

Zambezi Evangelical Church's role in addressing poverty in Malawi: A public practical theological reflection



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Dates:

Received: 26 July 2022
Accepted: 15 Sept. 2022
Published: 09 Dec. 2022

How to cite this article:

Magezi, V. & Nanthambwe, P., 2022, 'Zambezi Evangelical Church's role in addressing poverty in Malawi: A public practical theological reflection,' *In die Skriflig* 56(1), a2894. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2894>

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The high poverty levels in Malawi are a cause of concern resulting in many questions being asked. Among these questions is what role the faith communities can play to meaningfully contribute towards addressing this. Importantly, these high poverty levels challenge the church to reflect on the following questions: Beyond the clerical paradigm, what role can the church play in poor communities? How can the church effectively contribute to addressing the challenge of poverty? Thus, using the case of Malawi, in this article is considered the role that the church can perform to address public social issues. It reflects on literature and empirical data that were collected from the Zambezi Evangelical Church in Malawi to assess the role that the church has been playing to address poverty in the country. The article concludes by suggesting ways that the Malawian church could consider strengthening its role in addressing poverty.

Contribution: Through using an empirical approach, this article provides insight into the contribution that churches can make to address poverty. It locates such a ministerial approach as an endeavour in public practical theology that could be employed effectively on congregational level.

Keywords: public practical theology; church and public issues; church and society; practical theology; Zambezi Evangelical Church; poverty in Malawi.

Introduction

The primary mission of the church has been the subject of constant cross-examination. Deyoung and Gilbert (2011) pointed out categorically that:

The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of the Father. (pp. 62–63)

According to their observations, the church placed a strong emphasis on evangelising and edifying people in Christ, beginning with the Book of Acts and the life of the apostle Paul (Deyoung & Gilbert 2011). The synoptic gospels make clear that the church's first goal was to make disciples (Mk 16:16–20; Lk 24:46–48; Mt 28:18–20). In conjunction with Deyoung and Gilbert (2011:55–63), Hildreth (2018:55–63) adamantly contends that, among the primary responsibilities that the church should undertake as a collective endeavour to complete, are preaching, witnessing, and making disciples of all nations.

Nevertheless, there are other scholars who have challenged the exclusion of social involvement in sharing the gospel (Chester 2013:67–80; Sider 2010:27–28; Stearns 2009:181–189). Sider (2010:27–28) bemoaned the issue that arises when the gospel is restricted to the good news of the forgiveness of sin or individual salvation as opposed to the good news of the fullness of God's kingdom. He (Sider 2010) advised that the gospel must be grasped holistically in order to be preached, which calls for simultaneously preaching salvation and social involvement.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the church in Malawi has an imperative role to play in addressing poverty, but Janse van Rensburg and Breed (2011:2) ask whether the church has the knowledge and abilities to tackle poverty-related issues. Evidence from Janse van Rensburg and Breed (2011) shows that eradicating poverty requires more than just good intentions. They emphasise how crucial it is to be able to realistically participate in programmes that aim to reduce poverty. Nanthambwe (2020:11) noted that churches' lack of participation in joint initiatives with the government to combat poverty is related to their lack of capacity. Furthermore, there is 'a lack of well-developed practical theology to inform and guide the church to effectively function at the interface of church and social issues, such as poverty' (Nanthambwe 2020).

In this article, the church's role in tackling social problems like poverty is discussed. The article uses empirical information obtained from the Zambezi Evangelical Church (ZEC) leaders to make suggestions on how the church could successfully fight poverty in Malawi.

The background context of poverty and the Zambezi Evangelical Church in Malawi

About Malawi

Malawi, a small landlocked nation in Sub-Saharan Africa, shares borders with Tanzania to the east and north, Mozambique to the south and east, and Zambia to the west. According to the most recent United Nations statistics at the time this article was written, Malawi has a population of 19 832 024 and a land area of 94 484 square kilometres (World Population Review 2021b). With its population, Malawi has one of Sub-Saharan Africa's highest-density populations (Conroy 2006:14).

