Ultimately, these partnerships align with the church's mission of serving the common good and advancing human flourishing.

The sub-Saharan Africa context

The sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region has been affected by various challenges, including economic, health, environmental, political and social issues (Myers 2017; Nanthambwe 2024; Selassie & Hakobyan 2021; World Bank 2023).

Economically, the region faces high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, which are exacerbated by limited access to educational and financial resources (Louis 2015:1; Sachs 2000; World Bank 2018). According to Juju et al. (2020), despite significant progress over the past decades, the SSA remains the poorest and least developed region in the world. High levels of poverty, food insecurity and environmental degradation, as well as low access to infrastructure and low institutional capacity, characterise many areas across the continent. The World Bank (2018:3) and Myers (2017:149) describe the SSA as a region affected by fragility, conflict, weak institutions and a lack of success in channelling growth into poverty reduction. Commenting on the conflicts Abdel-Latif and El-Gamal (2024) assert the following:

> The security situation in many SSA countries is acutely problematic, as exemplified most recently by escalating violence and displacement in Sudan. Since the turn of the millennium, intermittently persistent conflicts have caused severe human suffering and economic destabilization throughout the region. Conflicts often begin with isolated operations of extremist groups, but quickly expand into regional violence that spreads, like a virus, from one subregion to another. (p. 7)

In terms of health, SSA is heavily burdened by widespread diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV and AIDS), malaria and the recent impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which have placed immense strain on its limited healthcare systems (Global Fund 2021; Moyo & Musekiwa 2022). The pandemic has particularly devastated livelihoods, with the poor and vulnerable populations being the most affected (Schotte & Zizzamia 2021).

Environmentally, the region faces significant challenges, including climate change, deforestation, desertification and biodiversity loss. These issues pose severe threats to agriculture and overall livelihoods, exacerbating food insecurity and economic instability (Gasparatos et al. 2020; Juju et al. 2020).

Politically, governance issues, corruption and instability further hinder the region's development. Weak institutions and ineffective governance make it difficult to implement policies that could drive economic and social progress (Augustine 2018; World Bank 2018).

Socially, SSA struggles with gender inequality, human rights abuses and inadequate access to basic services such as clean water and sanitation (Soliman & Jha 2023). These social issues present significant barriers to improving quality of life and achieving sustainable development (Nanthambwe 2022; Nanthambwe & Magezi 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and collaborative approach involving local governments, international organisations and civil society. Strengthening healthcare systems, enhancing environmental sustainability, improving governance and ensuring social equity are crucial steps towards fostering overall well-being and development in the region.

On the understanding of public good and its theological connotation

The concept of 'public good' varies significantly between economic and philosophical and political contexts, offering a unique perspective on what constitutes the public good and how it should be understood and applied.

In economics, a 'public good' refers to a specific type of good characterised by two main features: non-excludability and non-rivalry (Gravelle & Reese 2004; Mas-Colell, Whinston & Green 1995; Morrell 2009). In non-excludability, individuals cannot be effectively excluded from using the good. Once it is provided, everyone can benefit from it without being restricted (Hudson & Jones 2005). The non-rivalry aspect refers to a person's use of the good while not diminishing its availability to others (Hudson & Jones 2005; Morrell 2009). Classic public good examples include parks, national defence, clean air and drinking water (Fernando 2024). These goods are available to all, and one person's use does not reduce their availability to others. Providing such goods often requires public intervention because private markets may underprovide them because of the free-rider problem (Morrell 2009:542). Typically, a public good is provided by a government and funded through taxes (Fernando 2024; Morell 2009).

In a broader, more abstract sense, the 'public good' or 'common good' refers to a shared benefit that contributes to

society's welfare as a whole (Morrell 2009). Lewis (2006) explains that the terms 'public good', 'public interest' and 'common good' can have different nuances, but they are used interchangeably in contemporary literature. Thus, this concept goes beyond the economic definition and encompasses values and conditions that are advantageous to all members of society, such as social justice, public health and education. The 'common good' includes certain general conditions that are, in an appropriate sense, equally to everyone's advantage (Morrell & Clark 2010). This implies that societal arrangements and institutions should be structured to benefit all, not just specific groups.