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world (World Bank 2020; 2021a; World Population Review 2021c). The main causes of poverty in Malawi, according to experts (Arndt et al. 2014:84; Dossani 2012:20; Ellis Katangule & Nyasulu 2002:3; Marriot, Hamer & Coffey 2018:5), include dependence on failed agriculture, low levels of education, capital constraints, technological restrictions, and donor dependence (Chirwa 2004:24; Chirwa et al. 2008:27; Dunga 2014:97; Tsoka 2013:8). The World Bank (2021b:254) lists Malawi as one of the world's smallest open economies in Sub-Saharan Africa with a per capita GDP of US\$425.3 in 2020. As defined by the World Bank (2021b), an open economy is one in which a free market operates without restriction. With a population of about 20 million, 68% of the population is estimated to be living below the international poverty level of US\$1.90 per day (World Bank 2021b:254).

As part of its natural resources, Malawi has fresh water from Lake Malawi and the Shire River, natural forests, animal life and land (Dossani 2012:20; Nuka 2018; Page 2019:43). Because of its significant natural resources and committed and innovative citizens, Conroy, Blackie et al. (2006:1) do not consider Malawi to be a poor country. Despite all these factors, Malawi's HDI score (Human Development Index) places it at 171 out of 189 nations (World Population Review 2021a). This highlights the serious problem of poverty in the nation. According to Tsoka (2013:1), scientific investigations conducted in Malawi since 1998 have proved the nation's ongoing poverty. Studies have revealed insignificant advances in the nation's poverty reduction efforts. For instance, an assessment of Malawian poverty and vulnerability conducted by the Malawi Government and the World Bank in 1998 revealed that 54% of people were poor. Later, in 2005, the study showed that 52% were poor. The 2010–2011 Integrated Household Survey found that 51% of the population was poor. In the fifth Integrated Household Survey conducted in 2019–2021, the percentage that was

poor was 50.8% (GoM 2021:ii). This socioeconomic fact appears to suggest that destitution and underdevelopment are huge issues in the country, as there has been no meaningful changes (GoM 2021).

Zambezi Evangelical Church and practical ministries

Mkweteza (2017) outlined the ZEC's involvement in the proclamation of the gospel and its contribution to Malawians' socioeconomic advancement. He also quotes Luckwell Mtima, who was ZEC's general secretary at the time, when the organisation was commemorating its 125th anniversary in Malawi:

Am impressed looking at the years and the role the church has taken in helping the government in various development initiatives of the country. For example, in health, education services, women empowerment, youth and road infrastructures. (Mkweteza 2017:n.p)

As Paas (2006:201) reports, the ZEC was founded in 1892 by a missionary named Joseph Booth. In addition to having branches in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa, the church runs more than 500 church stations throughout Malawi (Beaton 2020; Zambesi Mission n.d.). The Synod, which meets twice a year, governs the church. In the 1980s, in response to the war in Mozambique, the ZEC Relief and Development Department was established to assist war victims. Following the end of the war in the 1990s, development work resumed – this time focusing on assisting Malawians in need of basic necessities such as water, food and health care. The implementation of this programme aimed to meet the needs of many people in the country who live in impoverished rural areas (Zambesi Mission n.d.). The ZEC is involved in holistic development within a gospel context (Zambesi Mission n.d.).

The ZEC's projects include emergency food distribution and a variety of other community development initiatives (Zambesi Mission n.d.). It has been involved in providing relief to victims of natural disasters. Food scarcity is one of the major issues that many people face as a result of the country's poor harvests. Projects with fish, bees, poultry and goats are among the community development programmes in which the ZEC is involved. The church also initiates programmes to assist with organic farming and tree, as well as crop nurseries. The villagers are also encouraged to take out small loans and start small businesses to supplement their income (Zambesi Mission n.d.). Given the country's high level of literacy, particularly among women (GoM 2021), the ZEC also assists the education sector in adult literacy. The ZEC is also involved in health-related projects such as water and sanitation, as well as AIDS awareness (Zambesi Mission n.d.).

According to information provided on the Zambesi Mission's official website (n.d.), the ZEC adopts a comprehensive approach to ministry. Yamamori (1996) elucidates that evangelism and social action are integral to the church's

overall ministry despite being functionally and relationally distinct from one another. In evangelism, the church is committed to spreading the good news of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. The social action component's goal is to free both men and women from social, political and economic difficulties (Yamamori 1996:1). He (Yamamori 1996) went on to say that the ministry of God, which includes evangelism and community involvement, cannot be viewed as separate entities. 'Holism implies the identity and distinctiveness of various parts in their relationship to the whole and, at the same time, their relationally inseparable nature' (Yamamori 1996).

According to Nanthambwe (2020:6), the ZEC approach to ministry is founded on the Bible. God commanded his people (Israel) to be just by caring for society's most vulnerable members (Zch 7:10–11). Widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor were among the vulnerable. According to Keller (2010:4–5), 'the *mishpat*' [justness] of a society is evaluated by how it treats these groups. 'Failure to provide for the needs of the members of this quartet is referred to as a violation of justice, or *mishpat*, rather than a lack of mercy or charity' (Keller 2010). This demonstrates that God defends the outcasts and marginalised members of society. It is from this perspective that the ZEC engages in a number of practical programmes to assist Malawi's needy and vulnerable citizens.

The necessity for a public practical theology investigation

In recent years, practical theology has undergone a change (Cahalan 2005:63). This is due to a shift in emphasis, away from focusing largely on church and clerical practice and toward societal issues such as poverty. According to Dreyer (2004:919–920), practical theology should not only be seen as concentrating on the church and clergy. 'The vision for practical theology should be broadened to include everyday life of people at local, national, and global levels' (Nanthambwe 2020:8). In her explanation of the practice of practical theology, Graham (2017:3–4) argues that it should start with practice, shift to a theoretical reflection and then return to practice. Graham (2017:3–4) and Beaudoin (2016:9) emphasise the importance of practice in practical theology by recognising it as a theological principle and thus giving it theological significance. This means that the emphasis on practice in practical theology is theological (Beaudoin 2016; Graham 2017). Therefore, it is believed that practical theology works to make sense of the way that believers live their lives in the world (Magezi 2019:119). Dreyer (2004:919) asserted that practical theology needs to take on a public dimension. Critical reflection on social and political issues, as well as the Christian heritage is required in practical theology (Dreyer 2004:919). Magezi (2019:133) correctly stated that 'practical theology in Africa is faced with a challenge of developing a holistic practical theological framework that includes practical spirituality, social, physical, political and economic issues'. This move in accentuation of practical theology to

public practical theology is a major shift that is recognised by numerous viable practical theologians (Dreyer 2004; 2011; Dreyer & Pieterse 2010; Magezi 2018b; Osmer & Schweitzer 2003). According to Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:218), the mission of public practical theology is realised in three ways. Firstly, it ensures that the public is in the audience. Secondly, it is to ensure that practical theology reflects on everyday matters and issues. Thirdly, practical theology must accelerate the dialogue between theology and contemporary culture.

Vanhoozer and Strachan (2015:16–17) correctly asserted that the pastor should be a theologian by saying 'what God is saying in Christ'. Simultaneously, he or she should be a public figure which means that he or she should 'publicly be involved in and for the community'. The emphasis on public issues in practical theology is intended to demonstrate that theology addresses critical societal issues such as poverty (Miller-McLemore 2005:95–106). From a public practical theological standpoint, the challenge of poverty in Malawi and the ZEC's involvement in addressing poverty, calls for reflection and examination. Practical theology as achieved at this public intersection is 'murky' and ambiguous (Magezi 2019:1). Writing in the context of the public pastoral care definition, Magezi (2019) rightly noted that:

Despite the recognition of the need for pastoral care to address broader social issues, the vexing questions and issues that currently remain somewhat like a black box or lacking clarity are the following: how does public pastoral care look like? How should public pastoral care be practically conceptualised? How can public pastoral care be done? What is pastoral about engaging in social issues? (p. 1)

The aforementioned inquiries are quite pertinent and could be used to gauge the ZEC's engagement in current practical theological difficulties. Regarding the advancements in public practical theology, Miller-McLemore (2012:26) made a very astute point, namely that practical theology has occupied the space that academic theology formerly occupied by advocating a new theology drawn from daily living (i.e. public life) (Miller-McLemore 2012). This means taking theology into the real world and using what is discovered, there to assess the veracity of statements made in the Bible, history and doctrine. The ZEC and its comprehensive ministry initiatives are examined from this angle in order to assess how the church is doing in relation to societal challenges like poverty.