While there is a conceptual overlap between the economic and philosophical and political understandings – such as the notion that fair and efficient provision of public goods can contribute to the public good – there are also significant distinctions. The economic sense of public goods is more concrete and operational, focussing on specific goods and services (Gravelle & Reese 2004; Morrell 2009, 2012). In contrast, the philosophical and political sense is more abstract, dealing with society's overall well-being and collective actions' moral and ethical implications (Brundson 2015).

In theology, the concept of the public good is multifaceted and varies across different religious traditions and theological frameworks (Brundson 2015). According to Hollenbach (2002), the common good in theology often refers to the conditions that allow individuals and communities to achieve their fulfilment more fully and easily. Hollenbach (2002:3) clarifies that this idea is rooted in classical philosophy, particularly in Aristotle's 'Nicomachean Ethics', which argues that the ultimate goal of human life is the pursuit of inherent goods that benefit the community as a whole. In moral theology, the public or common good is integrated into discussions on social justice, ethics and the responsibilities of individuals and institutions to contribute to the well-being of others (Long 2009).

Different religious traditions articulate the concept of the public good in their unique theological and ethical frameworks (Crouch 2012). For example, the Catholic Church has a well-developed concept of the common good, often linked to social teaching. The Church views the common good as encompassing all social conditions that enable people to achieve their fulfilment. Key documents such as 'Rerum Novarum' by Pope Leo XIII emphasise the importance of social justice, workers' rights and economic equity as components of the common good (Brundson 2015; Crouch 2012).

Similarly, Brundson (2015) mentions that within Reformed traditions, the concept of the public good is closely linked to the notion of 'Sola Scriptura' (Scripture alone) and the dual commandment to love God and neighbour. The public good is seen as a reflection of the social dimensions of faith, which require believers to engage in acts that promote societal well-being. While this understanding is apparent in scriptures, Brundson (2015) pointed out how the Southern African Reformed heritage corrupted the

clear interpretation of scripture to back their evil practice of apartheid in the following:

> … Under the guise of Reformed theology, the issue of common good was for many years muted by Scriptural support for the exclusive social engineering project of *apartheid*, making social and personal fulfilment impossible for many…. No theology, including Reformed theology, should however succumb to the temptation of using its tenets in support of any ideology. It should remain a transcending agent seeking the full will of God for all spheres of life, actively seeking the common good. (p. 350)

The primary challenge in theological discussions regarding the public good lies in navigating the complexities and disputes over the definitions of 'good' and 'common' (Miller 2004). Miller (2004) highlights the debates on balancing individual rights with communal responsibilities, the degree to which religious principles should impact public policy and the potential for religious teachings to either enhance or hinder societal well-being. These debates are crucial, as they address the tensions between personal freedoms and the collective needs of society, questioning how religious values can contribute to or detract from the community's overall welfare. Engaging with these issues requires a nuanced understanding of both secular and theological perspectives, aiming to find a harmonious approach that respects diverse viewpoints while striving for the common good.

The contributions of the church, profit organisation (businesses) and government to the public good

It is crucial to consider what roles the church, business and government play in promoting the public good. Why is this crucial? There are three reasons which answer this question. Firstly, understanding these roles helps to identify each institution's unique contributions and strengths, enabling more effective and targeted efforts in addressing societal needs (Zigan & Le Grys 2016). Secondly, recognising these entities' distinct yet complementary functions fosters better collaboration and synergy, leading to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions (Nanthambwe 2022). Thirdly, examining the roles of the church, business and government ensures accountability and transparency, encouraging these institutions to act ethically and in the best interest of the public ((Magezi & Nanthambwe 2022). It is for these three reasons that we discuss the contributions of these three entities to the public good.

But when is this collaboration needed for the public good? Collaboration of this nature becomes essential when challenges are too significant or multifaceted for any single sector to tackle alone (Nanthambwe 2022). For instance, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, churches played a pivotal role in raising awareness about vaccinations, non-profit organisations provided crucial medical supplies and governments spearheaded national healthcare initiatives. In SSA, the challenges are equally complex and multifaceted, ranging from poverty, healthcare deficiencies and educational gaps to environmental issues and political

instability. These issues demand joint efforts from churches, businesses and governments to generate sustainable solutions that improve the well-being of communities.

The church and the social or public good

What role does the church play in promoting social good? We believe there are several ways to answer this question. One way is to outline the church's contributions to society's welfare. However, when we do that, we miss showing the reasons why the church does what it does. Therefore, we are going to look at this from a different angle: firstly, explaining the nature of the church and, secondly, discussing the church's role in promoting the public good.