Methodology

The ZEC denomination has congregations in Malawi's northern, central and southern regions, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and a few in South Africa (Beaton 2019:90). Malawi's southern and central regions were the focus of the empirical data presented and analysed. The northern region is left out, because there are so few ZEC's there. Five pastors and seven church leaders were purposefully chosen to take part in the research. The questionnaire format was used for the interview. Telephone follow-up interviews with participants were conducted to clarify any

areas that were unclear. General qualitative data analysis principles such as coding and interpretation were used to analyse the data gathered during the interviews (Thomas 2013:109, 239–242). A constant comparative method was used to interpret the data, which resulted in a network analysis of themes and sub-themes (Thomas 2013:235–236). In response to the research questions and objectives, the themes were created.

Findings and discussion

Two goals were pursued in conducting the empirical investigation. Firstly, it was carried out to determine the ZEC's present level of commitment to fighting poverty. Secondly, in order to ensure that the ZEC's work is biblically informed and practically applicable, it was additionally done to understand the integrated, holistic ministerial principles and policies that the ZEC has established in order to reduce poverty in Malawi.

The study's findings revealed that, although on a limited scale, the ZEC does participate in programmes designed to combat poverty. When it comes to the church's involvement in socio-economic issues, Kaiya (2013:41) noted that various denominations have clung to different theological paradigms. Gama (2006:2) emphasised the four main theological models – separation, prophetic, identification, and transformational – that some churches have embraced in the context of the church's involvement in social issues in Malawi.

According to the study, the ZEC opposes the separation model, which calls for a separation of the state from the church (Gama 2006:40). The ZEC's responsiveness to the issue of poverty in the nation demonstrates their understanding of the church's contribution to community development. The separation model's proponents suggest that, because Christians are strangers in the world, they should completely avoid engaging in anything related to it (1 Pt 2:11). According to the separation paradigm, the passage from Romans 12:2 refers to Christians abstaining from involvement in global affairs (Gama 2006:40; Kaiya 2013:41–52). Christians should not attempt to make things right, but instead be prepared to suffer in this world. They should rather be prepared to avoid being associated with the world, just as Moses avoided being associated with the Egyptians who reared him (Heb 11:25). Separation from the world, according to the separation model's proponents, is evidence that one is obeying God.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are the current defenders of the separation model in Malawi. According to Kaiya (2013:41–52) and Jere (2019:216), a closer look at the Jehovah's Witnesses in Malawi demonstrates that they have no positive impact on the nation's socioeconomic development. They construct wonderful places of worship, but they steadfastly refuse to make any contributions to the nation's social or economic advancement.

The separation model has the advantage of having evangelism as its primary area of focus, according to Jere (2019:216). But

among its many flaws, the most significant one is that it lacks ways to show how much God cares for the oppressed and the destitute. This strategy is inappropriate in the setting of Malawi, as it ignores tackling the concerns such as poverty which are more important to the people there. As a result, Malawi needs to discourage the use of this paradigm. The following quote from Msangaambe (2011) supports his persuasive case for the relationship between the church and society:

At the same time, people who form the church are also members of society. In a biblical paradox, members of the Body of Christ are in the world but do not belong to the world. But, while they are citizens of heaven (Phlp 3:20), they are directly involved with the issues of this world on a daily basis. They are affected and infected by political unrests, social injustices, natural disasters, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and many other social evils. So, what happens in the society has a direct impact on the church's life and vice versa. The church that turns a deaf ear and a blind eye to what happens in the society, forfeits its missional responsibility and ceases to be relevant. (pp. 157–158)

This argument presented by Msangaambe supports the idea that, because the church and society coexist, serve the same people and are both institutions of God, they should interact. The study revealed that the ZEC is very aware of this reality.