The church's contribution to the public good is related to its nature (Niemandt 2015). It contributes to the public good because of what the church is and its calling. The question is, what is the church? We are going to highlight a few things concerning the understanding of what the church is. The concept of the church has been multifaceted and refers to several theological concepts as it finds expression in different ways in society (Beukes 2019:2; Forster & Oostenbrink 2015:5). It is a well-known fact that most people define the church as referring to the building or structures used by Christians for worship. Sometimes, the church is defined from a conventional management perspective as an organisation or institution (Erickson 2007:1037; Forster & Oostenbrink 2015). Erickson (2013) observed that confusion arises from misunderstanding the term 'church' because of a failure to understand its nature. Magezi 2007:68) cautioned against understanding the church merely as a building, emphasising that 'ekklesia' refers to an assembly of people. Grudem (2010) simply defines the church as the community of all true believers for all time.

Shedding light on what the church is, McGrath (2017) explains the discussions from Vatican Council II (Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church) about its nature. Three expressions were given regarding its nature: (1) The church as the communion (Koinonia). This refers to sharing the common life of believers within the church (Erickson 2013; McGrath 2017). (2) The church as the people of God: This calls for the involvement of all nations to be called the people of God, rather than limiting it to the Jewish nation (McGrath 2017). (3) The church as a charismatic community: This refers to the gifts or abilities that God has bestowed upon individuals within the church to fulfil specific services (McGrath 2017). Smit (2007:61–67) clarifies that the church, as the charismatic community not only serves within the church but also engages the community as believers are encouraged to participate in being an agent and bearers of hope in society. Both Smit (2007) and Grudem (2010) call this nature of the church as believers as 'salt and light in the world'. It is in its nature to engage with society that the church contributes to the public good. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) (2017) asserts the following:

> Churches have a public dimension, as they are called and sent to be transformative agents in the world. With their vision of the common good churches contribute to public life. This not only happens through their speaking and acting outside, but also through the way in which they create space inside the church … (p. 16)

> … Christians are called to participate in God's mission that brings life in abundance to all – not only to church members. When churches isolate themselves from the broader concerns of their societies they lose the chance to be the salt and light to the world. (Mt 5.13–16; pp. 16–17)

By its nature – as light and salt of the earth – the church plays a significant role in transforming societies. But how does the church enter this fray and contribute? The crucial role of the church in fostering public good and societal well-being involves its functions as both a living community and an organised institution, where it addresses spiritual and practical needs while serving both divine and human interests (Erickson 2013; Grudem 2010). It fulfils multiple roles, including those of prophet, priest, king and servant (McGrath 2017). In its prophetic role, the church acts as a moral guardian, ensuring that society upholds principles of justice and equity. It also bears the responsibility of condemning actions that undermine social and environmental justice, such as bribery, extortion, corruption and pollution.

Today, the church upholds these divine principles and continues to act as a prophet, priest and advocate for social justice (Nkansah-Obrempong 2018). Modise (2018) argues that the church's influence should extend deeply into all aspects of society, including politics, socioeconomic matters and beyond. The church's responsibilities, therefore, include advocating for the public good, fostering societal stability and promoting a value system essential for societal cohesion and cooperation (Modise 2018). The church contributes to the common or public good through its ministry of pastoral care (Magezi & Nanthambwe 2022).

In Africa, churches are the most trusted social institutions among their members, surpassing other organisations in public confidence (Magezi 2022; Nanthambwe 2022; Swart 2006). This trust is supported by various surveys (Banda 2020), highlighting the church's role as a catalyst for social change and development, thus promoting the common good. Consequently, churches play a vital role in nation-building. Their significant contributions to social development are recognised by both the business sector and the government, leading to formal partnerships aimed at enhancing societal well-being (Louw & Koegelenberg 2003). This is summarised in Chrysostom's quotation in Wallis (2013), which states that the seeking of the common good is the chief aim of Christianity in the following statement:

> This is the rule of most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the common good … for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbours. (p. 3)

The church's role in promoting the public good is deeply rooted in its nature as both a living community and an organised institution. The church's mission extends beyond addressing spiritual needs; it actively engages with society to foster justice, equity and societal well-being. By functioning as a prophet, priest, king and servant, the church serves as a moral guardian and advocate for social justice, condemning actions that harm the common good. Its influence permeates various aspects of society, contributing to nation-building and social stability. Trusted by its members and recognised by the business sector and government, the church is a catalyst for social change and development, embodying the Christian commitment to seeking the common good. As Chrysostom (in Wallis 2013) aptly observed, caring for one's neighbours and seeking the common good are the highest expressions of the Christian faith, reflecting the church's profound impact on society.