The study's findings supported the ZEC's agreement with the identification model, which encourages the church to engage in societal issues. According to Gama (2006:63), the identification model suggests that the church get involved in societal issues rather than criticising the government for not doing more to address issues that people are facing. The stories of Joseph and Daniel in the Old Testament demonstrate how believers can participate in world affairs without ruining their faith. Joseph and Daniel did not stop doing what God asked of them even after reaching the highest levels of secular authority. They had the choice of residing in either the kingdom of God or the kingdom of the earth. According to Chester and Timmis (2007:118), the church is the vehicle through which God's mercy is made manifest by undoing the effects of the fall in society. Therefore, it is crucial that the church addresses societal issues that are contrary to God's original intent.

Theologians who adhere to the transformation paradigm think that it is possible to transform and change the underlying structures of life. People's opinions can change within a community or culture according to this model's proponents (Kaiya 2013:41). This paradigm is founded on the eschatological hope that when the Parousia occurs, all of society will be transformed for the better. As a result, the fulfilment of this expectation will be realised during Jesus' second coming (Gama 2006:86; Jere 2019:217).

The church, according to the prophetic paradigm, should speak out against all injustices and combat the causes of those who are socially marginalised. The church must speak out against all social evils that support the exploitation of the

poor, just like the prophets of the Old Testament did. The church must speak for the marginalised and the underprivileged in society because their cries go unheard. In the same way that God used the prophets in the Old Testament to address wrongdoings that perpetuated the plight of the poor, the church stands up against all forms of injustice to show her solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised and the voiceless in society (Jere 2019:218). In 1992, the Catholic bishops of Malawi released a pastoral letter that addressed the socioeconomic evils that were plaguing the nation as an illustration of how the church has taken on this prophetic role in society. In the setting of Malawi, where social injustice is rife, this concept has been advocated (Jere 2019).

This study revealed that the ZEC has not adopted the prophetic model, despite it being suggested as one of the four theological approaches that would be most appropriate in the setting of Malawi. In-depth interviews with the respondents found that the majority of Sunday sermons in ZEC are delivered from a pulpit in a church environment. As a church, the ZEC has never directly tackled societal problems, unlike other denominations such as Catholics and Presbyterians. Because of the nature of poverty in Malawi, the prophetic model is an effective means of addressing some social issues that contribute to the spread of poverty in the country. The prophetic model favours those who are marginalised in society and can address the underlying inequities that many Malawians believe to be unavoidable causes of poverty (Jere 2019:218). Collins' statement that the church possesses divine authority was quoted by Jere (2019). The church should go beyond reflexive responses while serving the community, as it is empowered to address societal challenges. Because the church represents hope for the majority of Malawians, it is crucial that it addresses social issues on a broad scale. The church must not overlook the necessity of addressing Malawi's structural causes of poverty. It must exercise its prophetic authority by publicly confronting the problems that lead to poverty and oppression. 'The church must speak for the voiceless and act as a source of strength for the weak' (Nanthambwe 2020:81). For instance, the prevalence of poverty in Malawi has been influenced by problems such as corruption, inequality and selfishness in the nation (World Bank 2016). When addressing these concerns, the church cannot remain mute. It must be a prophetic voice that challenges such actions. The statement of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) (2002:27) reaffirms the necessity for the church to use a prophetic model while confronting social issues. This is what the LWF (2002) claims:

In its efforts to react to the needs of the suffering and marginalised, the church has to exhaust all possibilities and use all instruments at its disposal. But these conditions cannot be healed by charitable attention alone. The nature of structural poverty alone requires that one should attack its causes by appropriate methods and try to get to their roots at the structural level. In other words: the factors that damage and humiliate life, that prevents the fulfilment of basic needs and produce human injustice and

dependence must be dealt with at the level of their causes and not (or not only) at the level of their consequences. (p. 27)