However, churches need to be aware of some dangers of such collaborations. The first one is compromising the church's mission and values. In partnerships with for-profit entities and governments, there is a risk that the church may compromise its moral or ethical stance in exchange for funding or influence. For-profit organisations often prioritise profit over social or ethical concerns, and governments may have political agendas that conflict with the church's mission. This can lead to the dilution of the church's prophetic voice and its ability to advocate for justice and human dignity. For example, A church collaborating with a corporation that engages in exploitative labour practices could face backlash from its congregation for endorsing or being associated with unethical business practices. Additionally, when churches rely too heavily on funding or resources from governments or profit-driven organisations, they risk becoming dependent on these entities, which can undermine their autonomy. This dependency could make it difficult for the church to challenge these partners on issues of justice or morality, as it may fear losing financial support or political backing. For example, in a situation where a church receives significant government funding for social programmes, it may be reluctant to criticise the government's policies or actions, even when they conflict with the church's values.

Profit organisations (business) contribution to social or public good

Although the concept of the common good is frequently associated with Christian doctrine, its philosophical roots in ancient Greek thought to indicate that it does not necessarily depend on a religious foundation. This perspective is further supported by Bradstock and Russell (2017:166), who argued that the common or public good is also promoted by secular thinkers and groups, demonstrating its broader applicability beyond religious contexts. Among these secular groups are profit organisations (businesses), which are also called to promote the public good. And one way that profit organisations in Africa do promote social good is through corporate social responsibility (CSR).

What is CSR? The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD 2004) highlights that defining CSR is challenging because of its overlap with other concepts such as corporate citizenship, sustainable business, environmental responsibility, the triple bottom line, social and environmental accountability, business ethics and corporate accountability, among others (Idowu et al. 2013). This overlap has led to various interpretations of CSR. According to Cheruiyot-Koech and Reddy (2022), the difficulty in defining CSR arises from the diverse societal challenges and evolving public expectations of corporate responsibility, which differ according to societal needs, thereby preventing a universal definition. For instance, the European Commission (2001) defines CSR as 'a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and their interaction with their stakeholders voluntarily.' In contrast, McWilliams and Siegel (2001) provide a more straightforward definition, describing CSR as 'actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interest of the firm and that which is required by the law.'

Both definitions of CSR described in this section share the understanding that it involves the efforts of organisations or individuals to balance societal, economic and environmental concerns (Luchs & Mooradian 2012). From this viewpoint, CSR is regarded as an ethical principle requiring individuals and companies to meet their civic responsibilities by ensuring their actions enhance society's overall well-being, not just their profit margins (Ganti 2019:100).

But how does CSR help in promoting the public good? Through CSR initiatives, profit organisations engage in the public or common good by addressing community needs, advancing environmental sustainability, fostering ethical practices, supporting economic development, tackling social issues, promoting inclusivity, and encouraging ethical consumerism. These efforts help create a positive and lasting impact on society and the environment, hence the promotion and sustenance of public good (Cheruiyot-Koech & Reddy 2022).

Government's contribution to social or public good

Hinting at the need for the rulers, who are the representatives of a government, to promote the common good, Bradstock and Russell (2017) posited:

> It was Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, who first gave the common good the shape it has today, with a succession of papal encyclicals from the late nineteenth century refining it further and giving it contemporary application. In synthesising the writings of Augustine and Aristotle, Aquinas considered how the good life might be attained, not merely by the individual in the pursuit of goals such as health, education and the necessities to sustain life, but in a collective sense, as all seek the attainment of such ends. For Aquinas it is the responsibility of the virtuous ruler to ensure that society as a whole enjoys such benefits, and that all are able to live together peaceably and in a spirit of mutual assistance. (p. 166)