The research participants reported that the relevance, sustainability, efficacy and impact of the programmes in which the ZEC is involved, are factors in their selection. While these arguments are sound, research – a crucial consideration when picking programmes to combat poverty – was overlooked. The issue in this study was the lack of research in the ZEC's programme selection, as it was discovered that there had been no prior documented studies on poverty in the ZEC. This was further supported by the General Secretary's admission to the researcher that, to his knowledge, no research on poverty had been done. As has already been said, the ZEC has been a part of Malawi's history for a very long time. Despite this, it is pitiful to observe that, despite what the ZEC General Secretary told the researcher, no one has conducted any sort of research on poverty. This demonstrates that the ZEC is not intentionally addressing the challenges of poverty or taking them seriously. Myers (2017) noted that churches sparingly employ the knowledge provided by the social sciences to combat poverty. He (Myers 2017) pointed out that the social sciences have the greatest potential to support the church's effective operation globally. The fact that most churches do not utilise the insights that these disciplines provide, however, is to the church's detriment. Research is critical in the fight against poverty, because it promotes community involvement, which is necessary for successful development (Myers 2010:121; Voorhies 2009:605).

According to the study's findings, the ZEC's programmes are designed to serve the whole person. This shows that the ZEC is aware of the importance of adopting a holistic ministerial approach. It is founded on the theological ideas that God is actively involved in people's lives and that he wants them to love one another through taking care of one another's needs. This was proved during Jesus' earthly mission, when he not only taught the gospel, but also treated the people's numerous illnesses and, on occasion, miraculously provided sustenance. God has continued to improve the lives of his people up to this point. This claim is adequately supported by the fact that he sent his Son to become human in order to redeem mankind (Jn 3:16). Myers (1996) made thus a wise observation:

Of all people, Christians should best understand the importance and effectiveness of an incarnational approach to helping others. The gospel is an encounter with a person, not merely a message. Life with Christ is just that. Even the two great commandments – loving God and loving our neighbour are relational in nature. Transformation is about relationships before it is about anything else. (p. 214)

According to the report, there are certain significant flaws in the ZEC's planning for a comprehensive ministry in Malawi. This study revealed that there is no official training that pastors, church leaders or members receive to be ready to execute the activities intended to relieve poverty. What exactly is wrong with this? Training is crucial in the same way that research is crucial for understanding how effectively a

problem can be addressed. According to Karia et al. (2016:10) and Long (2016:475), training within an organisation is crucial to helping employees learn new material, as well as refresh and reinforce their already acquired knowledge and abilities. It is crucial for an organisation to consider new options and techniques for education and training that might improve productivity and effectiveness. Long (2016:475) vividly affirm that 'increase in training activities helps organisations to perform better and improve an organisation's future value'.

The ZEC leadership's lack of formal training in dealing with poverty is a reflection on the church's capacity to gain skills that would support its holistic ministerial practices in contemporary day. This study also revealed that the church is not using any organised or tested strategies to combat poverty. Each congregation is independent and carries out any actions believed to help combat poverty. This demonstrates that, despite the ZEC's efforts the organisation's leadership is not sufficiently empowered to do so. Failure results from a lack of power and resources in these organisations (Linthicum 1991:25). It is crucial that leaders in such organisations go through the process of being prepared and supported, so that they can take on the duty assigned to them efficiently and in a way that empowers everyone (Linthicum 1991).

The ZEC's biggest problems, which include its ineffective leadership, make it difficult to effectively combat poverty in Malawi. The fact that the majority of participants listed weak leadership as a problem, because it shows itself in the ZEC's lack of strategic plans to combat poverty is not a coincidence. In order to sustain excellent leadership, management and accountability in addressing poverty and injustice in Africa, the LWF (2017:21) unequivocally emphasises the significance of leadership. Lack of effective leadership is a problem in most African churches and communities, as well as the ZEC (LWF 2017:21). The achievements of programmes and projects addressing poverty in Africa suffer as a result of the continent's weak leadership and administration (LWF 2017).

The aforementioned elements demonstrate that, contrary to what the respondents said, the ZEC is not well prepared to carry out a holistic ministry. Finding donors to support the ZEC programmes is extremely challenging for the church due to the lack of preparation in executing holistic ministry. The scarcity of donors was thus brought up as one of the issues.

According to the research, there are several shortcomings in the ZEC's holistic ministerial preparation. The ZEC Synod lacks integrated programmes that outline the ZEC's position on alleviating poverty and provide guidance to congregations on how to engage in holistic ministry, which demonstrates the ZEC's lack of readiness in this area. The analysis showed that, despite the ZEC's best efforts to combat poverty, it lacks the resources necessary to carry out programmes designed to do so. As noted by Janse van Rensburg and Breed (2011:2), there are not any comprehensive recommendations to help the church engage in effective poverty-reduction efforts. This remark is particularly relevant to the ZEC's efforts to

combat poverty in Malawi. Despite the agreement among churches to engage in holistic ministry, Magezi and Mutowa (2018:125) pointed out that there is still uncertainty about how it can be done in practice. This is consistent with this study's findings that the ZEC's efforts to combat poverty have some exploitable weaknesses. Myers (2010:121) duly noted that '... evangelical holistic mission activists have acted. They have gone out and done transformational development. Doing is good. But there is more to doing than just acting.'

Recommendations for the involvement of the church to effectively address poverty in Malawi

The recommendations made in this article are intended to assist the church in Malawi in effectively addressing the issue of poverty. They are based on the findings of an empirical study conducted with members of the ZEC.

Malawi's church should address the issue of poor leadership

The empirical investigation revealed that one of the ZEC's major problems, which is also contributing to their inefficiency in combating poverty, is the issue of weak leadership. According to Stauffacher (2013:45), the problem with leadership affects most of the Christian denominations in Malawi, as well as the ZEC. It is well known that effective leadership is crucial to any organisation's success (Mathole 2005:336). As a result, without strong leadership, the church in Malawi cannot successfully combat poverty. By addressing leadership concerns, it will be possible to address the challenges of lack of transparency and accountability, as well as insufficient education among many Malawian church officials. The church in Malawi will be able to provide adequate education and training for their leaders so that they are qualified to address societal issues, once the leadership issues are resolved. When it comes to combating poverty, obtaining mere theological knowledge from Bible colleges is insufficient. The church must ensure that it is spending money on developing and preparing leaders who will be useful in addressing social challenges. By appointing leaders who comprehend what it means to be a Christian leader and are able to implement the truth of God's word in their lives so that their character is consistent with their profession, the issue of lack of transparency and accountability among church leaders can be resolved (Naidoo 2005:iii).

The church must create a distinct division or organisation to address concerns of poverty

The necessity to create a distinct department or organisation to address poverty and other development challenges is related to addressing leadership issues. The church needs to train leaders who are skilled at addressing issues of poverty and are knowledgeable about addressing other societal concerns. The next step is to create a distinct

department or organisation within the church that would focus solely on tackling poverty when such leaders have been found and trained. This is the biblically well-supported strategy that the Early Church utilised in Acts 6 to address issues of poverty. The church should tackle Malawi's poverty with the same zeal that it uses for evangelisation. The leaders who have been properly trained to interact with government representatives and other stakeholders in the cause of tackling poverty in the country without any compromise, should be taken into consideration in this mandate of the church dealing with poverty (Janse van Rensburg & Breed 2011:2).

The church must take on a prophetic role in addressing poverty

God's concern for the underprivileged is clearly reflected in the Bible. God instituted the Sabbath, Jubilee and all other laws pertaining to the poor in the Old Testament in order to ensure that the impoverished and marginalised members of society are taken care of and not exploited. Given that human institutions and sin are responsible for a substantial portion of Malawi's poverty, the church need to assume leadership in finding solutions. How could the church accomplish this? First and foremost, the church must proclaim the gospel and combat Christian nominalism in the nation. There are many persons who claim to be Christians, while their actions do not support this claim. The statement expressed by Statham and Voeltz (2014:1) that 'Christianity in Malawi is a river one mile wide and one inch deep' is accurate and sobering.

The relationship between sin and poverty is predictable (Kakwata 2016:273; Myers 2007:86; Wyngaard 2013:244). Sin is not just present on an individual level; it also appears on a communal level. According to Mathole (2005:135), the experiences of the impoverished go beyond their economic situation. Therefore, finding better economic solutions does not guarantee that the issues that people in societies are experiencing, will be resolved. As a result, the gospel cannot be confined to solely addressing economic concerns. Instead the gospel must touch on all facets of human reality holistically (Nanthambwe 2020:125).