From the perspective of the biblical Christian worldview, human government was established by God to safeguard humanity's inalienable rights from the sinful tendencies inherent in human nature (Gn 9:6; Rm 13:1–7). Given that human beings are naturally inclined to infringe upon each other's rights to better their own circumstances, a political system is necessary to protect these rights and restrain such evil tendencies (Sekhaulelo 2022). Because every individual possesses an inherent sinfulness, it is essential that our malevolent inclinations are controlled by laws and a governing authority capable of enforcing them. This includes the government's duty to shield society from the chaos of evil, ensure the community's welfare by punishing wrongdoing and rewarding good, and even collect taxes for these purposes. Thus, the government promotes the common good and provides for the general welfare (Geisler 2005). Thus, the government is mandated to promote social justice, provide safety and security for people in societies, and apply statutes and legislations to promote community and social cohesion, among other things (Sekhaulelo).

We see that the church, profit organisations and government each play vital roles in promoting the public good. The church contributes through its spiritual and moral guidance, advocating for justice, equity and societal well-being, while also fostering social change and development as a trusted institution. Profit organisations engage in the public good through CSR, addressing community needs, environmental sustainability and ethical practices. The government, mandated to protect and promote social justice and security, ensures societal welfare by enforcing laws, safeguarding rights and fostering social cohesion. Understanding these roles enhances collaboration, accountability and the effectiveness of efforts to address societal needs.

Public good as a focal point in public theology

Public theology broadens the scope of theological inquiry beyond Christian traditions, addressing critical social, political and environmental challenges (Dryer 2004). Unlike traditional church theology, which often focusses inwardly, public theology emphasises active engagement with societal issues (Smit 2017). This approach empowers churches to exert a more substantial influence on contemporary concerns (Nanthambwe 2022). Public theology transcends the confines of worship spaces, academic institutions and theological societies, operating dynamically within public spheres. It fosters open engagement with society, encouraging participation from diverse social contexts, including streets, markets and other community settings (Nanthambwe 2024). The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of South African Society (URTDSAS n.d.) characterises public theology as a theology that dialogues with social realities and human contexts, rather than being an institutionalised discipline. While it is not a substitute or rebranding of practical theology, public theology provides a platform for practical theology to be expressed in public discourse. It facilitates dialogue between theological concepts, ecclesial concerns and contextual realities, urging theology and the church to reflect on and engage with pressing social issues.

Public theology integrates these dialogues into its mission, applying theological principles to real-world issues and extending its influence beyond religious institutions into broader society (Nanthambwe 2024). This approach encourages churches and Christian communities to confront social, political and environmental challenges directly, advocating for ethical practices and social justice, hence promoting the public or common good. It calls for-profit organisations to consider their societal and environmental impacts, promoting responsible and sustainable practices. Public theology is not confined to theoretical discourse but is realised through practical actions and initiatives that address community needs. By linking faith-based values with the ethical demands of modern society, public theology fosters a culture of accountability and care for the common good (Beyers 2017; Fourie 2012). Ultimately, public theology emphasises a holistic ministry where faith and action converge to drive positive societal change, inspiring faith communities to lead by example and demonstrating how religious beliefs can guide efforts to build more equitable and sustainable communities (Magezi 2019).

Le Bruyns (2011) warns against oversimplifying the concept of public theology. He offers three key points. Firstly, the term 'public' in public theology should not be narrowly interpreted as merely the opposite of 'private,' nor should it be automatically equated with 'social'. Secondly, equating 'public with 'contextual'. Even though public theology engages with relational, social and contextual aspects, however, these should not define the entirety of public theology. Thirdly, being seen as 'particularistic', similar to how liberation, political, black, feminist, womanist, Africa, minjung and other theologies are often viewed. Why? This perspective can lead some to mistakenly consider public theology as merely a North American discourse or as a theology that conflicts with Latin American liberation theology, African womanist theology and others.

Le Bruyns (2011) effectively articulates the appropriate agenda and methodology of public theology as follows:

> There are thus inevitable implications for understanding the agenda and mode of public theology. It is a way of understanding and practising theology which must contribute in constructive, dialogical, enriching and transforming ways to 'the public good'. For example, without dissolving the theoretical integrity of theological content, public theology demands of us a developing expertise in other disciplines of knowledge matched by a commitment to participate in conversations and exercises beyond the borders of a congregation or theological seminary. (p. 2)

The quotation highlights two important aspects of public theology. Firstly, it underscores the need for public theology to be both constructive and transformative, actively contributing to the public good through dialogue and enrichment. Secondly, it emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary engagement, where theologians must develop expertise in other fields of knowledge and actively participate in discussions and activities that extend beyond

the traditional confines of congregational or seminary settings. These debates must promote the public or common good, as highlighted earlier in this article.

To what degree does public theology interact with public issues? Kim (2017:40) suggests that public theology involves a critical, reflective and reasoned engagement with society aimed at advancing the kingdom of God, particularly for the benefit of the poor and marginalised. Kim's (2017) argument emphasises that public theology is fundamentally focussed on addressing the needs of those on society's periphery. It endeavours to correct theology that has become irrelevant, distant and disconnected by rooting it in people's everyday experiences.

Public theology reflects the shift from confining faith to the 'private closet' towards actively positioning church communities in the public square, particularly in the context of SSA (Le Bruyns 2011; Magezi & Nanthambwe 2022). This transition emphasises the church's role in addressing social issues, advocating for justice and contributing to the common good within society (Dreyer 2004; Juma 2015). By moving beyond the boundaries of private belief and religious practice, public theology calls for the church to engage in societal discourse, influence public policy and participate in the transformation of communities (Dreyer & Pieterse 2010). In SSA, where social challenges are pronounced, this approach encourages church communities to be agents of social change, promoting the well-being of all citizens by integrating faith with public life in meaningful, impactful ways.

Proposed collaborative efforts among churches, profit organisations and governments for the advancement of public good in sub-Saharan Africa

How can churches, profit organisations and governments in SSA collaborate effectively to advance the public good? Given the region's widespread issues, such as poverty, corruption, tribalism, political instability, inequality and underdevelopment, a coordinated approach can be highly effective. There are five key ways in which these entities can work together.

Firstly, they can collaborate on social welfare programmes. Addressing critical issues such as poverty and healthcare necessitates a pooling of resources and expertise (Nanthambwe 2022; Swanson & Rusaw 2020). According to Swanson and Rusaw (2020) in their book *The Externally Focused Quest: Becoming the Best Church for the Community*, churches need to shift their focus from internal matters to a broader orientation towards their communities to make a meaningful impact. They advocate for partnerships between churches and non-church organisations to avoid the frustration of limited resources and to tackle challenges more effectively. This can be achieved by churches providing grassroots support and outreach, profit organisations supplying necessary resources and funding, and governments offering policy support and infrastructure development. For instance, churches could manage the distribution of food and medical supplies, profit organisations could fund and oversee health clinics, and governments could ensure regulatory and logistical support.

However, two critical factors must be carefully considered before implementing the proposed strategies. The first factor involves ensuring that all parties fully understand the specific challenges hindering public good within the community. It is essential to avoid assumptions about the community's needs and instead conduct comprehensive research to identify and address the genuine issues accurately. Nanthambwe's (2022) study indicates that many churches and development organisations become ineffective when their efforts fail to align with actual community needs. The second factor is the need for partners to be prepared to manage potential conflicts. Collaboration among churches, profit organisations and governments may lead to disagreements, so it is crucial to develop effective conflict resolution mechanisms and maintain flexibility to address challenges constructively.

Secondly, there should be collaboration on community development projects focussed on constructing essential infrastructure and enhancing living conditions in underdeveloped regions. According to a recent report by DNA Economics (2024), the challenges facing the African continent are not insurmountable. It is possible to establish well-structured, sustainable partnerships between governments, private entities and philanthropic organisations to address these issues collectively. Churches have a significant opportunity to engage in this collaborative effort. Potential projects could include building schools, developing clean water sources and constructing affordable housing. Missionary-initiated churches such as the Roman Catholic, Adventist and Dutch Reformed denominations have performed well in this regard in some countries in SSA, such as Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Uganda and many others. However, there is a great need, and we do not need missionary churches to continue building schools and hospitals at this stage. We need churches' cooperation with other entities to embark on various developmental programmes. In many sub-Saharan African countries, churches possess well-maintained facilities, even in rural areas, that could be repurposed to benefit the community. For instance, church buildings, typically used for worship on weekends, could serve as venues for programmes such as childcare and adult education during weekdays. In so doing, the public good is promoted.