Secondly, by speaking up for the voiceless, the church should adopt a prophetic role in advancing social justice in Malawi. The church must publicly criticise vices such as greed and corruption that have stifled the nation's economic prosperity. Sider (2020:19) made an important point when he stated that, because people have rebelled against God, they became selfish, and unjust social structures that oppress the poor were created. Therefore, the church should support efforts to combat selfishness which encourages everyone to use whatever power they have for their own gain.

Thirdly, the church ought to speak prophetically against the nation's pervasive inequality. In Malawi, there is a startling disparity between the rich and the poor, which is largely not due to natural causes, as noted by Marriot

et al. (2018:5). They result from the exploitation or oppression of the impoverished by institutional systems. In this regard, the church must confront issues of widespread inequality that exacerbate the situation of the poor and the socially marginalised.

The church must support the development of genuine church unity

As shown in the book of Acts, genuine unity was what enabled the Early Church to deal with poverty. The church was so cohesive that it was moved to assist the needy in escaping poverty. This is not merely a focused oneness on the surface. In most churches, the concept of oneness is used as a veil to hide the efforts of the socially dominant class to preserve its dominance (Ebayo 2000:43; Wilson & Letšosa 2014:3). When well-off people in Malawi start to understand how the impoverished feel and are moved to share what they have with the less fortunate, that is the kind of unity the church should strive to foster (cf. Ac 4:32–37). Unfortunately, most churches no longer comprehend or experience biblical *koinonia* to any considerable extent, as Sider (2005:209) noted. Wilson and Letšosa (2014:3) argued that it is a contradiction in terms for a church to profess to be one in the Lord, while refusing to share their money with people whom the Lord has associated himself with. The wealthy in Malawi need to completely identify with the poor in the church just like the Lord Jesus did (Wilson & Letšosa 2014). This oneness calls for believers to be readily available to one another with their time, resources and selves (Sider 2005:209). The impoverished in the church can be economically empowered via genuine unity (Christenson 2015:14; Jere 2018:6; Meeks 1989:180). According to Christenson (2015:14), men engage in honourable horizontal activity when people are in alignment with God in their relationships with one another. God truly joins individuals by transforming their hearts so they may actually look upon one another compassionately. This transformation is then turned into action for the neighbouring needy and impoverished (Christenson 2015:14; Jere 2018:6). The church in Malawi needs to act exactly like the Early Church did in this regard.

The church must collaborate more with the government and other parties involved in better programmes for development

The church can work with the government to administer schools and hospitals in addition to collaborating in a variety of other sectors such as environmental protection, sports, music and culture, tourism, and more. These items do not seem to be the main emphasis of many church-led development programmes in Malawi. However, the reality is that many people have struggled in school, but succeeded in other areas, lifting them out of poverty. For instance, according to the World Bank (2010), tourism was the second-largest contribution to the GDP and economic growth of the nation. This demonstrates how tourism, if done well, might be a means of reducing poverty for many Malawians. It is crucial to know how many churches there

are in Malawi, because the answer will reveal how few, if any, churches work with the government to promote tourism. The church in Malawi is being urged to start thinking creatively about how to address the issue of poverty in the nation. In order to lift people out of poverty, the church must strengthen development programmes in other areas.

Conclusion

The challenge of poverty in Malawi invites the church to answer the following question: Does the church have a solution to society's problems that goes beyond the clerical paradigm? This question necessitates a serious examination of how the church could influence society. A paradigm shift has occurred from the church concentrating only on the discourse about God, to the church interacting in the public sphere. The goal of one's theological education should not only be to serve local congregations, but also to serve the world. Theology must therefore be practical in the context of rendering service to the world, hence its public component. This article has demonstrated the church's role in addressing issues such as poverty in societies. The findings of the research with the ZEC are discussed in order to explore the church's involvement in addressing poverty in Malawi. Some recommendations have been presented on what the church can do to effectively address poverty in the country.

Acknowledgements

Some parts of this article are reworked from a Master's dissertation written by Patrick Nanthambwe under Prof. V. Magezi's supervision.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the writing of the article.

Ethical considerations

Ethics clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University's Theology Research Ethics Committee (TREC). Reference number: NWU-01888-20A6.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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