Thirdly, collaborate in providing public health initiatives. Churches, profit and nonprofit organisations must work together to combat health crises exacerbated by underdevelopment and poor healthcare infrastructure. The recent aftermath of COVID-19 has left many people in the world grappling with profound social, economic and psychological challenges. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, disrupted livelihoods and strained

healthcare systems, particularly in vulnerable communities of SSA (Schotte & Zizzamia 2021). As societies begin to rebuild, there is a growing need for collaborative efforts that address these deep-rooted issues, promote mental health, restore economic stability and foster resilience against future crises (Global Fund 2021). Collaborative efforts could involve vaccination drives, disease prevention education and healthcare facility upgrades. Churches can mobilise local communities for health education and outreach, profit organisations can supply medical equipment and funds, and governments can coordinate public health campaigns and ensure policy alignment.

Fourthly, collaborate in providing employment and skills training. Address unemployment and economic inequality by creating job training and vocational programmes. The distinct roles of each entity highlight the significance of partnerships and shared responsibility in addressing community challenges. In the South African context, for example, the church cannot independently provide social security or grants to the approximately 19 million impoverished individuals, nor to the more than 27 million people receiving the R350 COVID-19 social relief of distress (SRD) grants (Daily Investor 2023). This responsibility lies with government institutions such as the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). The church contributes to different capacities, such as promoting moral integrity within society and enhancing emotional intelligence, both of which are crucial for human capital development. While the church can serve as an employer (Saldanha 2022) and as an agent of community development (Nanthambwe 2022; Öhlmann, Frost & Gräb 2016), its capacity to generate employment is inherently limited. Profit organisations, on the other hand, play a vital role in job creation and in providing many of the services that are essential to both the church and the government. While companies can employ psychologists and wellness practitioners to support their workforce, the church uniquely provides qualified chaplains, pastors and spiritual caregivers, who are indispensable for offering comprehensive spiritual care. On the other hand, governments can support these initiatives with funding, policy frameworks and incentives for private sector involvement.

Fifthly, collaboration in disaster relief and humanitarian aid is essential. Effective responses to natural hazards and humanitarian crises, often exacerbated by political and infrastructural challenges, require a coordinated effort (Nanthambwe 2022). Churches can play a pivotal role in organising grassroots relief initiatives and providing community support, while profit organisations can contribute logistical and financial resources. Governments, in turn, can oversee disaster response operations and recovery efforts, ensuring that aid reaches the most vulnerable populations (Magezi 2019). However, it is crucial that post-crisis collaborative efforts extend beyond immediate relief and focus on development initiatives that can significantly improve people's lives. Ndukwe (2020) highlights that many efforts by churches, profit organisations and governments are often limited to relief activities and do not lead to sustainable community development.

The issues of inequality, unemployment, poverty and gender-based violence (GBV) that are pervasive across the continent are often exacerbated by the suppression of people's rights, the silencing of their voices and the presence of unjust systems that operate in SSA to the detriment of the most vulnerable. It is imperative that churches take a firm stand against these corrupt and oppressive systems that perpetuate the suffering of the poor and marginalised in the region. Churches have a crucial role in instilling democratic values and serving as a voice for integrity and accountability, as highlighted by Pereira (2010). The rampant corruption among government officials, which has deeply entrenched itself in the region, must be confronted directly and without hesitation.

In the light of this, churches in SSA are called to take on a more active and assertive role in addressing the social, economic and ethical issues that lie at the heart of the region's challenges. Churches need to find platforms where challenges affecting people in SSA can be addressed. Moreover, churches should seek to collaborate with other organisations and actors who share their commitment to promoting the common good, thereby amplifying their impact and fostering meaningful change.

These collaborative strategies seek to harness each sector's unique strengths to tackle the complex challenges confronting SSA, thereby promoting enhanced societal well-being and sustainable development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Christian faith must move beyond its private confines and engage actively in public issues to contribute meaningfully to societal well-being. Churches in SSA have a vital role in the public sphere, where they can collaborate with for-profit institutions and political governing bodies to promote social good. This collaboration requires churches to participate in advocacy, direct service and partnerships with secular organisations, ensuring their actions reflect equity and justice principles. By doing so, churches can play a significant role in shaping societal structures and fostering values such as compassion, justice and mutual respect. Ultimately, the article argues that by embracing this public engagement, churches can help bridge the gap between spiritual beliefs and the practical needs of communities, thereby advancing both public and social good.

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